

ALEXANDRE DUMAS DAVY DE LA PAILLETERIE & AUGUSTE MAQUET

(1802-70)

THE MUSKETEERS OF THE KINGS

(1844-50 & 1865-66)

PREFACE

... *In which it is shown that the heroes of the history we are about to have the honour to relate to our readers have nothing to do with mythology despite having names ending in OS and IS*

While doing research for my history of Louis XIV in the *Royal Library* a while ago, I stumbled across the *Memoirs of Sir D'Artagnan*, printed by Pierre Rouge in Amsterdam – where most of the works were printed during that period when authors who wished to tell the truth did so at the risk of a prolonged stay in the Bastille. This title fascinated me and with the kind permission of the archivist I took it home where I devoured it. It is not my intention to analyse this curious work here and I will content myself with recommending it to those of my readers who appreciate the vivid depiction of previous times. They will find character portraits in it sketched by the hand of a master and although these outlines may be for the most part, traced on barracks doors or tavern walls, they will not find the depictions of Louis XIII, Anne of Austria, Richelieu, Mazarin, or the courtiers of the period any less authentic than in Sir Anquetil's history. But as everyone knows, what strikes the capricious mind of the poet is not always what impresses the general reader. So while admiring the details of the story as others might, I was most taken with something that almost certainly no one else has noted. D'Artagnan relates that on his 1<sup>st</sup> visit to Sir Tréville, the Captain of the King's Musketeers, he met 3 young men in the antechamber who served in the illustrious corps he hoped to enter, whose names were Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. I must confess to being struck by these 3 strange names – and it immediately occurred to me that these were probably pseudonyms d'Artagnan had used to disguise their real, perhaps illustrious family names. Or they might perhaps be names the 3 had assumed on the day when they had donned the musketeers' simple tabard from caprice, restlessness, or lack of fortune. From then on I could not rest until I succeeded in finding some reference to these extraordinary names in some work of the period that had so aroused my curiosity. Just listing all the books I read in this pursuit would fill a whole chapter – which might be instructive but would not be very amusing for the reader. It is enough to relate that I was about to give up the quest, discouraged by my fruitless investigations when I came across a manuscript in folio, guided by my knowledgeable friend Paulin Paris. Catalogued either number 4772 or 4773, it bore the title *Memoirs of Sir Count of La Fère, Concerning Diverse Events that Occurred in France in the Latter Days of the Reign of King Louis XIII and at the Commencement of the Reign of King Louis XIV*. This was my last hope. Imagine my joy when I came across the name of Athos in turning the pages of this manuscript on page 20, the name of Porthos on 27, and the name of Aramis on 31. The discovery of such a completely unknown manuscript in the present day when the science of history is pursued so thoroughly seemed almost miraculous. So I hastened to ask permission to print it in the hope of accepting a membership in the *Academy of Inscriptions and Fine Arts* one day (in the all-too-probable event of being denied entry into the *French Academy*). I must say this permission was graciously granted – that gives the lie to those malcontents who claim we live under a government that is less than friendly to men of letters. Now what follows is the 1<sup>st</sup> part of this precious manuscript that I offer to the reader with the promise that if it is received as well as I expect the 2<sup>nd</sup> part will follow immediately. In the meantime as a godfather is a 2<sup>nd</sup> father, I request the readers to hold me responsible for his pleasure or boredom and not the Count of La Fère. That said, on with the tale.

ALEXANDRE DUMAS DAVY DE LA PAILLETERIE & AUGUSTE MAQUET  
D'ARTAGNAN & THE COUNT OF MORET  
BOOK I  
THE 3 MUSKETEERS  
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The 3 Presents of Sir d'Artagnan the Elder

On the 1<sup>st</sup> Monday of April 1625, the town of Meung appeared to be in such a state of revolt it was almost as if the Huguenots had made it into a 2<sup>nd</sup> La Rochelle. The men of Meung hurriedly donned whatever armour they had, seeing their women running toward the high street, leaving their babies crying in their doorways. Then they headed for the Inn of the Jolly Miller, propping up their shaky courage with muskets or pole-arms in front of which a jostling, noisy, and curious crowd was growing minute by minute. In those times panics were frequent and few days passed without some city in France suffering a similar event. Nobles fought each other, the king contended with the cardinal, and the Spanish warred on the king. Besides these conflicts, overt or covert, there were also robbers, vagrants, wolves, rogues, and Huguenots who were at odds with everyone. The citizens always took up arms against robbers, wolves, or rogues, often against nobles or Huguenots, sometimes against the king but never against the cardinal or Spain. So the citizens of Meung rushed toward the Jolly Miller, hearing an uproar, seeing neither the red and yellow flag of Spain nor the livery of Cardinal Richelieu. When they arrived, the cause of the alarm was obvious. A young man – but his portrait can be sketched with a single stroke of the pen: envision Don Quixote at 18 years old, Don Quixote without armour or helmet in a woollen doublet once blue, now faded to a nameless colour somewhere between that of the sky and the dregs of honey. His face was long and brown with high cheekbones, a sign of cleverness. He had a strong, muscular jaw, by which one can always tell a Gascon even without his beret that this young man wore adorned with some sort of feather. His eyes were open and intelligent, the nose hooked but finely chiselled. Too big for a youth but not quite a grown man, one might take him for a farmer's son on a journey if it were not for the long sword hanging from a leather baldric, knocking against its owner's calves as he walked and slapping the rough side of his mount when he rode. For this young man had a mount, as remarkable as it was remarked upon. It was a Béarnaise pony, about twelve to fourteen years old, with a yellow hide, a hairless tail, and galls on its legs. It walked with its head lower than its knees, making a head-check rein unnecessary but despite appearances it somehow managed to cover eight leagues a day. At that time everyone was a connoisseur of horses but unfortunately the good qualities of this horse were hidden so well beneath its strange colour and eccentric gait, its sad appearance gave a poor first impression that naturally extended to its rider. This poor impression was felt by young d'Artagnan (for that was the name of the Don Quixote on this second Rocinante) all the more painfully as he was well aware that such a horse made even the best horseman look ridiculous. He had sighed a deep sigh when accepting the gift from Sir d'Artagnan the elder. But despite its appearance, he knew that even a beast like this was worth at least 20 *livres* – and that the words he'd received with it were beyond price. "My son," the Gascon gentleman had said, in that Béarnaise accent Henry IV had never been able to lose, "my son, this horse was born in the house of your father around thirteen years ago, and here it has remained ever since that ought to make you love it. Never sell it: allow it to die peacefully and honourably of old age, and if you take it on campaign, care for it as you would an old servant. At Court, should you have the honour to go there," continued Sir d'Artagnan the elder, "an honour to which your ancient nobility gives you the right, uphold your name as a gentleman, a name borne with dignity by your ancestors for five hundred years. For your own sake, and for the sake of your family and friends, endure nothing from anyone but the cardinal and the king. It's by his courage – mark me! – By his courage alone that a gentleman makes his way these days. He who hesitates for a second may let an opportunity escape that his fortune depends upon. You're young and ought to be brave for two reasons: first because you're a Gascon, and second because you're my son. Never fear trouble – seek out adventures instead. I've taught you how to handle a sword; you've muscles of iron and a wrist of steel. Fight at every opportunity, all the more because duels are forbidden so it's twice as courageous to fight! I have nothing to give you, my son but fifteen crowns, my horse, and the advice you've just heard. Your mother will add a recipe she had from a Bohemian for a certain balm, an ointment with the miraculous virtue of curing any wound that doesn't reach the heart. Make the best of all this, and live happily and long. I have only one more thing to add that is to recommend a living example for you to emulate. I speak not of myself, for I've never appeared at Court, and only took part in the Wars of Religion as a volunteer but of Sir Tréville, my former neighbour, who had the honour to be a child playmate of our king, Louis XIII – whom God preserve! Sometimes their play degenerated into fights that the king didn't always win. The blows he took only increased his esteem and friendship for Sir Tréville. Later, on his first adult journey to Paris, Sir Tréville fought five duels; between the death of the late king and when the current one came of age, he fought seven more times; and from then until today, maybe a hundred times more! Thus, despite all edicts, ordinances, and decrees outlawing duels, he is now Captain of the Musketeers – that is to say, chief of a legion of Caesars. The king holds him in high regard, and the cardinal fears him, a man whom it's said fears nothing. Moreover, Sir Tréville earns ten thousand crowns a year, so he's a great noble, a *Grand*. And he began just like you! Go see him, with this letter, and model yourself on him, so you may do as he has done."

That said, d'Artagnan the elder belted his own sword on his son, kissed him tenderly on both cheeks, and gave him his blessing. Leaving his father's chamber, the young man found his mother waiting for him with the famous recipe that, given the advice he'd just received, ought to see frequent use. The goodbyes on this side were longer and tenderer. It's not that Sir d'Artagnan didn't love his son but Sir d'Artagnan was a man and would have thought it undignified for a man to give way to his emotions – whereas Madam d'Artagnan was a woman, and what was more, a mother. She wept a great deal, and to the credit of Sir d'Artagnan the younger, despite his efforts to remain firm (as befit a future musketeer), nature prevailed and the tears flowed, though he managed to conceal half of them. That same day the young man set out on his journey, provided with the three paternal gifts: the fifteen crowns, the horse, and the letter for Sir Tréville – with the advice thrown into the bargain. With such endowments d'Artagnan was morally and physically an exact copy of the hero of Cervantes. Don Quixote took windmills for giants and flocks of sheep for armies; d'Artagnan took every smile for an insult and every look for a provocation. So all the way from Tarbes to Meung his hand was constantly doubled into a fist or gripping the hilt of his sword. Yet the fist struck no jaw and the sword was never drawn from its scabbard. It wasn't that the sight of the wretched yellow pony didn't raise smiles on the faces of passers-by, it was that a sword of intimidating length bumped against the side of that pony, while over the sword glared an eye as fierce as it was proud. So the passers-by suppressed their amusement, or if amusement outweighed caution, they laughed out of only one side of their mouths, like the drama masks of the ancients. D'Artagnan therefore kept his dignity and pride intact until he came to the fatal town of Meung. There, as he was dismounting from his horse at the gate of the Jolly Miller, without host, stableman, or groom coming to hold his stirrup, d'Artagnan saw a gentleman at an open window of the ground floor. Handsome and lordly, though rather grim and stern, he was talking with two men who listened with obvious respect. As was his way, d'Artagnan naturally assumed that he was the subject of their conversation and listened. This time d'Artagnan was half right: it wasn't him they spoke of but his horse. The gentleman seemed to be listing its qualities for his audience, who flattered him by laughing at every remark. Given that a half-smile was enough to rile d'Artagnan, one can imagine what effect this outright hilarity had on him. D'Artagnan took a closer look at this arrogant gent who mocked him. Fixing a haughty eye on the stranger, he saw a man of from forty to forty-five years of age, with black, piercing eyes, a pale complexion, a prominent nose, and a perfectly trimmed black moustache. He wore doublet and breeches of violet, with aiguillettes of the same colour, and no other ornaments but the customary slashes in the doublet that displayed the shirt beneath. These breeches and doublet, though new, showed the creases of clothes that had been packed in luggage for a long time. D'Artagnan noted all this quickly but carefully, doubtless from an instinctive feeling that this stranger was to have a great influence over his future life. As d'Artagnan looked over the man in the violet doublet, that gentleman made his funniest remark yet about the Béarnaise pony. The two men laughed louder than ever, and the stranger himself, contrary to his custom, allowed a pale smile to cross his face. This time, beyond all doubt, d'Artagnan was definitely insulted. Convinced of this, he pulled his beret down over his eyes and advanced with one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other affixed to his hip, trying to imitate some of the Court airs he'd seen displayed in Gascony by travelling noblemen. However, as he advanced, he got angrier, so that instead of the lofty and dignified speech he'd planned to deliver as a prelude to his challenge, all he could manage was a gross personal insult and a furious gesture. "Hey! You, Sir!" he cried, "You, hiding behind that shutter! Yes, *you*! Tell me what you're laughing at and we'll all laugh together!"

The gentleman slowly raised his eyes from the mount to the master as if he needed a moment to be certain that it could really be to him that these strange reproaches were addressed. Then he knit his brows slightly, able to doubt the matter no longer and after a long pause, he replied to d'Artagnan with an irony and insolence impossible to describe, "I didn't speak to you, Sir."

"But me, I'm speaking to you!" the young man cried, infuriated by this mix of insolence, manners, politeness, and disdain.

The stranger regarded him for a moment with a slight smile, then withdrew from the window, strolled slowly out the door of the inn, and placed himself in front of the horse within two paces of d'Artagnan. His serene expression and insolent attitude redoubled the mirth of the pair remaining at the window. As he approached, d'Artagnan drew his sword a foot from its scabbard. "Decidedly, this horse's quite the buttercup – or was in its distant youth," resumed the stranger, addressing the men at the window. He paid no attention whatsoever to d'Artagnan who placed himself in front of him, fed up. "This colour's well known in botany but has heretofore been rare among horses."

"There're those who'd laugh at the horse who'd not dare to laugh at the rider!" cried the furious young emulator of Tréville.

"I rarely laugh, sir, as you can probably tell from my face," replied the stranger, "but nevertheless I retain the privilege of laughing when I please."

"And I'll," cried d'Artagnan, "allow no man to laugh when it displeases me!"

"Indeed, Sir?" continued the stranger, more serene than ever. "Well, that's perfectly correct." And turning on his heel, he moved to enter the inn yard by the gate within which d'Artagnan could see a saddled horse. But d'Artagnan was not the sort to allow someone to escape who had had the insolence to mock him. He drew his sword and pursued the stranger, crying, "Turn! Turn, sir Jester or I'll strike you from behind!"

"Strike me!" said the other, pivoting on his heel and regarding the young man with as much astonishment as contempt. "Come, come, dear fellow, you must be mad!" Then as if to himself: "This is annoying. What a find this fellow would be for His Majesty who's searching everywhere for young heroes to recruit for his musketeers!"

He had scarcely finished when d'Artagnan made such a furious lunge at him that if he had not sprung nimbly backward, he probably never would have joked again. The stranger, seeing this was no laughing matter, drew his sword, saluted his adversary, and gravely placed himself *on guard*. But at that moment his 2 cronies attacked d'Artagnan from behind with club, shovel, and tongs, accompanied by the innkeeper. Turning to face this shower of blows diverted d'Artagnan so completely from his attack that his adversary sheathed his sword, becoming a spectator of the fight instead of a participant. Still imperturbable, he said, "A plague on these Gascons! Put him back on his orange horse and let him go!"

"Not before I've killed you, you coward!" cried d'Artagnan, putting the best face possible on the situation and refusing to retreat one step before his three assailants who continued to rain blows on him. "Yet another Gasconade," said the gentleman. "Upon my honour, these Gascons are incorrigible! Continue the dance since he insists. He'll let us know when he's had enough."

But the stranger did not know what manner of man he was dealing with. D'Artagnan was never one to cry for quarter. The fight continued a few moments longer and then exhausted, d'Artagnan dropped his sword that had been broken in two by a club. The next moment a blow fell full on his forehead and knocked him to the ground, bloody and nearly senseless. This was when the citizens came rushing to the scene from all sides. The host carried the wounded man with the help of his waiters into the kitchen where he began to attend to him, fearing more trouble. As for the gentleman, he resumed his place at the window and regarded the crowd with a certain impatience, apparently annoyed by their refusal to go away. "So, how fares the madman?" he said, turning to address his host who had come from within to inquire if he was hurt.

"Your Excellency is safe and sound?" asked the innkeeper.

"Yes, perfectly safe and sound, my dear host. What has become of our young man?"

"He's better," said the host, "but he's fainted dead away."

"Indeed?" said the gentleman.

"However, before he fainted, he rallied enough to defy and challenge you."

"Why, this fellow must be the devil himself!" said the stranger.

"Oh, no, Your Excellency, he's far from being the devil," the host sneered. "While he's unconscious we rifled his saddlebags and found nothing but a clean shirt and eleven crowns. Nonetheless he said in his delirium that if this had happened in Paris you'd be sorry pretty quickly – but since it happened here you'll be sorry later."

"Is that so?" said the stranger, coolly. "He must be some Prince of the Blood in disguise."

"I'm telling you this, sir," replied the host, "so you may be on your guard."

"Did he name no one in his fury?"

"He did! He slapped his pocket and said, 'We'll see what Sir Tréville thinks of this insult to his protégé.'"

"Sir Tréville?" said the stranger, all attention. "He struck his pocket while naming Sir Tréville...? Well, my dear host, while your young man's unconscious, I'm sure you didn't fail to take a look in that pocket. What did he have?"

"A letter addressed to Sir Tréville, the Captain of the Musketeers."

"Indeed!"

"It's just as I have the honour to tell Your Excellency."

The host who was not very clever, missed the expression his words brought to the stranger’s face. The latter rose from the windowsill, knitting his brows with concern. “The devil!” he murmured between his teeth. “Can Tréville have set this Gascon on me? He’s very young – but a sword thrust’s a sword thrust, whatever the age of the swordsman and one is less suspicious of a youth. A small obstacle can be enough to overturn a great plan.”

The stranger fell into a brief reverie. “See here, my host,” he said at last, “isn’t there some way you can relieve me of this frantic fellow? In all conscience, I can’t kill him and yet,” he added with a coldly menacing expression, “He annoys me. Where’s he?”

“In my wife’s chamber upstairs, where they’re dressing his wounds.”

“His clothes and saddlebag are with him? He’s not removed his doublet?”

“On the contrary, everything’s in the kitchen. But if he annoys you, this young madman…”

“He does. He causes the kind of commotion in your inn that decent people can’t tolerate. Go upstairs, prepare my bill, and alert my lackey.”

“What? Is Sir leaving so soon?”

“As you well know, since I’ve already ordered my horse saddled. Haven’t I been obeyed?”

“It’s done. Your horse is at the front gate as Your Excellency can see, all ready for your departure.”

“Good. Do as I’ve told you then.”

“Huh!” said the host to himself. “Can he be afraid of this boy?”

But at a glare from the stranger he cut his musing short, bowed deferentially, and left. “It wouldn’t do for Milady to encounter this clown,” murmured the stranger. “She should be here any moment – she’s late already. My best course would be to ride out to meet her … if only I’d find out what’s in this letter addressed to Tréville!”

And the stranger headed for the kitchen, muttering to himself. Meanwhile the host who had no doubt but that the presence of the young man was driving the stranger from his inn, went back up to his wife’s chamber where he found that d’Artagnan had regained his wits. Telling him the police would go pretty hard on him for picking a fight with one of the *Grands* – for in the host’s opinion, the stranger was nothing less – the innkeeper insisted d’Artagnan should get up and be on his way despite his weakness. D’Artagnan rose, half stunned, without his doublet, and with his head wrapped in linen. Impelled by the host, he headed downstairs. When he arrived in the kitchen, he saw his antagonist calmly conversing at the door of a heavy carriage drawn by two large Norman horses through the window. The person he spoke with, whose face was framed by the carriage window, was a woman of 20 to 22 years of age. As already noted, d’Artagnan could assess a face very quickly. He saw at first glance that this woman was young and beautiful but he was struck by how very different her beauty was from that of the southern climes where d’Artagnan had lived till then. She was pale and fair, with long blond hair falling in curls to her shoulders, large, blue, languishing eyes, rosy lips, and hands of alabaster. Her voice was quite lively as she spoke with the stranger. “Then His Eminence orders me…”

“…To return instantly to England and inform him if the duke leaves London.”

“And my other instructions?” asked the fair traveller.

“They’re contained in this box that you will open when you’re on the other side of the Channel.”

“Very well. And you? What will you do?”

“Me, Milady? I return to Paris.”

“Without punishing this insolent boy?” asked the lady.

Just as the stranger opened his mouth to reply, d’Artagnan who had heard everything, rushed out the door. “This insolent boy does the punishing,” he cried, “and this time I trust my quarry won’t escape like before.”

“Escape?” replied the stranger, knitting his brow.

“That’s right! I presume you won’t dare to run in front of a woman!”

“Think,” said Milady, seeing the gentleman put his hand to his sword. “The least delay and all may be lost.”

“You’re right,” said the gentleman. “Be on your way and I’ll be on mine.”

And saluting the lady with a bow, he sprang onto his horse, while her coachman plied his whip. The two left at a gallop, departing in opposite directions. “Hey! Your bill!” shouted the host whose respect for the stranger was changed to profound disdain when he saw him depart without paying his tab.

“Pay him, rascal,” cried the stranger to his lackey as he galloped away.

The lackey threw 2 or 3 silver coins at the host’s feet and galloped off after his master. “Coward! Wretch! False gentleman!” cried d’Artagnan, dashing after the lackey. But the wounded youth was still too weak for such an effort. He had scarcely gone 10 paces before his ears began to ring, a red cloud fogged his vision, and he was overcome by dizziness. He fell in the middle of the street, still shouting, “Coward! Coward! Coward!”

“He’s indeed a coward,” echoed the innkeeper as he approached d’Artagnan, trying by this little flattery to ingratiate himself with the poor boy as the heron of the fable did with the snail he had snubbed the night before.

“Yes, a coward indeed,” murmured d’Artagnan, “but she – how beautiful!”

“She? Who?” asked the host.

“Milady,” d’Artagnan gasped.

Then he passed out for a second time. “Ah, well,” said the host, “I’ve lost two customers but this one remains and it looks to me as if it’ll be for several days. I’m eleven crowns to the good.”

11 crowns was the exact sum remaining in d’Artagnan’s purse. The host reckoned on 11 days of recovery at a crown a day but he underestimated his guest. At 5 o’clock the next morning d’Artagnan arose, descended by himself to the kitchen, and asked for (among other ingredients the names of which have been lost) some honey, oil, and rosemary. Then he prepared a balm that he applied to his numerous wounds with his mother’s recipe in his hand, replacing his bandages himself and refusing the aid of a doctor. Thanks to the effectiveness of this Bohemian balm, no doubt – and perhaps also to the absence of a doctor – d’Artagnan was back on his feet by that evening. By the next day he was nearly cured. However, when it came time to pay for the rosemary, the oil, and the honey that were his only purchases, as d’Artagnan had eaten nothing at all (in contrast with the yellow horse that had eaten 3 times the usual amount at least according to the stableman), d’Artagnan found nothing in his pockets but his old velvet purse with its 11 crowns. The letter addressed to Sir Tréville had disappeared. The young man began to search for the letter with great diligence, turning all his pockets out 20 times, rummaging through his saddle bags, and examining every fold of his belt pouch. Finally he concluded that the letter was really gone and flew into such a rage that the outcome would probably require another purchase of honey, oil, and rosemary. When the host saw this young hothead threatening to destroy his establishment unless his letter was found, he seized an iron spit, his wife grabbed a broom handle, and the servants picked up the same clubs they had used before. “My letter of recommendation!” cried d’Artagnan. “Or by God, I’ll spit you all like fowls!”

Unfortunately, circumstances were against the young man fulfilling his threat as he had entirely forgotten that his sword had been broken in half in his first brawl. When d’Artagnan drew his rapier he found himself armed with the stump of a sword 6 or 8 inches in length that the host had carefully replaced in the scabbard. As to the rest of the blade, the innkeeper had slyly put it aside for use as a larding-pin. However, this trick probably would not have stopped the fiery young man if it had not occurred to the host that his guest had a legitimate complaint. “Wait a minute,” he said, lowering the spit, “where *is* this letter?”

“Exactly! Where’s this letter?” cried d’Artagnan. “In the first place, let me warn you, this letter’s for Sir Tréville and it must be found. If it isn’t found, he’ll know how to see that it *is* found!”

This threat completely intimidated the host. After the king and the cardinal, Sir Tréville was probably the name most frequently on the lips of both the military and the middle class. (True, there was also Father Joseph but his name was never spoken aloud, such was the terror inspired by His Grey Eminence, as the cardinal’s familiar was called.) So the host dropped his spit, ordered his wife and servants to do the same with their weapons, and set the example by beginning to search for the lost letter himself. “Is this letter of great value?” he asked after some minutes of futile search.

“*Sandis!* I’d think so!” cried the Gascon who counted on this letter to help him make his way at Court. “It contained my fortune!”

“Letters of credit drawn on the public funds?” asked the host anxiously.

“Letters of credit drawn on the private treasury of His Majesty!” responded d’Artagnan who counted on entering the service of the king by virtue of the letter’s recommendation and therefore thought such a response was not stretching the truth too far.

“The devil!” said the host, now truly worried.

“But that’s of no importance,” said d’Artagnan with aplomb, “no importance, the money’s nothing – the letter’s everything! I’d rather have lost a thousand *pistoles* than that letter.”

He might as easily have said 20000 but he was restrained by a certain youthful modesty. As the host was consigning himself to the devil for his failure to find anything, a sudden light burst upon his mind. “That letter isn’t lost!” he cried.

“What!” said d’Artagnan.

“No – it’s stolen from you.”

“Stolen! By whom?”

“By the gentleman who’s here the other day. He came down into the kitchen where your doublet was and stayed there alone for a while. I’d wager he’s the one who stole it.”

“You think so?” replied d’Artagnan, unconvinced. He knew better than anyone that the value of the letter was purely personal and saw nothing in it to tempt anyone’s greed. He knew that neither servants nor guests of the inn had anything to gain by its possession. “Do you say,” resumed d’Artagnan, “that you suspect that impertinent gentleman?”

“I say that I’m sure of it,” said the host. “When I announced that Your Lordship was the protégé of Sir Tréville and you’d even a letter for that illustrious gentleman, he looked very uneasy. He asked me where the letter was and immediately went down into the kitchen where he knew your doublet to be.”

“Then that’s my thief,” replied d’Artagnan. “I’ll complain to Sir Tréville and Sir Tréville will complain to the king.” He then majestically drew 2 crowns from his purse and presented them to the host who accompanied him, hat in hand to the gate. D’Artagnan remounted his yellow horse and rode off. The horse carried him without further incident to the Porte Saint-Antoine at Paris where his owner sold him for three crowns – a good price, considering d’Artagnan had ridden him hard on the final stage. The dealer to whom d’Artagnan sold the nag made it clear that he gave the young man such an exorbitant sum solely due to the uniqueness of the horse’s colour. Thus d’Artagnan entered Paris on foot, carrying his saddlebags under his arm, and marched along until he found a chamber to rent that matched his limited resources. This chamber was a sort of attic situated in a house in the Rue des Fossoyeurs near the Luxembourg Palace. As soon as he made his down payment d’Artagnan took possession of his room, passing the rest of the day in sewing some ornamental lace onto his doublet and breeches. His mother had secretly removed this lace from a nearly new doublet belonging to d’Artagnan the elder and given it to her son. Next he went to the Quai of la Ferraille to have a new blade put on his sword, then went over to the Louvre to ask the first King’s Musketeer he should meet how to find the hôtel, or mansion, of Sir Tréville. This turned out to be in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier in the same neighbourhood as the room rented by d’Artagnan, a circumstance he took as a good omen for the success of his journey. After this, content with way he’d conducted himself at Meung, without remorse for the past, confident in the present, and hopeful for the future, he went to bed and slept the sleep of the brave. This naïve sleep carried him to nine o’clock the next morning, when he rose to make his way to the hôtel of the famous Sir Tréville, who was, in his father’s estimation, the third person of the realm.

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### The Antechamber of Sir Tréville

Sir Troisvilles as his family was still called in Gascony or Sir Tréville as he ultimately styled himself in Paris, really had begun like d’Artagnan: penniless but rich in audacity, spirit, and shrewdness – the assets that enable the poorest Gascon gentleman to make more of his family legacy than the richest noble of Périgord or Berry makes of his. Tréville’s courage that was greatest when the blows fell like hail, had hoisted him to the top of the ladder of Court Favour, a stairway he’d vaulted four steps at a time. He was a friend of the king, who worshipped the memory of his father, King Henry IV. Sir Tréville’s father had served Henry so faithfully in the wars against the Catholic League that after the fall of Paris, in place of money – a thing the Béarnaise king lacked all his life, often paying his debts with the only thing he never needed to borrow, that is to say, his wits – in place of money, Henry had authorised Tréville to take for his coat of arms a golden lion *passant* upon gules, with the motto *Fidelis et Fortis*. This was a great deal in the way of honour, though not much in the way of wealth; when this noble comrade of the Great Henry died, he left his sword and this motto as his sole legacy to his son. Thanks to this double gift, and the stainless name that went with it, Sir Tréville was admitted into the household of young Prince Louis. He served the king so well with his sword, and was so faithful to his motto, that Louis, one of the best blades in his kingdom, had said that if he had a friend who was about to fight a duel and needed a second, he would advise him to first choose himself, and next Tréville – or maybe even Tréville before him. So Louis XIII had a real affection for Tréville – a royal, egotistical affection, it’s true but an affection nonetheless. In those unhappy times a king needed to surround himself with men of Tréville’s mettle. Many might lay claim to the term “strong,” the second part of his motto but few gentlemen deserved to be called *loyal*. Tréville was one of those

rare spirits who possessed the blind courage and intelligent obedience of a faithful watchdog. He had a quick eye that saw if the king was displeased with someone, and a hand that instantly struck the offender; he was a Besme, a Maurevers, a Poltrot of Méré, or a Vitry in other words. In short, Tréville needed nothing but a chance; and he was vigilant, always ready to seize opportunity by the short hairs whenever it came within reach. Thus Louis XIII had made him his Captain of Musketeers who were to the king in their devotion – or rather their fanaticism – what his Ordinaries had been to Henry III and his Scots Guard to Louis XI. In this respect, the cardinal took after the king. When he saw the formidable elite with whom Louis XIII had surrounded himself, this second, or rather this first King of France, thought that he too should have a guard. He therefore had his own company of musketeers, as Louis XIII had his, and these powerful rivals vied with each other in scouring all the provinces of France, and even foreign states, to recruit the most celebrated swordsmen. During their evening game of chess, Richelieu and Louis XIII would often debate the merits of their servants. They boasted of the courage of their men, and while openly deploring duels and brawls, each secretly encouraged his own bravos to tangle with the other man's, and was chagrined or thrilled by his men's defeat or victory. Tréville understood his master's weak side, and it was to this understanding that he owed the long and constant favour of a king who lacks the reputation of being faithful in his friendships. His soldiers formed a devil-may-care legion that answered to no one but him. He paraded his musketeers before Cardinal Armand du Plessis of Richelieu with a mocking air that made His Eminence's grey moustache bristle with fury. Tréville was well versed in the prevailing principle of war that stated that he who failed to live at the expense of his enemy, had to live at the expense of his friends. Drunk, disorderly, and insolent, the King's Musketeers – or rather Tréville's Musketeers – lounged around the taverns, the public squares, and the sporting greens, making loud remarks, twirling their moustaches, rattling their swords, and taking great pleasure in provoking the Cardinal's Guards whenever they encountered them. They would draw their swords right in the open street, joking about the risks – and though they might be killed, they were certain to be mourned and avenged. They often slew their opponents but could count on not being left to rot in prison for long, as Sir Tréville would come to claim them. So these men sang the praises of Tréville in every key; they adored him and, hard cases though they were, they trembled before him like students before their master. They were obedient to his every word and ready to die to uphold the honour of the Company and of Tréville. Sir Tréville employed this powerful tool primarily on behalf of the king and his friends, secondarily for himself and his own friends. Beyond that, in none of the memoirs of a time that left so many memoirs, is this worthy gentleman accused of exploiting his loyal followers for personal gain, not even by his enemies – and he had many, among men of the pen as well as men of the sword. With a rare genius for intrigue with whom Louis XIII had surrounded himself, he nonetheless retained his integrity and remained an honest man. Furthermore, despite constant conflict and an exhausting workload, Tréville had become one of the most gallant courtiers, dashing ladies' men, and wittiest gossips of his day. Tréville's *good* fortunes with the ladies were spoken of like those of Bassompierre 20 years earlier – and that was no small thing. By everyone, then, the Captain of the Musketeers was either admired, feared, or loved – and one can't do better than that. Louis XIV would absorb all the smaller stars of his court into his own vast radiance but his father, one sun among many, allowed each of his favourites their own personal splendour, each individual courtier his own character. Besides the daily levees, or morning receptions, of the king and the cardinal, at this time in Paris there were more than two hundred lesser levees, each with its daily attendees. Among these two hundred minor levees, that of Tréville was one of the busiest. The courtyard of his hôtel, situated on the Rue du Vieux-Colombier, resembled an armed camp, busy by six in the morning in summer and by eight o'clock in winter. Appearing in relays to ensure an imposing number, fifty or sixty musketeers continually swaggered about, armed to the teeth and ready for anything. There, ascending and descending one of those grand staircases so vast that modern civilization would fill the space with an entire house, one could see petitioners for favours, gentlemen from the provinces eager to enrol, and servants in liveries of all colours bringing messages from their masters to Sir Tréville. In the antechamber at the top, on long curving benches, sat the elect, the lucky ones who were soon to be summoned within. There was a continual buzz of conversation from morning till night, while Sir Tréville, in his office next to the antechamber, received visits, listened to complaints, gave his orders and, like the king on his balcony at the Louvre, had only to appear at his window to review his men and their arms. The day that d'Artagnan presented himself the crowd in the courtyard was impressive, especially to a provincial just arriving from his province. However, this provincial was a Gascon, and at this period in particular his countrymen had the reputation of being hard to intimidate. Once he'd passed through the massive street gate, studded with heavy square-headed nails, he found himself amid a troop of swordsmen strolling about the courtyard, calling out to one another, playing practical jokes, and quarrelling about nothing in particular. To make headway through this turbulence one had to be either an officer, a high-ranking noble, or a pretty woman. The young man advanced into the middle of this disorderly uproar, his heart thumping, his long rapier rapping against his lean leg, one hand on the brim of his hat, and wearing the embarrassed half-smile of the provincial. When he'd passed the first cluster of boasters he began to breathe more freely but he couldn't help noticing that they turned to look at him – and for the first time in his life, d'Artagnan, who until that day had had a high opinion of himself, felt rather ridiculous. Arriving at the broad staircase, he felt even worse. While ten or twelve musketeers waited on the landing to take their turns, four of their comrades above amused themselves with the following exercise: one of the four, on the top step, naked sword in hand, tried to prevent the other three from mounting to his level. The 3 below fenced with him with their own flickering swords that d'Artagnan at first took for foils, with their points buttoned. He soon saw the scratches that proved that, on the contrary, these arms were pointed and sharpened. At every scratch both fencers and spectators laughed like madmen. The one who occupied the top step at that moment kept his adversaries at bay with marvellous skill. A circle was formed around the players and the rule was that, at each hit, the person touched should quit the game, losing his turn to his opponent. In five minutes three were lightly hit, one on the wrist, another on the chin, and the third on the ear, by the defender of the upper stair, who was himself untouched: an achievement, according to the rules, worth three turns of favour. Though the young Gascon liked to think of himself as hard to surprise, this game astounded him. He'd seen in his province, that land of hotheads, a few of the boastful challenges that preceded duels but the Gasconades of these four fencers were the most outrageous he had ever heard, even in Gascony. He believed himself transported to that famous country of giants that had terrified Gulliver – and he hadn't even reached the landing, let alone the antechamber. On the landing they didn't fight, they told stories of women, while in the antechamber they told tales of Court. On the landing, d'Artagnan blushed; in the antechamber, he shuddered. His quick wits and vivid imagination that in Gascony had made him dangerous to young chambermaids, and sometimes even to their youthful mistresses, had never dreamed, even in moments of delirium, of half the amorous feats, or a quarter of the exploits of gallantry, attributed here to well-known names in indecent detail. But if his morals were shocked on the landing, his respect for the cardinal was outraged in the antechamber. There, to his great astonishment, d'Artagnan heard harsh criticism of the policies that made all Europe tremble, as well as jokes about the cardinal's private life, affairs many powerful nobles had been punished for daring to meddle in. That great man, revered by d'Artagnan the elder, was a laughingstock to the musketeers of Sir Tréville, who joked about his knock-knees and bent back. Some sang satirical songs about Madam of Combalet, his niece and mistress, while others made plans to harass the Cardinal's Guards, both of which seemed monstrous impossibilities to d'Artagnan. However, when the name of the king was dropped into this derision of the cardinal, a sort of gag closed all the mocking mouths for a moment, while everyone looked timidly around and seemed to wonder if they could trust the partition between the antechamber and the office of Sir Tréville. But soon a smart remark about His Eminence restored the conversation, the laughter resumed, and none of his activities were spared. *I'm sure to see all these fellows either imprisoned or hanged*, thought d'Artagnan, terrified, *and me with them, no doubt. Having listened to them, I'll be taken as an accomplice. What would my father say, who wanted me to respect the cardinal, if he knew I was in the society of such pagans?*

Needless to say, d'Artagnan didn't dare join in the conversation, only watched with both eyes and listened with both ears, straining so as to miss nothing. In spite of his confidence in his father's advice, his inclination and instincts were with rather than against this unheard-of behaviour. As an absolute stranger making his first appearance in the midst of Sir Tréville's courtiers, he was eventually asked what it was he wanted. At this demand, d'Artagnan modestly gave his name, emphasising that he was one of Sir Tréville's countrymen. He begged the inquiring footman to ask for a moment's audience with the captain, a request that the other promised, in good time, to convey. D'Artagnan, somewhat recovered from his initial surprise, now had leisure to study figures and faces. The centre of the most animated group was a very tall musketeer of haughty demeanour, dressed in an outfit so outlandishly gaudy it made him the centre of attention. He wasn't wearing the musketeer's tabard – which wasn't yet obligatory in that time of lesser liberty but greater independence – but rather a sky-blue jerkin, a bit faded and worn, and over this a magnificent shoulder-belt, a baldric embroidered in gold that shone like rippling water reflecting the sun. A long cloak of crimson velvet fell gracefully from his broad shoulders, revealing in front the splendid baldric, from which hung a gigantic rapier. This musketeer had just returned from guard duty and, complaining of having a cold, coughed affectedly from time to time. That was why he'd worn his cloak, he said to those around him. He spoke with a lofty air, and smugly twirled his moustache, while everyone admired his gilded baldric – d'Artagnan more than any. "What'd you have?" said the musketeer. "It's the coming fashion. It's a folly, I admit but still, it's the fashion. Besides, one must find some use for one's inheritance."

"Now, Porthos!" cried one of his satellites. "Don't try to persuade us that baldric came from paternal generosity! It was given to you by that veiled lady I met you with last Sunday near Porte Saint-Honoré."

"No, on the honour and faith of a gentleman, I bought it myself, with my own coin," replied the man called Porthos.

"Oh, right," said another musketeer, "the same way I bought this new purse with what my mistress put in the old."

"It's true," said Porthos, "and the proof is, I paid twelve *pistoles* for it."

At this their admiration was redoubled, though not all doubts were dispelled. "Isn't it so, Aramis?" said Porthos, turning toward another musketeer.

This other musketeer formed a perfect contrast with the one who'd named him as Aramis: he was a young man, aged twenty-two or twenty-three at most, with a suave and ingenuous manner, eyes dark but mild, and cheeks rosy and downy as an autumn peach. His delicate moustache marked a perfectly straight line across his upper lip; he seemed afraid to lower his hands, lest their veins swell; and from time to time he pinched the tips of his ears to maintain their tender pink transparency. He spoke rarely and slowly, bowed frequently, and laughed quietly without showing his teeth that were excellent – like the rest of his person, of which he seemed to take great care. He replied to his friend with an affirmative nod of his head. This seemed to dispel all doubts about the baldric; everyone continued to admire it but no more was said about it, and with one of those sudden changes of thought, the conversation passed on to another subject. "What do you think of this tale from Chalais's equerry?" asked another musketeer, addressing no one in particular.

"And what tale does he tell?" asked Porthos, self-importantly.

"He says that in Brussels he encountered Rochefort, the cardinal's henchman, disguised as a Capuchin monk, and that this cursed Rochefort, thanks to his disguise, had duped that simpleton Sir Laigues into betraying Sir Chalais."

"He's a simpleton, certainly," said Porthos, "but are you sure about this?"

"I had it from Aramis," replied the musketeer.

"Indeed?"

"As you well know, Porthos," said Aramis. "I told you just yesterday. Let's say no more about it."

"Say no more about it! Is that how you see it?" replied Porthos. "Say no more about it! *Plague!* You drop it rather quickly! What – the cardinal spies on a gentleman and steals his letters by means of a traitor, a brigand, a scoundrel! With the help of this spy, he's as good as cut Chalais's throat, all under the stupid pretext that the man wanted to assassinate the king and marry Sir his brother to the queen! No one had heard a word of this until you told us about it yesterday, to our great satisfaction. Then, while we're all still dumbfounded by the news, you come to us today and say, 'Let's say no more about it.'"

"Then let's talk about it, since that's what you want," replied Aramis patiently.

"This Rochefort!" cried Porthos. "If I were poor Chalais's equerry, I'd give him an ugly time of it!"

"And in return, you would pass a sad quarter-hour with the Red Duke," replied Aramis.

"Ha! The Red Duke! That's good, that is! The Red Duke!" applauded Porthos, nodding his head in approval. "The 'Red Duke' is quite charming. I'll spread that one about, *my dear*, be certain of it. He has wit, this Aramis! What a pity you didn't follow your old vocation! What a delightful abbot you'd have made!"

"Oh, it's only a brief delay," replied Aramis. "I'll be one yet, someday. You know very well, Porthos, that that's why I continue to study theology."

"He'll do as he says," Porthos announced. "He'll do it, sooner or later."

"Soon," said Aramis.

"He's only waiting for one thing to happen before resuming his cassock that hangs just behind his uniform," said one musketeer.

"And what thing is that?" asked another.

"For the queen to give birth to an heir to the Crown of France."

"No pleasantries on that subject, Gentlemen," said Porthos. "Thank God, the queen is still of an age to provide the crown with one."

"They say the Duke of Buckingham is in France," observed Aramis with a sardonic smile that gave this apparently simple remark a scandalous significance.

"Aramis, my friend, this time you're in the wrong," interrupted Porthos. "Your wit takes you too far. If Sir Tréville heard you, you'd be the worse for it."

"Are you lecturing me, Porthos?" cried Aramis, whose mild eyes suddenly flashed like lightning.

"*My dear*, be a musketeer or an abbot. Be one or the other but not both," replied Porthos. "You know what Athos told you just the other day: you try to drink from both sides of the cup. Now, don't get angry with us, if you please – it would be a complete waste of time. Remember the pact between you, me, and Athos. But see here, you visit Madam of Combalet, and pay court to her, then go straight to Madam of Bois-Tracy, that little cousin of Madam of Chevreuse, and you seem to be far along in the good graces of that lady. My God, don't tell us about your luck with the ladies – no one asks for your secrets, we all know how discreet you are. But since you're so discreet, why the devil don't you use your discretion on behalf of Her Majesty? Whoever wants to talk about the king and the cardinal, let them – but the queen is sacred. If anyone speaks of her, let him speak only well."



"Porthos, you're as conceited as Narcissus," replied Aramis. "You know I hate moralising, except from Athos. But you, *'my dear'*, wear too magnificent a baldric to stand there and moralize. I'll be an abbot when it suits me but in the meantime, I'm a musketeer. In that capacity I'll say what I please, and right now it pleases me to say that I'm losing my patience with you!"

"Aramis!"

"Porthos!"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" the whole group cried out.

"Sir Tréville awaits Sir d'Artagnan," interrupted the footman, opening the door of the office. At this announcement everyone fell quiet. Amid the general silence the young Gascon crossed the antechamber and entered the sanctum of the Captain of the Musketeers, profoundly grateful at having escaped the end of that strange quarrel.

### 003 The Audience

Sir Tréville was in a sour mood. Nevertheless, he saluted young d'Artagnan politely, who replied by bowing to the ground. Tréville smiled on receiving this compliment and on hearing the Béarnaise accent that reminded him of his youth and his homeland, a double memory that makes a man smile at any age. But he stepped toward the antechamber while holding up a hand toward d'Artagnan as if asking permission to finish with others before starting with him. Then he called out 3 times, louder each time, his voice rising from imperative to angry: "Athos! *Porthos!* ARAMIS!" The musketeers who answered to the last 2 names left their comrades and approached the office, and as soon as they were inside the tapestry door dropped behind them. Their demeanour though not exactly serene, was nonetheless so nonchalant, and yet so dignified and deferential, that d'Artagnan could not help but admire them. He regarded these two men as demigods, and their chief as an Olympian Jupiter, armed with all his thunderbolts. When the two musketeers had entered and the door had dropped behind them, the buzz in the antechamber returned to normal – or even louder, doubtless increased by this summons. Meanwhile Sir Tréville, silent and frowning, paced the length of his office three or four times, passing each time before Porthos and Aramis who were as rigid and mute as if on parade. Suddenly he stopped and faced them, looked them up and down angrily, and demanded, "Do you know what the king said to me, no later than yesterday evening? Do you know, gentlemen?"

"No," responded the musketeers, after a moment's silence. "No, Sir, we don't."

"But I hope you will do us the honour of telling us," added Aramis in his most polite tone and with a graceful bow.

"He told me that from now on he plans to recruit his musketeers from among the guards of Your Eminence!"

"From the Cardinal's Guards! But why?" cried Porthos.

"Because he can see that our thin vintage needs to be strengthened by the addition of some strong honey!" The faces of the 2 musketeers went red to the whites of their eyes. D'Artagnan wished he were a hundred feet underground. "Yes! Yes!" continued Sir Tréville heatedly. "And His Majesty is right, for, upon my honour, the musketeers cut a sad figure at Court. Yesterday, while at cards with the king, with an air of condolence I didn't care for, Your Eminence related how the day before those damned musketeers, those devils incarnate – he lingered over those words with an ironical tone that stung me to the quick – those vandals, he said, with an eye like a tiger, had been loudly roistering past closing time in a cabaret in the Rue Férou, such that a squad of his guards had had to *arrest* the perpetrators. I thought he was going to laugh in my face! *Morbleu!* You must know something about this! Musketeers – arrested! You were there, and don't deny it! You were recognised, and the cardinal named you. Ah but it's my fault, yes, *my* fault, because I myself choose my men. See here, Aramis, why the devil did you ask me for a tabard when you'd be better off in a cassock? And you, Porthos, do you wear such a beautiful baldric just to hang a sword of straw from it? And Athos ... I don't see Athos. Where's he?"

"Sir," Aramis replied sadly, "he's ill – very ill."

"Ill! Very ill, you say? From what?"

"It's feared he's smallpox, Sir," replied Porthos, eager to get a word in, "a case so bad it's certain to ruin his face."

"Smallpox! You tell a fine story, Porthos. Smallpox at his age? Unlikely! But wounded, doubtless, perhaps killed ... if I only knew ... God! Gentlemen Mousquetaires, I'll not have this haunting of low dives, this picking of quarrels in the street, this swordplay in the crossroads. Most of all, I'll not see you laughed at by the Cardinal's Guards who're brave, patient, and skilful men who never have cause to be arrested – and would never *allow* themselves to arrested in any event! I'm sure they'd rather die on the *spot* than be arrested. To run away, scarper, and flee – what a fine thing for king's musketeer s to do!" Porthos and Aramis quivered with rage. They would have gladly strangled Sir Tréville if they had not felt it was his great love for them at the bottom that made him speak this way. They stamped on the carpet, bit their lips till they bled, and gripped their sword-hilts with all their might. Outside, everyone had heard Athos, Porthos and Aramis summoned in an angry voice by Sir Tréville. 10 curious heads leaned against the tapestry and grew pale with fury, for their ears had not missed a syllable of what was said and they repeated the captain's tirade to the whole population of the antechamber. Instantly from the office door to the street-gate, the entire hôtel was boiling with emotion. "So! King's Musketeers, *arrested* by Cardinal's Guards!" continued Sir Tréville furiously so that each word plunged like a stiletto into the breasts of his auditors. "So! Six of His Eminence's Guards arrest six of His Majesty's Musketeers! *Morbleu!* My path's clear! I'll go to the Louvre, resign as Captain of the King's Musketeers, and beg for a lieutenantcy in the Cardinal's Guards! And if he refuses me, *Morbleu!* I'll become an abbot."

At these words, the murmur outside the office became an explosion of oaths and blasphemies. The air was filled with "*Morbleu!*"

"God!"

And "Death of all the devils!"

D'Artagnan looked for a tapestry to hide behind and wished he could crawl under a table. "All right, *my Captain*," said Porthos, beside himself, "it's true, we were six against six but we were taken by a trick. Before we had time to draw our swords two of us were dead, and Athos so badly wounded he might as well have been. But you know Athos: he tried to get up twice, and twice he fell again. But we didn't surrender – no! They dragged us away by force, and on the way to prison we escaped. As for Athos, they left him for dead on the field of battle, not thinking it worth the trouble to carry him off. And that's the story! What the devil, Captain – one can't win every battle! The great Pompey lost at Pharsalia, and François I who was as good as anyone, still lost at Pavia."

"And I've the honour to assure you that I killed one of them with his own sword," said Aramis, "for mine broke at the first parry."

"I didn't know that," replied Sir Tréville, in a milder tone. "I see Your Eminence has exaggerated."

"But please, Sir," continued Aramis, seeing his captain somewhat mollified and seeking to take advantage of it, "please, Sir, don't tell anyone about Athos's wound. He'd be in despair if such news reached the ears of the king. And since the wound is very grave, passing from the shoulder down into the chest, it's feared..."

At that moment the tapestry was lifted, and a noble and handsome face, frightfully pale, appeared under the fringe. "Athos!" cried the two musketeers.

"Athos!" repeated Sir Tréville.

"You sent for me, Sir," said Athos to Sir Tréville, in a weak but perfectly calm voice. "You sent for me or so I've heard and I've come to receive your orders. Here I'm, Sir; what do you desire?"

And the musketeer, impeccably dressed, entered the office. Sir Tréville, moved to the bottom of his heart by this proof of courage, sprang toward him. "I was about to tell these gentlemen," he said, "that I forbid my musketeers to risk their lives needlessly, for brave men are very dear to the king, and the king knows his musketeers are the bravest men on earth. Your hand, Athos!" And without waiting for an answer, Sir Tréville seized his hand and gripped it with all his might. He didn't notice that Athos allowed a slight wince of pain to escape him, despite all his self-control, and if possible grew even paler than before. The door had remained open, and as everyone knew Athos was wounded despite all attempts at secrecy, his arrival had created a sensation. A general cry of satisfaction greeted the final words of the captain, and two or three heads, carried away by enthusiasm, appeared around the edge of the tapestry. Sir Tréville was about to reprimand this lapse, when he suddenly felt Athos's hand clench his own and realised he was about to faint. At the same instant Athos, who had rallied all his strength against the pain of his wound, was finally overcome by it, and fell on the parquet floor like a dead man, "A surgeon!" cried Sir Tréville. "My own – the king's – or better! A surgeon! Or, by God, my brave Athos will die!" At Tréville's cries, everyone rushed into the office and crowded around the wounded man in a perfectly useless frenzy of activity. Fortunately, the doctor in question happened to be in the hôtel. He pushed through the crowd to Athos, who was still unconscious, and, as all the uproar and milling about was hampering him, he demanded that the wounded musketeer be carried into a neighbouring chamber. Instantly Tréville opened a door and cleared the way for Porthos and Aramis, who followed him, carrying their comrade in their arms. The surgeon came next, and shut the door behind him. Then the usually sacrosanct office of Sir Tréville became a sort of extension of the antechamber. Everyone spoke at once, ranting, haranguing, swearing oaths, and consigning the cardinal and his guards to all the devils. After a few moments Porthos and Aramis re-entered the office, leaving the surgeon and Sir Tréville with the wounded man. At length Tréville also returned. The patient had regained consciousness and the surgeon declared there was no reason for the musketeer's friends to be uneasy as his weakness was simply due to loss of blood. Then Tréville waved them out, and everyone left – except d'Artagnan. He wasn't about to forget that he'd been granted an audience and he held his ground with Gascon tenacity. Once everyone had gone out and the door was closed, Sir Tréville turned and found himself alone with the young man. The events of the past few minutes had driven the youth's presence from his mind but he asked his stubborn petitioner what he could do for him. D'Artagnan repeated his name and Sir Tréville suddenly remembered everything. "Pardon me," he said, smiling, "your pardon, my dear countryman but I'd completely forgotten you. What would you have? A captain is nothing but the father of a family, charged with even more responsibility than the father of an ordinary clan. Soldiers are big children – but as I hold that the orders of the king, and above all the orders of Sir the Cardinal, must be carried out..." D'Artagnan couldn't hide a small smile. Seeing this smile, Sir Tréville concluded that he wasn't dealing with a fool and changed the subject, coming straight to the point. "I had a great liking for your father," he said. "What can I do for his son? Speak quickly, as my time isn't my own."

"Sir," said d'Artagnan, "upon leaving Tarbes to come here, I'd planned to ask you in remembrance of that unforgotten friendship, for the tabard of a musketeer. But after all I've seen in the past two hours I now understand how big a favour that would be and I'm afraid I may not deserve it."

"It's indeed a favour, young man," replied Tréville, "but it may not be as far above you as you think or appear to think. However, it's His Majesty's decision in any case and I regret to say that no one's received into the King's Musketeers who's not proved himself in several campaigns, through daring exploits or by having served for two years in some other regiment of less prestige than ours." D'Artagnan bowed and said nothing though he was more eager than ever to don the uniform of the musketeers now that he had learned how hard it was to obtain it. "But," continued Tréville, fixing his compatriot with a look that seemed to try to pierce to the depths of his heart, "out of respect for your father, my old companion, I'll do what I can for you, young man. Our cadets of Béarn aren't usually very wealthy and I doubt things have changed much since I left the province. I daresay you've brought none too much money with you." D'Artagnan drew himself up with a proud air that clearly conveyed that he asked charity of no one. "Very well, young man, very well," continued Tréville, "I see that you're proud. I first arrived in Paris with no more than four crowns in my pouch and would've fought anyone who told me I didn't have enough to buy the Louvre." D'Artagnan's pride redoubled, for thanks to the sale of his horse he was starting his career with 4 crowns more than Tréville had had at the beginning of his. "You'd do your best to conserve what you have, however much it is," Tréville continued, "but also perfect those skills becoming to a gentleman. I'll write you a letter to the Director of the Royal Academy and you'll be admitted without fee. Don't refuse this little favour. Our best-born and wealthiest gentlemen sometimes solicit it without success. You'll learn how to handle a horse, fence, dance, and make some valuable acquaintances. From time to time you can revisit me so I can see how you're doing and if I can do anything else for you."

D'Artagnan could not help but think that this was rather a cold welcome, though still a stranger to Court manners. "Alas, Sir!" he said. "I see now how much I miss the letter of recommendation my father gave me to present to you."

"Indeed," replied Sir Tréville, "I'm astonished you'd undertake such a long journey without that essential asset, the sole resource of poor Béarnaise like us."

"I'd one, Sir," lamented d'Artagnan, "and a good one but it's treacherously stolen from me."

And he related what had happened at Meung, describing his gentleman opponent in minute detail, speaking with a warmth and candour that charmed Sir Tréville. "This is strange, indeed," said Tréville after thinking about it. "You say you mentioned my name?"

"Yes, Sir. It's presumptuous of me but what'd you have? A name like yours is as good as a shield on such a journey. You may well suppose I didn't keep it a secret!"

Flattery was common practice at this time and Tréville was as pleased by it as any king or even cardinal. He could not restrain a satisfied smile but it was quickly suppressed. He returned to the adventure of Meung. "Tell me, had this gentleman a faint scar on his temple?"

"Yes as if he'd been grazed by a musket-ball."

"A good-looking man? Tall?"

"Yes."

"Pale complexion and brown hair?"

"Yes, yes, that's him! How is it, Sir, that you know this man? Ah, if I ever find him – and I'll find him, I swear it, if I have to follow him to Hell!"

"He's waiting for a woman?" continued Tréville.

"Yes! He left right after speaking for a moment to this woman he'd been waiting for."

"You didn't catch the gist of their conversation?"

"He delivered a box to her, told her the box contained her instructions, and that she'd not open it until she reached London."

"This woman's English?"

"He called her Milady."

"It's him!" murmured Tréville. "It's him! I thought he's still in Brussels!"

"Oh, Sir, if you know this man," cried d'Artagnan, "tell me who and where he's and you need do nothing more for me. I'd even give up admission into the musketeers for above all, I want to avenge myself."

"Watch yourself, young man," said Tréville. "If you see this man coming down one side of the street, cross over to the other! Don't cast yourself against this rock – he'll break you like glass."

"That won't stop me," said d'Artagnan. "If I ever find him..."

"In the meantime, if you'll take my advice, don't go looking for him," warned Tréville. All at once Tréville stopped, struck by a sudden suspicion. This great hatred, so loudly proclaimed by this young man for a strange gentleman who had rather improbably stolen his father's letter – mightn't this be some kind of trick? Could this young man have been sent by His Eminence to lay a trap for him? This supposed d'Artagnan could well be a spy the cardinal sought to introduce into Tréville's house, to win Tréville's confidence and later bring him down, as he'd done to a thousand others. He looked d'Artagnan over even more closely than before and was somewhat reassured by the young man's humble demeanour and obvious intelligence. *I know he's a Gascon*, he thought but *he might just as well be a Gascon for the cardinal as for me. Very well, let's try him.* "My friend," he said slowly, "I wish, as the son of an old comrade – and by the way, I believe your story of the lost letter – I wish, I say, to make up for my initial rather chilly reception by letting you in on the secret of our situation here. The king and the cardinal are the greatest of friends, and their apparent differences are only a game to deceive fools. I wouldn't want one of my countrymen, a handsome cavalier and brave youth who must get along here, to fall for these deceptions and be lost, as has happened to so many others. Understand that I am devoted to both these all-powerful masters, and that all my efforts are in service of the king and of Your Eminence, who is one of the most illustrious geniuses France has ever produced. Now, young man, be guided by this. And if you have, from your family, your relations, or even your instincts, any hostility toward the cardinal, such as we see in so many noble houses, bid me goodbye, and we'll say goodbye. I'll help you where I can but without attaching you to my person. I hope that my frankness, in any event, will make you my friend, as you are the only young man to whom I've ever spoken like this." To himself, Tréville said, "If the cardinal who knows how much I detest him has sent this young fox to me, he'll certainly have told his spy that the best way of paying court to me is to heap scorn on the cardinal. Therefore, despite my protestations, my cunning friend here will respond by denouncing His Eminence to me."

But it proved otherwise. D'Artagnan replied with the greatest sincerity, "Sir, I've come to Paris with exactly such intentions. My father recommended that I endure nothing from anyone but the king, the cardinal, and yourself whom he held to be the first three names in France." D'Artagnan had added Sir Tréville to the other two but he thought the addition would cost him nothing. "I've the greatest esteem for Your Eminence," he continued, "and the most profound respect for his actions. The better for me, Sir, as you say so frankly – for then I shall have the honour of sharing your opinions. On the other hand, if you distrust me, as naturally you might, then I'm probably ruining myself by speaking the truth. But I hope you will still honour me with your esteem that is worth more to me than anything else in the world."

Sir Tréville could not have been more surprised. He admired d'Artagnan's wisdom and candour though they did not entirely remove his doubts about him. The more superior this young man proved himself, the more dangerous he would be as a spy. Nevertheless, he shook d'Artagnan's hand and said, "You're an honest youth but what I've already offered is really the best I can do for you now. My hôtel will always be open to you. Call on me at need as opportunities arise and you'll probably be able to fulfil your desires."

"That's to say, Sir," replied d'Artagnan, "that you'll wait to see if I'm worthy. Very well, rest easy," he added with the familiarity of the Gascon, "you'll not have to wait long."

And he bowed as he withdrew as if henceforth he'd take care of himself. "Not so fast," said Tréville, stopping him. "I promised you a letter for the Director of the Academy. Are you too proud to accept it, my young gentleman?"

"No, Sir," said d'Artagnan, "and I'll answer for it that this one won't share the other's fate! I'll guard it, I swear, so that it arrives at its destination and woe to him who tries to take it from me!" Tréville smiled at this bravado and leaving his young countryman at the window where they had been talking, he seated himself at a table to write the promised letter of recommendation. Meanwhile d'Artagnan having nothing better to do, beat out a march with his fingers on the windowsill and watched the musketeers as they went down the street, one by one, following them with his eyes until they disappeared around the corner. Sir Tréville sealed the letter and rose, having written it, then approached the young man to give it to him but just as d'Artagnan reached out his hand to take it, Tréville was astonished to see him start, turn red with anger, rush from the office, crying, "God! He won't escape me this time!"

"Who won't?" demanded Tréville.

"Him – my thief!" shouted d'Artagnan. "Ah! The traitor!"

And he disappeared. "Devil take the madman!" murmured Sir Tréville. "Unless," he added, "this is a clever way to escape, having failed in his scheme."

004

The Shoulder of Athos, the Baldric of Porthos, & the Handkerchief of Aramis

D'Artagnan, furious, crossed the antechamber in 3 bounds and dashed for the stairs, planning to descend them 4 at a time. But carried away by his haste, he ran headfirst into a musketeer who was leaving Sir Tréville's chambers by a side door. D'Artagnan crashed into his shoulder, causing him to howl with pain. "Excuse me," said d'Artagnan, turning to resume his course, "but I'm in a hurry."

His foot was on the first stair when a hand of iron seized him by the sword-belt and stopped him. "You're in a hurry!" cried the musketeer, pale as a shroud. "On this pretext you crash into me, then say, 'Excuse me.' And you believe that to be sufficient? Not at all, my young man. Do you suppose that because you've heard Sir Tréville speak to us a little cavalierly today that others may treat us the same way? Don't fool yourself, my lad – you aren't Sir Tréville."

"My faith!" replied d'Artagnan, recognising Athos who was returning to his lodging after being bandaged by the doctor. "My faith, I didn't mean to do it so I said 'Excuse me.' It seems to me that's enough. I repeat perhaps once too often, that on my word of honour I really must hurry. Let go of me, I beg, and let me go about my business."

"Sir," said Athos, letting him go, "you're unmannerly. One can see that you come from somewhere a long way off."

D'Artagnan had already leaped down 3 or 4 stairs when this remark stopped him short. "*Morbleu*, Sir!" said he. "However far I've come, I warn you, you're not the man to give me a lesson in manners."

"Perhaps," said Athos.

"You know, if I weren't in such a hurry," snapped d'Artagnan, "if I weren't running after someone..."

"Sir Hasty, you can find *me* without running. Do you understand me?"

"And where's that, if you please?"

"Near the Carmelite convent."

"Time?"

"About noon."

"Very well, I'll be there about noon!"

"Don't keep me waiting, for I warn you, at a quarter past twelve I'll be running after *you* and cut off your ears on my way."

"Good!" cried d'Artagnan. "I'll be there ten minutes before twelve."

And he set off running like the devil, still hoping to catch up with the stranger, whose slow pace couldn't have carried him far. But at the courtyard gate Porthos was talking with the soldier on guard. Between them there was just enough space for a man to pass; d'Artagnan thought he could make it and sprang forward to dart between them. But he hadn't taken the wind into account. As he passed, the wind blew out Porthos's long cloak, and d'Artagnan ran full into it. Porthos must have had powerful reasons for retaining his cloak, for instead of letting it go, he pulled it toward him, so stubbornly that d'Artagnan was rolled up in the velvet. D'Artagnan, hearing the musketeer's oaths, tried to wriggle through the folds to escape from the blinding cloak. He particularly wanted to avoid damaging that magnificent baldric mentioned earlier; however, on timidly opening his eyes, he found his nose pressed right between Porthos's shoulders, exactly on the back of the baldric. Alas! Like so many things in this world that are nothing but appearances, the baldric was golden in front but only simple buff leather behind. The vainglorious Porthos couldn't afford a completely gilded baldric but he had at least half of one. The pretended head cold that necessitated his wearing a cloak was now explained. "*Vertubleu!*" cried Porthos, struggling to rid himself of d'Artagnan who was squirming against his back. "You must be crazy to run into people like that!"

"Excuse me," said d'Artagnan, reappearing under the shoulder of the giant, "but I'm in a great hurry! I'm running after someone and..."

"Do you always run with your eyes closed?" demanded Porthos.

"No," replied d'Artagnan, piqued. "No, and thanks to my eyes, I can see what others don't."

Porthos wasn't sure if he understood this but he understood it well enough to get angry. "Sir," he said, "I warn you, if you go running into musketeers, you're liable to get thrashed."

"Thrashed, Sir!" said d'Artagnan. "Strong words."

"Strong words become a man who's used to looking his enemies in the face."

"Well, by God! I know now why you don't turn your back on them!"

And the young man, delighted with his joke, laughed loudly as he walked away. Porthos, foaming with rage, made a grab for d'Artagnan. "Later, later," cried d'Artagnan, dodging, "when you're not wearing your cloak!"

"At one o'clock then, behind the Luxembourg!"

"Very well, at one o'clock," d'Artagnan called, turning the corner.

But d'Artagnan could see no one down either street. However slowly the stranger had walked, he had nonetheless gotten away or perhaps entered a house. D'Artagnan asked everyone he met about the man all the way down to the ferry, then returned up the Rue of Seine to the Croix-Rouge: nothing, absolutely nothing. However, at least the sweat of the chase cooled his angry heart. He reflected on recent events, numerous and boding nothing but ill. It was barely 11 o'clock in the morning yet he was already disgraced before Sir Tréville who could not help but find d'Artagnan's manner of leaving him a bit cavalier. In addition, he could look forward to duels with 2 men who were each capable of killing 3 d'Artagnans – with 2 King's Musketeers, no less, 2 of those heroes whom he esteemed in his heart and mind above all others. It was a sad situation. Sure of being killed by Athos, the young man was not worried overmuch about Porthos. However, as hope is the last thing extinguished in a man's heart, he hoped to somehow survive these 2 duels though probably with terrible wounds. In case he survived, he chided himself with the following reproaches: "What a hare-brained lout I'm! That brave and unfortunate Athos's wounded in the shoulder right where I ran into him headfirst like some ram. The only thing that astonishes me is that he didn't kill me on the spot. He certainly had the right – the pain I caused him must've been atrocious. And as for Porthos! Oh! As for Porthos – my faith, that's just too funny!" And in spite of himself the young man began to laugh while looking around to make sure no one was offended by his solitary laughter. "As for Porthos, that's droll, droll – but I'm still a brainless dolt. Does one run into people without warning? No! And does one look under cloaks to see what isn't there? No! He'd certainly have pardoned me if I hadn't mentioned that cursed baldric though I did so in veiled terms – no, not veiled, cloaked! Ha! Oh, cursed Gascon that I'm, my wit takes me from the frying pan to the fire. D'Artagnan, *my friend*," he continued, amiably lecturing himself, "if you escape that seems unlikely, henceforth you must take the path of perfect politeness. You must be admired for it, even cited as an example. To be obliging and polite doesn't make one a coward. Look at Aramis: charm and grace personified. Does anyone call Aramis a coward? No, certainly not and from now on he'll be my model. Ah! There he's now!" D'Artagnan had arrived within a few paces of the hôtel of Madam of Combalet as he walked and talked with himself and in front of that mansion he saw Aramis in conversation with 3 gentlemen of the French Guards. Aramis likewise saw d'Artagnan but he had not forgotten that earlier Sir Tréville had dressed him down in front of this young man and having seen the musketeers rebuked he was likely to be insolent so he pretended not to see him. D'Artagnan on the contrary, full of his plans of conciliation and courtesy, approached the 4 men and gave them a deep bow, smiling hopefully. All conversation immediately stopped. Aramis nodded his head slightly but did not smile. D'Artagnan was not so naïve as to fail to see he was intruding but also too ignorant of the manners of the *beautiful world* to know how to gracefully withdraw from a false position that is where a man usually finds himself when he interrupts a conversation that doesn't concern him. He was looking for the least awkward way out when he noticed that Aramis had his foot on a handkerchief that he had doubtless dropped by mistake. Here was a way to repair his blunder! He knelt, and with the most gracious air he could manage, pulled the handkerchief from under the musketeer's foot, in spite of the latter's efforts to keep it there. Then d'Artagnan presented it to him, saying: "Sir, I think that this is a handkerchief you'd be sorry to lose."

The handkerchief was in fact richly embroidered and had a coronet and arms on one of its corners. "Ah ha!" cried one of the guards. "Do you still insist, most discreet Aramis that you're not on good terms with Madam of Bois-Tracy when that gracious lady's the kindness to lend you one of her handkerchiefs?"

Aramis darted at d'Artagnan one of those looks that tell a man he has acquired a mortal enemy, then said, resuming his mild air, "You're misled, gentlemen. This handkerchief isn't mine and I've no idea why sir here fancies he'd return it to me rather than to one of you. As proof of what I say, here's mine in my pocket."

At these words he pulled out his own handkerchief that’s very elegant, of fine cambric (though cambric was then very expensive), without arms, and ornamented with a single initial, that of its owner. D’Artagnan said nothing, realising he had blundered again. But Aramis’s friends were not so restrained, unconvinced by his denial. One of them said to the young musketeer with pretended seriousness, “If it’s as you say, my dear Aramis, or rather pretend, I’d have to reclaim it myself – for as you know, Bois-Tracy is one of my closest friends and I can’t allow his wife’s personal items to be waved around like trophies.”

“Your critique’s poorly phrased,” replied Aramis, “and while I recognise the justice of your claim, I refuse it on account of its form.”

“The fact’s,” hazarded d’Artagnan timidly, “I didn’t see the handkerchief fall from Sir Aramis’s pocket. He’d his foot on it, that’s all, and I thought since the handkerchief’s under his foot, it must be his.”

“And you’re deceived, my dear sir,” replied Aramis coldly, unappeased. Then turning to the guard who had declared himself Bois-Tracy’s friend, he said, “Moreover, it occurs to me, my dear close friend of Bois-Tracy, that I’d keep it as he’s as much my friend as yours. Besides, the handkerchief could just as easily have fallen from your pocket as from mine.”

“No, upon my honour!” cried the guard.

“You’re about to swear upon your honour and I upon my word, and then it’ll be clear that one of us is lying. I have a better idea, Montaran. Let’s each take half of it.”

“Of the handkerchief?”

“Yes.”

“That’s perfect!” cried the other two guards. “The Judgement of King Solomon! Aramis, you’re wisdom itself!”

The young men burst out laughing, and naturally nothing more was made of the matter. The conversation over, the three guards and the musketeer cordially shook hands and parted, the guards going one way, Aramis the other. “Now’s the time to make my peace with this gentleman,” d’Artagnan said to himself, having stood to one side during the end of the conversation. With this noble intention he approached Aramis, who was going his way without paying any attention to him. “Sir,” d’Artagnan said to him, “you’ll pardon me, I hope.”

“Sir,” interrupted Aramis, “permit me to observe that you’ve not behaved in this matter as a man of good breeding should’ve.”

“What, Sir!” cried d’Artagnan, “Do you suppose…”

“I suppose, Sir, that you aren’t a fool and know very well that people don’t tread on handkerchiefs for no reason despite being from Gascony. What the devil! Paris isn’t paved with cambric.”

“Sir, it’s a mistake to try to humiliate me,” said d’Artagnan whose natural combativeness began to outweigh his peaceful intentions. “I’m from Gascony, it’s true, and since you know it, I don’t have to tell you that Gascons have short fuses. When they ask once to be pardoned even for a folly, they believe they’ve already done twice as much as they should.”

“Sir,” responded Aramis, “my remarks to you aren’t for the purpose of seeking a quarrel. I’m no ruffian, merely a temporary musketeer, thank God! I don’t fight unless forced to and always with great reluctance. However, this time the affair’s serious as a lady’s been compromised by you.”

“Say, rather, by us,” said d’Artagnan.

“Why did you so oafishly return me the handkerchief?”

“Why did you so carelessly let it fall?”

“I’ve said and I repeat, Sir, that the handkerchief didn’t fall from my pocket.”

“Then you’re twice a liar, Sir, for I saw it fall!”

“Oh ho! Are you going to take that tone, Sir Gascon? I see I must teach you how to behave.”

“And I, I’ll send **you** back to your mass, Sir Abbot! Draw if you please, and instantly!”

“Not now, *my good friend*; or at least, not here. Has it escaped your notice that we’re just outside the hôtel of Madam of Combalet that is full of the cardinal’s creatures? How do I know His Eminence’s not charged you with bringing him my head? I’m ridiculously partial to my head as it seems to go so well with my shoulders. No, you’ll die, rest assured – but quietly and in privacy, someplace where you’ll be able to boast to no one of your death.”

“Agreed – but don’t be so sure of success. And take the handkerchief whether or not it belongs to you; you may have occasion to need it.”

“Sir’s that much the Gascon then?” asked Aramis.

“I’m. Sir isn’t postponing this rendezvous through an excess of prudence?”

“Prudence, sir, is a virtue quite useless to musketeers – but indispensable to men of the Church and as I’m only a temporary musketeer, I’m prudent when I choose to be. At two o’clock I’ll have the honour of awaiting you at the hôtel of Sir Tréville. There I’ll name the site for our meeting.”

The two young men bowed, then parted, Aramis going up the street that led to the Luxembourg. D’Artagnan, seeing his appointed hour with Athos was nearly due, took the road to the Carmelite convent, saying to himself, “I certainly can’t turn back now – but at least if I’m to be killed, I’ll be killed by a musketeer!”

005

The Musketeers of the King & the Guards of the Cardinal

D’Artagnan knew no one in Paris so he went to his rendezvous with Athos without a second, resolved to be content with whomever his adversary should choose. Besides, he intended to make all proper apologies to the brave musketeer, though displaying no weakness. He wanted to avoid the usual outcome of a duel in which a young and vigorous man takes on an adversary who is weak from wounds: if he lost, it would be a double triumph for his antagonist; if he won, he would be accused of false courage and taking advantage of the other’s weakness. It must be clear by this point that d’Artagnan was no ordinary man. Though telling himself his death was inevitable, he refused to accept that death with resignation, as a less courageous man might have done in his place. He reflected on the different characters of his three antagonists and began to see his course more clearly. He hoped, by means of gracious and dignified excuses, to make a friend of Athos, whose air of nobility and whose austere demeanour he admired. He flattered himself he could intimidate Porthos by threatening to reveal the secret of the baldric that, if he weren’t killed on the spot, he could spread about to everyone. If he told the tale properly Porthos would be a laughingstock. As for sly Aramis, he wasn’t very afraid of him. If he should manage to make it that far, he felt confident he’d make short work of him, or at least mar his face, spoiling the beauty of which he was so proud as Caesar had recommended be done to the soldiers of Pompey. Above all, d’Artagnan was determined to follow his father’s advice to endure nothing from anyone but the king, the cardinal, and Sir Tréville. So he didn’t just walk toward the Carmelite convent, he flew. The Carmes-Deschaux, as it was then called, was a windowless building standing in an empty field adjacent to the meadow of Préaux-Clercs. It often served as a nearby rendezvous for antagonists with no time to waste. When d’Artagnan came in sight of the open ground at the foot of the convent, Athos had been waiting for only five minutes, and the bell in the tower was tolling twelve noon. Thus d’Artagnan was as punctual as the Samaritaine, and the most rigorous interpreter of the *code duello* could have no complaint. Athos, still suffering cruelly from his wound, though it had been dressed by Tréville’s surgeon, was sitting on a milestone and awaiting his adversary with that calm demeanour and noble air that never left him. At the sight of d’Artagnan he rose and stepped politely forward to meet him. D’Artagnan, on his part, met his adversary hat in hand, feather almost touching the ground. “Sir,” said Athos, “I’ve invited two of my friends to serve as seconds but they have not yet arrived. I’m surprised, as it’s not at all customary for them to be late for an occasion of this sort.”

“I myself have no seconds, Sir,” said d’Artagnan, “for having arrived only yesterday in Paris, so far I know only Sir Tréville. I was recommended to him by my father who’s the honour to be one of his friends in some degree.”

Athos reflected for a moment. “You know no one but Sir Tréville?”

“No, Sir. I know only him.”

“Ah but then,” continued Athos, speaking half to himself and half to d’Artagnan, “if I kill you, I’ll be called a child-eater.”

“Not quite,” replied d’Artagnan, with a dignified bow, “for you do me the honour to cross swords with me while hampered by a very painful wound.”

“Very painful indeed, you may take my word for it. You gave me a devil of a thump, I can tell you. But I’ll fight left-handed as I usually do in such circumstances. Don’t think I’m doing you a favour as I fight with either hand. In fact, it may be a disadvantage for you; a left-handed opponent can be a problem if one isn’t used to them. I regret not having informed you of this earlier.”

“Truly, Sir,” said d’Artagnan, bowing once again, “you display a courtesy that I very much appreciate.”

“You do me too much honour,” replied Athos with the air of a gentleman. “Let’s speak of something else, I beg. Ah! *Blue blood!* How you hurt me! My shoulder’s on fire.”

“If you’d permit me…” d’Artagnan said timidly.

“What, Sir?”

“I’ve a miraculous balm for wounds, a balm given to me by my mother, and which I’ve already proven upon myself.”

“Well?”

“Well, I’m sure that in three days this balm would cure you. Once you’re cured … it’d still be a great honour for me to meet with you.”

D’Artagnan said these words with a sincerity that ensured their politeness, casting no doubt on his courage. “By God, Sir,” said Athos, “your proposition pleases me; I can’t accept it but it savours of the gentleman a league off. That’s how the brave knights spoke in the time of Charlemagne and every cavalier should make them his model. Unfortunately, we don’t live in the time of the Great Emperor but in the time of Your Eminence and no matter how secret we kept it, within three days he’d know of our rendezvous and put a stop to our duel. Speaking of which, will these laggards never arrive?”

“If you’re pressed for time, Sir,” said d’Artagnan with the same simplicity with which a moment before he had proposed to postpone the duel three days, “if you’re in a hurry and would like to dispose of me at once, don’t delay on my account, I beg you.”

“I admire your way of speaking,” said Athos with a gracious nod to d’Artagnan. “That’s not the remark of a man without brains, still less a man without heart. Sir, I love men of your stamp. I can see that if we don’t kill each other, I’ll enjoy conversing with you hereafter. We’ll wait for the seconds if you don’t mind. I’ve plenty of time, and it’ll make the affair more correct. Ah! Here’s one now, I believe.” In fact, from the end of the Rue of Vaugirard, the gigantic form of Porthos began to appear. “What!” cried d’Artagnan. “Your first second’s Sir Porthos?”

“Yes. Does that displease you?”

“No, by no means.”

“And here’s the other one.”

D’Artagnan turned toward where Athos pointed and recognised Aramis. “What!” cried he, even more astonished, “Is your other second Sir Aramis?”

“Of course. Don’t you know that none of us are ever seen without the others and we’re known as the Three Inseparables by the musketeers and the guards at Court and in the city? Perhaps, since you come from Dax or Pau…”

“From Tarbes,” said d’Artagnan.

“Ah. You may then be somewhat ignorant of these details,” said Athos.

“My faith!” said d’Artagnan, “You’re well-named, gentlemen. My adventure here will certainly prove your alliance isn’t based on your differences if anyone hears of it.”

Meanwhile Porthos arrived, waved a greeting to Athos, and then turning toward d’Artagnan, froze in astonishment. (Let it be noted, in passing, that he had changed his baldric and given up his cloak.)

“What? What?” he said. “What does this mean?”

“It is with sir here, that I’m going to fight,” said Athos, indicating d’Artagnan with his hand, and saluting him with the same gesture.

“But … but I’m to fight with him also!” said Porthos.

“But not until one o’clock,” replied d’Artagnan.

“And I’m to fight with sir as well,” said Aramis, arriving.

“But not until two o’clock,” said d’Artagnan with the same nonchalance.

“But why’re you fighting him, Athos?” asked Aramis.

“My faith, I can’t quite say. Ah, yes – he hurt my shoulder. And you, Porthos?”

“My faith, I fight … because I fight!” answered Porthos, colouring.

Athos who missed nothing, saw a faint smile touch the Gascon’s lips. “We’d a discussion about wardrobe,” the young man said.

“And you, Aramis?” asked Athos.

“We’re fighting over theology,” answered Aramis, making a sign to d’Artagnan to keep quiet about the reason for their duel.

Athos saw a second smile cross d’Artagnan’s lips. “Really?” said Athos.

"Oh, yes – a passage in Saint Augustine upon which we'd not agree," said the Gascon.

"Decidedly, this man's his wits about him," murmured Athos.

"And now that you're assembled, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, "Permit me to make my excuses."

At the word *excuses*, Athos's brow clouded, a contemptuous smile touched Porthos's lips, and Aramis made a gesture of refusal. "You misunderstand me, gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, throwing back his head, its bold angles gilded by the sun. "I ask to be excused in case I may be unable to pay my debt of honour to all three of you. Sir Athos's the first right to kill me that seriously devalues your claim, Sir Porthos, and renders yours, Sir Aramis, nearly worthless. And so I repeat, gentlemen, please excuse me – but only on that account. Now, *on guard!*"

D'Artagnan drew his sword at these words with the air of a true cavalier. The blood had risen to his head and at that moment he would gladly have drawn his blade against all the musketeers in the realm. It was a quarter past noon. The sun was at its zenith and the ground chosen as the theatre of the duel was exposed to its full power. "It's quite hot," said Athos, drawing his sword in his turn, "and yet I can't remove my doublet, for I can tell my wound's bleeding, and I wouldn't care to disturb sir with a flow of blood that he's not drawn from me himself."

"Well said, sir," said d'Artagnan. "Drawn by myself or another, I assure you I'll always be sorry to see the blood of such a brave gentleman. I'll fight in my doublet like you."

"See here, see here," said Porthos, "enough of these compliments. Are we to wait all day to take our turns?"

"Speak for yourself, Porthos, when you speak so inappropriately," interrupted Aramis. "As for me, I find what they say very well said, entirely worthy of two such gentlemen."

"When you please, Sir," said Athos, coming on guard.

"I await your command," said d'Artagnan, crossing swords.

But the two rapiers had scarcely touched when a squad of His Eminence's guards came around the corner of the convent, commanded by Sir Jussac. "The Cardinal's Guards!" cried Aramis and Porthos. "Sheathe swords, gentlemen! Sheathe swords!"

But it was too late. The 2 combatants had been seen in a position that left no doubt as to their intentions. "*Whoa!*" cried Jussac, advancing toward them, and signalling his men to do likewise. "*Whoa!* Musketeers, here, and preparing to fight? And the edicts, what of them, eh?"

"You're generous men, gentlemen Guards," said Athos though with some hostility as Jussac had been one of the attackers of the day before. "If we're to see you fighting, I'd say let them fight without hindrance. Leave us be then and you may enjoy some free entertainment."

"Gentlemen," said Jussac, "I very much regret to say the thing's impossible. Duty before all. So sheathe if you please and follow us."

"Sir," said Aramis, parodying Jussac, "it'd give us great pleasure to obey your gracious invitation, if it were up to us. But unfortunately, the thing's impossible. Sir Tréville's forbidden it. Therefore, be on your way if you know what's good for you."

This railleery exasperated Jussac. He said, "If you disobey, we'll charge you."

"They are five," said Athos in an undertone, "and we're only three; we'll be beaten again, and must die on the spot for I swear, I'll never again appear defeated before the captain."

Athos, Porthos, and Aramis instantly closed in while Jussac drew his soldiers together. This brief moment was enough for d'Artagnan to choose his path. It was one of those events that decide a man's life; a choice between the king and the cardinal that once made is irrevocable. To fight was to break the law, risk his head, and make an enemy of a minister more powerful than the king himself in one stroke. All this the young man foresaw and to his credit he did not hesitate a second. Turning toward Athos and his friends, he said, "Gentlemen, may I make so bold as to correct you? You said you're only three but it seems to me we're four."

"But you're not one of us," said Porthos.

"That's true," answered d'Artagnan. "I lack the uniform but I'm with you in spirit. I've the heart of a musketeer, Sir – I feel it and must follow where it leads."

"Step aside, young man," called Jussac who had guessed d'Artagnan's plans, no doubt from his gestures and expression. "You may retire with our consent. Save your skin; be off!"

D'Artagnan stayed put. "What a fine fellow you are," said Athos, gripping the young man's hand.

"Come, come! Make up your minds," called Jussac.

"See here," said Porthos, "we must do something."

"Young man, you're generous to a fault," said Athos. But all three were worried about d'Artagnan's youth and inexperience. "We'll be but three, one of us wounded, plus a boy," resumed Athos, "but it'll nonetheless be said we're four men."

"Yes but to surrender!" said Porthos.

"It's rather difficult," replied Athos.

D'Artagnan understood their indecision. "Gentlemen, give me a try," he said, "and I swear to you on my honour that they won't take me from here alive."

"What're you called, *my brave man?*" said Athos.

"D'Artagnan, Sir."

"Well, then: Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan – forward!" cried Athos.

"See here, gentlemen, have you decided to decide?" called Jussac for the third time.

"We're ready, gentlemen," said Athos.

"And may we know your plans?" asked Jussac.

"We're about to have the honour of charging you," replied Aramis, tipping his hat with one hand while drawing his sword with the other.

"So! You resist!" cried Jussac.

"God! Are you surprised?"

And the 9 combatants rushed each other with fury – but not without method. Athos took on a certain Cahusac, a favourite of the cardinal; Porthos had Biscarat; and Aramis found himself facing 2 adversaries. As for d'Artagnan, he dashed at Jussac himself. The young Gascon's heart pounded as if it would burst from his chest, not from fear – by the grace of God, he had no shadow of that – but from excitement and exhilaration. He fought like a furious tiger, turning 10 times around his adversary, repeatedly changing his ground and his guard. Jussac was a connoisseur of the blade as they said then and quite experienced but he was hard put to defend himself against an adversary who leaped so agilely this way and that, attacking from all sides at once while parrying like a man with the greatest respect for his own skin. Eventually Jussac began to lose patience with this contest. Furious at being held in check by one he had regarded as a boy, he got angry and began to make mistakes. D'Artagnan redoubled his nimble attacks; though short on experience, he had a profound natural instinct for fencing. Jussac made a savage thrust at his adversary, fed up at last but d'Artagnan managed to parry it and while Jussac was recovering, d'Artagnan slid like a serpent under his steel and passed his sword through his body. Jussac fell like a dead weight. D'Artagnan then anxiously surveyed the field of battle. Aramis had killed one of his adversaries but the other was pressing him hard. Nevertheless, Aramis's situation was good and well able to defend himself. Biscarat and Porthos had wounded each other: Porthos had taken a thrust through the arm and Biscarat through his thigh. But the wounds were not serious and they just fought with all the more determination. Athos was visibly paler, wounded anew by Cahusac but had not retreated a foot; he had only changed his sword hand and now fought with his left. D'Artagnan was free to aid whomever he liked according to the laws of duelling of the time. While he tried to decide which of his companions most needed his help, he caught a glance from Athos, a glance of sublime eloquence. Athos would rather die than call for help but he could look and his look could appeal. D'Artagnan understood and with a single bound he fell on Cahusac's flank, crying, "Look to me, Sir Guard, or die!" Cahusac turned. It was time for Athos who had been held together only by his great courage, fell to one knee. "God!" he cried to d'Artagnan. "Don't kill him, young man, I beg you. I've an old grudge to settle with him when I'm cured and in good health. Just disarm him – bind his sword. That's it! Good! Well done!"

Athos cried as Cahusac's sword went flying 20 paces from him. Cahusac and d'Artagnan sprang forward together, the one to recover the sword, the other to seize it but d'Artagnan reached it first and placed his foot on it nimbler. Cahusac ran to the body of the man Aramis had killed and grabbed his rapier, then returned toward d'Artagnan – but on his way he met Athos. The musketeer had recovered his breath during the pause d'Artagnan had provided and, afraid that d'Artagnan might kill his enemy, sought to re-enter the fight. D'Artagnan understood that Athos preferred to be left to handle Cahusac alone. In fact, within a few seconds Cahusac fell with a wound across his throat. At the same moment, Aramis placed his sword against his remaining enemy's breast and made him call for mercy. That left only Porthos and Biscarat. Porthos pelted him with a thousand taunts, asking Biscarat what time it could be, offering his compliments on Biscarat's brother having just obtained a command in the Regiment of Navarre, and so on – but however he joked, it gained him nothing. Biscarat was one of those iron men with no fear of death. However, it had to be brought to an end. The Watch might arrive and arrest all the combatants, wounded or not, Royalists or Cardinalists. Athos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan surrounded Biscarat and demanded that he surrender. Though standing alone, and with a sword wound through his thigh, Biscarat was inclined to fight on – but Jussac, who'd risen on his elbow, called for him to yield. However, Biscarat turned a deaf ear – he was a Gascon, like d'Artagnan – and just laughed. Between parries, he found a moment to point with his sword at a spot on the ground. "Here," he said, paraphrasing a Bible verse, "here dies Biscarat, last of those who were with him!"

"But there are four against you!" called Jussac. "I order you to yield!"

"Ah! If you order it, that's different," said Biscarat. "As you're my officer, it's my duty to obey."

He jumped backward, broke his sword across his knee, and threw the pieces over the convent wall. Then he crossed his arms, whistling a Cardinalist song. Courage is always respected even in an enemy. The musketeers saluted Biscarat with their swords, then returned them to their scabbards. D'Artagnan did likewise; then aided by Biscarat, the only guard still standing, he carried Jussac, Cahusac, and Aramis's wounded opponent under the awning of the convent. The other guard was dead. D'Artagnan and the musketeers gleefully rang the convent bell and then, carrying 4 swords out of 5, drunk with joy, they set out toward the hôtel of Sir Tréville. They walked arm in arm, taking up the whole width of the street, and hailing every musketeer they met until it became a triumphal march. D'Artagnan's heart swelled as he marched between Athos and Porthos, gripping them tenderly. "If I'm not yet a musketeer," he said to his new friends as they entered the gate of the Hôtel de Tréville, "at least now I'm an apprentice, aren't I?"

## 006

### His Majesty King Louis XIII

The affair of the *mêlée* at the Carmelite convent made a great noise. Sir Tréville rebuked his musketeers in public and congratulated them in private. However, there was no time to lose in gaining the ear of the king, so Tréville hurried across the river to the Louvre. But he was too late: the king was engaged with the cardinal and Tréville was told he was too busy to receive him. That evening, Tréville went to play cards with the king. Always fond of money, the king was winning that put him in an excellent humour. Seeing Tréville from far off, he said, "Come here, Captain, so I can scold you. Are you aware that His Eminence's been complaining to me about your musketeers and so emotionally that it's made him ill? These musketeers of yours are devils incarnate!"

"No, Sire," replied Tréville, who saw right away how things stood. "No, on the contrary, they're good fellows, meek as lambs whose only desire's that their swords never leave their scabbards except in the service of Your Majesty. But what'd you have? The guards of Your Eminence are forever picking fights with them. For the honour of the corps, the poor young men are obliged to defend themselves."

"Listen to Sir Tréville!" said the king. "Hear him! You'd think he's speaking of a society of monks! In truth, my dear Captain, I'm inclined to relieve you of your commission and give it to Miss de Chemerault and give you the abbey I promised her. Do you think I'm going to take your word for everything? I'm called Louis the Just, Sir Tréville, and we'll see by and by what we'll see."

"And because I've perfect faith in that justice, Sire, I'll wait patiently and quietly on Your Majesty's good pleasure."

"Wait then, sir – wait," said the king. "I'll not keep you waiting long."

In fact, the king's luck soon changed. As his winnings began to dwindle, he was not sorry to find a reason *to make Charlemagne* (as the old expression has it) and quit while he was ahead. He stood up from the table and poured the money in front of him into his pockets, most of which was still winnings. "Take my place, La Vieuville," he said. "I must speak with Sir Tréville on an affair of some importance. Let's see, I'd eighty *pistoles* before me; put down the same sum, so the losers will have nothing to complain of. Justice before all!"

He turned toward Tréville and beckoned him into the embrasure of a nearby window. "Well, Sir, you say it's His Eminence's guards who sought to quarrel with the musketeers?" the king asked.

"Yes, Sire, as always."

"And how did this thing come to happen? Tell me, my dear Captain. A good judge always listens to both sides."

"How did it happen? Good God! In the most simple and natural way possible. Three of my best soldiers whom Your Majesty knows by name, whose devotion you've appreciated more than once – three of my best soldiers, I say, Gentlemen Athos, Porthos, and Aramis had planned an outing with a young Gascon cadet whom I'd introduced to them that morning. The party's to take place in Saint-Germain, I believe. They'd just met up at the Carmelite convent when they were accosted by Gentlemen of Jussac, Cahusac, Biscarat, and a couple of other guards who certainly didn't go there in such numbers without intending to violate the edicts."

"Ah! I tend to agree with you," said the king. "Doubtless they went to fight there themselves."

"I make no such accusation, Sire; but I'll leave it to Your Majesty to judge what might bring five armed men to an area as deserted as the neighbourhood of the Carmelite convent."

"Yes, you're right, Tréville – you're right!"

"Then they changed plans when they saw my musketeers. Their petty personal quarrels were nothing next to their hostility to our company – for Your Majesty must know that the musketeers who're for the king and no one but the king, are the natural rivals of the guards who're for Your Eminence."

"Yes, Tréville, I know," said the king in a melancholy voice, "and I think it's a shame to see two such factions in France, two heads to royalty. But all this will end, Tréville, all this will end. You say then that the guards sought a quarrel with the musketeers?"

"I say it's probable that such a thing occurred though I can't swear to it, sire. You know that judging the truth in such a matter is very difficult unless one is endowed with the kind of instincts that've earned Louis XIII the name of the Just..."

"That's so. But they're not alone, your musketeers – they had a youth with them?"

"Yes, Sire, and Athos's already wounded. So three King's Musketeers, one of them wounded, plus a youth, not only held their ground against five of the finest blades in the Cardinal's Guards, they even brought four of them down."

"But Tréville, this is a victory!" cried the king, radiant. "A complete victory!"

"Yes, sire, as complete as that of Ponts-de-Cé."

"Four men, one of them wounded, and one a youth, you say?"

"Barely a man. Nevertheless, he conducted himself so well, I'll take the liberty of recommending him to Your Majesty."

"His name?"

"D'Artagnan, sire. He's the son of one of my oldest friends, a man who served the king, your father of glorious memory in the civil wars."

"And you say he conducted himself well, this young man? Tell me about it, Tréville; you know how I love stories of war and combat."

King Louis XIII twirled his moustache delightedly and placed his hand on his hip. "Sire," continued Tréville, "As I said, Sir d'Artagnan is almost a boy, and as he's not the honour to be a musketeer, he's in civilian clothes. The Cardinal's Guards seeing how young he's and no musketeer, invited him to retire before they attacked."

"There, you see, Tréville," interrupted the king, "it's the guards who attacked."

"Quite so, sire, beyond all doubt. They called upon him to retire as I said but he replied that he's a musketeer at heart, devoted to Your Majesty, and will therefore remain with the gentlemen Musketeers."

"Brave young man!" murmured the king.

"In fact, he stayed with them so effectively, it's he who gave Jussac the terrible sword wound that's made Your Eminence so angry."

"He's the one who wounded Jussac?" cried the king. "A mere boy! Tréville, that's impossible."

"It's just as I've the honour to tell Your Majesty."

"Jussac, one of the first blades of the realm!"

"Well, Sire, it seems he's found his master."

"I'd like to see this young man, Tréville – I'd like to see him and if anything can be done for him, well, we'll make it our business."

"When would Your Majesty deign to receive him?"

"Tomorrow at noon, Tréville."

"Shall I bring only him?"

"No, bring me all four together. I'd like to thank them all at once. Such devoted men are rare, Tréville, and we must reward their devotion."

"At noon, Sire, we'll be at the Louvre."

"Ah ... come in the back way, by the Petit Escalier, Tréville. There's no point in letting the cardinal know about this."

"As you say, Sire."

"You understand, Tréville, an edict is still an edict. Duelling, on any account, is forbidden."

"But this encounter, Sire, was nothing like a duel. It was a brawl; what else can you call five Cardinal's Guards against three musketeers and Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Quite so," said the King, "but nonetheless, Tréville, come by the Petit Escalier."

Tréville smiled but it was already something of an accomplishment to have persuaded this child to rebel against his master so he bowed respectfully to the king and was given permission to retire. That evening the three musketeers were informed they were to have the honour of a royal audience. They'd been acquainted with the king for some time so this was no novelty for them; but d'Artagnan imagined his fortune was made and passed the night in golden dreams with his active Gascon imagination. By 8 o'clock the next morning he was already knocking on Athos's door. D'Artagnan found the musketeer dressed and ready to go out. As the audience with the king was not until noon, he had arranged to play tennis with Porthos and Aramis at the courts near the stables of the Luxembourg. Athos invited d'Artagnan to join them. Despite his ignorance of the game that he had never played, he accepted, not knowing what else to do with his time from 9 in the morning until nearly noon. The 2 other musketeers were already at the courts, knocking the balls about. Athos who excelled at all sports, led d'Artagnan onto the court and challenged them. However, though he tried to play left-handed with the first swing he discovered his wound was still too recent to allow such strenuous exercise. D'Artagnan kept at it but he was too much of a novice to play a regular game so they only volleyed balls back and forth without keeping score. One of these balls, served from Porthos's herculean wrist, passed so close to d'Artagnan's face that he thought if he had been struck by it, it probably would have cost him his royal audience. He could not possibly be presented to the king with a swollen face and in the Gascon's imagination his entire future depended on this audience. So he saluted Porthos and Aramis politely and bowed out of further play, offering to resume the game when he could meet them on more equal terms. He left the court and found a place in the gallery overlooking the net. Unfortunately for d'Artagnan, one of His Eminence's guards was among the spectators. Still seething about the defeat of his comrades the day before, he had sworn to seize the first opportunity for revenge and believed that now his chance had come. "It's no surprise that young man should be afraid of a mere ball," he said loudly to his neighbour. "He's probably an apprentice musketeer."

D'Artagnan spun around as if bitten by a snake and glared at the guard who'd made this insolent speech. "By God," continued the latter, with a mocking twist of his moustache, "look at me all you like, my little gentleman but I've said what I've said."

"And since what you've said is so clear that it needs no explanation," replied d'Artagnan, in a quiet voice, "I request you to follow me."

"And when'd you like me to do that?" asked the guard with the same mocking air.

"Immediately if you please."

"No doubt you know who I am."

"Me? I've no idea, and couldn't care less."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. If you knew my name, you might not be in such a hurry."

"All right, then, what is your name?"

"*Bernajoux* – at your service!"

"Very well, Sir Bernajoux," said d'Artagnan quietly, "I'll await you at the door."

"Go on, Sir, I'll follow you."

"Not too quickly, Sir, or someone will notice that we're leaving together. You understand that for the business at hand, witnesses would be inconvenient."

"Fine," said the guard, still surprised that his name had had so little effect on the young man. Everyone knew the name of Bernajoux – except perhaps d'Artagnan – for it figured prominently in the daily accounts of those fights that not even the edicts of the king and the cardinal could control. Porthos and Aramis were involved in their game and Athos was watching them intently so none of them saw their young comrade leave. He waited outside the door and less than a minute later the guard came down. D'Artagnan's audience with the king was fixed for noon so he had no time to lose. He looked around and seeing the street deserted, said to his adversary, "My faith! It's lucky you've to deal with only an apprentice musketeer even if your name *is* Bernajoux. But don't worry, I'll do my best. *On guard!*"

"But it seems to me this isn't exactly the best place for a meeting," d'Artagnan's opponent said. "Hadn't we better go behind the Saint-Germain Abbey or out to the Préaux-Clercs?"

"What you say makes sense," replied d'Artagnan, "but unfortunately my time's short as I've an appointment at noon. So if you please, Sir, *on guard!*"

Bernajoux was not the sort to receive such a compliment more than once. In an instant his sword shone in his hand and he charged his adversary whom he hoped was young enough to be intimidated. But the day before d'Artagnan had gone through his apprenticeship. Emboldened by his victory, inflated by high hopes for his future, he was determined not to retreat a single step. Their swords crossed close to the guards and d'Artagnan stood firm so it was his adversary who stepped back. But during the split-second in which Bernajoux's blade deviated from the line, d'Artagnan disengaged, lunged, and pierced his opponent in the shoulder. He then stepped back and lowered his sword but Bernajoux rushed blindly at him, crying out that it was nothing and impaled himself on d'Artagnan's blade. He didn't fall but staggered back, shouting he was not yet defeated. But he broke off and stumbled across the street to the hôtel of the Duke of La Trémouille where a relative of his was in service. D'Artagnan who had no idea how serious Bernajoux's second wound was, followed close on his heels. He would doubtless have struck him a third time but two of the guard's friends had witnessed the exchange of words between d'Artagnan and Bernajoux, seen the pair go out, and then heard the commotion in the street. They now rushed out of the tennis courts, swords drawn, and attacked d'Artagnan. Athos, Porthos, and Aramis appeared next, and lit into the 2 guards attacking their young comrade, forcing them back. Bernajoux finally fell, leaving the Cardinal's Guards only 2 against 4 so they shouted, "To us! You there in the Hôtel of La Trémouille!"

At these cries, all the armed men in the hôtel came out and rushed the four companions who themselves shouted, "Musketeers! To us!"

This call generally brought reinforcements for everyone knew the musketeers were His Eminence's enemies and people loved them for their hostility to the cardinal. In a brawl, the guards of those companies not belonging to the Red Duke, as Aramis had called him, usually took sides with the King's Musketeers. 3 guards of Sir Des Essarts's company were passing; 2 went to the aid of the 4 companions while the third ran to the hôtel of Sir Tréville, crying, "To us, musketeers, to us!"

As usual, the Hôtel of Tréville was full of his company's soldiers and they rushed to the aid of their comrades. The mêlée became general but the musketeers had the advantage of numbers. The Cardinal's Guards and Sir La Trémouille's men retreated into their hôtel, slamming the gates shut just in time to prevent their enemies from following them. Bernajoux was in bad condition and was taken inside immediately. Excitement was at its height among the musketeers and their allies. They debated setting fire to the hôtel to punish the insolence of Sir La Trémouille's household for daring to attack King's Musketeers. It looked like this proposal would be put into action when fortunately the bells of the town struck 11 o'clock and d'Artagnan and his companions remembered their royal audience. They succeeded in calming the hotheads who consoled themselves by hurling some paving stones at the gates of the mansion – but the gates would not budge so they soon gave it up. Besides, their leaders had already left for the hôtel of Sir Tréville who was waiting for them, having heard of this latest outburst. "To the Louvre and quickly," he said, "without losing a moment. We must try to see the king before he's swayed by the cardinal. We'll describe this thing as a result of yesterday's affair and the two will be disposed of together."

Sir Tréville, accompanied by the four young men, marched off toward the Louvre; but to the great astonishment of the Captain of the Musketeers, he was informed that the king had gone stag-hunting in the forest of Saint-Germain. Tréville asked to have this news repeated to him twice, and each time his companions saw his face grow darker. He asked, "Did His Majesty have any plans yesterday for this hunt?"

"No, Your Excellency," replied the *valet*. "This morning the Royal Huntsman reported the tracks of a great stag in the forest. At first the king said he'd not go but can't resist a good hunt and set out after his morning meal."

"Has the king seen the cardinal?" asked Sir Tréville.

"Probably," answered the *valet*, "for this morning, when I saw the horses being harnessed to His Eminence's carriage, I asked where he was going, and they said, 'To Saint-Germain.'"

"We've been forestalled," said Sir Tréville. "Gentlemen, I'll see the king this evening but as for you, I advise you not to risk it." This advice was too reasonable for the four young men to dispute it, especially since it came from a man who knew the king so well. Tréville recommended they go home and wait for news from him. As he entered his own hôtel, it occurred to Tréville that it's always best to be the first to lodge a complaint. He sent one of his footmen to the Duke of La Trémouille with a letter demanding the expulsion of the Cardinal's Guards from his house and a reprimand to his people for their audacity in attacking the musketeers. But Sir La Trémouille, already biased by his equerry, Bernajoux's relative, replied that Tréville and the musketeers had no right to complain. On the contrary, the duke should be the one to complain, as it was his men the musketeers had attacked and his mansion they had threatened to burn. Tréville knew this sort of debate between two nobles could go on forever, each becoming more rigid in his position as time passed, so he decided on a course that might end it: he would make a personal call on Sir La Trémouille. He immediately went to

La Trémouille’s hôtel and had himself announced. The two nobles saluted each other politely, for if they were not friends, they at least respected one another. Both were men of courage, honour, and as the Duke of La Trémouille, a Protestant who rarely saw the king, belonged to no faction, politics rarely coloured his social interactions. However, this time the duke’s welcome was colder than usual, though polite. “Sir,” said Tréville, “we believe we each have cause to complain of the other, so I’ve come myself to see if we can clear up this affair.”

“Willingly,” replied La Trémouille, “but I warn you I’ve already inquired into it and all the blame falls on your musketeers.”

“You are too just and reasonable a man not to accept the proposal I’m about to make to you,” Tréville said.

“I’m listening, Sir.”

“How fares your equerry’s relative, Sir Bernajoux?”

“Very poorly, Sir. Besides the sword wound in his arm that isn’t really dangerous, he’d another through the lung and the doctor doesn’t like the look of it.”

“But he’s still conscious?”

“Quite.”

“Can he talk?”

“He can talk but with difficulty.”

“Well, Sir! Let’s see him and put him under oath to speak the truth before God whom he may have to face all too soon. I’m willing to let him judge his own case and will abide by what he says.”

La Trémouille reflected for a moment but it was hard to think of anything more reasonable, so he accepted. The 2 went down to the chamber where the wounded man lay. When Bernajoux saw the 2 noble lords enter he tried to sit up in bed but he was too weak. Exhausted by the effort, he fell back and nearly passed out. La Trémouille revived him with some smelling salts. Then Sir Tréville who did not want to be accused of intimidating a sick man, invited La Trémouille to question Bernajoux himself. The questioning went as Tréville had foreseen. Hovering between life and death, Bernajoux had no intention of distorting the truth and he told the 2 gentlemen exactly what had happened. This gave Tréville everything he wanted. He wished Bernajoux a speedy recovery, took his leave of La Trémouille, and returned to his hôtel where he sent word inviting the 4 friends to dinner. Sir Tréville kept good company though his guests were always anti-Cardinalist. It goes without saying that the conversation throughout dinner dwelled upon the 2 recent reverses suffered by His Eminence’s guards. As d’Artagnan had been the hero of both occasions, all congratulations fell on him with the full approval of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. They were good comrades and besides, they had had their turn in the limelight so often they could afford to let d’Artagnan have his. Around 6 o’clock Tréville announced it was time to go to the Louvre. The hour of their audience was long past so instead of entering by the Petit Escalier, Tréville decided to await the king with his 4 young men in the main royal antechamber. When they arrived the king had not yet returned from the hunt but they waited among the crowd of courtiers for no more than half an hour before the doors were thrown open and His Majesty was announced. D’Artagnan felt himself tremble to the marrow of his bones. The next few moments would decide the rest of his life in all probability. He stared in an agony of suspense at the door through which the king would enter. Louis XIII appeared first in advance of his entourage. He was dressed for the hunt, wearing tall boots, carrying a whip, and coated head to toe with dust. At first glance, d’Artagnan could see the king was in an ugly mood. The king’s obvious bad temper did not prevent the courtiers from ranging themselves along his path. In royal antechambers, it’s better to be seen by an angry eye than not to be seen at all. The 3 musketeers therefore stepped forward without hesitation though d’Artagnan remained timidly behind them. But though the king knew Athos, Porthos, and Aramis personally, he passed without looking or speaking to them, acting as if he had never seen them before. As for Tréville, when the eyes of the king paused for a moment on him, he sustained their regard so firmly that the king was the first to look aside. Then grumbling, His Majesty passed into his chambers. “The situation looks bad,” said Athos, smiling. “We’ll not be made Knights of the Order this evening.”

“Wait here ten minutes,” said Sir Tréville. “If by that time I haven’t come out, return to my hôtel, for it’ll be useless to wait any longer.”

The young men waited 10 minutes; a quarter hour; 20 minutes; then since Tréville did not reappear, they left, more than a little uneasy about what was to come. Sir Tréville boldly entered the king’s chambers where he found His Majesty in a foul temper, seated on an armchair, and beating the dust out of his boots with the back of his whip. Undaunted, Tréville inquired about His Majesty’s health.

“Bad, Sir, bad,” answered the king. “I’m bored unto death.” This was Louis’s most frequent complaint. He would often beckon one of his courtiers to stare out the window with him, saying, “Come, Sir, let’s be bored together.”

“How! Your Majesty, bored?” said Tréville. “Didn’t you have the pleasure of the hunt today?”

“Some pleasure! Upon my soul, everything decays, decays ... I don’t know whether it’s because the game leaves scent no more or the dogs have just lost their noses. We start a stag of ten points, chase him for six hours, and when we’re about to take him when Saint-Simon is already putting the horn to his mouth to sound the halloo – *damn!* The entire pack takes off on a false scent after a mere two-point buck. Soon I’ll have to give up riding to the hounds as I’ve had to give up falconry. You know, I’d only one decent gyrfalcon and he died the day before yesterday. Oh, I’m a sad and unfortunate king, Sir Tréville.”

“Sire: that is indeed a great misfortune. No wonder you despair. But don’t you still have a good number of falcons, hawks, and tiercels?”

“With no one to train them! Good falconers are a thing of the past. No one but me knows the art of venery anymore. After me it’ll be gone and people will hunt with pits, snares, and traps. If only I’d time to train some apprentices! But Your Eminence’s always there, never giving me a moment’s rest, always talking to me about Spain, Austria, and England! Devil take it! ... But speaking of the cardinal, Sir Tréville, I must say I’m quite displeased with you.”

Tréville had been waiting for this. He knew the king well, knew that all these complaints were just a preamble to encourage himself and now he would finally get to the point. “And in what way I’ve been as unfortunate as to displease Your Majesty?” asked Tréville in pretended astonishment.

“Is this how you fulfil your duty, Sir?” continued the king without directly answering Tréville’s question. “Is it for this that I named you my Captain of Musketeers for this: a man’s assassination, an entire quarter in riot, Paris nearly set ablaze – and you’ve nothing to say about it? But no doubt I’m hasty in accusing you, no doubt the perpetrators are already in prison, and you’ve come to announce that justice’s been done.”

“No, Sire,” said Tréville calmly, “it’s justice I come to demand from you.”

“What? Against whom?” cried the king.

“Against libellers and scandalmongers,” said Sir Tréville.

“Ah! That’s a new one,” replied the king. “Are you going to tell me that your three damned musketeers, Athos, Porthos, Aramis, your cadet from Béarn haven’t sprung like furies on poor Bernajoux and injured him so badly that by now he’s probably dead? Are you going to tell me that they didn’t lay siege to the hôtel of the Duke of La Trémouille and try to burn it down? Of course, that mightn’t be such a bad thing in times of war since it’s a nest of Huguenots – but in peacetime, it sets a bad example! Speak! Isn’t this what you’re going to tell me?”

“And who’s told you this fine story, Sire?” Tréville asked calmly.

“Who’s told me this fine story, Sir? Who but he who watches while I sleep, works while I play, manages everything inside and outside the realm, in France as in Europe?”

“Your Majesty must be speaking of God,” said Tréville, “for only God can be so far above Your Majesty.”

“No, Sir, I speak of the buttress of the State, my only servant, only friend – Your Eminence!”

“His Eminence is not His Holiness, Sire.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that only the pope is infallible, and that his infallibility doesn’t extend to his cardinals.”

“Do you mean to say he tricks me, betrays me? You accuse him, then? Come, speak – admit that you accuse him!”

“No, Sire; but I say that he makes mistakes; that he is ill-informed; that he has too hastily and unjustly accused Your Majesty’s musketeers, and has relied on information from poor sources.”

“This accusation comes from Sir La Trémouille, from the duke himself! What do you say to that?”

“I might say, Sire that he is too interested in the question to be an impartial judge but I don’t say that – far from it. I know the duke for a loyal gentleman, and I’m willing to defer the entire matter to him – but on one condition, Sire.”

“And that is?”

“That Your Majesty summons him here, and interrogates him yourself, face to face, with no witnesses, and that I shall see Your Majesty as soon as you have finished with the duke.”

“Really?” said the king. “And you agree to bow to whatever Sir La Trémouille says?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“You’ll accept his judgement?”

“Without question.”

“And you’ll submit to whatever reparations he requires?”

“Certainly.”

“La Chesnaye!” called the king. “La Chesnaye!” Louis’s Confidential Valet, who always stood just outside the door, entered and bowed. “La Chesnaye,” said the King, “send someone right away to find me Sir La Trémouille. I wish to speak with him this evening.”

Tréville said, “Your Majesty gives me your word you’ll see no one between La Trémouille and me?”

“Nobody, word of a gentleman.”

“Until tomorrow then, sire.”

“Until tomorrow, sir.”

“At what hour will it please Your Majesty to see me?”

“At whatever hour you like.”

“But if I come too early, I fear I might wake Your Majesty.”

“Awaken me? Do you think I sleep? I ever sleep no more, sir; I dream sometimes, that’s all. Come as early in the morning as you like, at seven o’clock – but take care if your musketeers are guilty!”

“If my musketeers are guilty, sire, the guilty shall find themselves in the hands of Your Majesty who’ll deal with them at your good pleasure. Does Your Majesty require anything more? Only speak; I’m ready to obey.”

“No, Sir, no. It’s with reason I’m called Louis the Just. Until tomorrow then, sir, until tomorrow.”

“Till then, may God preserve Your Majesty.”

However little the king slept that night, Tréville slept still less. He had advised his three musketeers and their comrade to be back at his hôtel by 6:30 the next morning. When he left for the Louvre he took them along. He promised nothing, assuring them only that their future, and his, depended upon this roll of the royal dice. When they arrived at the foot of the Petit Escalier, or the King’s Little Stair, His Majesty’s private entrance into the Louvre from an inside corner of the Cour Carrée, Tréville asked his men to wait. If the king was still angry with Tréville they could leave without being seen. If the king consented to receive him, he could easily send for his men. In the king’s private antechamber Tréville found La Chesnaye, who told him they’d been unable locate the Duke of La Trémouille the night before until after it was too late for him to call at the Louvre. He’d only just now arrived for his audience and was in with the king as they spoke. Tréville was very pleased with this turn of events, as it ensured that no one else would get a word in between La Trémouille’s audience and his own. In fact, scarcely ten minutes passed before the king’s study door opened and the Duke of La Trémouille came out. The duke saw Tréville and said, “Sir, His Majesty sent for me to ask for an account of the events that took place yesterday morning at my hôtel. I’ve told him the truth, that is to say, that the fault was with my people, and that I was prepared to offer you my excuses. Since I see you now, I ask that you receive them, and take me hereafter as one of your friends.”

“Sir Duke,” said Tréville, “I was so confident of your integrity that I asked His Majesty for no other defender than yourself. I see that was no mistake, and I’m grateful there’s still one man in France of whom one can speak well and not be proven wrong.”

“Good! Good!” said the king, who’d been listening to this exchange of compliments from the doorway. “Only, tell him, Tréville, since he wants to be one of your friends, that I also want to be one of his but he neglects me. It’s been almost three years since I last saw him, and I never see him at all unless I send for him. Tell him all this for me, as there are some things a king can’t say for himself.”

“Thank you, Sire,” said the duke. “But Your Majesty should know that it’s not necessarily those you see every day – Sir Tréville accepted – who are your most devoted servants.”

“Ah, you heard what I said! So much the better, Duke, so much the better,” said the king, advancing from the doorway. “So there you are, Tréville. Where are your musketeers? I told you the day before yesterday to bring them to me. Why haven’t you done so?”

“They’re below, sire, and at your leave La Chesnaye can call them to come up.”



"Yes, yes, have them come up right away. It's nearly eight and at nine I've an appointment. Go, Sir Duke but be sure to return. Come in, Tréville." The duke bowed and retired. As the door closed behind him, the 3 musketeers and d'Artagnan, conducted by La Chesnaye, appeared at the head of the staircase. "Come in, *my braves*, come in," said the King. "I'm going to scold you."

The musketeers advanced and bowed, d'Artagnan right behind them. "What the devil!" continued the king, "Seven of His Eminence's guards rendered *hors* of combat by you four in two days! That's too many, Gentlemen, too many. At this rate, His Eminence will have to replace his entire company in three weeks and enforce the edicts with full rigor. I say nothing about one now and then but seven in two days is far too many."

"As you see, Sire, they come here contrite and wholly repentant, ready to make you their excuses."

"Contrite and wholly repentant? Hah!" said the king. "I've no faith in their hypocritical faces. I see one lurking in the back who looks particularly Gascon. Come here, Sir."

D'Artagnan approached despondently, assuming he was now in for it. "What? Did you tell me there's a young man involved? This is a boy, Tréville, a mere boy! And he's the one who gave that nasty sword-thrust to Jussac?"

"And two fine wounds to Bernajoux."

"Indeed!"

"Without taking into account," said Athos, "that if he hadn't saved me from the hands of Cahusac, I'd not be here to have the honour of making my most humble reverence to Your Majesty."

"Why, Sir Tréville, we've a veritable demon in this Béarnaise! *By the belly of the Grey Saint* as the king my father used to say! But I repeat, this sort of thing results in too many punctured doublets and broken swords. Now, the Gascons are always poor, aren't they?"

"Sire, as yet they've discovered no gold mines in their mountains although the Lord owes them such a miracle as compensation for the way they supported the ambitions of the king, your father."

"In other words, it's the Gascons who made me king since I'm the son of my father? Well, I'd not disagree. La Chesnaye, go rummage through my pockets and see if you can find forty *pistoles*. And now, young man, on your word of honour, how did all this come to pass?" D'Artagnan related the adventure of the day before in all its details: how, unable to sleep for joy at the chance to see His Majesty, he had gone to see his 3 friends the morning before the audience; how they had met at the tennis courts, and how when he showed his fear of taking a ball in the face, he had been mocked by Bernajoux who had nearly paid for his mockery with his life – and Sir La Trémouille who had nothing to do with it, with the loss of his hôtel. "Good, very good," said the king. "This matches the account the duke gave me. Poor cardinal! Seven men in two days, and among them some of his best! But that's quite enough, Gentlemen, quite enough. You've had your revenge for the incident in the Rue Férou and more. You'd be quite satisfied."

"If Your Majesty is," said Tréville, "then so are we."

"Oh, I am," added the king and taking a handful of gold from La Chesnaye, he gave it to d'Artagnan. "You see," he said, "here's proof of my satisfaction."

At this period, a gentleman's pride did not prevent him from receiving money directly from the hand of the king and such a gift was not the least bit humiliating or improper. D'Artagnan put his 40 *pistoles* into his pocket without a second thought and thanked His Majesty very sincerely. "*There!*" said the King, looking at a clock. "There, it's now half-past eight so you must go, as I'm expecting someone at nine. Thank you for your devotion, Gentlemen. I can count on it, no?"

"Oh, sire!" d'Artagnan cried, speaking for all four companions. "We'd let ourselves be cut to pieces if it'd serve Your Majesty!"

"Fine, fine – but it's better to stay whole. You're more useful to me that way. Ah, Tréville," the king added in a low voice, "since we've decided that an apprenticeship is necessary before entering the musketeers and since right now there's no room in the company anyway, place this young man in the guards company of your brother-in-law, Sir des Essarts." He chuckled. "By God! I can already see the cardinal's scowl. He'll be furious – but I'm in the right so this time I don't care."

And the king saluted Tréville who left to rejoin his musketeers whom he found dividing up d'Artagnan's 40 *pistoles*. As His Majesty had predicted, the cardinal was furious, so much that he kept away from the king's card table for 8 days. Meanwhile the king was as pleasant as could be, even smug and when he met the cardinal he would ask, "Well, Your Eminence, how goes it with your poor Bernajoux and your poor Jussac? Hmm?"

**007**

**The Domestic Life of the Musketeers**

Once d'Artagnan was outside the Louvre he consulted his friends as to how best to use his share of the 40 *pistoles*. Athos advised him to order a fine dinner at the Pomme-de-Pin tavern, Porthos to hire a lackey, and Aramis to find himself a suitable mistress. They had the dinner that evening and the newly hired lackey waited on the table. Athos ordered the food and drink while Porthos had provided the lackey. He was a Picard whom the splendid musketeer had engaged that same day when he saw him on the Pont of La Tournelle, loitering and spitting into the water. Porthos said that this occupation indicated a reflective, thoughtful personality, and he had hired him on the spot with no other recommendation. Planchet – that was the name of the Picard – was delighted by the grand appearance of Porthos whom he thought was his new employer. When they reached Porthos's lodgings he was disappointed to find the position of lackey already filled by a fellow named Mousqueton. Porthos informed Planchet that the state of his household while grand, would not support 2 domestics, and he must enter the service of d'Artagnan. Planchet grumbled at this – but when he waited at his new master's sumptuous dinner and saw him pay for it with a handful of gold from his pocket, he thought his fortune was made and thanked heaven for landing him in the service of such a Croesus. He continued to feel this way even after the feast when the leftovers compensated for many days on short rations. But that evening when he made his master's bed, Planchet's golden hopes suddenly vanished. D'Artagnan's bed was the only one in the apartment that consisted of just one bedroom and one antechamber. Planchet had to sleep on the floor in the antechamber under a thin coverlet taken from d'Artagnan's bed and which d'Artagnan did without from then on. Athos had a valet he called Grimaud whom he had trained to serve him in a most unusual fashion. The worthy Athos was taciturn to a fault. In the years he had lived cheek-by-jowl with Porthos and Aramis, his friends had seen him smile often but had never heard him laugh. His speech was concise but expressive, saying exactly what he wanted to say and nothing more: no embellishments, no embroidery, and no flourishes. His conversation was all fact and no fancy. Although Athos was scarcely 30 years old, handsome, intelligent, and well-mannered, no one had ever heard of his having a mistress. He never spoke of women and while he did not discourage others from doing so, it was clear he found it a very disagreeable topic. He added nothing to such discussions ever but bitter words and sour opinions. His reserve, gruffness, and reticence made him almost an old man, and he was certainly very set in his ways. In order to ensure that his needs were attended to precisely and with a minimum of disturbance, he had trained his lackey Grimaud to obey him at a gesture, or even a simple movement of his lips. He never spoke to Grimaud unless he had to. Grimaud who feared his master like fire, was at the same time very attached to and held him in a respect that approached worship. Sometimes he thought he understood perfectly what Athos wanted, leaped to fulfil the command, and did the exact opposite of what Athos had in mind. Then his master would shrug his shoulders and quite calmly proceed to give Grimaud a sound thrashing. On these occasions, he spoke a little. As should be apparent, Porthos's character was the complete opposite of that of Athos. Not only did he speak a great deal, he was very loud about it. To be fair, he did not really care whether anyone listened or not; he spoke for the pleasure of speaking and for the pleasure of hearing himself speak. He delivered loud opinions on every subject except the sciences, begging in that case to be excused because ever since his childhood he'd always hated scholars. Porthos knew he lacked Athos's air of natural nobility and this had so irked him early in their acquaintance that he had frequently been short with Athos, almost rude, and sought to outdo him through the splendour of his wardrobe. But with his simple musketeer's tabard and nothing more than the way he held his head and advanced his foot, Athos demonstrated his innate nobility and relegated the pompous Porthos to the second rank. Porthos consoled himself by making the antechamber of Sir Tréville and the guardroom of the Louvre echo with tales of his *good fortunes* with the ladies, a subject of which Athos, of course, never spoke. Porthos had claimed to have enjoyed the favours of a lawyer's lady, and later those of a baroness – rising from the noblesse of the robe to the noblesse of the sword – and recently Porthos had implied that he'd dazzled the eyes of no less than a foreign princess. An old proverb says: Like master, like manservant. Let us pass then from Athos's lackey to Porthos's lackey, from Grimaud to Mousqueton. Porthos's lackey was a Norman whose name his master had changed from Boniface to the more sonorous and warlike Mousqueton. He had entered the service of Porthos in exchange for no pay other than clothing and lodging, so long as those were magnificent; he kept two hours a day to himself to find such work as would provide for his other needs. Porthos had accepted the bargain, and it suited him very well. He had his old doublets and cast-off cloaks recut for Mousqueton, and thanks to a clever tailor who restored the old to new by turning them inside out (and whose wife was suspected of wanting to persuade Porthos to cast his eyes on one below his station), Mousqueton served his master looking very fine indeed. As for Aramis, his lackey was called Bazin. Reflecting his master's hopes of one day entering into orders, he always dressed in black, as became the servant of a man of the Church. He was from Berry, aged between thirty-five or forty, mild, peaceable, plump, and occupied what leisure time his master left him in reading pious works. He was skilled at concocting a dinner for two even when short of provisions – the courses might be few but what was there was always excellent. Otherwise, as regarded his master's business he was deaf, dumb, blind, and of totally proven fidelity. Having met, superficially at least, the masters and their lackeys, let us pass on to their dwellings. Athos lived in the Rue Férou, a few paces from the Luxembourg; his apartment consisted of two small, well-appointed chambers in a furnished house. (The landlady, young and still quite pretty, cast amorous looks at him daily to no avail.) Here and there in this modest lodging were displayed remnants of past splendour. There was a richly damascened sword in the style of the time of François I, the hilt of which alone, encrusted as it was with precious stones, might be worth two hundred *pistoles* – and which, even in his moments of greatest poverty, Athos had never pawned nor sold. Porthos would have given ten years of his life for this sword, and owning it had long been one of his ambitions. One day, when he had a rendezvous with a duchess, he tried to borrow it from his friend. Athos, without saying a word, had emptied his pockets, gathered all his jewellery, coins, aiguillettes, and chains of gold into a pile, and offered it to Porthos; but as for the sword, he said, it was fixed in its place, and would go nowhere until he himself moved away. Besides the sword, Athos also had a portrait on the wall representing a noble lord dressed as in the reign of Henry III, attired in the greatest elegance, and wearing the Order of Saint-Esprit. The family resemblance to Athos indicated that this *great sir*, Knight of the Orders of the King, was his ancestor. In addition, a magnificent gilded coffer, displaying the same coat of arms as the sword and the portrait, stood in the middle of the mantelpiece, clashing frightfully with the rest of the interior decoration. Athos always carried the key to this coffer on him but one day he'd opened it in front of Porthos, and Porthos had noted (to his disappointment) that the coffer contained nothing but letters and papers: love letters and family documents, he supposed. Porthos lived in a very large and very sumptuous apartment on the Rue du Vieux-Colombier. Every time he passed by this apartment with one of his friends, Mousqueton would be standing at one of the windows in full livery. Porthos would raise his hand, cock his head proudly, and say, "There you see my home!" But he was never found to be at home, never invited anyone inside, and no one had ever seen this opulent apartment to report on what luxurious appointments it really contained. Aramis lived in a small ground floor apartment composed of a dressing room, a dining room, and a bedroom, the last of which opened onto a fresh little garden, green, shady, and completely hidden from the eyes of the neighbourhood. As for d'Artagnan, we know how he was lodged, and have already met his lackey, Master Planchet. D'Artagnan was by nature very curious, as people who have a genius for intrigue generally are, and he made every effort to learn who Athos, Porthos, and Aramis really were. He knew that each of these young men hid the name of a nobleman under his *war name* – Athos in particular who savoured of the *Grand* a league off – but only Sir Tréville knew their true names and qualities. D'Artagnan tried pumping Porthos for information about Athos and Aramis, and Aramis to learn about Porthos. Unfortunately, Porthos knew nothing of the former life of his silent comrade Athos except for what he'd seen personally. It was rumoured that he had suffered some great romantic misfortune, some horrible treachery that had forever poisoned the life of this gallant man. What was this treachery?

No one knew. As to Porthos, his life was easy to know. Vain and indiscreet, one could see through him as easily as through crystal. The only way one could be misled about him would be to believe what he said of himself. Aramis, on the other hand, while claiming to have no secrets, was a young man completely made of mysteries. He answered few questions and evaded any that pertained to himself. One day d'Artagnan asked about Aramis's own amorous adventures after interrogating him for a long time about Porthos and his supposed *good* fortune with a princess. "And you, my dear Aramis," he said to him, "what of you who speak so freely of the baronesses, countesses, and Princess of others?"

"Your pardon," interrupted Aramis, "I spoke of them only because Porthos did so himself. Rest assured, my dear d'Artagnan, that if I'd such stories from another source or if they'd been told to me in confidence, there's no confessor more discreet than I."

"I don't doubt it," replied d'Artagnan. "But it seems to me that you yourself are tolerably familiar with coats of arms – witness a certain embroidered handkerchief, to which I owe the honour of your acquaintance."

This time, Aramis wasn't offended. He assumed a modest air and said, "*My dear*, don't forget that I intend to join the Church, and thus abstain from all such worldly complications. That handkerchief wasn't mine, it had merely been forgotten at my house by one of my friends. I'd to recover it to prevent him and the lady he loves from being compromised. As for me, I've no mistress, nor do I want one. In that regard I follow the very judicious example of Athos."

"But, what the devil! You're not an abbot yet, you're a musketeer!"

"A musketeer only for the interim, *my dear* – as the cardinal says about being a minister, I'm a musketeer against my inclination but a man of the Church in my heart. Athos and Porthos are the ones who dragged me into this when I needed something to occupy my time. You see, just before I was to be ordained, I had a little difficulty with ... but that wouldn't interest you, and I'm taking up your precious time."

"By no means, that interests me a great deal," cried d'Artagnan, "and at the moment I've absolutely nothing to do."

"Perhaps so but I've my breviary to say," answered Aramis, "then some verses to compose that Madam of Combalet asked for and after that I must go to the Rue Saint-Honoré to buy some rouge for Madam of Chevreuse. So you see, my friend, that if you've nothing pressing, I do."



And Aramis offered his hand to his companion and took his leave. Despite all his efforts, d’Artagnan was unable to learn anything more about his three new friends. He decided he’d just have to believe everything that was said of their pasts and hope for more certain revelations in the future. In the meantime, he considered Athos an Achilles, Porthos an Ajax, and Aramis a Joseph. For the 4 friends, it was a good time to be alive. Athos spent a great deal of time gambling, always unluckily. Nonetheless, he never borrowed a *sou* from his friends, though his purse was always at their services. When he had gambled using his word as credit, he always awakened his creditor at six o’clock the next morning to pay him his debt of the night before. Porthos gambled only occasionally but when he did, he went all in. When he won, he was smug, arrogant but generous with his winnings; when he lost, he disappeared completely for several days, reappearing pale-faced and worn but with money jingling in his purse. As for Aramis, he never gambled. In fact, he was the most unsocial, least fun-loving musketeer one could ever hope to see. There was always some task he had to go attend to. Sometimes, in the middle of dinner, when conversation and honey were flowing freely, and everyone believed they still had 2 or 3 hours at the table ahead of them, Aramis would look his watch, rise with a gracious smile and bid them goodbye – going, he might say, to consult a theologian with whom he had a rendezvous. Or he might return to his lodging to write a thesis, begging his friends not to disturb him. Athos would just smile that charming, melancholy smile that so became his noble appearance, while Porthos drained his glass, and swore that Aramis would never be anything but a village curate. Planchet, d’Artagnan’s valet, seemed quite satisfied with his lot. His pay was thirty *sous* per day, and during that first month he was gay as a chaffinch and always affable toward his master. But when the winds of adversity began to blow on the household in the Rue des Fossoyeurs – in other words, when King Louis’s forty *pistoles* were finally spent – he began to make whining complaints that Athos found nauseating, Porthos indecent, and Aramis ridiculous. Athos advised d’Artagnan to dismiss the rogue, Porthos wanted to pummel him first, while Aramis stated that a master should simply ignore everything from a servant but compliments. “That’s easy for you to say,” replied d’Artagnan. “You, Athos, who live like a mute with Grimaud, who forbid him to speak, and therefore never have cross words with him; you, Porthos, who lead such a magnificent life that you’re a virtual god to your valet Mousqueton; and finally you, Aramis, who, thanks to your theological studies, inspire a profound respect in the mild and religious Bazin. I, who have neither credit nor resources, who am not yet a musketeer – let alone a guard! – what am I supposed to do to inspire affection, terror, or respect in Planchet?”

“The thing is serious,” answered Aramis.

“It’s a family affair,” said Porthos.

“It’s the same with valets as it is with wives,” said Athos. “You must immediately put things on the footing where you’d like them to remain. Reflect thus.”

D’Artagnan reflected. He decided to thrash Planchet for his own good, a decision he put into effect with that conscientiousness that d’Artagnan brought to everything he did. Having thrashed him well, he forbade Planchet to quit his service without his permission. “The future is bright,” he said to him, “and better times are certain. If you stay with me, your fortune is made – and I’m much too good a master to allow you to miss your chance by letting you go, just because you ask for it.” This domestic policy of d’Artagnan’s won him a great deal of respect among his friends the musketeers. Planchet was likewise filled with admiration and spoke no more about leaving. The lives of the 4 young men had merged and become communal. D’Artagnan who had arrived from the country into the middle of a world completely new to him had no set habits and therefore fell easily into the routines of his friends. They rose around 8 in the morning in winter, 6 o’clock in summer, and went to the Hotel of Tréville to hear their daily orders and see how affairs were going. D’Artagnan, though not a musketeer, performed the duties of one with touching dedication. He was always on guard because he always kept company with whichever one of his friends was on duty. Everyone knew him at the mansion of the musketeers where he soon had the reputation of a good comrade. Sir Tréville who had appreciated him at first glance and genuinely liked him, recommended him regularly to the king. For their part, the 3 musketeers were very fond of their young comrade. The friendship that united these 4 men was such that they felt a need to see each other 3 or 4 times a day whether for a duel, business, or pleasure. The Inseparables were always running after each other like shadows, criss-crossing the Faubourg Saint-Germain, from the Palais of Luxembourg to the Place Saint-Sulpice or from the Rue du Vieux-Colombier back to the Luxembourg. Meanwhile, the promises of Sir Tréville began to become a reality. One fine day, the king commanded Sir Des Essarts to accept d’Artagnan as a cadet in his company of the royal *French Guards*. D’Artagnan sighing, put on his new uniform that he would have given 10 years of his life to exchange for the tabard of a musketeer. But Sir Tréville promised him that favour after service of 2 years in the guards – or less if d’Artagnan should find the opportunity to render some important service to the king or achieve some brilliant exploit. D’Artagnan consoled himself with this promise and joined the French Guards the next day. Then it was the turn of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis to mount guard with d’Artagnan when he was on duty. The day it took in d’Artagnan, the company of Sir Des Essarts thus gained 4 men instead of 1.

### 008 A Court Intrigue

Meanwhile, the 40 *pistoles* of King Louis XIII had come to an end like everything in this world and the 4 companions had fallen into financial embarrassment. For a while Athos supported them with money of his own. Porthos had succeeded him, and thanks to one of those mysterious disappearances of his, had provided for everyone’s needs for nearly a fortnight more. Then it was Aramis’s turn that he accepted with good grace; he succeeded in procuring a few *pistoles* by means, he said, of selling some of his theology books. Next they turned, as they usually did, to Sir Tréville, who gave them some advances on their pay. However, as they were already considerably in arrears this didn’t amount to much, and couldn’t carry three musketeers, plus a guard who had yet to be paid, very far. Finally, when they were on the verge of bankruptcy, they managed to scrape together eight or ten *pistoles* that Porthos took to the gaming tables. Unfortunately, his luck was out: he lost it all, plus twenty-five *pistoles* more on his word. Then the embarrassment became distress, and the quartet, followed by their lackeys, could be seen haunting the quays and the guard-rooms, calling on their friends for meals wherever they could – for on the advice of Aramis, when prosperous they had bestowed dinners left and right, so as to be able to call in their favours when times were hard. Athos received four such invitations, and each time brought along his friends and their lackeys. Porthos managed six, and likewise used them for the benefit of his comrades. Aramis had eight such invitations; as has already been shown, he was a man who got great results with little fuss. As for d’Artagnan, who as yet knew hardly anyone in the capital, he turned up nothing but a breakfast of chocolate from a Béarnaise priest and a dinner invitation from a cornet of the French Guards. He brought along his small army of friends to the priest’s house, where they devoured two months’ worth of the poor man’s provisions, and to the cornet’s, who outdid himself; but as Planchet said, “No matter how much you eat, you eat only one meal at a time.”

D’Artagnan was embarrassed at having provided his friends only one and a half dinners – for the breakfast at the priest’s couldn’t be counted as more than half a meal – in exchange for the feasts provided him by Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. He felt like a burden on their society, forgetting in his youthful enthusiasm that he’d fed that society for a month, and he put his wits to work to find a way to do better. It occurred to him that this coalition of four young men, all brave, enterprising, and active, ought to be able to find something more useful to do than fencing lessons, playing practical jokes, and swaggering around. In fact, four men like these, four men devoted to each other, from their purses to their very lives; four men always supporting each other, never yielding, executing alone or together their common resolutions; four arms menacing the four cardinal directions, or turning toward one point; these four, whether by covert means or overt, by mine or by trench, by ruse or by force, must inevitably make for themselves a road to any goal, no matter how well defended or how distant. The only thing that astonished d’Artagnan was that his companions had never thought of this before. He was sure that this fourfold force, like Archimedes’ lever, might lift the world if used properly. He was mulling over this idea, racking his brains for an objective, when someone rapped lightly on the door. D’Artagnan awakened Planchet and sent him to open it. Please note that the phrase: *D’Artagnan awakened Planchet* should not be taken to indicate that it was night or that the day had not yet begun. On the contrary: the church bells had just sounded four in the afternoon. Planchet, two hours earlier, had asked his master for dinner, and d’Artagnan had responded with the proverb, “Who sleeps, eats.”

So Planchet had been eating by sleeping. Planchet returned to introduce a man humble in appearance and with the air of a bourgeois, a person of the middle class. For his dessert, Planchet would have liked to listen in on the conversation but the bourgeois declared that what he had to say was important and confidential, so he preferred to speak to d’Artagnan alone. D’Artagnan therefore dismissed Planchet and offered his visitor a seat. There was a moment of silence during which the two men discreetly sized each other up, then d’Artagnan bowed and indicated he was ready to listen.

“I’ve heard it said that Sir d’Artagnan is a very brave young man,” began the bourgeois, “and this reputation, doubtless well earned, led me to decide to confide in you.”

“Speak, Sir, speak,” said d’Artagnan who instinctively scented something to his advantage.

The bourgeois paused once more, then continued, “My wife is a linen maid in the queen’s household, Sir, and she lacks neither wisdom nor beauty. I married her three years ago, though she had only a small dowry, because Sir La Porte, the queen’s cloak bearer, is her godfather and protector...”

“Well, Sir?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Well,” replied the bourgeois, “well, Sir: my wife was abducted yesterday morning, as she was leaving her workroom.”

“And who abducted her?”

“I know nothing for sure, Sir – but I suspect someone.”

“And who is this person you suspect?”

“A man who has pursued her for some time.”

“The devil!”

“But let me say, Sir,” continued the bourgeois, “that I’m convinced there’s less of love than of politics in this.”

“Less love than politics,” repeated d’Artagnan thoughtfully, “and what do you suspect?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you what I suspect...”

“Sir, allow me to point out that I have asked you absolutely nothing. It’s you who’ve come to me, you who said you had a secret to confide. Do as you please – stop now, if that’s what you want.”

“No, Sir, no; you seem to be an honest young man and I’ve confidence in you. Let me say I believe that it’s not because of my wife’s *amours* that she was arrested but because of those of a much greater lady than she.”

“Ah! Do you speak of Madam of Bois-Tracy?” said d’Artagnan who wanted to give the bourgeois the impression that he was well up on affairs at Court.

“Much higher, Sir, much higher.”

“Of Madam of Combalet?”

“Higher yet.”

“Of Madam of Chevreuse?”

“Higher, much higher!”

“Of the...” d’Artagnan stopped himself.

“Yes, Sir,” the bourgeois whispered.

“And with whom?”

“With whom could it be if not with the Duke of...?”

“The Duke of ...!”

“Yes, Sir!” whispered the bourgeois even lower.

“But how do you know all this?”

“You ask how do I know this?”

“Yes, how do you know this? And no half-truths, understand?”

“I got it from my wife, Sir – from my wife herself.”

“And who does she get it from?”

“From Sir La Porte. Didn’t I tell you she was the goddaughter of La Porte, the queen’s confidential valet? Well, Sir La Porte had placed her near to Her Majesty so our poor queen would have at least one person she could confide in, since she’s abandoned by the king, spied on by the cardinal, and betrayed by everyone.”

“Ah! I begin to get the picture,” said d’Artagnan.

“Now, my wife came home four days ago, Sir. One of the conditions of her job is that she be allowed to come see me twice a week; for, as I had the honour to tell you, my wife loves me dearly. Anyway, on my wife’s last visit she told me that the queen is exceedingly anxious.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes. It seems Your Eminence pursues her and persecutes her more than ever. He can’t forgive her for the episode of the Sarabande. You know about the episode of the Sarabande?”

“Know it? I should say so!” replied d’Artagnan, who knew nothing whatsoever but wanted to have the air of being *au courant*.

“So that now, you see, his persecution is more than just a matter of hate – it’s a matter of revenge.”

“Truly?”

“And the queen believes...”

“Yes, yes – what does the queen believe?”

“She believes someone has written to Sir the Duke of Buckingham in her name.”

“In the queen’s name?”

“Yes, to make him come to Paris – and once he arrives, to draw him into a trap.”

“The devil! But your wife, my dear Sir, what does she have to do with all this?”

“Everyone knows of her devotion to the queen so they want to separate her from her mistress or frighten her into revealing Her Majesty’s secrets, or maybe seduce her into serving them as a spy.”

“Yes, that’s probably right,” said d’Artagnan. “But the man who abducted her, do you know him?”

“As I said, I *believe* I know him.”

“His name?”

“That I don’t know; all I know is that he’s a creature of the cardinal, one of his right-hand henchmen.”

“But you’ve seen him?”

“Yes, my wife pointed him out to me one day.”

“Is there anything special about him? How would I recognise him?”

“That’s easily done! He’s a haughty-looking noble, with black hair, a brown or tan complexion, white teeth, eyes that look right through you, and a scar on the temple.”

“A scar on his temple, black hair, a dark complexion, white teeth, piercing eyes, and arrogant,” cried d’Artagnan. “That’s my man of Meung!”

“What do you mean, that’s your man?”

“He must be – but that has nothing to do with it. No, wait, I’m wrong, it simplifies things immensely: if your man is my man, then with one blow I’ll avenge us both! But where can I find him?”

“As to that, I know nothing.”

“You have no idea where he lives?”

“None! One day, as I was walking my wife back to the Louvre, he was coming out as she was going in, and she pointed him out to me.”

“The devil! The devil!” murmured d’Artagnan. “This is all so vague. How did you learn that your wife had been carried off?”

“From Sir La Porte.”

“Did he give you any details?”

“He didn’t know any.”

“And you’ve learned nothing from anywhere else?”

“Well, yes, I’ve received...”

“What?”

“Oh ... it would be rash, reckless of me to tell you!”

“You keep coming back to that. Isn’t it a little late to retreat?”

“And I won’t retreat. God!” cried the bourgeois, swearing to keep his courage up. “Besides, by the faith of Bonacieux...”

“You’re called Bonacieux?” interrupted d’Artagnan.

“Yes, that’s my name.”

“Pardon me for interrupting you but that name seems familiar to me.”

“It’s possible, Sir. I’m your landlord.”

“Ah!” said d’Artagnan, half rising and bowing. “You’re my landlord?”

“Yes, Sir, yes. And as it’s been three months since you came to my house, and since, distracted no doubt by your important affairs, you’ve forgotten to pay me my rent; since, I must point out, I’ve not harassed you once about it, I thought you might be appreciative of my restraint.”

“Why, my dear Sir Bonacieux!” replied d’Artagnan, “Rest assured that I very much appreciate your tact in this matter, and that if there’s anything I can do for you...”

“I believe you, Sir, I believe you, and as I was about to say, by the faith of Bonacieux, I have full confidence in you.”

“Let’s hear the rest of it, then.”

Bonacieux took a paper from his pocket and presented it to d’Artagnan. “A letter!” said the young man.

“I received it this morning.”

D’Artagnan opened it, and as the light was beginning to dim, he approached the window. The bourgeois followed him. “*“Don’t search for your wife,”*” read d’Artagnan. “*“She will be returned when there is no more need for her. If you take a single step to recover her, you are lost.”*” Nothing vague about that,” continued d’Artagnan, “but after all, it’s only a threat.”

“Yes but that threat terrifies me. I, Sir, am no man of the sword, and I fear the Bastille.”

“Hmm!” said d’Artagnan. “I don’t care for the Bastille any more than you. If it were only a matter of a sword fight, I’d venture it.”

“But, Sir, I’ve been counting on you.”

“You have?”

“Yes! I’ve seen you so often surrounded by proud musketeers, and I know these musketeers belong to Sir Tréville, so they’re enemies of the cardinal. I thought that you and your friends, while serving our poor queen, would be delighted to do a disservice to His Eminence.”

“No doubt.”

“And then I thought that, as you owe me three months’ rent that I’ve never mentioned...”

“Yes, yes, you’ve already given me that reason, and I think it’s an excellent one.”

“And I was further reckoning that as long as you do me the honour to remain in my house, I would never mention your rent again...”

“Most generous!”

“And on top of this – if I must – I thought to offer you fifty *pistoles* if, against all probability, you should find yourself short at the moment.”

“A happy thought! But you are rich then, my dear Sir Bonacieux?”

“I’m comfortable, Sir – comfortable is the word for it. The textile business brings in something like two or three thousand crowns a year, and I profited by investing in the final voyage of the celebrated navigator, Jean Mocquet, so that ... but wait a moment!” cried the bourgeois.

“What?” demanded d’Artagnan.

“There! Do you see him?”

“Where?”

“Across the street, in that doorway: a man wrapped in a cloak.”

“It’s him!” cried d’Artagnan and Bonacieux at the same time as each recognised his man.

“By God! This time,” cried d’Artagnan, grabbing his sword, “he won’t escape me!”

And drawing his sword from its scabbard, he rushed out of the apartment. On the staircase he met Athos and Porthos who were on their way up to see him. They split left and right, and d’Artagnan darted between them. “*Ah it!*” bellowed Porthos. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“The man of Meung!” cried d’Artagnan as he disappeared. D’Artagnan had more than once told his friends about his adventure with the stranger in Meung, and the stranger’s meeting with the beautiful traveller in which he’d appeared to confide an important mission to her. It was Athos’s opinion that d’Artagnan had lost his letter in the scuffle. A gentleman, he said – and, based on d’Artagnan’s description of the stranger, he must have been a gentleman – a gentleman would be incapable of such a base act as stealing a letter. Porthos had seen nothing in the story but an amorous rendezvous between a lady and a cavalier, a meeting that had been disrupted by the appearance of d’Artagnan with his yellow horse. Aramis had said that these sorts of things were always mysterious, and it was best not to sift through them. Athos and Porthos understood, then, from d’Artagnan’s brief explanation, that this was the matter at hand. They assumed that after either overtaking his man or losing sight of him d’Artagnan would return home, so they continued up the stairs. When they entered d’Artagnan’s chamber, they found it empty. Afraid of what would happen when the young man caught the stranger, and in accord with how he’d described his own character, the landlord had thought it high time to make himself scarce.

009

D’Artagnan Begins to Show Himself

D’Artagnan returned after half an hour as Athos and Porthos expected. Once again he had lost the stranger who had disappeared seemingly as if by magic. D’Artagnan had run through all the neighbouring streets, sword in hand but had found no one who resembled his man of Meung. Then he finally did what he probably should have done in the first place and knocked at the doorway where he had seen the stranger standing. After he pounded on the door-knocker 10 or 12 times without an answer, a neighbour stuck his head out his window, attracted by the commotion and told d’Artagnan that the house had been closed up and empty for 6 months. While d’Artagnan was running through the streets and knocking on doors, Aramis had joined his 2 companions at his lodging so when he returned home d’Artagnan found their society was complete. “Well?” said the 3 musketeers together as d’Artagnan entered, dripping with sweat and livid with anger. “Well!” he cried as he threw his sword on the bed. “This man’s the devil himself. He’s disappeared like a phantom – shadow – spectre!”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Athos asked Porthos.

Porthos shrugged. “I don’t believe in what I’ve not seen and since I’ve never seen a ghost, I don’t believe in them.”

“The Bible requires us to believe in them,” said Aramis. “The shade of Samuel appeared to Saul, you know. I’d be sorry to see you cast doubt on such an article of faith, Porthos.”

“In any case, man or devil, illusion or reality, this man’s born to be my nemesis,” d’Artagnan said. “His escape’s cost us a lovely piece of business, Gentlemen, an affair worth as much as a hundred *pistoles* – maybe more.”

“How’s that?” said Porthos and Aramis at the same time.

Athos merely interrogated d’Artagnan with a look, laconic as always. “Planchet,” said d’Artagnan to his servant who was eavesdropping just outside the half-open door, “go down to my landlord, Sir Bonacieux, and tell him to send up a half-dozen bottles of Monuca honey; it’s my favourite.”

“Oh ho! So you have open credit with your landlord?” asked Porthos.

“Yes,” answered d’Artagnan, “a standing account as of today, and believe me, if the honey is bad, we’ll send for him to find a better one.”

“One must use and not abuse,” said Aramis sententiously.

“I always said that d’Artagnan had the most wits of any of us,” stated Athos.

D’Artagnan acknowledged this compliment with a bow and Athos returned to his accustomed silence. “But see here, what is all this about?” asked Porthos.

“Yes,” said Aramis, “let us in on the secret, *my dear friend* – unless the honour of some lady’s involved, in which case you’d best keep it to yourself.”

“Don’t worry,” said d’Artagnan, “no one’s honour’s compromised in what I’ve to tell you.”

He related word for word the conversation between him and his host and his conviction that the man who had carried off his landlord’s wife was identical with the stranger he’d crossed swords with at the Inn of the Jolly Miller. “Your affair shows promise,” said Athos after tasting the honey like a connoisseur and nodding his approval, “and one might perhaps extract from this valiant mercer as much as fifty or sixty *pistoles*. But are fifty or sixty *pistoles* worth the risk of four heads?”

“Don’t forget there’s a woman in this affair,” said d’Artagnan, “a woman abducted, endangered, maybe tortured, and all because she’s loyal to her mistress!”

“Take care, d’Artagnan, take care,” said Aramis. “You’re allowing yourself to be caught up in the fate of this Madam Bonacieux. Woman’s created for our ruin and from her come all our miseries.”

At these words, Athos knit his brow and gnawed his lips. “You mistake me,” said d’Artagnan. “It’s not Madam Bonacieux I’m concerned about but rather the queen whom the king abandons, the cardinal persecutes, and who must look on as the heads of her friends fall, one by one.”

“Why must she love what we hate the most in the world, the Spanish and the English?” said Porthos.

“Spain’s her homeland,” said d’Artagnan simply. “It’s only natural she’d love the Spanish who are children of the same soil as she. As to your second reproach, I’ve heard that it’s not the English she loves but an Englishman.”

“Aye! My faith,” said Athos, “I must say this Englishman’s worthy of being loved. I’ve never seen one with a grander and nobler air than he has.”

“Not to mention that he dresses like no one else,” said Porthos. “I was at the Louvre the day he scattered his pearls and by God! I grabbed up two that I sold for ten *pistoles* apiece. What about you, Aramis – do you know him?”

“As well as you, gentlemen, for I was among those who arrested him in the garden at Amiens where I was introduced by Sir Putanges, the queen’s equerry. I was just out of seminary at the time; it seemed to me the episode must’ve been very cruel for the king.”

“Nonetheless,” said d’Artagnan, “if I knew where the Duke of Buckingham was, I’d gladly take him by the hand and conduct him to the queen if only to spite the cardinal; for our true, only, eternal enemy, gentlemen, is the cardinal, and if we can find a way to play him a nasty trick, I confess that I’d happily risk my head.”

Athos looked thoughtful. “Didn’t the mercer tell you, d’Artagnan, that the queen believed someone sought to summon Buckingham by a forged message?”

“So she fears.”

“Wait a moment,” said Aramis.

“What?” asked Porthos.

“Carry on – I’m trying to remember something that might be relevant.”

D’Artagnan said, “I’m convinced that this abduction of the queen’s woman is connected with this possible presence of Sir Buckingham in Paris.”

“The Gascon is full of ideas,” said Porthos with admiration.

“I like to hear him talk,” said Athos. “His accent amuses me.”

“Gentlemen,” interrupted Aramis, “listen to this.”

“We’re listening,” said his 3 friends.

“Yesterday I found myself at the house of a doctor of theology whom I sometimes consult for my studies...” Athos smiled. “He lives in a quiet neighbourhood,” continued Aramis. “His tastes and his profession require it. Now just as I was leaving his house...”

Here Aramis stopped. “Well?” demanded Porthos. “At the moment you’re leaving his house?”

Aramis looked uncertain like a man who runs into an unexpected complication in the middle of telling a lie; but the eyes and ears of his 3 companions were on him and there was no way to retreat.

“This doctor’s a niece,” continued Aramis.

“Ah! He’s a niece,” said Porthos with satisfaction.

“A very respectable lady!” said Aramis.

The 3 friends began to laugh. “God! If you laugh or doubt me, I’ll tell you nothing,” said Aramis.

Athos half-bowed and said, “We believe like loyal Muslims and are as mute as catafalques.”

“Then I continue,” sniffed Aramis. “This niece sometimes visits her uncle. I found her there yesterday by chance and could do no less than offer to conduct her to her carriage.”

“Ah! She has a carriage, this doctor’s niece?” interrupted Porthos, one of whose faults was an inability to keep his mouth shut. “She’s well-connected then. Not bad, my friend!”

“Porthos,” replied Aramis, “I’ve already had to observe more than once that you’re very indiscreet and it damages your reputation among the ladies.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” cried d’Artagnan who began to see where this was going, “the thing’s serious! Can we leave out the jokes? Go on, Aramis, go on.”

“We’re accosted by a tall, dark man with the manners of a gentleman – a man much like yours, it seems, d’Artagnan.”

“The same perhaps!” he said.

“It’s possible,” continued Aramis. “He approached me, accompanied by five or six men who followed ten paces behind him. In the most polite tone, he said, ‘Sir Duke and you, Madam,’ addressing the lady who had taken my arm...”

“The doctor’s niece?”

“Silence, Porthos!” said Athos. “You’re insupportable.”

“The man continued, ‘I must request you to enter my carriage, and to do so without making the least noise or resistance.’”

“He took you for Buckingham!” cried d’Artagnan.

“So I believe,” replied Aramis.

“But the lady?” asked Porthos.

“He took her for the queen!” said d’Artagnan.

“Just so,” responded Aramis.

“The Gascon’s the devil!” said Athos. “Nothing escapes him.”

“In fact,” said Porthos, “Aramis’s the same height as Buckingham and shaped much like the handsome duke; but still, it seems to me that in the outfit of a musketeer...”

“I wore a very large cloak,” said Aramis.

“In early September? The devil!” said Porthos. “Is this doctor afraid you might be recognised?”

Athos shook his head. “I can see how the spy’s taken in by the figure but the face...”

“I had a very large hat,” said Aramis.

“My God,” laughed Porthos, “what precautions for studying theology!”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said d’Artagnan, “these jokes just waste time. Let’s scatter and search for the mercer’s wife. She’s the key to this intrigue.”

“A woman of such inferior rank! Do you really believe that, d’Artagnan?” said Porthos, curling his lip with contempt.

“Haven’t I told you? She’s the goddaughter of La Porte, the queen’s confidential valet. For all we know, Her Majesty may be deliberately relying on a person of low station. Higher heads are more visible and the cardinal’s good eyes.”

“All right,” said Porthos. “Then set a price with this mercer, and a good one.”

“Don’t worry about him,” said d’Artagnan. “I have a feeling our reward will come from other hands than his.”

Suddenly footsteps came pounding up the stairs, the door opened with a crash, and the hapless mercer dashed into the chamber where the musketeers were taking counsel. “Gentlemen!” he cried.

“Save me, in the name of heaven, save me! There’re four men who’ve come to arrest me! Save me, save me!”

Porthos and Aramis leaped up. “Wait!” cried d’Artagnan. “Put up your swords! It’s not courage we need here, it’s prudence.”

“But, really,” protested Porthos, “we can’t just let them...”

“You’ll listen to d’Artagnan on this,” said Athos. “I say again, he has the sharpest wits of all of us, and I fully intend to follow his lead. Do as you will, d’Artagnan.”

At this moment, four city guards appeared at the door of the antechamber. Seeing four musketeers with their swords at their sides, they hesitated to come any further. “Enter, Gentlemen, enter,” cried d’Artagnan. “You’re welcome in my house; we’re all loyal servants of the king and Your Eminence.”

“Then, gentlemen, you’ll not oppose the execution of our orders?” asked the one who appeared to be the leader of the squad.

“On the contrary, gentlemen, we’re ready to lend a hand, if needed.”

“What did he say?” muttered Porthos.

“You’re a simpleton,” said Athos. “Silence!”

“But you promised me...” whimpered the poor mercer.

“We can’t save you unless we remain at liberty,” d’Artagnan said rapidly in a low voice. “If we appear to defend you, we’ll be arrested as well.”

“Yes but it seems to me...”

“Come in, Gentlemen, come in,” said d’Artagnan loudly. “I have no reason to defend sir. I’ve seen him today for the first time, and as for why, he can tell you himself: he came to collect my rent. Isn’t that so, Sir Bonacieux? Answer!”

“That’s the honest truth,” cried the mercer, “but sir doesn’t tell you...”

“Silence about me, about my friends, and about the queen above all, or you’re so lost that no one can save you,” d’Artagnan hissed. “Come, come, Gentlemen, take this man away!”

And d’Artagnan pushed the stunned mercer into the hands of the guards, while saying to him, “You’re a scoundrel, *my dear*. You, come to demand money of me – of *me*! Of a musketeer! To prison, Gentlemen! I say again, take him to prison, and keep him under lock and key as long as possible. That will give me time to pay his miserable debt.”

The city guards overwhelmed them with thanks. As they began to lead away their trembling prey, d’Artagnan clapped the squad leader’s shoulder. “Won’t you join me in a drink?” he said, filling two glasses of the Monuca honey he had from the generosity of Sir Bonacieux.

“It would be an honour for me,” said the squad leader, “and I accept with gratitude.”

“Then, to your health, Sir ... how are you named?”

“Boisrenard.”

“Sir Boisrenard!”

“To your health, my gentleman. And how’re you named if you please?”

“D’Artagnan.”

“To yours, Sir d’Artagnan!”

“And above all others,” cried d’Artagnan, as if carried away with enthusiasm, “to that of the king and the cardinal.”

The squad leader might have doubted d’Artagnan’s sincerity if the honey had been bad; but the honey was good, so he was convinced. “What devilish villainy was that?” said Porthos, once the squad leader had rejoined his companions and the four friends found themselves alone. “The shame of it! Four musketeers allow an unfortunate man who asked for aid to be arrested from among them! And then, worst of all, for a gentleman to raise a glass with a mere bailiff!”

“Porthos,” said Aramis, “Athos has already told you that you’re a simpleton, and I agree with him. D’Artagnan, you’re a great man, and when you occupy Sir Tréville’s place, I’ll ask for your influence to get me an abbey.”

“I’m completely lost,” said Porthos. “You mean you approve of what d’Artagnan’s done?”

“*For God’s sake!* I should think so!” said Athos. “Not only do I approve of what he’s done, I congratulate him on it.”

“And now, Gentlemen,” said d’Artagnan, without bothering to explain his conduct to Porthos, “all for one, and one for all – that’s our motto, isn’t it?”

“But...” said Porthos.

“Extend your hand and swear!” cried Athos and Aramis at the same time.

Bowing under pressure but still muttering to himself, Porthos extended his hand, and the four friends repeated in one voice the slogan dictated by d’Artagnan: “*All for one, and one for all.*”

“Good! Now let’s all retire to our homes,” said d’Artagnan as if he’d done nothing but command all his life. “But beware! For from this moment on, we’re at odds with the cardinal!”

### A 17<sup>TH</sup> Century Mousetrap

The mousetrap is no recent invention. When the earliest societies had a need for security, they invented the police – and the police, in turn, invented mousetraps. But the reader may be unfamiliar with police jargon, so it would be best to explain. When the resident of a house is arrested for a crime that arrest is kept secret, and four or five men are quietly placed inside the house. When someone knocks on the door, he is admitted – and arrested. In this way the police can lay their hands on all the habitués of a house within two or three days. And that is a mousetrap. They'd made a mousetrap of Master Bonacieux's apartment, and anyone who entered was taken and interrogated by the cardinal's people. A private entrance and staircase led to the first floor apartment where d'Artagnan lived, so he could receive visitors without fear of their arrest. In any event, his three musketeer friends were his only visitors. They'd each undertaken their own quest for information about the missing Madam Bonacieux but had found and discovered nothing. Athos had even gone so far as to question Sir Tréville that had surprised the captain, given the habitual reticence of his worthy musketeer. But Tréville knew nothing: only that, the last time he'd seen the cardinal, the king, and the queen, the cardinal was preoccupied, the king looked nervous, and the queen's red eyes showed she'd spent the night either wakeful or crying. This last didn't count for much, as the queen, since her marriage, had often cried or lain awake. Tréville just reminded Athos of his duty to the king, and moreover to the queen, and asked him to make the same recommendation to his comrades. As for d'Artagnan, he had converted his chamber into an observation post and never left his house. From the windows he watched all those who arrived downstairs and were taken. He'd removed several tiles from his floor and pried up the plank beneath, so only a thin ceiling separated him from the chamber below. When the bailiffs interrogated their prisoners, he heard everything that passed between the inquisitors and the accused. After a thorough search of the person arrested, the interrogations almost always began with the following questions: "Has Madam Bonacieux sent anything to you for her husband or any other person?"

"Has Sir Bonacieux sent anything to you for his wife or any other person?"

"Has either of them confided anything to you by word of mouth?"

"If they knew anything definite, they wouldn't be asking these questions," d'Artagnan said to himself. "Now, what is it they want to know? They want to know if the Duke of Buckingham is in Paris, and if he has set up an interview with the queen."

D'Artagnan was quite taken with this idea that seemed to him quite likely, based on what he'd heard. Meanwhile, the mousetrap continued, and so did the vigilance of d'Artagnan. On the evening of the day after the arrest of poor Bonacieux, as the bells of Saint-Sulpice began to toll nine o'clock, Athos had just left d'Artagnan to go call on Sir Tréville, and Planchet was beginning his nightly task of making the bed. D'Artagnan heard a knock on the street door below, followed by the sound of the door opening, then immediately closing again. Someone was taken in the mousetrap. D'Artagnan sprang to his eavesdropping post, lay down on the floor and listened. He heard cries, then groans that someone tried to stifle. There was no sign of an interrogation. "The devil!" said d'Artagnan to himself. "It seems to me this must be the missing wife. They're searching her but she's resisting ... they're using force! The dogs!"

D'Artagnan could hardly restrain himself from racing downstairs to her rescue, despite his resolutions of prudence. "Why won't you listen?" cried the unfortunate woman. "I tell you I'm Madam Bonacieux, the mistress of the house! I belong to the queen!"

"Madam Bonacieux! I was right!" murmured d'Artagnan. "Am I so lucky as to have found the woman everyone's looking for?"

The thought was immediately confirmed: "This is the woman we've been waiting for," said one of the bailiffs. She tried to speak again but her voice was muffled. Thuds and crashes echoed from the walls, indicating the victim was resisting as well as a single woman could resist four men. D'Artagnan heard her say, "Ah! No, gentlemen! Plea..." before her voice was reduced to inarticulate sounds. "They're gagging her! They're going to carry her off," cried d'Artagnan, and straightened like an unstrung bow. "My sword! Good, it's at my side. Planchet!"

"Sir?"

"Run and find Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. One of them must be at home, maybe all of them. They must grab their weapons and come here as fast as they can. No, wait – Athos is at Sir Tréville's."

"But where are you going, Sir, where are you going?"

"Out the window! It's quickest. You, put back the tiles, sweep the floor, run out the door, and do what I said."

"Oh! Sir, Sir, you're going to kill yourself," cried Planchet.

"Be quiet, you idiot," said d'Artagnan. And grabbing hold of the windowsill, he clambered out and let himself drop from the first floor. Fortunately this was no great height, so he landed without mishap. He immediately went to knock on Bonacieux's door, thinking, *I'll catch myself in this mousetrap, and woe to any cats who try to pounce on a mouse like me.*

At the sound of the door-knocker, the tumult inside ceased. Footsteps approached, the door opened, and d'Artagnan, with naked sword, launched himself into Master Bonacieux's front room. The door, attached to a spring, closed itself behind him. Then those neighbours who lived near the unfortunate house of Bonacieux heard shouts, stamping, a clash of swords, and a prolonged shattering of furniture. The ones who went to their windows to learn the cause of this commotion were rewarded with the sight of the door opening to emit four men in black clothes. They didn't so much run out as fly, like frightened crows, leaving shreds of their black plumage on the ground and on the corners of the furniture that came hurtling after them. D'Artagnan was victorious – without too much trouble, it must be said, for only one of the bailiffs had been armed, and he'd defended himself solely for form's sake. The other three had tried to knock d'Artagnan down with chairs, stools, and hurled pots but two or three scratches from the Gascon's sword put an end to that. A few moments after he'd entered, d'Artagnan was sole master of the field of battle. The neighbours, who had opened their windows with the *sangfroid* usual to Parisians in those times of perpetual riots and street brawls, closed them again when they saw the four black-clad men in flight, since it appeared, for the moment, that all was over. Besides, it was getting late, and then as now they went to sleep early in the quarter of the Luxembourg. D'Artagnan was now alone with Madam Bonacieux, and he turned to assist her. The poor woman had collapsed onto an armchair, half-fainting. D'Artagnan took her in at a glance. She was a charming woman, aged twenty-five or twenty-six, a brunette with blue eyes, a nose slightly *retroussé*, beautiful teeth, and a complexion of rose and opal. However, that was the limit of any resemblance between the mercer's wife and a lady of high rank. Her hands were white but not delicate, and her feet didn't bespeak a woman of quality. Fortunately, d'Artagnan wasn't yet aware of such details. As d'Artagnan examined Madam Bonacieux, he saw on the floor near her feet a fine batiste handkerchief. He automatically picked it up, and noted on one corner the same cipher he'd seen on the fallen handkerchief that had nearly set him and Aramis at each other's throats. Since then, d'Artagnan had been suspicious of handkerchiefs bearing coats of arms, so without saying a word he replaced it in Madam Bonacieux's pocket. At that light touch, Madam Bonacieux regained her senses. She opened her eyes and looked around her, terrified but saw only her apartment, and that she was alone with her liberator. She immediately held out her hands to him and smiled. And Madam Bonacieux had the most charming smile in the world. "Ah! Sir!" she said. "You've saved me. Permit me to thank you."

"Madam," said d'Artagnan, "I did only what any gentleman would do in my place. You owe me no thanks."

"I do, Sir, I do, and I hope to prove to you that I'm not ungrateful. But what did those men want with me? I thought at first they were robbers! And why isn't Sir Bonacieux here?"

"Madam, those men are far more dangerous than robbers. They're agents of Your Eminence. As for your husband, he's not here because yesterday he was taken to the Bastille."

"My husband, in the Bastille!" cried Madam Bonacieux. "Oh, my God! What did he do? The poor, dear man! He's innocence itself!"

And something like a smile touched the face of the still fearful young woman. "What did he do, Madam?" said d'Artagnan. "I believe his only crime is to have the simultaneous good and bad fortune to be your husband."

"But, Sir, you know then..."

"I know that you've been abducted, Madam."

"But by whom? Do you know? Oh! If you know, tell me!"

"By a man aged forty to forty-five, with black hair, a dark complexion, and a scar on his left temple."

"That's him, that's him! But his name?"

"That I can't tell you."

"And my husband knew I'd been abducted?"

"He was informed of it by a letter from the scoundrel himself."

"And does he suspect what was behind it?" asked Madam Bonacieux with some embarrassment.

"I believe he thought it was politics."

"I agree with him – that's what I've thought from the first. So dear Sir Bonacieux hasn't suspected me for an instant of...?"

"Oh, far from that, Madam. He's proud of your talents, and even more so of your love."

A second barely perceptible smile flickered across the rosy lips of the pretty young woman. "But how did you get away?" continued d'Artagnan.

"I was certain from this morning as to why I'd been carried off, so I took advantage of a moment when they left me alone to use the drapes to climb down from the window. I thought my husband would be at home, so I rushed here first."

"To put yourself under his protection?"

"Oh, no! Poor dear man, I know quite well he's incapable of defending me; but there was another way he could help, and I wanted to tell him of it."

"What's that?"

"I can't tell you. It's not my secret."

"In any case, this is hardly the place to share secrets," said d'Artagnan. "The men I chased off will be back with reinforcements, and if they find us here, we're lost. I've sent for three of my friends but who knows if they'll be at home?"

"Yes, yes, you're right." Madam Bonacieux shuddered, frightened anew. "We must go!" She took d'Artagnan's arm and pulled him toward the door.

"Yes but go where?" said d'Artagnan. "Where would we be safe?"

"First let's get far from this house, and then we'll see." So the young woman and the young man left, without even bothering to close the door. They went down into the Rue des Fossoyeurs, hurried along the Rue of Vaugiard to the Rue des Fossés-Sir-le-Prince, and didn't stop until they'd circled back around to the Place Saint-Sulpice. "Now what?" asked d'Artagnan, "Is there some place you'd like me to conduct you?"

"I wish I knew," said Madam Bonacieux. "I'd intended to send my husband to tell Sir La Porte what had happened. I need to know what's taken place in the Louvre in the last three days, and whether it's safe for me to go there."

"Well, I can certainly go to inform Sir La Porte," said d'Artagnan.

"You could but unfortunately, while they know Sir Bonacieux at the Louvre and would let him pass, they don't know you. They'd shut the door on you."

D'Artagnan smiled. "Don't tell me there isn't some postern gate at the Louvre where there's a concierge who's devoted to you, and who will respond to a password."

Madam Bonacieux looked searchingly at the young man. "And if that's so, and I give you this password, will you immediately forget it once it's been used?"

"Word of honour, faith of a gentleman!" said d'Artagnan with a ring of truth that convinced the young woman.

"Take it then; I believe you," she said. "You have the air of a brave young man, and maybe you'll be lucky enough to find a reward for such devotion."

"Reward or no, I'll do everything in good conscience that I can do to serve the king and help the queen," said d'Artagnan. "Regard me as a friend, and put me to use."

"But me – where shall I go in the meantime?"

"Is there some friend's house where you can stay until Sir La Porte sends for you?"

"No. I can trust no one."

"Wait," said d'Artagnan, "we're almost at Athos's door. Yes, that's it."

"Who is Athos?"

"One of my friends."

"But what if he's home, and sees me?"

"He's not home, and anyway, I'll take the key away with me once you've entered his apartment."

"But what if he returns?"

"He won't return; but if he does, I'll arrange to have him told that I brought a woman for a visit, and that she's in his rooms."

"But that will compromise me terribly!"

"What does that matter at this point? No one here knows you, and in our situation, we're going to have to put up with an inconvenience or two."

"Then let's go to your friend's house. Where does he live?"

"Rue Férou, two steps from here."

"Come on."

And the pair resumed their course. As d'Artagnan had foreseen, Athos wasn't home. He took the key that was customarily given to him as a friend of the household, climbed the stairs, and introduced Madam Bonacieux into that small apartment that has already been described. "Make yourself at home," he said. "When I leave, lock the door from the inside and open it to no one, unless you hear three knocks, like this."

He knocked three times, two rather hard taps close together, followed after a pause by a final light tap. "I have it," said Madam Bonacieux. "Now, it's my turn to give you my instructions."

"I'm listening."

"Present yourself at the postern of the Louvre on the Quai of l'École side and ask for Germain."

"Very well. After that?"

"He'll ask you what you want, and you'll answer with these words: 'Tours and Brussels.' That will put him at your orders."

"And what do I order him to do?"

"To go look for Sir La Porte, the queen's *valet*."

"And when he's found him and Sir La Porte has come?"

"You will send him to me."

"That's fine – but where and how will I see you again?"

"Do you want to see me again?"

"Very much!"

"Well, leave that in my care, and rest easy."

"I can count on your word?"

"You can count on it."

D'Artagnan bowed to Madam Bonacieux, fixing the most amorous look he could on her charming petite person. As he descended the stairs, he heard the door close behind him and the double turn of the lock. In two bounds he was at the Louvre: as he entered the postern of l'École, ten o'clock was sounding. All the events so far related had occurred in a single hour. Everything turned out as predicted by Madam Bonacieux. At the password, Germain bowed, and ten minutes later, La Porte was at the gatehouse. In a few words, d'Artagnan conveyed what had happened, and where Madam Bonacieux was to be found. La Porte made sure of the address by having d'Artagnan repeat it twice, then left at a run. However, he'd gone barely ten paces before he returned. "Young man," he said to d'Artagnan, "some advice for you."

"Which is?"

"There could be trouble for you over these events."

"You believe so?"

"Yes. Do you have some friend whose clock runs slow?"

"Perhaps. What then?"

"Go see him, so he can be a witness that you were at his house at half-past nine. In the law, that's called an alibi."

D'Artagnan found this advice sensible. He took to his heels and hurried to the Hôtel de Tréville. Instead of passing through the antechamber with everyone else, he asked to enter through Sir Tréville's study. As d'Artagnan was one of the habitués of the hôtel, no one saw any difficulty about this. A footman went to inform the captain that his young countryman had something important to say to him and desired a private audience. Five minutes later, Sir Tréville entered the study. He asked d'Artagnan what he could do for him, and what brought him to visit at such a late hour. "Your pardon, Sir!" said d'Artagnan, who had used his time alone in the room to turn back the hands of the clock by three-quarters of an hour. "I thought that, since it's only twenty-five past nine, I had plenty of time."

"Twenty-five past nine!" said Sir Tréville, looking at his clock. "But that's impossible!"

"Just see, Sir," said d'Artagnan.

"So it is," said Tréville. "I'd have thought it was later. Well, then, what'd you have of me?" D'Artagnan launched into a long story about the queen, recounting his worries about Her Majesty, and relating what he'd heard about the cardinal's plans for the Duke of Buckingham. It was all told with a self-possession and aplomb that quite convinced Sir Tréville of his sincerity, the more so since Tréville himself had remarked that there was something fresh going on between the cardinal, the king, and the queen. As the clock struck ten, Sir Tréville thanked d'Artagnan for his information, reminded him to keep always at heart the service of the king and queen, and then returned to his salon. D'Artagnan took his leave but at the foot of the stairs, he told the guard on duty that he'd forgotten his cane. He ran back up, re-entered the study, and with a turn of his finger set the clock back to its proper time. Certain now that no one would notice it had been disturbed, and that he had a witness to prove his alibi, he descended the stairs and found his way to the street.

## 011 The Plot Thickens

With his alibi established, d'Artagnan left Sir Tréville's and walked the deserted streets toward his home, taking the longest possible way. What was on d'Artagnan's mind on his roundabout route as he looked up at the stars in the sky, sometimes sighing, sometimes smiling? He was thinking of Madam Bonacieux who was almost an ideal lover for an apprentice musketeer. She was pretty, mysterious, and initiated into the inner secrets of the Court that added the spice of drama to her youth and grace. And he suspected her of being attracted to him as well – an irresistible appeal to a novice lover. Moreover, d'Artagnan had rescued her from interrogation at the hands of Richelieu's demons, a service that inspired the sort of gratitude that can so easily assume a tender character. So quickly do dreams soar on the wings of fancy that d'Artagnan already imagined he soon might be approached by some messenger from the young woman, a page who would pass him a letter setting a rendezvous, or a gold chain or diamond. Young cavaliers, as has already been shown, accepted gifts from their king without a qualm; in those times of easy morals it was no more shameful for them to accept presents from their mistresses who often gave them souvenirs both precious and durable as if trying to defy the transience of emotion with the solidity of gifts. It was no shame for a man to make his way with the help of women. Those who were only beautiful gave of their beauty that is doubtless the origin of the proverb, "The most beautiful girl in the world can give no more than she has." Those who were rich gave of their wealth, and many a hero of that gallant epoch would never have won his spurs in the first place, nor his battles thereafter, without the heavy purse that his mistress had attached to his saddlebow. D'Artagnan had nothing. His mantle of provincial diffidence had been blown to the winds by the unorthodox counsels of his three musketeer friends. In d'Artagnan's mind, his life in Paris was like that of a soldier on campaign, no less than if he had been at war in Flanders: conquer the Spaniard there, the woman here. He was in enemy territory, and had to live by what spoils he could take. However, at this moment d'Artagnan was moved by a nobler, more selfless sentiment. The mercer had told him he was rich, and the young man could guess that with a dolt like Sir Bonacieux for a husband, the wife must hold the purse strings. But the feelings Madam Bonacieux inspired in d'Artagnan far outweighed any financial considerations. Outweighed them but didn't eradicate them: to find that a young woman, beautiful, graceful, and spirited, was rich as well, only augmented the first bloom of love. Wealth enables the purchase of all those little whimsies that are so becoming to beauty. A fine white stocking, a silk dress, a lace collar, a delicate slipper, or a crisp new ribbon won't make an ugly woman pretty but they can make a pretty woman beautiful. And wealth beautifies a woman's hands – for a woman's hands must remain idle to remain beautiful. D'Artagnan was no millionaire obviously. He hoped to be one someday but in his mind the date when he would reach that happy state was still far off. In the meantime, how miserable it would be to see his ladylove pining for those thousand nothings that constitute female happiness, and to be powerless to provide her those thousand nothings! At least, when a woman is rich and her lover is not, those things he can't buy her she can buy for herself. Usually these presents to herself are paid for with her husband's money, though it's rarely to him that she's grateful. D'Artagnan was prepared to be the tenderest lover but at the same time he was determined to continue to be a most devoted friend, so though preoccupied with his amorous plans for the mercer's wife, he didn't forget his three comrades. The pretty Madam Bonacieux was just the woman to promenade beside in the Saint-Denis countryside, or at the Fair of Saint-Germain, in the company of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. D'Artagnan would be proud to show off such a conquest to them. Of course, he'd noticed that after walking for a while, one is always joined by hunger. How pleasant it would be to conclude such an outing with one of those charming little dinners where a man felt on one side a friend's hand, and on the other a mistress's foot. Moreover, d'Artagnan would become his friends' saviour in hard times, thanks to the generosity of his mistress. And what of Sir Bonacieux, whom d'Artagnan had thrust into the hands of the bailiffs while promising, in an undertone, to save him? It must be confessed that he never crossed d'Artagnan's mind – or if he did, it was with the thought that it was just as well that he was where he was, wherever that might be. Love is the most selfish of all the passions. (But let the reader rest assured that if d'Artagnan had forgotten his landlord – or conveniently overlooked him – the author has not, and knows just where he is. However, for now, let's imitate the amorous Gascon. As for the worthy mercer, we'll return to him later.) D'Artagnan, dreaming of the future course of his new love, smiling at the stars and even, sometimes, speaking to them, drifted west to the edge of the Faubourg and then came back up the Rue du Cherche-Midi – or Chasse-Midi, as it was then called. He realised he was in Aramis's neighbourhood and decided to drop in on his friend, to explain why he'd sent Planchet around earlier with that urgent message summoning him to the mousetrap. If Aramis had been at home when Planchet had arrived, he'd doubtless run to the Rue des Fossoyeurs. Maybe he'd encountered his two other comrades, who must have had no more idea than he why they'd been sent for. This imposition called for an explanation – at least, that's what d'Artagnan said aloud. But to himself he added that it would give him an opportunity to talk to someone about pretty little Madam Bonacieux, of whom his mind, if not his heart, was already quite full. First love brings such a gush of joy that, if it does not find a way to overflow, the lover feels as if he will drown. Paris had been dark for two hours and the streets were nearly deserted. Eleven o'clock echoed in the mild air from all the belfries of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. D'Artagnan followed an alley not yet called the Rue d'Assas, inhaling the heady scents borne on the night breeze from dew-freshened gardens along the Rue of Vaugirard. From far off, muffled by shutters and distance, came the sound of drinking songs from the cabarets along the Pré-aux-Clercs. D'Artagnan turned right, up the Rue des Canettes, and crossed the Place Saint-Sulpice to where the street became the Rue Férou. Aramis's house was on the Rue of Vaugirard between the Rue Férou and the Rue des Fossoyeurs. D'Artagnan had just turned onto the Rue of Vaugirard and could already see the door of his friend's house, shrouded under a vast umbrella of sycamores and clematis, when something like a shadow appeared to detach itself from the darkness of the Rue des Fossoyeurs. This something was enveloped in a cloak, and at first d'Artagnan thought it was a man but by its small stature and uncertain step he soon recognised it for a woman. It seemed she wasn't sure which house she wanted: she looked around, stopped, retraced her steps, and then came back again. D'Artagnan was intrigued. "Suppose I went and offered her my services?" he said to himself. "She looks young and maybe she's pretty. I'd do it! ... On the other hand, a woman on the streets at this hour can only be going to meet her lover. Plague take it! If I interfere with a rendezvous, it'll be a bad start to a relations-hip." The young woman came back again, this time counting houses and windows. This didn't take long: there were only three buildings on the block, with only two windows at street level. One window was in a pavilion next door to Aramis's house and the other was Aramis's own. *"By the love of God!"* said d'Artagnan to himself, suddenly recalling the tale of the theologian's niece. "Wouldn't it be funny if this late-flying dove was searching for my friend's house? Wait – upon my soul, that's what it looks like! Ah, my dear Aramis, I've you this time." And d'Artagnan, making himself as small as he could, melted into the shadows, watching from a stone bench at the back of a niche in the wall. The young woman advanced a few more paces, making no sound but for those light footsteps that had betrayed her gender and a little cough that suggested a sweet voice. D'Artagnan thought this cough sounded like a signal. Whether in response to the cough or to some other signal, the young woman appeared to recognise that she'd reached her destination. She resolutely approached Aramis's shutter and made three evenly spaced taps on it. "All's well to Aramis," murmured d'Artagnan. "Ah, Sir Hypocrite, now I see what theology you study!"

The third tap was scarcely struck when the inner casement opened and light glimmered through the panes behind the shutter. "Oh ho!" said the listener. "She was awaited, not at the door but at the window. Now the sash will open and the lady will enter by escalade. Excellent!"

But to d'Artagnan's surprise, the window stayed closed. The light that had flared for an instant disappeared and all returned to darkness. D'Artagnan told himself this could not last long and continued his surveillance, eyes and ears open wide. He was right: after some seconds, 2 sharp taps resounded from the interior. The young woman in the street answered with a single tap and the shutter was half opened. One can guess how avidly d'Artagnan looked and listened. The light within had been carried into another room but the eyes of the young man were used to the night. It is said the eyes of Gascons are like cats' and can see in the dark. As d'Artagnan watched, the young woman drew a white object from her pocket and unfolded it until it took the shape of a handkerchief. She then displayed a corner of this object to the person inside the window. This brought to mind for d'Artagnan the handkerchief he'd found at the feet of Madam Bonacieux that in turn recalled the one he'd found at the feet of Aramis. "What the devil," he said to himself, "could this handkerchief signify?" From where he was, d'Artagnan could not see the face of the person inside the window but the young man had no doubt but that it was his friend Aramis who was conversing with the lady on the outside. Curiosity prevailing over prudence, he took advantage of their preoccupation with the handkerchief to leave his hiding place. Quick as lightning but softly, he slid along to an angle of the wall where he could see into the interior of Aramis's apartment. D'Artagnan almost let out a cry of surprise: it was not Aramis inside the window, it was a woman. He could make out the form of her garments but could not distinguish her features. As he watched, the woman in the house drew a second handkerchief from her own pocket and exchanged it for the one that had been shown to her. Some final whispered words passed between the two women, and then the shutter was closed. The woman outside the window turned and walked away, passing within four paces of d'Artagnan while lowering the hood of her cloak; but the precaution was too late, for d'Artagnan had already recognised Madam Bonacieux.

*Madam Bonacieux!* He'd suspected it was her since she'd taken the handkerchief from her pocket but how likely was it that Madam Bonacieux, who was supposedly being conducted to the Louvre by Sir La Porte, should be running through the streets of Paris alone at half past eleven at night, risking a second abduction? She must have a very urgent reason to do such a thing. And what reason is most urgent to a woman of twenty-five? Love. But was it on her own account, or for some other person that she endangered herself so?

That was what d'Artagnan asked himself, the demon of jealousy gnawing at his heart as if he were already the young woman's acknowledged lover. There was one very simple means to find out where Madam Bonacieux was going and that was to follow her. This course was so natural that d'Artagnan instinctively assumed it. But, at the sound of footsteps behind her, and the sight of a shadow detaching itself from the wall like a statue from its niche, Madam Bonacieux uttered a little cry and fled. D'Artagnan ran after her. It wasn't hard for him to catch a small woman embarrassed by a large cloak, and he caught up to her before she'd gone a third of the length of the block. The unfortunate woman was exhausted, not by fatigue but by terror; when d'Artagnan placed his hand on her shoulder, she fell to the ground and cried out in a choked voice, "Kill me if you want but I'll tell you nothing!" D'Artagnan passed his arms around her waist and lifted the half-fainting woman, trying to reassure her with protestations of devotion. The words were nothing to Madam Bonacieux, for such things are often said with the worst intentions in the world; but the voice was everything. The young woman thought she recognised that voice, and opened her eyes to look at the man who'd so terrorized her. Seeing it was d'Artagnan, she gave a cry of joy. "Oh! *It's you!* Thanks be to God!"

"Yes, it's me, whom God has sent to watch over you," said d'Artagnan.

"Was it with that intention that you followed me?" she asked, smiling coquettishly, her spirits instantly restored.

All fear had disappeared the moment she'd recognised a friend in one she'd taken for an enemy. "No," said d'Artagnan, "no, I confess it was chance that put me in your path; I saw a woman knocking at the window of one of my friends..."

"One of your friends?" interrupted Madam Bonacieux.

"But yes. Aramis is one of my best friends."

"Aramis? Who's that?"

"Come, now! Are you going to tell me that you don't know Aramis?"

"This is the first time I've heard his name."

"Is it the first time then that you've been to that house?"

"Of course."

"And you didn't know that a young man lives there?"

"No."

"A musketeer?"

"Not at all."

"Then he wasn't the one you came looking for?"

"Not the least in the world. Besides, as I'm sure you'd see, the person I spoke with was a woman."

"That's true; but maybe she's one of Aramis's friends."

"I know nothing of that."

"Since she's staying in his house."

"That has nothing to do with me."

"Well, then, who's she?"

"Oh! That's not my secret."

"My dear Madam Bonacieux, you are charming but at the same time you're the most mysterious of women."

"Do I lose by that?"

"On the contrary, you're adorable."

"Then give me your arm."

"Most willingly. And now?"

"Now, escort me."

"To where?"

"Where I'm going."

"But where *are* you going?"

"You'll see when you leave me at the door."

"Should I wait for you?"

"There would be no point to that."

"You'll return, then, alone?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not."

"But the person who accompanies you then, will it be a man or a woman?"

"I don't know yet."

"But / will know!"

"How's that?"

"I'll wait to see you leave."

"In that case, goodbye!"

"Why?"

"I have no need for you."

"But you asked for..."

"The aid of a gentleman, not the surveillance of a spy."

"Spy! That's a hard word!"

"And what do you call those who follow people in spite of them?"

"The indiscreet."

"The word is too mild."

D'Artagnan sighed. "Very well, Madam. I can see I must do just what you wish."

"I'd think better of you if you'd done so at once."

"Is there no merit in repentance?"

"And do you really repent?"

"I have no real idea what we're talking about! All I know is, I promise to do everything you want if you let me escort you to where you're going."

"And you'll leave me afterward?"

"Yes."

"Without spying on my exit?"

"No."

"Word of honour?"

"Faith of a gentleman!"

"Take my arm then and let's go."

D'Artagnan offered his arm to Madam Bonacieux, and she took it, half laughing, and half trembling. Together they walked to the Porte Saint-Michel and passed through, to the top of the Rue of La Harpe. Beyond the Cluny bath house the young woman appeared to hesitate, as she had in the Rue of Vaugirard. But from certain signs she seemed to recognise one particular door. Approaching it, she said, "This is where I have business. A thousand thanks for the honour of your company that has protected me from the dangers I would have been exposed to if alone. However, I've arrived at my destination, and the moment has come for you to keep your word."

"You'll have nothing to fear when returning?"

"I'll have nothing to fear but robbers."

"Are robbers nothing?"

"What could they take from me? I don't have a *denier* on me."

"You forget that beautiful handkerchief, embroidered with a coat of arms."

"What?"

"The one I found at your feet, and returned to your pocket."

"Hush, you fool!" cried the young woman. "Quiet, or I'm lost!"

"So, there is still danger for you, since a single word terrifies you, and you admit that if it were overheard, you'd be lost. Ah, Madam, take what I offer!" cried d'Artagnan, seizing her hand and looking ardently at her. "Confide in me! Haven't you seen in my eyes the devotion of my heart?"

"I have," replied Madam Bonacieux. "Ask me for my secrets, and I'll tell you; but don't ask me for the secrets of others."

"All right," said d'Artagnan. "I'll discover them myself. Since these secrets have an influence over your life, these secrets must be mine."

"Take care, Sir! I beg you, in the name of whatever feelings I inspire in you, in the name of the services you've rendered me, and which I shall never forget – I beg you, I say, not to get mixed up in my affairs." Madam Bonacieux said this with a gravity that chilled d'Artagnan despite himself. "Believe what I tell you. Don't concern yourself any further about me. If you're wise, I'll no longer exist for you, just as if you'd never seen me."

"Must Aramis forget you as well, Madam?" said d'Artagnan, piqued.

"Again that name! Sir, I've told you two or three times already that I don't know him."

"You don't know the man whose shutter you knocked on? Come, Madam! How gullible do you think I am?"

"Admit that you invented that story, and created this Aramis person just to make me talk!"

"I invent nothing, Madam, I create nothing. I speak the exact truth."

"You hold to your story that one of your friends' lives in that house?"

"I say and repeat once again, that house is inhabited by my friend, whose name is Aramis."

"All this will have to be cleared up later," murmured the young woman. "Now, Sir, hush! That's quite enough."

"If you could see everything in my heart," said d'Artagnan, "you would read there so much curiosity that you'd pity me, and so much love that you would instantly satisfy my curiosity. They have nothing to fear from those who love them."

"You speak very quickly of love, Sir!" said the young woman, shaking her head.

"It's just that love has conquered me quickly, for the first time – and because I'm only twenty years old."

The young woman stole a glance at him, then looked down. “You may as well tell me, because I’m already on the track. Listen,” said d’Artagnan. “About three months ago, I nearly fought with Aramis over a handkerchief like the one you showed to the woman in his house, over a handkerchief that I’m sure bore the same coat of arms.”

“Sir, I swear, you’re exhausting me with all these questions,” said the young woman.

“But think, Madam, if you go about alone and are arrested with that handkerchief, won’t you be compromised?”

“Not at all. The initials on it are my own: C.B. – Constance Bonacieux.”

“Or Camille de Bois-Tracy.”

“Hush, Sir!” She stamped her foot in frustration. “Since endangering me won’t silence you, think of the danger to yourself!”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You could be imprisoned, even killed, just for knowing me.”

“Then I definitely mustn’t leave you.”

“Sir,” said the young woman, clasping her hands, “Sir, in the name of heaven, by the honour of a soldier, in the name of the courtesy of a gentleman, leave here! There, midnight is sounding – that’s when I’m expected!”

“Madam,” said the young man, bowing, “I can refuse nothing asked of me thus; be content, I depart.”

“And you won’t follow me, won’t spy on me?”

“I return home this instant.”

“Ah! I knew I could depend on you!” said Madam Bonacieux as she held out her hand to him.

She placed the other on the knocker of a door so small it could easily be overlooked. D’Artagnan seized her hand and kissed it passionately. “Ah! I wish I’d never seen you,” he cried, with that naïve roughness that women often prefer over affectations of politeness, because they reveal the heart and prove that emotion prevails over reason. “Well,” replied Madam Bonacieux tenderly, pressing d’Artagnan’s hand, “well, I won’t go that far: what’s lost for today isn’t lost for tomorrow. Who knows, when this is all over, whether I won’t satisfy your curiosity?”

“And will you make the same promise about my love?” cried d’Artagnan, elated.

“Oh! On that, I can’t commit myself. That depends on the feelings you inspire in me.”

“Then, today, Madam…”

“Today, Sir, I haven’t yet gotten beyond gratitude.”

“You abuse my love,” said d’Artagnan sadly.

“No, I use your generosity, that’s all. But, believe me, with some people, everything comes around.”

D’Artagnan brightened. “Then I’m the happiest man alive. Promise me you’ll never forget this evening – and never forget that promise.”

“Dear friend, in the proper time and place I will remember everything. But go, now, go, in the name of heaven! They expect me at midnight exactly, and I’m late.”

“By five minutes.”

“Yes but sometimes five minutes are five centuries.”

“When one loves.”

“Well, who says I don’t have business with a lover?”

“It’s a man who awaits you?” cried d’Artagnan. “A man!”

“Here we go again,” said Madam Bonacieux with a half-smile that was not free from a certain tinge of impatience.

“No, no, I’m going. I depart; I believe in you and want all the credit for my devotion even if that devotion’s stupidity. Goodbye, madam, goodbye!”

And as if he lacked the strength to detach himself from her hand except by a jolt, he turned and left at a run. Madam Bonacieux knocked as she had at the shutter with 3 light, evenly spaced taps. When d’Artagnan arrived at the corner of the next street, he turned for a final look but the door had already opened and closed and the pretty mercer’s wife had disappeared. D’Artagnan continued on his way. He had given his word not to spy on Madam Bonacieux, and if his life depended on knowing where she was going, or with whom, he would still have gone home. Five minutes later, he was in the Rue des Fossoyeurs. “Poor Athos,” he said. “He’ll never know what this was all about. He’ll have fallen asleep waiting for me, or returned home and been told that a woman has been there. A woman in Athos’s house! Well, after all,” continued d’Artagnan, “there was certainly one in Aramis’s house. All this is very strange, and I’m very curious to know how it will end.”

“Badly, Sir, badly,” replied a voice for d’Artagnan had been soliloquising aloud, preoccupied.

The young man recognised Planchet, waiting in the alley at the base of the stairway that led to his apartment. “What do you mean, badly? What kind of stupid remark is that?” d’Artagnan asked. “Has something happened?”

“All sorts of misfortunes.”

“Such as?”

“First of all, Sir Athos is arrested.”

“Arrested! Athos, arrested! Why?”

“They found him in your house and took him for you.”

“Who arrested him?”

“The city guards sent by those men in black you chased off.”

“Why didn’t he name himself? Why didn’t he tell them he was a stranger to this affair?”

“He was careful not to, Sir. On the contrary, he approached me and said, ‘It’s your master who needs his liberty right now, and not me, since he knows everything and I know nothing. They’ll believe d’Artagnan’s been arrested, and that will give him time; in three days I’ll reveal who I am, and they’ll have to let me go.’”

“Bravo, Athos! Noble heart,” murmured d’Artagnan, “That sounds like him, all right! And what did the guardsmen do?”

“Four of them took him someplace: maybe the Bastille, maybe the prison at For-l’Évêque. Two stayed behind, guarding the door, while those men in black searched everywhere and took all your papers. When they were finished, they all went away, leaving the house wide open.”

“And Porthos and Aramis?”

“I couldn’t find them.”

“But you left word that I awaited them?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. They might show up at any moment, so don’t budge from here. If they come, tell them what’s happened, and ask them to wait for me at the Pomme-de-Pin cabaret. It’s too dangerous to wait here; the house might be spied upon. I’ll run to Sir Tréville’s to acquaint him with all of this, and then I’ll join them.”

“Very well, Sir,” said Planchet.

D’Artagnan started to leave, then had second thoughts and turned back. “You’ll stay, won’t you, even if you’re afraid?” he said to Planchet.

“Don’t worry, Sir,” said Planchet. “You don’t really know me yet. I’m brave once I get going; it’s all a matter of setting myself up. Besides, I’m a Picard.”

“So, you’d be killed rather than quit your post?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to prove to Sir how attached I am to him.”

“Excellent,” said d’Artagnan to himself. “It seems the method I adopted for managing this fellow was a good one. I’ll have to repeat it now and then.”

And with what speed was left in his legs after all the running around he’d already done, d’Artagnan took himself to the Rue du Vieux-Colombier. However, Sir Tréville was not at his hôtel; he was with his company, on guard at the Louvre. He had to get to Tréville; it was important that he be told what had happened. D’Artagnan resolved to try to enter the Louvre. His uniform of a guard in des Essarts’s company would have to be his passport. He went down to the river by the Rue des Petits-Augustins and turned right along the quay to take the Pont Neuf across to the royal palace. He’d considered crossing by the ferry but on arriving at the water’s edge and checking his purse, he’d discovered he didn’t have enough money for the fee. As he passed the opening of the Rue Guénégaud he saw two people coming out of the Rue Dauphine ahead of him. He was struck by their appearance: one was a man, one a woman. The woman was shaped like Madam Bonacieux, and wore that black cloak d’Artagnan had seen silhouetted against the shutter on the Rue of Vaugirard. The man resembled no one so much as Aramis, and wore the uniform of the musketeers. The woman’s hood was lowered, while the man held his handkerchief to his face, precautions that showed the pair had an interest in not being recognised. They walked onto the bridge. That was d’Artagnan’s road, too, since his destination was the Louvre, so he followed them. He hadn’t gone twenty paces before he was convinced that the woman was Madam Bonacieux and the man was Aramis. Instantly he was overwhelmed by jealousy. He felt doubly betrayed by his friend and the woman whom he already loved like a mistress. Madam Bonacieux had sworn to him by all that was holy that she didn’t know Aramis, and here, a quarter of an hour later, he found her on Aramis’s arm. D’Artagnan didn’t reflect that he’d only known the pretty mercer’s wife for three hours, that she owed him nothing but some gratitude for having delivered her from her abductors, and that she’d promised him nothing. He saw himself as an outraged lover, betrayed and scoffed at. The blood mounted to his face, and he decided it was time to clear up this affair. The young woman and the young man noticed they were being watched and followed, and they doubled their pace. Breaking into a run, d’Artagnan cut across to the walkway on the right-hand side of the bridge, passed them, and ran all the way to the other end. Then he returned to accost them just as they passed in front of La Samaritaine. A lamp on the front of the great pump-house lit this whole part of the bridge. D’Artagnan halted before the couple and they stopped short. “What do you want, Sir?” asked the musketeer, drawing back a step and with a foreign accent that proved to d’Artagnan that he was wrong about at least one of his conclusions. “It’s not Aramis!” d’Artagnan cried.

“No, Sir, it’s not Aramis. By your exclamation I see that you’ve taken me for another, so I pardon you.”

“You, pardon me!” said d’Artagnan.

“Yes,” replied the stranger. “Let me pass then, since I’m not the one you have business with.”

“You’re right, Sir,” said d’Artagnan, “it’s not with you I have business, it’s with Madam.”

“With Madam! You don’t know her,” said the stranger.

“Wrong, Sir, I do know her.”

“Ah!” said Madam Bonacieux in a tone of reproach, “Ah, Sir! I had your word as a soldier and your faith as a gentleman. I’d hoped I could count on them.”

“And I, Madam,” said d’Artagnan, embarrassed, “you’ve promised me … that’s…”

“Take my arm, Madam,” said the stranger, “and let’s continue on our way.”

But d’Artagnan, though stunned and practically annihilated by all that had happened to him, still stood, arms crossed, before the musketeer and Madam Bonacieux. The musketeer took two steps forward and shoved d’Artagnan aside. D’Artagnan leaped back and drew his sword. At the same time, like lightning, the stranger drew his. “In the name of heaven, Milord!” cried Madam Bonacieux, throwing herself between the combatants and grabbing the blades in her gloved hands.

“Milord!” cried d’Artagnan, struck by a sudden idea. “Milord! Pardon, sir but you’re then…”

“Milord, the Duke of Buckingham,” said Madam Bonacieux in an undertone. “And now you can ruin us all.”

“Milord – Madam – pardon, a hundred pardons! I love her, milord, and I was jealous. You know what it’s to love, Milord! Pardon me and tell me how I can get myself killed in Your Grace’s service.”

“You’re a brave young man,” said Buckingham. He gave d’Artagnan his hand and shook it respectfully. “I accept the offer of your services. Follow twenty paces behind us as far as the Louvre – and if anyone spies on us, kill him.” D’Artagnan put his naked sword under his arm, let Madam Bonacieux and the duke go twenty steps ahead, and followed them, ready to execute to the letter the instructions of the noble and elegant minister of Charles I. Fortunately, the youth had no occasion to prove his devotion to the duke, and the young woman and the handsome *musketeer* entered the Louvre by the postern of l’École without trouble. As for d’Artagnan, he went immediately to the Pomme-de-Pin cabaret, where he found Porthos and Aramis waiting for him. Without explaining any inconvenience he might have put them to, he told them he’d wound up the affair on his own and hadn’t needed their help. Now, let’s leave the three friends, each to return to his home, and follow the Duke of Buckingham and his guide through the maze of the Louvre.



George Villiers, the 1<sup>ST</sup> Duke of Buckingham

Madam Bonacieux was known to belong to the queen, and the Duke of Buckingham wore the uniform of Tréville's musketeers who were on guard that night so they were able to enter the Louvre without difficulty. Germain, the keeper of the postern gate was one of the queen's partisans so the worst that could happen was that Madam Bonacieux might be accused of having brought her lover into the Louvre. Any blame would fall on her. Her reputation would be lost, of course – but of what value in the world was the reputation of a mercer's little wife? Once within the grounds of the Louvre, the duke and the young woman followed the base of the wall for about twenty-five paces to a small service door that was open by day but ordinarily closed at night. This door yielded to Madam Bonacieux's hand and they entered. When she'd closed it again they were in darkness but Madam Bonacieux knew all the ins and outs of the servants' corridors in that part of the Louvre. She took the duke by the hand, felt her way forward a few steps, located a banister, and led him up a staircase. The duke counted two flights of stairs. At the top she turned right, led him down a long corridor, and descended another flight of stairs into another hall, where she put a key into a lock and opened a door. She conducted the duke into a chamber lit only by a night lamp, saying, "Remain here, milord Duke. Someone will come for you."

Then she left by the same door, locking it with the key so that Buckingham found himself literally a prisoner. However, though left quite alone, it must be said that the Duke of Buckingham never felt a moment's fear. A yen for adventure and the love of romance were the keynotes of his character. Brave, enterprising, even reckless, this was not the first time he'd risked his life in such an endeavour. He'd already learned that the pretended message from Anne of Austria that had drawn him to Paris, was a snare – but instead of returning to England, he'd taken advantage of the situation to declare to the queen that he wouldn't depart without seeing her. At first the queen had refused but then she'd feared that if frustrated, the duke might do something rash. She decided to receive him and beg him to leave immediately – but Madam Bonacieux, whose task it was to find the duke and bring him to the Louvre, had been abducted on the very evening of the queen's decision. For two days Anne and her people had no idea what had become of her, and everything hung in suspense. Once Madam Bonacieux was free and in contact again with La Porte, events had resumed their course, and she'd gone to complete the dangerous task that but for her arrest, would have been accomplished three days earlier. Buckingham, alone in the little room, noticed a mirror and approached it. The uniform of a King's Musketeer suited him very well indeed. At thirty-five, he was justly called the most handsome gentleman and the most elegant cavalier of France or England. The favourite of two kings, wealthy beyond counting, all-powerful in a realm that he roiled at a whim and calmed at a caprice, George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, lived one of those fabulous lives that are still astonishing centuries after the fact. Sure of himself, convinced of his power, certain that the laws that govern other men had no power over him, he went straight toward his goal no matter what it was, even if it were so elevated and so overwhelming that it would be madness for another to reach for it. This was how he'd managed repeatedly to approach the beautiful and haughty Anne of Austria, and make her love him by dazzling her. George Villiers, still before the mirror, primped his striking blond hair to restore the curls the hat had flattened, and twisted his moustache into points. His heart swelling with joy at being so close to that moment he'd so long desired, he smiled at himself with hope and pride. At that moment, a door hidden behind a tapestry opened and a woman appeared. Buckingham saw this apparition in the mirror and uttered a cry: *It's the queen!*

Anne of Austria was then 26 or 27 and in all the splendour of her youthful beauty. She had the poise of royalty or divinity; her beautiful eyes that shone with glints of emerald, were at the same time sweet and majestic. Her mouth was small, rosy, and though her lower lip, like those of the Hapsburg princes, protruded slightly, her lips were as eminently graceful when curved in a smile as they were profoundly disdainful when curled in contempt. Her soft, velvety skin was renowned, and hands and arms were of such surpassing beauty that all the poets of the time sang of them as incomparable. Her hair that from blond in her youth had darkened to chestnut, and which she wore powdered and very lightly curled, framed her face admirably. It was a face that even the most rigorous critic could only wish wore a little less rouge, and in which the most exacting sculptor could only wish for a little more delicate shape to the nose. Buckingham stood for a moment, dazzled: though he'd seen her at balls, fêtes, and promenades, never had Anne of Austria appeared more beautiful than at that moment, attired in a simple dress of white satin. She was accompanied by Doña Estefania, the only one of her Spanish women who had not been driven away by the jealousy of the king or the persecution of Richelieu. Anne of Austria took two steps forward; Buckingham threw himself at her feet, and before the queen could prevent him, he kissed the hem of her dress. "Duke," she said, "you already know that it wasn't I who wrote to you."

"Yes, Your Majesty, I know," said the duke. "And I know that I've been mad to hope that snow could come alive or marble warm itself. But what of that? When one loves, one easily believes in love. And I can't consider this journey a loss if I see you as a result."

"Yes," replied Anne, "but you know why and how you see me, Milord. You see me from pity for yourself. You see me because insensitive to my troubles, you nonetheless stubbornly remain in a city where you risk your life and I risk my honour just by being here. I see you now to tell you that everything separates us: the depths of the sea, the hostility of kingdoms, and the sanctity of vows. It's a sacrilege to contend against all these things, milord. I see you at last to tell you that we must see each other no more."

"Speak on, madam. Speak, O queen," said Buckingham. "The sweetness of your voice makes up for the harshness of your words. You talk of sacrilege! The sacrilege's in the separation of two hearts that God's formed for each other."

"Milord," said the queen, "you forget that I've never told you that I love you."

"But you've never said you don't love me and truly, Your Majesty could say nothing so ungrateful ever. For tell me, where else can you find a love like mine, a love that neither time, nor absence, nor despair can extinguish: a love that's content with a lost ribbon, a stray glance, a chance word? It's been three years, madam, since I first saw you and for three years I've loved you thus. Do you want me to tell you how you were dressed the first time I saw you? Do you want me to detail every ornament of your wardrobe? I can see you still: you were seated on cushions, Spanish-style, wearing a dress of green satin embroidered with gold and silver with hanging sleeves fastened up to display your beautiful arms. You wore diamonds, a petite ruff about your neck on your head a small bonnet the colour of your dress and on the bonnet a heron's plume. Oh, Queen! I shut my eyes and see you as you're then; I reopen them and see you as you're now, a hundred times more beautiful still!" "What folly!" murmured Anne of Austria who had not the will to think ill of the duke for having retained such a portrait of her in his heart, "What madness to feed a useless passion with such memories!" "And on what'd you've me live then? I've nothing but these memories. They're my happiness, treasure, and hope. Each time I see you is like a new diamond to enclose in the coffer of my heart. This is the fourth gem that you've let fall for me to pick up; for in three years, madam, I've seen you only four times: the first I was just speaking of, the second at the hotel of Madam of Chevreuse, and the third in the garden at Amiens."

"Duke," said the queen, blushing, "never speak of that evening."

"On the contrary, let's speak of it, madam, let's speak of it! It's the happiest, most radiant evening of my life. Do you recall what a beautiful night it was? How the air's soft and perfumed, how the sky's midnight blue and frosted with stars? Ah! Then madam, I was able for one instant to be alone with you; then you're ready to tell me everything – the loneliness of your life, the grief of your heart. You're leaning on my arm, on this very arm. As I leaned toward you, I felt your beautiful hair brush my face, and each time it touched me I shivered from head to foot. Oh, queen, my queen! You can't know the heavenly happiness, the joys of paradise contained in that moment. I'd give everything, my worldly goods, fortune, power, and glory, all the days left me to live for one more such moment in one more such night! For that night, madam, *that* night you loved me – I swear it!"

"Milord, it's possible that under the influence of that place, the charm of that beautiful evening, the fascination of your regard – in short, that the thousand circumstances that sometimes combine to destroy a woman, came together on that fatal evening. But you saw, milord, the queen come to the rescue when the woman faltered: at the first word you spoke, at the first touch you dared, I called out."

"That's true. And at such a blow, any other love but mine would've given up. But it just made my love all the more ardent, all the more eternal. You thought you'd flee from me by returning to Paris, thinking I'd not dare to leave your sister Henriette, the treasure my master King Charles had charged me to watch. But what importance to me are all the treasures of the world and all the kings of the earth? Eight days later I returned to you, Madam. That time, you'd nothing to say to me. Though I'd risked royal disfavour even my life, to see you for a second, I didn't so much as touch your hand. You pardoned me on seeing me so submissive and repentant."

"Yes but though we did nothing, lying tongues have made much of these foolish meetings – as you well know, milord. The king, goaded by Your Eminence, made a terrible uproar. Madam du Vernet's driven away, Putanges was exiled, Madam of Chevreuse fell into disfavour and when you wanted to return as Ambassador to France, the king himself – remember, milord! – The king himself opposed it."

"Yes, and France will pay with a war for her king's refusal. So, I'm unable to see you, Madam? Very well then – but every day you'll hear of me. What do you think is the goal of my planned invasion of the Isle of Ré and alliance with the Protestants of La Rochelle? Nothing but the pleasure of seeing you! I daren't hope to penetrate to Paris, sword in hand – I know that very well. But this war will have to end in a peace that peace will require a negotiator, and that negotiator will be me. They'll not dare to refuse me then. I'll come back to Paris, I'll come back to you and be happy if just for a moment. True, thousands of men will pay with their lives for my happiness but what does that matter to me, provided I see you again? Perhaps this is all folly, even insane but tell me: what woman in the world's a lover more amorous? What queen's a servant more devoted?"

"Milord, Milord, what you say in your defence just condemns you all the more! These so-called proofs of your love verge on being crimes!"

"Because you do not love me, madam! If you loved me, you wouldn't see it like that. Oh but if you loved me – that would be too much happiness, and I *would* go mad. Madam of Chevreuse was less cruel than you; the Earl of Holland loved her, and she returned his love."

"Madam of Chevreuse was not a queen," murmured Anne of Austria, overcome despite herself by the expression of a love so profound.

"You would love me, then, if you were not a queen? Madam, say it – you would love me then? I can believe that it's only the dignity of your rank that makes you so cruel to me, that if you'd been Madam of Chevreuse, poor Buckingham might have hoped? Thanks for those sweet words, my beautiful Majesty, a hundred times thanks!"

"No, Milord, you've misunderstood. I didn't mean to say..."

"Hush! Hush!" said the duke. "If I'm happy in my mistake, please don't be so cruel as to take it away from me. You said yourself that I've been drawn into a snare that might cost me my life, and it may yet do so." The duke smiled a smile both sad and charming, and said, "For some time I've had strange premonitions of my own death."

"My God!" Anne cried with a terror that showed she cared much more than she wanted to say.

"I don't say this to frighten you, Madam. I shouldn't have mentioned it to you – please believe I'm not preoccupied by such dreams. But what you've said to me, the hope you've nearly given me, is worth everything, even my life."

"But, Milord," said Anne of Austria, "I, too, have had premonitions and dreams. I dreamed I saw you lying, bleeding from a wound."

"On the left side, wasn't it, and from a knife?" interrupted Buckingham.

"Yes, Duke, that's it – on the left side, with a knife! Who could have told you about this dream? I've confided it only to God, in my prayers."

"I want nothing more. You love me, Madam. All is well."

"I, love you? Me?"

"Yes, you. Would God send us the same dreams if you didn't love me? Would we have the same premonitions if our lives weren't joined at the heart? You love me, O Queen! Will you weep for me?"

"Oh! My God! My God!" cried Anne of Austria. "This is more than I can bear. Leave, Duke – in the name of heaven, go! I don't know if I love you or if I don't love you; but I do know that I won't break my word. Have pity on me, and leave. Oh! If you were caught in France, if you died in France, if I thought your love for me was the cause of your death, I'd never recover – I would go mad! Leave, then, leave – I implore you!"

"How beautiful you are this way! How I love you!" said Buckingham.

"Leave! Leave! I beg you. Come back later, if you must: come back as an ambassador, come back as a minister, come back surrounded by guards who will defend you, by servants who will watch over you. Then I shall fear no more for the length of your days, and I'll be happy to see you."

"Is ... is this true what you tell me?"

"Yes..."

"Then give me a pledge of your indulgence, something from you that will remind me that I didn't dream this, something you've carried and that I can carry in my turn: a ring, a necklace, a chain."

"And you'll leave, you'll really leave, if I give you what you ask?"

"Yes."

"This very instant?"

"Yes."

"You'll leave France, you'll return to England?"

"Yes, I swear to you!"

"Wait, then – wait."

Anne of Austria re-entered her chambers and came out again almost immediately, holding in her hands a small coffer of rosewood, marked with her cipher and chased with gold. “Here, Milord Duke,” she said. “Guard this in memory of me.”

Buckingham took the coffer and fell a second time to his knees. “You promised me you would leave,” said the queen.

“And I keep my word. Your hand, your hand, Madam, and I depart.”

Anne of Austria offered Buckingham one hand while closing her eyes and leaning on Estefania with the other, for she felt that her strength was going to fail her. Buckingham passionately kissed that beautiful hand, then rose. “Within six months,” he said, “if I’m not dead, I will see you again, Madam, if I must set the world at war to do it.” Then, true to his promise, he hastened from the room. In the corridor he found Madam Bonacieux awaiting him, who, with the same precautions as before, and with the same success, conducted him out of the Louvre.

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Sir Bonacieux

It may be remarked that there was one person in this affair who, despite his precarious position, seems to have been all but forgotten: the worthy Sir Bonacieux, martyr to the tangled political and amorous intrigues of this gallant epoch of chivalry. Fortunately, as the reader may recall, we promised not to lose sight of him. The officers who had arrested Bonacieux took him straight to the Bastille. Inside its gates he passed, trembling, before a platoon of soldiers loading their muskets. He was taken down into a semi-subterranean gallery, where Bonacieux was subjected to gross insults and some rough handling by his guards. The gendarmes saw that they were not dealing with a gentleman and treated him as if he were the lowliest peasant. After half an hour or so, a magistrate’s clerk arrived and put an end to these torments but not to Sir Bonacieux’s fears, as he ordered him conducted to the Interrogation Chamber. Ordinarily prisoners were interrogated in their own cells but apparently Bonacieux didn’t deserve such a dignity. Two gendarmes took possession of the mercer, marched him to a corridor guarded by three sentries, opened a door, and pushed him into a low chamber, the total furnishings of which were a table, a chair, and a commissioner. The commissioner was seated on the chair and busily writing on the table. The commissioner remained buried in his papers for a few moments, then looked up to see what he had to deal with. He was a repulsive little man, with a pointed nose, jaundiced cheeks stretched taut over sharp cheekbones, tiny, piercing eyes, and an expression suggesting both fox and weasel. His head balanced on the end of a long, mobile neck, issuing from a large, black robe like a turtle’s head protruding from its carapace. He began by demanding of Bonacieux his family and given names, age, condition, and address. The accused replied that he was called Jacques-Michel Bonacieux, his age was fifty-one, he was a retired mercer, and lived in the Rue des Fossoyeurs. Instead of asking further questions, the commissioner then launched into a long, rambling lecture about the perils awaiting an obscure bourgeois who dared to interfere in matters of state. He went on to praise the power and policies of His Eminence the Cardinal – that incomparable minister, who had eclipsed all past ministers, and was an example for all ministers to come, a man whose purposes and power none could flout with impunity. After completing this impressive speech, the commissioner fixed his eye on poor Bonacieux like a hawk surveying a mouse, and urged him to reflect on the gravity of his situation. The mercer had already done so, consigning La Porte to the devil for suggesting that Bonacieux should marry his goddaughter, and that this goddaughter should be received into the queen’s household as linen maid. The fundamental ingredients of Master Bonacieux’s character were a profound selfishness mixed with sordid avarice, the whole seasoned by utter spinelessness. Whatever love his young wife had inspired in him was entirely secondary to these basic elements. Bonacieux mulled over the commissioner’s speech. “But Sir Commissioner,” he said timidly, “please believe that I more than anyone recognise and appreciate the merits of the incomparable cardinal by whom we have the honour to be governed.” “Really?” asked the commissioner, with a doubtful air. “If that’s so, how is it that you’re here in the Bastille?”

“How I came here, or rather why I came here, is impossible for me to say, as I don’t know myself,” replied Bonacieux, “but certainly it’s not for having knowingly disobliged Your Eminence.”

“Nevertheless, you must have committed some crime, since here you are, accused of high treason.”

“High treason!” cried Bonacieux, terrified. “High treason! How could a poor mercer who hates the Huguenots and abhors the Spanish be accused of high treason? Sir, Sir – the thing is materially impossible!”

“Sir Bonacieux,” said the commissioner, his gaze boring into the accused as if his tiny eyes could see to the bottom of his heart, “Sir Bonacieux ... you’ve a wife?”

“Yes, Sir,” replied the trembling mercer, certain that now they were approaching the root of his troubles. “That is to say, I had one.”

“What? You had one? What have you done with her, if you no longer have her?”

“She was abducted from me, Sir.”

“She was abducted from you?” said the commissioner. “Ah!”

This “Ah!” confused Bonacieux more than ever.

“She was abducted from you!” resumed the commissioner. “And do you know who committed this abduction?”

“I ... believe I know him.”

“Who is he?”

“Take note that I affirm nothing, Sir Commissioner, I only suspect.”

“Whom do you suspect? Come, answer freely.”

Sir Bonacieux was perplexed. Should he deny everything, or tell all? If he denied everything, they would be sure to think he knew more than he was saying. If he told all, it would be proof of his willingness to cooperate. He decided to tell all. “I suspect,” he said, “a tall, dark man of haughty demeanour, with the air of a *Grand*. He followed us a number of times, I believe, when I went to the postern of the Louvre to meet my wife and bring her home.”

This reply seemed to make the commissioner nervous. “And his name?” he said.

“Oh! As to his name, I know nothing – but if I ever met him, I’d recognise him instantly out of a thousand people, I swear it.”

The commissioner’s face darkened. “You’d know him in a thousand, you say?”

“That is to say,” resumed Bonacieux, who saw he’d taken a wrong turn, “that is to say...”

“You have stated positively that you would recognise the man,” said the commissioner ominously. “That will be quite enough for today. Before we proceed further, I must report that you know your wife’s ravisher.”

“But I didn’t say I know him!” cried Bonacieux in despair. “I told you on the contrary...”

“Take the prisoner away,” said the commissioner to the pair of guards.

“And where should we take him?” asked the clerk.

“To a dungeon.”

“Which one?”

“For God’s sake! Whichever one you come to first, so long as it’s dark and deep,” replied the commissioner with an indifference that horrified poor Bonacieux.

“Alas! Alas!” he said to himself. “I’m doomed. My wife’s committed some frightful crime – they think I’m her accomplice, and will punish me as well. She must have talked, she must have confessed and told all. Women are so weak! And now I’m to be thrown into a dungeon, the first we come to. It’s all over! One night is soon past, and then tomorrow, it’s to the wheel, or the gallows! May God have pity on me!”

Without paying any attention to the lamentations of Master Bonacieux, having heard such laments a thousand times, the two guards took the prisoner by the arm and led him away. Meanwhile the commissioner hastily wrote a letter, then consigned it to the clerk. Once incarcerated in his dungeon, Bonacieux couldn’t even close his eyes – not because his dungeon was too disagreeable but because his anxieties were too great. He remained all night crouched on his stool, starting at every sound. By the time the first rays of daylight shone into his chamber, even the dawn appeared to him sombre and funereal. Suddenly he heard the bolts being drawn, and leaped up wildly. He thought they were coming to conduct him to the scaffold, so when he saw the commissioner and his clerk in place of the executioner he’d expected, he was ready to embrace them both. “Your affair has become more complicated since yesterday evening, my good man,” said the commissioner, “and I advise you to tell the whole truth, for only a full confession can stave off the cardinal’s anger.”

“But I’m ready to tell everything!” cried Bonacieux. “At least, everything I know. Interrogate me, I beg you.”

“Where is your wife, first of all?”

“I told you – she’s been abducted from me.”

“Yes but since five o’clock yesterday afternoon, she’s escaped – thanks to you.”

“My wife has escaped!” cried Bonacieux. “Oh! The wretch! Sir, if she has escaped, it’s not my fault, I swear to you.”

“Why then did you go to the rooms of your neighbour, Sir d’Artagnan, with whom you had a long conference?”

“Ah! Yes, Sir Commissioner, yes, that’s true, and I confess my mistake. I have been to Sir d’Artagnan’s.”

“What was the object of this visit?”

“To beg his aid in recovering my wife. I thought I had a right to reclaim her but apparently I was mistaken, and I ask your pardon.”

“And what did Sir d’Artagnan say to this?”

“Sir d’Artagnan promised me his aid but at the first chance, he betrayed me.”

“Do you think you can laugh in the face of justice? I tell you, Sir d’Artagnan made a deal with you. By virtue of this deal he chased off the policemen who had come to arrest your wife, and now he’s hidden her where no one can find her.”

“Sir d’Artagnan has abducted my wife? Wait, what are you telling me?”

“Happily, Sir d’Artagnan is in our hands, and you shall confront him.”

“Ah! My faith, I ask nothing more,” cried Bonacieux. “I won’t be sorry to see anyone I know.”

“Bring in Sir d’Artagnan,” said the commissioner to the guards.

The two guards brought in Athos.

“Sir d’Artagnan,” said the commissioner, addressing Athos, “declare everything that passed between you and sir, here.”

“But this isn’t Sir d’Artagnan!” cried Bonacieux.

“What?” said the commissioner, “This isn’t Sir d’Artagnan?”

“Not the least in the world,” replied Bonacieux.

“What’s his name, then?” demanded the commissioner.

“I can’t tell you, because I don’t know him.”

“What? You don’t know him?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen him before?”

“I have; but I don’t know what he’s called.”

“Your name?” demanded the commissioner.

“Athos,” replied the musketeer.

“But that’s not the name of a man, that’s the name of a mountain!” cried the poor interrogator, who was beginning to lose his head.

“That’s my name,” said Athos tranquilly.

“But you said your name was d’Artagnan.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“To be precise, when they met me, my guards said, ‘You are Sir d’Artagnan?’ I replied, ‘You think so?’ They said they were sure I was. I didn’t want to contradict officers in the pursuit of their duty. Besides, I could be wrong myself.”

"Sir, you insult the majesty of justice!"

"By no means," said Athos calmly.

"You are Sir d'Artagnan."

"There, you see? You keep telling me that."

"But I tell you, Sir Commissioner, there isn't the slightest doubt here," cried Bonacieux in his turn. "Sir d'Artagnan is my tenant, and I ought to know him when I see him, all the more so as he doesn't pay me my rent. Sir d'Artagnan is a young man, barely nineteen or twenty, and sir here is at least thirty. Sir d'Artagnan is in Sir Des Essarts's guards, and sir here is in the company of Sir Tréville's musketeers. Just look at his uniform, Sir Commissioner, look at his uniform!"

"That's true," murmured the commissioner, "by God, that's true."

At this moment the door was opened from outside and one of the Bastille gatekeepers admitted a messenger, who hurriedly gave a letter to the commissioner. "Oh! Wretched woman!" cried the commissioner, reading it.

"What's that? Of whom do you speak? Not my wife, I hope!" said Bonacieux.

"On the contrary, it is about her. Your little affair is becoming very pretty."

"That can't be!" cried the harried mercer. "Oblige me by telling me, Sir, how my affairs can get worse by what my wife does while I'm in prison!"

"Because she acts following a plan arranged between you – an infernal plan!"

"I swear to you, Sir Commissioner, that you are in the most profound error, and that I know nothing in the world about what my wife is doing. I'm entirely ignorant of what she's done, and if she's committed any follies, I disown, I deny, and curse her!"

"Bah!" said Athos to the commissioner. "If you have no more need of me here, send me elsewhere. Your Sir Bonacieux is very tiresome."

"Take the prisoners back to the dungeons," said the commissioner, indicating with the same gesture Athos and Bonacieux, "and see to it they are guarded more closely than ever!"

"I must say," Athos said, with his habitual calm, "if you have business with Sir d'Artagnan, I don't very well see how I can take his place."

"Do as I said!" cried the commissioner. "And maintain absolute secrecy! Do you hear?"

Athos shrugged his shoulders and followed his guards, while Sir Bonacieux uttered lamentations so pitiful they would have softened the heart of a tiger. They led the mercer back to the same dungeon where he'd passed the night and left him to himself for the rest of the day. All day Bonacieux wept like the tradesman he was, not being at all a man of the sword, as he himself admitted. In the evening, around nine o'clock, just when he'd decided to put himself to bed, he heard footsteps in the corridor. The footsteps approached his dungeon, his door opened, and the guards appeared. "Follow me," said an exempt, a military policeman who came behind the guards.

"Follow you!" cried Bonacieux. "Follow you, at this hour! My God, to where?"

"To where we have an order to conduct you."

"But that's no answer!"

"It is, however, the only one I can give you."

"Dear God," murmured the poor mercer, "this time I'm lost!" And he followed his guards mechanically and without resistance. They took the same corridor they'd taken before, crossed a courtyard, and then passed through another wing of the fortress. Finally, at the gate of the forecourt, Bonacieux was brought to a carriage surrounded by four mounted guards. They marched him into this carriage, the exempt got in beside him, they locked the door, and the two found themselves in a rolling prison. The carriage moved slowly, like a funeral hearse. Through the padlocked grille at the rear, the prisoner could see only houses and pavement. However, true Parisian as he was, Bonacieux recognised each street by familiar milestones, by signs, and by streetlights. When they arrived at Saint-Paul, where the Bastille's condemned were executed, he nearly fainted, and crossed himself twice. He thought the carriage was going to stop there ... but the carriage passed on. Farther on, a still greater terror took him as they skirted the Saint-Jean Cemetery, where state criminals were interred. The only thing that reassured him was that before these criminals were buried they generally cut off their heads, and his head so far was still on his shoulders. But when he saw the carriage take the route to the Place of Grève, when he saw the gabled roofs of the Hôtel of Ville, and the carriage began to pass beneath the hôtel arcade, he thought that everything was over for him. He tried to confess to the exempt, who refused to listen to him. At this, he made such pitiable cries that the exempt swore they were deafening him. He threatened Bonacieux that if he continued, he would have him gagged. This threat reassured Bonacieux somewhat: if they meant to execute him at the Place of Grève they wouldn't take the trouble to gag him, this close to the place of execution. In fact, the carriage crossed the fatal square without stopping. There was nothing further to fear but the Croix-du-Trahoir: the carriage was taking the road that led right to it. This time, there could be no doubt – for it was at the gallows of the Croix-du-Trahoir that they executed minor criminals. Bonacieux had been flattering himself to think he was worthy of attention at Saint-Paul or the Place of Grève; clearly, it was at the Croix-du-Trahoir that he would finish his journey and find his fate! He couldn't yet see this woeful cross but he felt somehow that it was coming to him. When they were within twenty paces of it, he heard the sound of a crowd, and the carriage halted. After everything he'd gone through, this was more than poor Bonacieux could bear; he uttered a feeble groan, like the last gasp of the dying, and fainted.

#### 014 The Man of Meung

The crowd at the Croix-du-Trahoir hadn't gathered expecting a hanging but to gawk at a man already hanged. Sir Bonacieux's carriage-prison stopped for an instant, then resumed its progress, forcing a passage through the throng. It continued threading its way along the broad, teeming Rue Saint-Honoré, turned onto the narrower Rue des Bons-Enfants, and stopped before a low gate. The gate opened, and the exempt handed the stunned Bonacieux out of the carriage and into the arms of two guards. The guards frogmarched him through an alley, up a flight of stairs, and finally deposited him in an antechamber. Bonacieux responded to all this motion in a purely mechanical fashion, marching like one in a dream. He glimpsed his surroundings as if through a fog, heard sounds without comprehending them. At that moment he could have been executed without raising a hand to defend himself, or saying a word to beg for mercy. He slumped in the antechamber on a bench, leaning back against a wall, arms hanging down beside him, staying in the same place and position where his guards had deposited him. He gradually became aware that nothing threatened him, nothing indicated any immediate danger – and as the bench was comfortably upholstered, the wall he leaned against was covered in handsome Cordovan leather, and red damask curtains with golden tiebacks fluttered before the window, he slowly came to the conclusion that his fright was exaggerated. Tentatively, he moved his head right and left, then up and down. No one opposed this action. Encouraged, he ventured to draw up one leg, then the other, and finally, aided by his hands, raised himself from the bench and found his feet. At this moment, a door opened and an impressive-looking officer appeared in the doorway. He finished exchanging a few words with somebody in the next room and then approached the prisoner. "Are you named Bonacieux?"

"Yes, officer, at your service," stammered the mercer, more dead than alive.

"Enter," said the officer, stepping aside so the mercer could pass.

The latter obeyed without a word, entering the chamber where it seemed he was awaited. It was a large study, the walls adorned with arms offensive and defensive. The atmosphere was close and stifling, and there was a fire in the hearth, though it was not yet the end of September. A square table occupied the centre of the room, covered with books and papers upon which was unrolled an immense map of the city of La Rochelle. Standing before the chimney was a man of medium height, of a haughty and proud demeanour, with piercing eyes, a high forehead, and a slender face elongated further by the pointed goatee called a *Royale*, surmounted by a thin, sharp moustache. Although this man was barely thirty-six or thirty-seven years of age, his hair, moustache, and *Royale* were greying. He lacked a sword but had the aura of a man of war, and his buff boots were still lightly covered with the dust that showed he'd ridden a horse that day. This man was Armand-Jean Duplessis, Cardinal of Richelieu – not as he is often represented, a broken old man, suffering like a martyr: body crippled, voice fading, buried in a large armchair like one anticipating the tomb, living only by the force of his genius, while the strings with which he made the states of Europe dance like puppets gradually fall from his fingers. This was Richelieu as he really was at that time, a dynamic and gallant cavalier, his physical strength already beginning to fail but sustained by that moral force that made him one of the most extraordinary men of history. This was Richelieu, after having taken Nîmes, Castres, and Uzès, making his plans to drive the English from the coast of France and lay siege to La Rochelle, then support the Duke of Nevers in his claim to the Duchy of Mantua. At first glance, nothing about him denoted the cardinal, and it was impossible for one who didn't know his face to recognise who he was. The poor mercer remained standing in the doorway, while the eyes of the man before the chimney fixed upon him, eyes that seemed able to peer into the depths of the past. "Is this that Bonacieux?" he asked after a moment of silence.

"Yes, My Lord," replied the officer.

"Very well, give me those papers and leave us."

The officer picked up the designated papers from the table, handed them to the cardinal, bowed to the ground, and left. Bonacieux recognised the papers as a transcription of his interrogation in the Bastille. From time to time, the man by the chimney raised his eyes from the vellum and plunged them like daggers into the poor mercer's heart. At the end of ten minutes' reading of the papers, and ten seconds' scrutiny of Bonacieux, the cardinal's mind was made up. "That head has never conspired," he murmured, "but no matter, let us test him."

"You are accused of high treason," said the cardinal slowly.

"That's what they told me, My Lord," cried Bonacieux, giving his interrogator the honorific he'd heard the officer use, "but I swear I know nothing about it."

The cardinal repressed a smile. "You've conspired with your wife, Madam of Chevreuse, and Milord the Duke of Buckingham," he said sternly.

"In fact, My Lord," replied the mercer, "I have heard her mention those names."

"On what occasion?"

"She said that Cardinal Richelieu had drawn the Duke of Buckingham to Paris to destroy him, and the queen with him."

"She said that?" the cardinal barked.

"Y-yes, My Lord! But I told her that she was wrong to bother about such matters, and that His Eminence was incapable..."

"Be silent. You are an imbecile," said the cardinal.

"That's just what my wife said, My Lord."

"Do you know who abducted your wife?"

"No, My Lord."

"You have suspicions, however?"

"Yes, My Lord; but these suspicions appeared to disturb Sir Commissioner, so I no longer have them."

"Your wife has escaped, did you know that?"

"No, My Lord! I heard about it only since I've been in prison, through Sir Commissioner, a nice, amiable man!"

The cardinal repressed a second smile. "Then you are ignorant of what has become of your wife since her escape?"

"Absolutely, My Lord; but I'm sure she'll return to the Louvre."

"As of one o'clock this morning, she had not yet returned."

"Good God! What has become of her, then?"

"We shall know, rest assured. Nothing can be hidden from the cardinal; the cardinal knows all."

"In that case, My Lord, do you think the cardinal would consent to my asking him what has become of my wife?"

"Perhaps. But first of all, you must confess everything you know about the relations of your wife with Madam of Chevreuse."

"But, My Lord, I know nothing about Madam of Chevreuse. I've never even seen her!"

"When you went to fetch your wife from the Louvre, did you always return directly home?"

"Almost never. She had business with linen merchants, and I escorted her to their houses."

"And how many of these linen merchants were there?"

"Two, My Lord."

"Where did they dwell?"

"One, just around the corner in the Rue of Vaugirard, and the other, halfway down the Rue of La Harpe."

"Did you enter these houses with her?"

"Never, My Lord. I always waited at the door."

"And what pretext did she give you for entering alone?"

"She didn't give me any. She told me to wait, so I waited."

"You are a complaisant husband, my dear Sir Bonacieux," said the cardinal.

"He calls me his dear sir!" the mercer said to himself. "*Plague!* Affairs go well!"

"Would you recognise those doors?"

"Yes."

"You know the addresses?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Number 25 in the Rue of Vaugirard and number 75 in the Rue of la Harpe."

"That's good," said the cardinal. He picked up a small silver bell and rang it, and the officer re-entered. "Go, and find me Rochefort," the cardinal said in an undertone. "He's to come immediately, if he's returned."

"The count is already here," said the officer, "and requests to speak with Your Eminence right away."

"With Your Eminence!" murmured Bonacieux, who knew this was the title ordinarily given to the cardinal. "To Your Eminence!"

"Let him come in, then, let him come in!" said Richelieu.

The officer hastened from the room, with the speed the servants of the cardinal usually displayed in obedience to his orders. "To Your Eminence!" murmured Bonacieux again. Five seconds scarcely elapsed between the officer's exit and the appearance in the doorway of a new face. Bonacieux took one look and cried, "That's him!"

"Who?" asked the cardinal.

"The man who abducted my wife!"

The cardinal rang a second time. The officer reappeared. "Return this man to the custody of his guards. He's to wait until I call for him."

"No, My Lord, that's not him!" cried Bonacieux. "I was deceived! It was another man who doesn't resemble him at all! Sir here is a very respectable person!"

"Take that imbecile away!" said the cardinal.

The officer took Bonacieux by the arm and returned him to the antechamber, where his guards awaited him. The new arrival gazed after Bonacieux impatiently until he was gone. When the door was firmly closed, he said, "They have seen each other."

"Who?" asked His Eminence.

"She and he."

"What? The queen and the duke?" said Richelieu.

"Yes."

"And where was this?"

"At the Louvre."

"You're sure of this?"

"Perfectly sure."

"Who told you of it?"

"Madam of Lannoy who is devoted to Your Eminence as you know."

"Why didn't she say so sooner?"

"By chance or by distrust, the queen had made Madam of Fargis sleep in her chamber, and she was under her eye all day."

"Well, we're beaten. Let us try to take our revenge."

"I am yours, My Lord."

"How did this happen?"

"At half past midnight, the queen was with her women, in her bedchamber, when someone came and brought her a handkerchief from her linen maid."

"And then?"

"The queen immediately reacted with some strong emotion, becoming pale despite the rouge on her face."

"And then? And then?"

"The queen rose, and in a strangely altered voice, said, 'Mesdames, wait for me ten minutes, and I'll return.' Then she opened the door of her alcove and went out."

"Why didn't Madam of Lannoy come to inform you that instant?"

"Nothing was yet certain; besides, the queen had said, 'Mesdames, wait for me,' and she didn't dare disobey the queen."

"How long was the queen out of her chamber?"

"Three quarters of an hour."

"Did none of her women accompany her?"

"Only Doña Estefania."

"Did she return at all during this time?"

"Yes, once. She took a small rosewood coffer, with her cipher on it, then left immediately."

"And when she returned later, did she have the coffer?"

"No."

"Does Madam of Lannoy know what she kept in that coffer?"

"Yes: the twelve diamond studs that His Majesty gave to the queen."

"And you say she returned without this coffer?"

"Yes."

"Madam of Lannoy's opinion, then, is that she gave them to Buckingham?"

"She is sure of it."

"How so?"

"During the day in her capacity as lady-in-waiting, Madam of Lannoy looked for the coffer and appeared uneasy at not finding it. Finally she asked the queen if she knew where it was."

"And the queen...?"

"The queen flushed, and replied that having broken one of the studs the previous evening, she had sent it to her goldsmith for repair."

"He must be interviewed to see whether or not this is true."

"I have just come from there."

"So – the goldsmith?"

"The goldsmith has heard nothing whatsoever of the matter."

"Well, well! Rochefort, all is not lost, and perhaps ... perhaps all is for the best!"

Rochefort frowned. "Of course, I don't doubt that Your Eminence's genius..."

"... Will repair the blunders of my agent. Is that it?"

"That's just what I was going to say, if Your Eminence had let me finish my sentence."

"Now, do you know the hiding places of the Duchess of Chevreuse and the Duke of Buckingham?"

"No, My Lord, my people could tell me nothing positive on that."

"But I know."

"You, My Lord?"

"Yes, there's not the least doubt. One stayed in the Rue of Vaugirard at number 25 and the other in the Rue of la Harpe, number 75."

"Does Your Eminence wish me to arrest them both?"

"It's too late – they'll be gone."

"Nonetheless, we can make sure."

"Take ten of my guards and search the two houses."

"I go, My Lord."

With a bow, Rochefort hurried from the room. The cardinal, left alone, reflected a moment, then rang a third time. The same officer appeared. "Bring in the prisoner," said the cardinal. Master Bonacieux was introduced anew. At a gesture from the cardinal, the officer retired. "You have deceived me," said the cardinal sternly.

"Me?" cried Bonacieux. "Me, deceive Your Eminence!"

"Your wife, when going to the Rue of Vaugirard and the Rue of la Harpe, wasn't going to the houses of linen merchants."

"And where was she going, by the good God?"

"She was going to meet the Duchess of Chevreuse and the Duke of Buckingham."

"That's right," said Bonacieux, recalling the events in question. "Yes, that's it, Your Eminence is right. I said to my wife many times that it was astonishing that linen merchants should live in such houses, houses that had no trade signs, and each time my wife laughed. Oh, My Lord!" Bonacieux threw himself at His Eminence's feet. "Oh! How truly you are the cardinal, the great cardinal, the man of genius whom all the world reveres."

To triumph over so lowly a creature as Bonacieux was no great victory but the cardinal nonetheless took a moment to enjoy it. Then, as if a new thought had occurred to him, a smile creased his lips, and taking the hand of the mercer, he said to him, "Rise, my friend. You are a worthy man."

"The cardinal has touched my hand! I have touched the hand of the great man!" said Bonacieux. "The great man has called me his friend!"

"Yes, my friend; yes!" said the cardinal, with that warm paternal tone that he knew how to assume sometimes but which didn't deceive those who knew him. "And since you have been unjustly suspected, well, you must be indemnified. Here: take this purse of a hundred *pistoles*, and be so kind as to pardon me."

"I, pardon *you*, My Lord!" Bonacieux hesitated to take the purse, fearing no doubt this pretended gift was only a joke. "But you are the master, free to have me arrested, to have me tortured, even to have me hanged, and no one would make the least objection. Pardon *you*, My Lord! You can't mean that!"

"Ah, my dear Sir Bonacieux! I see that you are generosity itself, and I thank you. So you'll take this purse, and won't go away too dissatisfied?"

"I shall go away enchanted, My Lord."

"Goodbye, then – or rather *au revoir*, for I hope that we shall meet again."

"Whenever My Lord wishes! I am completely at the orders of Your Eminence."

"It will be often, rest assured, for I've found your conversation extremely charming."

"Oh, My Lord!"

"*See you shortly*, Sir Bonacieux, *see you shortly*."

And the cardinal dismissed him with a friendly gesture. Bonacieux replied by bowing to the ground and backing out of the room. When he reached the antechamber, the cardinal heard him crying out enthusiastically, "Long live My Lord! Long live His Eminence! Long live the Great Cardinal!"

The cardinal listened smiling as Bonacieux's cries of praise dwindled into the distance. "Good," he said. "Henceforth, that man would kill himself for me." And the cardinal turned to examine with the greatest attention the map of La Rochelle that was open on the table, tracing with a pencil the line of the famous dyke that, eighteen months later, would close the port of the besieged city. As he was in the depths of his strategic meditations, the door reopened and Rochefort entered. "Well?" said the cardinal, rising with an eagerness that showed how important he considered the task he'd given the count.

"Well!" said the latter. "A young woman, aged twenty-six to twenty-eight, and a man, aged thirty-five or forty, were lodged in the houses indicated by Your Eminence, the one for four days and the other for five; but the woman left last night, and the man this morning."

"It was them!" cried the cardinal, looking at the clock. "By now it's too late to pursue them: the duchess is at Tours, and the duke at Boulogne. It's in London that we must catch up with them."

"What are Your Eminence's orders?"

"No one is to speak a word of what has passed. Let the queen remain perfectly secure, ignorant that we know her secret. Drop hints that will lead her to believe we're searching for some conspiracy or other. I shall need to see the Keeper of the Seals, Sir Séguier."

"And that man, what has Your Eminence done with him?"

"What man?" asked the cardinal.

"That Bonacieux."

"I've done all that could be done with him: I've set him to spy on his own wife." The Count Rochefort bowed in tribute to the superiority of the master and retired. Left alone, the cardinal seated himself anew, wrote a letter that he sealed with his personal signet, then rang the bell again. The officer entered for the fourth time. "Have Vitray come to me," he said, "And tell him to prepare for a long journey." Within minutes, the man he had asked for was standing before him, booted and spurred. "Vitray," said the cardinal, "you will leave immediately for London. Don't pause for an instant on the way. In London you will deliver this letter to Milady. Here is a note for two hundred *pistoles*: call upon my treasurer and have him pay you. You shall have as much again if you return here within six days and if you've executed your commission well." Without a word, the messenger bowed, took the letter and the note for two hundred *pistoles*, and left. The contents of the letter were as follows:

*Milady,*

*Attend the first ball where you can meet the Duke of Buckingham. On his doublet will be a dozen diamond studs. Approach him and cut off 2. Once these studs are in your possession, inform me immediately.*

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The Men of the Robe & the Men of the Sword

Athos's imprisonment on d'Artagnan's behalf weighed on the young man's conscience. The day after Athos's interview with the cardinal, d'Artagnan and Porthos informed Sir Tréville of the circumstances of Athos's disappearance. Aramis was absent: he'd asked for a five-day leave, and was at Rouen, it was said, on family business. Sir Tréville was like a father to his soldiers. No matter how lowborn or obscure a man might be, once he donned the uniform of the company he could count on Tréville's aid and support as if the captain was his own brother. Tréville immediately went to call on the magistrate who oversaw the Paris police. The magistrate summoned the officer who commanded the Croix-Rouge precinct, and through his inquiries they determined that Athos was at that moment lodged at the prison of For-l'Evêque. Athos had passed through the same interrogations that Bonacieux had suffered. He'd said nothing until his confrontation with the mercer, for fear that if d'Artagnan were hampered by the police, he might not have time to complete his mission. But after his interview with the commissioner Athos insisted his name was Athos and not d'Artagnan. He added that he knew neither Sir nor Madam Bonacieux and had never spoken with either. He'd gone at ten in the evening to pay a visit to his friend Sir d'Artagnan but before that hour he'd been dining at Sir Tréville's; twenty witnesses could attest to this fact, and he named several distinguished gentlemen, including the Duke of La Trémouille. The Commissioner of the For-l'Evêque was as confounded by the musketeer's simple and firm declaration as the Commissioner of the Bastille had been. He was eager to take that vengeance that the Men of the Robe love to win over the Men of the Sword but the mighty names of Gentlemen of Tréville and of La Trémouille inspired caution. The commissioner decided he was out of his depth and sent Athos back to the cardinal but unfortunately the cardinal was at the Louvre, conferring with the king. At precisely this moment Sir Tréville himself arrived at the Louvre. After leaving the criminal lieutenant he'd called on the Governor of For-l'Evêque but had been unable to find Athos. As Captain of the Musketeers, Sir Tréville had entrée to the king at all hours and was taken directly to His Majesty. It's well-known how suspicious the king was of the queen, suspicions the cardinal continually encouraged, as in matters of intrigue he himself mistrusted women infinitely more than men. A principal cause of the king's distrust was the friendship of Anne of Austria for Marie of Rohan, the Duchess of Chevreuse. These two women worried him more than the wars with Spain, the disputes with England, and the chronic embarrassment of the finances. The king believed that Madam of Chevreuse served the queen not only in her political intrigues but what was far worse, in her amorous affairs. At the cardinal's first mention of Madam of Chevreuse the king grimaced with anger. Exiled to Tours, she'd been believed to be in that city. Now the king learned that she'd been in Paris for five days, outmanoeuvring the police, and this made Louis furious. Though himself capricious and unfaithful, this king wished to be known as *Louis the Just* and *Louis the Chaste*. Posterity has had difficulty awarding him these titles, as history concerns itself with facts rather than intentions. The cardinal added that not only had Madam of Chevreuse been in Paris but that the queen had renewed her correspondence with her through the aid of a mysterious cabal. Just as the cardinal had been on the verge of untangling this web of intrigue and arresting the queen's emissary *in flagrante delicto* with all necessary proofs, a King's Musketeer had dared to interfere, disrupting the course of justice by falling, sword in hand, on the honest lawmen charged with investigating the affair on the King's behalf. At these words, Louis XIII could no longer contain himself and made a threatening step toward the queen's apartments, trembling with that pale and mute indignation that at times led this prince to commit acts of the coldest cruelty. And the cardinal had not yet said a word about the Duke of Buckingham. At this moment Sir Tréville entered: cool, polite, and irreproachable in dress and demeanour. Warned of what had passed by the presence of the cardinal and by the look on the king's face, Tréville felt very much like Samson before the Philistines. Louis already had his hand on the doorknob; at the sound of Tréville's entrance, he turned. "Your arrival is timely, Sir," said the king, who could never dissemble when in a passion. "I've learned some pretty things about your musketeers."

"And I," said Sir Tréville coolly, "have some pretty things to tell Your Majesty about your Men of the Robe."

"Do you say so?" said the king, haughtily.

"I have the honour to inform Your Majesty," continued Tréville in the same tone, "that a party of bailiffs, functionaries, and police, worthy men but inveterately biased against the uniform, have dared to arrest, lead away through the open street, and throw into the For-l'Evêque, one of my musketeers – or rather one of yours, Sire. They've done all this on an order they've refused to show me, imprisoning a man whose conduct is irreproachable, whose reputation is illustrious, and whom Your Majesty knows well: Sir Athos."

"Athos," said the King, mechanically. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do know that name."

"Your Majesty may recall," said Tréville, "that Athos is the musketeer who had the bad luck to grievously wound Sir Cahusac in that unfortunate duel at the Carmelite convent. Speaking of whom, My Lord," continued Tréville, addressing the cardinal, "Sir Cahusac is quite recovered, is he not?"

"He is, thank you!" said the cardinal, lips pinched with anger.

"The other evening," continued Tréville, "Sir Athos went to pay a visit to one of his friends, a young Béarnaise who is a cadet in des Essarts's company of His Majesty's Guards. This friend was absent, so Athos decided to wait but scarcely had he sat and picked up a book, when a swarm of bailiffs and officers appeared. They laid siege to the house, forcing numerous doors..."

The cardinal made a gesture to the king that signified: *This was the affair I spoke to you about*.

"We know all about that," interrupted the king, "because it was all done on our service."

"Then," said Tréville, "was it also on Your Majesty's service that they seized one of my innocent musketeers, placed him between two guards like a malefactor and promenaded him before a jeering populace? This gallant man, who has ten times shed his blood in Your Majesty's service, and would do so again?"

"Bah!" said the king, disturbed. "Is that how it was handled?"

"Sir Tréville fails to mention," said the cardinal phlegmatically, "that this innocent musketeer, this so-gallant man, had an hour before drawn his sword on four Commissioners of Inquiry, men delegated by me to investigate an affair of the highest importance."

"I defy Your Eminence to prove it," cried Sir Tréville, with his Gascon verve and military brusqueness, "for, one hour before, after having dined with me, Sir Athos did me the honour to converse in the salon at my hôtel with Sir Duke of La Trémouille and Sir Count of Charlus. Sir Athos, I must confide to Your Majesty, is under his real name a man of the highest quality."

The king looked at the cardinal. Responding to this mute inquiry, the cardinal said, "A full process verbal supports the accusation, and the maltreated officers have drawn up the following indictment that I have the honour to present to Your Majesty."

"A process verbal of Men of the Robe against the word of honour of a Man of the Sword?" replied Tréville haughtily.

"Come, come, Tréville, calm yourself," said the king.

"If His Eminence suspects one of my musketeers," said Tréville, "the justice of Your Eminence is sufficiently well-known for me to demand an inquest of him."

The cardinal was undisturbed. "Lodging in this house upon which justice had descended is, I believe, a Béarnaise friend of the musketeer."

"Your Eminence speaks of Sir d'Artagnan?"

"I speak of a young man whom you've made a protégé, Sir Tréville."

"Yes, Your Eminence, that's the one."

"We suspect this young man of having been a malign influence..."

"On Sir Athos, a man double his age?" interrupted Sir Tréville. "No, My Lord. Besides, Sir d'Artagnan had passed the evening at my hôtel."

"Really?" said the cardinal. "Did everyone involved in this affair spend the evening at your hôtel?"

"Your Eminence doubts my word?" said Tréville, face reddening with anger.

"No, God forbid!" said the cardinal. "But tell me, at what hour was he with you?"

"Now that I can speak about knowledgeably as when he entered, I remarked that it was half-past nine, though I'd thought it was later."

"And at what hour did he leave your hôtel?"

"At ten-thirty, an hour after the event."

"But then," replied the cardinal, who didn't doubt Tréville's integrity for a moment, and sensed that the victory was escaping him, "you can't deny that Athos was taken in that house on the Rue des Fossoyeurs."

"Is it forbidden for a friend to visit a friend? Or a musketeer of my company to fraternize with a guard of des Essarts's company?"

"Yes, when the house in which he fraternizes with his friend is suspected."

"You see, that house is suspected, Tréville," said the king. "Perhaps you didn't know that?"

"No, Sire, I was ignorant of the fact. But even if the house is suspected, I'm sure it doesn't apply to the part inhabited by Sir d'Artagnan. For I must say, Sire, that, to hear him tell it, there exists no more devoted servant of Your Majesty, or more profound admirer of Your Eminence."

"Wasn't this d'Artagnan the one who wounded Jussac in that unfortunate encounter near the Carmelite convent?" the king asked the cardinal who flushed with irritation.

"Yes, Sire, and Bernajoux the next day. Your Majesty has an excellent memory."

"Come, how shall we resolve this?" said the king.

"That's up to Your Majesty," said the cardinal. "Personally, I would affirm the man's guilt."

"And I would deny it," said Tréville. "But Your Majesty has judges. Let the judges decide."

"Quite so," said the king. "Let's set the case before the magistrates. It's their job to judge, so let them judge."

"Only it's tragic that in these sad times, even a pure life of incontestable virtue can't exempt a man from infamy and persecution," continued Tréville. "Believe me, Your Majesty's army won't be happy about seeing one of their own maltreated on account of police affairs."

The choice of words was provocative but Sir Tréville had used it quite deliberately. He wanted an explosion, because an exploding mine emits fire, and fire casts light. "Police affairs!" cried the king, echoing Tréville. "Police affairs! And what do you know of those, Sir? Stick to your musketeers, and stop vexing me! According to you, if by some mischance we arrest one musketeer, all France is endangered. All this fuss about one musketeer? I'd arrest ten of them, *Blue belly*! A hundred even – the whole company! And no one can dare tell me not to!"

"From the moment Your Majesty suspects them," said Tréville, "the musketeers are guilty. In that case, Sire, I'm ready to surrender my sword to you. No doubt Your Eminence, after accusing my men, will end by accusing me. I'll consider myself a prisoner along with Sir Athos, who is already under arrest, and Sir d'Artagnan, who will doubtless be arrested at any moment."

"Are you finished with your Gasconade?" said the king.

"Sire," replied Tréville, without lowering his voice in the least, "order my musketeer restored to me or let him be tried."

"He shall be tried," said the cardinal.

"Very well, so much the better. I will demand of His Majesty permission to plead for him."

The king wanted to avoid a judicial brawl. He said, "If His Eminence didn't have a personal interest..."

The cardinal saw where the king was going, and forestalled him. "*Pardon me*," he said, "but the moment Your Majesty regards me as a prejudiced judge, I must recuse myself."

"Enough of this," said the king. "Tréville, will you swear to me, by the name of my father, that Sir Athos was at your hôtel during the event and took no part in it?"

"By your glorious father and by yourself, whom I love and venerate more than all else in the world, I swear it!"

"Reflect, if you please, Sire," said the cardinal. "If we set the prisoner free, we will never be able to know the truth of this affair."

"Sir Athos will always be available," replied Sir Tréville, "ready to appear whenever it pleases the Gentlemen of the Robe to interrogate him. He'd never desert, Your Eminence – I'll answer for it."

"It's true, he'd never desert," said the king. "One can always summon him, as Sir Tréville says. Besides," he added, lowering his voice and almost pleading with His Eminence, "let's give them a little security – it would be politic, don't you think?"

Louis XIII's politics made Richelieu smile. "Order it so, Sire. You have the right of amnesty."

"The right of amnesty applies only to the guilty," said Tréville, out to get the last word, "and my musketeer is innocent. Thus it's not a ruling of amnesty, Sire but justice."

"You say he's in For-l'Evêque?" said the king.

"Yes, Sire, in solitary confinement in a dungeon, like the worst kind of criminal."

"The devil! The devil!" murmured the king. "What to do?"

"Sign the order that puts him at liberty and there's nothing more to say," replied the cardinal. "Like Your Majesty, I believe the guarantee of Sir Tréville is more than sufficient."

Tréville bowed respectfully but his joy was tainted by suspicion; he would have preferred stubborn resistance from the cardinal to this sudden compliance. The king wrote the order for Athos's liberation and gave it to Tréville, who immediately prepared to take his leave. As he was about to go, the cardinal gave him a friendly smile, and said to the king, "In your musketeers, Sire, perfect harmony reigns between the soldiers and the commander. It's a credit to the service, and benefits everyone."

"He's about to play me some dirty trick," Tréville said to himself. "I'll never get the last word when dealing with such a man. But quickly, quickly – the king could change his mind any moment. And most importantly, it's harder to get a man back into the Bastille or For-l'Evêque once he's out, than to keep him there once he's in."

Sir Tréville made a triumphant entrance into For-l'Evêque, from whence he delivered his musketeer, who'd continued to maintain his serene indifference. Then, the first time Tréville saw d'Artagnan, he said, "You've had a lucky escape; this squares the account for your wounding of Jussac. But there still remains the reckoning for Bemajoux, so don't be too cocksure."

Wise advice, for Sir Tréville had good reason to fear that the cardinal might have yet another arrow in his quiver. The Captain of Musketeers had scarcely closed the door behind him before His Eminence said to the king, "Now that we're alone, we can talk seriously, if it please Your Majesty. Sire, Sir Buckingham has been in Paris for five days, and only left it this morning."

In Which Séguier, the Keeper of the Seals Looks More Than Once for the Bell He Used to Ring

It is impossible to convey the effect the name *Buckingham* had upon Louis XIII. He grew red, then pale, then red again; and the cardinal saw that with one phrase he'd won back all the ground he'd lost to Tréville. "Buckingham! In Paris!" cried the king. "Why did he come here?"

"No doubt to conspire with your enemies, the Huguenots and the Spanish."

"No, by God – no! He came to conspire against my conjugal honour, with Madam of Chevreuse, Madam of Longueville, and the Condés!"

"Sire! What an idea! The queen is far too prudent, and loves Your Majesty too well."

"Woman is weak, Your Eminence," said the king, "and as for loving me too well, I have my own opinion about that."

"Nonetheless, I maintain that the Duke of Buckingham came to Paris for no other reason than politics," said the cardinal.

"And I am quite sure that he came for something else, Your Eminence! By God! If the queen is guilty, she'll suffer for this!"

"In point of fact," said the cardinal, "reluctant though I am to contemplate such treachery, Your Majesty's ire compels me to consider it. Madam of Lannoy – whom I interrogate frequently, as Your Majesty has commanded – Madam of Lannoy told me this morning that Her Majesty was up very late the night before last. Furthermore, this morning she was crying, and spent hours writing something."

"Writing! To *him*, no doubt," said the King. "Cardinal, I must have the queen's papers."

"But how can you get them, Sire? It seems to me that neither Your Majesty nor I can demand them of her."

"How did they do it with Concini's wife?" roared the king. "They searched her armoires, desks, and finally they searched her."

"Concini's wife was merely Concini's wife: a Florentine adventuress, Sire, nothing more. Your Majesty's august spouse is Anne of Austria, Queen of France – in other words, one of the most exalted Princess on earth."

"That doesn't make her any less guilty, Your Eminence! The more she forgets her high position, the guiltier she is, and the farther she has to fall! I decided some time ago to put an end to all these petty intrigues of love and politics. She has in her household a certain La Porte..."

"Whom I believe is the mastermind behind all this," said the cardinal.

"So you think, as I do, that she's deceiving me?" said the king.

"Sire, I believe, and I repeat once again, that the queen conspires against Your Majesty's power, not Your Majesty's honour."

"And I tell you it's against both! I tell you, the queen does *not* love me. I tell you, she loves another. I tell you, Sir, she loves that wretch the Duke of Buckingham! Why didn't you have him arrested while he was in Paris?"

"What? Arrest the Duke of Buckingham, the Prime Minister of King Charles of England? What can you be thinking, Sire? There'd be an international uproar! Worse, if Your Majesty's suspicions – which I don't by any means endorse – were discovered to have any foundation to them, what a scandal there would be!"

"But since Buckingham's proven himself a rogue and a sneak, he should have been..." Louis XIII stopped short, terrified by what he'd almost said. Richelieu stretched his neck toward him, hoping to coax out the word that remained unsaid on the king's lips.

"...Yes, Sire? He should have been..."

"Nothing," said the king, "nothing. But, while he was in Paris, I assume you never lost sight of him?"

"Oh, no, Sire."

"Where did he stay?"

"A house in the Rue of La Harpe."

"Which is where?"

"In the neighbourhood of the Luxembourg."

"And you're sure that he and the queen didn't see each other?"

"I believe the queen is too committed to her duties, Sire."

"But they've corresponded – it's to *him* the queen's been writing all day. Your Eminence, I must have those letters!"

"But, Sire..."

"Your Eminence, I must have them – whatever the price!"

"If I could observe to Your Majesty..."

"Do *you* betray me as well, Sir, by this way you have of always opposing my will? Are you, too, allied with the Spanish and the English, with Madam of Chevreuse and the queen?"

"Sire," replied the cardinal, sighing, "I thought I was above such suspicions."

"Your Eminence, I have spoken. I will have those letters!"

"In that case, there's only one way to do it."

"Which is?"

"To charge the Keeper of the Seals with the mission. This kind of task falls within the duties of Sir Séguier's position."

"Have him sent for this instant!"

"He should be at my hôtel, Sire. I had asked him to call, and when I left for the Louvre, I left orders to have him wait for me if he appeared."

"Have him sent for this instant!"

"Your Majesty's orders shall be executed, of course; but..."

"But what?"

"But ... the queen may refuse to obey."

"What? Disobey my orders?"

"She might, if she doesn't know the order came from the king."

"Very well: to remove all doubt, I'll go and tell her myself!"

"Your Majesty won't forget that I've done all I could to prevent an open break?"

"Yes, I know that you're very indulgent toward the queen – too indulgent, perhaps. And I must say, I may have to speak to you about that later."

"Whenever it pleases Your Majesty. But I shall always be happy and proud, Sire, to sacrifice myself for the cause of harmony between you and the Queen of France."

"Fine, Cardinal, fine; but meanwhile send for the Keeper of the Seals. As for myself, I will go see the queen."

And Louis XIII opened the door and passed into the chamber that led to the suite of Anne of Austria. The queen was in the midst of her women: Madam of Guitaut, Madam of Sable, Madam of Montbazon, and Madam of Guéménée. In the corner was her Spanish lady-in-waiting, Doña Estefania, who had followed her from Madrid. Madam of Guéménée was reading aloud and everyone was listening attentively, with the exception of the queen. She'd requested this reading so that, while pretending to listen, she could follow the thread of her own thoughts. These thoughts, gilded as they were in the glow of love, were nonetheless sad. Anne of Austria was deprived of the confidence of her husband and pursued by the hatred of the cardinal, who could not forgive her for having repulsed his own tender feelings. She had before her eyes the example of the queen mother, now also tormented by the hatred of the cardinal – although Marie de Médicis, if the memoirs of the time can be believed, had at one time granted the cardinal the favour Anne of Austria had refused him. One by one the queen's most devoted servants, her most intimate confidants, her dearest favourites, had all been sent away. It was as if she was endowed with a fatal gift that brought misfortune to all she touched; her friendship was a curse, a magnet for persecution. Her closest friends, Madam of Chevreuse and Madam du Vernet, had been exiled; and her cloak-bearer, La Porte, admitted to her that he expected to be arrested at any minute. She was deep in the most profound and sombre of these reflections when the door to the chamber opened and the king entered. The reader instantly stopped, the ladies all rose, and there was a heavy silence. The king made no pretence of politeness but marched right up to the queen. "Madam," he said, stuttering slightly, "y-you will receive a visit from Sir the K-keeper of the Seals. He will communicate certain matters to you, with which I have charged him."

The unhappy queen paled under her rouge. Though she had been threatened before with divorce, exile, or even trial and repudiation, she couldn't help saying, "But why this visit from the Keeper of the Seals, Sire? What can Sir Séguier say to me that Your Majesty can't tell me yourself?"

The king turned on his heel without reply, and at almost the same instant the Captain of the Queen's Guard, Sir Guitaut announced the arrival of the Keeper of the Seals. By the time Sir Séguier appeared, the king had already left by another door. The Keeper of the Seals entered half-smiling, half-blushing. As he may reappear in the course of this history, he deserves a brief introduction. This Sir Séguier was a pleasant gentleman. It was des Roches le Masle, canon at Notre-Dame and former secretary to the cardinal, who had introduced him to His Eminence as a totally devoted man. The cardinal trusted him and found him useful. Among the stories told of him, one is that, after a stormy youth, he had retired into a monastery for a while, to do penance for the follies of adolescence. However, once behind the doors of the holy place, the poor penitent found they were unable to shut out the passions of carnal lust that pursued him. These passions obsessed him; he confided his disgrace to the superior, who recommended that, when tormented by the demon of temptation, he should take to the bell-rope and toll the bells until he was exorcised. At the sound of the bells, the monks would know that a brother was besieged by temptation, and the entire community would go to prayers. This seemed like good advice to the future Keeper of the Seals. He tried to exorcise the evil spirit of lust with the assistance of the monks' prayers but the devil is not so easily dispossessed from a fortress he has garrisoned. As the monks redoubled their prayers, so Satan redoubled his temptations. Day and night the bells pealed out, proclaiming the penitent's need of mortification. The monks no longer had a minute of rest. By day, they did nothing but go up and down the steps that led to the chapel; by night, in addition to the prayers of compline and matins, they had to leap twenty times from their beds and prostrate themselves on the floors of their cells. No one knows whether it was the devil who let go or the monks who gave up but, in less than three months, the penitent reappeared in the world outside, with the reputation of having had the most terrible demonic possession ever recorded. After leaving the monastery, Séguier became a magistrate. He stepped into the presiding judgeship formerly held by his uncle and embraced the party of the cardinal that proved he didn't lack brains. Appointed Keeper of the Seals, he served His Eminence with zeal in his campaign against the queen mother and his vengeance on Anne of Austria. He oversaw the judges in the Chalais affair, and encouraged the efforts of Sir Laffemas, Grand Executioner of France. Finally, having completely earned the confidence of the cardinal, he was given the singular mission for which he had presented himself in the chambers of the queen. The queen was still standing when he entered but as soon as she noticed him she re-seated herself on her armchair, and made a sign to her women to resume their cushions and stools. Then, in a tone of supreme hauteur, Anne of Austria said, "What do you desire, Sir? Why are you here?"

"To make, Madam, in the name of the king, and with all due respect to Your Majesty, a thorough investigation of your papers."

"What, Sir! An investigation of *my* papers? Such a thing would be a gross indignity."

"I beg your pardon, Madam but under the circumstances, you can see that I'm merely the king's instrument. Wasn't His Majesty just here, and didn't he warn you to prepare for this visit?"

"Search, then, Sir! It seems I am a criminal. Estefania, give him the keys of my desks and secretaries."

Sir Séguier for form's sake searched all the furniture, though he knew quite well that he wouldn't find the queen's letter in a desk. When the bureaucrat had opened and closed the desk drawers twenty times, he had no choice but to overcome his hesitation and proceed to the affair's inevitable conclusion: in other words, to search the queen herself. With an air of embarrassment, the Keeper of the Seals advanced toward Anne of Austria and said in an unnatural voice, "And now it's time for me to make the principal investigation."

"Which is?" demanded the queen, who didn't understand, or rather was unwilling to understand.

"His Majesty is certain that you wrote a letter today, and he knows it hasn't yet been sent. This letter isn't in your desk, or your secretary but nonetheless, it *is* somewhere."

"Would you dare to lay a hand on your queen?" said Anne of Austria, drawing up to her full height and glaring at the bureaucrat with an expression almost menacing.

"I am a loyal subject of the king, Madam, and all that His Majesty orders, I will do."

"There's no doubt of that," said Anne of Austria, "and the spies of Your Eminence have served him well. I *have* written a letter today, and that letter has not yet been sent. The letter ... is here."

And the queen pressed her beautiful hand to her bosom. "Then give me that letter, Madam," said Sir Séguier.

"I will give it to no one but the king, Sir," said Anne.

"If the king had wanted that letter given up to him, Madam, he'd have demanded it of you himself. I must repeat, I'm the one who's been charged with recovering it from you and if you won't give it up..."

"Well?"

"His Majesty has charged me to take it from you."

"How! What's that you say?"

"That my orders go far, Madam. I'm authorised to search for the suspected letter even on the person of Your Majesty."

"What horror!" cried the queen.

"Be kind enough, Madam, to comply with my mission."

"To lay hands on me would be an act of infamous violence! Do you know that, Sir?"

"The king commands, Madam; please excuse me."

In the queen ran the hot imperial blood of Spain and Austria. "I will not tolerate it!" she cried. "No, no – I would rather die!" Séguier made a deep and reverential bow, then, clearly intending to fully execute his commission, he approached Anne of Austria like the torturer's assistant in a chamber of inquisition. The queen's eyes gushed tears of rage. The queen was a great beauty as has been noted. Some might consider Séguier's mission rather indelicate but the king was so jealous of Buckingham he was no longer jealous of other men. No doubt Sir Séguier's hands clutched at that moment for the famous bell-rope but not finding it, he reached instead for where the queen had said he could find the letter. Anne of Austria took a step backward, so pale she looked like death. Then, leaning with her left hand on a table behind her to keep from falling, with her right she drew the paper from between her breasts and handed it to Keeper of the Seals. "You see, Sir, here is the letter. Take it!" the queen cried in a broken, trembling voice. "Take it, and take your odious presence away from me."

Sir Séguier, trembling as well for reasons it's easy to guess, took the letter, bowed to the ground, and retired. The door was scarcely closed on him when the queen fell, half-fainting, into the arms of her women. The Keeper of the Seals carried the letter to the king without reading a single word of it. The king took it with shaking hands, looked for an address, and finding none, became very pale. He opened it slowly, and then, seeing from the first words that it was addressed to the King of Spain, he read it rapidly. The whole thing was a plan of attack on the cardinal. The queen urged her brother and the Emperor of Austria to seem injured, as in fact they were, by the policies of Richelieu, whose eternal preoccupation was the defeat of the Hapsburgs. She urged them to declare war on France and demand the dismissal of the cardinal as a condition of the peace. But of love, the letter contained not a single word. The king, overjoyed, inquired if the cardinal was still in the Louvre. On being told that His Eminence awaited the orders of His Majesty in the study, the king went straight to him. "There, Cardinal," he said, "you were right, and I was wrong. The whole intrigue is political, and there's not the slightest question of love in this letter. On the other hand, there is a great deal about you."

The cardinal took the letter and read it with the greatest attention: once, and then a second time. "Well, Your Majesty," he said, "You see how far my enemies will go. They menace you with two wars unless you dismiss me. In truth, if I were in your position, Sire, I would yield to such powerful arguments. Personally, it would be a relief for me to retire from public affairs."

"What are you saying, Cardinal?"

"I'm saying, Sire, that these struggles, these never-ending labours are destroying my health. In all probability I won't have the stamina for a siege of La Rochelle, and Your Majesty is better off appointing either Condé or Bassompierre for it, a valiant man who is in the right condition to lead a war, rather than me. I'm a man of the Church, though I've been diverted from my vocation and have had to apply myself to things for which I have no aptitude. Release me, Sire: you would be much happier in your domestic affairs, and you'd be applauded for it abroad."

"Your Eminence," said the king, "I understand. Rest easy: all those who are named in that letter will be punished as they deserve, even the queen herself."

"What are you saying, Sire? God forbid the queen should suffer the least inconvenience on my account! She has always believed I'm her enemy, Sire, though Your Majesty can bear witness that I always take her side, even against you. Of course, if she betrayed Your Majesty's honour, that would be another thing. In that case I'd be the first to say, 'No mercy, Sire – no mercy for the guilty!' But fortunately there's no question of that, and in this letter Your Majesty has a new proof of it."

"That's true, Your Eminence," said the king, "and you were right, as always. But the queen nonetheless deserves my anger."

"I beg your pardon but it's you, Sire, who have earned her anger. In truth, if she were to hold this against Your Majesty, I could understand it. Your Majesty has treated her with such severity ...!"

"That's how I will always treat my enemies, and yours, Cardinal, no matter how high their place, and how dangerous it may be to treat them severely."

"The queen may be my enemy, Sire but she's not yours. On the contrary, she's a devoted wife, submissive and irreproachable. Please allow me to intercede for her with Your Majesty."

"She should humble herself and reconcile with me first!"

"On the contrary, Sire, set the example! You were first to be in the wrong, since it was you who suspected the queen."

"What, me – reconcile with her first?" said the king. "Never!"

"Sire, I implore you to do so."

"Besides, how *could* I reconcile with her?"

"By doing something you know she would like."

"Such as?"

"Give a ball. You know how much the queen loves to dance. I will answer for it, she can't hold onto her resentment if you offer her a fête."

"Your Eminence, you know I don't enjoy such worldly pleasures."

"The queen will be all the more grateful to you since she knows you dislike such frivolous amusements. Besides, it would be an opportunity for her to show off those beautiful diamond studs you gave her for her birthday, and which she's not yet had a chance to display."

"We shall see, Your Eminence, we shall see," said the king. In his delight at finding the queen guilty of a crime he didn't care about, and innocent of the offence he so dreaded, the king was entirely ready for a rapprochement. "We shall see but, upon my honour, you are too indulgent toward her."

"Sire," said the cardinal, "leave severity to your ministers. Clemency is a royal virtue; rely on clemency, and you'll be pleased with the results." Upon which the cardinal, hearing the clock strike eleven, bowed deeply and asked permission of the king to retire. Anne of Austria, after the seizure of her letter, expected some reproach, and was astonished when the next day the king made overtures of reconciliation. Her first reaction was to reject him; her womanly pride and queenly dignity had both been so cruelly outraged that she simply couldn't make up with him at the first advance. However, on the advice of her women, she finally began at least to pretend to forget. The king took advantage of this favourable moment to immediately tell her that he was considering giving a ball. A ball was such a rare thing for poor Anne of Austria that at this announcement, just as the cardinal had predicted, the last trace of her resentment disappeared – if not from her heart, at least from her face. She asked when this ball would take place but the king replied that he must discuss this point with the cardinal. Thereafter, the king asked the cardinal every day when this ball should occur, and every day the cardinal put off settling it on one pretext or another. A week passed away thus. The eighth day after the king proposed the fête to the queen, the cardinal received a letter, postmarked in London, consisting of nothing more than the following lines:

*I have them but cannot leave London for lack of money. Send me five hundred pistoles, and four or five days after I have received them, I shall be in Paris.*

The same day that the cardinal received this letter, the king asked his usual question. Richelieu counted on his fingers, and said to himself, "She'll arrive four or five days after receiving the money. Figure on four or five days to get the money to her, and four or five days for her to return that makes ten days. Allowing for contrary winds, bad luck, and a woman's weakness, we'll make it twelve days."

"Well, Your Eminence," said the king, "have you completed your calculations?"

"Yes, Sire. Today is September twentieth. The City Aldermen are giving a fête on October third. That would suit your purposes perfectly as you won't seem to be going too far in reconciling with the queen." Then the cardinal added, "By the way, Sire, don't forget to tell Her Majesty, the night before the ball, that you want to see how she'll look wearing those diamond studs."

## 017 In the Bonacieux Household

This was the second time the cardinal had made a point of mentioning the diamond studs to the king. Louis XIII was struck by this and thought there must be something important behind the cardinal's suggestion. More than once the king had been humiliated by the superior knowledge of the cardinal. His Eminence's police were excellent, and he was often better informed than Louis himself about what was happening in his own household. The king hoped a conversation with the queen might shed some new light on her activities, so he could return afterward to His Eminence knowing some secret that, whether the cardinal knew it already or not, would elevate him in the eyes of his minister. So he went to the queen and, following his usual practice, bullied her by making threats against the people of her household. Anne of Austria lowered her head and let the torrent flow by without reply, hoping it would run out once the king was satisfied. However, that wasn't what Louis XIII had in



mind. The king wanted to provoke a response that would cast some light on events, convinced as he was that the cardinal was up to something and was preparing some terrible surprise in the way that only His Eminence knew how. Through persistent accusations, he eventually got what he wanted. “Please, Sire,” Anne cried, fed up with his vague attacks, “tell me what you really want. What have I actually done? What crimes have I committed? Your Majesty can’t possibly be this upset because of one letter written to my brother.”

The king, confronted directly like this, was unsure of what to say. He decided it was a good time to make the suggestion he was supposed to hold until the night before the ball. “Madam,” he said majestically, “there will soon be a ball at the Hôtel de Ville. To honour our worthy aldermen, I wish you to appear in full ceremonial attire, and I particularly want you to wear the diamond studs I gave you for your birthday. There: that is my response.” This response was terrible. Anne of Austria thought it meant that Louis knew everything, and that the cardinal had persuaded him to pretend otherwise for the last week, a deceit that was quite in character for him. She blanched, and groped for the support of a bureau with one of her beautiful hands that suddenly resembled a hand of wax. She looked at the king with terror in her eyes, and was unable to utter a single word. “You hear, Madam?” said the king, who was enjoying her embarrassment to its fullest, without comprehending its cause. “You hear?”

“Yes, Sire. I hear,” stammered the queen.

“You will appear at this ball?”

“Yes.”

“With those studs?”

“Yes!”

The queen’s pallor increased still more, till she was white as the lace of her collar. The king saw this and revelled in it, with that cold cruelty that was one of the worst sides of his character. “Then it’s agreed,” said the king, “and that’s all I have to say to you.”

“But when is this ball to take place?” asked Anne of Austria, barely able to speak.

Louis XIII felt instinctively that he should evade this question. “Very soon, Madam,” he said, “but I can’t precisely recall the date. I will ask the cardinal.”

“It was the cardinal, then, who proposed this fête to you?” cried the queen.

“Yes, Madam,” replied the king, astonished. “But what of that?”

“He’s the one who told you to require me to appear with the studs?”

“That is to say, Madam...”

“It was he, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, yes! What of it? What does it matter whether it was he, or I? Is there some crime in this request?”

“No, Sire.”

“Then, you’ll be there?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Fine,” said the king, retiring. “That’s fine. I count upon it.”

The queen curtsied, less from etiquette than because her knees were failing her. The king departed, delighted with his interview. “I’m lost!” murmured the queen. “Lost! The cardinal knows everything! He’s the one who’s been urging on the king who knows nothing yet but will soon know it all. I’m lost! My God! My God! My God!”

She knelt on a cushion and prayed, her head enfolded in her trembling arms. In truth, her position was dire. Buckingham had returned to London, Madam of Chevreuse was at Tours. More closely watched than ever, the queen felt sure that one of her women was betraying her but didn’t know how to tell which. La Porte didn’t dare leave the Louvre. She hadn’t a soul in the world in whom she could confide. Overcome by her troubles, threatened, menaced and feeling completely abandoned, she broke down and sobbed. “Is there anything I can do to help Your Majesty?” said a voice, full of sweetness and pity.

The queen turned eagerly, for there was no mistaking the tone of that voice. This was the voice of a friend. There, at one of the doors that gave onto the queen’s apartments, was the pretty Madam Bonacieux. She had been busy arranging dresses and linen in a closet when the king had entered. She’d been unable to leave and had heard everything. The queen, surprised and confused, gave a little shriek, for at first she didn’t recognise the young woman who had been brought into her household by La Porte. “Oh! Don’t be afraid, Madam,” said the young woman. Seeing the queen’s anguish brought tears to her own eyes, and joining her hands, she pleaded, “Listen, Your Majesty! I’m yours, body and soul, and no matter how far below you I may be, no matter how different our rank, I think I may be able to find a way to help Your Majesty out of this dilemma.”

“You! Oh, heavens! You!” cried the queen. “Come here. Look me in the face. I am betrayed on all sides. How can I confide in you?”

“Oh, Madam!” cried the young woman, falling to her knees, “Upon my soul, I’m ready to die for Your Majesty!”

This cry came from the bottom of her heart, like her first words, and couldn’t possibly be a deception. “You’re right, Madam,” continued Madam Bonacieux, “there are traitors here; but, by the holy name of the Virgin, I swear to you that no one is more devoted to Your Majesty than I am. Those studs the king demanded, you gave them to the Duke of Buckingham, didn’t you? I think those studs were kept in a little rosewood box that he carried away under his arm. Am I right? Isn’t that the case?”

“Oh, my God! My God!” murmured the queen, teeth chattering with fright.

“Very well,” said Madam Bonacieux, “we must get the studs back.”

“Yes, of course, that’s it,” cried the queen. “But how to do it?”

“Someone must be sent to the duke.”

“But who? Who can I trust?”

“Have confidence in me, Madam. Do me that honour, my queen, and I’ll find a messenger!”

“But I must write!”

“Oh, yes! That’s indispensable. I need a few words from the hand of Your Majesty, under your private seal.”

“But these few words could be my condemnation. It would mean divorce – exile!”

“Yes, if they fall into the wrong hands. But I will answer for it that these words are delivered to their address.”

“Dear God! Must I then place my life, my honour, my reputation, all in your hands?”

“Yes! Yes, Madam, you must, and I will save them all!”

“But how? Tell me that, at least.”

“My husband was set free a few days ago, though I haven’t yet had time to see him. He’s a brave and honest man with neither hatred nor love for anyone. He’ll do whatever I want: he’ll leave on an order from me without knowing what he carries; he’ll deliver Your Majesty’s letter to its address, without even knowing it’s from Your Majesty.”

The queen impulsively took up the young woman’s hands and looked at her as if to read into the depths of her heart. Seeing nothing but sincerity in her beautiful eyes, she embraced her tenderly. “Do it, then,” she said to her, “and you will have saved my life and honour!”

“Please, Madam, don’t exaggerate my service – I’m happy to do anything for you. Your Majesty’s honour is above question, there’s nothing for me to save. You’re just the victim of horrible schemes.”

“That’s true, my child, you’re quite right,” said the queen.

“Then give me that letter, Madam. We have little time.”

The queen ran to a small table on which she found ink, paper, and pens. She wrote two lines, sealed the letter with her private seal, and gave it to Madam Bonacieux. “But we’ve forgotten one absolute necessity,” said the queen.

“What’s that?”

“Money.”

Madam Bonacieux blushed. “Yes, that’s true,” she said, “and I confess to Your Majesty that my husband...”

“Your husband has none, is that what you want to say?”

“No, he does have some but he’s very greedy – that’s his one vice. However, Your Majesty shouldn’t be concerned – we’ll find the means.”

“I have none, either,” said the queen. (Those who’ve read the memoirs of Madam of Motteville won’t be surprised by this.) “But wait a moment.” Anne of Austria ran to her jewellery box. “Here,” she said, “here is a ring of great value or so I’ve been told. It comes from my brother, the King of Spain, and it’s mine to dispose of. Take this ring and convert it into cash, and then your husband can depart.”

“Within the hour, you shall be obeyed.”

“You see the address,” added the queen, speaking so low she could barely be heard. “To Milord the Duke of Buckingham, in London.”

“The letter shall be delivered to him personally.”

“Generous child!” cried Anne.

Madam Bonacieux kissed the queen’s hands, cached the paper in her bosom, and disappeared with the lightness of a bird. Ten minutes later she was at home. As she’d told the queen, she hadn’t seen her husband since his release, so she was ignorant of his new opinion of the cardinal, a change effected by His Eminence’s money and flattery, and confirmed since by two or three visits from the Count of Rochefort, who was Bonacieux’s new best friend. Rochefort had persuaded him there was nothing behind the abduction of his wife beyond mere political precaution. Madam Bonacieux found Sir Bonacieux alone, struggling to put his house back in order. On his return he’d found all but a few pieces of furniture broken and his wardrobes mostly empty, Justice not being one of the three things that King Solomon had stated leave no traces of their passage. The housemaid was gone, having fled upon the arrest of her master. The poor girl had been so overcome by fright she hadn’t stopped running from Paris until she reached her native province of Burgundy. Upon returning to his house, the worthy mercer had sent the news of his happy return to his wife, and his wife had replied with congratulations, assuring him she would pay him a visit at the first moment she could steal away from her duties. That first moment had taken five days to come about. Under other circumstances, this would have seemed rather long to Master Bonacieux; but his visit with the cardinal, and the visits from Rochefort, had given him plenty of subjects for reflection – and, as they say, nothing passes time like reflection. This was especially true in the case of Bonacieux, whose reflections were all rose-coloured. Rochefort called him his friend, his *dear Bonacieux* and kept telling him that the cardinal thought the world of him. The mercer already saw himself on the road to fortune and honours. For her part, Madam Bonacieux had also reflected but, it must be said, on something completely other than ambition. Despite herself, her thoughts constantly returned to that handsome young guardsman, so brave, and apparently so much in love. Married at eighteen to Sir Bonacieux, she’d always socialized with her husband’s friends, who lacked all attraction for a young woman whose heart was far above her position. Madam Bonacieux had remained indifferent to men and hadn’t fallen prey to any vulgar seductions. However, in this period, the title of *gentleman* had an irresistible allure for people of the middle class – and d’Artagnan was a gentleman. What’s more, he wore the uniform of the French Guards that, after the musketeers, was the uniform most admired by the ladies. Plus, he was handsome, young, and adventurous, and he spoke of love like a man who loved, and who longed to be loved in return. This was more than enough to turn the head of a twenty-three-year-old, and Madam Bonacieux had just arrived at that happy age. Though they hadn’t seen each other for more than a week, a week during which serious events had occurred for both of them, the two spouses found each other somewhat preoccupied. Nevertheless, Sir Bonacieux lit up with real joy and advanced toward his wife with open arms. Madam Bonacieux presented her cheek to him. “Let’s talk a bit,” she said.

“What?”

Bonacieux was astonished. “Yes, let’s talk. I have something of the greatest importance to tell you.”

“Indeed, and so do I – I have some rather serious questions of my own. Explain to me this abduction, if you would.”

“There’s no point in going into that now,” said Madam Bonacieux.

“What’s this important thing, then? Is it about my imprisonment?”

“No, I didn’t know about that until the day it happened. But since you weren’t guilty of any crime, and weren’t an accomplice in any intrigue – since you know nothing, in fact, that might compromise either you or anyone else, I didn’t consider your imprisonment particularly important.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Madam!” replied Bonacieux, wounded at how little interest his wife had in his troubles. “Do you know I was plunged for a day and a night into a dungeon of the Bastille?”

“Well, a day and a night soon pass away. Let’s put your captivity behind us, and return to the thing that brings me to you.”

“What! The thing that brings you to me? Wasn’t it the desire to see a husband you haven’t seen for eight days?” asked the mercer, stung to the quick.

"Of course, that most of all – but something else besides."

"Tell me."

"It's very important, and our fortune may depend on it."

"Our fortune has already greatly changed since I saw you last, Madam Bonacieux. In fact, a few months from now, it wouldn't surprise me if we were the envy of a lot of people."

"That's right, especially if you follow the instructions I'm about to give you."

"To me?"

"Yes, to you. There's a good and holy mission to accomplish, Sir – with plenty of money to be gained at the same time." Madam Bonacieux knew that by mentioning money to her husband, she was preying on his weakness. But a man who has talked for ten minutes with Cardinal Richelieu, even if he's only a mercer, is not the same man. "Plenty of money to be gained!" said Bonacieux, pursing his lips.

"Yes, quite a bit."

"How much, do you think?"

"Maybe a thousand *pistoles*."

"So what you have to ask of me is very serious, then?"

"Yes."

"What must be done?"

"You must leave right away on a journey. I'll give you a letter that you mustn't part with for any reason, and which you will deliver into the proper hands at journey's end."

"And where am I supposed to go?"

"To London."

"Me – to London! Come now, you're joking, I have no business in London."

"But others need you to go there."

"Who are these 'others'? I warn you, I'll do nothing blindly. I intend to know not only what I'm exposing myself to but who I'm being exposed for."

"An illustrious person sends you, an illustrious person awaits you, and the reward will exceed your desires. That's all I'm able to promise you."

"Intrigues, intrigues, always more intrigues! I won't have any more to do with such things, thank you very much. That course is clear to me, thanks to Your Eminence."

"The cardinal!" cried Madam Bonacieux. "Have you seen the cardinal?"

"He sent for me," the mercer answered proudly.

"And I suppose you went when he called! You're so thoughtless."

"I must say I had little choice about whether to go or not, as I was taken between two guards. I must also say that, as I didn't yet know His Eminence, if I'd been able to avoid the visit, I'd have been happy to do so."

"Were you mistreated, then? Did he threaten you?"

"He gave me his hand, and called me his friend – his friend! Do you hear, Madam? I am the friend of the Great Cardinal!"

"The Great Cardinal!"

"Would you care to dispute that title, Madam?"

"I'm not about to dispute anything with him. But I warn you, the favour of a minister doesn't last – you'd be crazy to attach yourself to him. There are powers above the cardinal that don't depend on the whim of one man or the outcome of events. These are the powers we should commit ourselves to."

"I'm sorry for it, Madam but I acknowledge no power higher than that of the great man whom I have the honour to serve."

"You serve the cardinal?"

"Yes, Madam. And as his servant I won't permit you to conspire in plots against the security of the State, or to serve the intrigues of a woman who isn't really French, who is Spanish at heart. Fortunately, the Great Cardinal is among us, vigilant against conspiracy, seeing to the bottom of every plot."

Bonacieux was repeating, word for word, something he'd heard from the Count of Rochefort. Whatever its source, it made his poor wife shudder. She'd counted on her husband, had answered for him to the queen, and now she trembled at how close she'd come to confiding in him, and at how helpless she was. However, knowing how weak her husband was, and moreover how greedy, she still hoped to bend him to her will. "So, you're a Cardinalist, Sir!" she sneered. "You'd join with those who manhandle your wife and insult your queen!"

"Private interests are as nothing before the interests of all. I am for those who preserve the State!" said Bonacieux emphatically.

This was another of Rochefort's phrases, and he'd been waiting for an opportunity to use it. "And what do *you* know about this 'State' you talk about?" said Madam Bonacieux, shrugging her shoulders.

"Be content to be a simple bourgeois, and ally with the side that offers the best return."

"Oh? Oh?" said Bonacieux, slapping a bulging purse that jingled with money. "What do you say to that, Madam Know-it-all?"

"Where did that money come from?"

"Can't you guess?"

"From the cardinal?"

"From him, and from my friend the Count of Rochefort."

"The Count of Rochefort! But he's the one who abducted me!"

"That's as may be, Madam."

"And you accept money from that man?"

"Haven't you said yourself that the abduction was purely political?"

"Yes but their goal was to make me betray my mistress, to torture me into a confession that could compromise the honour, and maybe the life, of my august mistress!"

"Madam," replied Bonacieux, "your august mistress is a perfidious Spaniard. That which the cardinal does, is well done."

"Sir," shrilled the young woman, "I knew you were cowardly, greedy, and stupid but I didn't know you were villainous!"

"Madam!" Bonacieux was taken aback. He'd never seen his wife lose her temper, and he recoiled from her anger. "Madam, what are you saying?"

"I say you're a miserable wretch!" continued Madam Bonacieux, who saw she was regaining the upper hand. "You'd meddle with politics, would you? And worse, with Cardinalist politics! For money, you'd sell yourself, body and soul, to the devil!"

"No, to the cardinal."

"It's the same thing!" cried the young woman. "Who says Richelieu, says Satan."

"Hush, Madam, hush! Someone might hear you!"

"Yes, you're right. I'd be ashamed if anyone knew of your cowardice."

"All right, all right! What do you need me to do? Come, now!"

"I told you: you must leave this instant, and faithfully complete the mission I give you. If you do that, I'll forget everything, I'll forgive everything – and besides," she held out her hand, "I'll give you all my love." Bonacieux was moved. He was greedy, and a coward but he loved his wife. A man of fifty can't be angry for long with a wife of twenty-three. Madam Bonacieux saw that he hesitated. "Come, have you decided?" she said.

"But, my dear love, think a little about what you're asking of me. London is far from Paris, very far, and this mission may not be without its dangers."

"What does that matter, if you avoid them?"

The mercer gulped. "In that case, Madam Bonacieux," he said, "I definitely refuse. Intrigues frighten me! I've seen the Bastille, I have. *Grr!* It's frightful, the Bastille! Just thinking of it makes my flesh crawl. They threatened me with torture! Do you know how they torture you in the Bastille? They force wooden wedges between your legs until your bones break! No, no, I'm definitely not going. *Morbleu*, why don't you go yourself? In truth, I think I've been wrong about you – I think really you must be a man, and a crazy one, at that!"

"And you, you're a woman, a low-down, miserable, and stupid woman! So, you're afraid, are you? Well, if you don't leave this instant, I'll have you arrested on the queen's orders, and you'll be put back in that Bastille you're so afraid of."

This gave Bonacieux something to think about. In his mind, he weighed the wrath of the cardinal against that of the queen – but there was no comparison, the wrath of the cardinal was infinitely weightier. "Go ahead, have me arrested in the name of the queen," he said. "I'll simply protest it to His Eminence."

At this, Madam Bonacieux saw that she'd overdone it, and was horrified by how far she'd let the matter go. She looked for one terrified moment at that stupid face, fortified with the invincible resolve of the fool who is governed by fear. "Very well, let it go!" she said. "Maybe you're right, when all is said and done. After all, a man knows more about politics than a woman – and moreover, you, Sir Bonacieux, are a man who's spoken with the cardinal. And yet, it's hard," she added, "that my husband, a man whose affection I thought I could count on, treats me so disgracefully and won't comply with any of my little whims."

"Your little whims lead you too far," replied Bonacieux triumphantly, "and I don't trust them."

"I'll give it up, then," the young woman sighed. "It's just as well; say no more about it."

"You might, at least, tell me what I was supposed to do in London," said Bonacieux, remembering a little late that Rochefort had urged him to try to discover his wife's secrets.

"There's no point in telling you that," said the young woman, whose instinctive mistrust impelled her to draw back. "It was just a matter of one of those little nothings that women like, a small gift that could have brought a large return."

But the more the young woman evaded the subject, the more Bonacieux thought that what she was refusing to tell him must be important. He decided he'd better go to Rochefort right away and tell him that the queen was looking for a messenger to send to London. "Pardon me for leaving so suddenly, my dear Madam Bonacieux," he said, "but, not knowing that you were coming to see me, I'd set up a rendezvous with one of my friends. I'll be right back – just wait for me for half a minute, and I'll return as soon as I've finished with my friend. Then, since it's growing late, I'll escort you back to the Louvre."

"A thousand thanks, Sir," replied Madam Bonacieux, "but as you aren't brave enough to be of any use to me whatsoever, I'd just as soon return to the Louvre alone."

"As you please, Madam Bonacieux," replied the former mercer. "Will I see you again soon?"

"Next week, probably. Hopefully, my work will leave me a little free time, and I'll take advantage of it to come and put things in order here, as they appear rather disarranged."

"Very well, I'll expect you. Do you need anything more from me?"

"No, nothing at all, dear."

"See you soon, then?"

"See you soon!"

Bonacieux kissed his wife's hand and quickly left.

"So much for that!" said Madam Bonacieux, once her husband had shut the street door and she found herself alone. "The only thing that imbecile lacked was to be a Cardinalist! And I've answered for him to the queen, I've promised my poor mistress ... dear God! She'll take me for one of those lying wretches who swarm about the palace, and are set to spy upon her. Ah, Sir Bonacieux! I never loved you very much but now, I positively hate you! And upon my word, you'll pay for this!"

As she said these words, a rap on the ceiling made her look up. A voice that appeared to come through the plaster said, "Dear Madam Bonacieux! Open the little door on the staircase for me and let me come down to you."

“Ah, Madam,” said d’Artagnan, entering by the door the young woman had opened for him. “If you don’t mind my saying so, that’s a sad husband you have there.”

“You overheard our conversation?” asked Madam Bonacieux with a mixture of unease and eagerness.

“I heard it all.”

“Oh, my God! But how could you do that?”

“By a little method I have, the same way I overheard the more animated conversation you had with the cardinal’s bailiffs.”

“And what did you gather from what you heard us say?”

“A thousand things! First of which, I’m happy to say, is that your husband is a simpleton and a fool. Second, that you’re in trouble that suits me perfectly, as it gives me the chance to place myself at your service – and God knows I’m ready to jump into a fire for you! Finally, that the queen needs a brave, intelligent, and devoted man to travel to London for her. I have at least two of those three qualities – and here I am!”

Madam Bonacieux’s heart leaped with joy, and a secret hope shone from her eyes. “And what guarantee can you give me if I agree to confide this mission to you?” she asked.

“My love for you. Come, speak: command me! What’s to be done?”

“*My God,*” murmured the young woman. “Must I confide such a secret to you, Sir? You’re practically a child!”

“Do you want someone to vouch for me?”

“Yes, that would be very reassuring.”

“Do you know Athos?”

“No.”

“Porthos?”

“No.”

“Aramis?”

“No. Who are these gentlemen?”

“They’re King’s Musketeers. Do you know Sir Tréville, their captain?”

“Oh! Yes, I know him – not personally but I’ve heard the queen speak of him more than once as a brave and loyal gentleman.”

“You’re not afraid he’d betray you to the cardinal, then?”

“Certainly not.”

“All right, then reveal your secret to him, no matter how important, precious, or terrible it is, and ask him whether you can trust it to me.”

“But this secret doesn’t belong to me – I can’t reveal it that way.”

“You were going to tell it to Sir Bonacieux,” said d’Artagnan, piqued.

“Yes, the same way one confides a letter to a hollow tree, a pigeon’s leg, or a dog’s collar.”

“But you can clearly see that I love you.”

“So you say.”

“I’m an honourable man!”

“I believe it.”

“I’m brave!”

“Oh! I’m sure of that.”

“Then put me to the test.”

Madam Bonacieux looked searchingly at the young man, hesitating on the brink. His eyes were so ardent, the enthusiasm in his voice was so persuasive, that she felt drawn to trust him. Besides, she was in one of those situations where one must risk everything on one throw of the dice. The queen could just as easily be ruined by too much caution as by too much trust. In the end, it was her own feelings for her young protector that impelled her to speak. “Listen,” she said, “I give in. I’ll accept your assurances. But I swear, before God who hears us, that if you betray me, and I escape my enemies, I’ll kill myself and accuse you of my death.”

D’Artagnan was impressed. “As for me, Madam,” he said, “I swear before God that if I’m taken while trying to accomplish your mission, I’ll die before I’ll do or say anything that would compromise anyone.” Then the young woman confided to him the terrible secret, some of which he’d already stumbled across by chance, that night in front of La Samaritaine. This was their mutual declaration of love. D’Artagnan was radiant with joy and pride. The possession of this secret, and the love of this woman, made him a giant. “I go,” he said. “I’ll go this minute!”

“You’ll go?” said Madam Bonacieux. “But what about your regiment, and your captain?”

“Upon my soul, you’ve made me forget all that, dear Constance! You’re right – I’ll have to ask for leave.”

“Yet another obstacle,” Madam Bonacieux murmured sadly.

“Don’t worry about that,” said d’Artagnan, after a moment of reflection. “I’ll manage it.”

“But how?”

“I’ll go this very evening to Sir Tréville and ask him to request my leave as a favour from his brother-in-law, Sir Des Essarts.”

“Good! But there’s still something else.”

Madam Bonacieux hesitated. “What is it, *love*?” asked d’Artagnan.

“You ... have no money, perhaps?”

“No ‘perhaps’ about it,” said d’Artagnan, smiling.

“Well, then,” Madam Bonacieux opened an armoire and pulled out the bag her husband had caressed so lovingly half an hour before, and said, “Take this purse.”

“The cardinal’s money!” d’Artagnan laughed.

Thanks to his hole in the floor, he’d heard every word of the conversation between the mercer and his wife. “The cardinal’s money,” said Madam Bonacieux. “It looks like a respectable sum.”

“By God!” said d’Artagnan. “It’ll be twice as funny if we save the queen with His Eminence’s money!”

“I like a man with a sense of humour,” said Madam Bonacieux, smiling, “and believe me, the queen won’t be ungrateful.”

“I’m already well paid!” cried d’Artagnan. “I love you, and you allow me to do what you ask. That’s already more happiness than I ever dared hope for.”

Madam Bonacieux started. “Hush!”

“Why?”

“Someone’s talking in the street.”

“It’s the voice...”

“Of my husband! I thought I recognised it!”

D’Artagnan ran to the door and threw the bolt. “Don’t let him in until I’ve left,” he said. “When I’m gone, open the door for him.”

“But I should leave too. How am I supposed to explain the disappearance of his money?”

“You’re right – you have to go.”

“But how? He’ll see us if we go out.”

“Then you must come up to my room.”

“Oh!” cried Madam Bonacieux. “You say that in a tone that frightens me!”

Tears of confusion sprang to her eyes. D’Artagnan was troubled, and knelt at her feet. “In my rooms,” he said, “you’ll be as safe as in a church, I give you my word as a gentleman.”

“Then let’s go,” she said. “I put my trust in you, my friend.” D’Artagnan carefully drew back the bolt of the inner door, and then, as light as shadows, they glided through the doorway and into the passage. They climbed quietly up the stairs and entered d’Artagnan’s apartment. Once in his rooms, the young man barricaded the door for greater security. They both then went to the window. Through the slats of the shutter they could see Sir Bonacieux who was talking with a man in a cloak. At the sight of the man in the cloak, d’Artagnan started, half drew his sword, and sprang toward the door. It was his man of Meung. “What are you doing?” cried Madam Bonacieux. “You’ll ruin us!”

“But I’ve sworn to kill that man!” said d’Artagnan.

“Your life is committed to another! In the name of the queen, I forbid you to throw yourself into any danger unrelated to your mission!”

“And what about in *your* name? Don’t you command anything for yourself?”

“For myself? In my own name, then, I beg you!” she said, her voice strained by emotion. “But listen! It sounds like they’re talking about me.”

D’Artagnan pressed his ear to the window. Sir Bonacieux had unlocked his door and seeing the apartment empty, had returned to the man in the cloak, whom he’d left in the doorway. “She’s gone,” he said. “She must have returned to the Louvre.”

“You’re sure she had no idea of your intentions when you left?” said the stranger.

“Oh, no,” Bonacieux replied smugly. “She’s too shallow a woman for that.”

“Is that guard cadet at home?”

“I don’t think so. Look: his shutters are closed, and you can’t see any light through the blinds.”

“Quite so – but let’s make sure.”

“How?”

“By knocking on his door.”

“I’ll ask his lackey.”

“Go.”

Bonacieux re-entered his house, passed through the same inner door as the two fugitives, climbed the stairs and knocked on d’Artagnan’s door. No one answered. Porthos, to cut a grand figure, had borrowed Planchet for the evening. When Bonacieux rapped on the door, the two young people within felt their hearts leap inside them. But d’Artagnan was careful to maintain complete silence.

“Nobody’s home,” called Bonacieux.

“Never mind. Come back down to your apartment; it’s safer than talking in the doorway.”

“Oh, my God!” murmured Madam Bonacieux. “We’ll hear nothing more.”

“On the contrary,” whispered d’Artagnan, “we’ll hear all the better.”

D’Artagnan raised the three or four tiles that made his chamber into a listening post, spread a carpet on the floor, knelt over the opening, and gestured to Madam Bonacieux to do the same. “You’re sure nobody’s there?” said the stranger in the apartment below.

“I’ll answer for it,” said Bonacieux.

“And you think your wife...?”

“Has returned to the Louvre.”

“Without speaking to anyone but you?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“That’s an important point – do you understand that?”

“So, the news I brought you is valuable?”

"Very, my dear Bonacieux. I won't try to hide that from you."  
"Do you think the cardinal will be pleased with me?"  
"No doubt about it."  
"The Great Cardinal!"  
"Are you certain your wife mentioned no names in her conversation with you?"  
"I don't think so."  
"She didn't mention Madam of Chevreuse, or Sir Buckingham, or Madam du Vernet?"  
"No, she only told me she wanted to send me to London to serve the interests of an illustrious person."  
"The traitor!" murmured Madam Bonacieux.  
"Hush!" whispered d'Artagnan, taking her hand that she unconsciously allowed him to keep.  
"No matter," continued the man in the cloak, "though you were a fool not to have pretended to accept the mission. You'd have that letter; the State that is threatened, would be saved; and you..."  
"And me?"  
"You? The cardinal would have presented you with the letters patent that would elevate you to the nobility."  
"Did ... he say that?"  
"Yes, I happen to know he was planning to surprise you with that."  
"Don't give up on me yet!" replied Bonacieux. "My wife adores me! There's still time."  
"The dolt!" murmured Madam Bonacieux.  
"Quiet," said d'Artagnan, pressing her hand with his.  
"How is there still time?" asked the man in the cloak.  
"I'll run to the Louvre and ask for Madam Bonacieux. I'll say that I've reconsidered, accept the mission, and obtain the letter. Then I'll go straight to the cardinal's hôtel."  
"Well, get moving! I'll return shortly to find out how it went."  
The stranger left. "That cowl!" said Madam Bonacieux, speaking less than tenderly of her husband.  
"Silence!" said d'Artagnan, squeezing her hand more tightly than ever.  
They were interrupted by a terrible howl. Her husband had discovered the disappearance of his purse and was crying thief. "Oh, my God!" cried Madam Bonacieux. "He'll rouse the whole neighbourhood."  
Bonacieux yelled for several minutes. But such cries were rather frequent in the Rue des Fossoyeurs, and attracted little notice – and besides, the house of the mercer had acquired a rather bad reputation of late. When no one came, Bonacieux ran out into the street, still shouting, and his voice could be heard trailing off in the direction of the Rue du Bac. "Now that he's gone, it's your turn to depart," said Madam Bonacieux. "Be brave but above all be careful and remember what you owe to the queen."  
"To her, and to you!" cried d'Artagnan. "Rest assured, sweet Constance, I'll return worthy of her gratitude. But will I also return worthy of your love?"  
The young woman replied only by the blush that rose to her cheeks. D'Artagnan departed a few moments later, enveloped like the stranger in a great cloak that barely covered the scabbard of his long sword. Madam Bonacieux followed him with her eyes, with that lingering look a woman sends after the man she loves. But once he'd turned the corner, she fell to her knees, clasped her hands, and cried, "Dear God! Protect the queen – and protect me!"

019  
The Plan of the Campaign

D'Artagnan went straight to the Hôtel de Tréville. It had occurred to him that in a few minutes the cardinal would be alerted by that damned stranger in the cloak who appeared to be his agent. He thought, quite rightly, that he hadn't a moment to lose. The young man's heart overflowed with joy. With this mission he had an opportunity to gain both money and glory – and, as an even greater incentive, to do a deed for the woman he adored. At one blow, he'd been given a chance to accomplish more than he would ever have dared pray for. Sir Tréville was in his salon, surrounded by his usual entourage of gentlemen. D'Artagnan, who was recognised as a regular visitor of the house, went straight to Tréville's study and made it known that he wished to speak to the captain on a matter of some importance. D'Artagnan waited no more than five minutes before Sir Tréville entered. One glance at the joy radiating from the cadet's face told the veteran captain that something new was up. All the way there, d'Artagnan had wrestled with whether he ought to confide in Sir Tréville or whether he should only ask him for a *carte blanche* for a secret mission. But Tréville had always been so good to him, and was so devoted to the king and the queen – and hated the cardinal so cordially – that the young man decided to tell him everything. "You asked for me, my young friend?" said Tréville.  
"Yes, Sir," said d'Artagnan, "and I hope you'll pardon me for troubling you, once you know how important it is."  
"Speak, then; I'm listening."  
D'Artagnan lowered his voice. "It concerns nothing less than the honour, and maybe the life, of the queen."  
"What's that you say?"  
Tréville glanced around to make sure they were alone, then fixed his gaze on d'Artagnan, questioning him with a look. "Sir, chance's made me privy to a secret..."  
"Which I hope you'll keep, young man, as sacred as your life."  
"But which I must confide to you, Sir, for only you can help me in the mission I've received from Her Majesty."  
"Is this *your* secret?"  
"No, Sir – it's Her Majesty's."  
"Are you authorised by Her Majesty to tell it to me?"  
"No, Sir. On the contrary, I've been told not to reveal it."  
"So why are you about to betray it to me?"  
"Because, as I said, without you I can do nothing – and I was afraid you might refuse me the favour I've come for if you didn't know why I asked for it."  
"Keep your secret, young man, and tell me what you want."  
"I'd like you to ask Sir Des Essarts to give me a leave of absence of fifteen days."  
"Starting when?"  
"Tonight."  
"You're leaving Paris?"  
"I'm going on a mission."  
"Can you tell me where?"  
"To London."  
"Does anyone have an interest in preventing you from arriving?"  
"The cardinal, I believe, would give the world to stop me."  
"And you're travelling alone?"  
"I'm going alone."  
"In that case, you won't get past Bondy, as sure as my name is Tréville."  
"How's that?"  
"You'll be assassinated."  
"Then I shall die doing my duty!"  
"Yes, I dare say. But your mission will be unfulfilled."  
"That's true," said d'Artagnan.  
"Believe me," said Tréville, "in ventures of this sort, you need to start out with four to be sure one arrives."  
"You're right, Sir," said d'Artagnan, "but you command Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, and it's up to you to decide if they can help me."  
"Wouldn't you have to share with them the secret I didn't want to know?"  
"The four of us are sworn to blind, mutual devotion no matter what. Besides, you can tell them you have complete confidence in me, and that will settle it."  
"Hmm. I can give them each a leave of fifteen days but no more. I'll send Athos, who still suffers from his wound, to the spa waters of Forges. Porthos and Aramis can accompany their friend, whom they wouldn't want to abandon in his sad condition. My issuing their leaves of absence will prove that I authorise their journey."  
"You're too kind, Sir! A thousand thanks!"  
"Go and find them this minute, and get this business under way tonight. Ah! But you may have had a spy on your heels, so first write your request to Sir Des Essarts. That way, if your visit here comes to the attention of the cardinal, it will be accounted for." D'Artagnan jotted down his request and gave it to Tréville, who assured him that before two o'clock in the morning the leave papers would be at the homes of the four friends. "Have the goodness to send mine to Athos's place, if you please," said d'Artagnan. "I'm afraid there'll be trouble if I go home to mine."  
"Don't worry. And now, goodbye, and *have a nice voyage!*" said Sir Tréville. Then, after a pause, he said, "No, wait – come back a moment."  
D'Artagnan returned. "Have you any money?" Tréville asked.  
For answer, d'Artagnan slapped the bulging purse in his pocket. "Enough?" asked Tréville.  
"Three hundred *pistoles*."  
"Well! You could go to the end of the world with that. Go then."  
D'Artagnan bowed to Sir Tréville, who gave him his hand; d'Artagnan took it with respect and gratitude. Since he'd arrived in Paris, he'd had nothing but well from this excellent man, whom he'd always found worthy, loyal, and generous. His first visit was to Aramis. He hadn't returned to the house of his friend since that evening when he'd followed Madam Bonacieux to his window. Since then, he'd scarcely seen the young musketeer but each time he had, he'd sensed a deep sadness in his friend. He found Aramis sitting up, sombre and pensive. D'Artagnan asked a few cautious questions about this profound melancholy but Aramis only gave as his excuse that he had to write a commentary on the eighteenth chapter of Saint Augustine in Latin for the following week, and it was that which preoccupied him. After the two friends had been chatting for a few minutes, a servant from Sir Tréville entered, carrying a sealed packet. "What's this?" asked Aramis.  
"The leave papers Sir asked for," replied the lackey.  
"I haven't asked for a leave!"  
"Be still and take it," said d'Artagnan. "And you, my friend, here's a *half-pistole* for your trouble. Tell Sir Tréville that Sir Aramis is very much obliged to him. Go."  
The lackey bowed to the ground and departed. "What's this all about?" asked Aramis.  
"Pack whatever you need for a fifteen-day journey and follow me."  
"But I can't leave Paris right now, not without knowing..."  
Aramis stopped. "What's become of her, is that it?" said d'Artagnan.  
"Who?" said Aramis.  
"The woman who was here, the woman of the embroidered handkerchief."  
Aramis turned pale as death. "Who told you there was a woman here?"  
"I saw her."  
"And you know who she is?"  
"I think I suspect, at least."

"Listen," said Aramis, "since you know so much, do you know what has become of her?"

"I presume she's returned to Tours."

"To Tours? It could be – I see you do know her. But how could she return to Tours without telling me?"

"Because she was afraid she'd be arrested."

"But why didn't she write to me?"

"Because she was afraid she might compromise you."

"D'Artagnan, you restore me to life!" cried Aramis. "I thought I was scorned – betrayed, even. You know, I was so happy to see her again! I didn't think she'd risk her liberty for me but why else would she have returned to Paris?"

"For the cause that takes us today to England."

"And what cause is that?" demanded Aramis.

"One day you'll know, Aramis – but for the moment, I must imitate the discretion of the theologian's niece."

Aramis smiled, remembering the story he'd told his friends. "Well, then, since you're sure she's left Paris, nothing holds me back, and I'm ready to follow you. You say we're going...?"

"To Athos's place, at the moment – and if you're going with me, please hurry, as we're losing precious time. By the way, tell Bazin."

"Bazin is going with us?" asked Aramis.

"Maybe. In any case, it's best that he follow us right now to Athos's."

Aramis called Bazin, and after ordering him to join them at Athos's apartment, he took up his cloak, his sword, and three pistols, then opened several drawers to see if he could find a stray coin or two. But it was useless, so he followed d'Artagnan, while asking himself how it was that this young cadet of the guards should know the lady who had visited him so well, knowing even better than him what had become of her. As they were leaving, Aramis took d'Artagnan by the arms, looked him in the eye, and said, "Have you spoken of this woman to anyone?"

"To no one in the world."

"Not even to Athos or Porthos?"

"I haven't breathed a word to them."

"Good." With this important point settled, Aramis willingly followed d'Artagnan, and the two soon arrived at Athos's lodgings. They found him holding his leave papers in one hand and the letter from Sir Tréville in the other. "Can you explain to me the significance of this leave and this letter I've just received?" said Athos, astonished. He quoted from the letter:

*My dear Athos, it would be well, as your health requires it, to take fifteen days of rest. Go, then, and take the waters of Forges, or any others that you may find convenient, and recover. Your affectionate, Tréville.*

D'Artagnan said, "These leave papers and this letter mean that you must follow me, Athos."

"To the waters of Forges?"

"There – or elsewhere."

"In the king's service?"

"The king, or the queen. Are we not servants of both Their Majesties?"

At that moment, Porthos came in. "*For the love of God!*" he said. "Here's a strange thing! Since when, in the musketeers, are men granted leaves of absence they haven't asked for?"

"Since they have friends who ask for it for them," said d'Artagnan.

"Ah ha!" said Porthos. "So something's up, then?"

Aramis said, "Yes, we're going..."

"Going? Going where?" demanded Porthos.

"My faith! I know nothing about it," said Athos. "Ask d'Artagnan, here."

"We go to London, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan.

"To London!" cried Porthos. "What business do we have in London?"

"That's what I can't tell you, Gentlemen. You'll just have to trust me."

"But to go to London takes money, and I don't have any," Porthos boomed.

"Nor I," said Aramis.

"Nor I," said Athos.

"Well, I have," said d'Artagnan. He pulled his purse from his pocket and dropped it jingling on the table. "In this purse are three hundred *pistoles*. That ought to be enough to take us to London and back." He shrugged. "But we probably won't all make it to London anyway."

"And why is that?"

"Because, in all probability, some of us will be left en route."

"What is this we're undertaking, a campaign?"

"Yes, and I must warn you, it's a dangerous one."

"But if we're going to risk being killed," said Porthos, "I'd very much like to know why at least."

"Much good that will do you!" said Athos.

"Nonetheless," said Aramis, "I am of Porthos's opinion."

D'Artagnan said, "Is the king in the habit of giving you his reasons? No; he just says, 'Gentlemen, there is fighting in Gascony, or in Flanders; go there, and fight.' And you go. You don't bother yourself with why."

"D'Artagnan is right," said Athos. "Here are the leave papers from Sir Tréville, and here are three hundred *pistoles*, from where I don't know. Let's go and get killed where we're told. Is life really worth so many questions? D'Artagnan, I'm ready to follow you."

"Me too," said Porthos.

"And I, as well," said Aramis. "Anyway, I'm not sorry to leave Paris. I can use a little distraction."

"Well, you'll have plenty of distractions, Gentlemen, I promise you that," said d'Artagnan.

"So, when do we leave?" said Athos.

"Right away," d'Artagnan replied. "There's not a moment to lose."

"Grimaud! Planchet! Mousqueton! Bazin! *Whoa!*" cried the four young men, calling their lackeys. "Shine my boots! Bring the horses from the hôtel!"

The musketeers kept their horses, and those of their lackeys, at the Hôtel de Tréville that acted in town as a barracks. Planchet, Grimaud, Mousqueton, and Bazin departed at a run. "Now, let's lay out the plan of campaign," said Porthos. "Where do we go first?"

"To Calais," said d'Artagnan. "That's the shortest route to London."

"Well, here's my advice," said Porthos.

"Let's hear it."

"Four men travelling together would be suspicious, so we should split up. D'Artagnan will give each of us our instructions. I will go by way of Boulogne to clear the road; Athos will leave two hours later, and go by way of Amiens; Aramis will follow us through Noyon; and as for d'Artagnan, he'll take whatever route he likes but dressed as Planchet, while Planchet will follow d'Artagnan but dressed in the uniform of the guards."

"Gentlemen," said Athos, "my opinion is that lackeys should have nothing to do with such an affair. A secret might be betrayed accidentally by gentlemen but it's nearly always sold by lackeys."

"Porthos, I'm afraid your plan won't work," said d'Artagnan, "since I don't know myself what instructions to give you. I'm the bearer of a letter, nothing more. I can't make three copies of the letter because it's sealed, so it seems to me we must travel together." He tapped the breast of his doublet. "The letter is here, in my pocket. If I'm killed, one of you must take it and continue on the road; if he's killed, it's another's turn, and so on. Provided one of us arrives, that's all that's needed."

"Bravo, d'Artagnan! Your opinion is mine," said Athos. "Besides, we must be consistent with our story. I'm going to take the waters, with your companionship. But instead of the waters of Forges, I'll go to take sea waters, as I'm free to choose. If we're stopped, I'll show Sir Tréville's letter and you will all show your leave papers. If we're interrogated, we'll maintain stubbornly that our only intention was to dip ourselves a few times in the sea. If we're attacked, we'll defend ourselves. They'd have an easy time of dealing with four isolated men but four men together are a troop. We'll arm our four lackeys with pistols and muskets. If they send an army against us, we'll give battle – and the survivor, as d'Artagnan says, will carry the letter."

"Well said!" cried Aramis. "You don't speak often, Athos but when you do, you're like Saint John of the Golden Mouth. I endorse Athos's plan. What about you, Porthos?"

"Me too," said Porthos, "if it suits d'Artagnan. He's the letter-bearer, so naturally he's the general of this campaign. What he says, goes."

"Very well," said d'Artagnan, "I decide that we'll adopt Athos's plan and leave in one half-hour."

"Agreed!" chorused the three musketeers. And each one reached his hand into the purse, took 75 *pistoles*, and went off to prepare to depart at the appointed time.

## 020 The Journey

At two o'clock in the morning, the four adventurers left Paris by Porte Saint-Denis. As long as it was night they were subdued and remained silent; despite themselves, they were oppressed by the darkness, and saw ambushes everywhere. With the first light of day their tongues loosened, and their spirits rose with the sun. It was like the eve of battle: their hearts beat, their eyes laughed, and they felt the life they might be about to lose was, after all, a good thing. Their cavalcade looked truly formidable. The musketeers' black horses, and their warlike demeanour as they rode with the regular march of a cavalry squadron, would have betrayed them as gentleman soldiers no matter how they were disguised. Their lackeys followed, armed to the teeth. All went well until Chantilly that they reached at about eight in the morning. It was time for breakfast. They stopped at an inn with a sign that showed Saint Martin giving half his cloak to a pauper that seemed to promise a generous hospitality. They ordered the lackeys to unsaddle the horses but to hold themselves ready to depart immediately. They entered the common room and sat at one of the long tables. A gentleman, who'd just arrived by the route from Dammartin, was sitting at the same table, eating his breakfast. He said something about the weather, and the travellers replied in kind; he drank their health, and the four friends returned the compliment. Mousqueton came in to announce that the horses were ready, and they were just rising from the table when the stranger proposed to Porthos to drink the health of the cardinal. Porthos replied, "I ask nothing better if you'll join me in drinking the health of the king."

The stranger leaped up from his bench, crying, "I recognise no king but His Eminence!"

"You must be drunk," said Porthos.

"I may be drunk," said the stranger, drawing his sword, "but you'll answer for that!"

"This is folly," said Athos, "but it can't be helped now. Kill the man and rejoin us as quickly as you can."

The three remounted their horses and departed at a good clip, as Porthos was promising to perforate his adversary with every thrust known to swordplay. "One down!" said Athos after five hundred paces.

"But of all of us, why did that man pick Porthos to quarrel with?" asked Aramis.

"Porthos talks the loudest, so he took him for our leader," said d'Artagnan.

"I always said this Gascon cadet was a well of wisdom," said Athos.

And the travellers continued on their way. They paused at Beauvais to breathe their horses and to wait for Porthos. He still hadn't arrived after two hours, and there was no news of him, so they reluctantly resumed their journey. A league beyond Beauvais, at a place where the road narrowed between two embankments, they met eight or ten men with shovels working on the roadbed, filling

the ruts with mud. They were flinging it around rather freely, and Aramis, afraid they'd soil his boots, told them off rather sharply. Athos tried to restrain him but it was too late. The workers began to jeer and heckle the travellers. They were so insolent they even irritated the usually cool-headed Athos, who rode his horse against the loudest of the gang. At this, the men retreated to a brushy ditch, and then reappeared, each with a loaded musket. They fired a volley and the cavalcade was literally riddled with musket-balls. Aramis took a ball through his shoulder, and Mousqueton another ball where the buttocks meet the thigh. Only Mousqueton fell from his horse – not because he was severely wounded but because, since he couldn't see the wound, he thought he was more dangerously hurt than he really was. "It's an ambush!" d'Artagnan shouted. "Don't waste time shooting back! Ride on!"

Aramis, though wounded, gripped the mane of his horse that carried him on with the others. After a few moments Mousqueton's horse rejoined them and galloped along at their side. "We can use that horse as a spare," said Athos.

"I'd rather have a hat," said d'Artagnan. "Mine was knocked off by a musket-ball. My faith, it's a good thing I wasn't carrying the letter in it."

"But, damn it all, they'll kill poor Porthos when he passes through," Aramis said through teeth gritted with pain.

"If Porthos were on his legs, he'd have rejoined us by now," said Athos. "My guess is that, once they reached the duelling-ground, that drunkard was completely sober."

They galloped on for two more hours, though their horses were so worn out they seemed on the verge of refusing their service. The travellers had detoured onto a side road, hoping that way to avoid trouble but at Crèvecœur Aramis declared he could go no farther. In fact, it had taken all the courage he concealed beneath his elegant form and polite manners to carry him that far. He was growing paler by the moment, and soon they had to support him on his horse. They put him down at the door of a cabaret and left Bazin with him, since if they got into a skirmish Aramis's valet was really more embarrassing than useful. D'Artagnan and Athos then resumed their way, in hopes of sleeping that night in Amiens. "*Morbleu!*" said Athos, as they left Crèvecœur. "Reduced to two masters, plus Grimaud and Planchet. Well, I won't fall for their monkey tricks. I won't open my mouth, or draw my sword between here and Calais. I swear..."

"Don't waste your breath," said d'Artagnan. "Let's gallop, if our horses will consent to it."

They dug their spurs into their mounts' flanks and the horses recovered some of their former speed. They arrived in Amiens at midnight, and stopped at the Inn of the Golden Lily. The host had the air of the most honest man in the world, and received the travellers with candlestick in one hand and nightcap in the other. He wanted to give a charming chamber to each of them but unfortunately these two charming chambers were on opposite sides of the inn, so d'Artagnan and Athos refused them. The host protested that he had no other rooms worthy of Their Excellencies but the travellers declared they would sleep in the common room, on mattresses thrown on the floor. The host insisted but the travellers held firm, and in the end he did as they asked. They had just laid out their beds and barricaded their door from the inside when someone tapped on the shutter of the courtyard window. They asked who was there, recognised the voices of Planchet and Grimaud, and opened up. "Grimaud can guard the horses," said Planchet, "and if you like, Gentlemen, I'll sleep across your doorway. That way you can be sure no one will come near you."

"And what will you sleep on?" asked d'Artagnan.

"I have my bed right here," said Planchet, displaying an armful of straw.

"You know, I think you're right," said d'Artagnan. "I don't trust our host's face – he's entirely too polite."

"Neither do I," said Athos.

Planchet came in through the window and installed himself across the doorway. Grimaud said that by five in the morning he would have their horses ready, then went and shut himself inside the stable. The night was tranquil until about two in the morning, when someone tried to open the door to their room. But Planchet awoke and called out, "Who goes there?" Whoever it was said he was mistaken and went away. At four in the morning, there was a great racket in the stables. Grimaud had tried to awaken the stable boys but the stable boys took offence and beat him up. When d'Artagnan opened the window they saw the poor fellow lying unconscious in the courtyard, head split open by a blow from a pitchfork handle. Planchet went down into the yard to saddle their mounts but the horses were still exhausted. Mousqueton's horse had travelled for five or six hours the night before without a rider, and might have been able to continue but by some incredible error a veterinary surgeon, who'd come to bleed one of the host's horses, had bled Mousqueton's instead. This was beginning to be annoying. Such a chain of accidents might possibly be the result of chance but they might just as likely be the product of a plot. D'Artagnan and Athos went out to find breakfast elsewhere, while Planchet went to see if there might be three horses for sale in the neighbourhood. At the door of the inn stood two fine horses, fully equipped for travel, fresh and vigorous. *Just the thing!*

Planchet asked where he could find their masters; he was told they had spent the night in the inn, and were preparing to settle their accounts with the host. Athos went down to pay their own bill, while d'Artagnan and Planchet waited at the street gate. Athos was directed toward a lower chamber in the back that was strange but it didn't occur to him to be suspicious. He found the room indicated and drew two *pistoles* from his pouch to settle the bill. The host was alone, seated behind his desk that had one drawer half-open. He took the coins that Athos gave him and turned them over and over in his hands. "These are counterfeit!" he suddenly cried. "I'll have you and your friend arrested as coiners!"

"You rogue!" Athos snarled, advancing toward him. "I'll cut your ears off!" But the host pulled two pistols from the half-open drawer and pointed them at Athos, meanwhile calling for help. Athos drew his own pistols but at the same moment four men, armed to the teeth, came in through the doors on either side of the room and jumped him. "I'm taken!" shouted Athos, at the top of his lungs. "Get out, d'Artagnan! Ride on! Ride on!"

Two pistol shots rang out from below. D'Artagnan and Planchet didn't need to be told twice: they untied the two horses that were waiting at the door, jumped into the saddles, buried their spurs in the horses' sides, and left at a gallop. "You were closer. Could you see what happened to Athos?" d'Artagnan asked Planchet as they rode.

"It was Athos who fired," said Planchet. "I could see through the door. One enemy dropped at each shot, and then he drew steel on the others."

"Brave Athos!" murmured d'Artagnan. "And to think we had to abandon him! The same fate may await us at the next bend of the road. Forward, Planchet, forward! You're a brave man."

"I told you, Sir," replied Planchet, "in action, we Picards show what we're made of. Besides, I'm in my own country here, and that puts me on my mettle."

Spurring on, they arrived at Saint-Omer without stopping once. They had to rest their mounts but to prevent any more accidents from happening, they held their horses' bridles in one hand while with the other they had a quick bite to eat from a street vendor. Then they departed again. A hundred paces from the gates of Calais, d'Artagnan's horse fell beneath him. It wasn't going to get up again; blood ran from its nose and eyes. They still had Planchet's horse but now that it had stopped, it refused to go any farther. Fortunately, they were just outside the city gates. They left their ailing mounts on the high road, passed through the gates, and ran toward the port. At the wharf, Planchet spotted a gentleman with his lackey who had arrived just ahead of them and pointed him out to his master. They eagerly approached this gentleman. His boots were covered with dust and he appeared to be in a great rush. They heard him inquire if he could immediately pass over to England. "Nothing would be easier," replied the captain of a ship ready to set sail, "except that this morning an order arrived that no one may leave the port without the express permission of the cardinal."

"I have that permission," said the gentleman, taking a paper from his pocket. "Here it is."

"Have it countersigned by the Governor of the Port," said the captain, "and I'm your man."

"Where can I find the governor?"

"At his estate."

"And where is his estate?"

"A quarter of a league from the city. Look, you can see it from here – at the foot of that little hill, the house with the slate roof."

"Excellent," said the gentleman.

And followed by his lackey, he headed toward the governor's estate. D'Artagnan and Planchet followed the gentleman at five hundred paces. Once they were out of the city, d'Artagnan picked up his pace and caught up with the gentleman as he was entering a little wood. "Sir," d'Artagnan said to him, "you appear to be in a great hurry."

"I couldn't be more so, Sir."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said d'Artagnan, "because I'm also in a great hurry, and I must beg you to do me a favour."

"What?"

"To let me go ahead of you."

"Impossible," said the gentleman. "I've gone sixty leagues in forty-four hours, and by noon tomorrow I must be in London."

"I've travelled the same road in forty hours, and must be in London tomorrow by ten in the morning."

"That's too bad, Sir – for I got here first, and won't go second."

"It *is* too bad, Sir, for I got here second, and I *will* go first."

"In the name of the king!" said the gentleman.

"In the name of myself!" said d'Artagnan.

"Look, it seems to me this is a pretty pointless quarrel," said the gentleman.

*"For God's sake! Not at all!"*

"What is it that you want?"

"You really want to know?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I want that order you're carrying, since I don't have one and you do."

"You must be joking."

"I never joke."

"Let me pass!"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"You know, young man, I believe I will blow your brains out. Lubin! My pistols!"

D'Artagnan said, "You take the lackey, Planchet, and I'll take the master."

Planchet, emboldened by his previous success, sprang upon Lubin. Strong and vigorous, he quickly pinned Lubin to the ground and put his knee on his chest. "Go about your business, Sir," said Planchet. "Mine is under control."

The gentleman, angered, drew his sword and pounced on d'Artagnan – but he got more than he'd bargained for. In three seconds d'Artagnan had wounded him three times, shouting, "One for Athos – one for Porthos – one for Aramis!"

At the third blow, the gentleman collapsed in a heap. D'Artagnan thought he was dead, or at least senseless, and bent over him to take the vital order. But as he reached out, the wounded man raised his sword and stabbed him in the chest, gasping, "And one for you!"

"And one for me – the best for last!" cried d'Artagnan furiously, nailing the man to the ground with a fourth thrust through the body.

This time, the gentleman closed his eyes and passed out. D'Artagnan searched his pockets, found the order for passage, and took it. It was in the name of the Count of Wardes.

He spared a final glance at the handsome young man, who was barely twenty-five, and whom he was leaving there, lying senseless and perhaps dead. He sighed for that strange destiny that leads men to destroy each other in the interests of people who are strangers to them, and who often don't even know they exist. He was soon drawn from these reflections by Lubin, who began shouting for help at the top of his lungs. Planchet took him by the throat and squeezed as hard as he could. "Sir," he said, "as long as I hold him like this he can't shout but as soon as I let him go he'll start up again. I can tell he's a Norman, and these Normans are stubborn."

In fact, gripped though he was, Lubin was still trying to make as much noise as he could. "Hold on," said d'Artagnan.

And taking out his handkerchief, he gagged him. "Now let's tie him to a tree," said Planchet.

This completed, they dragged the Count of Wardes over and laid him next to his servant. Night was beginning to fall, and since the gagged man and the wounded man were some yards into the woods, it seemed likely they would remain there until the next day. "And now," said d'Artagnan, "to the governor's house!"

"But aren't you wounded?" said Planchet.

"It's nothing. Let's deal with the most urgent business first, and we'll attend to my wound later. Anyway, I don't think it's very serious."

And they set out at a trot for the estate of the worthy bureaucrat. D'Artagnan had himself announced as the Count of Wardes, and was introduced to the governor's study. "You have an order signed by the cardinal?" said the governor.

"Yes, Sir," replied d'Artagnan. "Here it is."

"Ahem. Yes, this appears to be in order, and drawn up properly," said the governor.  
"But of course," replied d'Artagnan. "After all, I'm one of the cardinal's *loyal*."  
"It appears His Eminence wants to prevent someone from reaching England."  
"Yes – a certain d'Artagnan, a Béarnaise gentleman who left Paris with three of his friends with the intention of getting to London."  
"Do you know him personally?" asked the governor.  
"Intimately so."  
"Describe him for me."  
"Nothing could be easier."  
And d'Artagnan gave, point by point, a detailed description of the Count of Wardes. "Is anyone with him?"  
"Yes, a Norman lackey called Lubin."  
"We'll watch for them, and if we can lay our hands on them, we'll send them back to His Eminence in Paris under heavy escort."  
"Do that, Sir Governor, and you'll have the cardinal's personal thanks," said d'Artagnan.  
"Will you see him on your return, Sir Count?"  
"Of course."  
"Tell him for me, if you will, that I'm his loyal servant."  
"Count on it."

Delighted with this assurance, the governor countersigned the passage order and returned it. D'Artagnan lost no more time in useless compliments – he just thanked the governor, bowed, and departed. Outside, he and Planchet immediately set out for Calais, taking a detour around the wood and entering the city by a different gate. The ship was ready to sail, and the captain was waiting on the wharf. "Well?" he said as d'Artagnan came up to him.  
"Here's my pass, duly countersigned," said d'Artagnan.  
"What happened to the other gentleman?"  
"He can't go with us today," said d'Artagnan, "but I'll pay you for his passage as well."  
"In that case, let's go," said the captain.  
"As soon as you can," said d'Artagnan, leaping aboard. He was followed by Planchet, and five minutes later they were on their way out of the harbour. None too soon: they were barely half a league out when they saw a gun flash on the Calais wall, followed by a boom. It was the cannon that announced the closing of the port. D'Artagnan now had time to take a look at his wound. Fortunately, as he'd thought, it wasn't a bad one: the point of the sword had hit a rib and slid along the bone. Furthermore, his shirt had stuck to the wound and held it closed, so he hadn't lost much blood. But d'Artagnan was exhausted; they laid a mattress on the deck for him and he threw himself onto it and immediately fell fast asleep. Next morning at daybreak they found themselves still three or four leagues from the English coast. The breeze had been light all night and they'd made little headway. At 10 o'clock the ship finally dropped anchor in the port of Dover; at half past ten the ship's boat put them ashore and d'Artagnan set foot on English soil, saying, "I'm here at last!"  
But they still had to get to London. In England the post was well-served by a good post-horse service; d'Artagnan and Planchet rented horses and rode, led by a postilion, who went ahead to show them the way. In a few hours they reached the capital. D'Artagnan knew nothing of London and didn't speak a word of English but he wrote the name of Buckingham on a paper, and everyone he showed it to direct him towards the duke's town-house. At Buckingham's mansion they learned that the duke was hunting at Windsor with the king. D'Artagnan asked for the duke's confidential valet, who spoke fluent French, having accompanied him on all his travels. D'Artagnan told him he'd come from Paris on a matter of life and death and had to speak with his master immediately. Patrick, the confidential valet, was convinced by d'Artagnan's earnestness. He had two horses saddled, and went himself as guide to the young cadet. As for Planchet, he'd gotten off his horse as stiff as a stick, and stayed behind. The poor fellow was at the end of his strength but d'Artagnan seemed to be made of iron. They arrived at the castle and inquired after the duke. The king and Buckingham were hawking in the marshes, two or three leagues away. Riding hard, they reached there in twenty minutes, and Patrick soon heard the voice of his master, calling his falcon. "Whom shall I announce to milord duke?" asked Patrick.  
"The young man who sought a quarrel with him one evening on the Pont Neuf, in front of La Samaritaine."

"That's an unusual introduction!"  
"You'll see that it's better than any other."  
Patrick galloped up to the duke and announced that a messenger awaited him, describing him in the terms d'Artagnan had given him. Buckingham immediately realised that the messenger must be d'Artagnan. Suspecting that something was going on in France that he ought to know about, he only asked where this messenger was, and immediately set out toward him. As he approached, he recognised the uniform of the French Guards, put his horse into a gallop and rode straight up to d'Artagnan. Patrick discreetly held back behind him. "Surely nothing bad has happened to the queen?" cried Buckingham.  
And all his mind and all his heart were in the question. "I don't think so," said d'Artagnan, "but I believe she is in some great danger from which only Your Grace can save her."  
"Me?" cried Buckingham. "But what? I'd do anything for her. Speak! Speak!"  
"Read this letter, Milord," said d'Artagnan.  
"This letter! Who is this letter from?"  
"From Her Majesty, or so I believe."  
"From Her Majesty!" said Buckingham, turning so pale that d'Artagnan thought he might faint. He took the letter and broke the seal. "Why is it ripped here?" he said, showing d'Artagnan a place where the letter was pierced through.  
"I hadn't noticed that!" said d'Artagnan. "That must have happened when the Count of Wardes stabbed me in the chest."  
"You're wounded?" asked Buckingham, opening the letter.  
"It's nothing! A scratch!" said d'Artagnan.  
The duke scanned the letter. "What's this? Heavens above! Patrick, stay here, or rather, join the king wherever he is. Tender His Majesty my humblest excuses but tell him an affair of the highest importance calls me to London. Come, Sir, come!" And both set off at a gallop on the road to the capital.

## 021 The Countess Winter

As they galloped toward London, the duke fired questions at d'Artagnan to try to get a clearer picture of the queen's situation. He asked d'Artagnan to tell him only what he knew, not what he thought might have happened. Combining what he heard from the young man with his own information, he was able to form a pretty fair idea of the position, the seriousness of which had been conveyed by the queen's letter, so short but so explicit. What astonished him the most was that the cardinal, who had so much at stake in making sure that d'Artagnan never set foot in England, had nonetheless failed to stop him en route. When the duke remarked on this, d'Artagnan told him of the precautions they'd taken, and how, thanks to the devotion of his three friends, now left scattered and bloody on the road, he'd arrived having suffered no more than the single sword-thrust that had pierced the queen's letter (and for which he'd repaid of Wardes in such terrible coin). D'Artagnan told his story simply and modestly, while the duke listened in astonishment, as if unable to believe that so much prudence, courage, and devotion could be wrapped up in a person apparently no more than twenty years old. The horses went like the wind, and in what seemed like only a few minutes they found themselves in London. D'Artagnan had thought that on arriving in the city the duke would slacken his pace but no: he raced through the streets at full speed, with little regard for those unlucky enough to find themselves in his path. There were two or three minor collisions but Buckingham didn't even turn his head to see what had become of those he'd knocked over. D'Artagnan followed him amid cries that sounded a lot like curses. On entering the courtyard of his town house, Buckingham leaped down from his horse and, paying no more attention to it, threw the bridle on its neck and sprang up the steps to the door. D'Artagnan followed but with a little more concern for his mount, a noble creature whose virtues he appreciated. As he went in, he was consoled by seeing three or four grooms run from the stables to take charge of their horses. The duke marched so rapidly through his mansion that d'Artagnan could hardly keep up with him. They passed through a number of chambers more elegant than anything the grandest nobles of France could conceive of and arrived at last in a bedchamber that was a miracle of taste and splendour. In the alcove of this chamber they found a door hidden behind a tapestry that the duke opened with a small golden key that hung from his neck by a chain of the same metal. D'Artagnan discreetly held back but seeing the young man's hesitation, Buckingham said, "Come with me. And if you have the good fortune to be admitted to Her Majesty's presence, tell her what you've seen here."  
Encouraged, d'Artagnan followed the duke through the door, who shut it behind them. They found themselves in a small chapel hung with Persian silk tapestries and gold brocade, brightly lit by a vast number of candles. Above a sort of altar, and beneath a canopy of blue velour trimmed with white and red plumes, was a full-length portrait of Anne of Austria, so lifelike that d'Artagnan gasped in surprise: one could almost believe the queen was present and about to speak. Upon the altar, beneath the portrait, was the coffer that contained the diamond studs. The duke approached the altar, knelt like a priest before the cross and opened the coffer. "Look," he said, drawing forth a deep blue neck-ribbon sparkling with diamonds. "Here are those precious studs. I'd sworn an oath to be buried in them. But the queen giveth, and the queen taketh away. Her will be done like that of a god in everything."  
Then, one by one, he began to kiss the glittering diamonds he was about to part with. Suddenly he gave a terrible cry. "What is it?" d'Artagnan asked anxiously. "What is it, Milord?"  
"All is lost!" Buckingham cried, turning pale as death. "There are only ten! Two of the studs are missing!"  
"Could you have lost them, Milord, or do you think they were stolen?"  
"Stolen!" said the Duke. "And the cardinal is behind it. Here, look: the ribbons that held them have been cut with scissors."  
"If Milord has an idea who stole them, they may still be in that person's hands."  
"Wait; let me think," said the duke. "The only time I wore the studs was at a royal ball at Windsor Castle, about eight days ago. I'd quarrelled with Countess Winter but she made up with me at that ball. I was surprised at how affectionate she was but it was nothing more than a jealous woman's revenge! I haven't seen her since that night. I'm convinced that woman is an agent of the cardinal."  
"He must have agents all over the world!" said d'Artagnan.  
"Oh, he does," said Buckingham, grinding his teeth in anger. "He's a terrible enemy! Tell me, when is this ball in Paris supposed to take place?"  
"On Monday next."  
"Monday next! We still have five days – more time than we need. Patrick!" the duke shouted, opening the door of his secret chapel. "Patrick!" The confidential valet appeared. "My jeweller and my secretary," the duke said. The valet left with a speed that showed he was accustomed to obey blindly and without question. Though the jeweller had been mentioned first, the secretary arrived more quickly, since he resided in the house. He found Buckingham seated before a table in his bedchamber, writing orders in his own hand. "Mister Jackson," the duke said, "go see the Lord Chancellor and tell him that I charge him with the execution of these orders. I would like them promulgated immediately."  
Jackson glanced over the memo. "But, Milord," he said, "If the Lord Chancellor questions me as to Your Grace's reasons for taking such an extraordinary measure, what shall I tell him?"  
"That such is my good pleasure, and that I account for my orders to no one."  
"Is that what he should tell His Majesty," said the secretary, smiling, "if by chance His Majesty is curious to know exactly why no vessel may leave any port in Great Britain?"  
"You're right," replied Buckingham. "If the king asks, he should say that I've decided on war, and this measure is my first act of hostility against France."  
The secretary bowed and retired. "We're covered on that side," said Buckingham, turning toward d'Artagnan. "If the studs have not yet left for France, they won't arrive there until after you do."  
"How is that?"  
"I've just placed an embargo on all ships currently in His Majesty's ports. Without specific permission, none of them can raise anchor." Now it was d'Artagnan's turn to be astonished. Here was a man so elevated by the confidence of his king that he could exercise virtually unlimited power in pursuit of his personal love affairs. Buckingham saw, by the expression on the young man's face, what was passing in his mind, and smiled. "Yes," he said, "Anne of Austria is my true queen. On a word from her, I'd betray my country, king, and even God. She asked me not to send the Protestants of La Rochelle the help I'd promised them, and I've withheld it. I broke my word but what does that matter? I obeyed her desire, and haven't I been richly paid for my obedience? It's thanks to that obedience that she sent me her portrait." D'Artagnan was amazed by what fragile and unknown threads the destinies of people and the lives of men are sometimes suspended. He was still deep in these reflections



when the goldsmith entered. He was an Irishman, one of the most able of his art, and he openly boasted that he earned a hundred thousand *livres* per year from the Duke of Buckingham's commissions. "Mister O'Reilly," said the duke, leading him to the chapel, "look at these diamond studs and tell me what they're worth apiece." The goldsmith glanced at their elegant settings, calculated together what the diamonds were worth, and said without hesitation, "Fifteen hundred *pistoles* each, Milord." "How many days would it take to make two studs like these others? You see that two of them are missing."

"Eight days, Milord."

"I'll pay you three thousand *pistoles* apiece if I can have them the day after tomorrow."

"Done, Milord!"

"You're a gem yourself, O'Reilly – but there's more. This work cannot be entrusted to anyone else and must be completed here in my mansion."

"Impossible, Milord. I'm the only one who can cut them so no one can tell the difference between the new and the old."

"Then, my dear Mister O'Reilly, you are my prisoner. You couldn't leave my house now if you wanted to – so make the best of it. Name me the assistants you need, and what tools they should bring."

The goldsmith knew the duke, and knew it was useless to object, so he made up his mind to comply. "Am I permitted to inform my wife?" he asked.

"You may even see her, my dear Mister O'Reilly. Believe me, your captivity will be a mild one. And, since every inconvenience should have its compensation here over and above the price of the studs is an order for a thousand *pistoles* to help you forget the trouble I put you to." D'Artagnan could not get over his surprise at this minister who so openhandedly juggled men and millions. As for the goldsmith, he wrote to his wife, sending her the order for a thousand *pistoles*, requesting that in return she send him his most able apprentice, the necessary tools, and an assortment of diamonds that he gave the names and weights. Buckingham led the goldsmith to the chamber he was to use that was transformed into a workshop inside of half an hour. A guard was placed at each door and ordered to admit no one, with the exception of the confidential valet, Patrick. Needless to say, O'Reilly and his assistant were forbidden to leave for any reason. This matter arranged, the duke returned to d'Artagnan. "Now, my young friend, all England is ours. What would you like? What is your desire?"

"A bed," replied d'Artagnan. "Right now, that's what I need most."

Buckingham gave d'Artagnan a chamber adjacent to his own. He wanted to have the young man near at hand – not from mistrust but so he could have someone to talk to constantly about the queen. One hour later, it was announced from London that no ship could leave the ports of England for France, not even the packet-boat with the international mail. To everyone, this was tantamount to a declaration of war between the two realms. By eleven the following morning the two diamond studs were finished: such exact imitations, so perfectly alike, that Buckingham couldn't tell the new ones from the old, and even experts in such matters would have done no better. He immediately called d'Artagnan. "Here are the diamond studs you came for," he said, "and you are my witness that I've done everything in human power that could be done."

"Milord, you can be sure I'll report what I've seen. But is Your Grace giving me the studs without their box?"

"The box would just be an encumbrance. Besides, the box is precious to me – it's all I have left. Tell her I've kept it."

"I'll repeat your message word for word, Milord."

"And now," said Buckingham, looking earnestly at the young man, "how can I ever repay what I owe you?"

D'Artagnan coloured up to his eyes. He saw that the duke was looking for a way to give him something, and the idea that his blood, and that of his companions, was to be paid for in English gold was strangely repugnant to him. "Let's understand each other, Milord," said d'Artagnan, "and let's be clear up front, to avoid any mistake. I'm in the service of the King and Queen of France, and a member of the French Guards in the company of Sir Des Essarts, who like Sir Tréville is particularly attached to Their Majesties. Everything I've done has been done solely for the queen and not for Your Grace. Moreover, I might not have done any of it except to please someone who is my lady, as the queen is yours."

"Ah!" The duke smiled. "I think I know this other person. She's..."

"Milord, I have not named her," the young man interrupted sharply.

"Quite so," said the duke. "So it's to this other person whom I must be grateful for your devotion."

"As you say, Milord. In fact, right now, with war probable, I confess I see in Your Grace nothing but an Englishman – in other words, an enemy, whom I'd much rather encounter on the battlefield than in the park at Windsor or the corridors of the Louvre. Not that that will prevent me from completing my mission – even dying to accomplish it, if necessary. But I repeat to Your Grace, you owe me nothing more at this second meeting in London than you did at our first in Paris."

Buckingham nodded. "Here we say, 'proud as a Scotsman.'"

"As we say, 'proud as a Gascon,'" replied d'Artagnan. "The Gascons are the Scots of France."

D'Artagnan bowed to the duke and prepared to take his leave. "So, you're going away, just like that?" said the duke. "To where? And how?"

"Well ... I must admit, those are good questions," said d'Artagnan. "I'd forgotten that England is an island, and you are its king."

"Damn me! These Frenchmen haven't a clue! ... Go to the docks, ask for the brig *Sund* and give this letter to the captain. He'll carry you to a little port in France where no one would expect you, a place ordinarily used only by fishing boats."

"What is this port called?"

"Saint-Valery. But listen: when you arrive there, you'll find a wretched little inn, with no name and no sign – a mere angler's shack. There's only one, so you can't miss it."

"What then?"

"Ask for the host and say to him in British English: 'Forward!'"

"Meaning?"

"The French for it is '*en avant*.' It's the password. He'll give you a horse, saddled and ready to go, and indicate what route you should follow. This will take you to another relay: you'll find four along your route. Each horse is fully equipped for a campaign. If you like, give your address in Paris at each of these relays, and the four horses will follow you there later. You already know two like them – we rode them to London – and you appeared to appreciate them like a connoisseur. Take my word for it, the others are no worse." Buckingham smiled. "No matter how proud you are, you can't refuse to accept one of them, and accept the other three on the behalf of your companions. Anyway, you can use them against us in the war. As you French say, the end justifies the means, what?"

"Yes, Milord – and I accept them," said d'Artagnan. "And if it please God, we'll make good use of your gifts."

"Excellent! And now, young man, your hand. We may meet soon on the battlefield – but in the meantime, I hope we'll part good friends."

"Yes, Milord – in hopes of soon becoming enemies."

"Don't worry, that I can promise you."

"I'm counting on your word, Milord." D'Artagnan bowed to the duke and took his leave, heading without delay for the port. Opposite the Tower of London he found the designated ship and gave his letter to the captain. It was countersigned by the Governor of the Port and they prepared for immediate departure. Fifty ships were at the wharfs, waiting permission to leave. While passing alongside one of them, d'Artagnan thought he recognised the woman of Meung, the one the stranger had called "Milady," and whom d'Artagnan had thought so beautiful. But the current was strong and the wind was favourable – his vessel passed so quickly that he saw her for only an instant. Around nine o'clock the next morning he disembarked at Saint-Valery. D'Artagnan immediately went looking for the tiny inn that he found by following the sound of loud voices and singing. The sailors were celebrating the coming of war between England and France. D'Artagnan pushed his way through the throng, found the host, and said, "Forward!" The host made a sign for d'Artagnan to follow him, left by a door that gave onto the yard, and conducted him to a stable, where a horse, already saddled, awaited him. The host asked if he needed anything else. "I need to know what route I should follow," said d'Artagnan.

"Go from here to Blangy and from Blangy to Neufchâteau. At Neufchâteau, find the Golden Harrow Inn, give the password to the host, and like here, you'll find a saddled horse ready to go."

"What do I owe you?" asked d'Artagnan.

"It's all paid for," said the host, "and generously too. Now go, and God guide you!"

"Amen!" said the young man, and set off at a gallop.

Four hours later he was at Neufchâteau. He followed his instructions exactly, and as at Saint-Valery, he found a mount saddled and waiting. He was about to transfer the pistols from the saddle of the old horse to the saddle of the new when he found that its holsters were already furnished with similar weapons. "Your address in Paris?" asked the host.

"Hôtel des Gardes, des Essarts's company."

"Fine," said the man.

"What route should I take?"

"By way of Rouen but pass the city on your right, then stop at the little village of Ecouis. There's an inn there called the French Crown. Don't judge it by appearances; you'll find a horse in its stables that's as good as this one."

"Same password?"

"Exactly."

"Then goodbye, master host!"

"*Have a good journey*, Sir. Do you need anything?" D'Artagnan shook his head in reply, and departed at full speed. At Ecouis, the scene was repeated: he found a host just as genial and a horse just as fresh. As before, he gave the man his address in Paris and left at speed for Pontoise. At Pontoise he changed horses for the final time and at nine o'clock galloped into the courtyard of the Hôtel of Tréville. He'd ridden almost sixty leagues in twelve hours. Sir Tréville received him as if he'd just seen him that morning, except that he shook the young man's hand even more warmly than usual. With a smile, he announced that des Essarts's company was on guard duty at the Louvre – and he thought d'Artagnan might want to report at once to his post.

022

The Ballet of *La Merlaison*

The next day, the only topic of conversation in Paris was the ball the city aldermen were to give that night to the king and queen where Their Majesties were to dance the king's favourite ballet, *La Merlaison*. For over a week an army of labourers had been working at the Hôtel of Ville to prepare for this important event. The city carpenter had overseen the erection of multi-tiered scaffolds to provide seats for the lady guests; the municipal grocer had furnished the halls with two hundred flambeaux of white wax, an unheard-of luxury at the time; and twenty violinists had been engaged, at double the usual rate, on condition that they play all night. At ten in the morning, the Sieur of La Coste, ensign in the King's Guards, followed by two exempts and a squad of archers, came to demand of Clément, the city registrar, all the keys of the doors, chambers, and offices of the Hôtel of Ville. The keys were instantly rendered up to him, each with its label of location, and from that moment La Coste commanded all the doors and corridors. Duhallier, Captain of the City Guards, came in his turn at eleven o'clock, bringing with him fifty archers who were immediately assigned to guard duty at all the various doors of the hôtel. At three o'clock came the rest of Duhallier's guards, a company of Swiss, and des Essarts's company of the Gardes Françaises. At six in the evening the guests began to arrive. As they entered, they were ushered to their assigned places on the tiered scaffolds in the great hall. At nine o'clock the wife of the First President of Parliament arrived. After the queen, she was the most important lady invited to the fête, so she was received personally by the aldermen and placed in a loge opposite to that designated for Her Majesty. At ten o'clock a collation of sweets and preserves was laid out for the king in a small side chamber, served on the city's formal silver service that was guarded by four archers. At midnight shouting and cheering could be heard from outside. The king was approaching along the streets from the Louvre to the Hôtel of Ville that were lit for the occasion by coloured lanterns. At the sound of the cheers, the Paris Aldermen, attired in their finest robes and preceded by six sergeants holding flambeaux, went to welcome the king. They met him on the steps of the hôtel: the merchants' provost offered the official welcome, to which His Majesty replied with an apology for coming so late, laying the blame on Your Eminence, who had detained him until eleven o'clock discussing affairs of State. His Majesty, in full ceremonial dress, was accompanied by His Royal Highness Sir, by the Count of Soissons; the Grand Prior, the Duke of Longueville, the Duke d'Elbeuf, the Count d'Harcourt, and the Count of La Roche-Guyon; by Sir Liancourt, Sir Baradas, the Count of Cramail, and the Knight of Souveray. Everyone noticed that the king seemed melancholy and preoccupied. Dressing rooms had been prepared for the king and Sir, as well as the queen and Madam *President*, each containing costumes for a masque. The gentlemen and ladies of Their Majesties' suite were to dress, two at a time, in another pair of rooms. Before entering his dressing room, the king asked to have someone notify him the moment the cardinal arrived. Half an hour after the appearance of the king the cheering resumed, heralding the arrival of the queen. The aldermen, preceded by their sergeants, went out to meet their royal guest. As the queen entered the great hall, everyone could see that, like the king, she appeared sad – and moreover, genuinely fatigued. As she entered, the curtain on a small loge drew back and the pale face of the cardinal appeared, above the costume of a Spanish cavalier. His eyes were fixed on those of the queen and a smile of terrible joy passed over his lips – for the queen wasn't wearing her diamond studs. The queen paused briefly to receive the compliments of the city aldermen and to acknowledge

the salutations of their ladies. Suddenly, the king appeared with the cardinal at one of the doors of the hall. The cardinal was speaking to him in a low voice and the king was very pale. The king made his way through the press, unmasked and with the ribbons of his doublet barely tied. He approached the queen and said in a strained voice, “Madam, tell me if you please, why you haven’t worn your diamond studs when you know I particularly wanted you to be seen in them.”

The queen looked about and saw the cardinal behind the king, smiling a diabolical smile. “Sire,” replied the queen, her own voice strained, “I was afraid that in a great crowd like this, something might happen to them.”

“And you’re wrong, Madam! If I gave you such a gift, it was so you would appear in them. You were wrong, I tell you!”

The king’s voice trembled with anger, astonishing everyone within earshot for no one understood what was really going on. “Sire,” said the queen, “they’re in the Louvre, of course. I can send for them, if that accords with Your Majesty’s wishes.”

“Do so, Madam, do so – and as soon as possible. The ballet starts within the hour.”

The queen bowed in submission and followed the ladies who were to conduct her to her dressing room. The king turned on his heel and went to complete his own costume. A wave of dismay and confusion passed through the great hall. Everyone had noticed there was some kind of trouble between the king and the queen but as they’d spoken in low voices everyone nearby had respectfully drawn back, so nobody had heard much of anything. The violins began wailing with all their might but nobody paid any attention to them. The king was the first to leave his dressing room. He wore a most elegant hunting costume, and Sir and the other nobles were dressed to match. This was the costume most becoming to the king, and he truly looked like the first gentleman of his realm. The cardinal approached the king and presented him with a small, exquisite box. The king opened it and found two diamond studs within. “What does this mean?” he asked the cardinal.

“Oh, nothing,” the cardinal replied. “Only, if the queen has her studs that I presume to doubt – count them, Sire. If you find only ten, ask Her Majesty who could have taken the two you see here.”

The king looked at the cardinal as if he wanted to interrogate him but before he could utter a question the room erupted in applause and cries of admiration. If the king looked like the first gentleman of his realm, tonight the queen was beyond doubt the most beautiful woman in France. As with her husband, a hunting costume became her marvellously well: she wore a beaver hat with blue feathers, an overskirt of pearl-grey velvet with diamond clasps, and an underskirt of blue satin embroidered with silver. On her left shoulder glittered the diamond studs, on a broad bow of the same blue as the feathers and underskirt. The king trembled with joy, the cardinal with anger. The queen had her studs – but had she ten, or twelve? At this distance they couldn’t count them. The violins immediately sounded the fanfare that began the ballet. The king advanced toward Madam President, his partner for the dance, and His Royal Highness Sir led out the queen. They took their places and the ballet began. The king was placed opposite the queen, and each time he passed her he peered closely at the studs but was never able to count them all. A cold sweat shone on the cardinal’s brow. The ballet had sixteen movements and lasted an hour. It concluded amid the applause of the entire hall as each lord led his lady to her place. However, the king took advantage of his privileged position to leave his own partner and advance eagerly toward the queen. “I thank you, Madam,” he said to her, “for deferring to my wishes but I think you lack two studs. Allow me to return them to you.”

And he held out the pair of studs the cardinal had given him. “Why, Sire!” cried the young queen, pretending surprise. “You’re giving me two more? Then I’ll have fourteen!”

The king hesitated and then counted. There were twelve studs on Her Majesty’s shoulder. His Majesty called over the cardinal and asked, in a severe tone, “What does this mean, your Eminence?”

“It means, Sire,” Replied the cardinal after the briefest pause, “that I wanted to present these two studs to Her Majesty but didn’t dare to offer them myself, so I adopted this means of doing so.”

“And I’m all the more grateful to Your Eminence,” said Anne of Austria with a smile that proved she wasn’t deceived by this ingenious bit of gallantry, “as I’m certain these two studs cost you more than the other dozen cost His Majesty.”

The queen bowed to the king and cardinal, then walked majestically off toward her dressing room. The attention focused in the first part of this chapter on the high and mighty has diverted the story for an instant from the young man to whom Anne of Austria owed her unprecedented triumph over the cardinal. Abashed, ignored, jostling in the crowd near one of the doors, he watched from afar this scene that made sense to only four persons: the king, the queen, His Eminence, and himself. The queen had just re-entered her dressing room and d’Artagnan was preparing to leave the hall when he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He turned and saw a young woman who made a sign to him to follow her. This woman’s face was concealed by a black velvet domino mask but despite this precaution that was taken more against others than against him, he instantly recognised his usual guide, the lively and clever Madam Bonacieux. They had scarcely seen each other the night before in the apartment of Germain the Swiss, where d’Artagnan had gone to ask for her. She’d been in such a hurry to tell the queen the good news of her messenger’s happy return that they’d barely had time to exchange more than a few words. Now d’Artagnan followed Madam Bonacieux through the crowd, driven by both love and curiosity. He wanted to stop her, take hold of her and look at her, if only for a moment, all the more so as the corridors they traversed became more deserted – but, quick as a bird, she always glided out from between his hands. When he started to speak, she placed her finger on her mouth in a charming but imperative little gesture that reminded him that he was under the command of another, a power that he must blindly obey, without comment or complaint. At last, after a series of turns and detours, Madam Bonacieux opened a door and led the young man into a lightless closet. She repeated the sign for silence. Then she opened slightly a second door hidden behind a tapestry, and a sliver of bright light streamed into the closet. She touched him lightly on the cheek and disappeared back through the door to the corridor. D’Artagnan remained frozen for a moment, asking himself where he was but the ray of light that came in through the half-open door brought with it a warm breath of perfumed air and the conversation of two or three women, in language at once respectful and elegant. The word *Majesty* repeated several times, made it clear to him that he was in a closet adjoining the queen’s dressing room. The young man stood in the shadows and waited. The queen seemed jolly and happy that astonished her women who were used to seeing her nearly always anxious and careworn. The queen attributed her joy to the beauty of the ball and the pleasure she’d taken in dancing the ballet – and as it wasn’t permitted as a ring. Immediately the door closed and d’Artagnan found himself in complete darkness. He put the ring on his finger and again waited; there was evidently more to come. After the reward for his devotion must come the reward for his love. Besides, though the ballet was over, the evening was scarcely begun: supper was to be served at three, and the clock of nearby Saint-Jean had only just struck two-thirty. Little by little the sound of voices diminished in the neighbouring chamber as one by one the occupants departed. Then the corridor door of d’Artagnan’s closet quietly opened and Madam Bonacieux darted in. “You at last!” cried d’Artagnan.

“Silence!” said the young woman, placing her hand on the young man’s lips. “Silence! And go back the way you came.”

“But where and when will I see you again?” d’Artagnan said desperately.

“You’ll find a note in your rooms that will tell you. Now go! Go!” At these words she opened the door to the corridor and pushed d’Artagnan out of the closet. D’Artagnan, docile, obeyed like a child – that proved beyond doubt that he was really in love.

## 023 The Rendezvous

D’Artagnan returned home as fast as his feet could take him, and though it was three in the morning, and he had to traverse some of the nastiest quarters in Paris, trouble passed him by. Everyone knows that God watches over drunkards and lovers. He found the door of his staircase open, ran up the steps, and knocked lightly, in the manner prearranged with Planchet, whom he’d sent home two hours earlier from the Hôtel of Ville, with orders to wait up for him. The lackey came and opened the door. “Has anyone brought a letter for me?” d’Artagnan asked eagerly. “No one has brought a letter, Sir,” replied Planchet, “but one has come on its own.”

“What does that mean, dolt?”

“What it means is that, though I’d had the key to the door in my pocket the whole time I was out, when I came in I found a letter on the green baize table in your bedchamber.”

“And where is this letter?”

“I left it where it was, Sir! It’s not natural for letters to enter people’s houses this way. If the window had been open, even a little, I’d think nothing of it; but no, it was shut tight. Take care, Sir – there’s some sort of sorcery in this.” Despite Planchet’s warning, the young man had already darted into the bedchamber and opened the letter. It was from Madam Bonacieux:

*I owe you a thousand thanks, and I want you to have all of them. This evening, around ten o’clock, be in Saint-Cloud, in front of the pavilion on the corner of Sir d’Estrées’s estate.*

C.B.

Reading this letter, d’Artagnan felt his heart swell and clench in that happy lover’s spasm that torments and caresses. It was the first such note he’d ever received, and his first call to a lover’s tryst. He felt himself at the gates of the earthly paradise of love; his heart was so drunk with joy, he thought it would melt. “You see, Sir?” said Planchet, watching his master’s face go from red to white to red again. “I was right, wasn’t I? A letter that appears like that can only bring bad news.”

“This time you were wrong, Planchet,” said d’Artagnan, “and to prove it, here’s a crown for you to drink my health with.”

“Much obliged for the crown, Sir, and I promise to do as you ask with it – but still, letters that find their own way into closed houses...”

“Fall from heaven, my friend, fall from heaven!”

“You mean, it’s all right?” asked Planchet.

“My dear Planchet, I’m the happiest of men!”

“Then may I take advantage of Sir’s happiness and go to bed?”

“Yes, go!”

“May the blessings of heaven descend upon you, sir. But still, that letter...”

And Planchet retired, shaking his head worriedly, despite d’Artagnan’s generosity. Left alone, d’Artagnan read and reread his letter, then kissed twenty times over the lines that had been traced by the hand of his beautiful mistress. Finally he took himself to bed, where he slept, and dreaming golden dreams. At seven the next morning he rose and called Planchet, who opened the door at the second call, his face still lined with his anxiety of the night before. “Planchet,” said d’Artagnan, “I’m going out, perhaps for all day. You’re at liberty until seven o’clock this evening when you must be prepared to go, with two horses ready.”

“Go!” said Planchet. “So we’re off again to have more holes poked into our hides.”

“Bring your *musketoon* and pistols.”

“Just as I thought!” cried Planchet. “I knew it! It’s that lousy letter!”

“Stop worrying, mallet-head. We’re just going on a pleasant little outing.”

“Right! Like that pretty little trip the other day, when it rained bullets and sprouted steel traps.”

“All right, if you’re really afraid, I’ll go without you,” said d’Artagnan. “I’d rather travel alone than with a chicken-heart.”

“Oh, that’s harsh, Sir!” said Planchet. “I thought you’d seen me in action.”

“Yes but I thought maybe you’d used up all your courage in one episode.”

“Then I’ll show Sir that there’s still some left. But I must beg you not to spend it too quickly, if you want it to last.”

“Do you think you might have a bit available for this evening?”

“I hope so.”

“Good. I’m counting on you.”

“I’ll be ready at the time you said – but I thought Sir had only one horse in the guards’ stables.”

“There may be only one now but by this evening there’ll be four.”

“So, we went on that journey just to get spare horses?”

“Exactly,” said d’Artagnan. He clapped Planchet on the back and left. Sir Bonacieux was standing in his doorway. D’Artagnan had planned to pass the worthy mercer without speaking to him but the man greeted him so warmly that he thought he ought to stop and chat for a moment. Besides, it’s nearly impossible to avoid being a little condescending to a husband whose wife has set a rendezvous with you that evening in Saint-Cloud in front of Sir D’Estrées’s pavilion!

D’Artagnan approached with the friendliest air he could muster. Their talk naturally touched on the poor man’s incarceration. Sir Bonacieux, who didn’t know that d’Artagnan had heard his conversation with the stranger of Meung, related to his young tenant his persecutions at the hands of that monster, Sir Laffemas, whom he called the cardinal’s hatchet man, and went on at length about the Bastille: the locks, the bars, the dungeons, the chains, and the instruments of torture. D’Artagnan listened as if to his best friend. When Bonacieux had finished, he asked, “And Madam Bonacieux, do you know who abducted her? For I recall, it was due to that nasty business that I owe the pleasure of your acquaintance.”

"Ah!" said Bonacieux. "They were careful not to tell me that, and my wife, on her part, has sworn by all that's holy that she has no idea. But you," continued Bonacieux, in a tone of perfect bonhomie, "what became of you for the last few days? I haven't seen you, or any of your friends – and it's not from the streets of Paris, I think, that you collected all the dust I saw Planchet brush from your boots yesterday."

"You're right, my dear Sir Bonacieux; my friends and I took a little trip."

"Did you go far?"

"Lord, no! Only about forty leagues. We went to take Sir Athos to the waters of Forges, and my friends stayed there with him."

"But you came back, didn't you?" said Bonacieux, with a knowing smile. "A handsome fellow like you doesn't take a long leave of absence from his mistress. We were impatiently awaited in Paris, weren't we?"

"My faith!" the young man laughed. "I admit it! I can see there's no hiding anything from you, my dear Sir Bonacieux! Yes, I was awaited, and impatiently, too!"

A shadow passed over Bonacieux's brow but so quickly that it escaped d'Artagnan's notice. "And are we going to be repaid for all our devotion and hard work?" continued the mercer with a slight edge to his voice that d'Artagnan also missed.

"This very evening! It looks like you're right about that, too!" d'Artagnan said, smiling.

"I just wondered if you were going to be coming back late," said Bonacieux.

"Why?" asked d'Artagnan. "Are you planning to sit up for me, my dear host?"

"No, it's just that since my arrest and the robbery from my house, I'm alarmed every time I hear a door open, especially at night. *Dame*, what would you have? I'm no man of the sword, like you!"

"Well, don't be alarmed if I come home at one, two, or even three o'clock in the morning. In fact, I may not come home at all."

This time, Bonacieux turned so pale that d'Artagnan couldn't help but notice it. "What's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing," said Bonacieux, "nothing. It's just that, since my recent troubles, I've been subject to bouts of weakness that come over me all at once. I felt a little faint, that's all. Pay no attention – you've got your hands full being happy."

"It does keep me busy!"

"Just wait till this evening, as you said."

"And the evening will come, by God! But maybe you're just as impatient for it as I am – maybe this evening Madam Bonacieux will visit the conjugal abode!"

"Madam Bonacieux is not free this evening," her husband said grimly. "She is detained at the Louvre by her duties."

"Too bad for you, my dear host! When I'm happy, I want everyone to be happy but I guess that's just not possible."

And the young man went on his way, laughing at his little joke that he thought only he could understand. "Laugh while you can," said Bonacieux ominously.

But d'Artagnan was too far away to hear him, and even if he had in his current state of mind he wouldn't have paid any attention. D'Artagnan made his way toward the hôtel of Sir Tréville. His visit on the previous evening, he recalled, had been too brief to give the captain a proper explanation. He found Sir Tréville as cheerful as he'd ever seen him. The king and the queen had been charming to him at the ball, though the cardinal had been rather peevish and sullen. Shortly after the ballet, Tréville had retired under the pretext of feeling poorly. As to Their Majesties, they hadn't returned to the Louvre until six in the morning. "Now," said Sir Tréville, lowering his voice and glancing into the corners of his study to make sure they were alone, "let's talk about you, my young friend – for it's obvious that your fortunate return had something to do with the king's pleasure, the queen's triumph, and His Eminence's humiliation. You'd better watch out for yourself."

"What do I have to fear as long as I have the good luck to enjoy the favour of their Majesties?" d'Artagnan said.

"Everything, believe me. The cardinal is not the kind of man to leave troubles unattended to until he's settled accounts with the troublemaker, and the troublemaker in this case seems to me to be a certain young Gascon of my acquaintance."

"Do you suppose the cardinal knows as much as you and realises I'm the one who went to London?"

"London! The devil you say! Was it from London that you brought back that beautiful diamond that glitters on your finger? Take care, my dear d'Artagnan – it's not a good thing to accept a present from an enemy. Isn't there a Latin verse or two about that? Wait a moment..."

"Yes, I'm sure. There must be," said d'Artagnan who'd never been able to master the simplest rules of that language and had driven his tutor to despair.

"I'm certain of it," said Sir Tréville, who had a smattering of the classics. "Sir Benserade was citing it just the other day. Hold on ... ah! Here it is: *timeo Danaos et Doña ferentes*. Which means, 'Beware of the enemy who gives you gifts.'"

"But this diamond doesn't come from an enemy, Sir," said d'Artagnan, "it comes from the queen."

"From the queen! Oh ho!" said Tréville. "To be sure, it's a truly royal jewel, worth a thousand *pistoles* if it's worth a *denier*. Who did the queen delegate to send you this little present?"

"She gave it to me herself."

"Do you say so! Where was that?"

"In a closet adjoining her dressing room."

"How did she do it?"

"She gave me her hand to kiss."

"You kissed the hand of the queen?" Tréville was impressed. "Her Majesty did me that honour."

"And in the presence of witnesses! Oh, that's rash and reckless!"

"Don't worry, Sir, no one saw her," replied d'Artagnan.

He told Sir Tréville how it had been managed. "Ah, *the women, the women!*" cried the old soldier. "They live for romance! Everything mysterious is charming to them! So, you saw nothing more than an arm; you could meet the queen and not recognise her and she could see you and never know you."

"No but thanks to this diamond..."

"Listen," said Tréville, "will you accept some good *advice* from a friend?"

"You honour me, Sir," said d'Artagnan.

"Take that diamond to the first goldsmith you come across and sell it for whatever he'll give you. Even a Jew will give you no less than eight hundred *pistoles* for it. Money has no name, young man. That ring bears an awesome one and might betray he who wears it."

"Sell this ring!" cried d'Artagnan. "Sell the ring that comes from my sovereign! Never!"

"Then at least turn the stone inside, you poor fool, for everyone knows that a cadet from Gascony doesn't find such gems in his mother's jewel box."

"You really think I have something to fear?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Young man, a person sleeping over a landmine with a lit fuse is perfectly safe compared to you."

"The devil!" Tréville's certainty was finally beginning to get through to d'Artagnan. "What should I do?"

"You must be on your guard – always. The cardinal has a long memory and a longer arm. Believe me, he'll do you some sort of injury."

"Yes but what?"

"Who can say? He knows every trick in Satan's book. At a minimum, he'll have you arrested."

"What? Would they dare to arrest a man in His Majesty's service?"

"*For the love of God!* They certainly dared to arrest Athos! In any case, young man, take the word of someone who's been thirty years at Court: never let down your guard for a moment, or you're lost. On the contrary – it's I who tell you this! – watch for enemies everywhere. If anyone picks a fight with you, even a ten-year-old child, avoid it. If you are attacked, day or night, beat a retreat without shame. If you cross a bridge, check every plank, or it may give way beneath your feet. If you pass a house being built, look up, or a stone may fall on your head. If you stay out late, make sure you're followed by your lackey, and make sure he's armed – and for that matter, make sure you can trust your lackey. Trust no one: not your friend, not your brother, not your mistress – especially not your mistress."

D'Artagnan blushed. "My mistress," he said stiffly. "Why her more than another?"

"Because a mistress is the cardinal's favourite tool. He has none more useful: a woman will sell you for ten *pistoles*. Think of Delilah. You know your Scriptures, don't you?" D'Artagnan thought of the rendezvous Madam Bonacieux had arranged with him for that evening; but to our hero's credit, it must be said that Sir Tréville's poor opinion of women didn't make d'Artagnan the slightest bit suspicious of his pretty landlady. Tréville broke in on his thoughts. "Do you know what's happened to your three comrades?"

"I was about to ask if you had any news of them."

"None, I'm afraid."

"Well, I left them on the road: Porthos at Chantilly with a duel on his hands; Aramis at Crèvecœur with a ball in his shoulder; and Athos at Amiens, accused of counterfeiting."

"God's blood! And how did you escape?"

"I have to say, Sir, it was by a miracle, though I took a sword thrust in my chest on a back road near Calais, where I nailed Sir Count of Wardes like a butterfly to a tapestry."

"You see? Wardes – a cardinal's man and Rochefort's cousin. But wait, my friend, I'm getting an idea."

"What's that, Sir?"

"In your place, here's what I'd do. While His Eminence was looking for me in Paris, I, without blowing my horn about it, would return up the road to Picardy to look for news of my three comrades. What the devil! They deserve some consideration from you."

"That's good advice, Sir, and I'll set out tomorrow."

"Tomorrow! And why not tonight?"

"Tonight, Sir, I'm detained in Paris on a vital matter."

"Ah! Young man! Some little love affair? Take care, I repeat to you. It's women who're our ruin, women who ruin us all. Trust me and leave tonight."

"Impossible, Sir."

"You've given your word?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then that's quite another thing. But promise me that, if you're not killed tonight, you'll set out tomorrow."

"I promise."

"Do you need any money?"

"I still have fifty *pistoles*. That's as much as I'll need, I think."

"But your companions?"

"I don't think they'll be short. We each left Paris with seventy-five *pistoles* in our pockets."

"Will I see you again before you leave?"

"I don't think so, Sir, unless there's some new trouble."

"Then, the best of luck, and *have a safe journey*."

"Thanks, Sir."

And d'Artagnan took his leave of Sir Tréville, touched more than ever by his fatherly solicitude for his musketeers. He called successively at the homes of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis but none of them had returned. Their lackeys were likewise absent, and no one had heard news of any of them. He would have asked their mistresses about them but he didn't know those of Porthos and Aramis – and Athos, of course, had none. Passing by the Hôtel des Gardes, he glanced into the stables: three of the four horses had already arrived. Planchet, amazed, was in the midst of grooming them and was already done with the first two. "Ah, Sir!" Planchet said. "How glad I am to see you!"

"And why is that, Planchet?"

"Do you trust our landlord, Sir Bonacieux?"

"Trust him? Not the least in the world."

"That's a good thing, Sir."

"Why do you ask?"

"It's just that, while you were talking with him, I watched from above, and his face changed colour two or three times."

"Bah!"

"Sir may not have noticed, as he was preoccupied with the letter he'd received. But I, on the other hand, was on my guard, due to the strange way that letter got into our house. I paid close attention to the way Sir Bonacieux looked at you."

"And you thought he was...?"

"Treacherous, Sir."

"Really!"

"Moreover, as soon as Sir had disappeared around the corner, Sir Bonacieux took his hat, shut his door, and set off at a run in the opposite direction."

"I think you're right, Planchet; that does sound fishy. Rest assured, we won't pay our rent until the affair is explained to our complete satisfaction."

"Sir is pleased to joke about it – but we'll see."

"What would you have, Planchet? What the fates have written, will be!"

"Sir has not given up on this evening's outing, then?"

"On the contrary, Planchet. The more I have against Sir Bonacieux, the more eager I am to keep the rendezvous that was arranged in that letter that makes you so nervous."

"Then, Sir is determined..."

"Immovably, my friend. Be ready here, at nine o'clock, and I'll come to get you." Planchet, seeing there was no longer any hope of getting his master to renounce his excursion, heaved a profound sigh and set to grooming the third horse. As to d'Artagnan, he was basically a careful youth, so instead of returning home, he went and dined with that Gascon priest who, during the financial distress of the four friends, had given them a breakfast of chocolate.

024  
The Pavilion

At nine that evening d'Artagnan was at the Hôtel des Gardes, where he found that the fourth horse had arrived. Planchet was ready to go, armed with his musketoon and pistol. D'Artagnan had his sword and had thrust a pair of pistols into his belt. Quietly, they mounted their horses and departed. It was a dark night and no one saw them leave. Planchet fell in behind his master, about ten paces back. D'Artagnan followed the river quays past the Louvre and the Tuileries, left the city by Porte La Conference, and travelled along the road, prettier then than now, that leads to Saint-Cloud. While they were in the city, Planchet maintained his respectful distance from d'Artagnan but as the road became more lonely and dark, he drew gradually nearer. By the time they entered the Bois of Boulogne, he found himself quite naturally riding side by side with his master. The truth is, the swaying of the great trees and the moonlight dappling the dark underbrush made him rather uneasy. D'Artagnan noticed that something was on his lackey's mind. "Well, Sir Planchet," he said, "What is it this time?"

"Don't you find, Sir that the woods are like churches?"

"How's that?"

"Because one doesn't dare speak too loudly in either."

"Why don't you dare speak up, Planchet? Afraid?"

"Yes, Sir – afraid of being overheard."

"Afraid of being overheard! Our conversation is quite moral and proper, my dear Planchet, and no one could find fault with it."

"Ah, Sir, that Bonacieux has a cunning look to his eyebrows," said Planchet, returning to his former theme, "and he has a nasty way of twitching his lips!"

"What the devil brings Bonacieux to mind?"

"Sir, we think of what we must, not of what we will."

"Only because you're a coward, Planchet."

"Sir, don't confuse caution with cowardice. Prudence is a virtue."

"And you're very virtuous, aren't you, Planchet?"

"Sir, isn't that the barrel of a musket shining over there? Shouldn't we duck our heads?"

"Tréville was right," murmured d'Artagnan, remembering the captain's warning. "This fellow's fear will end up infecting me."

He put his horse into a trot. Planchet trotted beside him, following his master's movements as if he were his shadow. "Are we going to keep up this pace all night, Sir?" he asked as they emerged from the woods.

"No, Planchet, for you've arrived."

"I've arrived? How's that? And what about you, Sir?"

"I still have a little farther to go."

"But Sir is leaving me alone here?"

"Are you scared, Planchet?"

"No but Sir will please observe that it's a very cold night, that chills can bring on rheumatism, and that a lackey who has rheumatism makes a poor servant, especially for a master as active as Sir is."

"If you're cold, go into one of those cabarets you can see down the road there. Just be waiting for me by the door at six in the morning."

"Sir, I did as you asked with the crown you gave me this morning and ate and drank to your health but now I don't have a *sou* left for something warm to ward off the cold."

"Here's a half-*pistole*. I'll see you tomorrow."

D'Artagnan dismounted from his horse, threw the bridle to Planchet and strode off, enveloped in his cloak. "God but I'm cold!" said Planchet as soon as he'd lost sight of his master. Shivering, he hurried off to knock on the door of a building that bore all the hallmarks of a small suburban cabaret. Meanwhile, d'Artagnan, who'd detoured onto a side road, continued on his way into Saint-Cloud. Instead of following the high street, he took a path behind the château, went down a back lane, and soon found himself opposite the pavilion he sought. It was a lonely spot. A high wall ran along one side of the street, at the corner of which was the pavilion; on the other side behind a hedge was a garden behind a rundown cottage. He had arrived at his rendezvous. The letter hadn't mentioned how he was to signal his presence, so he waited. Not a sound could be heard; he could have been a hundred leagues from the capital. D'Artagnan glanced around, then leaned himself against the hedge. Beyond the hedge, the garden, and the cottage, a thick, dark mist cloaked the sprawling city of Paris, a black void from which only an occasional light glittered, like stars fallen from heaven to glimmer in hell. But for d'Artagnan, the world was garbed in happiness, the future smiled upon him, and every shadow would fade. The hour of his rendezvous had arrived. The great bell in the belfry of Saint-Cloud tolled slowly ten times. There was something doleful in its sonorous bronze voice, mournful to hear in the middle of the night – but the young man's heart vibrated in harmony with every stroke that sounded the hour he'd awaited so long. His eyes were fixed on the little pavilion on the corner. All its windows were closed and shuttered, except one up on the first floor. From this window shone a soft light that silvered the shivering leaves of the lime trees that grew just outside the park. Evidently behind this little window with its pleasant glow, waited pretty Madam Bonacieux. Comforted by this sweet idea, d'Artagnan waited with patient docility for half an hour, eyes glued to that charming little room. He could see part of a ceiling with gilded mouldings that hinted at the elegance of the rest of the apartment. The belfry of Saint-Cloud struck ten-thirty. This time without quite knowing why, d'Artagnan felt a cold shiver run through his veins. But maybe the chill was beginning to creep into him, and he'd mistaken a mere physical sensation for a shudder of apprehension. Suddenly he was convinced that he'd gotten the rendezvous wrong, that it was actually for eleven o'clock. He crossed the alley and approached the window, drew the letter from his pocket, and read it again in the dim light from above. He hadn't been wrong: the rendezvous was for ten o'clock. He went back and resumed his post, though the silence and the solitude were beginning to make him uneasy. Eleven o'clock sounded. Now d'Artagnan really began to fear that something had happened to Madam Bonacieux. He clapped his hands three times, the usual lovers' signal but there was no reply – not even an echo. He then thought, with a certain irritation, that maybe the young woman had fallen asleep while waiting for him. He crossed over to the wall and tried to climb it but the mortar between the bricks had been pointed recently and he couldn't get a good hold. As he slipped back to the ground he thought of the trees, their leaves still limned by the light. One of them hung over the road, and he thought that from within its branches he might be able to see into the pavilion. Climbing the tree was easy. Besides, d'Artagnan was barely twenty and still remembered his schoolboy skills. In an instant he was among the branches, looking through the windows deep into the interior of the pavilion. The calm, unwavering glow of the lamp with its soft light illuminated a scene of unspeakable chaos, and the strange contrast sent a chill through d'Artagnan from his soles to his scalp. One of the windowpanes was cracked; the door to the room had been broken in and hung in two pieces on its hinges; a table that had been covered with an elegant supper, lay overturned on the floor, amid shattered glass and smashed fruit. Everything in the chamber told the story of a violent and desperate struggle. D'Artagnan even thought he could see among the debris pieces of clothing and bloodstains spattered on the carpets and curtains. The young cadet dropped back down to the street, heart pounding frantically, to see if he could find other traces of violence in the soft light that still shined into the calm night. He then saw that the ground was trampled and pockmarked here and there with a confusion of footprints of men and horses. He hadn't noticed it before because he hadn't thought to look. Furthermore, the wheel-marks of a carriage had made a deep imprint in the soft earth near the wall. The carriage appeared to have come from Paris, turned around in front of the pavilion, and returned the way it came. At length d'Artagnan's search turned up a torn woman's glove near the wall. Still light and fresh in those places where it hadn't touched the muddy ground, it was the kind of perfumed glove that lovers like to pluck from a pretty hand. As d'Artagnan searched, a cold sweat dripped from his forehead, his breathing was ragged, and his heart clenched in horrible anguish. For reassurance, he told himself that the chaos in the pavilion might have nothing to do with Madam Bonacieux; that the young woman's rendezvous with him was for in front of the pavilion, not in the pavilion; that she might have been detained in Paris by her duties, or by the jealousy of her husband. But all these rationalizations were overwhelmed by an agonized conviction, that feeling we get that tells us with certainty that we're victims of a horrible fate. Then d'Artagnan nearly went mad. He ran wildly back along the high road, returning along his route from Paris. At the ferry across the river, he found the boatman and plied him with desperate questions. The boatman said that at about seven in the evening he'd carried across a woman enveloped in a black cloak, who seemed anxious not to be recognised. However, just because of that, the boatman had paid special attention to her and had noticed that she was young and pretty. There was then, as now, a regular series of young and pretty women who come to Saint-Cloud with an interest in not being seen but d'Artagnan didn't doubt for an instant that this woman was Madam Bonacieux. He took advantage of the lamp in the boatman's cabin to read her letter one more time and reassured himself that he'd made no mistake. The rendezvous had been at Saint-Cloud and not elsewhere in front of the pavilion of Sir d'Estrées and not in some other street. Everything seemed to confirm d'Artagnan's premonition of evil. Something awful had happened. He ran back to the château. Something might have occurred at the pavilion in his absence and some new clues might await him. The alley was still deserted, and the same soft light shone from the window. D'Artagnan then thought of that silent, dark cottage behind the hedge. Someone there might have seen something and might be willing to talk about it. The gate of the little enclosure was shut but d'Artagnan leaped over the hedge and approached the cottage, despite the barking of a chained-up dog. There was no response to his first few knocks. As with the pavilion, a deathlike silence reigned over the cottage. But the cottage felt like his last chance, so he kept at it. After a little while he thought he heard a noise from inside: a timid noise, a noise that seemed afraid of being heard. D'Artagnan stopped knocking and began to beg, to implore in a voice so filled with worry and terror, promises and cajolery, that even the most frightened person would have been reassured by it. At length an old, worm-eaten shutter was opened, or rather shoved ajar, and then suddenly slammed shut again when the light from a miserable lamp had shone on d'Artagnan's baldric, sword, and pistols. But in that moment d'Artagnan had glimpsed the pale head of an old man. "In the name of heaven!" he cried. "Listen to me! I've been waiting on someone who hasn't come and I'm worried to death. Has there been any trouble nearby? Tell me!" The window slowly opened and the aged face appeared again but even more pale than before. D'Artagnan told his story simply with no names. He told how he'd had a rendezvous with a young woman before the pavilion and how when she didn't appear, he'd climbed the lime tree, where by the light of the lamp he'd seen the terrible state of the room within. The old man listened attentively, nodding as if to say, "Just so."

When d'Artagnan was finished, he shook his head sadly. "Tell me what you mean!" cried d'Artagnan. "In the name of heaven! Speak! Explain yourself!"

"Oh, Sir!" said the old man. "Please ask me nothing. If I tell you what I've seen, it's certain that no good will come to me."

"You *have* seen something then? In that case in the name of heaven – and this coin—" d'Artagnan threw the man a *pistole* – "tell me what you've seen. I give you the word of a gentleman that I'll keep what you say locked in my heart."

The old man read so much truth and sorrow in d'Artagnan's face that he beckoned him closer. He said in a low voice, "At nearly nine o'clock, I heard a noise in the street. I wondered what it could be but when I approached my gate I saw that someone was trying to get in. I'm poor and not afraid of being robbed, so I went to open it and saw three men in the alley. In the shadow of the trees there was a two-horse carriage and several saddled horses that apparently belonged to the three men, who were dressed as cavaliers. 'My good Gentlemen,' I called, 'what can I do for you?'

'Do you have a ladder?' said one who appeared to be the leader.

'Yes, Sir, the one I use to pick my fruit.'

'Give it to us and go back into your house. Here's a crown for your trouble. Only remember that if you speak a word about what you see and hear – for you will spy and eavesdrop, I'm sure, no matter how we threaten you – if you speak a word, I say, you're lost.'

"At these words, he threw me a crown that I picked up, and he took my ladder. He was right: after shutting my gate behind them, I pretended to return to my house but I immediately went out the back door and sneaked through the shadows into those elderberry bushes, from which I could see everything. The three men quietly drew up the carriage, then brought a little man out of it, fat, short, grey, and dressed in shabby dark clothes. He carefully climbed the ladder, peeked into the lit chamber, came quietly back down, and whispered, 'It's her!' Immediately the one he'd spoken to approached the door of the pavilion, opened it with a key, entered, and closed the door behind him. Meanwhile the other two men climbed the ladder. The little old man waited at the door of the carriage, the driver held the carriage horses, and a lackey held the saddled horses. All at once shouts came from the pavilion, and a woman ran to the window and opened it, as if to jump out. But as soon as she saw the two men she shrieked and backed away. The two men sprang after her into the chamber. Then I could see no more but I heard the sound of furniture breaking. The woman shouted and called for help but then her cries were muffled. The two men appeared at the window, carrying the woman in their arms. They climbed down the ladder and took her into the carriage, followed by the little old man. The leader, who was still in the pavilion, closed the window and came out the door a moment later. He made sure the woman was in the carriage, then sprang into the saddle, followed by his two companions. The lackey climbed up next to the driver and the carriage set off at a gallop, escorted by the three cavaliers. That was the end of it, and from that moment I have heard and seen nothing."

D'Artagnan was crushed by this terrible news into a mute paralysis, while the demons of anger and jealousy howled in his heart. "Please, my gentleman," said the old man, affected more by this mute dejection than he would have been by tears and laments, "don't despair. They didn't kill her, and that's what really matters."

D'Artagnan said, "Do you know anything of the man who led this hellish crew?"

"Nothing at all."

"But since you spoke to him, you must have seen him."

"Oh, you want a description of him?"

"Yes."

"A tall dark fellow, with black mustachios, dark eyes, and the air of a gentleman."

"That's him!" d'Artagnan cried. "Him again! Always him! He's my nemesis, it seems. And the other?"

"Which?"

"The short one."

"Oh! He was no nobleman, I'll answer for it. Besides, he didn't carry a sword, and the others treated him with no respect."

"Some lackey," murmured d'Artagnan. "Ah! Poor woman! Poor woman! What have they done with you?"

"You promised to keep my secret," said the old man.

"And I repeat my promise. Never fear, I'm a gentleman. A gentleman's only his word and I've given you mine." With a weight on his soul, d'Artagnan returned along the road to the ferry. Sometimes he tried to believe that it hadn't really been Madam Bonacieux, that he'd find her tomorrow returned to the Louvre; sometimes he feared that she'd had an affair with some other man, who in a jealous rage had surprised her and carried her off. He wavered between grief and despair. "If only I had my friends!" he groaned. "Then I might at least have some hope of rescuing her. But who knows what's become of them?" It was nearly midnight. His next concern was to find Planchet. D'Artagnan checked all the cabarets along the high road that still showed a little light but Planchet was in none of them. As he entered the sixth cabaret, it occurred to him that this midnight search was rather hazardous. D'Artagnan had told his lackey to meet him at six in the morning, and wherever he'd gone, he was within his rights to be gone until then. Besides, it occurred to d'Artagnan that if he remained in the neighbourhood of the crime something might yet occur that would shed some light on the mysterious affair. So d'Artagnan stopped in the sixth cabaret, asked for a bottle of their best honey, then installed himself in the darkest corner of the room and settled in to wait for daylight. Once again his hopes came to naught, for though he listened to the cabaret's clientele with both ears, he heard nothing but crude insults and coarse jokes from the labourers, servants, and drovers who composed the honourable society of which he was temporarily a part. There was nothing at all about his poor abducted lady. Lacking options, he availed himself of his bottle until it was empty, and then to avoid suspicion he curled up to try to sleep as best he could. Of course, he was only twenty years old, an age when sleep has inalienable rights that must be obeyed, even over hearts in despair. Around six in the morning d'Artagnan awoke with that sticky feeling that generally follows a bad night. He straightened his clothes and checked to make sure no one had taken advantage of his sleep to rob him. His diamond was on his finger, his purse in his pocket and his pistols in his belt, so he arose, paid for his bottle, and left to see if he'd have any better luck finding his lackey in the morning than he'd had the night before. The first thing he saw in the damp, grey mist was honest Planchet, holding two horses outside the door of a cabaret so small, that the previous night d'Artagnan had passed it without even suspecting it was there.

025  
The Mistress of Porthos

Instead of returning directly home d'Artagnan stopped at Sir Tréville's gate, where he ran up the stairs. This time, he'd decided to tell the whole story of what had happened. No doubt Tréville could give him some good advice on the matter; and, as the captain saw the queen almost daily, he might be able to learn something from Her Majesty about poor Madam Bonacieux, now paying so dearly for her devotion to her mistress. Sir Tréville listened to the young man's account with a seriousness that indicated he saw something more in it than a mere love affair. When d'Artagnan had finished, he said, "Hum! This stinks of His Eminence a league off."

"But what should I do?" said d'Artagnan.

"There's absolutely *nothing* you can do right now except get out of Paris as soon as possible – as I told you yesterday. I'll see the queen and give her the details of this poor woman's disappearance, of which she's doubtless ignorant. The report might help her decide what to do, and on your return, maybe I'll have some good news for you. Leave it to me." D'Artagnan knew that although Tréville was a Gascon, he was not in the habit of making promises lightly – and if he did promise, he more than kept his word. D'Artagnan bowed to him, grateful for favours both past and future. The worthy captain who had a keen interest in this young man, so brave and resolute, shook his hand affectionately and wished him a safe journey. Determined to put Tréville's advice into practice right away, d'Artagnan made his way to the Rue des Fossoyeurs, intent on immediately packing his bags. As he came up the block, he recognised Sir Bonacieux, standing in front of his door in his morning clothes. Everything the prudent Planchet had said the night before about the sinister character of his landlord returned to d'Artagnan, and he looked at Bonacieux with new eyes. Besides having a sickly, jaundiced look that indicated an excess of bile in his blood that might not mean anything, d'Artagnan thought he detected something sly and perfidious lurking in the wrinkles around the man's eyes. A rogue doesn't laugh the same way as an honest man, and a hypocrite doesn't shed the same tears as a man of good faith. All falsehood is a mask – and however good the mask, with a little attention one can always tell the mask from the face. So it seemed to d'Artagnan that Bonacieux wore a mask – a mask that, once recognised, was thoroughly unpleasant to see. Overcome by a sudden feeling of repugnance, he was about to pass the man without speaking to him when Bonacieux waylaid him as he'd done the day before. "Well, young man," he said, "what late hours we seem to be keeping! Seven in the morning, *plague*! It seems to me you're doing things exactly backward, coming home just when others are going out."

"Certainly no one can say that of you, Master Bonacieux," said the young man. "You're a model of propriety. Though it goes without saying that when a man has a young and pretty wife, he doesn't need to go out looking for happiness. His happiness finds him – isn't that right, Sir Bonacieux?"

Bonacieux went pale as death but managed to grimace out a smile. "Ho-ho!" he said. "You're a funny one. And where the devil did you go last night, my young master? You appear to have taken none too clean a route."

D'Artagnan glanced down at his muddy boots and in the same glance noticed the mercer's shoes and stockings. It looked like they both came from the same gutter; both their feet were stained with the same kind of mud. D'Artagnan suddenly remembered the portly little old man in dark clothes, the sort of lackey who'd been treated with such disdain by the gentleman kidnappers. *It'd been Bonacieux himself!* The husband had assisted at the abduction of his wife. D'Artagnan felt a sudden urge to take the mercer by the throat and strangle him on the spot – but he was a prudent youth as has been said and restrained himself. However, the change of expression on his face terrified Bonacieux, who tried to back away but was stopped by the closed door behind him. "Haha! I think *you* are the funny one, Sir," said d'Artagnan. "My boots may need a good sponging but your stockings and shoes need brushing just as badly. Were you out on the town yourself, Master Bonacieux? You devil, you! That's inexcusable in a man your age, especially if he has a wife as pretty as yours!"

"Lord, no!" said Bonacieux. "Yesterday I went to Saint-Mandé to make inquiries about a new servant, since I can't do without one. The roads were so bad I picked up all this mud and I haven't had time yet to clean it off."

D'Artagnan was sure Bonacieux had named Saint-Mandé because it was in the exact opposite direction from Paris as Saint-Cloud. This was just one more proof that confirmed his suspicions. The probable truth of this gave d'Artagnan his first consolation in the whole affair. If Bonacieux knew where his wife was, d'Artagnan might, by extreme methods, pry open the mercer's teeth and force out his secret. But he needed to make sure the probability was a certainty. "Pardon my asking, my dear Sir Bonacieux," said d'Artagnan, "but nothing makes one as thirsty as lack of sleep. Allow me to step into your house for a glass of water. You know no neighbour would ever refuse such a request." And without waiting for permission from his host, d'Artagnan quickly opened the front door and stepped past him into the house, where he took a quick glance at the bed. It had not been slept in; Bonacieux hadn't been to bed at all. He must have returned in the last hour or two after having accompanied his captive wife to wherever they'd taken her, or at least to the first relay. "*Thank you*, Master Bonacieux," said d'Artagnan, draining his glass. "That's all I wanted from you. Now I'll return to my room and have Planchet brush my boots. When he's done, if you like, I'll send him down to brush your shoes."

He then left the mercer, who seemed surprised at his strange behaviour. D'Artagnan wondered if he'd tripped himself up. At the top of the stairs d'Artagnan found Planchet quivering in fright. "Ah, Sir!" cried Planchet, as soon as he saw his master. "It never stops! I thought you would never come back."

"What now?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Never, not in a hundred or thousand tries would you guess who came to visit you in your absence."

"When was this?"

"About half an hour ago, while you were at Sir Tréville's."

"Well, who was it? Come on, tell me."

"Sir Cavois."

"Sir Cavois?"

"In person."

"The Captain of the Cardinal's Guards?"

"Himself."

"Did he come to arrest me?"

"I don't doubt it, Sir, despite all his soft soap."

"Soft soap? Did he seem overly polite?"

"He was all honey, Sir."

"Really?"

"He came, he said, in the name of His Eminence, who wished you well, and said he wanted you to follow him to the cardinal's hôtel."

"What did you say to that?"

"That it was impossible, since you weren't at home, as he could see for himself."

"And he said...?"

"That you mustn't fail to call upon him sometime today. Then he added, in a low voice, 'Tell your master that His Eminence holds him in high regard and that his fortune may depend on this interview.'" D'Artagnan smiled. "That's a rather clumsy snare. I expected better from the cardinal."

"I saw the snare, too, so I told him that when you returned, you'd be desolate that you'd missed him. 'Where's he gone?' Sir Cavois asked, and I told him, 'To Troyes in Champagne.' 'When did he leave?' he asked, and I told him, 'Last night.'"

"Planchet, my friend," said d'Artagnan, "you're a prince."

"You understand, Sir, I thought that if you did want to see Sir Cavois, you could always contradict me and say that you hadn't left yet. That would make a liar of me but since I'm not a gentleman, it doesn't matter."

"Planchet, you may keep your reputation as a man of truth. We leave in a quarter of an hour."

"That's just the advice I was going to give to Sir. And where are we going, if I'm not being too curious?"

"In the opposite direction from the way you said I'd gone, by God! Besides, aren't you as eager for news of Grimaud, Mousqueton, and Bazin as I am to know what's become of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis?"

"Every bit, Sir," said Planchet. "I'm ready when you're ready. At the moment, I think the air of the provinces will be healthier for us than the air of Paris. So..."

"So pack our bags, Planchet, and let's go. As for me, I'm going out right now, nonchalant as can be, hands in my pockets, so no one will suspect anything. When we're packed, meet me at the Hôtel des Gardes. By the way, Planchet, I think you were right about our landlord. He's a genuine rat."

"Sir, you can always believe me when I tell you something like that. I'm a physiognomist, I am!"

As per the plan, d'Artagnan went down first. Then, to make sure he'd covered all eventualities, he called for a final time at the lodgings of his three friends. There was no news of them, except for a letter that had arrived for Aramis, perfumed and addressed in an elegant small hand. D'Artagnan took charge of it. Ten minutes later, Planchet rejoined him in the stables of the Hôtel des Gardes. To save time, d'Artagnan had already saddled his own horse. Planchet gave him his travel bag, and d'Artagnan said, "All right, now saddle the other three horses and we'll go."

"Does Sir think we'll travel twice as fast if we each have two horses?" Planchet asked sardonically.

"No, Sir Smart-Arse," replied d'Artagnan, "but with four horses we can bring back our three friends, assuming we find them alive."

"Small chance of that," said Planchet, "but we must never despair of the mercy of God."

"Amen," said d'Artagnan, mounting his horse. They separated as they left the Hôtel des Gardes, going opposite ways down the street, one to leave Paris by the Porte Saint-Martin and the other by the Porte Montmartre, to rejoin beyond Saint-Denis. This strategic manoeuvre was executed like clockwork, and as a result d'Artagnan and Planchet entered Pierrefitte together. Planchet, it must be said, was much more courageous by day than by night. However, his natural prudence never left him at any time. He hadn't forgotten any of the incidents of their first journey, and he regarded everyone they met on the road as a potential enemy. As a result, his hat was always in his hand – which earned him some severe rebukes from d'Artagnan, who feared such excessive politeness would make people think Planchet was lackey to a person of no consequence. However, because passers-by were mollified by Planchet's manners – or because, this time, no enemies were posted on the young man's road – the two travellers arrived at Chantilly without incident. They alighted at the Inn of Grand Saint-Martin, where they'd stopped on their first journey. The host, seeing a young gentleman followed by a lackey leading two fine horses, approached respectfully from the front door. Having travelled eleven leagues, d'Artagnan thought it was a good time to stop, whether or not Porthos could be found there. He thought it might not be wise to inquire immediately about the musketeer, so, without asking any questions, he descended from his horse, commended it to the care of his lackey, and went into the small back room provided for those who wished to dine alone. He asked the host to bring him a bottle of his best honey and as good a breakfast as he could manage, orders that confirmed the high opinion his host had formed of him at first glance. D'Artagnan, therefore, was served with miraculous speed. Everyone knew the regiment of the Gardes Françaises drew its recruits from among the leading gentlemen of the realm, so d'Artagnan, followed by a lackey and with four magnificent horses, couldn't fail to make an impression, despite the simplicity of his uniform. The host decided to wait on him personally. Seeing this, d'Artagnan told him to bring two glasses and opened up a conversation with him. "*My faith*, my dear host – I asked for a bottle of your best," said d'Artagnan, filling the glasses, "and if you've brought me anything less, your punishment will suit the crime, for since I hate to drink alone, you'll have to join me. Take up your glass, and let's drink! ... But we must drink to something no one can argue with. Let's drink to the prosperity of your establishment!"

"Your Lordship honours me," said the host, "and my sincere thanks for the compliment."

"Make no mistake," said d'Artagnan, "there may be more selfishness in my toast than you suppose. You can get good service only in a prosperous establishment; in a place that isn't doing well, the service is poor, and the traveller suffers from the troubles of the host. Now, I travel quite a bit, especially on this road, so I like to see all the inns along this route prospering."

"Yes, I thought I'd had the honour of seeing Sir once before," said the host.

"Once? Bah! I've passed through Chantilly maybe ten times, and I've stopped at your inn on at least three or four occasions. Why, I was here only ten or twelve days ago, accompanied by some friends – musketeers. By the way, one of them got into a dispute with a stranger, a man who picked a fight with him for no apparent reason."

"Yes, indeed!" said the host. "I recall it perfectly! Your Lordship means Sir Porthos, don't you? Tsk, tsk."

"Yes, that was my companion's name. Good lord! Don't tell me something's happened to him?"

"But Your Lordship must have noticed that he didn't continue his journey."

"Of course. He promised to rejoin us but he never appeared."

"He's done us the honour of remaining here in our inn. But I must admit, we're getting a little anxious about him."

"Why is that?"

"Because of certain expenses he's incurred."

"But whatever the total, I'm sure he'll pay it."

"Ah, Sir, that's music to my ears! He's run up quite a bill, and just this morning the doctor declared that if Sir Porthos didn't pay him he'd hold me responsible, as I was the one who'd sent for him."

"Is Porthos wounded then?"

"I can't tell you, Sir."

"What do you mean, you can't tell me? You ought to know better than anyone."

"Yes, Sir but in our situation we don't always say everything we know, especially when we've been warned that if we use our tongues, we'll lose our ears."

"Well, can I see Porthos?"

"Certainly, Sir. Take the stairs up to the first floor and knock at Number 1. Only, warn him that it's you."

"What? Why should I warn him that it's me?"

"I wouldn't want Sir to have an accident."

"What kind of accident are you afraid of?"

"Sir Porthos might take you for one of the staff and run you through, or maybe blow your brains out."

"What have you done to him?"

"We ... asked him for payment."

"The devil you say! Now I understand. It's a request that Porthos responds poorly to when he's out of funds. But I know he ought to be flush."

"We thought so too, Sir. As this house is quite meticulous about weekly accounts, after eight days we presented our bill. However, apparently we chose a bad time to do it, as at the first word on the subject, he told us to go to the devil. Now, it's true, he had been gambling the night before..."

"Oh? With whom?"

"My God, who can say? With some gentleman who was passing through, whom Sir Porthos invited to play lansquenet with him."

"That's it, then! The poor sap must have lost everything."

"Right down to his horse, Sir, for when the stranger was leaving, we noticed that his lackey was saddling Sir Porthos's mount. When we pointed this out to the stranger, he told us to mind our own business, as the horse was now his. We then notified Sir Porthos of what was going on. But he told us we must be lowborn louts to doubt the word of a gentleman, and if the man said the horse was his, it must be true."

"That sounds like Porthos, all right," murmured d'Artagnan.

"Then," continued the host, "I told him that since we seemed to have a disagreement about payment, I hoped he would have the courtesy to take his business over to the Golden Eagle but Sir Porthos said that, since my inn was the best in town, he preferred to remain here. This reply was so flattering I couldn't really insist that he leave. I limited myself to begging him to give up his chamber that is the best in the inn, and be content with a pretty little room on the third floor. But Sir Porthos said he was expecting at any moment to receive a visit from his mistress, who was one of the greatest ladies of the Court, and he gave me to understand that the chamber he did me the honour to occupy was barely adequate to host such a visitor. Though what he said might be true, I still felt I had to insist. But he wouldn't even discuss it with me – he just took out a pistol, laid it on the table, and declared that at the first word he heard about removing himself, he would blow out the brains of whoever would be so foolish as to meddle in something that concerned only himself. Since then, Sir, no one goes into his chamber except his servant."

"Mousqueton is here then?"

"Yes, Sir. Five days after your departure, he returned in rather bad shape. It appears he too had some bad luck on his journey. Unfortunately, he's more mobile than his master, and he's turned everything around here upside down. He thinks we might refuse if he asked for anything, so he just takes whatever he needs without asking."

"I've always said Mousqueton was a paragon of intelligence and devotion," said d'Artagnan.

"That may be, Sir but if I encounter such intelligence and devotion four times in a year, I'll be a ruined man."

"Not at all. Porthos will pay you."

"Hum!" said the host, in a doubtful tone.

"No favourite of a great lady will be allowed to be embarrassed by the miserable amount he owes you."

"Yes, well, if I dared to say what I believe about *that* matter..."

"Just what do you believe?"

"Or rather, what I know."

"What do you know, then?"

"In fact, what I'm sure of."

"All right, then: what are you sure of?"

"I'm sure I know who this 'great lady' is."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"And how is it that you know her?"

"Oh, Sir – if I thought I could trust your discretion..."

"Tell me. On the word of a gentleman, you won't be sorry."

"Well, as Sir must know, worry sometimes makes us do things we otherwise might not."

"What has worry made you do?"

"Nothing outside my rights as a creditor!"

"So?"

"Sir Porthos gave us a letter for this duchess and told us to put it in the post. This was before his servant had arrived, and since Sir was unable to leave his room, we were charged with running his errands."

"So, then?"



"Instead of putting the letter in the post that is rather unreliable, I took advantage of a trip one of my lads was making to Paris and charged him with delivering this letter to the duchess personally. Didn't this fulfil the intentions of Sir Porthos, who wanted us to take care of the letter?"

"Close enough."

"Well, Sir, do you know who this great lady is?"

"No; I've heard Porthos talk about her, that's all."

"You don't know the identity of this pretended duchess?"

"I just told you, I don't know her."

"She's the aging wife of a prosecutor of the Châtelet, Sir, whose name is Madam Coquenard. She's at least fifty but still acts jealous." The host chuckled. "I thought it was strange that a high-ranking noblewoman should keep a house in the Rue aux Ours."

"So how did you come to know so much?"

"Because she threw a fit when she received the letter, saying Sir Porthos was flighty and fickle, and she was sure it was because of some woman that he'd been wounded."

"What! He's been wounded!"

"Ah! My God! What have I said?"

"You said that Porthos was wounded."

"I know – but he forbade me to say so!"

"Why's that?"

"*Dame!* Because, Sir, he'd bragged that he'd perforate that stranger you left him fighting with – but despite all his boasts, it was the stranger who soon had *him* on the ground. Sir Porthos is a very proud man, and he insisted that no one should know he was wounded – except for his duchess, whom he hoped would respond generously to an account of his adventure."

"So it's a wound that's confined him to bed?"

"And quite a wound it is, let me tell you. If your friend wasn't so strong, he'd have given up the ghost."

"You saw the duel?"

"I was curious, Sir, so I followed them and saw the fight without being seen myself."

"What happened?"

"It didn't last long, I can tell you that. They came on guard, then the stranger made a feint and a stab, all so quickly that, by the time Sir Porthos tried to parry, he already had three inches of steel in his chest. He fell back like a log. The stranger put the point of his sword to his throat, and Sir Porthos, seeing he was at the mercy of his adversary, confessed he was beaten. The stranger demanded his name but when he learned that name was Sir Porthos, and not Sir d'Artagnan, he offered sir his arm, brought him back to the inn, then mounted his horse and disappeared."

"So it was Sir d'Artagnan the stranger wanted."

"Apparently."

"And do you know what became of the man?"

"No; I'd never seen him before that moment, and I haven't seen him since."

"Good. That's what I needed to know. Now, you say Porthos's room is Number 1, on the first floor up?"

"Yes, Sir, the best in the house, a chamber I could have rented ten times over by now."

"Calm down," d'Artagnan said, smiling. "Porthos will pay you with money from Duchess Coquenard."

"Prosecutor's wife or duchess, Sir, I couldn't care less, so long as she opens her purse. But she positively swore she was fed up with Sir Porthos's infidelities and wouldn't send him a *denier*."

"Did you give that answer to your guest?"

"We were careful not to! He'd find out how we'd delivered his letter."

"So he's still expecting his money?"

"My God, yes! He wrote to her again yesterday but this time his lackey put the letter in the post."

"Did you say this prosecutor's wife is old and ugly?"

"Fifty at least, Sir, and not good-looking at all, is what Pathaud said."

"In that case, rest easy – her heart will soon soften. Besides, Porthos can't owe you all that much."

"Not that much, you say! Twenty *pistoles* already, not counting the doctor's fee. He must be used to high living – he denies himself nothing."

"Well, if his mistress abandons him, he still has his friends, I can assure you of that. Relax, my dear host, and keep supplying him with whatever he needs."

"Sir promises not to mention the prosecutor's wife and not to say a word about the wound?"

"So be it; you have my word."

"Because he'd kill me, you know!"

"Don't worry, he's not quite the devil he appears to be."

With these words, d'Artagnan leaped up the staircase, leaving his host somewhat reassured about his two primary concerns: his finances and his life. At the top of the stairs, on the most conspicuous door on the corridor, a gigantic *No. 1* was traced in black ink. D'Artagnan knocked, was invited in, and entered. Porthos was in bed, playing a game of lansquenet with Mousqueton, just to keep his hand in. A partridge turned on a spit over the fire, while on either side boiled two casseroles, exhaling an enticing double aroma of gibelotte and matelote, rabbit stew and fish soup. A nearby desk and marble-topped table were covered with empty bottles. At the sight of his friend, Porthos gave a great cry of joy. Mousqueton, rising respectfully, yielded his place to d'Artagnan, then went to take a look at the two casseroles, in which he seemed to take a keen interest. "By God! It's you!" said Porthos to d'Artagnan. "Come in, and pardon me if I don't come to meet you. Do you know," he added uneasily, "what's happened to me?"

"No!"

"The host told you nothing?"

"I asked where you were, and I came straight up."

Porthos seemed to breathe more easily.

"And what *has* happened to you, my dear Porthos?" continued d'Artagnan.

"What happened was that, while lunging at my opponent – whom I'd already stabbed three times, and whom I meant to finish with a fourth – my foot slipped on a stone, and I sprained my knee."

"Really?"

"Word of honour! And it was lucky for the rogue, for you can bet I'd have left him dead on the spot."

"And what became of him?"

"I have no idea. He'd had enough and went off without waiting for more. But you, my dear d'Artagnan, what happened to you?"

"So it's this sprain that keeps you in bed, my dear Porthos?" persisted d'Artagnan.

"My God, yes – that's all! I'll be on my feet again in a few days."

"Why didn't you get a ride into Paris? It must be awfully boring here."

"I'd planned to – but, my dear friend, I have something to confess to you."

"What's that?"

"Well, as I had in my pocket the seventy-five *pistoles* you'd dispensed to me, and since, as you say, it's awfully boring here, to distract myself I asked a passing gentleman to come up and have a game of lansquenet with me. He accepted and, my faith! My seventy-five *pistoles* soon passed from my pocket to his – plus my horse that he won into the bargain. But what of you, d'Artagnan?"

"What do you expect, my dear Porthos? A man can't be a success at everything," d'Artagnan said. "You know what they say: 'Unlucky at play, lucky in love'! You're too lucky in love for the dice to be always on your side. But what can a few bad throws matter to you? Don't you have your duchess, you lucky dog, who never lets you down?"

"Well, d'Artagnan, here's how jinxed I am," replied Porthos with an air of nonchalance. "I wrote to her to send me fifty crowns that I needed because of the position I found myself in..."

"And?"

"And she must be at her country place because she hasn't replied."

"Really?"

"Not a word. So yesterday I sent her a second letter, more urgent than the first – but you, my friend, let's talk about you! I have to confess, I was beginning to worry about you."

"But it looks like your host has been treating you well, my dear Porthos," said d'Artagnan with a nod at the bubbling casseroles and the empty bottles.

"So-so," replied Porthos. "It's been three or four days since the insolent dog gave me his bill and I threw both him and his bill out the door. So I'm somewhat in the situation of a conqueror in a hostile land – always afraid, you see, that I'll be forced to defend my position. That's why I'm armed to the teeth."

"However, it looks to me like you make sorties from time to time," d'Artagnan laughed, indicating the food and drink.

"No, not me, unfortunately!" said Porthos. "This miserable sprain keeps me in bed but Mousqueton has been out on campaign and brings back provisions. Mousqueton, my friend, now that we've been reinforced, we'll need even more victuals."

"Mousqueton," said d'Artagnan, "you must do me a favour."

"What's that, Sir?"

"To share your recipes with Planchet. If I'm ever besieged, I want to enjoy the same delicacies that delight your master."

"Ah, *my God*, sir, nothing could be easier," said Mousqueton modestly. "It just takes being handy, that's all. I was raised in the country, and my father, in his spare time, was a bit of a poacher."

"What did he do the rest of the time?"

"Sir, he practiced a trade he found pretty prosperous."

"What was that?"

"It was during the wars between the Catholics and Huguenots. Since he saw the Catholics exterminating the Huguenots, and the Huguenots exterminating the Catholics, all in the name of religion, he adopted a mixed belief, one that permitted him to be sometimes Catholic and sometimes a Huguenot. He made a practice of strolling with his blunderbuss on his shoulder behind the hedges that lined the roads, and when he saw a lone Catholic coming along, a Protestant feeling arose within him. When he was within ten paces he would point his blunderbuss at the traveller and begin a conversation that nearly always ended with the traveller trading his purse for his life. Then if a Huguenot came along, he was filled with such ardent Catholic zeal that he couldn't understand how, a quarter of an hour before, he could have had the slightest doubt about the superiority of our holy religion. Personally, Sir, I'm a Catholic – though my father following his principles, raised my brother as a Huguenot."

"And how did this worthy man end up?" asked d'Artagnan.

"In a most unfortunate way, Sir," said Mousqueton. "One day he was surprised in a narrow lane between a Huguenot and a Catholic, who recognised him, since he'd had previous business with both. They allied against him and hanged him from a tree. Then they came and boasted of their feat in a tavern in the next village, where my brother and I were drinking."

"What did you do?"

"We let them have their say," replied Mousqueton. "Then, as they left the tavern in opposite directions, my brother went and hid himself ahead of the Catholic, and I did the same ahead of the Protestant. In less than two hours, it was done – we'd dealt with both of them. It was a tribute to the foresight of our poor father, who'd taken the precaution of raising us in different religions."

"As you say, Mousqueton, your father sounds like he was pretty sharp. And you said that, in his spare time, the good man was a poacher?"

"Yes, Sir. He's the one who taught me how to lay a snare and stretch a tripwire. So when I saw that villain of a host here try to feed us on rotten meat I wouldn't give away to vagrants, stuff not at all suitable for two sensitive stomachs like ours, I summoned up the old family skills. While strolling near the woods of Sir Prince, I laid a few snares on the game trails; and while lying on the banks of His



Highness's streams, I dropped a few lines in a likely pool. So now, thank the Lord, we won't starve. As Sir can see, we have partridges and rabbits, carp and eels – light, healthy food suitable for recovering invalids."

"But the honey," said d'Artagnan, "who furnishes the honey? Your host?"

"Yes and no, you might say."

"Yes and no? How do you mean?"

"He furnishes it, yes but he's unaware of the honour."

"Explain yourself, Mousqueton. Your conversation is surprisingly instructive."

"It's like this, Sir. In my travels I chanced to encounter a Spaniard who'd been all over, including to the New World."

"What does the New World have to do with the bottles on the desk and the table?"

"A little patience, Sir. Everything in its turn."

"Quite so, Mousqueton. You speak, and I'll listen."

"This Spaniard had in his service a lackey who'd accompanied him on his voyage to Mexico. This lackey was from my home province and we quickly became friends, especially since we had similar tastes and enjoyed hunting more than anything. He told me how, on the plains of the Pampas, the natives hunt tigers and wild bulls with simple running nooses that they loop around the necks of these dangerous animals. At first I couldn't believe that anyone could be so skilful as to throw a cord twenty or thirty paces with any accuracy but faced with proof I had to acknowledge it was true. Aiming for a bottle thirty paces away, my friend could catch the bottle's neck in his noose every time. I started practicing, and since I have a little natural talent for this sort of thing, today I can throw my *lasso* as well as any man in the world. So, do you see it yet? Our host has a well-furnished honey cellar but it's locked, and the key never leaves him. However, this cellar has a small window for ventilation. I toss my lasso through the ventilator, and as I now know in which corner he keeps his best, I amuse myself by fishing for vintage. So that, Sir, is what the New World has to do with the bottles on the desk and the table. Now, will you have a taste of our honey and give us your honest opinion of it?"

"Thank you, my friend but no – I've just come from breakfast."

"Well," said Porthos, "set the table, Mousqueton, and while we have our breakfast, d'Artagnan can tell us what's happened to him in the ten days since he left us."

"Gladly," said d'Artagnan. While Porthos and Mousqueton ate with the appetites of convalescents, d'Artagnan told how Aramis had been wounded and forced to stop at Crèvecœur, how he'd had to leave Athos fighting at Amiens in the hands of four men who'd accused him of being a counterfeiter, and how he, d'Artagnan, had been forced to run the Count of Wardes through the body in order to reach England. But that was as far as he went; he only added that, on his return from Britain, he'd brought with him four magnificent horses, one for himself and one for each of his comrades. He concluded with a flourish, telling Porthos that his horse was already installed at the inn's stable. At this moment Planchet entered to tell his master that the horses were rested, and if they left soon they still might sleep that night in Clermont. As d'Artagnan was now reassured about Porthos, and as he was eager for news of his other two friends, he offered his hand to the convalescent and told him he was off to continue his search. He counted on returning by the same route, so if, in seven or eight days, Porthos was still at the Inn of Grand Saint-Martin, he would stop by to see him. Porthos said with a wince that, in all probability, his sprain wouldn't permit him to leave for a while. Besides, he had to stay in Chantilly until he heard from his duchess. D'Artagnan wished him luck with that and complimented him again on having Mousqueton as a lackey. Then he paid his bill at the inn and resumed his journey with Planchet who was already relieved of one of the horses he'd been leading.

## 026 The Thesis of Aramis

D'Artagnan had said nothing to Porthos about his friend's wound or the prosecutor's wife. He was a wise lad, this Béarnaise, despite his youth. He'd done his best to appear to believe everything the blustering musketeer had told him, as he knew that friendship can't survive the revelation of such secrets, especially secrets central to a man's pride. Besides, we always feel a certain moral superiority over those whose secret lives we've discovered. Moreover, d'Artagnan hoped to use his three comrades as the instruments of his ambition in future intrigues, so he was happy to grasp whenever he could the invisible reins by which he hoped to lead them. Nonetheless, as he rode along a profound sadness gripped his heart. He thought of that young and pretty Madam Bonacieux, who'd been on the verge of repaying all his devotion – though it must be said that his sadness was less regret for his lost evening of love than fear of what evil might happen to the poor woman. For himself, he had no doubt but that she was the victim of the cardinal's vengeance – and as everyone said, the vengeance of His Eminence was terrible. He couldn't understand how he himself had managed to find favour in that minister's eyes. No doubt that's what Sir Cavois would have revealed to him, if the Captain of the Cardinal's Guards had found him at home. Nothing makes time pass or shortens a trip like getting lost in one's thoughts. Then external reality is like sleep, and our thoughts are the dream. Time loses its measure and space no longer has distance. One departs from one place and arrives at another – that's all. We remember nothing of the interval between but a vague blur, a thousand confused images of trees, slopes, and landscapes. In the grip of such a hallucination d'Artagnan was carried, at whatever pace his horse chose, across the six leagues between Chantilly and Crèvecœur, and later he couldn't remember a single thing he'd passed or encountered on the road. Only when he arrived did his mind return to the world around him. He shook his head, spotted the cabaret where he'd left Aramis and, putting his horse into a trot, soon pulled up at the door. This time it was not a host but a hostess who received him. D'Artagnan was a physiognomist; at a glance he took in her plump form and round, grinning face and figured there was no need to dissemble with her, or fear anything from anyone with such a cheerful look. "My good lady," asked d'Artagnan, "Can you tell me what's become of my friend, whom we had to leave here about twelve days ago?"

"A handsome young man, twenty-three or twenty-four, nicely mannered, amiable, and well set-up?"

"And wounded in the shoulder?"

"That's him! Well, Sir, he's still here."

"Thank God!" said d'Artagnan, as he dismounted and threw the bridle to Planchet. "My dear lady, you've brought me back to life. *Aramis!* Show me to him, so I can embrace him. I can't tell you how eager I am to see him again!"

"I'm sorry, Sir but I doubt if he'll receive you just now."

"Why not? Is he with a woman?"

"Lord! The things you say! No, poor lad, he's not with a woman."

"Who's he with, then?"

"With the Curate of Mont Didier and the Superior of the Jesuits of Amiens."

"Good God!" cried d'Artagnan. "Is the poor man dying?"

"No, Sir, on the contrary! While recovering from his illness he was touched by grace and decided to become ordained."

"Of course," said d'Artagnan. "I'd forgotten he was only a temporary musketeer."

"Is Sir still eager to see him?"

"More than ever."

"Well, Sir has only to take that stair on the right side of the yard up to No. 5, on the second floor."

D'Artagnan strode off in the direction indicated and found one of those exterior staircases that can still be seen climbing the outer walls of ancient French inns. But it afforded no entry to the lodgings of the future abbot: the door to Aramis's chamber was as fortified as the gardens of Armida for Bazin was stationed outside to bar all passage, emboldened by the thought that, at long last, he was about to see his dreams come true. Poor Bazin had always aspired to serve a man of the Church and had waited impatiently for that day, always delayed, when Aramis would abandon the uniform and don the cassock. Only Aramis's promise, renewed daily, that the moment wasn't far off, had kept him in service to the musketeer – a service in which, he said, he often feared for his very soul. So Bazin was at the apex of joy. It seemed to him that this time his master really meant to go through with it. The combination of physical suffering and a bout of melancholy had produced the effect so long desired: Aramis, afflicted in body and soul, had at last set his eyes and his thoughts on religion. He viewed the double accident that had befallen him – the wound to his shoulder and the complete disappearance of his mistress – as a warning from Heaven. So one can well imagine why, given his master's present disposition, nothing could be more disagreeable to Bazin than the arrival of d'Artagnan, an event that might draw his master back into the turmoil of worldly affairs that had so long distracted him. Bazin resolved to defend the door bravely. Since he'd been betrayed by the inn's hostess he couldn't get away with saying that Aramis was out, so he tried to persuade the new arrival that it would be the height of impropriety to disturb his master during such a pious conference. It had begun that morning, according to Bazin, and probably wouldn't end before nightfall. But d'Artagnan ignored Master Bazin's eloquent plea. He had no intention of getting into a debate with his friend's valet and simply pushed him aside with one hand, while with the other he turned the handle of the door to No. 5. The portal opened and d'Artagnan entered the chamber. Aramis, in a black robe, with a sort of round, flat skullcap on his head, was seated before an oblong table covered with rolls of paper and enormous bound folios. At his right sat the Jesuit superior, and at his left the curate. The curtains were drawn and admitted only the mysterious half-light necessary for mystical reveries. All the everyday things one usually sees when entering a young man's room, especially if that young man is a musketeer, had disappeared as if by magic – for, doubtless fearing the sight of them might give his master worldly ideas, Bazin had taken away sword, pistols, hat, plume, and every evidence of embroidery, lace, and decoration. In place of them, in a dark corner, d'Artagnan thought he could see a knotted scourge hanging from a nail in the wall. At the sound of d'Artagnan coming through the door, Aramis raised his head and recognised his friend. But to the young man's great astonishment, the sight didn't appear to produce much of an impression on the musketeer, so completely was his spirit detached from worldly things. "*Hello*, dear d'Artagnan," said Aramis. "Believe me, I'm very happy to see you."

"The same for me," said d'Artagnan, "though I'm not sure it's really Aramis I'm talking to."

"It's me, my friend, it's me. What makes you doubt it?"

"I was afraid I'd picked the wrong chamber and that I'd entered the cell of some man of the Church. Then another fear took me when I found you in the company of these gentlemen: I was afraid you were seriously ill."

The two men in black, who guessed what d'Artagnan was up to, stabbed him with menacing glares but d'Artagnan paid them no mind. "Maybe I'm disturbing you, my dear Aramis," continued d'Artagnan, "for, based on what I see here, it looks as if you're confessing to these gentlemen."

Aramis blushed faintly. "Disturbing me? You? On the contrary, *dear friend* – I swear it. And as proof, allow me to say that I rejoice to see you safe and sound."

*Ah! He'll come around yet!* D'Artagnan thought. *That's not bad.*

"Sir, here, who is my friend," Aramis continued smoothly, indicating d'Artagnan with an elegant gesture, "has just escaped from serious peril."

"Praise God, Sir," the pair responded, bowing in unison.

"I haven't failed to do so, Your Reverences," replied the young man, returning their salute.

"Your arrival is well-timed, dear d'Artagnan," said Aramis, "and by joining in our discussion, you may enlighten us with your clear thinking. Sir the Superior of Amiens, Sir the Curate of Mont Didier, and I are debating certain theological questions that have occupied us all morning. I'd be delighted to have your opinion."

"The opinion of a man of the sword doesn't carry much weight," replied d'Artagnan, who was beginning to feel uneasy at the turn things were taking. "Believe me, you'd better rely on the expertise of these gentlemen."

The two men in black bowed. "On the contrary," replied Aramis, "your opinion is vital. Here's the issue at hand. Sir Superior thinks that my thesis should be both dogmatic and didactic."

"Your thesis! You're working on a thesis?"

"Necessarily," said the Jesuit. "A thesis is *of rigour* for the examination that precedes ordination."

"Ordination!" cried d'Artagnan, who hadn't really believed what he'd been told by the hostess and by Bazin. "Ordination!" He gazed, stupefied, at the three black-clad figures before him.

"Now," continued Aramis, reclining as gracefully in his armchair as if adorning a Paris salon and complacently examining his hand, as soft and white as a lady's, while holding it up so the blood would drain from it. "Now, as you've heard, d'Artagnan, Sir Superior wants my thesis to be dogmatic, while I would prefer it to be idealised. Thus Sir Superior had proposed to me the following subject that has not been adequately addressed, and in which I admit there is material for magnificent development. To wit: *'Utraque manus in benedicendo clericis inferioribus necessaria est.'*"

D'Artagnan, whose lack of erudition has already been touched upon, showed no more understanding of this Latin quote than he had of Sir Tréville's about the gifts received from the Duke of Buckingham.

"That is to say," Aramis said, for his friend's benefit, "that two hands are indispensable when priests of the lower orders are bestowing benedictions."

"Such an admirable subject!" cried the Jesuit.

"Admirable *and* dogmatic!" added the curate whose Latin was actually no stronger than d'Artagnan's, so he kept a close watch on the Jesuit to keep pace with him and repeated his words like an echo.

As for d'Artagnan, he couldn't quite muster the same enthusiasm for the subject as the two men in black. "Admirable, yes! *Absolutely* admirable!" continued Aramis. "But it requires an exegesis and profound study of the Fathers and the Scriptures. Now, I've confessed to these learned ecclesiastics, and this in all humility that spending my evenings mounting guard in the service of the king has made me neglect study a bit. So I would find myself more at ease, *facilius natans*, in a subject of my own choice that would be to these severe theological questions what morals are to metaphysics in philosophy."

"Such an exordium!" cried the Jesuit.

D'Artagnan was already exhausted – as was the curate. "Exordium," repeated the curate, trying to keep up.

"*Quemadmodum minter coelorum immensitatem*," added the Jesuit.

Aramis glanced at d'Artagnan and saw his friend's jaw gaping open. "Let's speak French, *my dear Father*," he said to the Jesuit. "Sir d'Artagnan will be all the more edified by what we have to say."

"Yes, I'm tired from travelling," said d'Artagnan, "and all this Latin is escaping me."

"But of course," said the Jesuit, irritated – while the curate, who was thrilled, shot d'Artagnan a look of gratitude. The Jesuit cleared his throat. "Very well, let's see what we can derive from this gloss. Moses, the servant of God – and, mark my words, he was no more than a servant! Moses blessed with his hands; he held out *both* arms, to bless the Hebrews as they slaughtered their enemies. I repeat, he blessed them with *two* hands. Besides as says the Gospel: *Imponite manus* – not *manum*. Present the *hands*, not the *hand*."

"Present the hands," repeated the curate, making the gesture.

"Saint Peter, on the other hand – ahem – of whom the popes are the successors," continued the Jesuit, "said, *Ponige digitos*. Present the fingers. You see?"

"Certainly," replied Aramis, enjoying himself, "but the thing is subtle."

"The fingers!" said the Jesuit. "Saint Peter blessed with the fingers. The pope, therefore, also blesses with the fingers. And with how many fingers does he bless? With three fingers: one for the Father, one for the Son, and one for the Holy Spirit."

Everyone crossed himself, including d'Artagnan, who thought he ought to follow their example. "The pope is the successor to Saint Peter," continued the Jesuit, "and represents the Trinity; the rest of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, *ordines inferiores*, blesses in the name of the holy archangels and angels. The humblest clerics, such as deacons and sacristans, bless with holy-water sprinklers that simulate an infinite number of blessing fingers. And that's the subject, simplified: *argumentum omni denudatum ornamento*. Though I could expand it into two volumes the size of this one."

And in his enthusiasm, he rapped a Saint Chrysostom folio so big that it bowed the table with its weight. D'Artagnan shuddered. "*Certainly*," said Aramis, "I acknowledge in all justice the beauty of this thesis. But, at the same time, I humbly recognise that it would be overwhelming for me. I'd chosen another text – and tell me, d'Artagnan, if this isn't more to your taste: '*Non inutile est desiderium in oblatione*.' Or, in other words: *A little regret is not unbecoming in an offering to the Lord*."

"Stop right there!" cried the Jesuit. "That's a thesis that verges upon heresy! There's a proposition similar to it in the *Augustinus* of the heresiarch Jansenius whose book will be burned by the Inquisitors sooner or later. Take care, my young friend! You are leaning toward false doctrines. Take care, or you'll be lost!"

"You'll be lost," said the curate, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"You approach the notorious question of free will that is a deadly reef. You're on the brink of addressing the implications of the Pelagians, not to mention the semi-Pelagians."

"But, Most Reverend," said Aramis, a bit stunned by the hail of arguments raining on his head.

"How will you prove," said the Jesuit, overriding him, "that we should regret the world when we offer ourselves to God? Listen to this dilemma: God is God, and the world is the devil. To regret the world is to regret the devil. *That* is my conclusion."

"And mine as well," said the curate.

"But for heaven's sake..." said Aramis.

"*Desideras diabolum*, O wretched youth!" cried the Jesuit.

"He regrets the devil! Oh, my young friend," moaned the curate, "don't regret the devil, I beg of you!"

D'Artagnan thought he was losing his mind. He seemed to have stumbled into a madhouse, and he felt as if he was becoming as crazy as everyone else. But he held his tongue, as he couldn't understand half of what they were saying. "Hear me out," said Aramis politely but with an edge of impatience. "I don't say *regret*; I'd never say that, it wouldn't be orthodox..."

The Jesuit raised his arms toward heaven, and the curate did the same.

"At least you can agree with me that it would be unbecoming to offer to the Lord that with which we're completely disgusted," said Aramis. "Am I right, d'Artagnan?"

"By God! I should say so," he cried.

The curate and the Jesuit almost jumped from their chairs. "The point I start from is the following syllogism," Aramis continued. "The world doesn't lack for attractions; I give up the world, so I make a sacrifice. Now, Scripture positively says, 'Make a sacrifice unto the Lord.'"

"That is true..." said his antagonists.

"So, then," continued Aramis, pinching his ear to redden it and rubbing his hands to make them whiter, "I made a little rondeau on this last year and showed it to Sir Voiture who gave me a thousand compliments on it."

"A rondeau!" said the Jesuit, disdainfully.

"A rondeau," repeated the curate, mechanically.

"Let's hear it! Let's hear it!" cried d'Artagnan. "It will be a welcome change."

"Not at all, for it's religious," said Aramis. "It's theology in verse."

"*Devil!*" said d'Artagnan.

"Here it is," said Aramis modestly, not without a touch of hypocrisy:

You who weep for times now gone  
Whose days are filled with strife and fears,  
All your sorrows will be done,  
When to God you offer your tears,  
You who weep.

D'Artagnan and the curate rather liked it – but the Jesuit persisted in his disapproval. "Beware of profane tendencies in theological matters," he warned. "What did Saint Augustine say? '*Severus sit clericorum sermo*.'"

"*The sermon should be clear*," said the curate.

"Now," the Jesuit hastily interrupted, seeing his acolyte going astray, "your thesis would please the ladies, of course – it would have the success of one of Master Patru's sermons."

"May it please God!" cried Aramis, transported.

"You see?" cried the Jesuit. "The world still speaks in you in a loud voice, *altissima voce*. You follow the world, my young friend, and I tremble lest efficacious grace not serve to save you."

"Rest assured, Most Reverend, I can answer for myself."

"Worldly presumption!"

"I know myself, *my Father*. My resolution is irrevocable."

"Then you persist in pursuing that thesis?"

"I feel myself called to address that one and no other. I'm going to continue to refine it, and tomorrow I hope you'll be satisfied with the emendations I've made, thanks to your advice."

"Work not in haste," said the curate. "We leave you in an excellent disposition."

"Yes, the furrows are all sown," said the Jesuit, "and we needn't fear that a single seed of grain has fallen on stone, or along the road, or that the birds of heaven have eaten the rest, '*aves coeli coznederunt illam*.'"

"Plague take you with your Latin!" said d'Artagnan who was at the end of his rope.

He'd been gnawing his nails with impatience for the last hour and was beginning to work on the surrounding skin. "Goodbye, my son," said the curate, "until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow, reckless youth," said the Jesuit. "You promise to become one of the lights of the Church; may heaven grant that this light be not a devouring fire!"

The two men in black rose, bowed to Aramis and d'Artagnan, and advanced toward the door. Bazin, who'd been standing and listening to all this controversy with pious joy, sprang toward them, took the curate's breviary and the Jesuit's missal, and marched respectfully before them to clear their way. Aramis conducted them to the foot of the stairs, and then immediately came back up to d'Artagnan, who was still dazed. Left alone, the two friends regarded each other in a wary and embarrassed silence. However, somebody had to be first to break the ice, and as d'Artagnan appeared determined to leave that honour to his friend, Aramis said, "You see that I've returned to my original path."

"Yes, efficacious grace has touched you, as sir the Jesuit said."

"Oh, my plan to retreat from the world was formed long ago. You've heard me speak of it, haven't you, *my friend*?"

"Yes but I confess I always thought you were joking."

"Joking, on such matters? Oh, d'Artagnan!"

"*Dame!* We joke about death, don't we?"

"And wrongly so, d'Artagnan. Death is the door that takes us to perdition or salvation."

"All right, fine. But let's put theology aside. You must have had enough for today; as for me, I've just about forgotten what little Latin I ever knew. Plus, I must confess I've had nothing to eat since ten o'clock this morning, and I'm devilish hungry."

"We dine directly, my friend – only, you must recall that it's Friday, on which day I can't eat meat or see it eaten. I hope you'll be content with sharing my dinner – we're having tetragons and fruit."

"What do you mean by tetragons?" d'Artagnan asked uneasily.

"I mean spinach," replied Aramis, "but for you I'll add some eggs – though it's a grave infraction of the rules, for eggs are meat, since they engender chickens."

"Not a very succulent feast but never mind – I'll put up with it, to be with you."

"Thank you for making such a sacrifice," said Aramis. "It may not do much for your body but rest assured, it will elevate your soul."

"So, you've definitely decided to join the Church? What will our friends say? And Sir Tréville? They'll regard you as a deserter, I warn you."

"I'm not joining the Church, I'm rejoining it. It's the Church that I deserted for the world, and you know I betrayed my true self when I put on the tabard of a musketeer."

"No, I know nothing about it."

"You don't know how I left the seminary?"

"Not a bit."

"Then I'll give you my history. Besides, the Scriptures say, *confess unto others*, so I'll confess unto you, d'Artagnan."

"I give you absolution in advance. See what a good friend I am?"

"Don't joke about sacred things, *my friend*."

"All right – speak, then. I'm listening."

"I'd been at seminary since the age of nine; I was three days short of turning twenty; I was planning to become an abbot, and that was that. One evening, as was my habit, I'd gone to a certain house of joy that I visited frequently and pleasurably – I was young, and what would you have? Youth is weakness. An officer of the guard entered suddenly, unannounced, as I was reading *The Lives of the Saints* to the mistress of the house. I was reading an episode of Judith to her that I'd translated into verse. The lady was paying me all sorts of compliments, and just at that moment she was leaning right up against me as we read the passage over again. The officer had a jealous eye for this lady, and her position that I must admit was rather intimate, wounded his feelings. He said nothing – but when I left, he followed me and brought me up short. 'Sir Abbot,' he said, 'do you like canings?'

'Canings?' I replied. 'I can't say, Sir, as no one has ever dared to give me one.'

'Well, listen to me, Sir Abbot. If you ever return to the house where I found you this evening – I will dare.'

"I think I was frightened. I went pale and felt my legs fail me. I tried to find something to say but could say nothing. The officer waited for a reply but seeing it so long in coming, he laughed, turned on his heel and re-entered the house. I went back to the seminary. I'm a gentleman, my dear d'Artagnan – my blood is noble and sometimes rather hot, as you may have noticed. This was a terrible insult, and even though it was unknown to the rest of the world, it festered within me and gnawed at my heart. I informed my superiors that I didn't feel sufficiently prepared for ordination and, at my request, they postponed the ceremony for a year. I sought out the best master of arms in Paris and contracted with him for daily fencing lessons. Every day, for a year, I took those lessons. Then, on the anniversary of the day I'd been insulted, I hung up my cassock, donned the complete attire of a cavalier, and took myself to a ball given by a lady friend of mine where I knew I would find my man. It was in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, quite near La Force. In fact, my officer was there. I approached him as he sang a love lay to a lady he was making eyes at and interrupted him just in the middle of the second couplet. 'Sir,' I said to him, 'does it still displease you if I return to a certain house in the Rue Payenne, and would you still give me a caning if I took a fancy to disobey you?'

"The officer looked at me with astonishment, then said, 'What do you want with me, Sir? I don't know you.'

"I said, 'I'm the little abbot who read *The Lives of the Saints* and translated Judith into verse.'

'Ah, yes! Now I recall you,' said the officer, mockingly. 'What do you want with me?'

'I'd like you to find the time to take a little walk with me.'

'Tomorrow morning, if that suits you, and with the greatest of pleasure.'

'No. Not tomorrow morning, if you please. Now.'

'If you absolutely insist on it ...'

'I insist.'

'Then let's go. Ladies,' said the officer, 'don't disturb yourselves. Just give me a few minutes to kill sir here, and I'll return to finish the final couplet.' We went out. I led him to the Rue Payenne, to the same spot, at the very hour where a year before he'd paid me the compliment I told you of. It was a superb moonlit night. We drew our swords, and at the first pass, I ran him through."

"The devil!" said d'Artagnan.

"Now," continued Aramis, "as the ladies didn't see their singer return, and as he was found in the Rue Payenne with a great sword wound through his body, it was supposed that I had accommodated him thus, and there was something of a scandal. I had no choice but to renounce the cassock for a while. Athos, whom I'd met around that time, and Porthos, who'd supplemented my fencing lessons by showing me a few lively new thrusts, persuaded me to request the tabard of a musketeer. The king thought well of my father who'd been killed at the siege of Arras and granted me the tabard. But now the moment has come for me to rejoin the bosom of the Church."

"Oh? Why today rather than yesterday or tomorrow? What's happened today to give you these mouldy ideas?"

"This wound, my dear d'Artagnan, was a warning to me from heaven."

"That wound? Bah! It's nearly healed. I'm sure that's not what's giving you the most pain."

"What, then?" demanded Aramis, reddening.

"You have a wound in your heart, Aramis, deeper and more painful – a wound made by a woman."

Despite himself, Aramis's eye flickered. "*There!*" he said, hiding his emotions under a feigned nonchalance. "Don't speak of such things. What makes you think I would have such thoughts? Why should I suffer pains of love? *Vanitas vanitatum!* So you think I've lost my heart, and over who? Some *grisette*, some chambermaid I chased around the barracks? Spare me!"

"Spare *me*, my dear Aramis – for I think you set your sights rather higher."

"Higher? And who am I, to have such ambitions? A poor musketeer, wretched and obscure, who hates servitude and has no real place in the world!"

"Aramis, Aramis!" cried d'Artagnan, giving his friend a sceptical look.

"Dust I am, and to dust I return. Life is full of humiliation and sorrow," Aramis continued sombrely. "All the threads that lead to happiness break when a man grasps them, especially the golden threads. Oh, *my dear* d'Artagnan!" he said, with a touch of bitterness. "Believe me, if you've been hurt, never reveal it! Silence is the last remaining satisfaction of the stricken. Beware of giving voice to your grief – the voyeurs will gloat over your tears the way flies suck the blood of a wounded stag."

"Alas, my dear Aramis," said d'Artagnan, heaving a deep sigh, "That's my own story you tell."

"How's that?"

"It's true. A woman I love, even adore, has been stolen from me – abducted! I don't know where she is or where she's been taken. She may be a prisoner, she may even be dead."

"But at least you can say she didn't leave you voluntarily. If you have no news of her, it's because her messages have been interdicted – while I..."

"While you?"

"Nothing," replied Aramis. "Nothing."

"So, you renounce the world forever? That's it, then – your resolution is unshakable?"

"For all time! Today you're my friend, d'Artagnan but tomorrow you'll be nothing to me but a shadow, or even non-existent. As to the world, it's nothing but a sepulchre."

"The devil! That's the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"What would you have? My vocation calls me – it carries me off." D'Artagnan smiled but said nothing. Aramis continued, "However, as long as I'm still of this earth, let's talk about you, and our friends."

"Personally, I'd prefer to talk about you," said d'Artagnan, "but you're so detached from everything. Spare you from love! Your friends are but shadows! The world is a sepulchre!"

"Alas! You'll see it that way yourself someday," Aramis sighed.

"All right, we'll say no more about it then," said d'Artagnan, "and we'll burn this letter. It probably just contains news of some fresh infidelity on the part of your chambermaid."

"Letter? What letter?" cried Aramis.

"Just a letter that arrived at your place in your absence, and which I brought along for you."

"But who's it from?"

"Some desperate, heartbroken grisette, I imagine. Maybe it's from Madam of Chevreuse's chambermaid, who had to go back to Tours with her mistress. She probably wanted to impress you, so she stole some perfumed paper and sealed her letter with a duchess's coronet."

"What are you saying?"

"Oh, no! I think I've lost it," said the young man maliciously, pretending to search his clothes. "Fortunately, the world is a sepulchre, men – and of course, women – are but shadows and to love you say, 'Spare me!'"

"D'Artagnan, d'Artagnan!" cried Aramis. "You're killing me!"

"*Hey!* Here it is!" said d'Artagnan, and drew the letter from his pocket.

Aramis darted toward him, seized the letter, and read it – or rather, devoured it. His face positively glowed. "Your chambermaid seems to have a pleasing way of writing," said the messenger nonchalantly.

"Thank you, d'Artagnan! Thank you!" cried Aramis, nearly delirious. "She was forced to escape through Tours; she's not faithless, she still loves me! Come here, dear friend, and let me embrace you! I'm drowning in happiness!"

And the two friends danced around the venerable Saint Chrysostom, kicking up the sheets of the thesis that had fallen to the floor. Just then, Bazin entered with the spinach and the omelette. "Be gone, wretch!" cried Aramis, throwing the dish in his face. "Go back where you came from and take these appalling vegetables with you! Send for some stewed rabbit, a savoury chicken, a leg of mutton with garlic, and four bottles of old burgundy!"

Bazin, who couldn't understand what had gotten into his master, sadly let the omelette slide into the spinach, and the spinach slide onto the floor. "This is the moment to consecrate your existence to the King of Kings," said d'Artagnan, "if you still want to tender Him your respects. *'Non inutile desiderium in oblatione.'*" [There's no useless desire in the offering.]

"Go to hell, you with your Latin! Let's drink, my dear d'Artagnan! *Morbleu!* Drink deep, drink heartily – and meanwhile tell me what's been going on out in the big world."

027  
The Wife of Athos

"Now we just need to find some news of Athos," said d'Artagnan to the still-jovial Aramis once he had brought him *up to speed* on everything that had happened since their departure from Paris and an excellent dinner had made the one forget his thesis and the other his fatigue.

"Do you really think he's come to grief?" asked Aramis. "Athos is so cool, so brave, and so skilled with his sword."

"I don't doubt it. No one thinks more of Athos's courage and skill than I do but when armed with a sword I'd rather face steel than wooden clubs. I'm afraid Athos may have been overwhelmed by that mob of ruffians. Such men hit hard and don't quit when their man is down. That's why I want to get going as soon as possible."

"I'll do my best to keep up with you," said Aramis, "though I don't really feel equal to riding yet. Yesterday I undertook to discipline myself with that scourge you see on the wall there but the pain of my shoulder wound cut short my pious exercise."

"It's just as well, my friend. That's the first time I've heard of someone trying to cure a blunderbuss wound with a cat-of-nine-tails. But you were sick, and weak in the head, so you're excused."

"When do you plan to leave?"

"Tomorrow at daybreak. Get as much sleep as you can tonight; tomorrow, if you can manage it, we'll leave together."

"Till tomorrow then," said Aramis. "You'll need sleep, too, even if you *are* a man of iron."

The next morning, when d'Artagnan entered Aramis's room, he found him gazing out the window. "What are you looking at so intently?" d'Artagnan asked.

"My faith! I'm admiring those three magnificent horses the stable boys are leading out. It would be a royal pleasure to travel on mounts like those."

"Well, my dear Aramis, you may have such a pleasure, for one of those horses is yours."

"Do you say so? Which one?"

"Whichever one you like – it's all the same to me."

"And the horse's rich caparison, is that mine, too?"

"No doubt about it."

"Stop joking, d'Artagnan."

"I've given up joking since you gave up Latin for French."

"That silver-studded saddle, the velour trim, those gilded holsters – they're mine?"

"All yours, just as that horse pawing the ground is mine, and the one caracoling belongs to Athos."

"*Plague!* Those are three superb animals!"

"I'm flattered that you find them to your taste."

"Did the king give them to you?"

"It certainly wasn't the cardinal! But don't worry about where they came from; just be glad that one of them is yours."

"I'll have the one led by that red-headed stable boy."

"As you like."

"God!" said Aramis. "That clears up the last of my melancholy. I could ride a horse like that with thirty bullet-wounds. Upon my soul! Have you ever seen such stirrups? *Whoa!* Bazin, come here, and make it snappy."

A sad Bazin reluctantly appeared at the door. "Sharpen my sword, clock my hat, brush my cloak, and load my pistols!" said Aramis.

"That last order is unnecessary," said d'Artagnan. "The pistols in your saddle holsters are already loaded." Bazin sighed. "Come now, Master Bazin – don't be so glum," said d'Artagnan. "People gain the kingdom of heaven in all sorts of ways."

"But sir was such a fine theologian!" said Bazin, almost in tears. "He might have been a bishop, or even a cardinal!"

"Poor Bazin. Look, what's the point of being a man of the Church? It doesn't get you out of going to war – or haven't you noticed that Cardinal Richelieu is already preparing for the next campaign, helmet on head and halberd in hand? And Sir Nogaret of La Valette, what about him? He's a cardinal too. Ask his valet how many times he's had to prepare bandages for him."

"Alas!" sighed Bazin. "It's as you say, Sir. The world is upside-down nowadays."

The two young men and the grieving lackey made their way down stairs. "Hold my stirrup, Bazin," said Aramis.

And he leaped into the saddle with his usual grace and elegance. But the noble horse was lively, and after a few vaults and curvets his rider was so overcome by dizziness and pain that he blanched and almost fell from the saddle. D'Artagnan, who'd foreseen this difficulty and was watching for it, caught Aramis as he fell and helped him back up to his room. "It's all right, Aramis. Just look after yourself," he said. "I'll find Athos on my own."

"You're a man of metal," Aramis said to him.

"No – just lucky, that's all," said d'Artagnan. "But what will you do till I see you again? No more theses, all right? No more glosses on benedictions, with either fingers or hands?"

Aramis smiled. "I think I'll write a few verses," he said.

"Right, perfumed with the aroma of that letter from Madam de Chevreuse's chambermaid. Teach Bazin how to write poetry – it'll console him. As for the horse, ride him a little every day, until you get used to him."

"Oh, don't worry about that," said Aramis. "I'm determined to be ready to follow you."

They bid each other goodbye, and ten minutes later, after commending his friend to the care of Bazin and the hostess, d'Artagnan set off toward Amiens at a trot. *In what condition was he going to find Athos if he could find him at all?* He'd left him in serious trouble, and the musketeer might have succumbed to it. This depressing idea made d'Artagnan sigh repeatedly, and he swore vengeance, if he found that the worst had happened. Athos was the eldest of all his friends and the least like him in tastes and sympathies. And yet, it was Athos who was first in his heart. Athos's distinguished and noble air, the gleams of grandeur that from time to time shone from the shadows in which he hid himself, the unshakable composure that made him the most pleasant of companions, his humour, mordant but not malicious, and the courage that might have been called blind if it hadn't been the product of pure *sangfroid* – d'Artagnan responded to all these qualities with his esteem, his friendship, and more, his admiration. In fact, Athos, on those days when he was in a good humour, even compared well with that superbly elegant and noble courtier, Sir Tréville. He was of average height but so strong and well-proportioned that, when wrestling with Porthos, whose physical might had become proverbial among the musketeers, he'd more than once won out over the giant. His head, with its piercing eyes, straight nose, and chin cut like Brutus's, had an indefinable character of grandeur and grace. His hands that he never bothered to care for, were the despair of Aramis, who cultivated his with the aid of almond paste and perfumed oil. His voice was at once penetrating and melodious. Most surprising of all was that Athos, who was always so retiring, had nonetheless a broad knowledge of the world, particularly of the manners and practices of the highest ranks of society. In fact, the habits of the high nobility showed themselves in even the least of his actions. If a dinner was to be held, Athos organised it better than anyone, placing each guest in the exact rank of precedence that his ancestors had earned for him. If there was a question of heraldry, Athos knew every noble family in the realm: their genealogy, their alliances by marriage, their family arms, and the origin of those arms. No fine detail of etiquette was too minute for him; he was familiar with all the rights and duties of the great landowners; and he was so well-versed in falconry and hunting lore that one day he'd impressed King Louis XIII himself who prided himself on being a past-master in the field. Like all the great nobles of the period, he rode and fought to perfection. But unlike most of the *Grands*, his scholastic education hadn't been overlooked. Porthos pretended to understand the scraps of Latin that Aramis deployed but Athos just smiled at them. Two or three times, to the great astonishment of his friends, he'd even caught Aramis in some fundamental error and restored a verb to its proper tense or a noun to its case. On top of all this, his integrity was irreproachable, in a century when men of war routinely trampled on the dictates of conscience and religion, lovers behaved without the least delicacy or decorum, and the poor roundly ignored God's seventh commandment. In short, Athos was an extraordinary man. And yet, this nature so distinguished, this creature so handsome, this essence so fine, daily drifted more and more into a dull and sluggish apathy, as old men fall into mental and physical decay. Athos's blackest moods – and these moods were frequent – extinguished his bright virtues one by one, until he was nothing but a figure of shadow. When the demigod disappeared, the remnant was barely a man. His head drooped, his eyes dulled, his speech became slow and painful. Athos would spend hours gazing blankly at his bottle, his glass, or at Grimaud who, accustomed to obey him by signs and gestures, read in the merest glance of his master his least desire and satisfied it immediately. If the four friends were together during one of these moods, a single word, produced with great effort, might be all that Athos contributed to the conversation. However, he drank enough for four, without any effect but a gradual furrowing of his brow as he slid deeper into melancholy. D'Artagnan, whose inquiring and penetrating mind we are familiar with, had never been able to discern the cause of this melancholy, or to detect a pattern in these moods, despite his fascination with the subject. Athos never received any letters and never had any secret business he kept from his friends. honey couldn't be blamed for his dark moods, for he drank only to fight his melancholy – though the remedy only made him more sombre. His excess of the evil humours couldn't be attributed to gambling, for unlike Porthos, who trumpeted his changes of fortune with songs or oaths, Athos was as impassive when he won as when he lost. Among the musketeers he'd been known in a single evening to win three thousand *pistoles*, then lose down to a gold-embroidered belt that had seen better days, then regain it all, plus a hundred crowns over, without his shapely eyebrows rising or falling a hair, his hands losing their pearly pallor, or his conversation that was agreeable that evening, ceasing for a moment to be calm and amiable. Nor was it, as with our neighbours the English, the influence of the weather that darkened his outlook, for his melancholy deepened as the weather improved: for Athos, the most terrible months were June and July. He couldn't care less about the present; he shrugged his shoulders when people spoke of the future; his secret must be in the past – or so d'Artagnan thought. This mysterious shadow coloured Athos's whole personality, rendering him all the more fascinating. Even at his most drunken he never revealed anything, by eye or by mouth, no matter how adroitly he might be questioned. "Well," muttered d'Artagnan, "poor Athos might even now be dead – thanks to me, for I'm the one who dragged him into this affair. He never knew the start of it, will never know how it ended and never had anything to gain from it anyway."

"Not to mention, Sir," added Planchet, "that we probably owe our lives to him. Do you recall how he shouted, *Ride on, d'Artagnan! I'm taken?* And after firing his pistols, what a terrible racket he made with his sword? It sounded like twenty men – or rather twenty devils!"

These words only made d'Artagnan even more eager. He urged his horse on – pointlessly, as it was already carrying its rider at a gallop. About eleven in the morning they came in sight of Amiens. By half-past eleven they were at the door of the fatal inn. D'Artagnan had given a lot of thought to what sort of revenge he might take on the treacherous host, fantasies that had been at least some consolation. Now he entered the inn with his hat pulled down over his eyes, his left hand on the pommel of his sword, while with his right he gestured menacingly with his riding crop. The host advanced, bowing. "Remember me?" d'Artagnan said.

"I have not that honour, sir," the host replied, dazzled by the brilliant equipage on d'Artagnan's mount and by the youth's high-and-mighty manner.

"You really don't know me?"

"No, My Lord!"

"Well, a couple of words will restore your memory. What have you done with that gentleman who, about fifteen days ago, you had the audacity to accuse of counterfeiting?"

The host paled at d'Artagnan's menacing attitude that was echoed by Planchet. "Ah, My Lord! Don't even bring it up!" he cried in a pathetic tone. "Oh, Sir! How I've paid for that mistake! Of all the rotten luck!"

"That gentleman, I say – what's happened to him?"

"Only deign to listen to me, Sir, and go easy on me. Sit down, please, I beg you."

D'Artagnan, mute with anger and anxiety, sat like a judge about to pronounce sentence. Planchet stood behind him, looking fierce. "Here's the story, My Lord," the host said, trembling. "I remember you now – it was you who departed during the unfortunate dispute with the gentleman you mentioned."

"Yes, that was me. So you see you can expect no mercy if you fail to tell me the whole truth."

"Just listen to me, and you'll know everything."

"I'm listening."

"I'd been warned by the authorities that a notorious counterfeiter would stop at my inn with several companions, all disguised as guards or musketeers. Your horses, your lackeys, your descriptions were given to me complete."

"And so?" said d'Artagnan who had a good idea where such exact descriptions had come from.

"So, following the orders of the authorities, who sent me a reinforcement of six men, I took such measures as I thought would assure me of getting hold of these counterfeiters."

"Watch your language!" said d'Artagnan, deeply wounded by the word *counterfeiter*.

"Pardon me, Sir, for saying such things but it's part of my sad story. The authorities had put the fear of God into me, and you know that an innkeeper has to stay on the good side of the authorities."

"I ask one more time: the gentleman, *where is he?* What happened to him? Is he dead? Is he alive?"

"Patience, My Lord, we're getting there. So, things fell out as you know, including your rapid departure that seemed," added the host, with a finesse that didn't escape d'Artagnan, "to confirm your description. Sir your friend defended himself desperately. His lackey, who'd had the bad luck to quarrel with some of those reinforcements, who were disguised as stable boys..."

"You miserable wretch!" cried d'Artagnan. "You were all in it together! I don't know what stops me from exterminating the lot of you!"

"Alas! No, My Lord, we weren't all in on it, as you'll soon see. Sir your friend – and pardon my not calling him by the honourable name he doubtless carries, as I'm still ignorant of it – sir your friend, having put two men *hors of combat* with two pistol shots, fell back defending himself with his sword that crippled another one of my men, and stunned me with a blow from the flat of it."

"Get to the point, you torturer!" said d'Artagnan. "Athos, what happened to Athos?"

"While beating a retreat, as I told My Lord, he found the stairs to the cellar behind him, and as the door was open, he darted inside, took out the key, and barricaded the door. After that, since we knew where to find him, we left him alone."

"I see," said d'Artagnan. "You didn't necessarily want to kill him, just imprison him."

"God's name! Imprison him, My Lord? I swear, he imprisoned himself. But not before he'd done some rough work: one man shot dead, and two others badly wounded. The dead man and the two wounded were carried off by their comrades, and I haven't heard of any of them since. As for myself, when I regained my wits, I went to find Sir the Governor of Amiens. I told him everything that had happened and asked him what I should do with the prisoner. But Sir the Governor told me he knew absolutely nothing about the matter, that the orders I'd received hadn't come from him, and that if I dared to mention his name in connection with this mess he'd have me hanged! It seems I'd made a mistake. Sir: I'd arrested the wrong man, and the one I should have arrested got away."

"But Athos?" cried d'Artagnan, more impatient than ever upon hearing how the authorities had abandoned the matter. "What happened to Athos?"

"Of course, I was anxious to amend the wrongs I'd done the prisoner," replied the innkeeper, "so I made my way to the cellar to set him free. But, Sir, he was no longer a man, he was a devil! He declared that my offer of liberty was a trap, and that before he came out he intended to impose his own conditions. I told him, very humbly – for I couldn't help but realise the trouble I was in by having laid hands on one of His Majesty's Musketeers – I told him I was quite ready to submit to his conditions. 'First,' he said, 'send me my lackey, fully armed.' We hurried to obey him, for as you can imagine, Sir, we were eager to do whatever your friend wanted. Sir Grimaud – who told us his name, though he doesn't talk much – Sir Grimaud went down to the cellar, wounded though he was. Then his master, after taking him in, re-barricaded the door and ordered us back upstairs."

"So where is he now?" cried d'Artagnan.

"In the cellar, Sir."

"How can that be, you wretch? Have you kept him in the cellar all this time?"

"Merciful heaven! No, Sir. Us, keep him in the cellar? You don't know what he's up to in that cellar! Oh, if only you could get him out, Sir, I'd be grateful all my life – you'd be my patron saint!"

"So he's still there, and that's where I'll find him?"

"I don't doubt it, Sir – he won't leave! Every day we pass some bread to him through the window vent on a pitchfork, as well as some meat when he asks for it ... but it's not bread or meat that he consumes the most of. I once tried to go in there with two of my serving boys but he flew into a terrible fury. I heard the sound of him loading his pistols while his lackey loaded his musketoon. When we asked what they intended to do, the master said that he and his lackey had forty rounds between them and they planned to fire every shot before he'd allow a single one of us to set foot in the cellar. So, Sir, I went and complained to the Governor, who told me I got only what I deserved, and that it ought to teach me not to insult honourable gentlemen who stopped at my inn."

"So, since then...?" said d'Artagnan, unable to keep from laughing at the host's pathetic expression.

"Since then, Sir, our lives have been miserable. For Sir must know that all our provisions are in that cellar: the honey, in bottles and barrels, the beer, the oil, spices, lard, sausages, and so on. And since we're not allowed down there, we have to refuse food and drink to our customers, so that day by day our business is going to hell. One more week of your friend in my cellar and we're ruined."

"As is only just, you buffoon. Couldn't you tell, by looking at us, that we were gents of quality and not counterfeiters?"

"Yes, you're right, of course, Sir," said the host. "But wait, there he goes again!"

"Someone provoked him, no doubt," said d'Artagnan.

"But we couldn't help disturbing him! We've got these two English gentlemen who've just arrived."

"So what?"

"Well, the English like good honey, as you probably know, Sir, and these have demanded our best. My wife has begged Sir Athos for permission to enter to satisfy these gentlemen but he's refused, like always. Ah! Merciful heaven! There he goes again, louder than ever!"

In fact, d'Artagnan could hear an uproar from the direction of the cellar. He rose and, preceded by the hand-wringing host, and followed by Planchet, who was armed with his musketoon, they approached the source of the commotion. The two English gentlemen were fed up. "We've had a long ride and we're dying of hunger and thirst!" cried one of them, in very good French, though with a foreign accent. "It's sheer tyranny that this madman won't allow these good people access to their own honey. Come on! Let's break down the door, and if he persists in his madness, well ... we'll just have to kill him."

"Relax, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, drawing his pistols from his belt. "Let's not kill anyone, if you please."

"Excellent," said Athos' calm voice from beyond the door. "But why not let them come in, these child-eaters, and see what happens?"

Brave though they undoubtedly were, the two English gentlemen looked at each other and hesitated. It was almost as if they stood before the cave of a ravenous ogre, one of those gigantic creatures of legend into whose cavern none could enter with impunity. There was a moment of silence; but in the end the two Englishmen were too proud to retreat. The more impatient of the two descended the five or six steps of the stairs and gave the door a kick that could crack a wall. "Planchet," said d'Artagnan, cocking his pistols, "I'll take the one at the top of the steps and you take the one below. Now, gentlemen, if you want a fight, I'll give you one!"

"My God," cried the disembodied voice of Athos, "That sounds like d'Artagnan!"

"In person," said d'Artagnan, raising his own voice. "It's me, my friend."

"Very well, then," said Athos, "together we'll do some work on these door-breakers!"

The gentlemen had drawn their swords but they found themselves taken between two fires. They hesitated a moment more but as before, pride won out, and a second kick split the door-panel from top to bottom. "Stand aside, d'Artagnan," cried Athos, "I'm going to fire."

"Gentlemen!" said d'Artagnan, who never stopped thinking. "Athos, be patient a moment. Gentlemen, consider! You're making a bad move – you're just going to be shot full of holes. My lackey and I have three shots at you, and you'll get as many from the cellar. Then we have our swords, and I assure you, my friend and I are quite passable with the blades. Let me handle this for both sides. You'll have something to drink soon enough, I give you my word."

"If there's any left," jeered the voice of Athos.

The innkeeper felt a cold chill run down his spine. "If there's any left!" he murmured.

"What the devil! Of course there's some left," said d'Artagnan. "Those two can't possibly have drunk the whole cellar. Take my word for it, gentlemen, and return your swords to their scabbards."

"All right if you put your pistols back in your belt."

"Gladly."

And d'Artagnan set the example. He made a sign to Planchet to un-cock his musketoon. The Englishmen, convinced by this, sheathed their swords, though not without some surliness. They were then told the story of Athos's imprisonment and as they were truly gentlemen, they held the host accountable. "Now, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, "go back up to your room and, inside ten minutes, you'll have everything you want – I'll answer for it."

The Englishmen bowed and departed. "Now that it's just me, my dear Athos, pray open the door," said d'Artagnan.

"This instant," said Athos.

They heard the sound of planks being tossed aside and beams groaning, as the besieged demolished his own counterscarps and barricades. A minute later the gashed door was thrust aside and the pale face of Athos appeared, taking in the environs with a quick glance. D'Artagnan grabbed him by the shoulders and embraced him tenderly. He then tried to draw Athos out of his damp lair but was surprised when Athos staggered. "Are you wounded?" he said.

"Wounded? Not the least in the world. I'm drunk, that's all – and no man has ever done a better job of it! God's life, my host but since I've been down here, I must have drunk at least a hundred and fifty bottles."

"The Lord have mercy!" cried the host. "If the lackey has drunk half as much as the master, I'm ruined!"

"Grimaud is a lackey from a good house and would never presume to imitate his master. He drank only from the barrels. But you know, I don't think he remembered to put the bung back. Hear that? It's running."

D'Artagnan broke into a laugh while the host went from chills to fever. Meanwhile, Grimaud appeared behind his master, musketoon on his shoulder, his head shaking like one of those drunken satyrs in the paintings of Rubens. He was drenched fore and aft with what the host recognised as his best olive oil. The cortège crossed the public room and installed itself in the best chamber in the house that d'Artagnan took by right of conquest. Meanwhile, the host and his wife grabbed lamps and ran down into the cellar, so long denied to them. A frightful scene was waiting beyond the fortifications that Athos had breached in order to escape, and which were built of logs, planks, and empty barrels, assembled according to the defensive arts of war. There they found, swimming in a sea of oil and honey, the bones of all the hams Athos and Grimaud had eaten. A pile of broken bottles cluttered the whole left-hand corner of the cellar, and a barrel, the bung of which was still open, was trickling out the last drop of its blood. Of fifty sausages that had been hanging from the rafters, virtually none were left. As the poet of antiquity says: *The image of devastation and death reigned as over a field of battle.*

Then the howling of the host and hostess was heard coming up through the floor. Even d'Artagnan was moved; Athos didn't even turn his head. But grief was followed by fury. In his despair, the host armed himself with a spit and charged into the chamber taken by the two friends. "Some honey!" said Athos, on seeing the host.

"Some honey!" cried the host, stupefied. "Some honey! But you've already drunk more than a hundred *pistoles*' worth. I'm a ruined man! Lost! Annihilated!"

"Bah!" said Athos. "We were thirsty."

"If you'd stopped at drinking, fine – but you broke the rest of the bottles!"

"It's your own fault – you pushed me onto a stack that tumbled down."

"All my oil is lost!"

"Oil is a sovereign balm for wounds, and poor Grimaud had to treat the wounds you'd inflicted on him."

"All my sausages, gnawed!"

"There are a lot of rats in that cellar."

"You're going to pay me for everything!" railed the host.

"You triple buffoon," said Athos, getting up.

But he immediately fell back; he'd reached the end of his strength. D'Artagnan came to his rescue, raising his riding crop menacingly. The host stumbled backward, then burst into tears. D'Artagnan said, "This ought to teach you to treat the guests God sends you more courteously."

"God! You mean the devil!"

"My dear friend," said d'Artagnan, "if you abuse our ears this way, all four of us are going to shut ourselves up in your cellar, and then we'll see if things are as bad as you say."

"Oh, Gentlemen! Gentlemen," said the host, "I confess I've been wrong but have you no mercy? You are noblemen, and I'm just a poor innkeeper. Have pity on me!"

"If you put it that way," said Athos, "you'll break my heart and the tears will flow from my eyes like the honey ran from your barrels. We're not the devils we seem to be. Come here and let's talk about it."

The host approached, somewhat uneasily. "Come here, I say, and don't be afraid," Athos said. "At the moment I was about to pay you, you may remember, I'd put my purse on the table."

"Yes, my Lord."

"That purse contained sixty *pistoles*. Where is it?"

"In the justice clerk's office, my Lord. They said it was counterfeit money."

"Very well – retrieve my purse and keep the sixty *pistoles*."

"But my Lord knows that justice never let's go of anything it gets its hands on. If it were really counterfeit, we might have some hope but if it's genuine money..."

"Do the best you can, my worthy. It's nothing to do with me, especially since I haven't a *livre* left."

"Not so fast," said d'Artagnan. "Where is Athos's old horse?"

"In the stable."

"What's it worth?"

"Fifty *pistoles* – maybe."

"It's worth *eighty pistoles*. Take it, and call it quits."

"What do you mean by selling my horse?" said Athos. "My good old Bazajet? How am I going to ride to campaign? On Grimaud?"

"I've brought you another," said d'Artagnan.

"Another?"

"A magnificent steed!" cried the host.

"Fine. If there's another, stronger and younger, I give you the old. Let's drink!"

"What will you have?" asked the host, his serenity restored.

"Some of those on the bottom rack. There are still around twenty-five bottles left; all the others were broken by my fall. Bring us six of them."

"This man is a human barrel!" the host said to himself. "If he stays here a fortnight – and actually pays for what he drinks – my business will be restored twice over."

"And don't forget," said d'Artagnan, "to bring up four bottles of the same for those English nobles."

"Now," said Athos, "while we're waiting on the honey, tell me, d'Artagnan, what's become of the others."

D'Artagnan related how he'd found Porthos in bed with a sprain and Aramis in a debate with two theologians. As he finished, the host returned with the requested honey as well as a ham that, fortunately for him, had been left out of the cellar. "Excellent," said Athos, filling his glass and d'Artagnan's. "Here's to Porthos and Aramis! But you, my friend, what's happened to you personally? There's something sad behind your smile."

"Alas!" said d'Artagnan. "I'm the unluckiest of us all."

"You, unlucky, d'Artagnan?" said Athos. "What makes you so unlucky? Tell me about it."

"Later," said d'Artagnan.

"Later? Why do you say that? ... Oh, you think I'm drunk, don't you, d'Artagnan? Well, understand this: I never think so clearly as when I've been drinking. Tell me – I'm all ears."

D'Artagnan related his adventure with Madam Bonacieux. Athos listened impassively, and then said, when he was finished: "Mere trifles – nothing but trifles."

"I knew it! You always say 'trifles,' Athos. That doesn't carry much weight from you, who've never been in love."

For a moment, Athos's eyes flickered, then returned to a honey-dulled vacancy. "Quite so," he said placidly. "Me, I've never been in love."

"Then admit, stone-heart, that it's wrong for you to be so hard on those whose hearts are tender," said d'Artagnan.

"Tender hearts!" spat Athos. "Wounded hearts!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that love is a lottery in which the winner wins death! Believe me, d'Artagnan, you're lucky to have lost her. If you take my advice, you'll lose every time."

"She seemed so much in love with me!"

"She *seemed*."

"No! She *did* love me!"

"Child! There's not a man alive who hasn't believed, like you that his mistress loves him, and there's not a man alive who hasn't been betrayed by his mistress."

"Except you, Athos, who's never had one."

"That's true," said Athos, after a moment of silence. "I've never had one. Let's drink!"

"But since you're such a philosopher," said d'Artagnan, "instruct me and support me. I need wisdom and consolation."

"Consolation? For what?"

"For my misfortune."

Athos shrugged his shoulders. "Your so-called misfortune is a joke. I wonder what you'd say if you heard a real story of love."

"Did it happen to you?"

"To me, or to a friend of mine. It hardly matters."

"Tell it, Athos. Tell it."

"Let's drink. The tale will go better."

"Drink up, then, and speak on."

"Up and on it shall be," said Athos, emptying his glass and refilling it. "The two things go marvellously well together."

"I'm all attention," said d'Artagnan.

Athos collected himself, and as he did so, d'Artagnan saw his skin grow even paler. He was in that phase of intoxication when less mighty drinkers drop off into sleep. But Athos stayed up, and dreamed without sleeping. There was something almost frightful in this drunken somnambulism. "You're sure you want it?" he asked.

"Please go on, Athos," said d'Artagnan.

"As you wish, then. One of my friends – mark me, not myself," Athos said, interrupting himself with a melancholy smile. "One of the counts of my province of Berry, a man as noble as a Dandolo or a Montmorency fell in love at age twenty-five with a girl of sixteen, as beautiful as love itself. Though she had the naïveté of youth, her passionate mind glowed with the spirit, not of a woman but of a poet. She was more than just pleasing, she was ... intoxicating. She lived in a small town with her brother, who was a curate. They'd arrived in the country recently, though no one knew from where. But seeing her so lovely, and her brother so pious, nobody was suspicious of their origin. It was said that they were of good extraction. My friend, who was lord of the county, might have seduced her if he desired, or even taken her by force. He was the master there – and who would have come to the aid of two unknown strangers? Unfortunately, he was an honourable man – he married the girl. The fool! The ass! The imbecile!"

"Why do you say that, if he loved her?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Just listen," said Athos. "He took her to his château and made her the first lady of the province. And in all justice, she bore her new rank supremely well."

"And then?" asked d'Artagnan.

"And then, one day, while riding to the hunt with her husband," continued Athos, speaking rapidly in a low voice, "she fell from her horse and swooned. The count leaped to her aid. She seemed to be constricted by her tangled clothes, so he ripped them open with his dagger and thus exposed her shoulder. Can you guess, d'Artagnan, what she had on her shoulder?" said Athos with a burst of hysterical laughter.

"How could I know?" d'Artagnan said.

"She had a *fleur-de-lys*," said Athos. "She'd been branded."

And he tilted back the glass in his hand and emptied it in a single swallow. "That's horrible!" cried d'Artagnan. "What are you saying?"

"Only the truth. My friend, the angel was a devil. The poor young girl was a branded criminal – a thief, or worse."

"What did the count do?"

"The count was a *grand*, one of the great nobles; on his land, he had the right of the high and the low justice. He tore up the countess's dress, tied her hands behind her, and hanged her from a tree."

"Heavens, Athos! A murder!" cried d'Artagnan.

"Yes, a murder: nothing more nor less," said Athos, pale as death. "But it seems to me they've let me run out of honey."

And Athos grabbed the last bottle by the neck, put it to his mouth, and drained it in a single draught as if it were an ordinary glass. Then he let his head fall into his hands. D'Artagnan stood before him, paralysed. Eventually Athos raised his head. "That has cured me of beautiful, poetic, and loving women," he said, dropping the pretence of the nameless count. "May God do as much for you, let's drink!"

"Then she's dead?" babbled d'Artagnan.

"*For God's sake!*" said Athos. "Just give me your glass. Some ham, buffoon!" he cried. "And we have nothing to drink!"

"What about ... her brother?" d'Artagnan added timidly.

"Her brother?" said Athos.

"Yes – the curate."

"Ah! I inquired after him, so as to hang him in his turn but he was ahead of me, having left the curacy somewhat abruptly."

"But at least you must have figured out who this wretch was?"

"No doubt he was the first lover, and accomplice, of the fair lady – a worthy man who'd pretended to be a curate to help get his mistress married into a secure position. He'll have been hanged and quartered by now, I should hope."

"My God! My God!" d'Artagnan repeated, stunned by this horrible tale.

"Have some of this ham, d'Artagnan; it is exquisite," said Athos, cutting a slice and placing it on the young man's plate. "Too bad there were only four like it in the cellar! I'd have drunk fifty more bottles."

D'Artagnan's head was spinning; he felt he couldn't handle any more of this insane conversation. He let his head drop onto his hands and pretended to fall asleep. "None of these youngsters know how to drink nowadays," said Athos, with a pitying look. "And yet, this is one of the best of them!"

028  
The Return

D'Artagnan was still stunned by Athos's terrible confession, though many things in that incomplete story were yet unclear. In the first place, it had been made by a man drunk out of his mind, to a listener who was half-drunk out of his mind. However, despite a brain fogged by two or three bottles of burgundy, when d'Artagnan awoke the following morning every one of Athos's words was graven on his memory, impressed permanently in his mind as if they'd just come from Athos's lips. The vagaries in the story raised questions that only made d'Artagnan even more determined to know the answers, and he went to his friend's room with the firm intention of renewing the conversation of the previous night. But he found Athos restored to his usual composure, in which he was the most impenetrable of men. In any event, the musketeer, after a firm, welcoming handshake, was the first to bring up the matter. "I was quite drunk last night, my dear d'Artagnan," he said. "I can tell because this morning my tongue was swollen and my pulse was agitated. I'll wager I spoke a thousand follies."

As he said this, he examined his friend with a gaze so direct that d'Artagnan was quite embarrassed. "Not at all," replied d'Artagnan. "I can't recall that you said anything out of the ordinary."

"You surprise me! I thought I'd related a most lamentable story to you."

And he looked at the young man as if trying to read the depths of his heart. "My faith!" said d'Artagnan. "I must have been even more drunk than you since I remember nothing of the kind."

Athos wasn't persuaded. He said, "You've probably noticed, my friend that everyone has his own style of intoxication, whether sad or merry. My drunkenness is the sad kind, and when I'm far gone I tend to relate all the grim stories my dour old nurse used to fill my head with. That's my vice – and I'll admit, it's a serious one. Otherwise, I'm a good drinker."

Athos said this so nonchalantly that d'Artagnan was shaken in his conviction. "Oh, so that's it, is it?" replied the young man. Eager for the truth, he said, "I just remember something as if from a dream. I think we were talking about hanging people."

"Ah! You see how it is," Athos said, turning pale but trying to laugh. "I thought it was that. Hanging is my particular nightmare."

"Yes, yes," continued d'Artagnan, "it's coming back to me now. Yes, it was about ... wait a moment ... it was about a woman."

"Exactly," replied Athos, face a sickly grey. "That's my grand story of the fair lady. When I tell that one, I must be nearly dead drunk."

"Yes, that's it," said d'Artagnan. "The story of a fair lady, tall and beautiful, with blue eyes."

"Yes – who was hanged?"

"By her husband, who was a nobleman of your acquaintance," continued d'Artagnan, looking intently at Athos.

"Well, that shows how a man can compromise himself when he doesn't know what he's saying." Athos shrugged his shoulders, as if he thought he ought to be pitied. "Decidedly, I must give up getting drunk, d'Artagnan. It's too vulgar a habit."

D'Artagnan said nothing. Athos tried to change the subject. "By the way, thank you for that horse you brought me."

"Does it suit you?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Yes but it's no horse for stamina."

"That's where you're wrong. I've ridden him ten leagues in less than an hour and a half, at the end of which he was breathing no harder than if I'd just taken him for a turn around the Place Saint-Sulpice."

"Dear me. I begin to have regrets."

"Regrets?"

"Yes; I've parted with him."

"How's that?"

Athos shrugged. "I woke up this morning at six o'clock; you were sleeping like the dead, and I didn't know what to do with myself. I was still rather dazed from last night's debauch. I went downstairs to the public room, where I saw one of our English friends bargaining with a horse-trader for a new mount, his old one having died of a haemorrhage. As I approached, I overheard him offering a hundred *pistoles* for a worn-out chestnut nag. 'By God, Sir,' I said, 'I have a horse to sell too.'

'And a very handsome one,' he said. 'I saw him yesterday, when your friend's lackey was leading him.'

'Do you think he's worth a hundred *pistoles*?'

'Yes! Would you sell him to me for that price?'

'No but I'll game with you for him.'

'What game?'

'Dice.' No sooner said than done – and I lost the horse. But wait! Listen!" continued Athos. "I won back the caparison."

D'Artagnan made a face. "This displeases you?" said Athos.

"Yes, I confess it does," replied d'Artagnan. "That horse was intended to help us win glory on the day of battle. It was a pledge, a keepsake. Athos, you've done wrong."

"My dear friend, put yourself in my place," said the musketeer. "I was dying of boredom – and besides, I've never liked English horses. If all we want to do is look glorious, the saddle will suffice for that – it's remarkable enough on its own. As to the horse, we can always find some reason for its disappearance. What the devil! A horse is mortal; suppose mine came down with glanders or even farcy?"

D'Artagnan wasn't amused. "It grieves me that you appear so attached to these animals," continued Athos, "as my story isn't over."

"What else have you done?"

"After having lost my own horse, rolling nine against ten – you see how close it was! – the idea came to me of staking yours."

"But it was just an idea ... wasn't it?"

"No, I put it into action on the instant."

"Ow! And the result?" asked d'Artagnan uneasily.

"I threw, and lost."

"My horse?"

"Your horse. Seven against eight, just a pip shy – but you know the proverb."

"Athos, I swear, you must be out of your mind!"

"My friend, you should have told me that last night, when I was telling you foolish stories, and not this morning. Anyway, I lost him, with all his equipage."

"But this is awful!"

"Listen a moment, we're not at the end yet. I'd make an excellent gambler if I weren't so impulsive. But there it is; I was impulsive and..."

"But what else could you stake, if you had nothing left?"

"Ah but I did, I did, my friend! There was still that diamond that glitters on your finger, and which I'd noticed yesterday."

"This diamond!" cried d'Artagnan, clapping his hand over his ring.

"And as I'm a connoisseur of such things, having once had a few of my own, I estimated its value at a thousand *pistoles*."

"Please tell me," said d'Artagnan, scared half to death, "that you didn't mention my diamond."

"On the contrary, dear friend. You must understand, this diamond had become our sole resource; with it, I could regain our horses and their equipment, and maybe some extra money for the road."

"Athos, you're making me really nervous," said d'Artagnan.

"I described your diamond to my opponent, who'd also noticed it. What the devil! You strut around with a star from heaven on your finger and you think nobody pays any attention? Impossible!"

"Please get to the point!" said d'Artagnan. "Upon my honour, you're killing me with your nonchalance!"

"So, we divided the diamond into ten parts, of a hundred *pistoles* each."

"You're making this all up, aren't you?" said d'Artagnan. Anger was beginning to take him by the hair, as Minerva takes Achilles in *The Iliad*. "You're pulling my leg."

"I certainly am not. Joking? *God!* I'd like to see what you would have done in my place! Especially if you hadn't seen a human face for a fortnight and had no one but bottles for company."

"That's no reason for staking my diamond!" said d'Artagnan, clenching his hand nervously.

"Hear me out. Ten parts, at a hundred *pistoles* each, so therefore ten throws, with no revenge allowed. After thirteen throws, I'd lost it all. Thirteen! That's always been my unlucky number. It was on the thirteenth of July that I..."

"God's *guts!*" cried d'Artagnan, leaping to his feet.

This morning's story had made him forget last night's. "Patience," said Athos calmly. "I had a plan. This Englishmen was an eccentric; I'd seen him talking earlier with Grimaud, and Grimaud had said that he'd tried to hire him into his service. So, I staked Grimaud, old silent Grimaud, divided into ten parts."

"Ah! That was a stroke!" said d'Artagnan, laughing despite himself.

"Grimaud himself, mark me! And with these ten parts of Grimaud that aren't worth the tenth part of a *ducat*, I won back the diamond. Now, tell me persistence isn't a virtue."

"My faith, that's funny!" cried d'Artagnan, somewhat consoled and holding his sides with laughter.

"So, naturally, seizing the moment, I once again staked the diamond."

"The devil!" said d'Artagnan, taken aback.

"I won back your equipage, then your horse, then my equipage, then my horse – then I lost again. To sum up, I managed to retrieve your horse furniture and mine. That's where we are. My final throw was superb, so I decided to leave well enough alone."

D'Artagnan could breathe again; he felt like the weight of the whole inn had been on his chest. "So I still have my diamond?" he asked timidly.

"Intact! Plus, my dear friend, the furniture of your Bucephalus and mine."

"But what's the point of horse-furniture without horses?"

"I have an idea about that."

"Athos, you're scaring me again."

"No but listen: you haven't gambled in quite a while, have you, d'Artagnan?"

"Nor do I want to!"

"Never say never. As I said, you haven't gambled in some time, so your luck ought to be in."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well! That Englishman and his companion are still here. I noticed he was very sorry not to get your equipment. You appear quite attached to your horse. In your place, I would stake the equipment against the horse."

"But he won't want just one set of equipment."

"Then stake both, by God! I'm not the selfish one here."

"You would really do that?"

D'Artagnan was wavering; Athos had more influence over him than even he realised. "Word of honour. I'd risk all on a single throw."

"But having lost the horses, I really would like to keep the furniture at least."

"Stake your diamond then."

"This? Never! That's another thing entirely."

"The devil!" said Athos. "I'd propose that you stake Planchet but the way things worked out last time the Englishman might not be willing."

"My dear Athos, I'd rather not risk anything."

"That's a shame," said Athos coolly. "That Englishman is positively stuffed with *pistoles*. Good God, man! Just try one throw. One throw is nothing!"

"And if I lose?"

"You'll win!"

"But if I lose?"

"Then you give up the furniture."

"All right. One throw," said d'Artagnan.

Athos went to find the Englishman and discovered him in the stable, casting a covetous eye on their saddles. It was the perfect moment, and Athos proposed his conditions: both sets of furniture against one horse or a hundred *pistoles*, winner's choice. The Englishman made a quick calculation: the furnishings were worth three hundred *pistoles* per set. He agreed. D'Artagnan's hands trembled as he threw the dice. A two and a one: three. Athos was alarmed by his friend's pallor but merely said, "That was one sad throw, comrade. It looks like you're going to have those horses fully furnished, Sir." The Englishman, triumphant, didn't even bother to shake the dice – he was so sure of victory, he just threw them on the table without looking at them. D'Artagnan had turned away to hide how badly he was taking the loss. "My, my, my," said Athos, in his quiet voice. "That's an extraordinary throw, something I've seen only four times in my life: two aces!"

The Englishman looked, and froze in astonishment. D'Artagnan, on the other hand, nearly jumped for joy. "Yes," continued Athos, "only four times. Once at Sir Créquy's; another time at my country château at – that is, when I had a château; a third time at Sir Tréville's, where it surprised all of us; and the fourth time at a cabaret, where it fell to me. I lost a hundred crowns and a supper on it."

"Then Sir takes back his horse?" said the Englishman.

"Certainly," said d'Artagnan.

"No chance of revenge?"

"No revenge: that was the condition. Remember?"

"Quite so. The horse shall be brought to your lackey, Sir."

"One moment," said Athos. "With your permission, Sir, I'd like to have a word with my friend, here."

"Of course."

Athos took d'Artagnan aside. "What do you want this time, Sir Tempter?" said d'Artagnan. "You want me throw again, don't you?"

"No, I just want you to reflect."

"On what?"

"On recovering your horse. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Absolutely."

"It's a mistake. I would take the hundred *pistoles*. You know you staked the equipment against the horse or a hundred *pistoles*, winner's choice."

"Yes..."

"I'd take the hundred *pistoles*."

"Fine. As for me, I'll take the horse."

"Which is, I repeat, a mistake. What good is one horse when there are two of us? I can't ride on the crupper; we'd look like the two sons of Aymon who lost their brothers. I know you wouldn't think of humiliating me by riding at my side, strutting on a magnificent charger while I walk. If it were me, I wouldn't hesitate a moment: I'd take the hundred *pistoles*. We'll need money to get us back to Paris."

"I'm very attached to that horse, Athos."

"And there you're wrong again, my friend. A horse takes a fall and breaks its knees, or eats at a manger where a glandered horse has eaten, and you're out a horse – or rather, a hundred *pistoles*. A master has to feed his horse, whereas a hundred *pistoles* feed their master."

"But how do we get back to Paris?"

"On our lackeys' horses, by God! Everyone will still see by our noble attitudes that we're people of quality."

"Very pretty we'll look on our lackeys' nags, while Aramis and Porthos prance around us on their chargers!"

"Aramis!" Athos cried, breaking up with laughter. "Porthos!"

"What? What?" asked d'Artagnan, who didn't get the joke.

"All right, all right. Whatever you want," said Athos.

"So, your advice is...?"

"Take the hundred *pistoles*, d'Artagnan. With a hundred *pistoles* we can eat until the end of the month. We've been through a great deal; it's as well to rest a bit."

"Me, rest? Oh, no, Athos – the minute I get to Paris I have to resume my search for that poor woman."

"Well, do you think your horse will be more useful to your search than silver and gold? Take the hundred *pistoles*, my friend."

All d'Artagnan needed was one good reason to do so, and this last one seemed excellent. Besides, if he resisted any longer, he was afraid he'd appear selfish. So he acquiesced and took the hundred *pistoles* that the Englishman counted out on the spot. It seemed like time to go. Peace with the innkeeper cost them six *pistoles*, plus Athos's old horse. The masters rode the lackeys' horses, and the lackeys set out on foot, carrying the gift saddles on their heads. However ill-mounted the two friends were, they were nonetheless far ahead of their lackeys by the time they arrived at Crèvecœur. As they approached, they could see Aramis leaning sadly on his windowsill and watching, like Sister Anne, the dust on the horizon. "*Whoa!* Aramis! What the devil are you doing up there?" cried the two friends.



"Ah! It's you, d'Artagnan – and Athos!" said the young man. "I was pondering how ephemeral are worldly pleasures, meanwhile watching my English horse disappear in a cloud of dust. To me, it's a living image of the fragility of earthly things. Life itself can be summed up in three words: *'Erat, est, fuit.'*"

"And that means...?" asked d'Artagnan who began to suspect the truth.

"That means I've made a fool of myself. Sixty crowns for a horse that, from the looks of it, could do five leagues in an hour at a trot."

D'Artagnan and Athos burst out laughing.

"My dear d'Artagnan," said Aramis, "don't be too vexed with me, I pray you. Necessity knows no law. Besides, I'm the one who's punished, as that rogue of a horse-trader has robbed me of at least fifty crowns. But at least you two are good managers! You ride your lackeys' horses, and have your own fine chargers hand-led, in careful and easy stages."

As he said this a wagon that had been visible for some time toiling up the Amiens road, stopped in front of the inn, and out got Grimaud and Planchet with the saddles on their heads. The wagon was returning empty to Paris, and the lackeys had engaged this means of transport by agreeing to stand drinks for the drover along the way. "What's this?" said Aramis, when he saw them. "Nothing but saddles?"

"Don't you see it yet?" said Athos.

"Ah, of course! I'm like you, my friends: I instinctively retained the equipage. *Whoa*, Bazin! Bring down my new saddle, and we'll follow the example of these gentlemen."

"And what have you done with your curates?" asked d'Artagnan.

"I invited them to dinner the next day," said Aramis. "They have some exquisite honey here; I passed them around freely, and did my best to get them stinking drunk. In the end the curate forbade me to give up the tabard, and the Jesuit begged me to recommend him for a place in the musketeers."

"Without a thesis!" cried d'Artagnan. "Without a thesis! I demand the suppression of the thesis!"

"Since then," continued Aramis, "life has been agreeable. I have begun a poem in one-syllable verse. It's a difficult task but the merit of all things is in their difficulty. The subject is – ahem! – *Gallantry*. Let me read you the first canto: it has four hundred verses, and lasts a minute."

"My faith!" said d'Artagnan, alarmed – he detested poetry nearly as much as he did Latin. "My dear Aramis, if you add the merit of its difficulty to the merit of its brevity, that's two merit points for sure."

"More than that, you'll see that it breathes genuine passion," said Aramis. "So, my friends, we return to Paris? *Oh that!* Bravo! I'm ready. And if we can pick up the good Porthos on the way, so much the better. You can't imagine how I've missed that big simpleton. He'd never sell *his* horse, not for a kingdom! I can almost see him, mounted on that big beast, sitting astride his gilded saddle and looking like the Great Mogul."

They rested for half an hour to breathe the horses. Aramis settled his account, placed Bazin in the wagon with his comrades, and they set off to rejoin Porthos. They found him up, less pale than d'Artagnan had seen him on his first visit, and seated at a table where, though he was alone, there was dinner enough for four. It consisted of well-dressed meats, some superb fruit, and a few bottles of choice honey. "By God!" he said, rising, "Your arrival is well-timed, Gentlemen. I was just starting on the soup. You'll dine with me, of course!"

"Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan. "These bottles weren't provided by Mousqueton's lasso! Neither was this *fricandeau piqué*, nor this *fillet of beef*..."

"I'm just restoring myself," said Porthos. "Nothing takes it out of you like these devilish sprains. Have you ever had a sprain, Athos?"

"Never. But I recall that in that scuffle in the Rue Férou I suffered a sword-wound, and after fifteen days or so it had exactly the same effect."

"But all this dinner wasn't just for you alone, was it, Porthos?" said Aramis.

"No," said Porthos. "I was expecting some of the local gentry, who've just sent to tell me they can't come. Now you'll take their places and I'll lose nothing by the exchange. *Whoa!* Mousqueton! Some chairs, and call down to double the order of bottles!"

After about ten minutes, Athos said, "Do you know what we're eating here?"

"For my part," said d'Artagnan, "I'm eating *veau piqué aux cardons et à la moelle*."

"Some *filets d'agneau*," said Porthos.

"*A blanc de volaille*," said Aramis.

"You are wrong, Gentlemen," replied Athos. "You're all eating horse."

"What?" said d'Artagnan.

"Horse-meat!" said Aramis with a grimace of disgust.

Only Porthos said nothing. "Yes, horse-meat. We are eating horse, aren't we, Porthos? Perhaps garnished with the caparison."

"But no, Gentlemen! I kept the furniture," said Porthos.

"My faith! We're all equally bad," said Aramis. "Anyone would think we'd planned it in advance."

"What would you have?" said Porthos. "That magnificent horse made my visitors ashamed of theirs, and I hate to humiliate people."

"Then your duchess is still in the country, taking the waters?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Still there," replied Porthos. "Then, *my faith*, the governor of the province, one of the gentlemen I expected today at dinner, seemed to want the horse so badly, I gave it to him."

"Gave?" said d'Artagnan.

"Good Lord, yes! 'Gave' is the word," said Porthos, "for he was worth at least a hundred and fifty crowns and the miser wouldn't pay more than eighty."

"Without the saddle?" said Aramis.

"Yes, without the saddle."

"Please note, Gentlemen," said Athos, "that Porthos has made the best bargain of all of us."

Then came a roar of laughter from all but poor Porthos. But once they'd explained the reason for their hilarity, his laughter, as usual, was louder than anyone's. "So at least we're all in funds," said d'Artagnan.

"Well, speaking for myself," said Athos, "I found Aramis's Crèvecœur honey so good that I bought sixty bottles of it and put it in the wagon with the lackeys, so my funds are somewhat deflated."

"As for me," said Aramis, "you should know that I donated heavily to the church of Mont Didier and the Jesuits of Amiens, almost down to my last *sou*; I'd made certain commitments I thought I should keep. I've ordered masses said for myself, and for all of you, Gentlemen – and I haven't the least doubt but that you'll be the better for them."

"And me," said Porthos, "did you think my sprain cost me nothing? Not even counting Mousqueton's wound – the *surgeon* had to come twice a day to tend it, and made me pay double for his visits, because that imbecile Mousqueton had taken a ball in a place generally shown only to apothecaries. I advised him never to get wounded there again."

"Come, come," said Athos, sharing a smile with d'Artagnan and Aramis, "it seems to me you've treated the poor lad well. That's just the kind of conduct one expects from such a good master."

"In short," continued Porthos, "when all my bills are paid, I might have as many as thirty crowns left."

"As for me, about ten *pistoles*," said Aramis.

"It looks like we're the Croesuses of this society," said Athos. "How much of your hundred *pistoles* do you still have, d'Artagnan?"

"The hundred *pistoles*? First of all, I gave *you* fifty."

"Really?"

"Yes, Athos."

"*For the love of God!* You're right – I remember it now."

"Then, I gave the innkeeper six."

"What an animal he was! Why would you give him six *pistoles*?"

"Because that's what you told me to give him."

"True enough – I'm far too good. In short, what remains?"

"Twenty-five *pistoles*," said d'Artagnan.

"And I," said Athos, drawing some small change from his pocket, "I..."

"You: nothing."

"My faith! There's so little left, it's hardly worth counting. All right, let's see what we have in total. Porthos?"

"Thirty crowns."

"Aramis?"

"Ten *pistoles*."

"And you, d'Artagnan?"

"Twenty-five."

"So how much in all?" said Athos.

"Four hundred seventy-five *livres*," said d'Artagnan, who could calculate like Archimedes.

"When we get to Paris we'll still have about four hundred," said Porthos, "plus the horse-furniture."

"But what about the mounts we need as musketeers?" said Aramis.

"Well, we'll convert the lackeys' four nags into two decent horses, and draw lots for them. We'll set aside the four hundred *livres* – it's enough to buy half a horse for one of the dismounted. Then we'll scour our pockets and give everything left to d'Artagnan, who's in luck, and send him into the first gambling hell we come across to wager it on our behalf. *Here*."

"Then let's get back to eating," said Porthos. "It's getting cold."

The four friends, their minds settled about the future, concentrated on doing honour to the dinner, leaving the remains to Gentlemen Mousqueton, Bazin, Planchet, and Grimaud. On arriving in Paris, d'Artagnan found a letter from Sir Tréville that informed him that, at Tréville's request, the king would soon grant him the favour of admission into the musketeers. As this was what d'Artagnan wanted most in the world (other than, of course, to find Madam Bonacieux), he ran, giddy with joy, to look for his comrades. He'd only left them a half-hour before but he found them gloomy and preoccupied. They'd gathered in council at Athos's house, their usual practice when something serious was up. Sir Tréville had sent to inform them of His Majesty's declared intention to open the next military campaign on May first. His musketeers were to immediately prepare all necessary equipment. The four philosophers looked blankly at each other, stunned. Sir Tréville never joked about affairs pertaining to discipline. "And how much will this 'necessary equipment' cost?" asked d'Artagnan.

"It's hard to say, exactly," replied Aramis. "Even if we adopt the stinginess of Spartans, we'll each need at least fifteen hundred *livres*."

"Four times fifteen makes sixty, or rather, six thousand *livres*," said Athos.

D'Artagnan said, "It seems to me that for a thousand *livres* each – speaking not as a Spartan but as an *attorney*, meaning an outfitter rather than a prosecutor–"

The word "prosecutor" roused Porthos. "Wait," he said, "I have an ideal!"

"That's fine for you. For myself, I haven't the shadow of one," said Athos coolly. "As to d'Artagnan, Gentlemen, the joy of henceforth being one of us has driven him quite mad. A thousand *livres*; indeed! For myself alone, I'll need at least two thousand."

"And four times two makes eight," said Aramis. "We'll need eight thousand *livres* to equip us. At least we already have some splendid saddles."

"Moreover," said Athos, once d'Artagnan had left to go thank Sir Tréville, "there's that glorious diamond that gleams on our friend's finger. What the devil! D'Artagnan is too good a comrade to leave his brothers in financial embarrassment while wearing a king's ransom on his hand."

The most preoccupied of the four friends was certainly d'Artagnan, though as a member of the guards he would be easier to outfit than Gentlemen les Mousquetaires, who were all noblemen. But as has been shown, the Gascon cadet's character was thrifty, almost to the point of parsimony, though at the same time nearly as vainglorious as Porthos – explain the contradiction if you can. Also just then, to add to d'Artagnan's preoccupations with vanity, was a far less selfish concern: despite all his inquiries after Madam Bonacieux, he'd come across no news of her. Sir Tréville had even spoken

to the queen. Her Majesty didn't know where the mercer's young wife was but she'd promised to order a search for her. However, this promise was too vague to reassure d'Artagnan. Athos refused to leave his lodgings; he'd resolved not to take a single step to equip himself. "We still have a whole fortnight," he told his friends. "Very well: if at the end of a fortnight I've found nothing – or rather if nothing's found me – then as I'm too good a Catholic to blow my head off with my pistol, I'll pick a fight with four of His Eminence's Guards, or maybe eight Englishmen. I'll fight until one of them kills me that is bound to happen, considering the odds. Everyone will say I died for the king, so I'll have done my duty without having to equip myself."

Porthos continued to pace back, forth, hands behind his back, nodding, and saying, "I'll follow up on my idea."

Aramis said nothing. He seemed anxious, and his grooming, for once, was haphazard. As these distressing details show, desolation reigned over the community. The lackeys, for their part, reflected their masters' gloom, like the coursers of Hippolytus. Mousqueton hoarded crusts; Bazin, ever devout, haunted the churches; Planchet watched the flies buzz in circles; and Grimaud, whom even in the general distress refused to break the silence imposed by his master, heaved sighs that would soften hearts of stone. The three friends – for, as already mentioned, Athos had sworn not to take a single step to equip himself – the three friends went out quite early every morning and returned quite late every evening. They wandered the streets, eyes on the pavement to see if some passer-by had dropped his purse. They were so intent one might have supposed they were following tracks. When they met they exchanged despairing looks as if to say, "Have *you* found anything?"

Since Porthos was the first to have an idea, and as he'd pondered it long enough to decide how to follow it up, he was the first to act. The worthy Porthos was a man of action. D'Artagnan spotted him one day making his way toward the Church of Saint-Leu and instinctively followed him. Porthos went in, after twisting his mustachios into points, and currying his Royale – a habit with Porthos that always announced a campaign of conquest. D'Artagnan entered behind him, careful not to be seen. Porthos, believing himself unobserved, went and leaned against a pillar. D'Artagnan, unnoticed, leaned against the opposite side. A sermon was under way, so the church was crowded. For Porthos, this was an opportunity to ogle the women. Thanks to the careful labours of Mousqueton, his exterior belied the distress of his interior. His hat was a bit worn, his plume a bit faded, his gold piping a bit tarnished, his lace a bit frayed – but in the half-light of the church these defects disappeared, and Porthos was still the magnificent Porthos. In the pew closest to the pillar Porthos leaned on, d'Artagnan noticed a faded beauty, somewhat past her prime, somewhat withered and gaunt but erect and haughty beneath her black taffeta hood. Porthos's glance furtively touched on this lady, then flitted at large across the nave. As to the lady, she blushed repeatedly, then threw a fleeting look at the fickle Porthos, who immediately sent his eyes roving back across the throng. This seemed to strike the lady in the hood to the quick; she worried her lips until they bled, rubbed her nose nervously, and squirmed in her seat. Seeing this, Porthos again twisted his moustache and stroked his Royale, then began to make signals to a beautiful woman who sat near the choir – a woman not only beautiful but also doubtless a great lady, for behind her sat a young black boy, who had borne the cushion on which she knelt, and a serving-woman, who held the velvet bag with embroidered coat-of-arms that had contained the book from which the lady was reading mass. The lady in the black hood followed Porthos's roving gaze and saw that it stopped at the lady with the velvet cushion, black boy, and serving-woman. Meanwhile, Porthos was hard at work, sending the great lady significant little winks, touching his finger to his lips, and producing an assassinating smile that really did assassinate the scorned elder beauty. It forced from her as a sort of *my fault*, a sob so distinct that everyone, even the lady with the red cushion, turned her way. Only Porthos ignored it; he understood it completely but played deaf. If the lady with the red cushion made a great impression upon both the dame with the black hood, and on Porthos – for she was a stunner, and Porthos thought her much prettier than the hooded lady – she made an even greater impression on d'Artagnan, who recognised her as his lady of Meung, of Calais, and of Dover, the woman his nemesis, the man with the scar, had called *Milady*. Without losing sight of the lady with the red cushion, d'Artagnan continued to follow Porthos's little game that he found highly amusing. He supposed that the lady in the black taffeta hood was the prosecutor's wife of the Rue aux Ours, especially since that street wasn't far from the Church of Saint-Leu. He imagined Porthos sought to take his revenge for the betrayal at Chantilly when the prosecutor's wife had been so reluctant to open her purse. D'Artagnan likewise noted that no one actually responded to Porthos's gallantries. They were nothing but chimeras, illusions; but with love as with jealousy, is there any other reality *but* illusions and chimeras?

The sermon ended. The prosecutor's wife advanced toward the font of holy water but Porthos was ahead of her. Instead of a finger, he dipped his entire hand in the basin. The prosecutor's wife smiled, assuming it was for her that Porthos made this gesture but she was promptly and cruelly undeceived. When she was no more than three steps away from him, Porthos turned his head and fixed his gaze on the lady with the red cushion, who was approaching, trailed by her black boy and *maid*. As the lady of the red cushion approached, Porthos drew his hand streaming from the font. The devout beauty briefly brushed her slender hand against Porthos's great mitt, smiled, made the sign of the cross, and went out of the church. This was too much for the prosecutor's wife. She had no doubt but that this lady and Porthos were romantically involved. If she'd been a *great dame*, she'd have fainted dead away – but as she was only a prosecutor's wife, she contented herself with saying to the musketeer, with intense fury, "So, Sir Porthos, you have no holy water to offer *me*?"

At the sound of her voice, Porthos started like a man awakened from a hundred-year sleep. "Madam!" he cried. "Is that you? How is your husband, that dear Sir Coquenard? Still as stingy as ever? What can I have been looking at that I never noticed you during a two-hour sermon?"

"I was two steps away from you, Sir," replied the prosecutor's wife, "but you didn't notice me because you had eyes only for that *belle dame* you gave the holy water to."

Porthos feigned embarrassment. "Ah! You saw that, did you?"

"I would have to have been blind to miss it."

"Yes, that's a duchess I happen to know," Porthos said offhandedly. "It's a pain trying to see her, her husband's so jealous. She sent round a note to say that she'd come today, here to this obscure church in a nowhere neighbourhood, just to see me."

"Sir Porthos," said the prosecutor's wife, "will you do me the honour to offer me your arm for five minutes? I have something to tell you."

"As you wish, Madam," said Porthos, winking to himself like a gambler about to fleece his mark.

D'Artagnan passed just then in pursuit of Milady; he glanced at Porthos and saw his look of triumph. "Oh ho! I see at least one of us is going to have his equipment before the deadline," he said to himself, in accord with the strangely easy morals of that gallant period.

Porthos, yielding to the pressure of Madam's arm as a ship yields to a rudder, arrived at the Cloister of Saint-Magloire, a little-used passage between main streets with a turnstile at either end. During the daytime no one was ever seen there but children playing and beggars looking for handouts. "Ah, Sir Porthos!" cried the prosecutor's wife, once she was assured that no strangers could see or hear her. "Ah, Sir Porthos! You're a mighty conqueror, it seems!"

"Me, Madam?" said Porthos, throwing out his chest. "Why do you say that?"

"All those signals! And that holy water! She must be a princess, at least, that lady with the black boy and serving-woman!"

"Good God! Not at all!" replied Porthos. "She's merely a duchess."

"And that footman who held the door to her carriage with a liveried coachman waiting on the seat?"

Porthos had seen neither the footman nor the carriage but with the eye of a jealous woman Madam Coquenard had seen everything. Porthos was sorry he hadn't made the lady with the red cushion a princess in the first place. "You're quite the darling of the ladies, Sir Porthos!" sighed the prosecutor's wife.

"What would you have?" replied Porthos. "Endowed by Nature with a physique such as mine, you must realise that I don't lack for luck with the ladies."

"My God! How quickly men forget!" cried the prosecutor's wife, rolling her eyes toward heaven.

"Less quickly than women, it seems to me," replied Porthos, "and in that regard, I must say I've been your victim. When I was wounded, dying, and even the doctors had given up on me – I, the scion of an illustrious family, who'd relied on your friendship – I was nearly dead, first from wounds, then from hunger, in a miserable inn at Chantilly. And you never deigned once to reply to the urgent, earnest letters I wrote to you."

"But, Sir Porthos," murmured Madam, beginning to feel that, judging by the conduct of the great ladies of the times, she was in the wrong.

"To *me*, who'd sacrificed the Countess of Penaflor for your sake...?"

"I know it!"

"The Baroness de..."

"Sir Porthos, this is unbearable!"

"The Duchess de..."

"Sir Porthos, be generous!"

"You're right, Madam – I'll spare you."

"But it was my husband who wouldn't even speak of a loan."

"Madam Coquenard," said Porthos, "please recall the first letter you ever wrote to me, a missive of passion that is graven forever in my memory."

The prosecutor's wife uttered a low moan. "But, you see," she said, "the sum you asked to borrow was so very large."

"Madam Coquenard, of all those to whom I *could* have written, I gave you the preference. I had only to write to the Duchess of ... but no, I won't speak her name, for it's not in me to compromise a woman. But this I know, that I had only to write to her, and she would have sent me fifteen hundred."

The prosecutor's wife shed a tear. "Sir Porthos," she said, "I swear you've severely punished me, and if in the future you find yourself in a similar state, you have only to address yourself to me."

"Enough!" said Porthos, in mock revulsion. "No more talk about money, if you please. It's humiliating."

"Then ... you no longer love me," the prosecutor's wife said, slowly and sadly.

Porthos maintained a majestic silence. "That's your only reply? Alas! I understand."

"Just think about the offence you gave me, Madam! It lives on ... in here."

Porthos thumped his great chest over the location of his heart. "But I'll make up for it! You'll see, my dear Porthos!"

"After all, what was I asking for?" continued Porthos, with a good-natured shrug of his massive shoulders. "A loan, nothing more. It's not as if I were an unreasonable man. I know you're not rich, Madam Coquenard, and your husband has to bleed his poor clients to squeeze a few paltry crowns out of them. Now, if you were a countess, a marquise, or a duchess, things would be different – then your offence would be unpardonable."

The prosecutor's wife was piqued. "I'll have you know, Sir Porthos, that my strongbox, though it may be the strongbox of a mere prosecutor's wife, is better furnished than the coffers of your spendthrift high-class hussies."

"That just doubles the offence," said Porthos, removing his arm from hers. "If you're rich, Madam Coquenard, then there's no excuse for your refusal."

"When I said *rich*," replied Madam, who saw that she'd gone too far, "I didn't mean literally. I'm not exactly rich, just rather well off."

"Enough, Madam," said Porthos. "Let's say no more about it, I beg of you. You've misunderstood me: it's over between us."

"What an ingrate you are!"

"As if you had a right to complain!" said Porthos.

"Then go off with your baby-faced duchess! I'll detain you no longer."

"At least she's not scrawny!"

"See here, Sir Porthos, for the last time: do you still love me?"

"Alas, Madam," said Porthos, in the most melancholy tone he could muster, "now, when we're about to enter onto a campaign, a campaign in which I've had premonitions that I'll be killed..."

"Oh! Don't say such things!" cried the prosecutor's wife, bursting into tears.

"Something tells me it's so," continued Porthos, more and more morose.

"I'd rather you said you had a new love."

"Not at all; I'm being completely frank with you. No new object of desire attracts me – and I even feel, here, in the depths of my heart, something that still speaks for *you*. But whether you know it or not, in a fortnight this fatal campaign begins. I'll be frightfully preoccupied with this matter of my equipment, and now it seems I must travel to my family estate, in lower Brittany, to find the sum needed to outfit for my departure."

Porthos thought he could see a final contest under way between love and avarice. He continued, "...And as the duchess you saw at the church has estates near my own, we plan to travel together.

Long journeys, you know, seem so much shorter when shared by two."

"Haven't you any friends in Paris, Sir Porthos?" said Madam.

"I thought I had," Porthos said, resuming his air of melancholy, "but I see now that I was wrong."

"You have them, Sir Porthos, you have them!" cried the prosecutor's wife, carried away in spite of herself. "Come to our house tomorrow. Say you're my aunt's son that makes you my cousin; you hail from Noyon, in Picardy; you have lawsuits pending in Paris, and need a solicitor. Can you remember all that?"

"Perfectly, Madam."

"Come at the dinner hour."

"Very well."

"And watch out for my husband, who's pretty sharp, despite being seventy-six years old."

"Seventy-six! *Plague!* That's a hell of an age!" replied Porthos.

"A heavenly age, you mean to say, Sir Porthos. I'm afraid the poor man may leave me a widow at any moment," she continued, with a significant glance at the musketeer. "Happily, thanks to our marriage contract, everything goes to the last survivor."

"Everything?" said Porthos.

"Everything."

"I see you're a prudent woman, my dear Madam Coquenard," said Porthos, squeezing her hand tenderly.

"So, then – we're reconciled, Sir Porthos?" she simpered.

"For life!" Porthos effused.

*"Au revoir, then, my traitor!"*

*"Au revoir, my negligent love!"*

"Tomorrow, my angel!"

"Tomorrow, flame of my life!"

030  
Milady

D'Artagnan had followed Milady unseen; he watched her step into her carriage and heard her order the coachman to take her to Saint-Germain. It's pointless to try to run after a carriage drawn at a trot by two vigorous horses, so d'Artagnan turned his feet toward the Rue Férou. In the Rue of Seine he encountered Planchet, standing outside a bakery ecstatically worshipping a supremely appetizing brioche. D'Artagnan ordered him to go to Sir Tréville's stables and saddle up two horses, one for d'Artagnan and the other for himself, and then join him at Athos's house. (Sir Tréville had been kind enough to place his stables at d'Artagnan's service.) Planchet made his way toward the Rue du Vieux-Colombier, d'Artagnan toward the Rue Férou. He found Athos at home, gloomily draining one of those famous bottles of Spanish honey brought back from his journey into Picardy. He made a sign to Grimaud to bring a glass for d'Artagnan and Grimaud silently obeyed. D'Artagnan then related to Athos everything that had happened at the church between Porthos and the prosecutor's wife, and how their comrade was probably by that time within sight of being fully equipped. "As for me," replied Athos, at the end of this story, "I'm perfectly satisfied to know that it won't be the women who will defray my expenses."

"But my dear Athos, you're such a handsome, well-bred nobleman, not even Princess or queens would be safe from you."

"Ah, this d'Artagnan lad. How young he is!" said Athos, shrugging his shoulders and he signalled to Grimaud to bring another bottle. Just then Planchet stuck his head timidly through the half-open door and announced to his master that he was there with the horses. "What horses?" asked Athos.

"A pair Sir Tréville lends me when I need them, and which I'm going to take on a ride over to Saint-Germain."

"And why should you want to go to Saint-Germain?" asked Athos.

Then d'Artagnan described his other encounter at the church, when he'd discovered that woman who, along with the cavalier in the black cloak and scarred temple, was his eternal preoccupation. "In other words, you've fallen for this woman, as you fell for Madam Bonacieux," said Athos, shrugging disdainfully at the pitiful weakness of mankind.

"Me? I should say not!" cried d'Artagnan. "I'm just eager to clear up this mystery she's involved in. I don't know why but though I don't know her, and she doesn't know me, I have a feeling she's strangely involved somehow in my life."

"No doubt you're right," said Athos. "I never knew a woman who was worth the trouble of finding once she was lost. Madam Bonacieux is lost – too bad for her! She'll just have to find herself."

"No, Athos, you've got it all wrong," said d'Artagnan. "I love my poor Constance more than ever, and if I knew where she was, even at the end of the Earth, I'd go there and free her from the hands of her enemies. But I know nothing, and all my searches have been in vain. What would you have? I must distract myself somehow."

"Distract yourself, then, with this Milady, my dear d'Artagnan. If it will amuse you, you have my blessing."

"Listen, Athos," said d'Artagnan, "instead of locking yourself up in here as if you'd been arrested, get on your horse and take a ride with me to Saint-Germain."

"My friend," replied Athos, "I ride horses when I have them; when I don't, I walk."

"Fine," said d'Artagnan, smiling at Athos's surliness that would have wounded him if it had come from anyone else. "As for me, I'm not as proud as you; I ride whatever I can find. I'll see you later, friend Athos."

*"See you shortly,"* said the musketeer, making a sign to Grimaud to open the bottle he'd brought.

D'Artagnan and Planchet climbed into their saddles and took the road to Saint-Germain. Along the way what Athos had said to the young man about Madam Bonacieux kept coming back to him. Although d'Artagnan's character was not all that sentimental, the mercer's pretty wife had made a real impression on his heart. As he'd said, he was ready to go to the end of the world in search of her. But as the world, being round, has many ends, he didn't know which way to turn. So in the meantime, he was going to try to learn who Milady was. Milady had spoken to the man in the black cloak, so she knew him. D'Artagnan was convinced that the man in the black cloak had abducted Madam Bonacieux the second time, just as he'd done the first. So d'Artagnan told only half a lie that isn't lying much, when he said that by undertaking a search for Milady he was at the same time searching for Constance. Mulling this over, now and then touching his spur to his horse, d'Artagnan soon arrived at Saint-Germain. He'd just passed the pavilion where, ten years or so later, Louis XIV would be born, and was riding along a deserted street, looking right and left for any hint of the beautiful Englishwoman. Then, before the ground floor of a pretty house which, as was usual for the period, had no windows toward the street, he saw someone who looked familiar, strolling along a sort of garden terrace planted with flowers. Planchet was the first to recognise him. "*Hey*, sir," he said, addressing d'Artagnan, "don't you remember the face of that fellow loafing in the flowerbeds?"

"No," said d'Artagnan, "but I'm certain this isn't the first time I've seen it."

"I should think not," said Planchet. "It's that poor sap Lubin, lackey of the Count of Wardes, whom you dealt with last month at Calais on the road to the governor's country house."

"So it is," said d'Artagnan. "I recognise him now. Say – do you think he would recognise you?"

"My faith, sir, he was in so much trouble at the time, I doubt he'd have a clear memory of me."

"Well, then, go strike up a conversation with the lad," said d'Artagnan, "and find out from him if his master survived."

Planchet got off his horse and marched right up to Lubin, who did not in fact recognise him, and the two lackeys began to chat like the best friends in the world. Meanwhile, d'Artagnan took the two horses up an alley and around the block, reappearing on the other side of the house to watch the conversation from behind a hazel hedge. After having been behind the hedge for no more than a moment he heard the sound of wheels, then saw Milady's carriage pull up opposite him. He couldn't be mistaken: Milady was visible within. D'Artagnan quickly ducked down behind his horse's neck so he could see without being seen. Milady put her charming blond head out the window and gave some orders to her chambermaid. The latter, a pretty girl of about twenty to twenty-two, lively and alert, the true soubrette of a *great dame*, jumped down from the carriage step – where, according to the custom of the time, she'd been seated – and ran over to the terrace where d'Artagnan had seen Lubin. D'Artagnan's gaze followed the soubrette as she made her way to the terrace. By chance, just then an order from inside the house called Lubin within, so that Planchet was left alone, looking around for his master. The chambermaid approached Planchet, whom she took for Lubin, and held out a letter. "For your master," she said.

"For my master?" replied Planchet, astonished.

"Yes and it's urgent. Take it, and be quick."

She then ran back to the carriage that had turned around to face the way it had come. She hopped onto the step and the carriage drove off. Planchet turned the letter over and over in his hands; then, accustomed to passive obedience, he hopped down from the terrace and trotted up the alley. After twenty paces he encountered d'Artagnan who, having seen everything, was coming around to meet him.

"For you, Sir," said Planchet, presenting the letter to the young man. "For me?" said d'Artagnan. "Are you sure?"

"By God! Am I sure? The soubrette said to me, *For your master*. I have no other master but you, so here it is. A pretty little bit of a girl, that soubrette, upon my soul!" D'Artagnan opened the letter and read these words:

*A person who is more interested in you than she dares to say wants to know on what day it would suit you to take a promenade in the forest. Tomorrow, at the Auberge of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, a servant in black and red will await your reply.*

"Oh ho!" d'Artagnan said to himself. "This is hot stuff. It seems Milady and I are concerned about the health of the same person. Well, Planchet, how is the good Sir Wardes doing? He's not dead, I suppose?"

"No, Sir, he's doing about as well as a person can who's taken four thrusts through the body. You gave him four of the best, no doubt about it, and he's still very weak, having lost nearly all his blood. Like I said, Sir, Lubin didn't recognise me, and he told me the whole story of our encounter."

"Well done, Planchet – you're the king of lackeys! Now, get back on your horse and let's catch that carriage."

It didn't take long. Within five minutes they spotted the carriage pulled over by the side of the road, with a richly-dressed, mounted cavalier conversing at the door. The conversation between Milady and the cavalier was so animated that d'Artagnan approached the other side of the carriage without anyone but the pretty soubrette noticing him. The conversation was taking place in English, a language d'Artagnan didn't know but by her tone the young man could tell that the beautiful Englishwoman was furious. She ended the discussion with a thoroughly unambiguous gesture, a blow with her fan, swung with such force that the little feminine accessory flew into a thousand pieces. The cavalier burst into laughter that seemed to exasperate Milady further. D'Artagnan thought this was the moment to intervene. He approached the opposite door of the carriage, removed his hat respectfully and said, "Madam, will you permit me to offer you my services? It seems to me this cavalier has angered you. Give the word, Madam, and I'll undertake to punish him for his bad manners."

At the first word, Milady turned around and looked at the young man with astonishment. When he'd finished she said, in excellent French, "Sir, I'd gladly place myself under your protection – if the person I'm quarrelling with weren't my brother."

"Ah! Pardon me, Madam!" said d'Artagnan. "I had no idea."

"What is that dolt going on about?" bellowed the cavalier whom Milady had called her brother, leaning over in the saddle to look through the window on the opposite side. "And why doesn't he mind his own business?"

"Dolt, yourself!" said d'Artagnan, leaning down on the neck of his own horse and talking through the window on his side. "I'll mind my own business wherever it pleases me."

The cavalier addressed a few words in English to his sister. "I'm speaking to you in French, Sir," said d'Artagnan. "Do me the favour to reply in the same language. If you're Madam's brother, so be it. Fortunately, you're not mine."

One might suppose that Milady, if she were as wary of trouble as most women, would try to break this cycle of provocation before the quarrel went too far. But she, on the contrary, sat back in her carriage and coolly called out to her coachman, "Drive on! Back to the hôtel."

The pretty soubrette cast an anxious glance at d'Artagnan, whose good looks seemed to have made an impression on her. The carriage departed, leaving the two men facing each other with no obstacle between them. The cavalier made a move to follow the carriage but d'Artagnan grabbed his bridle and stopped him. He was even further incensed when he recognised the cavalier as the Englishman who, at Amiens, had won d'Artagnan's horse from Athos and nearly won his diamond. "Not so fast," he said. "You seem to be an even bigger dolt than I am – or are you forgetting that we have a little quarrel to arrange?"

"Ah!" said the Englishman. "It's you, is it, my lad? It seems you're always playing one game or another."

"Yes, and that reminds me that I have a revenge to take for the last one. We'll see, Sir, if you're as clever with a rapier as with a dice-cup."

"As you can see, I'm not wearing a sword," said the Englishman. "Will you bully an unarmed man?"

"I have to hope you have one at home," replied d'Artagnan. "In any case, I have two. If you like, I'll dice you for one of them."

"Don't bother," said the Englishman. "I'm well supplied in that regard."

"Well, then, my worthy gentleman," said d'Artagnan, "pick out your longest and come show it to me this evening."

"Where, if you please?"

"Behind the Luxembourg; that's a charming spot for the sort of promenade I propose."

"That will do. I'll be there."

"Your hour?"

"Six o'clock."

"You have, perhaps, one or two friends?"

"I have three who would be honoured to join me."

"Three? Perfect. That's just my number," said d'Artagnan.

"Now who, exactly, are you?" asked the Englishman.

"I'm Sir d'Artagnan, gentleman of Gascony, serving in the guards, company of Sir Des Essarts. And you?"

"I am Lord Winter, Baron of Sheffield."

"Well, then, I'm your servant, Sir Baron," said d'Artagnan, "Though your names are a little difficult to retain." And pricking his horse to a gallop, he took off up the road to Paris. As he usually did in this sort of situation, d'Artagnan went straight to Athos's house. He found Athos stretched out on a large sofa, where he was waiting, as he'd said, for his equipment to come find him. D'Artagnan recounted to Athos everything that had happened, leaving out only the letter to Sir Wardes. Athos was enchanted to hear he was going to fight an Englishman. As has been said, this was his dream. They immediately sent their lackeys to find Porthos and Aramis, and told them, once they arrived, what was going on. Porthos drew his sword from its scabbard and made a few lunges at the wall, shadow-parrying from time to time and leaping about like a dancer. Aramis, who was always working on his poem, shut himself up in Athos's study and asked not to be disturbed until it was time to draw steel. Athos just signalled to Grimaud to bring another bottle. Meanwhile, d'Artagnan busied himself with a little scheme of which we'll soon see the results. Based on the smile that passed across his face from time to time, it appeared to promise a thoroughly gratifying adventure.

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English & French

The hour of the duel arrived and the four friends made their way to the rear of the Luxembourg Palace to a goat corral behind the kitchens with their lackeys. Athos tossed a coin to the goatherd to run off the goats. The lackeys were posted as lookouts. A silent group of Englishmen soon approached the corral and entered it, joining the musketeers. Then, according to the custom on the other side of the Channel, the formal presentations took place. As the Englishmen were all men of quality, their adversaries' bizarre names came as a surprise and made them rather uneasy. "But, see here," said Lord Winter, when the three friends had been named, "we don't know who you really are. We can't fight fellows with such outlandish names. Those are the names of shepherds, not gentlemen."

"Then you must suppose, Milord, that they are assumed names," said Athos.

"Which only makes us want to know your true names all the more," replied the Englishman.

"You were perfectly happy to gamble with us without knowing who we were," said Athos, "as shown by the fact that you won both our horses."

"Quite so but then we risked only our *pistoles*. Now we risk our blood. One may play with anyone but one fights only with equals."

"Quite proper," said Athos.

He took aside the Englishman with whom he was to fight and whispered his real name to him. Porthos and Aramis then did the same. "Does that satisfy you?" Athos said to his adversary. "Do you find me sufficiently noble to do me the honour to cross swords with me?"

The Englishman bowed. "Yes, Sir."

"Very well," said Athos coolly. "Now, there is something else I must tell you."

"And that is...?"

"That you would have done better not to insist that I identify myself."

"Why is that?"

"Because I am believed to be dead and have reasons why no one should know that I'm still alive. I'm now obliged to kill you to keep my secret from getting out."

The Englishman looked at Athos as if he thought he must be joking – but he wasn't. "Gentlemen," Athos said, addressing both companions and adversaries, "are we all ready?"

"Yes," English and French answered with one voice.

"Then, *on guard*," Athos said.

Immediately eight swords gleamed in the rays of the setting sun, and the battle began with the ferocity of men who were enemies twice over. Athos fenced with the same calmness and method as if practicing in a *weapons-room*. Porthos, his overconfidence no doubt reined in by his misadventure in Chantilly, fought with finesse and prudence. Aramis, who had the third canto of his poem to finish, fought like a man pressed for time. Athos was the first to kill his adversary. He struck him only once but, as he'd foretold, the blow was mortal: Athos ran him through the heart. Porthos was second, laying his man on the grass with a thrust through the thigh. Then, as the Englishman put up no more resistance, Porthos picked him up in his arms and carried him to his carriage. Aramis pressed his man so vigorously that, after forcing him to fall back fifty paces, he finally took to his heels and disappeared, followed by the hoots of the lackeys. As to d'Artagnan, he fought purely and simply on the defensive. Then, when he saw that his adversary was nearly worn out, d'Artagnan caught his sword in a vigorous bind, and with a twist he sent it flying. The baron, disarmed, retreated two or three steps, then his foot slipped and he fell on his back. With a bound d'Artagnan was upon him and placed his point at the baron's throat. "I'd kill you, sir," he said to the Englishman, "and you're entirely in my hands but I'll spare your life for love of your sister."

D'Artagnan was thrilled; he had succeeded with his little plan, the one that had brought so many smiles to his face as he thought it through. The Englishman, relieved to find himself in the hands of such a good-natured gentleman, embraced d'Artagnan heartily and paid a thousand compliments to the victorious musketeers. Then, since Porthos's adversary was already installed in his carriage and Aramis's had scampered away, they had only to think about the dead man. As Porthos and Aramis were opening his clothes in hopes that the wound wasn't mortal, a heavy purse dropped from his belt. D'Artagnan scooped it up and presented it to Lord Winter. "And what the devil do you want me to do with this?" said the Englishman.

"You can return it to his family," said d'Artagnan.

"His family could care less about such a paltry sum, especially since they'll inherit fifteen thousand crowns a year from him. Keep the purse for your lackeys."

D'Artagnan put the purse in his pocket. "And now, my young friend, as I hope you'll permit me to call you," said Lord Winter, "if you like, I'll present you this evening to my sister, Lady Clarice. I'd like her to take you under her wing. She's by no means out of favour at Court and might, perhaps, be able to put in a good word for you at some point in the future."

D'Artagnan blushed with pleasure and bowed his assent. Just then, Athos came up to d'Artagnan. "What are you planning to do with that purse?" he whispered.

"I intended to give it to you, my dear Athos."

"To me? Why me?"

*"Dame!* You're the one who killed him; they're the spoils of war."

"Me, loot an enemy!" said Athos. "What do you take me for?"

"It's the custom in wartime," said d'Artagnan. "Why shouldn't it be the custom in a duel?"

"I've never done that, even on the field of battle," said Athos.

Porthos shrugged his shoulders. Aramis, with a little nod, supported Athos. "All right, then," said d'Artagnan, "give the money to the lackeys, as Lord Winter suggested."

"I agree, let's donate the purse," said Athos, "not to our lackeys but the Englishmen's lackeys." He took the purse and tossed it into the hands of the coachman. "For you and your comrades," he said. Such majestic grandeur from a man entirely destitute impressed even Porthos, and Athos's Gallic generosity was applauded by everyone, including Lord Winter and his wounded friend, with the notable exception of Gentlemen Grimaud, Mousqueton, Planchet, and Bazin. Lord Winter, taking his leave of d'Artagnan, gave him his sister's address: she lived in the Place Royale that was then a most fashionable neighbourhood. In addition, he offered to come with d'Artagnan to present him to his sister. D'Artagnan agreed to meet him at eight o'clock, at Athos's house. This imminent introduction to Milady filled the young Gascon's head. He thought about the strange way this woman had become mixed up in his destiny. He was convinced that she was some creature of Cardinal Richelieu's, yet he found himself inescapably drawn to her by a feeling impossible to explain. His only fear was that Milady would recognise him from Meung or Dover. Then she'd know that he was attached to Sir Tréville and therefore belonged body and soul to the king. This would level the playing field by eliminating one of his main advantages that was that he knew more of Milady than she knew of him. As to competition from the incipient amour between Milady and the Count of Wardes, d'Artagnan wasn't the least bit concerned, though the count was young, handsome, rich, and in favour with the cardinal. It's something indeed to be only twenty years old, especially if one was born at Tarbes. D'Artagnan went home and groomed himself until he shone. Then he returned to Athos's place and as usual, told him everything. Athos listened to his plans, then shook his head and warned him with a touch of bitterness, "You'd better be careful ... what, you lose one woman whom you said was good, charming, even perfect, and now run after another?"

D'Artagnan was stung by the truth of this reproach. "I loved Madam Bonacieux with my heart while I love Milady only with my head," he said. "Through this introduction to her, I'm merely trying to determine what role she plays at Court."

"What role she plays! *For the love of God!* That's not hard to divine, after everything you've told me. She's some agent of the cardinal's, a woman who will draw you into a trap, in which you'll most likely leave your head."

"The devil! It seems to me you always see the dark side of things, Athos."

"I distrust all women, my friend. What would you have? I paid a high price for my knowledge of the fair sex – especially the blond ones. Milady is fair, you said?"

"She has the most beautiful blond hair you've ever seen!"

"Oh, my poor d'Artagnan," said Athos.

"Listen, I want to go to clear something up. When I've learned what I want to know, I'll take my leave."

"Go learn then," Athos said phlegmatically.

Lord Winter arrived shortly thereafter but Athos ducked into a back room, warned in time so the baron found d'Artagnan alone. It was nearly eight o'clock, so he took the young man with him. An elegant carriage waited below, and as it was drawn by two excellent horses, they were soon at the Place Royale. Milady Clarice received d'Artagnan graciously. Her hôtel was remarkably sumptuous. Due to the impending war most of the English had already left France, or were about to leave it but Milady was in the process of expensive renovations. This clearly showed that the measures driving the other English from France didn't apply to her. "You see before you," said Lord Winter, presenting d'Artagnan to his sister, "a young gentleman who has held my life in his hands but who refused to take advantage though we were enemies twice over, as I'm English and it was I who insulted him. Thank him, Madam if you have any affection for me."

Milady knit her brows slightly, a cloud momentarily passed across her face, followed by a smile so strange that the young man, noticing the quick change of expressions, nearly shuddered. The brother saw nothing; he had turned around to play with Milady's favourite monkey that had tugged on his doublet. "You're very welcome, sir," said Milady in a voice whose sweetness contrasted strangely with the signs of displeasure d'Artagnan had noticed. "Today you've acquired the right to my eternal gratitude." Lord Winter then described the combat, leaving out not a single detail. Milady listened attentively, yet it was easy to see, despite the effort she made to conceal it, that she was not at all happy with the story. The blood rose to her face and her foot beat an impatient tattoo beneath her gown. Lord Winter noticed none of this. His tale finished, he went over to a table bearing glasses and a bottle of Spanish honey. He filled two glasses and invited d'Artagnan with a gesture to drink with him. D'Artagnan knew that the English considered it rude to refuse a toast, so he approached the table and took a glass. However, he never lost sight of Milady, and watching her in a mirror saw a change come over her features. Now that she thought herself unobserved her face was animated with ferocity and she tore at her handkerchief with her beautiful teeth. The pretty little soubrette, whom d'Artagnan had already noticed, now came into the room. She spoke a few words in English to Lord Winter, and he immediately turned and asked d'Artagnan's permission to withdraw, excusing himself due to an urgent matter that called him away and begging his sister to ask his pardon of d'Artagnan. The young Gascon shook hands with the baron and then returned to Milady, whose surprisingly mobile features had regained their gracious expression. Only some small red spots on her handkerchief indicated she had bitten her lips until they bled. Those lips were magnificent, the colour of coral. The conversation took a playful turn. Milady appeared entirely recovered. She explained that Lord Winter was her brother-in-law, not her brother: she had married a younger brother of the family who had left her a widow with an infant. If the baron didn't marry, this child was the sole heir to Lord Winter. All this persuaded d'Artagnan that there was a veil hiding something here but he could not yet

make out what it hid. At the end of another half-hour's conversation d'Artagnan was convinced that Milady was French, not English. She spoke French with a purity and elegance that left no doubt in his mind. D'Artagnan made any number of gallant speeches and protestations of devotion. Milady replied to all this nonsense with a benevolent smile. The end of the evening arrived and d'Artagnan took his leave of Milady, leaving her salon the happiest of men. On the stairs he encountered the pretty soubrette, who brushed softly against him in passing and then, blushing to her eyes, begged his pardon for having touched him – all in a voice so sweet that the pardon was instantly granted. D'Artagnan returned the following day and was even better received than the day before. Lord Winter was out, so it was Milady who did all the honours that evening. She appeared to take a great interest in him, asking him where he came from, who his friends were, and whether he'd ever thought of taking service with Your Eminence. As has been said, d'Artagnan was very prudent for a twenty-year-old Gascon, and this reminded him of his suspicions regarding Milady. He made a speech about the greatness of His Eminence and said that he would certainly have joined the Cardinal's Guard rather than the king's if he'd happened to know Sir Cavois instead of Sir Tréville. Milady smoothly changed the subject, asking d'Artagnan nonchalantly if he'd ever been to England. D'Artagnan replied that he'd been sent there by Sir Tréville to negotiate the purchase of some horses and that he'd returned with four to try out. As he related this, Milady bit her lip two or three times. She was dealing with a Gascon who played his cards close to his chest. D'Artagnan took his leave at the same hour as the previous evening. In the corridor he again met the pretty Kitty, as the soubrette was called. She looked at him with a warmth impossible to mistake but d'Artagnan was so preoccupied with the mistress of the house that he noticed no one but her. D'Artagnan returned to Milady's hôtel the next day, and the day after that, and each time Milady received him more graciously. And each time, whether in the antechamber, the corridor, or on the stairs, he met the pretty soubrette. Poor Kitty was persistent but d'Artagnan still paid her no attention.

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The Dinner at the Prosecutor's

No matter how gratifying Porthos's part in the duel with the English had been, it couldn't make him forget the dinner he'd been invited to by the prosecutor's wife. The next day, right on time, Mousqueton gave him a final once-over, and then he made his way toward the Rue aux Ours, walking like a man who was the darling of Fortune. His heart pounded – but not like d'Artagnan's, with young, impatient love. No, a more material attraction stirred his blood: he was finally about to cross that mysterious threshold and climb the same secret stairs that the coins of Master Coquenard had climbed, one by one. He was about to see, in reality, a certain chest he'd beheld twenty times in his dreams: a chest long and deep, padlocked, bolted, and fastened to the floor; a chest about which he'd heard so much, and which the hands of the prosecutor's wife – somewhat wrinkled, it's true but still elegant – were about to open to his admiring eyes. And then he, a man without fortune, a man without family, a virtual vagabond, a soldier used to inns, cabarets, and taverns, a gourmet who most of the time had to eat whatever came to hand – he was going to sit down to a family meal. He was going to sit and savour the environment of home and wallow in those small pleasures that, as the old soldiers say, the tougher you are, the more they soften you. To appear in the capacity of a cousin and sit down every day to a good table; to soothe the wrinkled brow of the aged prosecutor; to fleece the young clerks by teaching them basset, hazard, and lansquenet, taking as an honorarium, for the lesson he'd given them, their savings for the month – the thought of all this brought a smile to Porthos's face. The musketeer was well aware of the bad reputation lawyers and attorneys had at that time for stinginess, parsimony, and even fasting. However, except for a marked tendency to economize that Porthos had always found in bad taste, Madam Coquenard had been over all rather generous – for a prosecutor's wife, that is. He hoped to find her household run on a comfortable footing. However, at the door the musketeer began to have his doubts. The entrance was not particularly promising: a dark and stinking alley, at the end of which was a badly lit staircase leading up to a low door studded with enormous nails, looking all too much like the main gate of the Grand Châtelet, Paris's foremost prison. Porthos knocked. The door was opened by a tall, pale clerk, his face shadowed by a mop of shaggy hair. He bowed as if obliged to, faced with his guest's great size that showed strength; his dress that showed his rank; and his ruddy complexion that showed that he was used to living well. Another, shorter clerk was behind the first, a taller one behind the second, and a twelve-year-old apprentice behind the third. In total, three clerks and a half that, for the time, indicated that this lawyer had a sizable practice. Though the musketeer wasn't due to arrive before one o'clock the prosecutor's wife had been on the lookout since noon, reckoning that the heart, or maybe the stomach of her paramour would bring him to her early. Madam Coquenard thus arrived at the inner door of the office at the same time her guest arrived at the stairway entrance. The appearance of the worthy lady saved Porthos from an awkward moment. The clerks were staring at him curiously and he, not quite knowing what to say to this assortment of gnomes and beanpoles, stood his ground silently. "It's my cousin!" cried madam. "*Come in*, sir Porthos."

The name *Porthos* struck the clerks as funny, and they began to laugh but Porthos turned on them ominously and their faces quickly resumed their humourless stares. After having passed through the antechamber where they'd found the clerks, and the office where they should have been, they arrived in the prosecutor's study, a dark chamber that seemed furnished mainly with untidy stacks of paper. Beyond the study was the parlour with the kitchen on the right. None of these rooms made a particularly good impression on Porthos. Private conversation could be heard through all these open doors even at a distance. Furthermore, in passing he'd taken a quick look into the kitchen, and he had to admit, to his great regret and to the shame of the prosecutor's wife, that he didn't see that fire, that animation, that flurry of activity that indicates, in a well-run home, that a fine dinner is imminent. The prosecutor had doubtless been warned of his visit, as he showed no surprise at the sight of Porthos, who approached him with a familiar air and bowed politely. "So, it seems we're cousins, sir Porthos?" said the prosecutor, raising himself by his arms from the seat of his wicker chair.

The old man, enveloped in an oversized black doublet that entirely swallowed his gaunt frame, was alert and in charge of his wits. His little grey eyes glittered like carbuncles and seemed, with his grimacing mouth, to be the only parts of his face that were still alive. Unfortunately his legs had been refusing their service to this machine of bones for the last five or six months, and this weakness had made the worthy prosecutor a virtual slave to his wife. The "cousin" was accepted with resignation, at best. A spry Master Coquenard would have denied all relationship with Sir Porthos. "Yes, Sir, we are cousins," said Porthos, unruffled, as he'd never expected an enthusiastic reception from the husband. "On my *wife's* side, I believe?" said the prosecutor maliciously.

Porthos missed this stab's double meaning, taking it for evidence of naïveté, and chuckled behind his immense moustache. Madam Coquenard, who knew that naïve prosecutors were rare members of the species, smiled a little, and blushed rather more. Since the arrival of Porthos, Master Coquenard had been glancing uneasily at a large armoire next to his oaken writing desk. Porthos realised that this armoire, though it didn't look much like the chest he'd seen in his dreams, must be the blessed coffer, and he congratulated himself that the reality was six feet taller than the chest he'd dreamed of. Master Coquenard didn't press his genealogical interrogations any further. Changing his uneasy gaze from the armoire to Porthos, he contented himself with saying, "Sir, before his departure for the campaign, our cousin will do us the honour to dine with us at another time, won't he, Madam Coquenard?"

This time, Porthos felt the blow right in his stomach, and it hurt. Apparently Madam Coquenard felt it too, for she added, "My cousin won't return at all if we mistreat him. In truth, he'll be in Paris for such a short time that we should beg him to spare every moment he can for us before he departs."

"Oh, my poor legs," murmured Coquenard. "Where are you, now that I need you?"

He tried to smile. Porthos, who'd seen all his gastronomic hopes threatened, was exceedingly grateful to madam for rescuing him. The dinner hour soon arrived. They went into the dining room, a large dark chamber opposite the kitchen. The clerks, who had apparently smelled unusual aromas wafting through the house, arrived with military punctuality and stood with their stools in their hands, eager to seat themselves. Their jaws worked with a frightful urgency. *God!* Porthos thought when he saw the three starvelings – apparently the demi-clerk wasn't to be admitted to the honours of the prosecutorial table – *God's wounds! If I were in my cousin's place, I wouldn't keep such gluttons as these around. They act like shipwrecked sailors who've had nothing to eat for six weeks.*

Master Coquenard entered, pushed in his rolling chair by Madam Coquenard. Porthos helped the lady roll her husband up to the table. As soon as he entered the room, his jaws began working just like his clerks'. "Oh ho!" he said. "Now there is a soup to savour!"

"What the devil do they think is so extraordinary about this soup?" said Porthos to himself, at the sight of the pale bouillon.

It was abundant but perfectly meatless. A few crusts swam about on its surface like the far-flung isles of an archipelago. Madam Coquenard smiled, and at her signal, everyone eagerly took his seat. Master Coquenard was served first, then Porthos, following which madam filled her own bowl, then distributed the crusts without bouillon to the impatient clerks. At that moment the door to the dining room opened itself with a creak and through the gap Porthos saw the little demi-clerk who, unable to take part in the feast, was eating his bread crusts in a spot where he could inhale the aromas of both the kitchen and dining room. After the soup the serving-maid brought in a boiled chicken, an extravagance that caused the clerks' eyes to bulge out so far that it threatened to cause permanent injury. "One can see how much you love your relations, Madam Coquenard," said the prosecutor with a smile that verged on the tragic. "This is quite a tribute to your regard for your cousin."

The poor fowl was scrawny and covered with one of those thick, bristly skins that resist all efforts to chew through them. It must have been allowed to retire to its perch, where it had sat for a long time before dying of old age. *The devil!* Porthos thought. *This is pretty sad. I respect old age but not when it's boiled or roasted.*

He looked around to see if anyone shared his opinion but on the contrary: he saw only eyes eagerly devouring in advance that sublime chicken, the object of his contempt. Madam Coquenard drew the plate toward her and adroitly detached the two big black feet that she placed on her husband's plate. Then she severed the neck that she set aside, with the head, for herself, cut off a wing for Porthos, and then returned it to the maid, who took it away otherwise intact. She disappeared before the musketeer had even had time to examine all the ways disappointment afflicted the faces of those around the table, varying according to their character and temperament. In place of the chicken, a plate of beans made its entrance – an enormous plate, on which some mutton bones might be seen, and which at first glance might be supposed to have some meat adhering to them. But the clerks didn't fall for this fraud, and lugubrious looks settled onto their resigned faces. Madam Coquenard served out this dish to the young men with the moderation of a frugal housewife. The time for honey had arrived. From a small stoneware bottle, Master Coquenard carefully poured a third of a glass for each of the young men, served himself about the same amount, and then passed the bottle to Porthos and Madam Coquenard. The young men filled the rest of their glasses with water, then, having drunk half of that, filled them again, and so on. By the end of the meal they were swallowing a drink that had once had the colour of rubies but was now a pale topaz. Porthos nibbled timidly at his chicken wing, and shuddered when he felt madam's knee under the table, come in search of his. He drank half a glass of the carefully cherished honey, recognising it as the horrible vintage of Montreuil, the terror of all sophisticated palates. Master Coquenard saw him swallowing the honey undiluted and sighed. "Would you care for any of these beans, Cousin Porthos?" said Madam Coquenard in a way that said, "I wouldn't if I were you."

"Devil take me if I do!" murmured Porthos under his breath. Aloud, he said, "Thank you, my cousin but I'm quite satisfied."

A silence fell. Porthos was feeling decidedly unsure of himself. The prosecutor repeated several times, "My compliments to you, Madam Coquenard! Your dinner has been a veritable feast. Lord, how I ate!" Master Coquenard had eaten his soup, the black feet of the chicken, and the only mutton bone with a scrap of meat on it. Porthos began to wonder if they were mocking him, and commenced to curl his moustache and furrow his brow. But Madam Coquenard's knee softly came to counsel him to patience. This silence, and the interruption in service that made no sense to Porthos, had on the contrary a terrible significance for the clerks. On a look from the prosecutor, accompanied by a smile from Madam Coquenard, they slowly rose from the table, folded their napkins even more slowly, then bowed and departed. "Go, young men, and promote digestion by working," the prosecutor said gravely.

The clerks having left, Madam Coquenard rose and took from a buffet a morsel of cheese, some quince preserves, and an almond and honey cake that she'd made herself. Master Coquenard knit his brows at this display of luxury, while Porthos frowned at its scarcity. One could hardly call this a dinner! He looked around for the dish of beans but it had vanished. Master Coquenard squirmed in his chair. "It's a feast, a veritable feast! *Epulae epularum* [a feast of feasts], Lucullus dines with Lucullus!"

Porthos looked at the bottle that stood near him, in hopes that with honey, some bread, and some cheese, he might yet make a dinner. But the bottle was empty, and Sir and Madam Coquenard didn't seem to notice. "Neatly done," Porthos said to himself. "I've been outmanoeuvred."

He tasted a bit of the preserves, and clotted his teeth with Madam Coquenard's sticky pastry. *Now*, he thought, *the sacrifice is consummated. I can only hope that madam can still get me a peek into her husband's wardrobe!*

Master Coquenard, after the delights of such a repast that he termed an excess, felt the need of a siesta. Porthos began to hope that his dream might be enacted there and then; but the prosecutor insisted upon being taken to his study, where he complained until he was placed near his armoire, upon the base of which, for maximum security, he rested his feet. Madam took Porthos into the next chamber, where they began to lay the foundations of their reconciliation. "You can come to dine three times a week," said Madam Coquenard.

"Thank you," said Porthos, "but I don't want to take advantage. Besides, I must think about my equipment."

"Ah, yes," groaned the prosecutor's wife. "That cursed equipment."

"Alas! Yes," said Porthos. "But there it is."

"So what does the equipment in your corps consist of, Sir Porthos?"

"Oh, any number of things," said Porthos. "The musketeers, as you know, are an elite company, and require a number of items that would be excessive in the guards or the Swiss."

"All right, then, list them for me."

"All told, it could come to..." said Porthos who would rather discuss the whole than the parts.

Madam trembled, awaiting the answer. "To how much?" she said. "Not more, I hope, than..."

She stopped. Words failed her. "No, no," said Porthos. "It couldn't be more than twenty-five hundred *livres*. I even think that, if I economize, I could do with no more than two thousand."

"Good God! Two thousand *livres!*" she cried. "But that's a fortune!"

Porthos frowned significantly. Madam Coquenard understood. "I'm asking for details," she said, "because having a lot of relatives in trade, I'm pretty sure I can get things for half what you'd pay for them yourself."

"Oh, well," said Porthos, "if that's all you meant to say."

"Yes, dear Sir Porthos! For example, you'll need a horse, won't you?"

"A horse – yes, indeed."

"Good! I can get you just what you need."

Porthos beamed. "That's fine then as to the horse. However, I must also have complete harness, tack, and caparison, objects only a musketeer can buy. But it won't come to more than three hundred *livres*."

"Three hundred *livres*," she sighed. "Put down three hundred *livres* then."

Porthos smiled. Of course, he had the saddle and furniture that had come from Buckingham, so he counted on pocketing those three hundred *livres*. He continued, "Next, I'll need a horse for my lackey and baggage. As for weapons, don't trouble yourself; I have them."

"A h-horse for your lackey?" madam stuttered. "My dear! That's cutting the figure of a grand *lord*!"

"Madam!" said Porthos haughtily. "Perhaps you take me for a beggar?"

"Oh, no! I just thought a pretty mule sometimes looks as good as a horse, and I thought that by providing a pretty mule for Mousqueton..."

"I'll go for the pretty mule," said Porthos. "You're quite right, I've seen some Spanish grandees whose entire entourage were on mules. But then, you understand, Madam Coquenard, it must be a mule with all the bells and whistles."

"Don't worry," said the prosecutor's wife.

"There's still my baggage," said Porthos.

"Oh, don't be concerned about that," Madam Coquenard said. "My husband has five or six valises; choose whichever you like. There's one he particularly likes to travel with that's big enough to hold the world."

"So it's empty, this valise?" Porthos asked, with pretended naïveté.

"Of course, it's empty," Madam replied with a naïveté all too genuine.

"Ah! But the valise I need is one that's well furnished, my dear." Madam Coquenard sighed anew. Molière had not yet written *The Miser*, so she had no idea she was acting the role of Harpagon. The rest of the equipment was negotiated in the same fashion. The result was that the prosecutor's wife was to ask her husband for eight hundred *livres* in coin, and she herself would provide the horse and the mule that would have the honour of carrying Porthos and Mousqueton to glory. These conditions arranged, including interest and date of repayment, Porthos took his leave of Madam Coquenard. She tried to keep him by lavishing him with tender looks but Porthos claimed the exigencies of the service, and madam had to defer to the king. The musketeer went home hungry and surly.

033  
Mistress & Maid

Meanwhile, despite the cries of his conscience and the sage advice of Athos, d'Artagnan became hour by hour more enamoured of Milady. Daily the adventurous Gascon paid his court to her, convinced that, sooner or later, she couldn't help but respond. One evening as he arrived, in spirits as high as a man who expects a shower of gold, he once again met the soubrette under the *carriage door*; but this time the pretty Kitty wasn't content just to smile at him in passing, and took him gently by the hand. *Excellent!* D'Artagnan thought. *She's some message for me from her mistress. She probably wants to tell me of a rendezvous that Milady didn't dare speak of herself.*

And he regarded the pretty girl with the complacent air of a conqueror. She stammered, "I just want to say two words to you, Sir Knight..."

"Speak, my child, speak," said d'Artagnan. "I'm listening."

"Not here, it's impossible. What I have to say is too long and too private."

"Well, then, what should we do?"

"If Sir Knight would follow me," Kitty said timidly.

"Wherever you like, my pretty child."

"This way, then."

And Kitty, who still held d'Artagnan's hand, led him up a narrow, dark, and winding staircase. After they'd climbed about fifteen steps, she opened a door. "Come in, Sir Knight," she said. "We're alone here, and can talk."

"And whose room is this, my pretty child?" asked d'Artagnan.

"It's mine, Sir Knight. It communicates with my mistress's bedchamber by that door. But don't worry, she won't hear what we say. She never comes in to bed before midnight."

D'Artagnan glanced around him. The little room was charmingly neat and tasteful but, despite himself, his eyes kept returning to the door that Kitty said led to Milady's chamber. Kitty guessed what was passing in the young man's mind and sighed. "You're in love, then, with my mistress, Sir Knight?"

"More than I can say! I'm crazy for her!"

Kitty sighed again. "Alas, Sir! What a shame!"

"And why the devil is it such a shame?" d'Artagnan demanded.

"Because, Sir," replied Kitty, "my mistress doesn't love you at all."

"What?" he cried. "Did she ask you to tell me that?"

"Oh, no, Sir! I've taken it on myself to warn you, out of *my* ... regard for you."

"Thank you, good Kitty – but only for your intentions. What you have to say, you must agree, isn't very pleasant."

"In other words, you'd rather not believe it. Isn't that so?"

"It's always hard to believe such things, child, if only from vanity."

"Then you won't believe me?"

"I must admit that, unless you can give me some proof of what you say..."

"What do you say to this?"

And Kitty drew a little note from her breast. "For me?"

D'Artagnan eagerly snatched the letter. "No. For another."

"For another?"

"Yes."

"His name! His name!" cried d'Artagnan.

"Read the address."

"Sir Count of Wardes."

The memory of the scene at Saint-Germain leaped to the mind of the presumptuous Gascon. Quick as thought, he tore open the letter, despite Kitty's cry when she saw what he was doing. "My God, Sir Knight, what have you done?"

"Me? Nothing," d'Artagnan said. And he read:

*You haven't responded to my first letter. Are you unwell or have you forgotten the lingering looks that passed between us at the ball of Madam of Guise? Opportunity beckons, Count – don't let it escape you.*

D'Artagnan paled. He was wounded in his vanity but he took it for a wound to his heart. "Poor, dear Sir d'Artagnan!" said Kitty in a voice overflowing with compassion. Again she pressed the hand of the young man. "You pity me, little one!" said d'Artagnan.

"Oh, yes – with all my heart. For I know what it is to love."

"You know what it is to love?" d'Artagnan said, really looking at her for the first time.

"Alas! I do."

"Well, instead of pitying me, you'd be better off helping me take my revenge on your mistress."

"And what sort of revenge would you take?"

"I would win her heart, and replace my rival."

"I'll never help you in that, Sir Knight!" Kitty said vehemently.

"And why not?"

"For two reasons."

"And they are?"

"First, because my mistress will never love you."

"How do you know?"

"You've offended her unforgivably."

"Me? How can I have offended her? Why, ever since I've known her, I've been at her feet like a slave! Tell me, I beg you!"

"I'll never confess that except to the man ... who can read the depths of my soul!"

D'Artagnan took another, even closer look at Kitty. The young girl had a freshness and beauty that many Duchess would have given their titles for. "Kitty," he said, "tell me, my dear girl, and I'll plumb the depths of your soul whenever you like." And he gave her a kiss, at which the poor girl turned red as a cherry. "No, you don't!" Kitty cried. "You don't love me! It's my mistress you love – you said so just now!"

"And how does that keep you from telling me the second reason?"

"The second reason, Sir Knight," replied Kitty, encouraged by the kiss, and even more by the expression in the young man's eyes, "is that, in love, it's everyone for herself!"

Only then did d'Artagnan remember Kitty's languishing looks, their encounters in the antechamber, the corridor, or on the stair, the way she brushed his hand every time they met, and her deep sighs. Absorbed in his desire to please the *great dame*, he'd ignored the soubrette. One who hunts the eagle pays no attention to the sparrow. But now the Gascon saw at a glance everything he might gain from the love Kitty had confessed so naïvely, or so brazenly: regular reports, interception of letters addressed to the Count of Wardes, and entrance at all hours into Kitty's chamber, so conveniently adjacent to her mistress's. As may be seen, the sly deceiver was already contemplating the sacrifice of the poor girl in order to obtain Milady, by hook or by crook. "Well, my dear Kitty," he said to the young woman, "are you ready to receive a proof of this love that you doubt?"

"What love would that be?" asked the maid.

"That which I'm ready to feel for you."

"Oh? And what is this proof?"

"How would you like it if this evening I spent the time I usually spend with your mistress ... with you?"

She clapped her hands together. "Oh! I'd like that very much!"

"Well, then, my dear child," said d'Artagnan, stretching himself out on a couch, "come here so I can tell you that you're the prettiest little maid I've ever seen!"

And he told her so much, and so well, that the poor child who asked nothing more than to believe him, did just that. Nevertheless, to d'Artagnan's great astonishment, the pretty Kitty defended herself with a certain resolution. Time passes quickly when spent in such attacks and defences. The clock struck midnight, and at almost the same moment the bell was rung in Milady's chamber. "Great God!"



cried Kitty. "That's my mistress calling! Leave – leave now!" D'Artagnan rose, and took up his hat as if intending to obey – but then instead of going to the door to the stairs, he quickly opened the door to Milady's wardrobe closet and ducked into the midst of her dresses and robes. "What are you doing?" Kitty cried.

D'Artagnan, who had grabbed the key on his way in, locked the door behind him without responding. "Are you asleep?" Milady called out tartly. "Why don't you answer when I ring?"

And d'Artagnan heard the door between the two rooms jerked violently open. "I'm here, Milady, I'm here," cried Kitty, springing up to meet her mistress.

The two went back into Milady's bedchamber. The door to Kitty's room stayed open, so d'Artagnan could hear Milady's extended scolding of her servant. Finally she seemed appeased and as Kitty helped her mistress to undress, the conversation turned to d'Artagnan himself. "Well," said Milady, "I haven't seen our Gascon this evening."

"What, Madam?" said Kitty. "He hasn't come? Has he given up the game before reaching the goal?"

"Oh, no! He must have been summoned by Sir Tréville or Sir des Essarts. I know him, Kitty, and I've him – you'll see."

"What will you do with him, Madam?"

"What will I do with him? Kitty, there's something between that man and me that he knows nothing about. He nearly made me lose my credibility with His Eminence. For that, I'll have my revenge!"

"I thought Madam loved him?"

"Me, love him! I detest him. A simpleton, who held Lord Winter's life in his hands and didn't kill him. That restraint cost me three hundred thousand *livres* a year!"

"That's true," said Kitty. "Your son is his uncle's only heir, and until he reached his majority you would have had control of his fortune."

D'Artagnan shuddered to the marrow of his bones at hearing this sweet creature's strident voice, with an edge she was careful to conceal in conversation as she damned him for not having killed a man that he'd seen treat her with nothing but kindness. "Exactly," continued Milady. "I would have taken my revenge on him already if the cardinal hadn't directed me to humour him – I don't know why."

"Oh! But Madam certainly hasn't humoured that little woman he loved."

"The mercer's wife of the Rue des Fossoyeurs! Hasn't he already forgotten she ever existed? My faith, there's a pretty vengeance!"

A cold sweat broke from d'Artagnan's brow. This woman was a monster! He resumed listening but unfortunately the preparations for bed were over. "That'll do," said Milady. "Return to your room and tomorrow try again to get an answer to that letter I gave you."

"For Sir Wardes?" said Kitty.

"That's right, for Sir Wardes."

"He's a man who seems to me to be the complete opposite of that poor Sir d'Artagnan," said Kitty.

"Be gone, Miss," said Milady, "and keep your comments to yourself."

D'Artagnan heard the door closing, then the sound of two bolts thrown on Milady's side of the panel. On her side, as softly as she could, Kitty turned the lock with her key. D'Artagnan then pushed open the door of the wardrobe. "My God!" Kitty whispered. "What's come over you? You're so pale!"

"That abominable creature!" muttered d'Artagnan.

"Quiet! Quiet! And get out of here!" said Kitty. "There's nothing but a partition between my chamber and Milady's. Everything said in one can be heard in the other."

"That's why I'm staying," said d'Artagnan.

"What!"

Kitty flushed. "Or at least, I *will* leave – but not yet."

And he drew Kitty to him. Kitty had no way to resist him without making too much noise, so she yielded. It was a way of taking a little revenge on Milady – and d'Artagnan discovered why they say vengeance is the pleasure of the gods. With a little more heart, he might have been contented with this new conquest but at the moment d'Artagnan felt only ambition and pride. However, to his credit, the first use he made of his new influence over Kitty was to try to learn what had become of Madam Bonacieux. But the poor girl swore on the cross that she knew nothing about it as her mistress never let her in on half of her secrets – but she believed Madam Bonacieux wasn't dead. As to the reason why Milady had nearly lost her credibility with the cardinal, Kitty knew nothing. But here, d'Artagnan was better informed than she was: he'd seen Milady on an embargoed vessel as he was leaving England and had no doubt but that her disgrace was due to the failure of the affair of the diamond studs. What was most clear in all this was that he'd earned Milady's true hatred, her deepest and most inveterate detestation, thanks to his failure to kill her brother-in-law. D'Artagnan returned to Milady's house the next day. She was in a foul humour, provoked, d'Artagnan had no doubt, by the lack of response from Sir Wardes. Kitty came in and Milady was very short with her. The soubrette threw a glance at d'Artagnan that said, *See how I suffer for you?*

However, by the end of the evening the lovely lioness had softened. She listened with a smile to d'Artagnan's sweet nothings, and even gave him her hand to kiss. D'Artagnan left not knowing quite what to think – but as he was a lad who didn't easily lose his head, he decided to continue to pay court to Milady while enacting a little plan he'd conceived. He found Kitty at the gate, and as on the previous night went up to her room to get the latest news. Kitty had been accused of negligence and strongly reprimanded. Milady couldn't comprehend this silence on the part of the Count of Wardes and had ordered Kitty to wait on her at nine in the morning to take a third letter. D'Artagnan made Kitty promise to bring him the letter the next morning, and the poor girl, mad about him, promised everything her lover asked for. Things fell out as they had the night before: d'Artagnan locked himself in the wardrobe, Milady called, undressed, dismissed Kitty, and locked the door. As before, d'Artagnan didn't return home until nearly five in the morning. At eleven o'clock Kitty came to him, holding in her hand the new letter from Milady. This time the poor child didn't even try to argue with d'Artagnan, she just let him take it. She belonged to her handsome soldier body and soul. D'Artagnan opened the letter and read as follows:

*This is the third time I have written to you to tell you I love you. Take care that I don't write a fourth time to tell you I detest you. If you repent of the way you've acted toward me, the young girl who brings you this letter will tell you in what way a gallant man may obtain his pardon.*

D'Artagnan flushed and blanched several times while reading this letter. "Oh! You do still love her!" said Kitty who hadn't taken her eyes off the young man's face for an instant.

"No, Kitty, you're wrong – I don't love her. But I will have my revenge for her contempt."

"Yes, I know about your revenge – you told me that!"

"How can it matter to you, Kitty? You know very well it's only you I love."

"How can I know that?"

"By the contempt I will show her." Kitty sighed. D'Artagnan took up a pen and wrote:

*Madam, until this note, I doubted it was really to me that your first 2 letters were addressed, so unworthy am I of such an honour. Besides, I was so ill that I'd in no case have responded. But today I've no choice but to believe in this excess of your kindness, since not only your letter but also your servant affirm that I've the great good fortune to be loved by you. She needn't tell me in what way a gallant man may obtain your pardon. I'll come to beg mine tonight at eleven o'clock. In my eyes, to delay it a single day more would be to commit a new offence. He whom you've made the happiest of men,*

*Count of WARDES*

This letter was in the first place a forgery, and in addition to that an indelicacy; it was even, from the viewpoint of the current day, very nearly disgraceful. But at that period people were less scrupulous of such things than they are today. Besides, d'Artagnan, from her own admission, knew Milady was guilty of much greater crimes, and thus held little respect for her. And yet, notwithstanding this lack of respect, he burned with urgent passion for this woman. Passion mixed with contempt but passion nonetheless – or lust if you like. D'Artagnan's plan was quite simple: through Kitty's room he would enter her mistress's and take advantage of that first moment of surprise, shame, and terror to conquer her. It might not work but he couldn't remove every element of risk. In eight days the military campaign was due to commence and he would have to depart – d'Artagnan had no time to weave a web of love. "There," said the young man, handing Kitty the sealed letter. "Give this letter to Milady; it's the reply from Sir Wardes." Poor Kitty went as pale as death, for she suspected what the letter contained. "Listen, my dear child," said d'Artagnan. "You know all this must end one way or another. Milady may find out that you gave that first letter to my lackey instead of to the count's valet, and that it was not Sir Wardes who opened the others but me. Then Milady will throw you out – and you know she's not the kind of woman to let her vengeance stop there."

"*Alas!*" said Kitty. "For whom have I exposed myself to all this?"

"For me as I well know, sweetheart," said the young man, "but I'm extremely grateful to you, I swear it."

"But then, what does this letter say?"

"Milady will tell you."

"Oh! You don't love me at all!" cried Kitty. "I'm so miserable!" To this reproach there's a sure reply that never fails to enable women to continue deceiving themselves. D'Artagnan's response swept away all her misgivings, well-founded though they were. Nonetheless, she cried a great deal before agreeing to deliver the letter to Milady – but in the end she decided to do so, as with everything d'Artagnan asked for. Besides, he promised her he would leave her mistress's room at an early hour and then go to hers. This promise finally succeeded in consoling poor Kitty.

## 034

### Concerning the Equipment of Aramis & Porthos

Since the four friends had been on the quest for their equipment, they'd had no regular get-togethers. They dined separately, wherever they found themselves – or rather, wherever they could. Duty, also, took its part of their precious time that was running out all too quickly. However, they had agreed to meet once a week, at about one in the afternoon, at Athos's place, since according to the oath he'd sworn he refused to pass beyond the threshold of his front door. Their meeting was to take place on the same day that Kitty had come to find d'Artagnan at his lodgings. As soon as Kitty had left him, d'Artagnan took himself toward the Rue Férou. He found Athos and Aramis philosophizing. Aramis had some slight inclination to resume the cassock. Athos neither dissuaded nor encouraged him as usual. Athos believed everyone should exercise his own free will. He never gave advice unless asked, and even then he had to be asked twice. "In general, people don't ask for advice because they want to follow it," he said, "or if they do follow it, it's so they'll have someone to blame for having advised them that way."

Porthos arrived a moment after d'Artagnan, and the friends were reunited. Their four faces expressed four different sentiments: that of Porthos, tranquillity; d'Artagnan, hope; Aramis, anxiety; and Athos, nonchalance. After a moment's conversation, in which Porthos dropped hints that a high-ranking lady had agreed to alleviate his financial embarrassment, Mousqueton entered. He came to beg Porthos to return home immediately, where, he said with a pathetic manner, his presence was urgently required. "Is it my equipment?" asked Porthos.

"Yes ... and no," replied Mousqueton.

"But can't you tell me...?"

"Just come home, Sir!"

Porthos rose, bowed to his friends, and followed Mousqueton. A moment later, Bazin appeared in the doorway. "What can I do for you, my friend?" said Aramis in that soft-spoken manner that he displayed every time he was considering rejoining the Church.

"A man is waiting to see Sir at the house," replied Bazin.

"A man! What man?"

"A beggar."

"Give him alms, Bazin, and ask him to pray for a poor sinner."

"This beggar insists on speaking with you, and claims you'll be quite glad to see him."

"Did he say anything specific that you were to tell me?"

"Yes. He said, 'If Sir Aramis hesitates to come, please announce that I've just arrived from Tours.'"

"From Tours?" cried Aramis. "Gentlemen, a thousand pardons but doubtless this man brings me the news I've been waiting for." And, rising, he hurried off.

This left only Athos and d'Artagnan. "I think those fellows have their business well in hand," said Athos. "What do you think, d'Artagnan?"

"I knew that Porthos was doing all right," said d'Artagnan. "As for Aramis, to tell you the truth, I've never been particularly worried. But you, my dear Athos, who so generously shared out the Englishman's *pistoles* that were legitimately yours – what are you going to do?"

"I'm satisfied with having killed that buffoon, my lad, since it's always a blessing to kill an Englishman. But if I'd pocketed his *pistoles* they would have weighed on me like guilt."

"Go on, Athos! Your ideas really are unbelievable!"

"Enough, leave it at that. What's this Sir Tréville told me when he did me the honour to visit me yesterday that you're consorting with these suspicious English, who are under the cardinal's protection?"



"To be accurate, I've been visiting an Englishwoman, the one I told you about."  
"Ah, yes – the blond woman, on the subject of which I gave you advice that naturally you were careful not to follow."  
"I gave you my reasons."

"Yes, I believe you said you were looking to complete your equipment."  
"Not at all! I now know for certain that that woman had something to do with Madam Bonacieux's abduction."

"Ah, yes, I understand: to recover one woman, you pay court to another. It's the longest road but certainly the most entertaining."  
D'Artagnan was on the point of telling everything to Athos but one thing stopped him: Athos was a gentleman very strict in matters of honour, and in some of d'Artagnan's plans regarding Milady he was sure there were things that wouldn't meet with Athos's approval. We now take our leave of the two friends, who had nothing more of importance to say to each other, and follow Aramis. At the news that the man who wanted to speak with him came from Tours, we've seen how quickly the young man followed, or rather preceded, Bazin. He rushed without pause from the Rue Férou to the Rue de Vaugirard. On entering his house, he discovered a man awaiting him, short, with intelligent eyes but dressed in rags. "You asked for me?" said the musketeer.

"I have asked to speak with Sir Aramis. Is this your name, then?"  
"I am he. Have you brought something for me?"

"Yes, if you can show me a certain embroidered handkerchief."  
"It's here," said Aramis, drawing a key from around his neck and opening a little ebony coffer inlaid with mother-of-pearl. "Here it is. Look."  
"That's it," said the beggar. "Dismiss your lackey." In fact, Bazin, curious to know what a beggar could want with his master, had nearly kept pace with him and had arrived at almost the same moment. But all his hurry was wasted; at the beggar's suggestion his master made a sign for him to retire, and he had no choice but to obey. Bazin having left, the beggar took a quick look around to be sure no one could see or hear them. Then he undid the leather belt that barely held together his ragged vest, ripped open a seam in the lapel of his doublet, and drew forth a letter. Aramis let out a cry of joy at the sight of the seal and kissed the handwriting of the address. Then, with an almost religious respect, he opened it. It contained the following:

*My friend,  
It's the will of fate that we be separated for some time yet – but the glorious days of youth aren't lost beyond return. Do your duty in camp; I'll do mine elsewhere. Accept that which the bearer brings you, go on campaign like a handsome, true gentleman – and think of me who gently kisses your dark eyes. Goodbye – or rather, see you shortly!*  
The beggar unstitched his doublet further, and drew one by one from his ragged clothing a hundred and fifty Spanish double *pistoles* that he stacked on the table. Then he opened the door, bowed, and departed before the young man, stupefied, had dared to speak a single word to him. Aramis then read the letter again and noticed it had a postscript:  
*P.S. You may receive the bearer with honour as he's a Count and Grandee of Spain.*

"Golden dreams!" cried Aramis. "Ah! Life is beautiful! Yes, we are still young! Yes, we still have happy days ahead of us! To thee, my love – my blood – my life! All, all, *all* for my darling mistress!"  
And he kissed the letter passionately, without even glancing at the gold glinting on the table. Bazin scratched at the door. Aramis no longer had any reason to keep him out, so he allowed him to enter. Bazin, amazed by the sight of the gold, forgot that he'd come to announce d'Artagnan. Curious to know whom the beggar was, he'd come to Aramis's house after leaving Athos. D'Artagnan was quite informal with Aramis, so seeing that Bazin had forgotten to announce him, he announced himself. "What the devil!" he said. "My dear Aramis, if these are the plums sent to you from Tours, give my compliments to the gardener who harvests them."

"You're mistaken, *my dear*," said Aramis, ever wary. "This is from my publisher, who has sent me the price of that poem in single-syllable verse that I began on our journey."  
"Really!" said d'Artagnan. "Well, all I can say is your publisher is quite generous, my dear Aramis."  
"How, Sir!" cried Bazin. "A poem sold for as much as that! It's incredible! Oh, Sir – write as much as you want! You may become the equal of Sir Voiture and Sir Benserade. I'd like that. A poet is as good as an abbot. Please, Sir Aramis, become a poet – I beg of you."

"Bazin, my friend," said Aramis, "I believe you are intruding on my conversation."  
Bazin saw he was in the wrong; he bowed and departed. "You sell your script for its weight in gold," said d'Artagnan with a smile. "You're very lucky, my friend – but watch out, or you're going to lose that letter sticking out of your doublet that no doubt also comes from your publisher."

Aramis, blushing to the eyes, thrust the letter back into his doublet and buttoned it up to his neck. "My dear d'Artagnan," he said, "let's go, if you please and find our friends. Since I'm well off, we may resume dining together again, until it's once more your turn to be rich."  
"My faith!" said d'Artagnan, with great pleasure. "It's been too long since we've had dinner together. And as I have a rather hazardous expedition to make tonight, I confess I won't be sorry to brace myself with some bottles of old burgundy."

"I wouldn't say no to some old burgundy," said Aramis whose ideas of retreat from the world had been completely effaced by the sight of the gold.  
Pocketing three or four double *pistoles* to answer the needs of the moment, he put the others into that ebony coffer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, next to the famous handkerchief that served as his talisman. The two friends went to visit Athos who, faithful to his oath not to leave his lodgings, sent out to order dinner brought in. As he was a connoisseur on the subject of gastronomy, d'Artagnan and Aramis had no hesitation about leaving these important details to him. They took themselves off to find Porthos – but at the corner of the Rue du Bac they encountered Mousqueton, who with an air of self-pity was driving before him a horse and a mule. D'Artagnan uttered a cry of surprise, not unmixed with joy. "My yellow horse!" he cried. "Aramis, look at that horse!"

"How appallingly bilious!" said Aramis.  
"Really? Well, my friend," replied d'Artagnan, "it was on that very horse that I came to Paris."  
"What? Sir *knows* this horse?" said Mousqueton.  
"Its colour is certainly distinctive," said Aramis. "I've never seen a hide quite like it."  
"I can believe that," said d'Artagnan. "That's how I got three crowns for him. It must have been for his hide, for his carcass certainly is worth no eighteen *livres*. But how did this horse find its way into your hands, Mousqueton?"  
"Let's not talk about that, Sir," said the valet. "It's a dirty trick played on us by the husband of our duchess."  
"How's that, Mousqueton?"

"As you know, we're looked on with favour by a lady of quality, the Duchess of ... but no! Begging your pardon, my master's ordered me to be discreet. She pressed upon us as a little keepsake, a magnificent Spanish jennet, plus an Andalusian mule that looked simply gorgeous. The husband heard about it, confiscated the fine animals she was sending to us, and substituted these horrid beasts."  
"Which you're returning to him?" said d'Artagnan.

"Exactly!" replied Mousqueton. "You don't imagine we could accept mounts like these in exchange for those promised to us."  
"Not at all – though I would have liked to see Porthos on my Buttercup, by God! That would give me some idea of how I looked myself when I arrived in Paris. But don't let us keep you, Mousqueton – go and complete your master's mission. Is he at home?"  
"Yes, Sir but he's in a rotten humour," Mousqueton said. "Get along, you!"

And he continued on his way toward the Quai des Grands-Augustins while the two friends went to ring the bell at the door of the unlucky Porthos. He, having spotted them crossing the forecourt, was careful not to answer, and they rang the bell in vain. Meanwhile, Mousqueton continued on his way. Crossing the Pont Neuf, driving the two nags ahead of him, he reached the Rue aux Ours. Arriving there, according to his master's orders, he hitched the horse and the mule to the prosecutor's doorknocker. Then, without bothering himself as to their fate, he returned to Porthos and announced his mission accomplished. After a while the two unfortunate beasts, who hadn't eaten anything since the morning, kicked up such a fuss with the doorknocker that the prosecutor ordered his demi-clerk to go ask around the neighbourhood to find out who the nags belonged to. Meanwhile, Madam Coquenard had recognised her gifts but couldn't understand their sudden restitution. However, a visit from Porthos soon cleared this up. The wrath that smouldered in the musketeer's eyes, in spite of his efforts to suppress it, terrified his sensitive inamorata. Mousqueton had mentioned running into d'Artagnan and Aramis, and that d'Artagnan had recognised the yellow horse as the Béarnaise pony on which he'd come to Paris. Porthos departed after setting a rendezvous with madam in the Cloister of Saint-Magloire. Seeing that he was on his way out, the prosecutor invited him to dinner, an invitation the musketeer refused with a majestic air. Madam Coquenard went trembling to the Cloister of Saint-Magloire, for she guessed what reproaches awaited her there – but she couldn't resist Porthos and his haughty and noble airs. All the imprecations and reproaches that a man wounded in his pride could inflict on a woman Porthos hurled upon the bowed head of the prosecutor's wife. "Alas!" she said. "I was just trying to do what was best for everyone. One of our clients is a horse-trader and owed us money in arrears. I took the mule and the horse in place of what he owed – he promised me two noble steeds."

"Well, Madam," said Porthos, "if he owed you more than five crowns, your horse-trader is a thief."  
"There's nothing wrong with trying to get a bargain, Sir Porthos," Madam said, looking for an excuse.  
"No, Madam – but those whose first interest is a bargain should permit others to find more generous friends."

And Porthos, turning on his heel, made as if to go. "Sir Porthos! Sir Porthos!" cried the prosecutor's wife. "I've been wrong, I know that – I shouldn't have tried to bargain when it comes to equipping a cavalier like you!"

Porthos, without a word, continued to walk away. To the lady, it seemed as if he was leaving for a golden realm where Duchess and marquises threw bags of money at his feet. "Sir Porthos, stop, in the name of heaven!" she cried. "Stop, and let's talk."  
"Talking with you just brings me bad luck," said Porthos.  
"But tell me, what do you ask of me?"

"I ask for nothing, because it brings the same result as asking for something."  
She hung on his arm and cried out, in her grief, "Sir Porthos, I know nothing of such things! What do I know of horses or harnesses?"  
"You should have left it to me, Madam, who does know. But you prefer bargaining and usury."  
"I was wrong, Sir Porthos but I'll make good, on my word of honour."

"And how will you do that?" asked the musketeer.  
"Listen. Tonight Sir Coquenard is going to visit Sir Duke of Chaulnes, who has sent for him. Their meeting will last at least three hours. Come to me: we'll be alone, and can settle our accounts."  
"Now, my dear, that sounds more like it!"  
"You'll forgive me?"  
"We shall see," Porthos said majestically.  
And they parted, saying, "Till this evening."  
*The devil!* Porthos thought as he walked away. *I may see the inside of Master Coquenard's cabinet after all.*

035  
All Cats are Grey at Night

The evening, awaited so impatiently by both Porthos and d'Artagnan, finally arrived. As was his custom, d'Artagnan presented himself at Milady's at about nine o'clock. He found her in a charming mood. Never before had she received him so warmly. The Gascon knew at first glance that his letter had been delivered and its message had taken effect. Kitty came in with some sorbets. Her mistress, with a face that would charm a statue, smiled on her graciously. Alas! The poor girl was so distressed, she never noticed Milady's benevolence. D'Artagnan looked from one to the other of these women, and had to confess that Nature had erred in their creation. The *great dame* had received a soul venal and vile, while the soubrette had been given the heart of a duchess. At ten o'clock Milady began to appear uneasy. D'Artagnan knew what she wanted to say. She looked at the clock, rose, sat down again, and smiled at d'Artagnan as if to say, "You're a pleasant enough fellow but you'd be far more charming if you left!"  
D'Artagnan rose and took his hat. Milady gave him her hand to kiss. The young man felt her press his hand but knew she was not flirting, she was just grateful for his departure. "She loves him like the devil loves sin," he said to himself. Then he departed. This time Kitty wasn't waiting for him, neither in the antechamber, in the corridor, nor at the gate. D'Artagnan had to find the little staircase to her room by himself. Kitty lay with her head in her hands, crying. She heard d'Artagnan enter but didn't raise her head. The young man sat next to her and took her hands but she just sobbed. As d'Artagnan had predicted, Milady had been delirious with joy on receiving the letter and had told her servant everything. To reward Kitty for accomplishing her mission, Milady had given her a purse heavy with

coin. Kitty, upon returning to her room, had thrown this purse into a corner. There it lay, three or four coins spilling out onto the carpet. Hearing d'Artagnan's voice, the poor girl raised her head. D'Artagnan was startled by her expression that was agony made visible. She clasped her hands together like a suppliant but couldn't utter a single word. D'Artagnan was insensitive, as youth must be but even his heart was touched by this silent grief. However, he was too attached to his plan to change it now. And he gave Kitty no such hope, merely described his intended actions as solely driven by vengeance. Accomplishing this vengeance was made easy for him, for Milady, doubtless to pretend to conceal her blushes from her lover, had ordered Kitty to put out all the lights in her chambers, even her bedchamber. Well before dawn, Sir Wardes must leave, unseen. Soon they heard Milady retire to her bedchamber. D'Artagnan immediately slipped into the wardrobe. He was barely inside it when Milady's little bell sounded. Kitty answered her mistress's summons but shut the door behind her. Nonetheless, the partition was so thin that d'Artagnan could hear everything the two women said. Milady seemed giddy with glee, and made Kitty repeat the tiniest details of her imaginary interview with of Wardes. *How had he received the letter? How had he responded? What was the expression on his face? Did he seem at all love-struck?*

Kitty, forced to wear a smiling face, replied to all these questions in a choked voice that her mistress never noticed. Happiness is always egotistical. Then, as the hour for the advent of the count approached, Milady had all the lights dimmed or extinguished. She ordered Kitty to return to her room but to be prepared to introduce of Wardes when he arrived. Kitty didn't have long to wait. D'Artagnan had been watching through a crack in the wardrobe. He'd scarcely seen the lights extinguished before he was slipping out of his hiding place, just as Kitty closed the door between her room and Milady's. "What is that noise?" demanded Milady.

"It is I," said d'Artagnan, half-whispering, "I, the Count of Wardes."

"My God, my God," murmured Kitty, "he can't even wait until the time he appointed!"

"Well, then," said Milady, her voice trembling, "why don't you come in? Count, Count – you know I await you!"

At this call, d'Artagnan softly left Kitty behind and entered Milady's bedchamber. *What emotion, even rage or sorrow, can match the exquisite torture produced when a lover, under an assumed name, hears declarations of love addressed to his lucky rival?*

This was a heartrending circumstance that d'Artagnan hadn't foreseen. Jealousy gnawed at his heart, and he suffered almost as much as poor Kitty, who wept quietly in the adjoining chamber. "Yes, Count," said Milady in her sweetest voice, tenderly caressing d'Artagnan's hand, "yes, I rejoiced in the love you showed me through your looks and words whenever we met. And I love you in return. Oh, tomorrow, tomorrow I must have some keepsake from you that proves that you think of me and won't forget me. Take this!" And she pulled a ring from her finger and pushed it onto one of d'Artagnan's. He remembered having seen this ring on Milady's hand: it was a magnificent sapphire encircled with diamond brilliants. D'Artagnan's first impulse was to return it but Milady breathed, "No, no. Care for that ring as you care for me. Besides," she said, her voice shaking with emotion, "in accepting it, you do me a much greater favour than you could ever imagine."

"This woman is made of mysteries," d'Artagnan said to himself.

He was nerving himself up to reveal everything, tell Milady who he really was, and for what vengeance he'd come when she murmured, "You poor angel, nearly killed by that monster of a Gascon!"

He was that monster. "Your wounds," she said, "do they still make you suffer?"

"Yes ... a lot," whispered d'Artagnan who didn't know quite what to say.

"Rest easy," murmured Milady. "I will avenge you – and most cruelly!"

*Plague!* D'Artagnan thought. *I'd better delay revealing any secrets.*

It was some time before d'Artagnan resumed their little dialogue, as they were otherwise occupied – and by then, all the ideas of vengeance he'd brought with him had completely vanished. This woman held an incredible power over him: he hated her, and at the same time he adored her. He would never have believed that two such opposite feelings could live in the same heart, and together form a love so strange as to be almost diabolical. The bells tolled one o'clock; it was time to part. As he left Milady, d'Artagnan felt only regret at parting from her. They exchanged passionate goodbyes and agreed on another rendezvous for the following week. Poor Kitty had hoped to have a few words with d'Artagnan as he passed through her chamber but Milady herself escorted him out through the darkness, leaving him only at the staircase that led to the door. The next morning, d'Artagnan hurried to Athos's house. He was engaged in such a bizarre adventure that he had to have advice. He told Athos everything. Athos frowned more than once in the telling. "Your 'Milady' seems to me an infamous creature but nonetheless it was a mistake to deceive her so. One way or another, you'll see that you've made a terrible enemy."

As he said this, Athos first noticed, then focused all his attention on the sapphire ring set with diamonds that d'Artagnan wore on his finger. It had taken the place of the queen's ring, now secreted away in its own small box. "You're looking at this ring?" the Gascon said, proud to display such a glorious present to his friend.

"Yes," said Athos. "It reminds me of a family jewel."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said d'Artagnan.

"Magnificent," replied Athos. "I didn't think two sapphires of such fine water existed. Did you trade your diamond ring for this?"

"No," said d'Artagnan, "it's a gift from my lovely Englishwoman – or rather, my lovely Frenchwoman. I haven't asked her about it but I'm convinced she was born in France."

"This ring comes from Milady?" cried Athos in a voice that couldn't hide his shock.

"Milady herself. She gave it to me last night."

"Let me see that ring," said Athos.

"Here it is," d'Artagnan said and took it from his finger.

Athos examined it, and became very pale. He tried it on the ring finger of his left hand: it slipped on as if made for it. An angry cloud darkened his usually calm brow. "It's impossible for it to be the same," he said. "How could this ring find its way into the hands of Milady Winter? And yet it's hard to imagine that two such gems should be so similar."

"You know this ring?" asked d'Artagnan.

"I thought I knew it," said Athos, "but doubtless I was mistaken."

He returned it to d'Artagnan but continued to look at it. "D'Artagnan," Athos said, after a minute or two, "either take that ring off your finger or turn the stone inside. It brings back such cruel memories that I don't think I could continue to talk with you. Don't ask *me* for advice, by God; don't tell me you're over your head and don't know what you should do!" He paused. "Wait. Give me the sapphire again. The one I once knew had one of its faces marred in an accident."

D'Artagnan took the ring from his finger and gave it once more to Athos. The musketeer started. "Here," he said. "Look. Now, isn't that strange?"

And he showed d'Artagnan the scratch he'd remembered. "But who did this sapphire come from, Athos?"

"From my mother who'd it from her mother. As I said, it's an old jewel – one that should never have left the family."

D'Artagnan hesitated. "And *you* ... sold it?" he asked.

"No," replied Athos with a strange smile. "I gave it away during a night of love – just as it was given to you."

It was d'Artagnan's turn to be thoughtful. He seemed to see abysses in Milady's soul whose depths were dark and unknown. He took back the ring but put it in his pocket rather than on his finger.

"Listen," Athos said to him, taking his hand. "You know I love you, d'Artagnan. If I had a son I couldn't love him more than you. Hear me: give up this woman. I don't know who she is," he said, "but a kind of intuition tells me she is a lost creature, and that there's something fatal about her."

"You're right about that," said d'Artagnan. "You're right. I'll drop her. I must confess, that woman terrifies me."

"Do you have the courage to do it?" Athos said.

"I do," replied d'Artagnan. "It's done as of now."

"It's the right thing to do, my son," said the gentleman, pressing the Gascon's hand with an almost paternal affection. "May God grant that this woman who's barely touched your life, leaves it without scarring you as she goes." Athos bowed his head, and the young man understood that he wished to be left alone with his thoughts. On returning home, d'Artagnan found Kitty waiting for him. A month of fever couldn't have changed the poor child more than one night of sleepless grief had. She had been sent by her mistress to the false of Wardes. Her mistress was mad with love, intoxicated with joy. She wanted to know when her lover would grant her a second tryst – and now poor Kitty, pale and trembling, awaited d'Artagnan's reply. Athos had a great influence over the young man; the advice of his friend echoed the voice of his own heart, and he decided, now that his pride was salved and his vengeance satisfied, not to see Milady again. For his response, he took up a quill and wrote the following letter:

*Don't count upon me, Madam, for another rendezvous. Since my convalescence I've so many affairs of this sort to attend to that I must impose a certain order upon them. When your turn comes again, I'll have the honour to inform you of it. I kiss your hands,*  
*Count of WARDES*

Not a word about the sapphire. *Did the Gascon plan to keep it as a weapon against Milady? Or, to be frank, was he retaining the sapphire as a last resource for his equipment?*

It would be a mistake to judge behaviour in one period from the point of view of another. An act that a gentleman of today would consider disgraceful was at that time viewed as simple and natural, during a period when the young sons of the best families were frequently supported by their mistresses. D'Artagnan passed this letter, open, to Kitty. At first she could hardly comprehend it but after reading it a second time she went wild with joy. Kitty could scarcely believe such happiness, and d'Artagnan had to reread it to her aloud, in his own voice, before she could accept it was true. Then, despite the danger the poor girl incurred in delivering such a letter to the hot-blooded Milady, she ran back to the Place Royale as fast as her legs could go. The heart of even the best of women knows no pity toward a rival. Milady was as eager to open the letter as Kitty had been to bring it – but the first words she read made her livid with rage. Crushing the paper in her hand, she turned to Kitty with fiery eyes and demanded, "What is this letter?"

"It's just the reply to Madam's note," replied Kitty, trembling.

"Impossible!" cried Milady. "It's impossible for a gentleman to have written such a letter to a woman!" Then starting, she said, "My God! Could he have seen...?" She stopped. She ground her teeth and turned the colour of ashes. She tried to get to the window for air but as she stretched out her arms, her legs failed her and she sank onto a divan. Kitty, who thought she was stricken ill, began to open the bodice of her dress. Milady sat up suddenly, saying, "What are you up to? Why are you laying your hands on me?"

"I ... thought Madam was ill and wanted to help her," her servant said, alarmed by the terrible expression on her mistress's face.

"Me, fall ill? *Me?* Do you take me for some little housewife? When I'm insulted, I'm not weak or ill – I'm *avenged!* Do you hear me?" And with a gesture, she dismissed Kitty from the room.

### 036 Dreams of Vengeance

That evening Milady left orders that when d'Artagnan came at his usual time, he should be admitted immediately. But he did not come. The next day Kitty went to see the young man once more, and told him what had happened the previous evening. D'Artagnan smiled; Milady's jealous rage was his revenge. That evening Milady was even more impatient than the night before, and renewed her order for immediate admission of the Gascon – but as on the night before, she waited in vain. The next day, when Kitty presented herself at d'Artagnan's lodgings, she was no longer lively and joyous as she'd been on the two previous days – she was as sad as death. D'Artagnan asked the poor girl what had happened to her. Her only reply was to draw a letter from her pocket and hand it to him. This letter was in Milady's hand, only this time it was addressed to d'Artagnan rather than to Sir Wardes. He opened it, and read the following:

*Dear Sir d'Artagnan,*

*It's wrong to neglect your friends this way, especially just when you are about to leave them for so long. My brother-in-law and I expected you yesterday and the day before but in vain. Will it be the same this evening?*

*Your most grateful,*

*LADY CLARICE*

"No surprises here," said d'Artagnan. "I expected such a letter. My credit rises with the fall of that of the Count of Wardes."

"Will you allow yourself to be summoned this way?" asked Kitty.

"Listen, my dear child," said the Gascon, groping for a way to excuse himself for breaking the promise he'd made to Athos, "you realise it would be shockingly bad manners to refuse such a direct invitation. If I quit visiting Milady without explanation she's liable to suspect something, and who could say how far the vengeance of such a woman might go?"

"God above!" said Kitty. "You always know how to make things sound like you're in the right. Now you're going to pay court to her again – and this time, if you manage to please her in your own name and with your own face, everything will be even worse than before!"

The poor girl intuitively guessed what was going to happen. D'Artagnan reassured her as best he could, and promised to remain unmoved by Milady's seductions. He told Kitty to reply to Milady that he couldn't be more grateful for her kindness to him, and he would comply with her orders. He didn't dare write to her for fear that Milady's sharp eyes would recognise his handwriting. D'Artagnan was in the Place Royale at the stroke of nine. It was clear that the servants who waited in the antechamber had been told what to do when d'Artagnan appeared; before he'd even asked if Milady was receiving, one of them ran to announce him. "Show him in," Milady said sharply in such a piercing tone that d'Artagnan could hear her in the antechamber.

As he was introduced into her chambers Milady said to her lackey, "I am at home to no one. Do you hear me? To no one."

The servant bowed and left them. D'Artagnan cast a curious glance at Milady. She was pale and her eyes looked tired, from either crying or insomnia. The lights in the room were dimmer than usual, intentionally so but the young woman couldn't conceal the traces of the fever that had devoured her for the past two days. D'Artagnan approached her with his usual gallantry. She made a supreme effort to receive him warmly but never was such a charming smile belied by such underlying distress. D'Artagnan asked her how she was feeling. "Ill," she replied, "very ill."

"But then, my visit is an indiscretion," said d'Artagnan. "I fear you need rest. I should retire."

"Not at all," said Milady. "On the contrary! Please remain, Sir d'Artagnan, and honour me with your pleasant company."

*Uh-oh*, thought d'Artagnan. *She's never been half this charming before. I'd better watch myself.* Milady was all warmth, affection, and her conversation was brilliant. Meanwhile, the fever that had briefly abandoned her, returned full force, lending lustre to her eyes, colour to her cheeks, and coral to her lips. D'Artagnan found himself once again in the toils of the Circe who had formerly enwrapped him in her enchantments. His love that he'd thought extinct but which was only asleep, reawakened in his heart. Milady smiled upon him, and d'Artagnan felt he would willingly damn himself for that smile. There was even a moment when he felt something like remorse for what he'd done to her. Gradually, Milady's conversation became more personal. She asked d'Artagnan if he had a mistress. "Alas!" D'Artagnan put as much feeling into the word as he could. "How can you be so cruel as to ask me such a question – of me who, from the moment I first saw you, have breathed and sighed only for you!"

Milady smiled a strange smile. "Then, you love me?" she said.

"Do I have to tell you? Can you have missed it?"

"Maybe I have. But you know, the prouder the heart, the harder it is to capture."

"Oh! I'm not afraid of mere difficulties," said d'Artagnan. "I fear only impossibilities."

"Nothing is impossible," said Milady, "when love is true."

"Nothing, Madam?"

"Nothing," Milady replied.

*The devil!* d'Artagnan thought. *This is a new tune. Is there a chance she's falling in love with me? She's so impulsive! Is she going to give me another sapphire like the one she gave me for of Wardes?*

He eagerly drew his chair closer to Milady's. "Let's just see," she said, "exactly what you'd do to prove this love you speak of."

"Anything you want of me! Just tell me – I'm ready."

"Anything?"

"Anything!" cried d'Artagnan, who knew in advance that he didn't risk much by such a promise.

"Well, then – let's have a little talk."

Milady drew her own chair nearer to d'Artagnan's, "I'm listening."

Milady seemed anxious and uncertain for a moment but then appeared to come to a decision. "I have an enemy," she said.

"You, Madam?" D'Artagnan pretended surprise. "My God! Is that possible, to someone as lovely and good as you are?"

"A mortal enemy."

"Really?"

"An enemy who has insulted me so cruelly that between us it is war to the death. Can I count on your help?"

D'Artagnan saw right away where the vindictive creature was going. "You can, Madam!" he said emphatically. "Like my love, my arm and life are yours!"

"Then," said Milady, "Since you're as generous as you are loving..."

She paused. "Since I am..."? prompted d'Artagnan.

"Since you are," Milady replied, after a moment of silence, "then you need no longer talk of ... impossibilities."

"Oh, Milady!" d'Artagnan cried. "My heart overflows with happiness!"

He fell to his knees, and she allowed him to cover her hands with kisses. *Avenge me on that cow of Wardes*, Milady thought, *and I'll have no trouble disposing of you, you fool. You're nothing but a living sword.*

*Fall willingly into my arms*, d'Artagnan thought, *after the way you've abused me, you two-faced femme fatale, and later I'll laugh at you with the man you want me to kill.* D'Artagnan raised his head. "I am ready," he said.

"You have understood me then, dear Sir d'Artagnan?"

"I would understand your slightest glance!"

"Then you would use your strong arm for me, that arm that is already so renowned?"

"Instantly!"

"But I," said Milady, "how could I repay such a service? I know what lovers are like – a man will take everything and give nothing in return."

"You know the only reply I desire," said d'Artagnan, "the only one worthy of you and me!"

He drew her softly closer to him. She resisted hardly at all. "Demanding man," she said, smiling.

"Ah!" cried d'Artagnan, truly carried away by the passion this woman had fired in him. "It's because this happiness is so hard to believe! I'm afraid it will vanish like a dream, so I rush to make it a reality."

"Then do what you must to deserve such happiness."

"I am at your orders," said d'Artagnan.

"Are you really?" said Milady with a final doubt.

"Just tell me the name of the dog who has brought tears to your lovely eyes!"

"Who told you I'd been crying?" she said.

"It seemed to me..."

"Women like me don't cry," Milady said.

"All the better! Come now, tell me his name."

"You realise I'm revealing a secret."

"Even so, you must tell me his name."

"I know I must. Look at the confidence I have in you!"

"You drown me in joy. What is his name?"

"You know him."

"I do?"

"Yes."

D'Artagnan pretended to hesitate. "Surely it's not one of my friends?"

"So if it were one of your friends, you'd hold back?" Milady said with a menacing look.

"No, not even if it were my brother!" d'Artagnan cried, seemingly carried away with enthusiasm.

The Gascon had nothing to lose as he knew whom she meant. "I love your devotion," Milady said.

"Is that the only thing you love about me?" asked d'Artagnan.

"I love you, too," she whispered, taking his hand.

And the warm pressure of her fingers made d'Artagnan tremble as if through her touch the fever that consumed Milady caught fire in him. "You, in love with me! You!" he cried. "Oh! If that were true, I'd lose my mind!"

And he took her into his arms. She didn't try to avoid his kisses but didn't respond to them. Her lips were cold. D'Artagnan felt as if he were embracing a statue. He was nonetheless drunk with joy, electrified with love. He almost believed that Milady had a heart; he almost believed in the crime of Wardes. If of Wardes had come under his hand at that instant, he'd have killed him. Milady seized the moment. She hissed, "His name is..."

"De Wardes! I know it!" cried d'Artagnan.

"How do you know that?" demanded Milady.

She gripped his hands and gazed at him searchingly, trying to read to the depths of his soul. D'Artagnan realised he'd let himself get carried away and had made a serious mistake. "Speak! Speak! Speak, I demand it!" repeated Milady. "How do you know it?"

"How do I know it?" said d'Artagnan.

"Yes!"

"I know it, because ... yesterday, I was in a salon where of Wardes showed around a ring he said he had from you."

"The miserable wretch!" cried Milady. This insult struck d'Artagnan to the bottom of his heart as may well be imagined. "Well?" she continued.

"Well! I shall see that you are revenged on this 'miserable wretch'," replied d'Artagnan, donning the bombastic airs of a knight of the stage.

"Thank you, my brave friend!" cried Milady. "And when will this vengeance take place?"

"Whenever you please: tomorrow or this very moment."

Milady almost burst out, "This very moment!" –

But it occurred to her that d'Artagnan might find this less than gracious. Besides, she had a thousand precautions to take, a thousand warnings to give to her defender, to make sure he said nothing to the count in the presence of witnesses that might implicate her. But all these thoughts were pre-empted by d'Artagnan's next words: "Tomorrow," said he, "you will be avenged, or I will be dead."

"No!" she said. "You will avenge me but you won't die. He's nothing but a coward."

"Toward women, perhaps but not toward men. I know something of him."

"It seems to me you can't complain about your luck in your last fight with him."

"Luck is a fickle lover: she may favour you today, then tomorrow choose another."

"In other words, now you hesitate."

"Hesitate, me? God forbid it! But would it be just to let me go to a possible death, without having given me something more than mere hope?"

Milady replied with a look that said, *Is that all? Just ask.* She reinforced the look by saying tenderly, "That's no more than fair."

"And you're ... an angel," said the young man.

"Then, all is agreed?" she said.

"All, except what I should ask of you, dear heart!"

"Even though I've said you can count on my affection?"

"I couldn't possibly wait till tomorrow."

"Hush!" Milady said. "I hear my brother coming. It will do no good for him to find you here."

She rang and Kitty appeared. "Go out this way," Milady said to d'Artagnan, opening a small, concealed door. "Return at eleven and we'll conclude our little talk. Kitty will bring you to my chamber." At these words, poor Kitty froze and nearly fainted. "What's come over you, young lady, standing there like a statue?" Milady demanded. "On your way! Escort the knight out. You heard my orders – carry them out when he returns at eleven."

*It appears all these appointments are made for eleven o'clock, d'Artagnan thought. It's a regular routine. Milady gave him her hand, and he kissed it tenderly. Nevertheless, he said to himself, retiring in haste to avoid Kitty's reproaches, nevertheless, I mustn't fool myself. This woman is a terror. Watch yourself, d'Artagnan – watch yourself.*

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The Secret of Milady

Instead of going up to Kitty's room, d'Artagnan immediately left Milady's hôtel, despite the young girl's desperate invitation. For this, he had two reasons: first, so he could avoid Kitty's reproaches, recriminations, and pleas; and second, because he wanted an opportunity to organise his thoughts and, if possible, divine those of Milady. The chief thing on his mind was the fact that, while he was madly in love with Milady, she didn't love him in the slightest. It was clear that the best thing d'Artagnan could do would be to go home and write Milady a long letter, confessing that he and "de Wardes" were one and the same, and consequently he couldn't engage to kill "de Wardes" without committing suicide. But he was also spurred on by a fierce desire to avenge himself by possessing this woman under his own name. The opportunity for such a revenge was too sweet to surrender. He walked around the Place Royale five or six times, turning every ten paces or so to look at the light shining from between the window blinds in Milady's chambers. This time, it seemed, the young woman was not quite so eager to retire to her bedchamber as she'd been for of Wardes. Eventually, the light winked out. D'Artagnan's last hesitation disappeared with the light. He recalled the details of his first night with Milady and, heart pounding, brain afire, he re-entered her hôtel and raced up to Kitty's room. The young girl, pale as a corpse, trembling in every limb, tried to stop her lover – but Milady, alert, had heard the sound of d'Artagnan's entrance. She opened the door to her bedchamber. "Come in," she said.

This was so brazen, so incredibly shameless, that d'Artagnan could scarcely believe what he saw or heard. He felt as if he'd fallen into one of those fantastic situations one meets only in dreams. He nonetheless flew into Milady's arms, drawn to her like iron to a lodestone. The door shut solidly behind them. Kitty threw herself at that door. Jealousy, fury, outraged pride – all the passions that roil the heart of a woman in love – tempted her to reveal everything to Milady. But she would be ruined if she confessed to playing a part in such a plot – and, worst of all, d'Artagnan would be lost to her forever. This last, loving thought persuaded her to make the final sacrifice. As for d'Artagnan, he had finally achieved the object of all his desires. No longer was it a rival who was loved but he himself – or at least, so it appeared. A little voice in the back of his mind whispered to him that he was no more than an instrument of revenge, beloved until he repaid her caresses with death. But pride, conceit, and a fever of passion combined to drown out this voice. Besides, when the enormously self-confident Gascon compared himself to of Wardes, he asked *why, all things considered, he shouldn't be loved for himself?* He abandoned himself entirely to the sensations of the moment. For him, Milady was no longer that woman of fatal intentions who had briefly terrified him. She was an ardent and passionate mistress whose complete surrender to him seemed to prove her love. Two hours passed in this way. Eventually, their passions were spent. Milady whose motives were not at all the same as d'Artagnan's, was quick to return to her agenda. She interrogated the young man as to whether he already had a plan for his encounter with of Wardes the next day. But d'Artagnan, who had other things on his mind, forgot himself and responded with foolish gallantry, saying this was no time concern themselves with duels and sword-thrusts. D'Artagnan's lack of interest in the only thing that mattered to Milady alarmed her, and her questions grew more pointed. D'Artagnan, who had never seriously considered this impossible duel, tried to change the subject but failed miserably. Milady kept him to the subject by the sheer force of her irresistible spirit and iron will. D'Artagnan then thought it would be clever to advise Milady to pardon of Wardes and give up her vindictive scheme. But at the first words he said in this vein, she started and drew back. "Are you afraid, dear d'Artagnan?" she said, in a shrill, mocking tone that echoed strangely in the darkened room. "You can't think that, sweetheart!" replied d'Artagnan. "But, just suppose this poor Count of Wardes is less guilty than you think."

"In any event, he's deceived me," said Milady gravely, "and from the moment he did so, he deserved to die."

"Then die he shall, since you condemn him!" d'Artagnan said firmly. His tone reassured Milady of his devotion, and she immediately drew closer to him. No one can say how long the night seemed to Milady but to d'Artagnan it seemed that no more than a couple of hours had passed before the pale light of dawn crept through the blinds and infiltrated Milady's bedchamber. As d'Artagnan prepared to go, Milady reminded him of his promise to avenge her on of Wardes. "I'm ready," said d'Artagnan, "but first I must be certain of something."

"Of what?" asked Milady.

"That you love me."

"It seems to me I've given you proof of that!"

"Yes – and I'm yours, body and soul."

"Then thank you, my brave lover! But now that I've proven my love, you must prove yours. Isn't that so?"

"Certainly," replied d'Artagnan. "But if you love me as you say, aren't you just a little bit afraid for me?"

"What do I have to fear?"

"For starters, that I might be badly wounded – even killed."

"Impossible," Milady said. "Not with one so brave, and so fine a swordsman."

"Wouldn't you prefer a means that would avoid a fight but would avenge you all the same?" said d'Artagnan.

Milady regarded her lover in silence. In the pale dawn light, her clear eyes spelled death. "Truly," she said, "I believe that now you *do* hesitate."

"No, I'm not hesitating. But I feel sorry for this poor Count of Wardes, now that you no longer love him. It seems to me the man must be so cruelly punished by the loss of your love, it's unnecessary to chastise him further."

"Who told you I loved him?" demanded Milady.

"Well, you've certainly given me plenty of reason to believe that you love someone other than him," the young man said, caressingly, "but I must say, I've taken an interest in this count."

"You have?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"Why should you?"

"Because only I know..."

"What?"

"That he's far from being as guilty toward you as he appears."

"Indeed?" Milady said uneasily. "Explain yourself, for I really don't know what you're talking about."

And she regarded d'Artagnan who still held her in his arms, with eyes that began to smoulder. D'Artagnan decided to make an end of this. "As you say, I'm a man of honour," he said, "and since I'm quite sure that I possess your love – I do possess it, don't I?"

"Entirely. Go on."

"Then I'm transported with joy! ... Except I have a small confession to make."

"A confession?"

"If I had any doubt about your love for me I wouldn't say anything – but you do love me, don't you, my darling?"

"No doubt about it."

"Then if due to an excess of love, I haven't been entirely straight with you, you'd forgive me?"

"...Perhaps."

D'Artagnan put on the most charming smile he could, and leaned forward to kiss Milady's lips but she turned her head. "This confession," she said, growing paler, "what is this confession?"

"You had a midnight rendezvous with of Wardes in this very room last Thursday, didn't you?"

Milady didn't turn a hair. "Me? No! Absolutely not!" she said in a voice so firm that if d'Artagnan hadn't been perfectly certain that he himself had been there, he would have been forced to doubt it.

"No deceptions now, my lovely angel," d'Artagnan said, smiling. "There's no point to it."

"How's that? Speak! You're killing me!"

"Don't worry, I don't hold that rendezvous against you. I've forgiven you already."

"For what? Where is this going?"

"De Wardes has nothing to brag about."

"How can you say that? You told me yourself about that ring..."

"My love, I'm the one who has that ring! The Count of Wardes of last Thursday and the d'Artagnan of last night are the same person!"

The reckless youth expected her reaction to be surprise mixed with shame, and that he would just have to weather a little storm of emotion that would dissolve into tears. But he was fooling himself, and he wasn't long in learning it. Milady drew herself up, pale and terrible. With a sharp blow to his chest, she knocked d'Artagnan aside and sprang from the bed. By then it was broad daylight. Imploring her forgiveness, d'Artagnan tried to hold her by grabbing at her nightgown of fine Indian toile but Milady was determined to escape him. The gown tore, revealing her fair, round shoulders. With a shock, d'Artagnan recognised on one shoulder the *fleur-de-lys*: – *A brand, burned into her flesh by the hand of a royal executioner!*

"Great God!" d'Artagnan cried.

Paralysed and speechless, the nightgown fell from his fingers to the bed. Milady knew from the horror in his eyes that d'Artagnan had seen everything. The young man now knew her secret, her terrible secret that she'd hidden from all the world – except him. She turned on him, not like an angry woman but like a wounded panther. "You wretch!" she spat. "You played a coward's trick on me – and worse, now you know my secret! For that, you die!"

She dashed to her vanity table, opened an inlaid box with feverish and trembling hands, and drew forth a thin, sharp stiletto with a golden hilt. With this she lunged at the half-naked d'Artagnan. Brave young man though he was, he was terrified by the naked savagery of her face, with its horribly dilated pupils, bleeding lips, and cheeks pale as death. He backed across the bed as if pursued by a venomous snake. Reaching behind the bed, he snatched up his sword, and with sweating hands, drew the blade from its scabbard. Paying no attention to the sword, Milady lunged across the bed at him, stopping only when she felt the sharp point at her throat. She tried to grab the rapier with her hands but he kept it out of her grasp. Threatening first her eyes, then her chest, he slid from the bed, looking to make his retreat through the door into Kitty's room. Milady, screaming like a Fury, kept trying to get at him. As the situation resembled a duel, d'Artagnan began to get hold of himself. "All right, *pretty lady*, all right," he said. "But back off or by God, I'll carve a second *fleur-de-lys* on your other shoulder."

"Bastard!" she howled. "Bastard!"

But d'Artagnan, still looking for the door, stayed on the defensive. Hearing the noise they made – he manoeuvring the furniture to keep it between them, she overturning it to try to get at him – Kitty timidly opened her door. D'Artagnan, whose every move had aimed at approaching this door, was no more than three paces from it. With a single bound he leaped from Milady's chamber into that of her servant. Quick as lightning, he slammed the door, then leaned all his weight against it as Kitty threw the bolts. Then Milady tried to tear the door from its frame, with a strength seemingly beyond that of mortal woman. Finding the thing impossible, she thrust through the door with her stiletto, the point repeatedly penetrating the wood. Each blow was accompanied by a shrill cry. "Quick, Kitty, quick!" said d'Artagnan in a low voice as soon as the bolts were thrown. "Get me out of this hôtel! If we give her a moment to think, she'll have me killed by her lackeys!"

"But you can't go out like that," Kitty said. "You're practically naked."

"You're right," d'Artagnan said, only then realising his state of undress. "Clothe me as well as you can but hurry! This is life or death!"

Kitty knew this all too well. Quickly she draped a flowered dress and a large hooded cloak over him. He thrust his naked feet into a pair of her slippers and she led him down the stairs. It was time: Milady had pulled every bell-cord and roused the whole hôtel. Kitty had the gatekeeper let d'Artagnan out into the street just as Milady appeared at her window, half-nude, crying, "Bar the door, you fools!"

D'Artagnan fled as Milady shook her fist at him from her window. When she lost sight of him she fell back into her chamber, fainting. The young man was in such a panic that, without a thought as to what might become of Kitty, he ran full tilt across half of Paris. The shock and terror that spurred him on, the cries of the Watch as they pursued the fleeing figure, and the mocking hoots of passers-by on early-morning business, only made him run all the faster. He didn't stop until he arrived at Athos's door. He crossed the forecourt, leaped up the two flights to Athos's room, and pounded on the door almost hard enough to break it in. Grimaud opened the door, peering through eyes still swollen with sleep, and d'Artagnan burst in so furiously that he nearly knocked him over. Despite the lackey's habitual silence, this time he found his tongue. "Hold on there, hussy!" he cried. "What do you want with us, you trollop?"

D'Artagnan untangled his hands from the folds of the cloak and threw back his hood. At the sight of a bristling moustache and a naked blade, Grimaud realised he was dealing with a man – probably some kind of assassin. "Help!" he screamed. "Help! Murder!"

"Shut up, nitwit! I'm d'Artagnan! Don't you recognise me?" the young man said. "Where's your master?"

"Sir d'Artagnan? You? Impossible!"

"Grimaud," said Athos, coming out of his chamber in a dressing gown, "did I hear you allowing yourself to speak?"

"Ah, Sir! It's..."

"Silence."

Grimaud resorted to pointing a trembling figure at d'Artagnan. Athos recognised his comrade and, phlegmatic as always, burst out laughing at d'Artagnan's strange masquerade: his hair askew, petticoats tumbling over his slippers, sleeves rucked up, and mustachios quivering in agitation. "Don't laugh, my friend," said d'Artagnan, "for God's sake don't laugh, because as sure as there's a hell, it's no laughing matter."

He spoke with such a solemn air, with such real terror behind it, that Athos immediately took his hands and said, "Are you wounded, d'Artagnan? You're so pale!"

"No but I've just been through something terrible. Are you alone, Athos?"

"*For God's sake!* Whom do you think I'd have in here at this hour?"

"Good! Fine!" d'Artagnan said, hurrying into Athos's inner chamber.

Athos followed him, bolting the door behind him to ensure their privacy. "All right, talk!" he said. "Is the king dead? Have you killed His Eminence? You're not looking your best, you know. Come on, talk, or I'll die from heart failure."

"Athos," said d'Artagnan, as he stripped off Kitty's clothing and appeared in his shirt, "prepare yourself for the most incredible story you've ever heard."

"How about putting on this dressing gown first?" said the musketeer to his friend.

D'Artagnan threw on the robe but he trembled so much he tangled it up and put his arms through the wrong sleeves. "Well?" said Athos.

"Well." D'Artagnan leaned toward Athos's ear and whispered, "Milady is marked with a *fleur-de-lys* on one shoulder!"

"*Augh!*" cried the musketeer as if he'd taken a bullet in his heart.

"Athos," said d'Artagnan, "are you sure the ... *other* ... is dead?"

"The other?" Athos said in a voice so choked that d'Artagnan could barely hear it.

"Yes – the one you told me of that day in Amiens." Athos groaned, bent over, and put his face in his hands. "This woman is in her middle to late twenties," continued d'Artagnan.

"And she's blond," said Athos, "isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Pale blue eyes, strangely clear with dark eyelashes and eyebrows?"

"Yes."

"Tall, and well-shaped? Missing a tooth, next to her left eye-tooth?"

"Yes."

"The *fleur-de-lys* is small, pink, and looks as if she's tried to hide it with powder and paint?"

"Yes."

"But you said she's English!"

"They call her *Milady* but she may be French. Lord Winter is her brother-in-law, not her brother."

"I must see her, d'Artagnan."

"Carefully, Athos, carefully. You attempted to kill her before – she'll do the same to you if she gets a chance and it's not like her to fail."

"She wouldn't dare. It would be as good as denouncing herself."

"She's capable of anything! Have you ever seen her in a fury?"

"No," said Athos.

"A tigress – panther! Oh, Athos, I'm sorry to say it but I'm afraid I've drawn down a terrible vengeance on us both."

D'Artagnan then told him everything, including Milady's mad rage and her threats to kill him. "You're right," said Athos. "Upon my soul, my life wouldn't be worth a hair. Fortunately, we leave Paris the day after tomorrow. We're going to La Rochelle, in all probability, and once we're gone..."

"If she recognises you, Athos, she'll pursue you to the end of the world. Let her confine her hatred to me alone."

"My dear fellow! What does it matter if she kills me?" Athos said. "Do you suppose I care whether I live or die?"

"There's some awful mystery behind all this, Athos. I'm sure that woman is one of the cardinal's agents."

"In that case, be on your guard. Unless the cardinal somehow admires you for that business in London, he'll bear a grudge. Since the affair was secret, he can't accuse you openly – but hatred must be satisfied, especially a cardinal's hatred, so take care. If you go out, never go out alone. If you must eat, take every precaution. In short, mistrust everything, even your own shadow."

"Fortunately, I have to stay out of trouble only until after tomorrow night," said d'Artagnan. "Once we're off with the army, we should have only men to fear."

"In the meantime," Athos said, "I hereby renounce my seclusion so I can stay by your side. You need to return to the Rue des Fossoyeurs, so I'll go with you."

"It may be no more than right around the corner but I can't go like this," d'Artagnan said.

"*It's justice*," said Athos. He rang the bell and Grimaud entered. Athos made a gesture that said, *Go over to d'Artagnan's and bring back some clothes*. Grimaud made an affirmative gesture in reply and departed. "That's that! But this is getting us nowhere in pulling together your equipment, my friend," said Athos, "for unless I miss my guess you've left your best outfit at Milady's, and I doubt she'll be gracious enough to return it to you. Fortunately, you have the sapphire."

"But the sapphire is yours, my dear Athos! Didn't you say it was a family jewel?"

"Yes, my father once told me he paid two thousand crowns for it. It was a wedding present to my mother – it's quite magnificent. My mother gave it to me – and I, instead of keeping it like a holy relic, gave it to that miserable woman. Fool that I was."

"I understand what it must mean to you. Please, my friend – take it back."

"I, take back that ring, after it has passed through the hands of that she-devil? Never! That ring is soiled, d'Artagnan."

"Then sell it."

"Sell a gem that came from my mother? To me, that would be like sacrilege."

"Well, then, pawn it. You should be able to get at least a thousand crowns. With that sum you can settle your affairs, and when you're flush again, you can redeem it. Having passed through the hands of usurers, it will come back cleansed of its old taints."

Athos smiled. "D'Artagnan, you're a charming companion," he said. "Your perpetual good humour is a balm for the afflicted spirit. Very well, we'll pawn that ring – but on one condition!"

"Which is?"

"That there be five hundred crowns for me, and five hundred crowns for you."

"Are you kidding, Athos? As a guard, I don't need a quarter of that sum, and I'll get it by selling my saddle. What do I need? A horse for Planchet, that's all. Besides, you forget that I, too, have a ring."

"To which you're more attached, it seems to me, than I am to mine. At least, that's what I thought."

"It's true, because in an emergency it might save us not only from financial embarrassment but from great danger. Coming from the queen, it's not just a precious diamond – it's practically an enchanted talisman."

"I may not understand it but I believe what you tell me. So let's return to consideration of my ring, or rather yours. Either you take half of what we get for it, or I throw it in the Seine. And I doubt whether, as with Polycrates, a fish will do us the favour of returning it."

"All right, then, I accept!" said d'Artagnan.

At that moment Grimaud returned, accompanied by Planchet, who was worried about his master. Eager to know what had happened to him, he'd taken advantage of the opportunity to bring the clothes himself. D'Artagnan got dressed, as did Athos. When both were ready to go, Athos pantomimed a man taking aim to Grimaud, who took up his musketoon and prepared to accompany his master. Athos and d'Artagnan, followed by their valets, reached the Rue des Fossoyeurs without incident. Bonacieux was at his door, regarding d'Artagnan reproachfully. "Well, if it isn't my loyal lodger! Make haste, there's a pretty girl waiting for you upstairs – and the women, you know, don't like to be kept waiting!"

"That's Kitty!" D'Artagnan dashed up the staircase.

So it was. On the landing outside his rooms, huddled against his door, he found the poor girl all atremble. When she saw him, she said, "You promised to protect me, you promised to save me from her anger! Remember, you're the one who's ruined me!"

"Yes, yes, no doubt about it, Kitty. Easy, now," d'Artagnan said. "What happened after I left?"

"How do I know?" Kitty said. "At her cries, the lackeys all came running. She was insane with anger. There's no curse she didn't call down on your head. I thought she might remember that you came through my room to get to hers, and would think I was your accomplice, so I took what little money I had and a few of my best things and ran for it."

"Poor child! But what can I do for you? I leave the day after tomorrow."

"Do whatever you can, Sir Knight. Get me out of Paris – get me out of France!"

"I can't very well take you with me to the siege of La Rochelle," d'Artagnan said.

"No but you can find me a place in the provinces, in the household of some lady you know – in your own province, maybe."

"My dear girl! In my province, the ladies do without chambermaids. But listen, I think I can manage it for you. Planchet, go find Aramis and ask him to come here right away. We have an important matter to discuss with him."

"I see where you're going," said Athos, "but why not send for Porthos? It seems to me a duchess..."

"Porthos's duchess is waited on by her husband's clerks," d'Artagnan laughed. "Besides, Kitty wouldn't care to live in the Rue aux Ours. Would you, Kitty?"

"I'll live anywhere you want," Kitty said, "as long as I'm well-hidden and no one knows where I am."

"Kitty, now that we're about to be parted, and you're no longer jealous of me..."

"Sir Knight, whether near or far, I'll always love you."

"Constance and loyalty – who would have thought?" Athos murmured.

"That goes for me, too," said d'Artagnan. "I'll always love you, never fear. But in the meantime, tell me – and I attach great importance to the question I'm about to ask – did you ever hear talk of a young lady who was carried off one night?"

"My God, Sir Knight! Are you still in love with *that* woman?"

"No, it's one of my friends who loves her. In fact, it's Athos, here."

"Me?" cried Athos in the tone of a man who sees he's about to step on a cobra.

"You, absolutely!" d'Artagnan said, giving Athos a significant nudge. "You know how concerned we are about that poor little Madam Bonacieux. Besides, Kitty won't say anything – will you, Kitty? You understand, my child," d'Artagnan continued, "she's the wife of that hideous baboon you saw at the door when you came in."

"Oh, my God!" cried Kitty. "You remind me of how scared I was! What if he had recognised me?"

"What do you mean, recognise you? Have you seen that man before?"

"He came to Milady's house twice."

"Did he? When was that?"

"About two or two-and-a-half weeks ago."

"Really."

"And last night he came again."

"Last night?"

"Yes, just before you came yourself."

"My dear Athos, we're entangled in a web of spies!" d'Artagnan said. "Do you think he knew you, Kitty?"

"I pulled my hood down when I saw him but it might have been too late."

"Athos, he mistrusts you less than he does me. Go down and see if he's still at his door."

Athos went down the stairs, and returned shortly thereafter. "He's disappeared," he said, "and the house is closed up."

"He's gone to make his report and say that all the pigeons are in the dovecot."

"Then the pigeons should fly," said Athos. "Just leave Planchet to let us know what happens."

"Half a moment! We sent for Aramis, you know."

"Quite so," said Athos. "We'll wait for Aramis."

At that moment Aramis came in. They quickly explained everything, and asked if, among all his high connections, he could find a place for Kitty. Aramis thought for a moment and said, "Would this really be of service to you, d'Artagnan?"

"I would be grateful to you all my life."

"Very well. Madam of Bois-Tracy," Aramis said, colouring, "asked me for a trustworthy *femme de chambre* for one of her friends who lives in the provinces. If you can vouch for miss, my dear d'Artagnan..."

"Oh, Sir!" cried Kitty. "Believe me, I'll be completely devoted to anyone who gives me a way to get out of Paris."

"Then all is for the best," said Aramis.

He sat at a table and wrote a short note that he folded and sealed with a ring. Then he gave the note to Kitty. "Now, my child," said d'Artagnan, "You know it's no good for any of us to stay here any longer. It's time to part but we'll meet again in better days."

"And whenever we meet again, in whatever time and place," said Kitty, "you'll find I love you then as much as I love you today."

"Gamblers' promises," muttered Athos as d'Artagnan escorted Kitty down the stairs. A moment later, the three young men separated, setting a rendezvous for four o'clock at Athos's lodgings. Planchet was left to guard the house. Aramis returned home, while Athos and d'Artagnan went to see about pawning the sapphire. As the Gascon had predicted, they easily got three hundred *pistoles* in pawn for the ring. Furthermore, the Jew told them that it would make a magnificent pendant for an earring, and he would give them five hundred *pistoles* if they would sell it. Athos and d'Artagnan, with the knowledge of a connoisseur and the energy of two soldiers, needed less than three hours to purchase all the equipment of a musketeer going on campaign. Besides, Athos, who was every inch the great noble, refused to haggle. When he found what he wanted, he paid the asking price without deigning to bargain. D'Artagnan wanted to negotiate but Athos, smiling, just put his hand on his shoulder, and d'Artagnan understood that, while it was all right for a petty Gascon gentleman to dicker over price that was not for a man with the airs of a prince. The musketeer found a superb Andalusian steed, rising six years, as black as jet, with clean, elegant legs, and nostrils of fire. He examined him and found him faultless. They were asking a thousand *livres* for him. Perhaps he could have been had for less but while d'Artagnan was debating the price with the horse-trader, Athos was counting his hundred *pistoles* onto the table. Grimaud got a Picard horse, stout and strong that cost three hundred *livres*. But after buying the saddle for this latter horse and arms for Grimaud, there wasn't a *sou* left of Athos's hundred and fifty *pistoles*. D'Artagnan offered to let his friend dip his hands into his share that he could return later but Athos's only response was a shrug of the shoulders. "How much did the Jew say he would give us for the sapphire if we sold it?" he asked.

"Five hundred *pistoles*."

"In other words, two hundred *pistoles* more – a hundred for you, and a hundred for me. That's a veritable fortune. My friend, let's go back to his shop."

"You ... mean you want to..."

"To have that ring again would only bring back dismal memories. Besides, we'll never have the three hundred *pistoles* to redeem it, so not selling it will just cost us the extra two hundred. Go and tell him the ring is his, d'Artagnan, and come back with the two hundred *pistoles*."

"Athos – reconsider, I beg you."

"What we need right now is money, so we'll just have to learn to make sacrifices. Go, d'Artagnan, go. Grimaud will accompany you with his musketoon." A half an hour later d'Artagnan returned, without trouble and with the 2000 *livres*. And that was how Athos found, close at home, resources he'd never anticipated.

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An Apparition

At four o'clock the four friends met at Athos's house. Their common preoccupation with finding equipment for the campaign had vanished, and each face only expressed its owner's private anxieties – for behind all present happiness lurks a fear for the future. Suddenly Planchet burst in with two letters for d'Artagnan. One was a little billet, discreetly folded and sealed in green wax with a cachet of a dove carrying a leafy branch. The other was a great square epistle, resplendent with the awesome arms of His Eminence the Cardinal. At the sight of the little letter, d'Artagnan's heart leaped, for he thought he recognised the handwriting of the address – and though he'd seen that script only once, the memory was engraved on his heart. He took the little billet and opened it eagerly. It said: *On Thursday, between six and seven o'clock in the evening, take a stroll on the road to Chaillot and look with care into the passing carriages. But as you value your life, or the lives of those who love you, don't say a word or make a move that might lead anyone to believe you recognise me, the woman who exposes herself to ruin just to see you for an instant.*

The letter was unsigned. "It's a trap," said Athos. "Don't go, d'Artagnan."

"Perhaps," said d'Artagnan, "but I think I recognise the handwriting."

"It may be a forgery," replied Athos. "Between six and seven o'clock the road to Chaillot is quite deserted. It's no safer than going for a walk in the forest of Bondy."

"But suppose we all go?" said d'Artagnan. "What the devil! They can't eat up all four of us, plus our lackeys, horses, and arms."

"And it's a fine opportunity to show off our new equipment," said Porthos.

"But if it's a woman who's written to you, d'Artagnan," said Aramis, "and that woman desires not to be seen, you must realise that this would compromise her. That's not the act of a gentleman."

"We'll hang back and let him go up alone," said Porthos.

"Maybe but a pistol is easily shot from a carriage, even at a gallop."

"Bah!" said d'Artagnan. "They'll miss me. Then we'll catch the carriage and exterminate the villains inside it, since they'll have proven themselves our enemies."

"He's right – we'll have ourselves a little battle," said Porthos. "It'll be a chance to try out our new weapons."

"Yes, that might be amusing," said Aramis, in his mild and nonchalant way.

"As you like," said Athos.

"Gentlemen, it's already half past four," d'Artagnan said. "There's barely enough time to be on the road to Chaillot by six o'clock."

"Besides, if we go too late, it will be too dark to see us," said Porthos, "and that would be a pity. Let's get ready to go, Gentlemen."

"Let's not forget the second letter," said Athos. "That seal, it seems to me, indicates that it merits being opened. I must say, my dear d'Artagnan, it probably deserves more attention than that little trifle you've stowed away over your heart."

D'Artagnan blushed. "All right, then, Gentlemen, let's see what His Eminence desires." He unsealed the letter, and read: *Sir d'Artagnan, of His Majesty's Guard, Company des Essarts, is expected at the Hôtel Cardinal this evening at eight o'clock.*

*LA HOUDINIÈRE the Captain of His Eminence's Guards*

"The devil!" said Athos. "Here's a rendezvous that's much more serious than the other."

"I'll go to the second one after the first," d'Artagnan said. "One is for seven o'clock, the other for eight; there will be time for both."

"Hmm! I wouldn't go at all," said Aramis. "A gallant cavalier can't ignore a rendezvous set by a lady but a prudent gentleman may excuse himself from waiting on His Eminence, especially when he has reason to believe he isn't being summoned to receive a compliment."

"I agree with Aramis," Porthos said.

"Gentlemen, I already received from Sir Cavois another such invitation from His Eminence," replied d'Artagnan. "I ignored it, and the next day something awful happened to me! Constance disappeared. This time, no matter what, I'm going."

"If you're set on it," said Athos, "then so be it."

"But what about the Bastille?" Aramis said.

"Bah! You would get me out," d'Artagnan replied.

"No doubt about it," Porthos said with admirable aplomb, as if it were a simple matter.

"Of course we'd get you out," Aramis said, "but the timing is inconvenient, as we're supposed to set out on campaign the day after tomorrow. You're better off not risking the Bastille, at least at present."

"We can offer something better than that," said Athos. "We'll stay with him the entire evening. Then each of us, with three musketeers behind us, can watch one of the doors of the cardinal's hôtel. If we see a closed carriage come out that looks suspicious, we can fall upon it. It's a long time since we had a scrap with the guards of His Eminence; Sir Tréville must think we're dead."

"Decidedly, Athos, you were meant to be a *General of the Army*," said Aramis. "What do you say to this plan, *gentlemen*?"

"Admirable!" the young men replied in chorus.

"All right," said Porthos, "I'll run to Sir Tréville's hôtel and warn some of our comrades to be ready by eight o'clock and meet us at the Hôtel Cardinal. Meanwhile, have the lackeys saddle the horses."

"I haven't got a horse," d'Artagnan said, "but I can borrow one of Sir Tréville's."

"No time," said Aramis. "You'll take one of mine."

"One of yours? How many do you have?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Three," said Aramis with a little smile.

"My friend, you are certainly the best-mounted poet in the Kingdom of France and Navarre," said Athos.

"Really, Aramis – *three* horses?" said d'Artagnan. "I can't imagine why you would go and buy *three* horses."

"That's why I only bought two," Aramis said.

"What, did the third one fall from heaven?"

"No," Aramis said, "the third one was brought to me this morning by a liveried servant, who wouldn't say what household he served but who said he was following the orders of his master."

"Or his mistress," d'Artagnan said.

"That's neither here nor there," Aramis said, blushing. "At any event, he said he had orders from his mistress to put the horse in my stable, without saying where it came from."

"Such things happen only to poets," Athos said gravely.

"Well, in that case, we're fine," said d'Artagnan. "Which of these horses will you ride: one of those you bought, or the one you were given?"



"The one I was given, naturally. You understand, d'Artagnan that I could never offend..."

"Your unknown patron," said d'Artagnan.

"Or patroness," amended Athos.

"So the extra one you bought is of no use to you?"

"Not much."

"You chose it yourself, I assume."

"And with the greatest care! The safety of a rider, you know, depends almost entirely on his horse."

"All right, then sell it to me for whatever you paid for it."

"I was going to make you that exact offer, my dear d'Artagnan. It's a mere bagatelle; take all the time you need to repay me."

"How much did it cost you?"

"Eight hundred *livres*."

"Here are forty double *pistoles*, *my dear friend*," said d'Artagnan as he drew the sum from his pocket. "I remember that this is the coin in which you were paid for your poems."

"So, you're in funds?" Aramis said.

"Filthy rich, my friend!" D'Artagnan jingled the pocket that held the rest of his *pistoles*.

"Then send your saddle to the Hôtel des Mousquetaires and your horse can come back wearing it, along with ours."

"All right – but it's already five o'clock, so let's hurry."

A quarter of an hour later, Porthos appeared at the end of the Rue Férou on a magnificent jennet. Mousqueton followed him on a small but solid Auvergne horse. Porthos was swollen with joy and pride. At the same time Aramis appeared at the other end of the street mounted on a superb English charger. Bazin followed on a roan, leading a spirited Mecklenburg horse; this was to be d'Artagnan's mount. The two musketeers met outside the door; Athos and d'Artagnan watched them from the window. "The devil!" said Aramis. "That's an excellent horse you have there, my dear Porthos."

"It is," Porthos replied. "It's the one that should have been sent to me the first time, when I was the butt of the husband's tasteless joke. But the husband has been punished, and I'm completely satisfied with the substitute."

Grimaud appeared in his turn, leading his master's mount. d'Artagnan and Athos went down into the street, vaulted into the saddles beside their companions, and all four set forth: Athos on a horse he owed to his wife, Aramis on a horse he owed to his mistress, Porthos on a horse he owed to the prosecutor's lady, and d'Artagnan on a horse he owed to Dame Fortune – the best mistress of all. Their lackeys followed. Porthos's hopes were fulfilled: the cavalcade made a fine impression. If Madam Coquenard had been in their path and seen Porthos in all his grandeur on the handsome Spanish jennet, she would have had no regrets about bleeding her husband's strongbox for him. Near the Louvre the four friends met Sir Tréville, who was returning from Saint-Germain. He stopped to compliment them on their fine turnout that quickly drew a crowd of several hundred gawking Parisians. D'Artagnan took advantage of this encounter to inform Sir Tréville about the letter with the great red seal and the cardinal's arms – though about his other letter, he didn't breathe a word. Tréville approved of his planned response, and assured him that, if he didn't reappear by the following day, Tréville would find him, wherever he might be. At that moment, the clock in La Samaritaine struck six. Saying they had an appointment, the four friends excused themselves and took their leave of Sir Tréville. A short gallop brought them to the road to Chaillot. The day was waning. Carriages passed, going this way and that. D'Artagnan, keeping a good distance from his friends, peered into every carriage that went by but saw no one he recognised. Finally, after waiting a quarter of an hour with the shadows lengthening into twilight, a carriage appeared on the road to Sèvres, approaching at a rapid clip. D'Artagnan had a premonition that this coach carried the one who'd set the rendezvous. The young man was astonished to feel his heart beating violently in his chest. Suddenly, a woman's head appeared at the window, two fingers held to her lips, commanding silence – or sending a kiss. D'Artagnan let slip a cry of joy, for this woman – or rather, this apparition, for the carriage flashed past like a vision – was his Madam Bonacieux. With an involuntary movement, despite his orders to the contrary, d'Artagnan spurred his horse to a gallop, and in a few strides overtook the carriage. But the window was closed, sealed shut – the apparition had vanished. Then d'Artagnan remembered: *As you value your life or the lives of those who love you, don't say a word or make a move that might lead anyone to believe you recognise me.*

He stopped, aghast, fearful not for himself but for the poor woman who'd apparently exposed herself to frightful danger to grant him this brief rendezvous. The carriage continued on its way without slowing, until it disappeared into the shadowy streets of Paris. D'Artagnan sat rooted in place, not sure what to think. *If that really was Madam Bonacieux, and she was returning to Paris, why this furtive meeting, this fleeting glimpse, this forlorn kiss? On the other hand, if it wasn't her – which was quite possible, as the light was so dim that he could easily have been mistaken – if it wasn't her, might this be the start of some plot against him, using as bait an appearance by the woman he was known to love?* His three companions rode up. All three had clearly seen a woman's head appear at the window, though none of them, except Athos, knew Madam Bonacieux. Athos thought it was her; however, less focused on her face than d'Artagnan, he thought he'd also seen a second occupant of the carriage: a man. "If that's so," said d'Artagnan, "they must be transporting her from one prison to another. But what are they planning to do with the poor girl, and how will I ever find her again?"

"My friend," Athos said gravely, "remember that it's only the dead we may never see again on Earth. You – and I – have good cause to know that, don't we? If your mistress isn't dead, if that was her we saw just now, then someday you'll find her. And maybe," he added in that misanthropic tone of his, "sooner than you'd like, by God!"

The carriage had been twenty minutes late, and half-past seven had already struck. D'Artagnan's friends reminded him that he had another appointment. They also pointed out that there was still time to give it a pass. But d'Artagnan was both stubborn and curious. He'd decided to see the cardinal and find out what His Eminence wanted to say to him. He wasn't about to change his mind at this point. When they arrived in front of the grand hôtel of the cardinal, they found a dozen musketeers loitering around waiting for their comrades. Only then were they informed of what was expected of them. D'Artagnan was well known to the honourable corps of the King's Musketeers, and was expected to one day take his place among them. He was regarded, in advance, as their comrade, so they all heartily approved of the mission for which they'd been convened. Besides, it seemed likely to offer an opportunity to give a black eye to His Eminence or his men and these worthy gentlemen were always ready for that kind of trouble. Athos divided them into three groups, took command of the first, and gave the second and third to Aramis and Porthos; then each group went to lie in ambush near one of the exits of the hôtel. D'Artagnan, for his part, entered boldly by the main gate. Despite the support of his friends, the young man was not without a qualm or two as he ascended, step by step, the great stairway. His treatment of Milady had been more than a little deceitful, and he suspected her of being a political instrument of the cardinal; not to mention that of Wardes, whom he'd handled so roughly, was one of His Eminence's loyal retainers – and d'Artagnan knew that if His Eminence was a terror to his enemies, he was fiercely protective of his friends. "No doubt of Wardes has described our little encounter to the cardinal – and if he recognised me that is likely, I'm basically a condemned man," said d'Artagnan, shaking his head ruefully. "But if so, why wait to act until now? Well, that's simple enough: Milady has laid her complaints against me, with that melodramatic passion that makes her so fascinating, and that was the final drop that made the sherbet glass overflow. Fortunately," he added, "my good friends are waiting below, and they won't let me be carried off without a fight. However, the musketeers can't wage war on the cardinal, who controls the forces of all France, and against whom the queen has no power and the king has no will. D'Artagnan, my friend, you have many fine qualities – but these women will ruin you!" He came to this sad conclusion as he entered the antechamber. He handed his letter to the audience-controller who led him into a waiting room, then disappeared into the interior of the mansion. In this waiting room were five or six Cardinal's Guards who recognising d'Artagnan as the man who'd wounded Jussac, favoured him with sinister smiles. These smiles seemed a bad omen to d'Artagnan but the Gascon wasn't easily intimidated – or rather, due to the natural pride ingrained in his countrymen, he hid any feelings of fear, even from himself. He stood boldly in front of Gentlemen les Gardes, hand on one hip in an attitude of defiance. The audience-controller returned and gestured to d'Artagnan to follow him. It seemed to the young man that the guards, watching him leave, whispered among themselves. He followed a corridor, crossed a great hall, entered a library, and found himself before a man seated at a desk, writing. The audience-controller announced him, then withdrew without another word. At first, d'Artagnan took the man at the desk for some magistrate examining his dossier but then he noticed that the man was writing, or rather correcting, lines of unequal length, scanning the words with his fingers. Apparently, d'Artagnan was dealing with a poet. After a moment the poet closed his manuscript, on the cover of which was written:

MIRAME, A Tragedy in 5 Acts

Then the poet raised his head. D'Artagnan recognised the cardinal.

#### 040 The Cardinal

The cardinal leaned his elbow on his manuscript, his cheek in his hand, and regarded the young man for a moment. No one had a more penetrating eye than the Cardinal of Richelieu, and d'Artagnan felt this regard sweep over him like a beam of heat. However, he kept his cool, holding his hat in his hand and awaiting the good pleasure of His Eminence, without being either too haughty or too humble. "Sir," the cardinal said to him, "are you a d'Artagnan of Béarn?"

"Yes, My Lord," replied the young man.

"There are several branches of the d'Artagnan family in the vicinity of Tarbes," said the cardinal. "Which do you belong to?"

"I am the son of him who served in the Wars of Religion with Great King Henry, father of His Gracious Majesty."

"Quite so. You set out, some months ago, from your province to find your fortune in the capital?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"You passed through Meung, where there was some sort of incident, I'm not sure what – but an incident."

"My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "here's what happened..."

"No matter, no matter," interrupted the cardinal, with a smile that indicated he knew the story as well the teller did. "You were recommended to Sir Tréville, were you not?"

"Yes, My Lord, just so – but in the trouble at Meung..."

"...The letter was lost," replied His Eminence. "Yes, I know that; but Sir Tréville is a skilled physiognomist, who knows a man at first sight. He found you a place in the company of his brother-in-law, Sir Des Essarts, and you hope to someday join the musketeers."

"My Lord is extremely well-informed," said d'Artagnan.

"Since then, a number of things have happened to you. You were strolling one day behind the Carmelite convent when it would have been better for you to be elsewhere. Then, you took a trip with your friends to the waters of Forges; they stopped on the way but you continued on the road. Naturally enough: you had business in England."

"My Lord," stammered d'Artagnan, "I went..."

"Hunting at Windsor, or some such. It's no concern of mine. I happen to know about it because it's my business to know everything. On your return, you were received by an august personage, and I'm pleased to see that you've kept the souvenir she gave you."

The queen's diamond was still on d'Artagnan's finger. He covered it with his other hand and turned the gem inside – but it was too late. "The next day, you received a visit from Cavois," continued the cardinal, "who went to invite you to the Hôtel Cardinal. You didn't repay his visit, and that was wrong."

"My Lord, I was afraid I'd incurred Your Eminence's anger."

"Oh? Why is that, Sir? For having carried out the orders of your superiors with more intelligence and courage than another might have? Incur my anger, when you deserve to be commended? It's those who don't obey whom I punish, not those who, like you, obey ... too well. For proof, remember the day when I invited you to come to me and search your memory for what happened that same night." That was the night of the abduction of Madam Bonacieux. D'Artagnan shivered; and recalled that only a half an hour before that poor woman had passed by him, no doubt still in the power of those who were behind her disappearance. "In fact," continued the cardinal, "as I've heard nothing of you for some time, I wanted to know how you were doing. Besides, you owe me some gratitude; you must have noticed how well you've been taken care of, under the circumstances." D'Artagnan bowed respectfully. "That care didn't arise solely from my natural sense of justice," continued the cardinal. "It's also due to certain plans I have for you." D'Artagnan was astonished. "I wanted to explain my plans on the day you received my first invitation – but you didn't choose to come. Fortunately, nothing has been lost by the delay, and today you shall hear them. Sit there, in front of me, Sir d'Artagnan; you are quite gentleman enough not to have to listen standing." With his finger, the cardinal indicated a chair to the young man who was so astounded that it took a second gesture from His Eminence before he obeyed. "You are brave, Sir d'Artagnan that is good; and you are prudent that is even better. I like men of head and heart. No, no!" The cardinal smiled. "By men of heart, I mean men of courage. But despite your youth, and having just entered into the world, you've made some powerful enemies. If you don't take care, they'll destroy you!"

"*Alas*, My Lord!" replied the young man. "No doubt they'll have an easy time of it, as they're strong and have powerful allies – while I have only myself."

"Yes, that's true – but by yourself, you've already done quite a bit, and will do more yet, I don't doubt. But you have, I think, need of some guidance in this adventurous career you've undertaken – for, unless I'm mistaken, you came to Paris ambitious to make your fortune."

"I'm at the age of impossible hopes, my Lord," said d'Artagnan.



"Impossible hopes are for fools, Sir, and you're a man with wits. Now, what would you say to a rank of ensign in my guards, and command of a company after the campaign?"

"Ah! My Lord!"

"You accept, don't you?"

"My Lord..." replied d'Artagnan with an embarrassed air.

"What? You refuse?" cried the cardinal, astonished.

"I serve in His Majesty's Guards, my Lord, and have no reason to be discontented."

"But it seems to me that my guards are also His Majesty's guards," said his Eminence, "and that wherever you serve in a French corps, you serve the king."

"My Lord, your Eminence misunderstands me."

"You want a pretext then? I understand. Well, here's your excuse: advancement, the coming campaign, the opportunity to serve me – that will do for the world. As for yourself, you need the guarantee of my protection. For you should know, Sir d'Artagnan, that I've received grave complaints about you. You don't dedicate your days – or nights – exclusively to the service of the king." D'Artagnan flushed. "Moreover," said the cardinal, placing his hand on a stack of papers, "I have here a whole dossier concerning you. But before opening it, I'd like to say something. I know you to be a man of resolve; your efforts, properly directed, should result in your advancement instead of leading you into trouble. Come, reflect – and decide."

"Your kindness leaves me speechless, my Lord," replied d'Artagnan. "I recognise in Your Eminence a grandeur of soul beside which I feel no more than a worm. But, since My Lord permits me to speak frankly...?" D'Artagnan paused.

"Yes, yes – speak."

"Then, I must tell Your Eminence that all my friends are King's Musketeers or Royal Guards, while my enemies, by some fatal destiny, all belong to Your Eminence. If I accepted your offer, my Lord, I'd be scorned here and reviled there."

"Are you so deluded by pride that you feel I haven't yet made you an offer equal to your merit?" asked the cardinal with a smile of disdain.

"My Lord, your Eminence is a hundred times too good to me! On the contrary, I think I haven't yet shown myself worthy of such high regard. The siege of La Rochelle is ahead of us, my Lord; I will serve under Your Eminence's eye and if I'm lucky enough that my conduct at the siege should meet with your approval, well – at least I'll have behind me some exploits that justify the offer of protection with which you honour me. Timing is everything, my Lord; later, I may have earned the right to give myself to you but at this point I'd appear to sell myself."

"In other words, you refuse my service, sir," said the cardinal, vexed but in a tone that nonetheless conveyed a measure of respect. "Keep your liberty then and indulge your likes and dislikes."

"My Lord..."

"If you please," said the cardinal. "I wish you no ill but you must understand, we have quite enough to do to defend and reward our friends. To our enemies we owe nothing. But I'll give you some free advice: watch yourself, Sir d'Artagnan, because from the moment I withdraw my hand from you, your life isn't worthy a bent copper."

"I'll do my best, my Lord," replied the Gascon, with his unshakable self-assurance.

"Remember, if something bad should happen to you," Richelieu said earnestly, "that I was the one who sought you out, and I did everything I could to protect you."

"Whatever happens," d'Artagnan said, placing his hand on his chest and bowing, "I'll be eternally grateful to Your Eminence for what you've said to me today."

"Well, then! As you say, Sir d'Artagnan, we'll meet again after the campaign. I'll have my eye on you, for I'll be there too" – the cardinal indicated a magnificent suit of armour he was to wear – "and when we return, one way or another, we shall settle our account."

"Ah! My Lord!" cried d'Artagnan. "Spare me the weight of your displeasure! Stay neutral, my Lord, if you see that I behave as a gallant man should."

"Young man," said Richelieu, "if I am able to say again what I said to you today, I promise I shall do so."

But these final words from Richelieu came in a tone that expressed nothing but doubt. This alarmed d'Artagnan more than a threat would have, for it was a warning that carried the ring of truth. The cardinal had been trying to protect him from a real menace. He opened his mouth to reply but with a haughty gesture, the cardinal dismissed him. D'Artagnan took his leave but at the door his courage almost failed him and he nearly returned. Then he thought of the grave and noble face of Athos: if he accepted the cardinal's proposal, Athos would deny him his hand, would disown him. It was this fear that restrained him, so powerful is the influence of a truly great character on everything around it. D'Artagnan went down the same stairway he'd gone up and found Athos and his four musketeers waiting outside the door, where they were beginning to get uneasy. D'Artagnan reassured them with a word, and Planchet ran to notify the other posts that it was pointless to stand guard any longer, as his master had come safely out of the Hôtel Cardinal. On their return to Athos's house, Aramis and Porthos bombarded d'Artagnan with questions about the reason for this strange interview but d'Artagnan told them only that Sir Richelieu had sent for him to offer him a position of ensign in his guards that he'd refused. "And with good reason!" cried Porthos and Aramis with one voice. Athos fell into a profound reverie and would reply to nothing. But when he and d'Artagnan were alone, he said, "You behaved quite properly, d'Artagnan – but may have done the wrong thing." D'Artagnan sighed deeply for his inner voice told him the same and terrible times were ahead. The next day was spent in preparations for departure. D'Artagnan went to pay his respects to Sir Tréville. At that point it was believed that the guards and the musketeers would be only briefly separated as the king was holding his *parliament* that evening, and intended to set out the day after. Sir Tréville contented himself with asking d'Artagnan if he needed anything but d'Artagnan replied proudly that all his needs had been met. The Guards of Sir des Essarts and the Musketeers of Sir Tréville were friends and companions, and that night they celebrated together. They were parting, and would meet again when it pleased God, and if it pleased God. As may be imagined, they were a rowdy lot, as high anxiety can be warded off only by high spirits. The next day, at the first sound of the trumpets, the friends were separated: the musketeers hurried off to the hôtel of Sir Tréville, the guards to that of Sir Des Essarts. Each captain led his company to the Louvre, where they passed in review before the king. The king was melancholy and appeared ill that moderated his usually haughty manner. In fact, the night before a fever had come over him in the middle of parliament, while he was holding his *lit of justice*. He had nonetheless decided that he would leave the next day, despite warnings to the contrary. He was determined to have his review of the troops, hoping, by a show of strength, to defeat the illness that was taking hold of him. The review over, the guards set off alone on their march. The musketeers had to wait for the king – which gave Porthos, in his splendid outfit and equipment, a chance to take a quick turn in the Rue aux Ours. The prosecutor's wife saw him pass in his new uniform and on his superb horse. She loved Porthos too much to let him depart this way; she made a sign to him to dismount and come to her. Porthos was magnificent: his spurs jingled, his cuirass shone, his sword slapped proudly against his leg. This time the clerks had no urge to laugh, as Porthos looked as if he'd have their ears for souvenirs. The musketeer was introduced to Sir Coquenard, whose tiny grey eyes glittered with anger at seeing his cousin so resplendent. However, he consoled himself with the thought that everyone said the coming campaign would be brutal, and he hoped, in his secret heart, that Porthos might not survive it. Porthos paid his compliments to Master Coquenard; Master Coquenard returned the favour, wishing him every sort of prosperity; and Porthos took his leave. At this, Madam Coquenard couldn't restrain her tears. No one regarded her grief as the least bit improper, as everyone knew how attached she was to her relatives, as shown by the noisy arguments she always had about them with her husband. The real goodbyes were said in Madam Coquenard's private chamber – and they were heartrending. Afterward, the prosecutor's wife waved her handkerchief after Porthos as long as her eyes could follow him, leaning so far from her window that she threatened to fall out. Porthos received these signs of affection like a man who is used to such things. As he turned the corner, he simply lifted his hat and waved his goodbye. Aramis wrote a long letter for his part. *To whom?* No one knew. Kitty who was waiting in the next room, was to take it with her when she departed that evening for Tours. Athos, sip by sip, savoured his last bottle of Spanish honey. Meanwhile, d'Artagnan was marching with his company. As he left Paris and entered the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, he turned around and waved a cheerful goodbye to the Bastille; but, as he was looking only at the Bastille, he failed to notice Milady, who was mounted nearby on a dun-coloured horse. She pointed him out to two tough-looking men, who stepped up to the passing ranks to get a good look at him. When they glanced at her for confirmation, she replied with a sign that said, *He's the one*. Then, certain that there could be no slip in the execution of her orders, she pivoted her horse and disappeared. The two men followed the company and, on leaving the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, mounted two fully equipped horses that a groom without livery was holding in readiness for them.

#### 041 The Siege of La Rochelle

The Siege of La Rochelle was one of the key political events of the reign of Louis XIII, and one of the greatest military enterprises of the cardinal. It is therefore interesting, and even necessary, to say a few words about it, especially as some of the details of the siege are too important to this story to be passed over in silence. The political concerns of the cardinal, as he undertook this siege, were many and varied. We shall consider these first of all, then pass on to his private concerns that may have had no less influence on His Eminence than the former. Of all the cities that Henry IV had awarded to the Huguenots as places of sanctuary, none remained except La Rochelle. This last bulwark of Calvinism had to be destroyed, as it was a dangerous leaven in the body politic, constantly fermenting both civil revolt and inviting foreign interference. Spanish, English, and Italian malcontents, adventurers of every nation, soldiers of fortune of every sect who answered the call of war, had arrayed themselves under the flag of the Protestants and organised a loose alliance whose branches spread through every part of Europe. La Rochelle that had been elevated to new importance upon the ruin of the other Calvinist cities, became the focus of dissension and a centre of ambition. Moreover, it was the last port in the realm of France still open to the English, and by closing it against England, France's eternal enemy, the cardinal would complete the work begun by Joan of Arc and the Duke of Guise. Thus Bassompierre, who was at the same time Protestant and Catholic – Protestant by conviction but Catholic as a Commander of the Order of the Holy Ghost – Bassompierre, German by birth, though a Frenchman at heart – Bassompierre, in short, who was one of the three main French commanders at the siege of La Rochelle, said, while leading several other Protestant nobles to the attack, "You will see, Gentlemen, that we shall yet be fools enough to take La Rochelle!" And Bassompierre was right. The cannonades of the Isle of Ré foretold the Dragonnades of the Cevennes, the later forced conversion of the Huguenots; the fall of La Rochelle was the harbinger of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes that Henry IV had decreed to safeguard the Huguenots' rights. But in addition to the political goals of the great minister whose levelling and centralizing of all power in France is a matter of history, the chronicler must recognise the petty purposes of the lover and the jealous rival. Richelieu, as everyone knows, had been in love with the queen; was this love a simple matter of the politics of flattery, or was it genuinely one of those profound passions that Anne of Austria inspired in those around her? No one can say; but in any case, as shown by the earlier events in this history, the Duke of Buckingham had gotten the better of him. Two or three times the cardinal had been completely confounded, particularly in the affair of the diamond studs, thanks in that event to the devotion of the three musketeers and the courage of d'Artagnan. So Richelieu's goal was not only to dispose of an enemy of France but also to take revenge on a rival. Furthermore, he desired his vengeance to be breath-taking and colossal, worthy in every way of a man who held in his hand, like a sword, the forces of a mighty kingdom. Richelieu knew that in battling England, he was battling Buckingham, that by triumphing over England, he triumphed over Buckingham – that, in fact, if he humiliated England in the eyes of Europe, he humiliated Buckingham in the eyes of the queen. For his part, Buckingham, while pretending to uphold the honour of England, was driven by motives that mirrored those of the cardinal. Buckingham also was pursuing a private vengeance. He couldn't, under any pretext, return to France as an ambassador, so he'd resolved to return as a conqueror. Thus, the true stake of this game that two powerful realms played at the whim of two men in love, was nothing more than a look from the eyes of Anne of Austria. The first advantage had been gained by the Duke of Buckingham. Arriving unforeseen off the coast of the Isle of Ré, with ninety vessels bearing nearly twenty thousand men, he had surprised the Count of Toiras, who commanded the island for the king. After a bloody battle, Buckingham's initial landing had been successful. He had troops on French soil, albeit an island, within a few miles of La Rochelle. (It should be mentioned, in passing, that one of the fallen in this battle was the Baron of Chantal. The baron left behind an orphan, a little girl aged eighteen months, who was later to be known as Madam of Sevigne.) On Ré, the Count of Toiras retreated into the Citadel Saint-Martin with his garrison, throwing a hundred men into a little outwork called the Fort of La Prée. This event forced the cardinal to rush his preparations. It was determined that he and the king would take personal command of the siege of La Rochelle but until they could get there they sent "Sir" (the king's younger brother, Prince Gaston) to direct the initial operations. And they sent all the troops they could muster marching toward the theatre of war. It was this vanguard detachment of which d'Artagnan was a part. As has been noted, the king was to follow as soon as his *lit of justice* had been held. But on rising from his court of justice, on June 28th, he was taken with a fever. He was willing to set out nonetheless but his health deteriorated and he was forced to halt at Villeroy. Now, wherever the king stopped, the musketeers stopped too. As a result d'Artagnan, in the guards, found himself separated, at least for a while, from his friends Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. This separation that he regarded as a mere nuisance, would have been the cause of serious anxiety if he'd known what dangers really surrounded him. However, on the tenth day of September, in the year 1627, he arrived without incident at the army's camp before the walls of La Rochelle. The situation was static: the Duke of Buckingham and his English troops, who held the Isle of Ré, continued to besiege the Citadel Saint-Martin and the Fort of La Prée without success. Hostilities between La Rochelle and the king's forces had begun that very morning, La Rochelle opening fire on a fort near the city walls that the Duke d'Angouleme had had constructed. Sir Des Essarts's Guards took up lodging on the south side of the siege, at the abbey of the Minimes. However, d'Artagnan, preoccupied by his ambition to become a musketeer, had made few friends among his comrades. He felt rather isolated, and spent a lot of time with his own thoughts. His thoughts were not very cheerful. Ever since his arrival in Paris he'd been mixed up in public affairs but his private affairs hadn't progressed very far, neither in love nor fortune. In *amour*, the only woman he could have loved was Madam Bonacieux – but she had disappeared, and he'd been unable to discover what had become of her. As for fortune: insignificant though he was, he'd nonetheless managed to make himself an enemy of the cardinal, before whom trembled the mightiest *Grands* of the realm, starting with the king. That man had the power to crush him, and yet he hadn't done so. To a mind as sharp as d'Artagnan's, the cardinal's forbearance was a lamp that lit the way to a brighter future. Then again, he'd made one other enemy: perhaps less to be feared but still, not to be underestimated. Milady. On the positive side, he'd acquired the protection and esteem of the queen – but the esteem of the queen, at this point, was just another cause for persecution. And her protection, as everyone knew, wasn't worth much: witness Chalais and Madam Bonacieux. What he

had clearly gained was the diamond, worth five or six thousand *livres*, that he wore on his finger. Yet this diamond, assuming that d’Artagnan had ambitions to use it someday as a sign of the queen’s gratitude, had no more value in the meantime than the pebbles he trod under his feet. He compared the gem to pebbles, for d’Artagnan made these reflections while taking a solitary walk along a pretty little road that led from the camp to the village of Angoulins. His reflections had carried him farther than he’d intended and the day was darkening, when by the last ray of the setting sun he thought he saw the barrel of a musket glisten from behind a hedge. D’Artagnan had a quick eye and a quick mind. He knew that musket hadn’t come there on its own, and that whoever held it wasn’t hidden behind a hedge with friendly intentions. He decided to give it a wide berth – then saw, on the other side of the road, the end of another musket barrel peeking from behind a rock. This, evidently, was an ambush. The young man glanced at the first musket and saw, with a certain dismay, that it was swivelling in his direction. As soon as it stopped moving, he threw himself to the ground. At the same moment the gun fired and he heard the whistle of a ball passing over his head. There was no time to lose. D’Artagnan sprang up with a bound, just as a shot from the second musket scattered the stones from the spot where he’d been lying. D’Artagnan was not one of those reckless heroes determined to court a pointless death just so it could be said that he never retreated a single step. Besides, there was no question of courage here: this was an ambush. *If there’s a third shot*, he thought, *I’m a dead man!* He took to his heels, fleeing toward camp, with the swiftness of the men of his region, so renowned for their agility. But despite his speed, the first shooter had had time to reload and fired again – so accurately, this time that the ball tore d’Artagnan’s hat from his head and carried it ten paces ahead of him. But since d’Artagnan had no other hat, he scooped it up as he ran. He arrived at camp pale and panting for breath. He sat down without saying a word to anyone and began to think. This event could have had three possible causes. The first, and most likely, was that it had been an ambush of the Rochelois, who wouldn’t be sorry to kill one of His Majesty’s Guards, as it would mean one less enemy – and moreover, an enemy who might have a full purse in his pocket. D’Artagnan took up his hat, examined the bullet hole, and shook his head. The hole hadn’t been made by a musket-ball but by the ball of a hunter’s harquebus. The accuracy of the shot had made him suspect the use of such a weapon. So this hadn’t been a military ambush, as the ball was the wrong calibre. It might be a present from the cardinal. He recalled that just before he’d noticed that gleaming gun-barrel, he’d been wondering at His Eminence’s indulgence toward him. But again d’Artagnan shook his head. For people toward whom he had only to reach out his hand, His Eminence rarely had recourse to such means. But it could be the revenge of Milady. Yes – that was the most probable cause. He tried in vain to remember anything about the appearance of the assassins but he’d left in such a hurry he hadn’t had time to notice anything. “Ah, my dear friends,” murmured d’Artagnan, “where are you? How badly I need you now!”

That night was a bad one for d’Artagnan. Three or four times he awoke with a start, imagining someone sneaking up on him with a dagger. But the darkness passed without incident and dawn finally arrived. However, d’Artagnan suspected that trouble was only deferred, not disposed of. He spent all day in his quarters, telling himself he was staying in because of bad weather. The following morning, at nine o’clock, the drums beat to arms. Prince Gaston, the Duke d’Orléans, was inspecting their post. The guards ran to take up their weapons and d’Artagnan took his place in the ranks of his comrades. The king’s younger brother walked down the line of troops, then Sir Des Essarts and all the superior officers approached him to pay their respects. After a minute or two it appeared to d’Artagnan that Sir Des Essarts made a sign to him to approach. Afraid he might be mistaken, he waited for a second signal from his commander; when it came, and he left the ranks and advanced to receive his orders. “Sir is going to ask for some bold men for a dangerous mission, one that will bring honour to those who accomplish it,” des Essarts said. “I signalled to you so you would be ready.” “*Thank you, my Captain!*” replied d’Artagnan who asked nothing better than to distinguish himself under the eyes of the lieutenant general.

In fact, the Rochelois had made a sortie during the night and had retaken a bastion that the Royal Army had overrun just two days before. The task at hand was a reconnaissance to determine how well the bastion was defended. Shortly, des Essarts raised his voice and said, “I need three or four volunteers for a mission, led by a reliable man.”

“As for the reliable man, I have him right here, My Lord,” said Sir des Essarts, indicating d’Artagnan, “and as for the volunteers, My Lord has but to announce his intentions and the men will not fail to step up.”

“Four men of stout heart who will risk death with me!” cried d’Artagnan, raising his sword.

Two of his comrades from the guards immediately leaped forward. Two other soldiers joined them, and that filled the bill. D’Artagnan refused to take any others, as he thought the first volunteers should have their chance at all the glory. After the Rochelois had retaken the bastion, no one knew whether they’d evacuated it or left a garrison. It was up to d’Artagnan’s squad to get close enough to find out. D’Artagnan set out with his four comrades, following a trench that led toward the enemy. The two guards marched alongside d’Artagnan and the pair of soldiers took up the rear. In this way, under cover of revetments, they were able to follow a series of trenches until they were within a hundred paces of the bastion. There, d’Artagnan turned and saw that the two soldiers had disappeared. He assumed they’d lost heart and stayed somewhere behind. At the angle of the counterscarp, the three remaining comrades found themselves within sixty paces of the bastion. They saw no one, and the bastion looked abandoned. They were discussing whether they should go any farther, when suddenly smoke erupted from the stone stronghold and a dozen balls whistled past d’Artagnan and his companions. They’d learned what they needed to know: the bastion was occupied! Staying any longer would have been both dangerous and useless; d’Artagnan and the two guards turned their backs and commenced a retreat that strongly resembled a flight. As they arrived at the corner of the protective counterscarp one of the guards fell with a ball through his chest. The other, still whole, continued his way toward the camp. But d’Artagnan wasn’t willing to abandon his comrade. As he bent to raise him and help him back to their lines, two shots rang out: one struck the head of the wounded guard and the other flattened on a rock, having passed within two inches of d’Artagnan. The young man spun around, for this attack couldn’t have come from the bastion that was now masked by the angle of the trench. He remembered the two soldiers who’d seemingly abandoned him – and also the two assassins of the ambush on the road. Determined this time to learn what he was up against, he fell across the body of his comrade as if dead. Almost immediately, within thirty paces of him, he saw two heads appear above the edge of an abandoned trench. D’Artagnan’s suspicions were confirmed: it was the two soldiers, who’d followed him for the sole purpose of assassinating him, in hopes that the young man’s death would be blamed on the enemy. To make sure he wasn’t just wounded, in which case he might return to denounce their crime, they approached to finish him off. Fortunately for d’Artagnan, they were taken in by his ruse and hadn’t reloaded their weapons. When they were within ten paces of him, d’Artagnan, who in falling had taken care to keep hold of his sword, leaped up and sprang toward them. The assassins knew that if they fled toward camp without having killed their man they were lost, so their first thought was to defect to the enemy. One of them grabbed his gun by the barrel to use it as a club, and swung a terrible blow at d’Artagnan. He evaded the blow by jumping aside but this left an opening for the bandit, who immediately raced for the bastion. But the Rochelois who were manning it were unaware of his intentions; they fired on him, and a ball broke his shoulder. Meanwhile, d’Artagnan had thrown himself at the second soldier, attacking him with his sword. The fight didn’t last long, as the wretch had nothing with which to defend himself but an empty harquebus. The guard’s blade slid down the barrel of the useless weapon and went through the assassin’s thigh. He fell, and in a moment d’Artagnan’s point was at his throat. “Don’t kill me!” cried the bandit. “Mercy! Mercy, officer and I’ll tell you everything!”

D’Artagnan withheld his thrust. “You’d trade your secret for your life? Is it worth it?”

“It’s not just my life, it’s yours – if life has value to a man of twenty-two, handsome and brave, who has his whole future ahead of him!”

“You wretch!” said d’Artagnan. “Talk, and talk fast. Who hired you to assassinate me?”

“A woman – I don’t know her name but she’s called Milady.”

“How do you know that, if you don’t know her?”

“My partner knew her, and that’s what he called her. She did all her business with him, not me. He even has a letter from her in his pocket. He said she attached a great deal of importance to you.”

“How did you get involved in this business?”

“My partner asked me if I’d join in on the deal, and I said I would.”

“And how much did she pay you for this little assassination?”

“A hundred gold crowns.”

“*Well!*” the young man laughed. “*I’m* worth something to her! A hundred crowns! That’s quite a sum to two miserable dogs like you; I can see why you’d jump at it. All right, I’ll pardon you – but on one condition.”

“What’s that?” asked the soldier anxiously as he could see that all was not yet over.

“That you go and retrieve the letter your partner has in his pocket.”

“But that’s just another way of killing me!” the bandit cried. “How can I go and fetch that letter under the guns of the bastion?”

“Nonetheless, you’re going to go retrieve it, or you can be sure I’ll kill you with my own hand.”

“Mercy, Sir! Have pity, in the name of that young lady you love, and whom maybe you think is dead – but she isn’t!” the bandit cried.

He collapsed to his knees and leaned on one hand, for his strength was draining out with his blood. “And how do you know there’s a young woman I love, or that I thought she was dead?” demanded d’Artagnan.

“By that letter my partner has in his pocket.”

“Then you see *I must* have that letter,” said d’Artagnan, “so no more delay, no more hesitation, or no matter how reluctant I am to soil my blade twice with the blood of a wretch like you, I swear on the word of a gentleman...”

At these words d’Artagnan made a gesture so menacing that the wounded man leaped up. “Stop! Stop!” he cried, his terror giving him strength. “I’ll go! I’ll go!”

D’Artagnan took the soldier’s harquebus, then drove him toward his comrade by prodding him from behind with the point of his sword. It was a frightful thing to see the wounded ruffian, pale in the face of death, smearing a long trail of blood behind him as he tried to crawl unnoticed toward his fallen accomplice, some twenty paces away. His face, covered with cold sweat, was so etched with terror that d’Artagnan pitied him. “Enough! Stay there,” he said with a look of disdain. “I’ll go – and show you the difference between a man of heart and a coward like you.” Then quick on his feet, keeping a sharp eye on the movements of the enemy, and taking full advantage of the contours of the terrain, d’Artagnan made his way to the body of the second soldier. There were two ways of handling it: search him on the spot, or carry him, using his body as a shield, and search him in the trench. D’Artagnan chose the second option, lifting the assassin onto his shoulders just as the enemy opened fire. A jolt, the sound of three balls lodging in flesh, a final cry, and an agonized shudder told d’Artagnan that the man who’d sought to kill him had ended by saving his life. D’Artagnan regained the safety of the trench and dropped the cadaver next to the wounded man, who was pale as death. The inventory of the dead man’s possessions began immediately: a broad leather wallet; a purse, apparently containing part of the bandit’s payment; a dice-cup and dice – that was the whole of his legacy. D’Artagnan let the dead man keep his dice-cup, threw the purse to the wounded bandit, and then eagerly opened the wallet. Among some unimportant papers he found the following letter, for which he’d risked his life:

*Since you’ve lost track of the woman, who’s now safely in some convent you should never have allowed her to reach, try at least not to fail with the man. If you do, you know that I have a long reach, and you’ll repay me my hundred crowns many times over.*

It was unsigned. Nonetheless, it was clearly from the hand of Milady, so he stowed it away as a piece of evidence. Then, still safe behind the angle of the trench, he began to interrogate the wounded man. The bandit confessed that he’d been hired, along with his now-dead partner, to abduct a young woman who was going to leave Paris through the barrier of La Villette – but having stopped for a drink at a cabaret, they’d missed the carriage by ten minutes. “But what were you supposed to do with this woman?” gasped d’Artagnan.

“We were to take her to a hôtel in the Place Royale.”

“Yes, that’s it,” murmured d’Artagnan, “Milady’s own home.” The young man shuddered as he comprehended what a terrible thirst for vengeance drove this woman to destroy him and all those who loved him. The story also showed how well versed she was in the affairs of the Court, since she seemed to know everything that went on. No doubt she owed much of that knowledge to the cardinal. But beyond that he understood with a dawning joy, that the queen must have discovered the prison where poor Madam Bonacieux had been paying the price of her devotion and she’d freed her from that prison. The letter he’d received from the young woman, and her passage like an apparition along the road to Chaillot, were now explained. That meant as Athos had predicted that someday it would be possible to meet Madam Bonacieux again! After all, a convent was not impregnable. At this, d’Artagnan’s heart was filled with forgiveness. He turned to the wounded man who had been anxiously watching the series of expressions on his face, and offered him his arm. “Come on, then – I’m not going to abandon you,” he said. “Lean on me and let’s return to camp.”

“Oh?” said the wounded man who found it hard to believe in such generosity. “So you can have me hanged, right?”

“Not at all. I’m going to spare your life once again,” d’Artagnan said. “You’ve my word.” The wounded man fell to his knees and tried to kiss d’Artagnan’s feet but the young man who no longer had any good reason to remain near the enemy, cut off this expression of gratitude. The guard who had fled at the first volley from the Rochelois had announced the death of his four comrades. So the regiment was both astonished and delighted when d’Artagnan reappeared safe and sound. D’Artagnan recounted the perils they’d encountered and the death of the other soldier, inventing a sortie by the enemy to explain his companion’s sword wound. This story grew in the retelling until it became a veritable triumph. By the end of the day the whole army was talking about the exploit, and the lieutenant general, Sir, sent d’Artagnan his compliments. Every great effort has its reward, and for d’Artagnan it was the restoration of his lost serenity. D’Artagnan thought such serenity was justified, since 1 of his 2 enemies was dead and the other was now devoted to him. But this only showed how little d’Artagnan understood Milady.

After the distressing news of the king's illness, one day word of his recovery began to circulate through the camp. It was said he was eager to arrive in person at the siege, and that as soon as he could mount his horse he would take the road again. Meanwhile, Sir his brother did precious little, as he knew that once the king arrived he could expect to be replaced as commander by the Duke d'Angouleme, Bassompierre, or Schomberg, all of whom were vying for the post. He wasted days with probes and patrols, unwilling to risk attempting to drive the English from the Isle of Ré, where they continued to besiege the Citadel of Saint-Martin and the Fort of La Prée, just as the French besieged La Rochelle. D'Artagnan had regained his self-confidence, as always happens when a danger is past, especially when that danger seems to have vanished. Only one thing worried him: he'd heard no news of his three friends. But one morning early in October he received a letter, posted from Villeroy, that explained everything:

*Sir d'Artagnan,*  
*Gentlemen Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, after ordering a fine revel in my house, and enjoying themselves with vigour, were so boisterous that the provost of the château, a very rigid individual, has incarcerated them for several days. However, at their request, I am sending you a dozen bottles of my Anjou honey, for which they have developed a great regard. They beg that you will drink their health in this, their favourite honey. Thus I have done, and am, Sir, with the greatest respect,*  
*Your most humble and obedient servant,*  
*GODEAU,*

*Host to Gentlemen the Musketeers*

"Well, isn't that fine!" cried d'Artagnan. "They think of me in their fêtes, while I think of them in my funk. Nonetheless, I'll certainly drink to their health, and with all my heart – but I won't drink alone." D'Artagnan went to find a couple of guards with whom he was more friendly than most to invite them to share with him this delicious little honey of Anjou. But one of the guards was engaged that evening and the other was busy the next, so the gathering was set for the day after that. D'Artagnan sent the dozen bottles of honey to the guards' commissary with a request that they take good care of them. On the appointed day, d'Artagnan sent Planchet off at nine in the morning to begin the preparations for dinner that was set for noon. Planchet, puffed up with pride at being elevated to the dignity of *master d'hôtel*, resolved to oversee the event intelligently and thoroughly. To this end he enlisted the aid of Fourreau, the valet of one of his master's guests, as well as the false soldier who'd tried to murder d'Artagnan but who since had entered d'Artagnan's service and become a sort of assistant to Planchet. At the appointed hour the two guests arrived, took their places, and the food was brought to the table. Planchet served, towel on arm; Fourreau uncorked the bottles; and Brisemont, the wounded faux-soldier, poured the honey into carafes. The honey appeared to have been shaken up during its journey; the first bottle seemed to have quite a bit of sediment at the bottom, so Brisemont poured the lees into a glass. D'Artagnan gave him permission to drink it, as the poor devil still hadn't recovered all his strength. The guests, having finished the soup, were about to raise the first glass of honey to their lips, when suddenly a cannon sounded from Fort Louis or Port-Neuf. The guards, who thought this might herald some unexpected attack either from the besieged Rochelois or the English, immediately sprang to their swords. D'Artagnan did the same, and all three ran out to report to their posts. But they were scarcely out of the mess hall before they discovered the cause of the uproar: cries of "*Long live the king! Long live his Eminence!*" resounded on every side. And drums were beating throughout the camp. In fact, it was the king: impatient to reach La Rochelle, he had pressed forward by forced marches and had just arrived, with his entire household and a reinforcement of ten thousand troops. He was preceded, and followed, by his musketeers. D'Artagnan gave them a grand salute from the ranks of his company. His friends spotted him there, and Sir Tréville recognised him immediately. The welcome ceremony was soon over and the four friends found themselves arm in arm once again. "By God!" cried d'Artagnan. "You couldn't have come at a better time – the dinner hasn't even had time to get cold. Eh, Gentlemen?" he added, turning to the two guards whom he introduced to his friends.

"Oh ho! It seems we're having a little banquet," said Porthos.

"I do hope," said Aramis, "that there are no *women* at your party!"

"Is there any honey worth drinking in this dive of yours?" asked Athos.

"*For the love of God!* There's your own, my friend," replied d'Artagnan.

"Our honey?" said Athos, perplexed.

"Yes, the honey you sent me."

"We sent you some honey?"

"As you well know – that little honey from the vineyards of Anjou."

"Yes, I know that honey well!"

"It's the honey you prefer, isn't it?"

"Absolutely, when I can't get champagne or *chambertin*."

"Well, we have neither champagne nor *chambertin*, so you'll have to content yourselves with the Anjou."

"So we've sent for some Anjou honey, gourmets that we are?" said Porthos.

"No, it's the honey that you sent to me."

"Honey that we sent you?" said the three musketeers.

"Aramis, did you send this honey?" asked Athos.

"No. What about you, Porthos?"

"No. Was it you, Athos?"

"No."

"It was none of you – it was your host," said d'Artagnan.

"Our host?"

"But yes! Godeau, your host in Villeroy."

"My faith! Who cares where it came from?" said Porthos. "Let's try it, and if it's good, let's drink it."

"No," said Athos. "Let's not drink honey from an unknown source."

"Athos is right," said d'Artagnan. "So none of you ordered Godeau to send me any honey?"

"No! Nevertheless, you say he sent you some on our behalf?"

"I have the letter right here!" said d'Artagnan.

And he showed it to his comrades. "This is not his handwriting!" said Athos. "I'm familiar with it because before we left, I settled the company accounts with him."

"It's a complete forgery!" said Porthos. "We were never incarcerated!"

"Really, d'Artagnan," said Aramis, in a tone of reproach, "how could you believe that we'd been boisterous, or caused a disturbance?"

D'Artagnan paled and a shudder ran through him. "You're alarming me, boy," Athos said, shocked into informality. "What's happened here?"

"Hurry, my friends!" cried d'Artagnan. "I've a horrible suspicion this is a further revenge of that woman!"

At this, it was Athos's turn to blanch. D'Artagnan raced to the mess hall, followed by the three musketeers and the two guards. The first thing d'Artagnan saw as he entered was Brisemont, rolling on the ground in horrible convulsions. Planchet and Fourreau, pale as death, were trying to help him but it was clear that all aid was futile: Brisemont's features, contorted in agony, were those of a dying man. "You!" he cried, seeing d'Artagnan. "Agh! You traitor! You pretend to pardon me, then you poison me!"

"Me!" cried d'Artagnan. "What are you saying?"

"I say *you* gave me the honey, and *you* told me drink it, because *you* wanted to pay me back! Argh! It's horrible!"

"Don't think that, Brisemont!" said d'Artagnan. "Don't think that! I swear, I give you my word..."

"God sees! God will punish you! Dear God, make him suffer someday as I do!"

"I swear on the Gospel," said d'Artagnan, kneeling down by the dying man, "I swear I didn't know the honey was poisoned. I was going to drink it too!"

"I don't believe you," said the soldier.

And in a final fit of agony, he died. "Horrible! Horrible!" murmured Athos while Porthos shattered the bottles and Aramis gave orders a little bit late to send for a confessor.

"Oh, my friends!" said d'Artagnan. "Once again you've saved my life – and not just mine but the lives of these gentlemen. Gentlemen," he continued, addressing the guards, "I have to ask you to keep silent about this incident. Persons of high rank may be involved in what you've seen, and if we make trouble it will just rebound on us."

"M-m-sir!" stammered Planchet, more dead than alive. "What a narrow escape I've had!"

"Why, buffoon?" cried d'Artagnan. "Were you planning to drink my honey?"

"To the health of the king, Sir! I was about to down a small glass when Fourreau told me someone was calling for me."

"*Alas!*" said Fourreau, teeth chattering with terror. "I wanted to get him out of the way so I could drink it myself!"

"Gentlemen," d'Artagnan said to the guards, "I'm sure you can understand that a banquet after what has happened would be a pretty melancholy affair, so I beg you to accept my excuses and allow me to postpone the party to another day."

The guards bowed courteously and retired, seeing that the four friends wanted to be alone. Once the three musketeers and their young friend were on their own, they looked at one another in a way that showed they all understood the gravity of their situation. "First of all," said Athos, "let's find somewhere else to go. The dead make unpleasant company, especially those who've died a violent death."

"Planchet," said d'Artagnan, "I commend the body of this poor devil to your care. See that he's buried in holy ground. He committed a crime, it's true – but he repented of it."

And the four friends left the room, leaving Planchet and Fourreau in charge of paying mortuary honours to Brisemont. Their host gave them another chamber in which he served them hard-boiled eggs and water that Athos himself went to draw from the fountain. In a few words, the background of the situation was explained to Porthos and Aramis. "So you see, friend," d'Artagnan said to Athos, "it's a war to the death."

Athos nodded. "Yes, I can see that. But do you really think *she* is behind it?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Nevertheless, I confess I still have my doubts."

"But the *fleur-de-lys* on her shoulder?"

Athos shrugged. "She is some Englishwoman who committed a crime in France and was branded as punishment."

"Athos, I'm telling you, *it's your wife*," said d'Artagnan, lowering his voice. "Remember how much she resembles your description?"

"But she *must* be dead! I hanged her so thoroughly."

D'Artagnan shook his head. "In any event, what are we to do?" he said.

"We can't remain like this, with a sword hanging eternally over our heads," said Athos. "We must alter the situation."

"But how?"

"Listen: you must find a way to meet with her. Tell her, 'Peace, or war! On my word as a gentleman, I promise to say nothing against you, and do nothing against you – but on your side, I must have a solemn oath to remain neutral toward me. Otherwise, I'll go the chancellor; I'll go the king; I'll go to the hangman! I'll bring you up before the court, denounce you as a branded woman, put you on trial – and if you escape justice, well, on my word as a nobleman, I'll kill you. I'll corner you and kill you, as I'd kill a mad dog.'"

"I like it as a plan," said d'Artagnan, "but how can I manage to meet with her?"

"Time, *dear friend*. Time will bring the opportunity, and opportunity is our harness to destiny. The more there is at stake, the more one gains by knowing how to wait."

"Certainly, Athos but to wait, surrounded by assassins and poisoners..."

"Bah!" said Athos. "God has preserved us till now, and God will continue to watch over us."

"Us, yes. But we're men," d'Artagnan muttered. "It's our business to risk our lives. But she ....!"

"What *she*?" asked Athos.

“Constance.”

“Madam Bonacieux! Quite so,” said Athos. “My poor friend! I’d forgotten that you were in love.”

“Yes but didn’t you learn from that letter you found on the dead ruffian that she’s safe in a convent?” Aramis said. “One can be quite well off in a convent – and as soon as the siege of La Rochelle is over, I promise you, for my part…”

“Good!” said Athos. “Excellent, my dear Aramis. We all know your interest in religious matters.”

“I am only a *temporary* musketeer,” Aramis said humbly.

“And it’s a long while since he heard from his mistress,” Athos added in an undertone. “But we know all about that, and are careful to pay no attention.”

“Well,” said Porthos, “this seems like a simple matter to me.”

“Why so?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Didn’t you say she’s in a convent?” replied Porthos.

“Yes.”

“Well, after the siege is over, we’ll carry her off from that convent.”

“But first we have to find out what convent she’s in!”

“That’s … true,” said Porthos.

“I know,” said Athos. “You said, didn’t you, d’Artagnan, that it was the queen who sent her to this convent?”

“Yes – or at least, so I believe.”

“Well, this is where Porthos can assist us.”

“How’s that?” said Porthos.

“Why, through your marquise, or duchess, or princess, or whatever she is. She must have a long reach.”

“Shush!” said Porthos, putting a finger to his lips. “I’m afraid she’s a Cardinalist. She mustn’t know anything about this.”

“Then,” said Aramis, “I’ll undertake to see what I can find out.”

“You, Aramis?” said his friends. “How is that?”

“Through the Queen’s Almoner who’s a … close friend of mine,” Aramis said, blushing. And with that assurance, having finished their modest meal, the four friends separated, promising to meet again that same evening. D’Artagnan returned to the Minimes, and the three musketeers went to the king’s camp to find their own lodgings.

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The Inn at Colombier-Rouge

Though scarcely arrived in camp, the king was eager to confront the enemy, as he had even more right than the cardinal to hate the Duke of Buckingham. He ordered the commitment of all his forces, first to drive the English from the Isle of Ré, and then to prosecute the siege of La Rochelle. But despite his urgency, progress was delayed by a quarrel that broke out, pitting Gentlemen Bassompierre and Schomberg against the Duke d’Angouleme. Bassompierre and Schomberg were Marshals of France and claimed the right to command the army under the direct orders of the king. But the cardinal feared that Bassompierre, who was a Huguenot at heart, might be unwilling to press home attacks against the English and Rochelois, his brothers in religion. He supported the Duke d’Angouleme, and at his recommendation the king appointed Angouleme lieutenant general. Then, in order to keep the undeniably talented Bassompierre and Schomberg from deserting the siege in a huff, each had to be given a separate command of his own. Bassompierre took the quarter north of the city, from La Leu to Dompierre; the Duke d’Angouleme commanded the east, from Dompierre to Périgny; and Sir Schomberg directed operations in the south, from Périgny to Angoulins. Sir’s quarters were at Dompierre. The king stayed sometimes at Etré, sometimes at La Jarrie. The cardinal’s lodgings were in the dunes, at the Pont of La Pierre, in a simple house with no entrenchments. Thus, Sir could keep an eye on Bassompierre; the king, on the Duke d’Angouleme; and the cardinal, on Sir Schomberg. Once this arrangement was established, they took up the question of how to drive the English from Ré. Conditions were favourable. To be good soldiers, the English, above all, had to be well fed. With nothing to eat but salted meat and stale biscuits, many in their camp were sick. Worse, the sea, angry at this season on every coast, was daily wrecking some small ship or other, and the shore from the Pointe of l’Aiguillon to the trenches was littered at every tide with the debris of pinnaces, luggers, and sloops. So it was evident that sooner or later Buckingham, who persisted on the Île of Ré out of sheer stubbornness, would have to lift his siege, even if the king’s troops simply sat in their quarters. However, when Sir Toiras on Ré reported preparations in the enemy camp for a new assault on Saint-Martin, the king decided to make an end of the affair, and gave the orders to mount a decisive attack. But this is not intended to be a history of the siege, only to report those events relevant to our story. In short, the expedition to relieve Ré was a success, to the great astonishment of the king and to the credit and glory of the cardinal. The English, driven back foot by foot, beaten in every encounter, and defeated on the causeway to the Isle of Loix, were obliged to take to their ships. They left two thousand men on the field of battle including 5 colonels, 3 lieutenant colonels, and 250 captains, 20 gentlemen of rank, 4 cannons, and 60 flags, and banners that were taken to Paris by Claude of Saint-Simon and suspended with great pomp in the vault of Notre-Dame. Te Deums were sung in the camp and throughout France. The cardinal was left master of the field, able to prosecute the siege of La Rochelle without, for the moment at least, having anything to fear from the English. For the moment, that is. Then a man named Montagu, an envoy of the Duke of Buckingham, was captured carrying proof of an alliance between the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, England, and Lorraine – an alliance against France. Moreover, in Buckingham’s lodgings on Ré that he’d been forced to abandon more hastily than expected, papers were found that confirmed this league, and which, as the cardinal asserted in his *Memoirs*, greatly compromised Madam of Chevreuse, and therefore the queen. It was on the cardinal that all responsibility fell – for one cannot be an all-powerful minister without responsibility. All the resources of his vast genius were employed night and day to oppose this threat, analysing rumours and reports from all the great courts of Europe. The cardinal knew of Buckingham’s activities, all of which confirmed his hatred of Richelieu; if the league threatening France triumphed, the cardinal would fall from power. The Spanish and Austrian parties would gain representatives among the king’s ministers where now they had only sympathizers – and Richelieu, the prime minister, would be ruined. The king obeyed him like a child but hated him as a child hates his master; if Richelieu failed, the king would abandon him to the combined vengeance of Sir and the queen. His fall would be hard – and France might fall with him. This is what he had to guard against. So the couriers, every day more numerous, came day and night to the small house at the Pont of La Pierre where the cardinal had established himself. There were monks, who appeared uncomfortable in their robes, and clearly belonged to the Church Militant; women dressed as pages, whose billowing trousers couldn’t quite conceal their rounded forms; and peasants with blackened hands but soft skin, savouring of the man of quality from a league away. And besides this, there were other, less agreeable visitors – for two or three times it was reported that attempts had been made to assassinate the cardinal. It’s true that it was said by His Eminence’s enemies that he himself had hired these maladroit assassins to give him an excuse to make reprisals – but it won’t do to believe everything said by ministers, or by their enemies. None of this prevented the cardinal, whom even his worst enemies never accused of lacking personal bravery, from making nocturnal excursions: sometimes to communicate important orders to the Duke d’Angouleme, sometimes for discussions with the king, and sometimes to confer with some messenger whom he preferred not to receive at his house. For their part, the men of the King’s Musketeers, who weren’t under strict orders and were not much involved with the siege, had time to enjoy life. This was particularly true for the Three Inseparables who, as friends of Sir Tréville, had no trouble getting permission to remain outside the camp after curfew. One evening, when d’Artagnan was in the trenches and couldn’t accompany them, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, mounted on their warhorses, wrapped in their heavy cloaks, with their hands on the butts of their pistols, were returning from an inn Athos had discovered two days before on the road to La Leu, at Colombier-Rouge. They were on their way back to their camp, on guard for fear of ambush, when a quarter of a league from the village of Boisnar they thought they heard the sound of horses approaching. The three immediately halted, closed ranks, and waited, blocking the middle of the road. A moment later, as the moon appeared from behind a cloud, they saw two cavaliers come around a bend in the road. Seeing the musketeers, they likewise stopped, and seemed to be considering whether to continue forward or turn back. This hesitation raised the suspicions of the three friends. Athos advanced a few steps, and in a firm voice called out, “Who goes there?”

“Who goes there, yourself?” replied one of the cavaliers.

“That’s no response,” said Athos. “Who goes there? Reply, or we’ll charge you.”

“Take care what you do, Gentlemen!” said a voice that rang with the habit of command.

“It’s some superior officer on his night rounds,” said Athos to his friends. “What would you like to do, Gentlemen?”

“Who are you?” called the same voice, in the same tone of command. “Respond at once, or you’ll regret your disobedience.”

“King’s Musketeers!” called Athos, now even more convinced that this was a superior who had the right to ask questions.

“What company?”

“Company of Tréville.”

“Advance and be recognised, and explain to me what you are doing here at this time of night.”

The three companions advanced, somewhat abashed, as they were now sure they were dealing with someone who outranked them. They allowed Athos to continue to speak for them. One of the two cavaliers – the second one to speak – was ten paces ahead of his fellow. Athos signalled to Porthos and Aramis to hang back and advanced alone to meet him. “Pardon, *officer!*” said Athos. “We’d no idea whom we were dealing with but as you see we were alert and on the guard.”

“Your name?” said the officer, whose face was partly concealed by his cloak.

“But what of yourself, Sir?” said Athos, who was beginning to bridle under this interrogation. “Give me, if you please, proof that you have the right to question me.”

“Your name?” repeated the cavalier, letting his cloak fall and revealing his face.

“His Eminence!” cried the musketeer, astonished.

“Your name?” repeated His Eminence, for the third time.

“Athos,” said the musketeer.

The cardinal gestured to his equerry, who approached. “These three musketeers will follow us, as I don’t want it known that I’ve left the camp,” said the cardinal, in a low voice. “If they stay with us, we can be sure they tell nobody.”

“We are gentlemen, my Lord,” said Athos. “You need have nothing to fear if we give you our word. *Thank God*, we know how to keep a secret.”

At this bold interruption, the cardinal fixed his piercing eyes on Athos. “You have a quick ear, Sir Athos,” he said. “But hear this: I don’t wish you to follow me out of distrust but for my security. No doubt your companions are Gentlemen Porthos and Aramis?”

“Yes, your Eminence,” Athos said as the two musketeers approached, hats in hands.

“I know you, Gentlemen, I know you,” said the cardinal. “I know that you are not entirely my friends that I regret. But I know too that you are brave and loyal gentlemen, and that I can trust you. Do me the honour then, Sir Athos, you and your friends, to accompany me, and I will have an escort the king will envy, should we encounter him.”

The three musketeers bowed to the necks of their horses. “Well, upon my honour, your Eminence is right to take us with you,” said Athos, “as we’ve met with several ugly customers on the road tonight, and even had a quarrel with four ruffians at Colombier-Rouge.”

“A quarrel? And why, Gentlemen?” said the cardinal. “I am not fond of quarrellers, you know.”

“That is precisely why I have the honour of informing Your Eminence about it myself, for otherwise you might get a false report from others and believe us at fault.”

The cardinal frowned. “What were the results of this quarrel?”

“My friend Aramis, here, took a slight sword-cut on the arm but as you can see, it’s nothing that would prevent him from joining an assault tomorrow, if Your Eminence ordered an escalade.”

“But you aren’t the sort of men to allow yourselves to take sword-wounds this way,” said the cardinal. “I’ve heard good accounts of you, so be frank with me. Come now, confess: you know I have the right to give absolution.”

“As to myself, my Lord,” said Athos, “I never even so much as drew my sword. I merely picked up my man and threw him out the window, though in falling,” Athos hesitated, “it seems he broke his thigh.”

“Indeed!” said the cardinal. “And you, Sir Porthos?”

“Knowing that duelling is prohibited, my Lord, I hit one of the brigands with a bench. I fear he may have broken his shoulder.”

“Well, well,” said the cardinal. “And you, Sir Aramis?”

"My Lord, being naturally of a mild temperament, and as I am about to enter the Church, of which My Lord may not be aware, I tried to separate the combatants. But one of those faithless wretches slashed my left arm with a sword, and then I must admit I lost my patience. I drew my own sword, and as he charged me, I'm very much afraid that he allowed it to pass through his body. I only know for certain that he fell, and was carried off by his two companions."

"The devil, Gentlemen!" said the cardinal. "Three men *hors of combat* in a barroom brawl! You don't do things by halves. And what, exactly, was this quarrel all about?"

"The ruffians were drunk," said Athos. "Having heard there was a lady who'd arrived at the inn this evening, they tried to break into her room."

"Break into her room!" said the cardinal. "To do what?"

"To do her violence, no doubt," said Athos. "The wretches, as I have had the honour to tell Your Eminence, were drunk."

"Would this woman be young and attractive?" asked the cardinal uneasily.

"We did not see her, my Lord," Athos said.

"You did not see her! Very well, then," the cardinal said quickly, "it was quite proper for you to act to defend a woman's honour. And, as I'm on my way to the inn at Colombier-Rouge myself, I shall soon know whether you've told me the truth."

"My Lord!" said Athos proudly. "We are gentlemen, and wouldn't sully our honour with a lie to save our heads."

"And therefore I don't doubt what you tell me, Sir Athos, not for a single second. But, tell me" the cardinal added, to change the subject, "was this lady alone?"

"The lady had a cavalier in the room with her," said Athos, "but, as he never appeared despite the tumult, he is presumably a coward."

"Judge not rashly, says the Gospel," replied the cardinal. Athos bowed. "And now, Gentlemen, as I've heard what I needed to know," the cardinal said, "follow me." The three musketeers arrayed themselves behind the cardinal, who once again covered his face with his cloak and resumed riding forward, keeping eight or ten paces ahead of his four companions. They soon arrived at the inn that was solitary and silent. Doubtless the host knew to expect an illustrious visitor and had sent any other inconvenient guests on their way. At ten paces from the door the cardinal gestured to his equerry and to the three musketeers to halt. A horse, saddled and ready, was tied up near the entrance. The cardinal leaned down and rapped the door with a distinctive triple knock. A man concealed by a cloak immediately came out. He exchanged a few quick words with the cardinal, then mounted the ready horse and rode off in the direction of Surgères – which was also the direction of Paris. "Come forward, Gentlemen," said the cardinal. "Gentlemen, you have told me the truth," he said, addressing the musketeers, "and it won't be my fault if our encounter this evening doesn't redound to your advantage. In the meantime, follow me." The cardinal dismounted, and the three musketeers did likewise. His Eminence threw his horse's bridle to his equerry, and the musketeers tied up their horses near the door. The innkeeper awaited them in the doorway. As far as he knew, the cardinal was only an officer come to visit a lady. "Do you have a chamber on the ground floor where these gentlemen can wait, one with a good fire?" asked the cardinal.

"I have this, sir," the host replied, opening the door to his great room in which an old, smoky stove had recently been replaced by a new one with a large and excellent chimney.

"That will do," said the cardinal. "Oblige me by waiting for me here, Gentlemen. I shouldn't be more than half an hour." And as the three musketeers entered the chamber on the ground floor, the cardinal, without asking for directions, ascended the staircase like a man who knows exactly where he's going.

## 044

### On the Utility of Stovepipes

Apparently, without realising it, and motivated solely by their chivalrous and adventurous natures, the three musketeers had done a favour for someone in the inn at Colombier-Rouge whom the cardinal honoured with his particular protection. *Now who could that someone be?* This was the main subject of discussion among the three friends. Eventually, since they could reach no satisfactory conclusion, Porthos called the host and asked for some dice. Porthos and Aramis sat at a table and began to play. Athos paced back and forth, thinking. While thinking and pacing, Athos kept passing by the stump of the chimney from the old stove, where it protruded from the ceiling. Every time he passed he heard a murmur of speech, and eventually this caught his attention. Stopping by the stovepipe, he heard a few words that froze him in place. He gestured to his companions to hush, then stood, ear bent to the opening of the chimney. "Listen, Milady," said the cardinal, "this is an important matter. Sit down, and we'll discuss it."

"Milady!" murmured Athos.

"Your Eminence has my full attention," replied a female voice that made the musketeer start.

"A small vessel with an English crew, whose captain belongs to me, awaits you at the mouth of the Charente, at Fort of La Pointe. It will set sail tomorrow morning."

"And you want me there tonight?"

"You'll depart after you've heard my instructions. Two men whom you will find outside the door when you leave, will serve as your escort. I shall leave first; you will wait one half-hour, then leave yourself."

"Yes, My Lord. Now, let's return to my mission. As I would like to continue to be worthy of Your Eminence's confidence, please outline it in the clearest possible terms so there will be no chance of mistakes."

There was a moment of profound silence between the two negotiators. It was evident the cardinal was weighing in advance the terms in which he would speak, and Milady was focusing her attention to understand what he would tell her, and engrave it permanently in her memory. Athos took advantage of this pause to ask his comrades to lock the door from the inside, and then motioned for them to come and listen with him. The two musketeers, who loved their ease, brought chairs for themselves and another for Athos. All three then sat down, heads together, and cocked their ears toward the stovepipe. "You will go to London," the cardinal resumed. "Once in London, you will find Buckingham."

"I must observe to Your Eminence," said Milady, "that the duke suspects me of having been involved in the affair of the diamond studs, and His Grace hasn't trusted me since."

"But this time," said the cardinal, "it's not a matter of winning his confidence. I want you to present yourself to him frankly and openly as a negotiator."

"Frankly and openly," repeated Milady in a tone of the utmost duplicity.

"Yes, frankly and openly," replied the cardinal, in the same tone. "The entire negotiation must be open and above-board."

"I will follow Your Eminence's instructions to the letter – once you give them to me."

"You will speak to Buckingham on my behalf, and you will tell him I am aware of all the preparations he is making but that they cause me no concern, as at the first move he makes, I will ruin the queen."

"Will he believe Your Eminence is in a position to make good on this threat?"

"Yes – for I have proof of her complicity."

"I must be able to present this proof to convince him."

"Of course. You will tell him that I will publish the account from Bois-Robert and the Marquis of Bautru about the duke's meeting with the queen during the masked fête at the Hôtel of Chevreuse. To remove any doubts he may have, tell him that he came in the costume of the Grand Mogul that the Knight of Guise was to have worn, and which he bought from him for the sum of three thousand *pistoles*."

"Very well, my Lord."

"Give him the details of the night when he entered the Louvre disguised as an Italian fortune-teller. To make it clear that I'm fully informed, tell him that he wore beneath his cloak a great white gown embroidered with black teardrops, death's-heads, and crossbones, so that if necessary he could pass as the Phantom of the White Lady – who, as everyone knows, returns to the Louvre whenever some great event is imminent."

"Is that all, my Lord?"

"Tell him that I'm also acquainted with all the details of the incident at Amiens, and that I will have a little romance published about it, arch and amusing, with a plan of the garden and portraits of the principal actors in that nocturnal farce."

"I will tell him."

"Tell him also that I have his man Montagu in the Bastille. Although no letters were found on him, torture may make him tell what he knows ... and perhaps even what he doesn't know."

"Excellent."

"Finally, you may add that His Grace, in his hasty departure from the Isle of Ré, left in his quarters a certain letter from Madam of Chevreuse that is most compromising to the queen, as it proves that Her Majesty not only loves the enemies of the king, she conspires with the enemies of France. Now, can you recall everything I've said?"

"Let Your Eminence be the judge: the masked ball at the Hôtel of Chevreuse; the night at the Louvre; the evening in the garden at Amiens; the arrest of Montagu; and the letter from Madam of Chevreuse."

"That's it," said the cardinal. "Your memory is excellent, Milady."

"But," the lady said, ignoring the flattery, "what if, despite all these reasons, the duke stands firm and continues to threaten France?"

"Love has driven the duke to insanity ... or perhaps just sheer stupidity," replied Richelieu, bitterly. "Like the ancient paladins he goes to war just to win a look from his ladylove. But if he knows that his war will cost the lady of his heart her honour, and maybe her liberty, he'll have second thoughts – I will answer for it."

"And yet," Milady continued, determined that there should be no ambiguity about the goal of her mission, "if he persists, nonetheless?"

"If he persists...?" said the cardinal. "That is unlikely."

"But it is *possible*," said Milady.

"If he persists..." his Eminence paused. "If he persists, well ... we'll hope for one of those events that change a nation's history."

"If Your Eminence could give me a specific example of one of these events," said Milady, "perhaps I would be more worthy of your confidence in me."

"Very well, then!" Richelieu said. "When King Henry IV, of glorious memory, was about to invade both Flanders and Italy in 1610, assailing Austria on both sides, and incidentally for a reason much like that of the duke's – well, didn't something happen that saved Austria? Why shouldn't the current king of France have the same good fortune as the Holy Roman Emperor?"

"Your Eminence refers to that knife-blow struck in the Rue of la Ferronnerie?"

"Just so," said the cardinal.

"Your Eminence isn't concerned that the torture and slow death inflicted on Ravailiac, the wielder of that knife, might discourage anyone with the idea of imitating him?"

"In every country, especially those racked by religious divisions, there will always be fanatics who ask nothing better than to become martyrs. It occurs to me that right now the Puritans are furious with Buckingham, and their preachers are calling him the Antichrist."

"Well?" said Milady.

"Well," continued the cardinal, nonchalantly, "all it would take, at this point, would be to find some woman, young, beautiful, and clever, who has a grudge against the duke. There must be such women; the duke is quite a ladies' man, and succeeds in love by sowing promises of eternal devotion right and left. It follows that he must also have sown hatred by his continual infidelities."

"No doubt such a woman could be found," Milady said coolly.

"Well, if such a woman put the blade of a Jacques Clément or a Ravailiac in the hands of a fanatic, it would be the salvation of France."

"Yes but then she would be an assassin's accomplice."

"And were the accomplices of Jacques Clément or Ravailiac ever named?"

"No – but perhaps they were placed higher than anyone dared to raise their eyes to look. The Palais of Justice doesn't get burned down for just anyone, my Lord."

"You think, then, that the fire at the Palais of Justice was no accident?" Richelieu asked in a tone of indifference.

"I, my Lord?" replied Milady. "I think nothing; I state a fact, nothing more. However, I do say that if I were called Miss of Montpensier or Queen Marie de Médicis, I would take fewer precautions than I must take as mere Lady Clancee."

"Fair enough," said Richelieu. "What is it you want?"

"I want an order that ratifies, in advance, anything I think duty requires me to do for the good of France."

"But first a woman must be found who bears a grudge against the duke."

"She is found," said Milady.

"Then this poor fanatic must be found, the man who will serve as an instrument of God's justice."  
"He will be found."  
"Then when he has been," said the cardinal, "it'll be time to claim the order you've asked for."  
"Your Eminence is right," said Milady, "and I was mistaken to see this mission with which you honour me as anything more than it appears – in other words, to announce to His Grace, on the behalf of Your Eminence, that you are aware of the different disguises by which he was able to approach the queen during the fête given by Madam of Chevreuse; that you have proof of an interview granted at the Louvre by the queen to a certain Italian astrologer, who was actually the Duke of Buckingham; that you are sponsoring a satirical little romance about the incident at Amiens, with a plan of the gardens and portraits of the principal actors; that Montagu is in the Bastille, where putting him to the Question may make him tell what he remembers, and even things he's forgotten; and, finally, that you possess a certain letter from the Duchess of Chevreuse, found in His Grace's quarters, that is extremely compromising, not only to her who wrote it but to her in whose name it was written. Then if, despite all this, the duke persists in his designs – well, since I will have reached the limits of my mission, I'll have nothing more to do but pray to God to work a miracle for the salvation of France. That is correct, is it not, my Lord? I shall have nothing else to do?"  
"That is correct," replied the cardinal, coldly.  
"Then," said Milady, appearing not to notice the change in Richelieu's tone, "since I've received Your Eminence's instructions regarding your enemies, will my Lord permit me to say a few words about mine?"  
"Have you enemies then?" asked Richelieu.  
"Yes, My Lord – enemies against whom you owe me your support, as I made them in serving Your Eminence."  
"And who are they?" replied the cardinal.  
"First of all, a scheming little slut named Bonacieux."  
"She is in the prison of Mantes."  
"That is to say, she was," replied Milady, "but the queen has cajoled the king into giving her an order by which she was transferred to a convent."  
"A convent?"  
"Yes."  
"Which convent?"  
"I don't know; the secret has been well guarded."  
"But I will know!"  
"And Your Eminence will then tell me what convent the woman is in?"  
"I see nothing inconvenient in that," said the cardinal.  
"Excellent. But I have another enemy, one much more dangerous to me than that little Madam Bonacieux."  
"Who is that?"  
"Her lover."  
"What is his name?"  
"Oh, Your Eminence knows him well!" cried Milady in sudden fury. "He's the nemesis of us both! He's the one who, in an encounter with Your Eminence's Guards, tipped the victory to the King's Musketeers. He's the one who gave three terrible sword wounds to your agent, of Wardes, and caused the failure of the affair of the diamond studs. And now, knowing that I'm the one who had his Madam Bonacieux abducted, he's sworn to kill me."  
"Ah, yes," said the cardinal. "I know who you mean."  
"I mean that s honey, d'Artagnan!"  
"He is an audacious young man," the cardinal said.  
"That audacity is what makes him dangerous."  
"I cannot act without proof that he is somehow connected to Buckingham."  
"Proof!" said Milady. "I'll find you ten proofs."  
"Well, then, this is the simplest thing in the world! Give me that proof and I'll send him to the Bastille."  
"Excellent, My Lord – but afterward?"  
"Once in the Bastille, there is no *afterward*," the cardinal said quietly. "By God! If it were as easy to eliminate my enemy as it is to eliminate yours! ... Is it against such nonentities as these that you ask for an order of immunity?"  
"My Lord," Milady said intently, "I ask for *quid pro quo*: a man for a man, a life for a life. Give me the one, and I will give you the other."  
"I have no idea what you're talking about," the cardinal replied, "nor do I want to know. But I like to indulge you, and see nothing inconvenient in giving you what you ask for in regard to someone so inconsequential – especially since you inform me that this d'Artagnan fellow is a libertine, a duellist, and a traitor."  
"He's a bastard, my Lord, a filthy whoreson bastard!"  
"Well, then, get me some paper, ink, and a plume," the cardinal said.  
"Here, My Lord."  
There was a minute of silence, indicating that the cardinal was choosing his terms carefully in the writing of the order. Athos, who hadn't missed a word of the conversation, motioned to his two companions and led them to the other end of the room. "Well, what do you want?" said Porthos. "And why won't you let us listen to the end of the conversation?"  
"Quietly!" whispered Athos. "We've heard everything we needed to hear. Besides, it's not that I don't want you to listen but that I have to leave."  
"You have to leave!" said Porthos. "And if the cardinal asks for you, what are we supposed to say?"  
"You won't wait till he asks. You must speak first and tell him that I've gone on to scout ahead, as certain of our host's remarks led me to believe that the road might not be safe. I'll give the same story to the cardinal's equerry. The rest is my business, so don't worry about it."  
"Athos," said Aramis, "be careful."  
"I said not to worry," replied Athos. "Trust me to keep my head." Porthos and Aramis nodded, and went back to their seats by the stovepipe. Meanwhile Athos, making no attempts at secrecy, went out the door of the inn, where he convinced the equerry in a few words of the need for an advance scout. He untied and mounted his horse, checked to make sure his pistols were loaded and primed, drew his sword, and rode hell-for-leather down the road to camp.

045  
A Conjugal Scene

As Athos had foreseen, it wasn't long before the cardinal came down from the room where he'd met with Milady. He opened the door of the musketeers' chamber and found Porthos and Aramis deeply engrossed in a game of dice. A quick glance around the room told him that one of the men was missing. "What has become of Sir Athos?" he asked.  
"He's gone to scout ahead, my Lord," Porthos replied. "Some remarks by our host led him to believe the road might not be safe."  
"And what have you been doing, Sir Porthos?"  
"I've won five *pistoles* from Aramis!"  
"And now, will you accompany me on our return to camp?"  
"We are at Your Eminence's orders."  
"To horse then, Gentlemen. The hour grows late."  
The equerry was at the door, holding the bridle of the cardinal's mount. In the shadows, not far off, stood two men with three horses. This was the escort that was to conduct Milady to Fort of La Pointe and assist there at her embarkation. The equerry confirmed to the cardinal what the two musketeers had said about Athos. With a gesture of approval, the cardinal mounted and they returned the way they had come, with the same precautions as before. Let us leave the cardinal to follow the road to camp, protected by his equerry and the two musketeers, and return to Athos. He maintained his gallop toward camp until he was out of sight of the inn, then turned his horse to the right, circled around, and came back to within twenty paces of the road, where he watched the passage of the little troop from behind a thicket. Having recognised his companions' plumed hats and the cardinal's embroidered cloak, he waited until the riders had turned the corner of the road; when they were out of sight he returned at a gallop to the inn, where the host recognised him and admitted him without trouble. "My officer forgot to convey an important piece of information to the lady," Athos said, "and sent me back to correct the oversight."  
"Go on up," said the host. "She's still in her chamber."  
Stepping as lightly as he could, Athos climbed the stairs to the landing, and through the open door saw Milady putting on her hat. He entered the chamber and shut the door behind him. At the sound of the bolt sliding home, Milady turned. Athos stood just inside the door, enveloped in his cloak, his hat pulled down over his eyes. Seeing this figure, mute and immobile as a statue, Milady took fright.  
"Who are you? What do you want?" she cried.  
"My God! It is her," Athos murmured.  
Letting fall his cloak and raising his hat, he advanced toward Milady. "Do you recognise me, Madam?" he said.  
Milady took a step forward, then recoiled as if she'd seen a serpent. "Good," said Athos. "I see that you do recognise me."  
"The Count of La Fère!" Milady murmured.  
The blood drained from her face and she backed away until stopped by the wall. "Yes, *Milady*," replied Athos. "The Count of La Fère in person come expressly from the other world for the pleasure of seeing you. Sit down and we'll discuss it, as my Lord the Cardinal said."  
Milady, overcome with terror, sat without saying a word. "You are a demon, sent to afflict the earth," said Athos. "Your powers are great, as well I know – but with the aid of God, men may conquer the most terrible of demons. You crossed my path before, and I thought, Madam, that I had crushed you. Either I was mistaken or Hell has revived you."  
These words brought back frightful memories to Milady. Her head drooped and she uttered a nearly inaudible groan. "Yes, Hell has revived you," continued Athos. "Hell has made you rich; Hell has furnished you with another name; Hell has even altered your face. But it has effaced neither the stains from your soul, nor the mark of the brand from your flesh."  
Milady leaped up as if launched by a coiled spring, and her eyes flashed lightning. Athos remained seated. "You thought me dead, didn't you? As I thought you to be. And the name of Athos hid the Count of La Fère, just as the name of Milady Clarice hid Anne of Breuil! Isn't that what you were called when your honourable brother married us?" Athos laughed. "What a strange position we're in! We've only been able to live till now because each thought the other was dead, and memory is less burdensome than a living person. Though memory can be voracious, and eats from within!"  
"But, then," Milady said, in a faint voice, "why have you returned to me? And what do you want?"  
"I want you to know that though I've been invisible to your eyes, I haven't lost sight of you."  
"You know what it's I've done?"  
"I can recount your actions to you since you entered the service of the cardinal day by day until this very evening." An incredulous smile passed over Milady's pale lips. "Listen: it was you who lifted two diamond studs from the Duke of Buckingham's shoulder. It was you who had Madam Bonacieux carried off. It was you who, infatuated with of Wardes, thought to pass the night with him but opened the door instead to Sir d'Artagnan. It was you who, believing of Wardes had betrayed you, lusted to have him killed by his rival. It was you who, when this rival had discovered your shameful secret, engaged to have him murdered by two assassins you sent in pursuit of him. It was you who, after the bullets had missed their mark, sent poisoned honey with a false letter, to make your victim think the honey had come from his friends. And to make an end, it was you, in this very chamber, sitting on this chair where I sit, who engaged with the Cardinal of Richelieu to assassinate the Duke of Buckingham, in exchange for his promise to let you assassinate d'Artagnan."  
Milady was livid. "But how?" she said. "Are you Satan?"



"Perhaps," Athos said. "In any case, listen to this, and listen well. Assassinate the Duke of Buckingham or have him assassinated – I couldn't care less! I don't know him and besides, he's an Englishman. But d'Artagnan is a loyal friend whom I love and will defend. Do not touch a single hair on his head with even the tip of your finger or I swear to you in the name of my father, it will be your final crime."

"Sir d'Artagnan has cruelly insulted me," Milady said in a hollow voice, "and he must die."

"Really? Since when is it possible to insult you, Madam?" Athos mocked. "*He's insulted me and must die.* Ha!"

"He *will* die," repeated Milady. "The woman first and then him."

It made Athos suddenly dizzy: the sight of this creature brought back terrible memories, though there was nothing about her now that made him think of her as a woman. He recalled the day, in a situation less dangerous than this one, when he'd attempted to sacrifice her on the altar of his honour. The will to murder came blazing back, swept over him like a fever. He stood up, drew his pistol from his belt, and cocked it. Milady, pale as a corpse, tried to cry out but her tongue froze, and she could utter only a hoarse sound that was less like human speech than the croak of a beast. Glued to the dark tapestry behind her, hair in wild disarray, she was a frightful image of terror. Athos slowly raised his pistol and extended his arm, until the barrel nearly touched Milady's forehead. Then, in a voice all the more terrible for having the supreme calmness of inflexible resolve, he said, "Madam, you will instantly give up to me that paper the cardinal signed or upon my soul, I will blow out your brains." Milady might have doubted this with any other man – but she knew Athos. Nevertheless, she didn't move. "You have one second to decide," he said.

Milady saw by the narrowing of his eyes that he was about to fire. She quickly reached her hand between her breasts, drew forth a paper and thrust it at Athos. "Take it," she said, "and be damned!" Athos took the paper and replaced the pistol in his belt. Then, to be certain it was the right one, he approached the lamp, unfolded it, and read:

*It is by my order, and for the good of the State, that the bearer has done what has been done.*

05 August 1628

RICHELIEU

"And now," Athos said, resuming his cloak and replacing his hat on his head, "now that I've drawn your teeth, viper – bite if you can!"

And he left the chamber without even looking behind him. Outside the door of the inn he found the two men holding the horses. "Gentlemen," he said, "as you know, my Lord's order is to conduct this woman, as rapidly as possible, to Fort of La Pointe, and stay with her until she's aboard."

As this was basically in accord with the orders they'd already received, they bowed their heads in agreement. As for Athos, he leaped lightly into the saddle and set off at a gallop. But instead of following the road he went across the fields, spurring on his horse and stopping from time to time to listen. On one of these halts, he heard the sound of several horses on the road. He had no doubt but that it was the cardinal and his escort. He immediately rode to a point ahead of them, rubbed down his horse with some brush and leaves, and placed himself in the middle of the road, about two hundred paces short of the camp. "Who goes there?" he cried as soon as he could see the riders.

"That is our brave musketeer, I believe," said the cardinal.

"Yes, my Lord, it's me," said Athos.

"Sir Athos," Richelieu said, "accept my thanks for the excellent guard you've kept. Gentlemen, we have arrived. Take the gate on the left; the password is, '*Roi et Ré*.'"

With these words, the cardinal saluted the three friends with a nod and took the path to the right, followed by his equerry – for, that night, he too slept in the camp. "Whew!" said Porthos and Aramis together, as soon as the cardinal was out of earshot. "Athos," Aramis continued, "he signed that paper she demanded."

"I know," Athos said serenely, "because here it's." And except when giving the password to the sentinels, the three friends didn't say another word until they reached their quarters. There, they sent Mousqueton to tell Planchet that his master's presence was requested in the musketeers' quarters as soon as he returned from the trenches. Meanwhile, as Athos had foreseen, when Milady found the two men awaiting her at the door, she made no trouble about following them. For an instant, she had the impulse to go to the cardinal and tell him everything – but a disclosure from her would lead to a disclosure from Athos. If she accused him of attempting to hang her, he would reveal that she was branded. She thought it better, for the moment, to keep silent, depart discreetly, and accomplish her difficult mission with her usual skill. Then, everything having been completed to the satisfaction of the cardinal, she could return to claim her vengeance. So they travelled all night, and by seven in the morning she was at Fort of La Pointe. By eight she had embarked, and by nine o'clock the vessel that had been provided with letters of marque by the cardinal, and which was supposed to be sailing for Bayonne, raised anchor and set its course for England.

046

The Bastion of Saint-Gervais

On arriving at the quarters of his three friends, d'Artagnan found them waiting for him in the common room. Athos was deliberating, Aramis was reading prayers from a charming little book of hours bound in blue velvet, and Porthos was curling his moustache. "By God, Gentlemen, I hope what you have to tell me is worth the trouble," d'Artagnan said, "or I won't forgive you for summoning me here instead of letting me get some rest, after a night spent taking a bastion and then demolishing its defences. It's a shame you weren't there, Gentlemen – it was warm work!"

"Where we were, it wasn't exactly cold!" replied Porthos, giving his moustache the peculiar twist that was one of his trademarks.

"*Hush!*" Athos said.

D'Artagnan looked at the lines on the musketeer's brow and said, "Uh-oh. There's something new, isn't there?"

"Aramis," said Athos, "the day before yesterday you took breakfast at the Heretic's Inn, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"Personally, I ate very little. It was a day of fasting, and they had only meat."

"What?" said Athos, "We're at a seaport, and you couldn't get fish?"

"It's said that the dyke His Eminence is building to block entry to the port has scared all the fish out to sea," Aramis said mildly, resuming his pious studies.

"That's not really what I want to know, Aramis," said Athos. "I want to know if anyone intruded on you, or if you were left to yourself."

"Ah, I see what you're getting at. No, I was not interrupted or importuned; the Heretic should suit us well."

"Then let's go to the Heretic," Athos said. "The walls here are thin as paper." D'Artagnan was familiar with his friend's ways, knew by these words, and a subtle gesture that the situation was serious. He went out arm in arm with Athos without saying a word. Porthos followed, chatting with Aramis. They met Grimaud en route. Athos made a sign to him to follow and Grimaud obeyed silently, as usual. By this time the poor fellow had nearly forgotten how to speak. They arrived at the Heretic at about seven in the morning, as dawn began to lighten the sky. The three friends ordered breakfast and went into a room where the host said they wouldn't be disturbed. Unfortunately, it was a bad time of day to try to hold a confidential meeting. The drummers had just beaten reveille, the troops had barely awakened, and everyone was out to dispel the morning's grogginess with some grog: dragoons, Swiss, guards, musketeers, and cavalymen came one after another at a rate that must have brought a smile to the innkeeper's face. However, it was not at all what the four friends had in mind, and they were less than cordial in replying to the salutes, toasts, and gibes of their comrades-in-arms. "We'd leave," said Athos, "before we get involved in some petty quarrel that is the last thing we need right now. D'Artagnan, tell us how your night went; we'll get to ours later."

"Quite so!" interrupted a cavalry officer who held a glass of *eau-de-vie* that he'd obviously already been sampling. "Quite so! You guards were in the trenches last night, weren't you? I hear the Rochelois just about handed you your heads!"

D'Artagnan glanced at Athos for guidance on how to handle this intruder into their conversation. "Sir Busigny honours you with a question," Athos said. "Go on; tell us all what happened last night, since these gentlemen want to know."

"You are take some bastion, *ja?*" asked a Swiss, drinking rum from a pint glass.

"Yes, sir," D'Artagnan bowed. "We've had that honour. We even got a barrel of black powder under one of the corners as you may have heard and blew a very pretty breach in the wall. It damaged the rest of the works as well, as the bastion is pretty old."

"And what bastion was this?" asked a dragoon who had a goose impaled on his sabre that he was bringing in for roasting.

"The Bastion of Saint-Gervais," replied d'Artagnan. "The one the Rochelois were using to annoy our pioneers."

"Was the affair a hot one?"

"But yes. We lost five men, and the Rochelois eight or ten."

"*Balzampleu!*" said the Swiss who despite the fine collection of oaths boasted by the German language, had taken to swearing in French.

"But in all probability the Rochelois will just send their own pioneers out this morning to repair the damage to the bastion," the cavalry officer said.

"Yes, they probably will," said d'Artagnan.

"Gentlemen," said Athos, "a wager!"

"Oh, yes! A wager!" said the Swiss.

"Which is?" asked the cavalry officer.

"Wait a moment," said the dragoon, balancing his sabre like a spit on the andirons in the fireplace. "Wait a moment – I want a piece of this too. Innkeeper, damn it! Get me a dripping-pan *tout of suite* – I don't want to lose a drop of fat from this fine fowl."

"Is right!" said the Swiss. "Goose-grease is damn good with the pastries, by damn!"

"There! Got it," said the dragoon. "Now, on with the wager! We're listening, Sir Athos."

"Yes! Let's have the wager," said the cavalry officer.

"Very well, Sir Busigny. I will bet you," said Athos, "that I and my three companions, Gentlemen Porthos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan, will have breakfast in the Saint-Gervais bastion and will remain there for one hour by the clock, no matter what the enemy tries to do to dislodge us."

Porthos and Aramis looked at each other – they began to understand. "Umm, Athos," d'Artagnan whispered in Athos's ear, "you do realise you're about to get us all killed."

"We're more likely to be killed if we *don't* go," Athos replied.

"My faith, Gentlemen!" said Porthos, leaning back in his chair and twisting his moustache. "I hope that's a pretty enough wager for you."

"You're on!" said Sir Busigny. "Now we just need to fix the stakes."

"Well, there are four of you," Athos said, "and there are four of us. How about dinner for eight – will that suit you?"

"Perfectly," said of Busigny.

"Fine by me," said the dragoon.

"Is good," said the Swiss.

The fourth man, who had yet to speak a word, signified his assent with a brief nod of his head. "Your breakfast is ready, Gentlemen," said the host.

"Well, bring it in," said Athos.

The host obeyed. Athos called Grimaud over with a gesture, pointed to a large basket lying in a corner, and signalled that he should wrap the food in their napkins for travelling. Grimaud understood that breakfast had become a picnic. He wrapped up the food, placed it in the basket with some bottles, and put the basket on his arm. "But where're you going to eat my breakfast?" asked the innkeeper.

"What does that matter to you, so long as you're paid?" said Athos.

And he threw two *pistoles* majestically on the table. "Would you like your change, *mon Officer?*" asked the host.

"No – just add two bottles of champagne and the difference will cover the napkins."

This wasn't quite what the host had hoped to hear but he consoled himself by slipping in two bottles of cheap Anjou honey in place of the champagne. "Sir Busigny," said Athos, "would you care to synchronise your watch with mine or shall I set mine by yours?"

"As you like, sir!" said the cavalry officer, drawing out on its chain a handsome watch set with diamonds. "I've half past seven," he said.

"And I, seven thirty-five," said Athos, "So you'll note that I'm five minutes ahead of you, Sir."

Then with a final bow to their admiring audience, the four young men took the road to the Saint-Gervais bastion, followed by Grimaud, carrying the basket. He had no idea where they were going but, trained by Athos to passive obedience, it never occurred to him to ask. While they were still inside the bounds of the camp, the four friends didn't dare say a word to each other. For one thing, they'd attracted a number of curious followers who'd heard about the wager and wanted to see how it would turn out. Once they'd crossed the line of circumvallation and left their followers within the defences,

d'Artagnan, who was completely ignorant of what this was all about, thought it high time to demand an explanation. "And now, my dear Athos," he said, "would you do me the favour of telling me where we're going?"

"As you can see," said Athos, "we're going to your bastion."

"And just what are we going to do there?"

"We're going to have breakfast, obviously!"

"Why couldn't we have had breakfast at the Heretic?"

"Because we have important matters to discuss, and we couldn't talk for five minutes in that inn without being hailed or accosted by someone. There, at least," Athos said, pointing at the bastion, "no one will interrupt us."

"It seems to me we could have found some deserted place in the dunes, or on the beach," said d'Artagnan with that natural prudence that balanced out his extraordinary bravery.

"Where someone would have seen the four of us conversing, so that inside a quarter of an hour the cardinal would know from his spies that we were holding a council."

"Athos is right, you know," said Aramis. *"Progress in the desert."*

"A desert would be just the thing," said Porthos, "but where would we find one?"

"There is no place deserted enough where a bird can't pass over your head, where a fish can't jump from the water, or where a rabbit can't hop from its burrow, and I believe that bird, fish, and rabbit would all be the cardinal's spies," Athos said. "We're better off seeing this little exploit through, especially since we can't draw back now without dishonour. We made a wager with our comrades, something our enemies couldn't have foreseen, and I defy anyone to guess our real motives for it. In order to win our bet, we have to spend one hour in the bastion. We'll either be attacked, or we won't. If we're not, we'll have the whole time to ourselves to talk, for I'll answer for it that the walls of that bastion have no ears. If we are attacked, we'll have our business meeting just the same – and in defending ourselves, we'll cover ourselves with glory. So everything works out for the best."

"Well," said d'Artagnan, "but one of us is bound to catch a bullet."

"Ah, my friend," said Athos, "you ought to know by now that the bullets we have most to fear aren't fired by the Rochelois."

"But it seems to me that for an expedition like this, we should at least have brought our muskets," said Porthos.

"Don't be a blockhead, Porthos," Athos said pleasantly. "Why weigh ourselves down with a useless burden?"

"In the face of an enemy, I don't think an army musket, a dozen cartridges, and a powder flask are so useless."

"Yes but you heard what d'Artagnan said."

"I did?" said Porthos. "What did d'Artagnan say?"

"D'Artagnan said that in last night's action eight or ten Rochelois were killed, and almost as many Frenchmen."

"All right. So?"

"They had no time to strip the bodies – the conquerors had more pressing affairs to tend to. Do you see?"

"Well..."

"Well, we'll gather up their muskets, their cartridges, and their powder flasks, and instead of four muskets with a dozen shots apiece, we'll have fifteen firearms and a hundred rounds."

"Athos, I salute you," said Aramis. "You're a great man!"

Porthos bowed his agreement. Only d'Artagnan appeared unconvinced. No doubt Grimaud shared the young man's misgivings. When he realised they weren't stopping in their march toward the bastion, he tugged on the hem of his master's coat. *Where are we going?*

He asked with a gesture. Athos pointed to the bastion. *But*, Grimaud continued in their private sign language, *we're going to lose our skins!*

Athos raised his eyes to the sky and pointed a finger toward heaven. Grimaud dropped his basket, sat down, and shook his head. Athos took a pistol from his belt, checked to see if it was primed, cocked it, and placed the muzzle behind Grimaud's ear. Grimaud leaped up as if spring-loaded. Athos made a sign to him to pick up the basket and take the lead. Grimaud obeyed. The only thing he'd gained from his brief pantomime was a promotion from the rear-guard to the vanguard. When they arrived at the bastion, the four friends turned around. More than 300 soldiers from various units were crowding around the gates of the camp. On a high crest off to the side they could distinguish Sir Busigny, the dragoon, the Swiss, and the fourth better. Athos took off his hat, balanced it on the end of his sword, and waved it in the air. The spectators returned his salute with a loud *hurrah!* After which, the four disappeared into the bastion, hard on the heels of Grimaud.

047

The Council of the Musketeers

As Athos had predicted, the only occupants of the bastion were a dozen dead bodies, both French and Rochelois. "Gentlemen," said Athos, who had assumed command of the expedition, "while Grimaud sets the table, let's start collecting muskets and cartridges. We can talk while we're at it; these gentlemen" – he indicated the corpses – "cannot hear us."

"But we could throw them into the moat," said Porthos, "after first making sure they have nothing in their pockets."

"We could," said Aramis, "but let's leave that job to Grimaud."

"All right, we'll have Grimaud search them, then throw the bodies over the walls," d'Artagnan said.

"Grimaud will do no such thing," said Athos. "These bodies may yet be of service to us."

"How are dead bodies going to serve us?" said Porthos. "You're crazy, my friend."

"Judge not rashly, say the Gospel and His Eminence," replied Athos. "How many muskets do we have, Gentlemen?"

"A dozen," said Aramis.

"How many rounds?"

"A hundred."

"That's all we should need. Let's load the muskets." The four musketeers set about their task. Just as they'd loaded the final weapon, Grimaud signalled that breakfast was served. Athos replied with another gesture that meant *Fine*, and indicated to Grimaud that he should go to a barbette and stand watch. To alleviate the tedium of sentinel duty, Athos allowed him to take a loaf, two cutlets, and a bottle of honey. "And now, to table," said Athos.

The four friends sat down on the ground, legs crossed like Turks or tailors. "Now that we no longer have to fear being overheard, Athos," d'Artagnan said, "I hope you're going to share this big secret with me."

"What I hope to share with you, gentlemen, is pleasure and glory at one and the same time," said Athos. "I've invited you on a charming walk; we've before us a sumptuous breakfast; and as you can see through the murder-holes, there are five hundred people back there who take us for either madmen or heroes, two classes of imbecile so similar that it's hard to distinguish between them."

"But the secret!" demanded d'Artagnan.

"The secret," said Athos, "is that last night I saw Milady."

D'Artagnan had been lifting a glass to his lips but at the name "Milady," his hand shook so that he had to put down the glass or risk spilling the contents.

"You saw your wi..."

"Hush!" interrupted Athos, with quiet intensity. "You forget, dear friend, that these gentlemen are not as intimate with my family affairs as you. Yes," he continued, in a normal voice, "I've seen Milady."

"Where?" d'Artagnan demanded.

"Within two leagues of here in the *hostel* at Colombier-Rouge."

"In that case, I'm done for," said d'Artagnan.

"Not just yet," replied Athos, "for by this time, she'll have left the shores of France."

D'Artagnan breathed freely again. "But, see here," said Porthos, "who exactly is this *Milady*?"

"A woman *very charming*," said Athos, sipping his honey. "That peasant scum of an innkeeper!" he suddenly cried. "He's given us Anjou honey instead of champagne and thinks we can't tell the difference!"

"Milady," he continued. "A charming woman. She was quite generous of herself with our friend d'Artagnan, who nonetheless somehow managed to offend her, and now she's out to exact her revenge. A month ago, she tried with a couple of musket balls; last week, she tried to poison him; and yesterday, she demanded his head from the cardinal."

"What? She demanded my head from the cardinal?" cried d'Artagnan, pale with terror.

"Death truth," said Porthos. "I heard it with my own ears."

"I as well," said Aramis.

"Then," said d'Artagnan, going limp with despair, "it's pointless to struggle any longer. I may as well end it now and blow my own brains out."

"Let's save that folly till the end," said Athos, "Since it's the only one there's no cure for."

"But with enemies like these, I can't possibly escape," said d'Artagnan. "First, there's the stranger of Meung; then there's of Wardes, whom I gave those three wounds to; next there's Milady, whose fatal secret I've discovered; and finally there's the cardinal, whose vengeance I've thwarted."

"Well, that's only four – and we're four, so it's even," said Athos. *"For the love of God!* If we can believe Grimaud's signals, we're about to have to deal with an even larger number. What is it, Grimaud? Considering the gravity of the situation, my friend, I permit you to speak – but keep it brief, if you please. What do you see?"

"A troop."

"Of how many men?"

"Twenty."

"Their nature?"

"Sixteen pioneers, four soldiers."

"Range?"

"Five hundred paces."

"Fine! We still have time to finish this fowl and drink a glass of honey to your health, d'Artagnan!"

*"À ta santé!"* repeated Porthos and Aramis.

"Well, to my health, then! Though I'm afraid your good wishes won't be much protection."

"Bah!" said Athos. "God's Great as the (Sunni) Muslims say and the future is in his hands."

Then emptying his glass that he set down carefully near him, Athos rose nonchalantly, took up the nearest musket, and approached one of the loopholes in the wall. Porthos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan did the same. As for Grimaud, he was ordered to back up the four friends by reloading their weapons. Almost immediately, they saw the approaching troop. They were following a narrow trench that communicated between the bastion and the city. "God!" said Athos. "It's hardly worth our time to deal with twenty buffoons armed with picks, hoes, and shovels! If Grimaud had just waved them off, I'm sure they would have left us alone."

"I doubt it," d'Artagnan remarked. "They look pretty determined to me. Besides, an officer and four soldiers are along with the pioneers, all armed with muskets."

"They just haven't seen us yet," replied Athos.

"My faith!" said Aramis. "I must confess a certain reluctance to fire on these poor devils of bourgeois."

"It's a poor priest who pities heretics!" said Porthos.

"No, I think Aramis is right," said Athos. "I'm going to warn them."

"What the devil are you doing?" cried d'Artagnan. "You're going to get shot!"

But Athos ignored his advice and climbed into the breach, his musket in one hand and his hat in the other. “*Gentlemen!*” he called out to the soldiers and pioneers. They stopped about fifty paces off, astonished by this apparition, who bowed to them courteously. “Gentlemen! My friends and I are taking breakfast in this bastion. Now, nothing is more disagreeable than being disturbed during breakfast, so we must request, if you absolutely must come up here, to please come back later – or at least wait till we’ve finished our meal. Unless, that is, you’d rather renounce the party of rebellion and come drink with us to the health of the King of France.”

“Watch it, Athos!” cried d’Artagnan. “Can’t you see they’re going to fire?”

“Yes, of course,” said Athos, “but these bourgeois are terrible shots, and they’re bound to miss me.” Just then, four musket shots rang out, and though the balls ricocheted around Athos, none of them hit their target. Almost simultaneously, four shots echoed in reply but much better aimed than those of the attackers. Three soldiers fell dead, and one of the pioneers was wounded. “Grimaud, another musket!” said Athos, still in the breach.

Grimaud instantly obeyed. The other three reloaded their weapons, and another volley followed. The officer and two pioneers fell dead, and the rest of the troop fled. “Now, Gentlemen, a sortie,” said Athos. The four friends dashed out of the fort onto the field of battle and gathered up the four soldiers’ muskets and the officer’s half-pike. Then, convinced that the fugitives wouldn’t stop before they reached the city, they climbed back into the bastion, carrying their victory trophies. “Reload the muskets, Grimaud,” said Athos, “and we, Gentlemen, shall resume our breakfast and continue our conversation. Now, where were we?”

“You were telling us about Milady,” said d’Artagnan who was more than a little interested in her itinerary.

“She’s on her way to England,” Athos said.

“Yes but to what end?”

“To assassinate, or arrange the assassination of, the Duke of Buckingham.”

“But that’s infamous!” d’Artagnan exclaimed.

“As to that, I must confess little interest and less concern.” Athos shrugged. “If you’re finished, Grimaud, take that officer’s half-pike, tie a napkin to it, and plant it at the peak of our bastion, to show these rebels of Rochelois that they have to deal with brave and loyal soldiers of the king.”

Silently, Grimaud obeyed. A moment later a white flag, battle standard of the Bourbons, unfurled above the heads of the four friends, to a thunder of applause from the royal lines. Half the camp was lining the barricades. “Wait!” d’Artagnan said. “How can you care so little if Buckingham is killed? The duke is our friend.”

“The duke is English and is fighting against us. Let Milady do as she likes with the duke; he means no more to me than this empty bottle.”

Athos drained a bottle into his glass, then threw the dead soldier toward the bodies of the enemy. “But hold on – I can’t just abandon Buckingham like that. He gave us four magnificent horses.”

“Not to mention some very handsome saddles,” added Porthos who was wearing a cloak edged with the braid from his.

“Besides,” observed Aramis, “God desires the conversion of the sinner, not his death.”

“Amen,” said Athos, “and we can return to the subject later, if it pleases you. But at the time, what seemed most important to me – as I’m sure you can understand, d’Artagnan – was acquiring from that woman the carte blanche she’d extorted from the cardinal. She could use it to rid herself of you, and maybe of us, with complete impunity.”

“What is this woman, some sort of demon?” asked Porthos, holding out his plate to Aramis, who was slicing up a fowl.

“This carte blanche,” said d’Artagnan, “is it ... still in her hands?”

“No, it has passed into mine. I won’t say without trouble, for that would be a lie.”

“My dear Athos, I give up counting how many times I owe you my life,” d’Artagnan said.

“Then the reason you left us was to go back to her?” asked Aramis.

“Just so.”

“Then you have this letter from the cardinal?” d’Artagnan said.

“Right here,” said Athos. And he drew the precious paper from a pocket inside his tabard. D’Artagnan unfolded it without even trying to hide the tremor in his hands, and read:

*It is by my order, and for the good of the State that the bearer has done what has been done.*

*5 August 1628 RICHELIEU*

“In effect, it absolves the bearer from all penalty,” said Aramis.

“It must be torn up!” cried d’Artagnan who saw in it his death warrant.

“On the contrary,” said Athos, “it must be carefully preserved. I wouldn’t trade this paper for as much gold as it would take to cover it.”

“What do you think she’s going to do now?” asked the young man.

“She’s probably going to write to the cardinal, saying that a damned musketeer named Athos has ravished her of her safe-conduct,” Athos said carelessly. “In the same letter, she’ll probably advise him to rid himself of the said Athos, as well as his two friends, Porthos and Aramis. The cardinal will remember that these men have crossed his path before. Some fine morning he’ll arrest this d’Artagnan fellow, and so he won’t be lonely, he’ll send the rest of us to keep him company in the Bastille.”

“Humph,” said Porthos. “That’s a poor excuse for a joke, my friend.”

“I’m not joking,” replied Athos.

“You know,” Porthos said, “twisting this damned Milady’s neck for her would be less of a sin than twisting the necks of these poor Huguenot devils, who’ve committed no crime worse than singing the Psalms in French instead of Latin.”

“What says the abbot?” asked Athos placidly.

“I say that in this case, I agree with Porthos,” replied Aramis.

“As do I!” said d’Artagnan.

“Fortunately, she’s a long way from here,” Porthos said, “for I must admit that if she were nearby, it’d make me ... uneasy.”

“She makes me as uneasy in England as she does in France,” Athos said.

“She makes me uneasy wherever she is,” d’Artagnan said.

“So when you had her, Athos, why didn’t you drown, strangle, or hang her?” said Porthos. “It’s only the dead who never return.”

“Is that what you think, Porthos?” the musketeer replied, with a sombre smile that only d’Artagnan understood.

“I,” said d’Artagnan, “have an idea.”

“Let’s hear it!” said the musketeers.

“To arms!” cried Grimaud.

The young men sprang up, grabbing their muskets. This time a larger troop was advancing on them, consisting of twenty or twenty-five men – and these were no pioneers, they were soldiers of the garrison. “Shouldn’t we maybe return to camp?” said Porthos. “It doesn’t seem to me the sides are quite equal.”

“Impossible, for three reasons,” Athos replied. “First of all, we haven’t finished our breakfast. Second, we still have some important things to discuss; and third, there are still ten minutes left in our hour.”

“Then we’re going to need a plan of battle,” Aramis said.

“That couldn’t be simpler,” Athos replied. “As soon as the enemy are in musket-range, we fire on them. If they continue to advance, we keep firing, as long as we have loaded guns. If the remnants of the troop insist on mounting an assault, we’ll let the besiegers get down into the moat, and then we’ll push down onto their heads that leaning length of stone wall – there, where it still seems to be standing only due to a miracle.”

“Bravo!” cried Porthos. “Athos, you were born to be a general, and the cardinal who thinks he’s such a man of war, is nothing next to you.”

“Attention, Gentlemen, if you please,” said Athos. “Pick your man.”

“I have mine,” said d’Artagnan.

“As do I,” said Aramis.

“Me too,” said Porthos.

“Then, fire!” said Athos. The four muskets rang out as one and four men fell. Immediately the drum began to beat and the troop advanced at the charge. The gunshots continued, fired irregularly now but always with the same accuracy. However, the Rochelois continued to advance at a run, as if they knew how few their enemies were. At least two men fell for every three shots but the remaining soldiers refused to relent. When they arrived at the base of the bastion, their enemies still numbered at least a dozen. They were greeted by a final volley but it didn’t stop them; they jumped into the dry moat and began to climb the fallen stones toward the breach. “Now, my friends, the death-blow!” cried Athos. “To the wall! To the wall!” And the four friends, aided by Grimaud, pried with their musket-barrels at the base of the immense piece of wall. It leaned over as if bending before the wind, then fell with a horrible crash into the moat. They heard cries of surprise and pain, a cloud of dust rose into the sky, and then it was all over. “Do you suppose we crushed every single one of them?” asked Athos.

“*My faith!* It looks like it,” said d’Artagnan.

“No,” said Porthos. “See there – two or three of them survived, though not intact.”

In fact, three or four of the unfortunate troop, covered with dirt and blood, were fleeing for the trench that led back to the city. That was all that remained of their attackers. Athos looked at his watch.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “we’ve been here an hour and our wager’s now won but we mustn’t grab at our winnings. Besides, d’Artagnan hasn’t told us his idea.”

And the musketeer, with his habitual *sangfroid*, sat down beside the remains of the breakfast. “My idea?” said d’Artagnan.

“Yes, you said you had an idea,” Athos replied.

“Ah, yes, right!” said d’Artagnan. “I’ll go to England a second time, find Sir Buckingham, and warn him about this plot against his life.”

“D’Artagnan,” said Athos coolly, “you will not do that.”

“And why not? I did it once before.”

“Yes but at that time we were not yet at war; Sir Buckingham was still an ally, not an enemy. To take that trip now would be tantamount to treason.”

D’Artagnan saw the logic of this, and was silent. “But wait!” said Porthos. “I think I may have an idea!”

“Silence, all, for the idea of Sir Porthos!” said Aramis.

“I’ll ask Sir Tréville for a leave, on some pretext you’ll have to figure out – I’m not so good at pretexts. Anyway, Milady doesn’t know me, so I can approach her unsuspected. Then, when I catch my little beauty alone, I’ll strangle her.”

“You know,” said Athos, “there’s something to be said for Porthos’s idea.”

“What, kill a woman? Have you no shame?” said Aramis. “No, listen: I have a much better idea.”

“If you have an idea, Aramis, let’s have it,” said Athos who had a great respect for the young musketeer.

“We must warn the queen.”

“Ah! My faith, yes,” said Porthos.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” said d’Artagnan.

“Warn the queen?” said Athos. “And just how are we going to do that? Do we have any entrée at Court? And if one of us goes to Paris, won’t it be known throughout the camp? From here to Paris is a hundred and forty leagues – we couldn’t get past Angers without being thrown into prison.”

“As to getting a letter safely to Her Majesty, I will see to that,” said Aramis, reddening. “I know a clever person at Tours...”

Aramis stopped, seeing Athos smile. “Well, do you approve of this plan, Athos?” said d’Artagnan.

“I don’t reject it out of hand,” Athos said, “but I will observe to Aramis that we can’t desert the siege, and nobody but one of us would be a reliable messenger. If one of us leaves, within two hours all the cardinal’s agents, spies, and Capuchin monks would know the letter by heart, and you and your clever person would be arrested.”

“Not to mention that the queen would save Sir Buckingham and leave the rest of us to fry,” objected Porthos.

"What Porthos says makes sense to me, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan.

"One moment – what are they up to, there in the city?" said Athos.

"They're beating the general call to arms!"

The four friends listened: the sound of drums rolled out. "They're sending out a whole regiment, just for us," said Athos.

"You're not thinking of taking on a whole regiment," said Porthos. "Are you?"

"Why not?" said the musketeer. "I'm just in the mood for it. I'd take on a whole army, if we'd taken the precaution of bringing another dozen bottles of honey."

"The drums are definitely approaching," said d'Artagnan.

"Let them come," said Athos. "It's a quarter-hour's march from here to the city, so it's the same from the city to here that is more than enough time to complete our plan. If we leave here now, we'll never find another place as suitable. And you know, Gentlemen, I think the right idea has just come to me."

"Let's hear it!"

"Just permit me to give Grimaud a few indispensable orders." Athos called over his valet with a gesture. "Grimaud," he said, pointing to the bodies lying inside the bastion, "take these deceased gentlemen here and lean them up against the wall, with their hats on their heads and their guns in their hands."

"O Great Man!" cried d'Artagnan. "I get it!"

"You get what?" said Porthos.

"Do *you* get it, Grimaud?" asked Aramis.

Grimaud gestured his affirmative. "Then that's all we need," said Athos. "Now, as to my idea."

"But I, too, would like to get it," said Porthos.

"That's not at all necessary."

"Yes, Athos – give us your idea!" said d'Artagnan and Aramis.

"This woman, this creature, this demon of a Milady – didn't you say she has a brother-in-law, d'Artagnan?"

"Yes, I know him rather well. But I don't think he has a lot of affection for his sister-in-law."

"Nothing wrong with that," replied Athos. "In fact, if he detested her, it would be all the better."

"In that case, we should be fine."

"However," said Porthos, "I really would like to get what Grimaud is up to."

"Oh, hush, Porthos," said Aramis.

"What's the name of this brother-in-law?"

"Lord Winter."

"Where is he now?"

"He returned to London at the first rumour of war."

"Well, he's just the man for us," said Athos. "He's the one we must warn. We'll let him know that his sister-in-law is out to have someone assassinated and beg him not to lose sight of her. There is in London, one hopes, some establishment on the order of the Madelonnettes or the Daughters of Repentance. He must commit his sister-in-law to one of these, and then we can rest easy."

"Right," said d'Artagnan, "until she escapes."

"My faith, d'Artagnan!" said Athos. "You ask too much! I've given you all I have, and I must warn you that's the bottom of the barrel."

"Personally, I think it would be best to warn both the queen *and* Lord Winter," said Aramis.

"Yes but who's going to carry the letter to Tours, not to mention the letter to London?"

"I'll answer for Bazin," said Aramis.

"And I, for Planchet," said d'Artagnan.

"That's right! We can't desert the camp but our lackeys can certainly go," said Porthos.

"True. They can even go today, if we get the letters written," said Aramis. "We'll give them some money and send them off."

"We'll give them some money?" said Athos. "Do you *have* any money?"

The four friends looked at each other, a cloud darkening expressions that had just been so bright. "Look!" cried d'Artagnan. "See those black and red specks moving out there? That's no regiment, Athos – it's a whole army!"

"*My faith*," said Athos, "there they are. What cunning dogs, advancing without tambours or trumpets. Grimaud! Are you finished yet?"

Grimaud signed Yes, and pointed to the dozen bodies he'd set up, quite artistically: some held their weapons ready, while others appeared to be taking aim, or waiting, sword in hand. "Bravo!" said Athos. "I honour your imagination."

"Fine," said Porthos, "but I still don't get it."

"*Get out* first, *get it* later," said d'Artagnan.

"In a moment, Gentlemen! Give Grimaud a chance to bus the table."

"I must point out that those black and red specks are enlarging rapidly," Aramis said. "I'm of d'Artagnan's opinion: we have no time to lose if we're going to regain the camp."

"Then I withdraw my opposition to a tactical retreat," Athos said. "My faith, we wagered on an hour and have been here an hour and a half. No one can say anything against that! Let's be on our way, gentlemen." Grimaud, with the basket, took the lead, the four friends following about ten paces behind. "The devil!" cried Athos, turning around.

"Did you forget something?" asked Aramis.

"Our banner! *Morbleu!* We can't leave a flag in the hands of the enemy, even if that flag is only a napkin."

And Athos dashed back to the bastion, mounted the wall, and recovered the flag. The Rochelois, meanwhile, were now within musket-range, and they opened a withering fire on this man who appeared to be exposing himself just for the sport of it. But Athos seemed to have a charmed life. The balls whistled all around him but he remained untouched. He waved his standard, turned his back on the Rochelois, and saluted the camp. Shouts arose from both sides: cries of anger from one, cheers from the other. A second volley followed the first, and three balls, passing through the napkin, made it into a real battle flag. The whole camp clamoured, "Come down! Come down!"

Athos came down. His comrades, awaiting him anxiously, were overjoyed at his return. "Come on, Athos, come on!" said d'Artagnan. "Let's pick up the pace! Now that we've figured out everything except where to find some money, it would be stupid to get killed."

But Athos continued to march majestically, no matter what his companions said. Seeing that their protests were pointless, the others adopted Athos's measured pace. Grimaud and his basket were already far ahead, out of the danger zone. Suddenly a furious fusillade burst out behind them. "What's that?" demanded Porthos. "And just *who* are they firing at? I don't see anyone, and I heard no shots."

"They're shooting at the dead," replied Athos.

"But the dead can't shoot back."

"Quite so. But the Rochelois will think it's an ambush. They'll take it slowly, scout out the situation, and by the time they discover our little pleasantry we'll be well out of range. That's why there's no point in risking heart failure by hurrying."

"Oh! I get it!" said Porthos, amazed.

"Well done," said Athos with a shrug of his shoulders. On their side, the French, seeing the four friends return at a deliberate march, cheered their throats out. Eventually there was another fusillade from behind, and this time the balls whistled past their ears and scattered off nearby stones. The Rochelois had finally retaken the bastion. "What oafs those fellows are," said Athos. "How many did we shoot? A dozen?"

"Maybe fifteen."

"And how many did we crush under the wall?"

"Eight or ten."

"And in exchange for all that we didn't even get a scratch? But wait – what have you done to your hand, d'Artagnan? You're bleeding, it seems to me."

"It's nothing," said d'Artagnan.

"A spent bullet?"

"Not even that."

"Then what is it?"

As has been said before, Athos loved d'Artagnan like his own son, and his sombre and severe personality now gave way to the solicitude of a father. "It's just a little cut," d'Artagnan replied. "My fingers got caught between two stones and ring gouged my hand."

"That will teach you to wear diamonds into battle," Athos said disdainfully.

"But wait!" cried Porthos. "If we have a diamond, why the devil are we plaguing ourselves about how to find some money?"

"Say, now..." said Aramis.

"A good point, Porthos," said Athos. "This time you really do have an idea."

"Of course I do," said Porthos, puffed up with pleasure at receiving a compliment from Athos. "If we have a diamond, let's sell it."

"But," said d'Artagnan, "this diamond comes from the queen."

"All the more reason," replied Athos. "The queen rescuing her lover Sir Buckingham is only proper; the queen saving us, her loyal friends, is only moral. What do you say, Sir Abbot? I don't ask Porthos; he's given us his opinion already."

"Well, I think that as the ring wasn't a gift from a mistress," said Aramis, with a blush, "and therefore isn't a *gage d'amour*, d'Artagnan can sell it."

"My dear Aramis, you speak like theology incarnate. So your opinion is...?"

"Sell the diamond."

"All right, then," d'Artagnan said cheerfully, "we'll sell the diamond and say no more about it."

The rebel fusillade continued but the friends were now out of range, and the Rochelois were only firing from a sense of duty. "My faith, Porthos," Athos said, "It was high time for you to have your idea, for here we are at camp. Remember, Gentlemen, not a word about this business. Look, they've seen us, and are coming to meet us. It appears we shall be borne in in triumph."

In fact, the entire camp was abuzz with excitement. An audience of over two thousand had watched, as at a spectacle, this act of bravado on the part of the four friends, without anyone suspecting the real motivation for it. From every side came cries of "*Long live the Guards! Long live the Musketeers!*"

Sir Busigny was the first to shake Athos's hand and admit the wager was lost. The dragoon and the Swiss followed him, and all their comrades came behind. There were congratulations, backslapping, and embraces all around, with endless gibes at the expense of the Rochelois. Eventually, the commotion grew so great that his Eminence thought there must be some sort of riot, and sent La Houdinière, a captain of his guards, to see what was going on. The captain was told the tale in all its glory. "Well?" demanded the cardinal when La Houdinière returned. "Well, My Lord," the latter said, "it seems three musketeers and a guard laid a bet with Sir Busigny that they would breakfast in the Saint-Gervais bastion. They had their breakfast, held out for two hours against the enemy, and killed I don't know how many Rochelois."

"Did you learn the names of these three musketeers?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"What are they called?"

“Gentlemen Athos, Porthos, and Aramis.”  
“Always those three champions!” murmured the cardinal. “And the guard?”  
“A Sir d’Artagnan.”

“That young rogue again! Decidedly, I must make these four men mine.”  
That evening, the cardinal spoke to Sir Tréville about the morning’s exploit that was the talk of the whole camp. Tréville, who’d had the story of the adventure from the mouths of the heroes themselves, related it in all its detail to His Eminence, not forgetting the episode of the napkin. “Excellent, sir Tréville,” said the cardinal. “Send me that napkin if you please. I’ll have it embroidered with three gold *fleurs-des-lys* and present it to your company as a battle flag.”  
“My Lord, that would be an injustice to the guards,” said Sir Tréville. “Sir d’Artagnan isn’t one of mine, he belongs to Sir des Essarts.”  
“Well, then, take him,” said the cardinal. “It’s only fair that four brave soldiers who are so attached to one another should serve in the same company.”  
Later that same evening, Sir Tréville announced the good news to d’Artagnan and the three musketeers, inviting all four to breakfast with him in the morning. D’Artagnan was dazed with joy. Becoming a musketeer was his dearest dream. His three friends were just as gleeful. “My faith, Athos,” d’Artagnan said, “what a magnificent idea you had! As you predicted, we’re covered in glory, plus we were able to have a conversation of critical importance.”  
“Which we can now resume without being under a cloud of suspicion, for from now on, with God’s help, we’ll be taken for Cardinalists,” Athos said. D’Artagnan immediately went to pay his compliments to Sir Des Essarts and inform him of his promotion. Des Essarts, who valued d’Artagnan, made him offers of promotion in his own company, a promotion that wouldn’t require the expense of outfitting to join the musketeers. D’Artagnan declined but seeing an opportunity, asked the captain if he could get him a good price for his diamond, as he wanted to turn it into cash. The next afternoon, Sir Des Essarts’s valet came to d’Artagnan’s quarters, carrying a bag containing seven thousand *livres*. This was the price of the queen’s diamond.

048  
A Family Affair

“A family affair”: Athos had come up with the phrase. A *family affair* was not subject to investigation by the cardinal. A *family affair* concerned no one outside the family. One could uphold the privacy of a family affair against a world of intruders. Thus, Athos, had come up with the *why*: the matter was to be called a family affair. Aramis had come up with the *who*: they would employ the lackeys. And Porthos had come up with the *how*: they would sell the diamond. Only d’Artagnan had come up with nothing, though he was ordinarily the most inventive of the four. But in this case, just the name “Milady” was enough to paralyse him. But no, that’s not quite right: d’Artagnan had found a buyer for the diamond. The breakfast next morning at Sir Tréville’s was as merry as a carnival. D’Artagnan showed up already dressed in his new uniform – for he and Aramis were similar in size, and since Aramis had been paid so well by the publisher who’d purchased his poem he’d bought two of everything that enabled him to completely outfit his friend. D’Artagnan would have felt like he’d reached the apex of his ambitions if it weren’t for Milady, the dark cloud on all his horizons. After breakfast, they agreed to reunite that evening at Athos’s quarters, where they would finish the business begun in the bastion. D’Artagnan passed the day displaying his musketeer’s tabard in every corner of the camp. The four friends reconvened at the appointed hour in the evening. There were only three things left to decide: what to write to Milady’s brother-in-law; what to write to the clever person in Tours; and which lackeys should carry the letters. Each offered his own lackey. Athos praised the discretion of Grimaud, who never spoke unless his master unsealed his mouth; Porthos boasted that Mousqueton was strong enough to thrash four ordinary men; Aramis, in a pompous eulogy, extolled the shrewdness and suavity of Bazin; and d’Artagnan expressed his complete faith in the courage of Planchet, reminding them of the way he’d handled himself in that sticky affair at Calais. They disputed the virtues of discretion, strength, shrewdness, and courage for a far longer time than bears repeating here. “Unfortunately,” Athos said, “whoever we send should have all four of these qualities combined.”  
“But where could we find such a paragon among lackeys?”  
“Nowhere, as we know too well,” said Athos. “So take Grimaud.”  
“Take Bazin.”  
“Take Mousqueton!”  
“Take Planchet; Planchet is both brave and shrewd, so he has at least two qualities of the four.”  
“Gentlemen,” said Aramis, “the principal here is not to determine which of our four lackeys is most discreet, strong, shrewd, or brave; it’s to identify which one loves money the most.”  
“What Aramis says makes sense,” said Athos. “We must consider men’s faults before their virtues. Sir Abbot, you are a moralist *par excellence*.”  
“I say this,” Aramis continued, “because for this mission to succeed, we must not only be well served but that service *must not fail*. For if the mission is lost, heads will be lost – and not the lackeys’...”  
“Not so loud, Aramis,” said Athos.  
“Quite,” Aramis said. “I repeat: it’s not the lackeys who will lose their heads but their masters! Are our servants so devoted that they’ll risk their lives for us?” He shook his head. “No.”  
“My faith – I’d just about answer for Planchet on that score,” said d’Artagnan.  
“Then, *my dear friend*, bolster this natural devotion with a cash bonus large enough to set him up comfortably, and instead of answering for him once,” said Aramis, “answer for him twice.”  
“What? Good God, you’ll only be deluded twice,” said Athos, who was an optimist about matters of chance but a pessimist about mankind. “A servant will promise you the world for a handful of money but once he’s on the road he’ll be paralysed by fear. If taken, he’ll be tortured, and if tortured, he’ll talk. What the devil! You’re speaking like children! To get to England” – Athos lowered his voice – “you must cross half of France, past all the cardinal’s agents and spies. Then you need an embarkation pass; and then you must speak English to find your way to London. The thing is damnably difficult.”  
“But not at all!” said d’Artagnan, who badly wanted the mission accomplished. “On the contrary, I think it’s quite simple. Now, it goes without saying that if we write to Lord Winter describing the threatening schemes of the fiendish cardinal...”  
“Not so loud!” said Athos.  
“...And reveal official state secrets,” d’Artagnan continued, “then of course we’d all be broken on the wheel. But for God’s sake, don’t forget, Athos that as you yourself said, we’re writing solely about a family affair. We just need to request that as soon as Milady reaches London, she should be locked away someplace where she can’t hurt us. I’ll write him a letter in almost exactly those terms.”  
“Let’s hear it, then,” said Aramis, with a sceptical expression. “All right. Ahem: *‘Sir and dear friend ...’*”  
“Oh, that’s good: ‘dear friend,’ to an Englishman,” interrupted Athos. “A fine start, d’Artagnan – bravo! Except that with phrases like that, you won’t be broken on the wheel, you’ll be drawn and quartered.”  
“All right, then, I’ll just say, *‘Sir’* and keep it short.”  
“Better would be ‘Milord,’” replied Athos, a stickler for propriety.  
“Milord: Do you recall that little goat pen of the Luxembourg?”  
“Oh, excellent – now the Luxembourg is a goat pen! Quite ingenious. Except it could be taken for an insult to the queen mother,” said Athos.  
“Then we’ll just say, ‘Milord: Do you recall a certain little enclosure where your life was spared?’”  
“My dear d’Artagnan,” said Athos, “you are an appalling correspondent. ‘Where your life was spared’ – shame on you! To remind a gallant man of that kind of obligation simply isn’t done. To refer to such a favour is an insult.”  
“*For God’s sake!* This is intolerable,” said d’Artagnan. “If one has to be subjected to this sort of criticism to be a writer, I give up.”  
“As well you should, *my dear*,” said Athos. “Stick to your musket and sword and you’ll do admirably. But pass the plume to sir Abbot – that’s his province.”  
“That’s right! Pass the plume to Aramis,” said Porthos. “He writes theses in Latin, he does.”  
“Well, so be it!” said d’Artagnan. “You draw up this document, Aramis. But, by our Holy Father the Pope, choose your words carefully, because this time I’m editing *you*.”  
“I couldn’t ask for better,” said Aramis, with the sublime self-confidence of the poet. “Let’s just make sure I’ve got the gist: I’ve been told that this sister-in-law is an iniquitous woman, and heard the proof of it myself when we eavesdropped on her conversation with the cardinal.”  
“Not so loud, *damn it!*” said Athos.  
“But I must admit,” continued Aramis, “that the details escape me.”  
“Me too,” said Porthos.  
D’Artagnan and Athos looked at each other in silence for some time. Finally Athos, seeing no option, blanched and nodded to d’Artagnan, who took this to mean that he was free to speak. “Well, here is the essence of what you must say,” said d’Artagnan. “Milord: your sister-in-law is a liar, an impostor, and worse. She wanted to have you killed so she could inherit your estate. However, she was never legally married to your brother because she was already married in France and having been...”  
D’Artagnan stopped, as if at a loss for the right word, and looked at Athos. “Repudiated by her husband,” Athos said.  
D’Artagnan nodded. “Repudiated, because he discovered she’d been branded...”  
“Bah!” Porthos grunted. “This is ridiculous! You say she wanted to have her own brother-in-law killed?”  
“Yes.”  
“She was previously married?” asked Aramis.  
“Yes.”  
“And her husband discovered she had the *fleur-de-lys* branded on her shoulder?” said Porthos.  
“Yes.”  
All three yeses had been spoken by Athos, his voice growing progressively darker.  
“And who has actually seen this *fleur-de-lys*?” asked Aramis.  
“D’Artagnan and I – or rather, to be strictly chronological, I and d’Artagnan,” said Athos.  
“And this appalling creature’s husband is still alive?” said Aramis.  
“He’s still alive.”  
“You’re sure of this?”  
“I am sure – because I am he.”  
There was an instant of frozen quiet as the friends dealt with this statement, each according to his nature. Athos was the first to break the silence. “This time,” he said, “d’Artagnan has given us an excellent outline, and it should be written out at once.”  
“*Devil!* You’re right, Athos,” said Aramis, “but composing it will be touchy. Sir the Chancellor himself would have trouble drawing up such an epistle, though he writes a *procès-verbal* with ease. But no matter! Silence, if you please, and I’ll give it a try.” Aramis took up the pen, reflected for a minute, then wrote eight or ten lines in a tiny, almost feminine handwriting. Then, in a voice soft and slow, as if each word had been painstakingly considered, he read:  
*Milord,*  
*The person inscribing these lines had the honour to cross swords with you in a little yard off the Rue d’Enfer. As you have obliged him several times since then by professing to be his friend, this person considers it his duty to repay that friendship with a warning. Twice you have nearly fallen victim to a close relative, a woman you believe to be your heir, because you are ignorant of the fact that before she contracted a marriage in England, she was already married in France. At the third attempt on your life that is imminent, you may succumb. Be warned that your relative departed La Rochelle for England during the night. Watch for her arrival, for she has great and terrible schemes. If you absolutely must know of what she is capable, her past can be read on the flesh of her left shoulder.*  
“Well, that’s really quite good,” said Athos. “My dear Aramis, you have a plume as sharp as a secretary of state. Lord Winter will now be on his guard – assuming this letter reaches him. Even if it falls into His Eminence’s hands, we won’t be compromised. But to make sure the lackey who carries it goes all the way to London instead of just stopping in Châtellerault, let’s give him no more than half his pay with the letter, the second half to be paid in exchange for a response. D’Artagnan, do you have the diamond?”  
“What I have is even better: the diamond’s value in cash.”  
And d’Artagnan dropped a leather sack on the table. At the heavy sound of gold, Aramis raised his eyebrows and Porthos started. Only Athos remained impassive. “How much’s in this little sack?” he asked.  
“Seven thousand *livres* in gold.”

"Seven thousand *livres*!" cried Porthos. "That pathetic little diamond was worth seven thousand *livres*?"

"So it appears," said Athos, "since here they are. I don't imagine d'Artagnan has come up with this sum on his own."

"Gentlemen, in our concern for ourselves, we've forgotten about the queen," said d'Artagnan. "We should pay some attention to the health of her beloved Buckingham. That's the least of what we owe her."

"That's only just," said Athos, "and once again we must turn to Aramis."

"Very well," said Aramis, blushing at the compliment. "What shall we say?"

"Nothing could be simpler," replied Athos. "Compose a second letter to that clever person at Tours." Aramis picked up the plume, thought some more, then wrote the following lines that he immediately submitted to his friends for approval:

*My Dearest Cousin –*

"Oh, so this clever person is your relative!" said Athos.

"*First cousin*," said Aramis.

"All right, cousin it is!" Aramis continued:

*My Dearest Cousin,*

*His Eminence the Cardinal, whom God preserve for the good fortune of France and the confusion of the enemies of the realm, is on the verge of defeating these heretical rebels of La Rochelle. The English relief fleet will probably never even get within sight of the place. I'll go so far as to say that I'm certain that Sir Buckingham will be prevented from departing England by some great event. His Eminence is the most illustrious minister of times past, times present, and in all probability for all time to come. He would put out the sun, if the sun inconvenienced him. Pass on this good news to your sister, my dear cousin. I had a dream that this wicked Englishman was dead. I can't remember whether he fell to steel or to poison but I am sure of this: I dreamed he was dead, and you know my dreams are never wrong. Rest assured, therefore, that you will soon see me return.*

"Perfection!" said Athos. "You are the king of poets, my dear Aramis: you write with the power of the Apocalypse and the truth of the Gospel. Nothing remains but to give this letter an address."

"Easily done," said Aramis. He folded the letter artistically, then picked up the plume and wrote:

*To Miss Marie Michon*  
*Linen maid*  
*Tours*

The three friends looked at each other and laughed. Once again, Aramis had outwitted their curiosity. "Now, Gentlemen," Aramis said, "you realise that no one but Bazin can take this letter to Tours; my cousin knows only Bazin and will trust only him, so no one else can handle this. Besides, Bazin is ambitious and intelligent – he has read history, Gentlemen, and knows that Sextus Quintus became pope after having begun as a cowherd. *Well*, since he plans to enter the Church when I do, he dares to hope that one day he, too, might become pope – or at least a cardinal. You understand that a man of such ambitions will never allow himself to be taken, and if he is, will suffer martyrdom rather than talk."

"All right, I accept Bazin, with all my heart," said d'Artagnan, "but then grant me Planchet. One day Milady had him thrashed and thrown out the door – and he has an excellent memory. I swear that, so long as there's still a chance for revenge, he'd rather risk death than give it up. If the business in Tours is your business, Aramis, then the business in London is mine. Let's settle on choosing Planchet, especially since he's already been to London with me and learned how to say 'London, sir, if you please,' and 'my master, Lord d'Artagnan,' in proper English. So you can rest easy about him finding his way and returning."

"In that case," said Athos, "Planchet should have seven hundred *livres* for going, and another seven hundred for returning, and Bazin three hundred for going, and three hundred more on his return. That reduces our holdings to five thousand *livres*; we can each have a thousand *livres* to employ as we see fit, and we'll leave the final thousand in the care of sir Abbot, for general needs or extraordinary expenses. How's that?"

"My dear Athos," said Aramis, "You speak like Nestor, who was, as everyone knows, the wisest of the Greeks."

"Then it's agreed," said Athos. "Planchet and Bazin will be the ones to go. All things considered, I'm not sorry to have Grimaud stay; he's used to my ways, and I to his. He's already shaken up by that business yesterday at the bastion; a voyage would be the end of him."

Planchet was sent for and given his instructions. He was informed of the honour by d'Artagnan, who introduced it to him gradually, touching first on the glory of it, then on the money, and finally the danger. "I'll carry the letter in the lining of my coat," said Planchet, "and if I'm taken, I'll swallow it."

"But then you won't be able to complete the mission," d'Artagnan said.

"Give me a copy of it this evening and I'll know it by heart by tomorrow."

D'Artagnan gave his friends a triumphant look as if to say: *Well, didn't I promise you?* "All right," he continued, addressing Planchet, "you've eight days to reach Lord Winter and eight more for the return, sixteen days in all. If you're not here by eight o'clock on the morning of the sixteenth day, no bonus money, even if you're only five minutes late."

"In that case, Sir," said Planchet, "I'll need a watch."

"Take this one," said Athos, handing over his own, with his typical casual generosity. "You're a brave lad. Keep in mind that if you talk, if you get drunk, if you delay, it's your master's neck – your master, who has such great faith in your loyalty, and who vouches for you. Keep in mind, also, that if by your failure any evil comes to Sir d'Artagnan, I'll find you, wherever you are, and slice you open from breastbone to belly."

"Oh, sir!" said Planchet, hurt by such suspicion – and even more, terrified by the musketeer's calm sincerity.

"And I'll skin you alive!" said Porthos, rolling his big eyes.

"Ah! Sir!"

"And I," said Aramis, in his soft and melodious voice, "will grill you slowly over a fire like a savage."

"Sir! Please!" And Planchet began to sob – moved either from terror at all these threats and menaces, or by tenderness at seeing four friends so devoted to one another.

D'Artagnan lifted him up and embraced him. "Look, Planchet," he said, "these gentlemen only talk this way out of affection for me. They know your true worth, believe me."

"Oh, Sir!" said Planchet. "I *will* succeed, or be cut into quarters. And even if they cut me into quarters, I swear not a single piece of me will talk!"

It was decided that Planchet should depart at eight the next morning so that during the night, as he'd said, he could learn the letter by heart. He now had to return by eight in the evening of the sixteenth day, so he gained a dozen hours by this arrangement. In the morning, as Planchet was mounting his horse, d'Artagnan, who in the bottom of his heart had a weakness for the duke, took Planchet aside. "Listen," he said to him, "when you've delivered the letter to Lord Winter and he's read it, say this to him also: 'Watch over His Grace Lord Buckingham, for they mean to assassinate him.' But see here, Planchet: this is so serious, so important, that I haven't even told my friends that I'm confiding this secret to you – and I wouldn't dare commit it to writing, not even for a captain's commission."

"Rest easy, Sir," said Planchet. "You'll see that you can count on me."

Then, mounted on an excellent horse that he was to ride for twenty leagues before switching to post-horses, Planchet set off at a gallop, a little anxious about the triple promise made to him by the musketeers but otherwise with a light heart and high hopes. Bazin, given eight days to perform his commission, left the following day for Tours. During the time these two were gone the four friends had, as might be imagined, an eye on the watch, a nose to the wind, and an ear to the ground. Their days were passed in trying to catch every whisper of news, in analysing the demeanour and behaviour of the cardinal, and in noting the arrival of every courier. More than once, when summoned unexpectedly to receive new orders, they found they couldn't suppress a tremor of fear. They were on constant watch for threats to their lives; Milady was a spectre who, once she appeared to haunt someone, never again allowed him to sleep easily. On the morning of the eighth day Bazin, carefree as ever and smiling as usual, strolled into the Heretic as the four friends were at breakfast. According to plan he recited, "Sir Aramis, here's the reply from your cousin."

The four friends exchanged looks of joy and relief. Half of the task was done – though admittedly it was the shortest and easiest part. Blushing in spite of himself, Aramis unfolded the letter that was written in a sprawling and awkward hand. "Good God!" he cried, laughing. "She's hopeless! My poor Michon will never make a poet like sir Voiture."

"What you mean, it's poor Michon?" asked the Swiss who was chatting with the four friends when the letter arrived.

"Nothing, praise God – less than nothing," said Aramis. "She's a charming little linen maid whom I love dearly, and who I'd asked for a few lines as a keepsake."

"*God*," said the Swiss, "if the lady is as free with her favours as she is large in her handwriting, you're a lucky man, comrade!"

Aramis read the letter, said, "Take a look at what she's written, Athos," and passed it over to his friend. Athos cast a quick glance over the contents. Then, to alleviate all suspicion, he read it aloud:

*My Dear Cousin,*

*My sister and I are very good at interpreting dreams and regard them as fearful portents – but of yours we can hope to say it is nothing but an evil fancy. Goodbye! Take care and act in such a way that from time to time we may hear of you.*

*Marie MICHON*

"And what dream might that be?" inquired the dragoon, who had approached during the reading.

"Yes, what dream?" said the Swiss.

"Eh? *For the love of God*," said Aramis, "nothing much, just a little dream I'd related to her."

"Yes, everyone tells their dreams when they have some. I don't dream, me," said the Swiss.

"You are lucky," said Athos, rising. "I wish I could say the same."

"Never!" repeated the Swiss, delighted that a man like Athos could envy him in anything. "Never do I dream! Not once!"

D'Artagnan, seeing Athos rise, did the same, took his arm, and went out with him. Porthos and Aramis stayed behind to suffer the crude humour and worse jokes of the dragoon and the Swiss. As for Bazin, he went and stretched himself out on a bed of straw. And then, having more imagination than the Swiss, he dreamed: he dreamed that he knelt before Sir Aramis, now Pope Aramis I, who placed on his head a red cardinal's hat. But Bazin's happy return alleviated only a portion of the four friends' anxieties. Days spent waiting are long ones: d'Artagnan, in particular, would have wagered that every day now lasted forty-eight hours. He forgot about the inevitable delays of sea-travel, and exaggerated Milady's infernal powers. The woman seemed like a demon to him, and he imagined she must have familiars as supernatural as herself. At every unexpected noise he thought he was about to be arrested, or that Planchet had been dragged back to accuse him and his friends. Worse, his confidence in the worthy Picard, once so great, now diminished day by day. His anxiety began to infect Porthos and Aramis. Only Athos remained impassive as if no danger hung over him, and his everyday life went on as usual. By the sixteenth day, d'Artagnan and his two friends were visibly agitated. They couldn't sit still and wandered aimlessly about the camp, always returning to the road on which Planchet would return. "Really, now," Athos said to them, "how can you let a mere woman frighten you so? You're not men, you're children! What's the worst that can happen? We get sent to prison. If so, we'll get out of it; after all, Madam Bonacieux got out. And suppose they do cut off our heads? Every single day, in the trenches, we cheerfully expose ourselves to worse than that – for a bullet might break your leg, and I'm convinced it would be worse to have a surgeon take off your leg than to have an executioner take off your head. Calm down; in two hours, maybe four, maybe six at the most, Planchet will be here. He promised he would, and I have faith in Planchet's promises. He's a brave lad, Planchet."

"But what if he doesn't come?" said d'Artagnan.

"Well, if he doesn't come, it's because he's been delayed, that's all. He may have fallen from his horse; he may have gone over the side of a bridge; he may have ridden so fast that the wind gave him a rheum in the chest. There are always accidents, Gentlemen! Life is a cat's-cradle of little miseries that the philosopher untangles with a smile. Be philosophers, like me, Gentlemen – pull up a chair, and let's drink. Nothing makes the future look rosier than viewing it through a glass of chamberlin."

"That's all very well for you," replied d'Artagnan, "but I'm afraid, at every sip, that what I drink comes from Milady's cellar."

"You are very difficult," said Athos. "And about such a beautiful woman too!"

"A woman of the finest brand!" said Porthos, laughing loudly at his joke.

But it made Athos start. He ran his hand across his brow to wipe away a sudden cold sweat, and with a nervous shiver he couldn't quite suppress, he rose and took his leave. The day passed slowly, and though evening was long in coming, it finally arrived. The taverns filled with customers, and Athos, pockets full of his share of the diamond, installed himself in the Heretic. Sir Busigny – who, by the way, had given them a magnificent dinner – had turned out to be a gaming partner worthy of Athos. They were playing together, as usual, when seven o'clock sounded, and they could hear the tramp of the patrols passing to double the posts at the perimeter. Then, at half past seven, the drums beat the retreat. "We are lost," d'Artagnan said in Athos's ear.

"You mean to say we have lost," said Athos placidly, drawing four *pistoles* from his pocket and throwing them on the table. "Come, Gentlemen," he continued, "there sounds the retreat. Let's go to bed."



And Athos left the Heretic, followed by d’Artagnan. Aramis came behind, arm in arm with Porthos. Aramis muttered verses distractedly, while Porthos, in despair, plucked bristles from his moustache. But all at once, out of the darkness appeared a shadowy form, the shape of which was familiar to d’Artagnan, and a voice he recognised said to him, “I’ve brought your cloak, Sir, as the air is chilly this evening.”

“Planchet!” cried d’Artagnan, overcome with joy.

“Planchet!” repeated Porthos and Aramis.

“Well, of course it’s Planchet,” said Athos. “What’s so astounding about that? He promised to be back by eight o’clock, and eight is just striking now. Bravo, Planchet! You’re a man of your word, and if you ever leave your master, there will always be a place for you in my service.”

“Oh, no, Sir!” said Planchet. “I would never leave Sir d’Artagnan.”

Meanwhile, d’Artagnan felt Planchet slipping a note into his hand. D’Artagnan had a strong urge to give Planchet an embrace like the one he’d given him on his departure but he restrained himself, afraid that showing affection to a lackey in the middle of the street might seem strange to passers-by. “There’s a note,” he told his friends.

“Good,” said Athos. “Let’s return to our quarters and read it.” The note burned in d’Artagnan’s hand. He wanted to hurry, to step up their pace but Athos passed his arm through d’Artagnan’s, and the young man had no choice but to walk in time with his friend. Eventually they arrived at their tent, lit a lamp, and while Planchet stood guard at the door so they couldn’t be surprised, d’Artagnan, with trembling hands, broke the seal and opened the anxiously awaited letter. It contained only half a line of English in handwriting unmistakably British with a brevity that was positively Spartan:

*Thank you. Don’t worry.*

“What does it say?” said d’Artagnan.

“Thank you. Don’t worry,” Athos translated.

He took the letter from d’Artagnan’s hand, approached the lamp, set fire to the paper, and didn’t release it until it was reduced to ashes. Then, calling Planchet, Athos said, “Now, my lad, you can claim your seven hundred *livres*, though you didn’t risk much bearing a note like that one.”

“You can’t blame me for wanting it kept short,” said Planchet.

“Well, tell us about it!” said d’Artagnan.

*“Dame! It’s a long story, Sir.”*

“You’re right, Planchet,” said Athos. “Besides, they’ve beaten the retreat, and someone will notice if we keep a lamp burning unusually long.”

“So be it,” said d’Artagnan. “To bed! Sleep well, Planchet.”

“My faith, Sir! If I do, it’ll be the first time in sixteen days!”

“The same for me!” said d’Artagnan.

“And me, as well,” said Aramis.

“Me too!” said Porthos.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” said Athos, “the same goes for me!”

## 049 The Hand of Fate

Meanwhile Milady, wild with fury, was roaring on the deck of the ship like a captured lioness. She was tempted to plunge into the sea to regain the shore, for she couldn’t bear the idea that she’d been insulted by d’Artagnan and threatened by Athos, and then compelled to leave France before she could take her revenge. This thought soon grew so intolerable that she implored the captain to put her ashore, despite the risk of terrible consequences for herself. But the captain, intent on escaping from that dangerous zone where he risked being caught between French and English cruisers, like the fabled bat caught between the rats and the birds, was in great haste to reach England. He obstinately refused to submit to what he took for a feminine caprice but he did promise his passenger, whom the cardinal wanted treated with special care, that he would try to put in to one of the Breton ports, either Lorient or Brest, weather (and the French navy) permitting. But the weather didn’t permit: the winds were contrary, the sea rough, and the ship had to beat to windward to avoid being cast on the lee shore. Nine days after leaving the Charente, Milady, pale with rage and frustration, saw they had made it no farther than the blue coast of Finisterre. She calculated that to cross this corner of France and return to the cardinal would take her at least three days. Add a day for landing, plus the nine days at sea, and she would have lost thirteen days – thirteen days during which any number of important events might have taken place in London. She thought it likely that the cardinal would be furious at her return, and consequently would be more disposed to listen to complaints against her than to her accusations against others. So she let Lorient and Brest pass without insisting on being put ashore – and the captain, for his part, was careful not to remind her of her earlier demand. Milady’s ship stayed on course, and the ambassador of His Eminence arrived triumphantly at Portsmouth on the very day that Planchet took ship from that same port to return to France. The entire town was a whirlwind of activity. Four great vessels, all brand new, had been christened and launched into the harbour. Buckingham could be seen standing on the jetty, encrusted with gold brocade, glittering as usual with diamonds and precious stones, his hat topped with a white plume that drooped nearly to his shoulder, surrounded by a staff decked out nearly as brilliantly as he was. It was one of those rare and beautiful days when England remembers there is a sun. The day-star, pale but still splendid, was slipping toward the horizon, gilding the sky and sea with bands of fire, and outlining the town’s towers and old houses with a final gleam of gold, reflected from the windows like a shower of sparks. Milady, inhaling the ocean air that is so much more refreshing when approaching the land, contemplated the vast array of preparations for war that it was her task to destroy, all the mighty power of an army that she had to face alone – she, a woman, with nothing but a few sacks of gold at her disposal. She compared herself to Judith, that terrible woman of the Jews, when she penetrated the camp of the Assyrians and saw the enormous mass of chariots, horses, men, and arms that a single stroke of her hand was to dissipate like a cloud of smoke. Their vessel entered the roads but as they hove in to the shallows where they could drop anchor, a cutter, and small but formidably armed, approached the merchant ship. This cutter was apparently the coast guard; it put out a longboat that pulled directly toward the brig’s ladder. This boat contained an officer, a mate, and eight rowers. Only the officer came aboard, where he was received with all the respect due his uniform. The officer spoke a few moments with the captain, and handed him several documents to read. Then, at the order of the merchant-captain, everyone aboard was called on deck, both sailors and passengers. This summons completed, the officer loudly inquired the brig’s point of departure, its route, and ports of call, and to all these questions the captain responded with neither hesitation nor difficulty. The officer then passed in review before every person on the ship, one after another, until he came to Milady – and stopped. He considered her with great care, though without saying a word. He returned to the captain, spoke a few more words to him, and then, as if he was now in command of the ship, ordered a manoeuvre that the crew executed immediately. The brig resumed its course, escorted now by the small cutter that sailed beside it, menacing its hull with the mouths of its six cannon. The longboat followed in the wake of the ship, dwarfed by its enormous mass. While the officer was inspecting Milady, Milady, as may be imagined, was inspecting him. But whatever skill this woman with the eyes of flame had at reading the hearts of those whose secrets she wished to divine, this time she found a face so impassive that her scrutiny told her nothing. The officer who had stopped and silently studied her with such care was twenty-five or twenty-six years old, with a pale complexion and clear, deep-set blue eyes. His mouth, regular and well defined, maintained its immobility with the rigor of strict propriety. His prominent chin denoted the force of will that, in the more vulgar Briton, manifests as mere stubbornness. His brow was broad and slightly receding – typical of poets, soldiers, and fanatics. His hair, thin and trimmed short, was, like the beard that lined his jaw, a striking, deep chestnut colour. Night had fallen by the time they entered the port. The darkness was deepened by fog that formed glowing circles around the ship’s lamps and the jetty’s lanterns, like the ring that appears around the moon when the weather threatens rain. The air they breathed was heavy, humid, and chill. Milady, that woman of iron will, shivered in spite of herself. The officer demanded that Milady’s things be identified, and then had her baggage handed down into the longboat. This operation completed, he invited her to descend by offering her his hand. Milady looked at this man, and hesitated. “Who are you, Sir,” she asked, “who have the kindness to concern yourself so particularly with me?”

“As you can see by my uniform, Madam, I’m an officer in the English Navy,” the young man replied.

“But is it customary for officers in the English Navy to tender such assistance to ladies when they disembark in British ports, and to be so gallant as to personally conduct them ashore?”

“Yes, Milady, it is customary, from prudence rather than gallantry, to conduct foreigners in times of war to designated hotels, where they stay under governmental surveillance until their identities and purposes have been fully ascertained.”

These words were pronounced with perfect civility and complete calm. Nonetheless, Milady was unconvinced. “But I’m no foreigner, Sir,” she said, with an accent as pure as any ever heard between Portsmouth and Manchester. “My name is Lady Clarice, and this precaution...”

“This precaution is general, Milady, and it’s useless to try to evade it.”

“Then, Sir, I will follow you.”

And accepting the officer’s hand, she began to descend the ladder, at the bottom of which the longboat waited. The officer followed her down. A large cloak was spread in the stern of the boat. The officer asked her to sit on the cloak and placed himself beside her. “Shove off,” he ordered the sailors.

The eight oars plunged into the sea with a single sound, and with one stroke the longboat seemed to fly across the surface of the water. Five minutes later they reached the land. The officer sprang onto the wharf and again offered his hand to Milady. Beyond him, a carriage was waiting. “Is that carriage for us?” Milady asked.

“Yes, Madam,” replied the officer.

“The hotel is far, then?”

“At the other end of town.”

“I see,” said Milady and climbed resolutely into the carriage. The officer saw that her baggage was fastened carefully onto the rear platform, then took his place beside Milady and shut the door. Immediately, with no order being given or any destination named, the driver departed at a gallop, plunging right into the streets of the town. This strange reception gave Milady plenty to think about. And as the young officer didn’t appear disposed to conversation, she leaned back in her corner of the carriage and considered, one after another, all the possibilities that came to mind. However, after a quarter of an hour, surprised at the length of the trip, she moved to the window to see where she was being taken. Outside no more houses could be seen, only trees dashing by in the darkness one after another, like great black phantoms. Milady shivered. “Why, Sir, have we left the town?” she said. The young officer remained silent. “I must advise you, sir, that I will go no farther unless you tell me where you’re taking me!” This threat evoked no response. “This is too much!” cried Milady. “Help! *Help!*”

No voice replied to hers. The carriage rolled rapidly onward. The officer was as still as a statue. Milady glared at the officer with one of those imperious looks of hers that rarely failed to be obeyed. Her eyes flashed with anger in the dark. The young man remained impassive. Milady tried to force open the door and throw herself out. “Take care, Madam,” the young man said coolly. “You’ll kill yourself if you jump.”

Milady sat back down, seething. The officer leaned forward to look at her as if surprised to see that face, beautiful only moments before, so distorted now by rage as to be almost hideous. The cunning creature realised she was jeopardizing herself by exposing her inner soul. She regained control of herself and said, in a piteous voice, “In the name of heaven, sir! Tell me if it’s you, or your government, or some enemy who’s responsible for this violence being done to me?”

“There will be no violence, Madam. What’s happening to you is the result of a simple precaution we’re forced to take with all who disembark in England.”

“Then you don’t know who I am, sir?”

“This is the first time I’ve had the honour of seeing you.”

“And on your honour, you’ve no reason to hate me?”

“None – on my honour.”

The young man’s voice was so calm, cool, and even mild that Milady was reassured. Eventually, after travelling for nearly an hour, the carriage paused before an iron gate, beyond which was an avenue leading to a castle, massive, grim, and isolated. As the wheels rolled onto the fine gravel of the lane, Milady heard a vast roaring that she recognised as the sound of the sea crashing against a rocky coast. Entering the castle, the carriage passed under two vaulted gates, then finally stopped in a dark, angular courtyard. Almost immediately the door of the carriage opened. The young man sprang lightly to the ground and offered his hand to Milady. She accepted it, and succeeded in maintaining her calm as she descended. “I see I’m a prisoner,” said Milady, looking around her, then turning her eyes back to the young officer with a most gracious smile. “But not for long, I’m sure,” she added. “My conscience – and your courtesy, Sir – are my guarantees of that.”

However flattering this compliment, the officer made no response, only drawing from his belt a small silver whistle, such as boatswains use in the navy. He whistled three times, each whistle a different pitch; several men appeared, who unharnessed the steaming horses and rolled the carriage into a coach house. Then the officer, with the same calm courtesy as before, invited his prisoner to enter the keep. She took his arm and entered with him through a low arched doorway, maintaining her smile. Within was a long vault, lit only at the far end that led to a stone staircase that spiralled up around a pillar of rock. It ended before a massive door that, after the young officer turned a key in its lock, pivoted ponderously open on its iron hinges, revealing the chamber destined for Milady. With a single glance, the prisoner took in every detail of the apartment. It was a chamber whose furniture, though severe, might be appropriate for either a prison or a guest chamber. However, the bars on the

windows, and the exterior bolts on the door, decided the question in favour of the prison. Suddenly the force of will that animated this creature, though drawn from a well of deep strength, abandoned her. She sank onto an armchair, arms crossed, head bowed, as if expecting any instant to see the entrance of a judge sent to interrogate her. But no one entered except two or three marines, who brought in her baggage and belongings, set them down in a corner, and retired without a word. The officer presided over these details with the same unflinching calm Milady had seen from the beginning, never saying a word, commanding obedience with a gesture of his hand or a pipe of the whistle. One might almost say that between this man and his subordinates all spoken language was forgotten or useless. Finally Milady could stand it no longer and broke the silence herself. "In the name of heaven, Sir!" she cried. "What does all this mean? Let me know where I stand! I have enough courage to face any danger I can foresee, any trouble I can understand. Where am I, and why am I here? If I'm free, why the bars and the locks? If I'm a prisoner, what crime did I commit?" "You are in the lodging assigned to you, Madam. I received an order to take charge of you at sea and conduct you to this castle. I've followed this order, I believe, with the rigorous propriety of a soldier, and also with the courtesy of a gentleman. That ends, for the moment at least, my duty toward you. What comes after concerns someone else?" "And who is this someone else?" Milady demanded. "Can't you tell me his name?" At that moment the clang of spurs sounded on the stairs. Voices could be heard echoing down the corridor. Then the sound of a man's footsteps approached the door. "That someone is here, Madam," said the officer, stepping aside from the doorway and drawing himself up in an attitude of respect and submission. At that, the door opened and the silhouette of a man appeared. It was hatless, wore a sword at its side, and its fingers toyed with a handkerchief. Milady thought she recognised that figure in the shadows. She leaned forward with one arm on the chair, peering intently to be certain. The stranger slowly advanced, and as he entered into the circle of light projected by the lamp, Milady involuntarily drew back. There could no longer be any doubt. "What! My brother!" she cried, stupefied. "Is it you?" "Yes, fair lady!" replied Lord Winter, making a bow, half courteous, half ironic. "In person." "But, then – this castle?" "Is mine." "This chamber?" "Is ... yours." "Then I'm your prisoner?" "Essentially." "But this is a frightful abuse of power!" "No oratory, if you please. Let's sit down and have a quiet little chat, like a proper brother and sister." Then, turning toward the door where the young officer was awaiting his final orders, he said, "That'll be all, thank you. You may leave us, Mister Felton."

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A Conversation between Brother & Sister

While Lord Winter shut the door, closed a shutter, and drew a stool up near his sister-in-law's armchair, Milady considered the shape of her destiny. Pensive, she traced the cords of the web that had caught her, whose shape she hadn't been able to see so long as she was ignorant of whose hands she'd fallen into. She knew her brother-in-law as a proper gentleman, an avid hunter, an intrepid gamesman, and a bold hand with the ladies but not especially adroit at matters of intrigue. *How had he learned of her arrival? Why had he arranged her arrest? Why was he detaining her?* Athos had let slip a few words that had revealed that her conversation with the cardinal had been overheard by hostile ears but she didn't think he was capable of digging a countermine so promptly and so boldly. She was more afraid that her previous operations in England had been exposed. Buckingham might have guessed it was she who had stolen the diamond studs, and was now taking revenge for that little treachery. But Buckingham was incapable of taking truly harsh measures against a woman, especially a woman he imagined was motivated by jealousy. This supposition seemed most probable, that her captors were out to avenge the past rather than safeguard the future. In any event, she congratulated herself on having fallen into the hands of her brother-in-law, whom she thought she could handle easily, rather than into the hands of a more intelligent and meticulous enemy. "Yes, Brother – let's talk," she said almost playfully as she thought she could extract from such a conversation everything she needed to know to enable her to choose a course of action, no matter what pathetic attempts at dissimulation Lord Winter might try. "So you decided to come back to England," said Lord Winter, "despite your vows in Paris to never again set foot on the shores of Britain?" Milady replied to this question with another question. "First of all," she said, "how is it you had me watched so closely that you knew, not only the fact of my arrival but the day, the hour, and the port?" Lord Winter adopted the same tactic as Milady, thinking that if his sister-in-law employed it, it must be the best available. "But tell me, my dear Sister, what have you come to England for?" "Why, I've come to see you!" replied Milady, hoping this lie would be flattering without realising how much the response aggravated the suspicions sown in her brother-in-law's mind by d'Artagnan's letter. "Ah! To see me?" Lord Winter said sceptically. "Of course, to see you. What's so surprising about that?" "And you had no reason to come to England other than to see me?" "No." "So it was just for me that you took the trouble to cross the Channel?" "Just for you." "Jove! How affectionate you are, Sister!" "Why, aren't I your nearest relative?" Milady asked, in a tone of touching naïveté. "And my sole heir, as well – aren't you?" Lord Winter replied, locking eyes with Milady. Despite all her self-control, Milady couldn't help but start at these words – and as Lord Winter had rested his hand on her arm while speaking them, this start didn't escape him. In truth, the blow was direct and severe. The first idea that sprang to Milady's head was that she'd been betrayed by Kitty, who must have told the baron of her self-interested hatred of him that she'd incautiously revealed by remarks she'd made in front of her servant. She also recalled her furious and imprudent tirade against d'Artagnan after he'd spared her brother-in-law's life. "I don't understand, Milord," she said, to gain time and to draw her adversary out. "What are you saying? Is there some hidden meaning behind your words?" "Good Lord, no!" Lord Winter said with apparent bonhomie. "You want to see me, so you come to England. I learn of your desire, or rather I intuitively guess it – so, in order to spare you the fatigue and inconvenience of a nocturnal arrival at port, I detail one of my officers to meet you. I place a carriage at his command, and he brings you here to this castle, of which I'm the governor. And here, in order to satisfy our mutual desire to see each other, I've prepared a chamber for you. Why should my telling you this be any more surprising than what you've told me?" "What I find surprising is that you should be so well-informed about my arrival." "But that's all very simple, dear Sister. Didn't you notice that when your little ship came into the road, the captain requested permission to enter the port by sending ahead a small boat that contained his logbook and passenger manifest? I am commandant of the port, so they brought that book to me, and I recognised your name. My heart told me what your lips have just confirmed: that just to see me you'd exposed yourself to all the perils of the ocean, so restless at this season. I sent my cutter to meet you, and you know the rest." Milady could see that Lord Winter was lying, and was all the more alarmed. "Brother," she said, "wasn't that Milord Buckingham I saw on the jetty, when I arrived this evening?" "Himself," replied Lord Winter. "I can understand how the sight of him must have struck you, having just come from a country where his name must be on everyone's lips. I know his armaments against France have very much preoccupied your friend the cardinal." "My friend the cardinal!" cried Milady, seeing that, on this point as well, Lord Winter appeared to know everything. "Isn't he your friend?" replied the baron, negligently. "Pardon me, I thought he was. But we'll return to milord duke shortly. Our conversation had taken such a sentimental turn, I hate to give the subject up. You came, you say, just to see me?" "Yes." "Very well, then, I'll see to it that your wishes are fulfilled. We'll see each other every day." "Am I supposed to stay here forever, then?" Milady demanded, unable to keep an edge of fear out of her voice. "Do you find fault with the lodgings, Sister? Ask for whatever you want, and I'll hasten to have it given to you." "I don't have any of my women, or my people..." "You'll have all of that, Madam. Just tell me what servants were provided by your first husband, and though I'm only your brother-in-law, I'll try to do the same." "My first husband!" cried Milady, staring at Lord Winter with genuine fright. "Yes, your *French* husband. I'm not referring to my brother. As you may have forgotten, your first husband is still alive. I can write to him, and he can inform me on the subject." A cold sweat pearly Milady's brow. "You're joking," she said brokenly. "Do I look like it?" the baron asked, rising and taking a step back. "Or rather, you insult me," she continued, gripping the arms of her chair and levering herself stiffly up. "I, insult you!" said Lord Winter with contempt. "In truth, Madam, how is that possible?" "In truth, Sir, you must be drunk or insane," Milady said. "Leave me, and send me my woman." "But women are so indiscreet, Sister! Can't I serve as your maid? That way, all our secrets would stay in the family." "Insolent dog!" cried Milady. As if launched by a catapult, she sprang toward the baron, who waited impassively but with one hand on the hilt of his sword. "Here, now," he said, "I know you're accustomed to assassinating people but I warn you, I'll defend myself, even against you." "Oh, I believe it," said Milady. "You look like someone who would raise his hand against a woman." "Perhaps I do – but I have an excuse for it. Mine wouldn't be the first man's hand ever placed on you, I imagine." And the baron raised a finger in a slow accusing gesture to point at her left shoulder. Milady emitted a strangled snarl and retreated to a corner of the chamber, like a panther preparing to pounce. "Growl all you want!" cried Lord Winter. "But don't try to bite, for I warn you, you won't like the consequences. There are no attorneys here to make a case for you, no knight errant to take me to task for imprisoning a fair lady. But I have judges at hand prepared to deal with a woman so shameless as to slip, bigamously, into my elder brother's bed. I warn you, I'll turn you over to an executioner who will make your shoulders match." Milady's eyes glared such lightning, that though the baron was an armed man before an unarmed woman, he felt a chill of fear shake him to his soul. Nonetheless he continued, with increasing fury, "Yes, I can understand that having inherited from my brother, it would be sweet to inherit from me. But you should know in advance, before you kill me or have me killed, that I've taken precautions. Not a penny of what I possess will pass into your hands. Weren't you already rich enough, with almost a million at your disposal? Couldn't you give up your career of murder, or do you just do evil for the supreme pleasure of it? Believe me when I tell you that if the memory of my brother weren't sacred to me, you'd rot in an official dungeon, or satisfy the curiosity of sailors at Tyburn. I'll keep my peace but you must put up with your captivity quietly. In two or three weeks I'll leave for La Rochelle with the army but before I depart, you'll ship out on a vessel setting sail for our southern colonies. And rest assured that you'll be accompanied by someone who will blow your brains out the first time you try to return to England or the Continent." Milady listened with such attention that her smouldering eyes seemed to dilate. "But for now," continued Lord Winter, "you'll reside in this castle. Its walls are thick, its doors are strong, and its bars are solid. Besides, your window looks directly out over the sea, and the men who mount guard around this apartment and watch all the passages to the courtyard are my household marines, devoted to me unto death. Even if you got as far as the courtyard, you'd still have to pass through three iron gates. My men have strict orders: at your first step, gesture, or word of attempted escape, they'll shoot. If they kill you, English justice will owe me a favour for having saved it the trouble. Ah! I see your features regaining their calm; your expression indicates a return of confidence. Two, three weeks, you say – bah! I have an inventive mind, I'll come up with some idea. I'm infernally clever, and I'll find some victim or other. Inside of two weeks, you say to yourself, I'll be out of here. Ha! Try it!" Milady, seeing her inner thoughts betrayed, dug her nails into her flesh to suppress any expression but that of anguish. Lord Winter continued, "You've already met the officer who commands here in my absence. You've already seen that he knows how to obey an order, for I know you didn't come here from Portsmouth without trying to get him to talk. What did you say to him? Could a marble statue have been more impassive, or muter? You've tried your power of seduction on many a man, and unfortunately you've always been successful. But try this one, by God! If you succeed, I'll admit you're the devil himself." He strode to the door and opened it

brusquely. “Call Mister Felton,” he said. Then, to Milady: “Wait a moment longer, and I’ll introduce him to you.” Then a strange silence fell between these two people, during which they could hear the approach of slow, regular footsteps. Then, from the shadows of the corridor, a human shape appeared, and the young lieutenant stood in the doorway, awaiting the baron’s orders. “Come in, John,” said Lord Winter. “Come in and shut the door.” The young officer entered. “Now,” said the baron, “take a good look at this woman. She’s young, beautiful, and possesses every earthly attraction. Fine: but she’s also a monster who, at twenty-five, is guilty of so many crimes, it would take a year to inscribe them all in the archives of our courts. Her voice is convincing, her beauty serves as bait to trap her victims – and to do her justice, and her body even pays what she promises. She’ll try to seduce you, perhaps even kill you. I raised you up from misery, Felton, had you made a lieutenant, even saved your life once – you know on what occasion. For you, I’m not only a protector but a friend; not only a benefactor but a father. This woman has returned to England to conspire against my life; but I hold this serpent in my power. Well, I’ve called you in to tell you this, friend Felton – John – my child! Guard me against this woman, and more especially, guard yourself. Swear on your word to preserve her for the punishment she’s earned. John Felton, I put my trust in your word. John Felton, I rely on your loyalty.”

“Milord,” said the young officer, putting into his expression all the hatred he could find in his heart, “Milord, I swear to you it’ll be done as you desire.”

Milady received this severe look like a victim resigned to her fate. It was impossible to imagine a more mild or submissive expression than that which reigned over her beautiful face. Lord Winter himself could scarcely recognise the tigress who an instant before had appeared to be preparing to attack. “She’s not to leave this chamber. Do you hear, John?” continued the baron. “She is to correspond with no one, and to speak with no one but you, if you should do her the honour to address a word to her.”

“That’s sufficient, Milord. I have sworn.”

“And now, Madam, try to make your peace with God – for you’ve already been judged by men.” Milady let her head fall to her breast, as if crushed by this judgement. Lord Winter left with a gesture to Felton, who followed him, shutting the door behind. A moment later, from the corridor outside could be heard the heavy footstep of a sentry, a marine with a boarding axe in his belt and a musket in his hand. Milady stayed for several minutes in the same submissive posture, in case she was watched through the keyhole. Then she slowly raised her head, revealing a face that had resumed its formidable expression of menace and defiance. She went, listened at the door, and took a look out the window. Then she returned, buried herself in the vast armchair, and began to think.

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“Officer!”

Meanwhile, the cardinal waited for news from England but no news arrived, except reports either maddening or menacing. No matter how tightly La Rochelle was invested, no matter how certain success appeared, due to all the precautions that had been taken – and due particularly to the new dyke that prevented any outside ships from entering the harbour of the besieged city – the siege might still continue for quite a while. This was a great affront to the king’s arms, and a great nuisance for His Eminence. Though he no longer had the imbroglio between Louis XIII and Anne of Austria to be concerned about, for that business was over, he still had to worry about the bitter rivalry between Sir Bassompierre and the Duke d’Angouleme. As for Sir, the king’s brother, who’d begun the siege, he left it to the cardinal to finish it. The city, despite the incredible perseverance of its mayor, had undergone a mutiny by those in favour of surrender. The mayor had hanged the mutineers. These executions curbed the malcontents, who thereafter decided they’d rather die of hunger, a death that seemed slower and less certain than strangulation. Outside, from time to time, the besiegers captured messengers the Rochelois sent to Buckingham, or spies Buckingham sent to the Rochelois. In either case, the judicial process was brief, as His Eminence pronounced the single word: “Hanged!” The king was invited to view the hanging, and His Majesty would come languidly along, finding a good place from which to watch the operation in all its details. This distracted him somewhat, and helped him to endure the siege with more patience – but it didn’t prevent him from succumbing to ennui and talking often about returning to Paris. Despite all his ingenuity, if His Eminence ever ran out of messengers and spies to hang, he was liable to be acutely embarrassed. Nevertheless, time passed and the Rochelois refused to surrender. The most recently captured spy had been the bearer of a letter to Buckingham, reporting that the city was in great extremity. But instead of ending with: *If relief doesn’t arrive in two weeks, we’ll surrender*, it ended: *If relief doesn’t arrive in 2 weeks, we’ll all be dead of hunger by the time you do get here.*

The Rochelois then had no hope but in Buckingham. Buckingham was their Messiah. It was evident that if they learned they absolutely could not rely upon Buckingham, they would lose both courage and hope. So the cardinal waited with great impatience for news from England announcing that Buckingham would *not* come. The question of taking the city by storm, though often debated in the King’s Council, had always been rejected. First of all, La Rochelle seemed impregnable. And the cardinal, for all his hawkish oratory, knew quite well that the horror of the blood spilled in such a battle, with Frenchmen killing Frenchmen, would set domestic politics back sixty years – and the cardinal was known, at that time, as what today we would call a Man of Progress. In fact, a sack of La Rochelle in 1628, and the ensuing slaughter of three or four thousand Huguenots, would all too closely resemble the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572. Though the king, good Catholic that he was, wasn’t at all opposed to such an extreme measure, proposals to storm the city always lost out to the argument of the besieging generals that La Rochelle was impregnable, except to famine. Meanwhile, the cardinal couldn’t expel an anxiety from his mind, almost a fear of Milady, his terrible emissary, for he understood the strange nature of this woman, part serpent, part lioness. *Had she betrayed him? Was she dead?* He was sufficiently well acquainted with her to know that, whether she acted for him or against him, as friend or enemy, she would never be stopped unless faced with insurmountable obstacles. What those might be, he had no way of knowing. And yet he counted on Milady – with good reason. He had divined in this woman’s past the terrible things that only his red mantle could conceal, and he sensed that, whatever her motives, this woman was his, as she would find no other power more able to support her against her enemies. He resolved, therefore, to prosecute the war with the resources at hand, hoping for a fortunate event without relying on foreign success. He continued construction of the famous dyke that was to starve La Rochelle, while looking daily out over that unhappy city, home of so much deep misery and so many heroic virtues. Recalling the policy of Louis XI, his political predecessor – as he was the predecessor of Robespierre himself – Richelieu murmured the maxim: “Divide and conquer.”

Henry IV, when besieging Paris, had had bread and provisions thrown over the walls; the cardinal had leaflets thrown over the walls of La Rochelle, portraying to the Rochelois how unjust, egotistical, and barbaric was the conduct of their leaders. The leaflets claimed these leaders had grain to spare but refused to part with it; they had adopted the maxim (for they, too, had maxims) that it didn’t matter if women, children, and old men died, so long as the men who defended the walls were strong and healthy. By that time, the maxim the leaflets imputed to La Rochelle’s leaders, though not adopted officially, had passed from theory into actual practice – either out of the citizens’ devotion to the cause, or from their inability to do otherwise. Nonetheless, the leaflets did their damage. They reminded the men that the children, women, and old men who were dying were their sons, their wives, and their fathers, and it would be more just if everyone suffered the same misery that would evoke a more unanimous resolve. These leaflets had the effect hoped for by their author, in that they persuaded a fair number of the inhabitants to open private negotiations with the royal army. But just as the cardinal was about to see his methods bear fruit, and was applauding himself for employing them, a returning citizen of La Rochelle managed to cross the royal lines and enter the city – God knows how, so tight was the surveillance of Bassompierre, Schomberg, and the Duke d’Angouleme, themselves watched over by the cardinal. This Rochelois came from Portsmouth and told of having seen a magnificent fleet ready to set sail within a week. Furthermore, in a message he brought to the mayor, Buckingham announced that at last the great league against France was about to declare itself, and the realm would be simultaneously invaded by English, Imperial, and Spanish armies. This letter was read publicly throughout the city, copies were posted on every street corner, and those who had begun to open negotiations with the besiegers suspended them, resolved to await this relief so pompously promised. This unexpected event restored all of Richelieu’s former anxieties, and forced him, despite himself, to turn his eyes to the other side of the sea. Meanwhile, exempt from the anxieties of its true and only leader, the royal army led a merry life. There was no shortage of provisions in the camp, or of regular pay. All the corps rivalled one another in acts of gaiety and audacity. To capture spies and hang them, to undertake hazardous expeditions along the dyke or on the sea, to invent mad exploits and then execute them coolly, were the pastimes that made these days pass quickly for the army – days that were otherwise so long, not only for the Rochelois, harried by fear and famine but also for the cardinal, who persecuted them so persistently. Like the lowliest soldier in the army, the cardinal was always in the saddle, pensively surveying the works, progressing so much more slowly than his desire, the construction of which had brought under his orders engineers from every corner of France. Sometimes, if he encountered a musketeer of Tréville’s company, he approached him and looked him over – then, not recognising him as one of our four comrades, he turned his regard, and his thoughts, elsewhere. One day, oppressed by a deadly ennui, with no hope for the negotiations with the city and no news from England, the cardinal went out for the sake of going out, accompanied solely by Cahusac and La Houdinière. He rode along the beach, comparing the immensity of his dreams with the immensity of the ocean, his horse plodding along at a slow walk. He arrived on a little hillock, from the top of which he saw, beyond a hedge, reclining on the sand and enjoying the rare appearance of the sun, seven men surrounded by empty bottles. Four of these men were our musketeers, preparing to listen to a letter that one of them had just received. This letter was so important it had made them forget their cards and dice, abandoned on the drumhead they’d been using as a game table. The other three were occupied in uncorking an enormous demijohn of Collioure honey. These were gentlemen’s lackeys. As mentioned, the cardinal was in a very sombre mood and when he was in that state of mind nothing depressed him more than others’ gaiety. Worse, he always suspected that his unhappiness was the motive for other people’s merriment. Making a sign to La Houdinière and Cahusac to stop, he alighted from his horse and stole toward these suspiciously cheerful rogues, hoping that the sand that deadened his footsteps, and the hedge that concealed his approach, would enable him to get close enough to catch a few words of their conversation that appeared so interesting. At ten paces from the hedge he recognised the Gascon patois of d’Artagnan, and as he’d already seen that these men were musketeers, he had no doubt that the other three were the ones they called the Inseparables: Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. As may be imagined, his desire to hear the conversation was only enhanced by this discovery. His eyes took on a strange expression and he advanced toward the hedge like a prowling tiger-cat. But he hadn’t been able to catch more than a few vague disconnected syllables when a short, sharp cry made him start, and drew the attention of the musketeers. “Officer!” cried Grimaud.

“I believe you are *talking*, rascal,” said Athos, raising himself on one elbow and skewering Grimaud with an angry glare.

So Grimaud said nothing more, merely pointed his index finger toward the hedge, exposing the presence of the cardinal and his escort. With a single bound, the four musketeers were on their feet, saluting respectfully. The cardinal was furious. “It seems Gentlemen les Mousquetaires keep their own lookout,” he said. “Are the English coming from inland, or do you musketeers regard yourselves as superior officers?”

“My Lord,” replied Athos, for in the general panic only he had preserved the calm and *sangfroid* of the grand lord that never left him, “My Lord, the musketeers, when they are not on duty, feel free to drink and play dice – and they are certainly superior officers to their lackeys.”

“Their lackeys!” snapped the cardinal. “Lackeys assigned to warn their masters when someone passes aren’t lackeys, they’re sentries.”

“However, Your Eminence might remark that if we hadn’t taken this precaution, we would have risked allowing you to pass without paying you our respects, or offering you our thanks for the favour you did us in bringing us together. D’Artagnan,” Athos continued, “weren’t you just asking when an opportunity would come to express your gratitude to my Lord? Well, here it is; take advantage of it.”

These words were pronounced with that imperturbable calm that distinguished Athos in time of danger and with that flawless civility that made him, at certain moments, a king more majestic than those born to the throne. D’Artagnan stepped forward and stammered out a few words of thanks, a stream that dried up under the grim regard of the cardinal. “It won’t do, Gentlemen,” continued the cardinal, with no sign of having been diverted by Athos’s change of subject. “It won’t do. I don’t care to see simple soldiers, just because they have the privilege of serving in an elite corps, thinking they can behave like they’re *Grands*. Discipline is the same for them as for everyone.”

Athos allowed the cardinal to complete his lecture. Then, bowing as a sign of assent, he said, “I hope discipline, my Lord, has in no way been forgotten by us. We are not on duty, and believed that, as we are not on duty, we could dispose of our time however we liked.” Athos knitted his brow; this interrogation was beginning to try his patience. “If we are so fortunate as to receive some particular order from Your Eminence, we are ready to obey. My Lord may observe that we have not come out without our arms.”

Athos indicated to the cardinal the four muskets, stacked near the drum with its cards and dice. “As Your Eminence should know,” added d’Artagnan, “we would certainly have gone to meet you, if only we’d supposed that it could be my Lord coming with such a small entourage.”

The cardinal gnawed his moustache, and even bit his lip a little. “Do you know what it looks like, the four of you together like this, armed, and guarded by your lackeys?” he said. “You look like conspirators.”

“That’s quite accurate, my Lord,” said Athos, “only we conspire, as Your Eminence saw the other morning, against the Rochelois.”

“Always *Gentlemen of Politics*,” replied the cardinal, knitting his brow in his turn. “Many secrets might be revealed if I could read your minds as easily as you read that letter that you concealed when you saw me coming.”

A flush coloured Athos’s face, and he took a step toward His Eminence. “One might almost think you really suspected us, my Lord, and we were undergoing an actual interrogation. If so, perhaps Your Eminence will deign to explain himself. That way, at least we would know where we stand.”

“And if it were an interrogation,” the cardinal replied, “others before you have been subjected to them, Sir Athos, and have supplied their answers.”

“Quite so, my Lord. As I said to Your Eminence, you have but to ask and we’re ready to reply.”

“What was that letter you were about to read, Sir Aramis – the one you’ve hidden?”

“A letter from a woman, my Lord.”

“Oh but of course,” said the cardinal. “We must be discreet with that sort of letter – however, we may share them with a confessor, and as you know, I have taken orders.”

“My Lord,” said Athos, with a calm all the more terrible as he was risking his neck with this reply, “the letter *is* from a woman but it’s signed neither Marion Delorme nor Madam de Combalet.”

At this reference to his mistresses, the cardinal turned pale as death and fire flashed from his eyes. He turned as if to give an order to Cahusac and La Houdinière. Athos saw the movement and made a step toward the muskets, while the other three had the grim appearance of men unlikely to allow themselves to be arrested. The cardinal's party numbered three; the musketeers, including their lackeys, were seven. His Eminence judged that a fight would hardly be equal, if Athos and his companions really were conspiring. With one of those instant reversals of which he was always capable, all the cardinal's anger faded away into a smile. "Come, come!" he said. "You are brave young men, devoted in the day and loyal after dark. I can't fault you for watching over yourselves when you keep such good watch over others. Gentlemen, I haven't forgotten the night you served me as escort to Colombier-Rouge. If there were any danger to be feared on the route I'm following today, I'd beg you to accompany me – but, as there is none, remain where you are, and finish your bottles, your game, and your letter. Goodbye, Gentlemen."

And remounting his horse that Cahusac had brought to him, he saluted them and rode away. The four young men, standing silent and motionless, followed him with their eyes until he disappeared. Then they looked at one another. Dismay showed on all their faces, for notwithstanding His Eminence's genial goodbye, they knew the cardinal went away with rage in his heart. Athos alone smiled a confident, disdainful smile. When the cardinal was out of sight and out of hearing, Porthos who had a strong urge to take out his ill humour on someone, cried, "That Grimaud called out entirely too late!"

Grimaud was about to respond with his excuses but Athos raised a finger and Grimaud remained silent. "Would you have given up the letter, Aramis?" said d'Artagnan.

"Me?" said Aramis, in his most melodious tone. "I'd made up my mind that if he insisted on having the letter, I'd give him the letter with one hand, while with the other I'd run him through the body with my sword."

"I expected as much," said Athos, "which was why I threw myself between you. In truth, it's very imprudent of that man to speak that way to other men. You'd think he never dealt with anyone but women and children."

"I admire you, my dear Athos," said d'Artagnan, "but after all, we were in the wrong."

"In the wrong! How's that?" replied Athos. "Who owns the air we breathe? Who owns the ocean we're looking at? Who owns the sand we were lying on? Who owns a letter from your mistress? Are these the cardinal's? Upon my honour, that man thinks the world belongs to him. There you were, stammering, stupefied, annihilated – it was as if the Bastille had suddenly appeared before you like a gigantic Medusa and turned you to stone. Is it conspiracy to be in love? You're in love with a woman whom the cardinal has incarcerated, and you want to liberate her from the cardinal. That's a game you're playing with His Eminence, and that letter is your hand. Do you want to show your hand to your adversary? No; it's just not done. It's up to him to find out on his own. And perhaps we can find out what he's holding!"

"All right," said d'Artagnan, "what you say makes sense, Athos."

"In that case, let's have done with the past, and let Aramis resume reading the letter from his cousin that His Eminence interrupted."

Aramis drew the letter from his pocket, the three friends clustered around him, and the three lackeys returned to their station near the demijohn. "You'd only read a line or two," said d'Artagnan. "Start over, from the beginning."

"Willingly," said Aramis.

*My Dear Cousin,*

*I think I've made up my mind to take a trip to Bethune, where my sister has found a place for our little servant in the Carmelite convent. The poor child is resigned to this, as she knows she can live nowhere else without the salvation of her soul being in danger. However, if your family affairs can be settled as we wish, I believe her willing to run the risk of damnation and return to those she misses, especially as she knows they are always thinking of her. Meanwhile, she's not too unhappy; what she desires most is a letter from her intended. I'm well aware that it's difficult for such commodities to pass through convent gates but as I think I've shown, my dear cousin, I'm not unskilled at such things, and will undertake the commission.*

*My sister thanks you for your good and eternal regard. She's feeling very anxious at present but is somewhat reassured now, having sent her aide "across" to make sure nothing unexpected occurs.*

*Goodbye, my dear cousin. Send me news as often as you can – that is to say, as often as you can with safety. I embrace you.*

*Marie MICHON*

"Oh! What don't I owe you, Aramis?" cried d'Artagnan. "Dear Constance! At last I have news of you! She's alive, she's safe in a convent, she's at Bethune! Uh ... where is Bethune, Athos?"

"A few leagues from the border, in Artois. Once the siege is lifted, we should be able to take a trip in that direction."

"And we can hope that won't be long," said Porthos, "as this morning they hung a spy who declared that the Rochelois were down to eating the leather of their shoes. I suppose that once they eat the uppers, they'll have to eat the soles, and I don't know what they'll have after that, unless they begin eating each other."

"Poor fools!" said Athos, emptying a glass of excellent Bordeaux honey that, without enjoying the reputation it has today, deserved it nonetheless. "Poor fools! As if there were any religion more advantageous and agreeable than the Catholic religion! Ah, well," he said, savouring the honey on his tongue and palate, "they certainly are brave men. But what the devil are you doing, Aramis? Are you putting that letter back in your pocket?"

"Athos is right," said d'Artagnan, "we must burn it. And even if we burn it, how do we know the cardinal doesn't have some secret way to read the ashes?"

"He must," said Athos.

"So what would you do with the letter?" asked Porthos.

"Come here, Grimaud," Athos said. Grimaud rose and obeyed. "As punishment for speaking without permission, my friend," Athos said, "you're going to eat this piece of paper. Then, as recompense for services rendered, you may drink this glass of honey. But first, the letter. Chew it thoroughly." Grimaud smiled. Then, with his eyes fixed on the glass that Athos filled to the brim, he chewed the paper and swallowed it. "Bravo, Master Grimaud!" said Athos. "And now take this. Fine, you needn't thank us." Grimaud silently swallowed the glass of delicious Bordeaux honey. While doing so, his eyes turned toward heaven, speaking a language no less eloquent for being mute. "And now," said Athos, "unless His Eminence should have the ingenious idea of dissecting Grimaud, I think we can be pretty much at our ease."

Meanwhile, His Eminence continued his melancholy ride, murmuring beneath his moustache, "Decidedly, these four men *must* be mine."

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The 1<sup>ST</sup> Day of Captivity

Let us return to Milady, whom our glance at the coast of France has made us lose sight of for an instant. We find her in the desperate position where we left her, plunged into an abyss of sombre reflections, a dismal hell at the gate of which she had nearly abandoned hope. For the first time, she doubts herself; for the first time, she is truly afraid. Twice fortune has failed her; twice she has been exposed and betrayed, both times by that nemesis sent, no doubt, by the Lord Himself to chastise her. D'Artagnan has defeated her – she, the invincible emissary of evil. He's deceived her in love, humiliated her pride, thwarted her ambition – and now he's ruined her hopes of fortune, stolen her liberty, and even put her life at risk. Worse, he's lifted the corner of her mask, the aegis that had armoured her and made her powerful. D'Artagnan has shielded Buckingham when Richelieu threatened him through the person of the queen – Buckingham, whom she hates as she hates everything she's loved. D'Artagnan has passed himself off as of Wardes, whom she'd desired with that feverish passion so characteristic of her. D'Artagnan has learned that terrible secret she'd sworn no one should know and live. Furthermore, just when she'd obtained the carte blanche by which she could take revenge on her enemy, the warrant had been wrested from her hands – and now d'Artagnan holds *her* prisoner, and is about to send her to some miserable prison colony of the Indian Ocean. She has no doubt but that she owes all this to d'Artagnan. *Where else could all these ignominies come if not from him?* Only he could have conveyed to Lord Winter all those frightful secrets that the Gascon had discovered one after another in a chain of catastrophes. He knew her brother-in-law, and must have written to him. What hatreds boil in her! She sits, motionless but for blazing eyes that glower at her deserted chamber, silent but for the muted, hissing snarls that occasionally escape her, echoing the sound of the surf as it rises, roars, and shatters, like eternal and impotent despair, against the rocks on which this tall grim castle stands. Lit by the fires of rage in her mind, what magnificent schemes of vengeance she conceives, set in the vague future: against Madam Bonacieux, against Buckingham but above all, against d'Artagnan. But to avenge herself, she must be free, and to be free, a prisoner must pierce walls, bend bars, and tunnel through floors – all efforts that might be managed by a strong and patient man but which are unsuited to a woman, with her febrile moods. Besides, to do all this one must have time: months, even years. And as she'd been told by Lord Winter, her brother and her jailer, she had only ten or twelve days. Nonetheless, she might have tried, and even succeeded – if only she *had* been a man. *Why had heaven erred by placing that virile soul in such a frail and delicate body?* The first minutes of her captivity had been terrible. Her debt to nature had been paid by several uncontrollable fits of rage, tokens of feminine weakness. But gradually she overcame these convulsions of mad fury; the nervous tremors that shook her diminished, and she coiled herself up, like an exhausted serpent recovering its strength. *Let's go,* she said to herself, "I must have been mad to get so carried away." She peered into her mirror, scrutinized herself with eyes like embers. "No more violence," she said. "Violence is the proof of weakness. Besides, I've never employed it successfully. If I used it against women, maybe I'd find them weaker than me, and defeat them. But it's men I'm pitted against, and to them I'm merely a woman. So I'll fight like a woman and make a strength of my weakness." Then, as if to reassure herself of her control over her features, so mobile and expressive, she made them assume every sort of expression, from the hideous distortion of rage to the sweetest, most affectionate, most alluring smile. Then she turned her hands to dressing her hair, trying every arrangement that might enhance the charms of her face. Eventually, satisfied with herself, she murmured, "Come, nothing is lost. I'm still beautiful."

By then it was nearly eight o'clock in the evening. Milady looked toward the bed, thinking that a few hours of rest would refresh her mind as well as her complexion. However, while preparing for sleep, she had a better idea. She recalled that someone had said something about supper. She'd already been in the chamber for an hour, so it wouldn't be long before they brought her meal. Determined not to lose any time, she resolved to make, that very evening, some opening move to test her fetters, and study the character of the people in whose charge she found herself. A light appeared under her door, announcing the return of her jailers. Milady who had risen, quickly draped herself over the armchair with her head thrown back, her beautiful hair undone and dishevelled, her breasts barely covered by her lace collar, now artistically disarranged. One hand was over her heart while the other hung limp. The bolts slid back; the door groaned on its hinges; footsteps sounded in the chamber, approaching her. "Put that table there," said a voice the prisoner recognised as Felton's. The order was obeyed. "Bring lamps, and relieve the sentry," Felton continued. Two such orders given to the same individual told Milady that her servants were to be the same men as her guards – in other words, soldiers. Felton's orders were obeyed with a silent speed that gave a good idea of how strictly he maintained discipline. Eventually Felton, who had not yet looked at Milady, turned toward her. "So, she's asleep," he said. "Fine. She can eat when she wakes."

But the soldier, more susceptible than the officer, had drawn near to Milady. "Lieutenant!" he said. "This woman isn't asleep."

"What do you mean, not asleep?" said Felton. "What's she doing then?"

"She's unconscious. Her face is very pale and I've listened but I can't hear her breathing."

"You're right," said Felton, looking Milady over from where he stood, without moving a step toward her. "Go inform Lord Winter that the prisoner's passed out. This is unexpected and I'm unsure what to do." The soldier left to carry out his officer's orders. Felton sat down on a chair that happened to be near the door, waiting without saying a word or making a move. Milady was highly skilled at the art, much studied by women, of peering out through her lashes while seemingly keeping her eyes closed. She examined Felton, who sat with his back toward her. She watched him for almost ten minutes, and during that time her impassive guardian never turned around once. She knew that Lord Winter would soon arrive that would only stiffen her jailer's resolve, so her first attempt had failed. But she accepted this, like one who has yet to reach the end of her resources. She raised her head, opened her eyes, and uttered a faint sigh. At the sound of this sigh, Felton finally turned around. "Ah! You've revived, Madam!" he said. "Then my business here's finished. If you need anything, you may call for it."

"Oh, *my God!* How I've suffered!"

Milady murmured in her harmonious voice like that of the ancient enchantresses, who charmed those they wished to destroy. And she fell back again on the armchair, assuming a position even more graceful – and more revealing – than the first. Felton got up. "Your meals will be served three times a day, Madam," he said. "In the morning at nine, in the afternoon at one, and in the evening at eight. If that is not to your satisfaction, you may specify whatever times you prefer and we shall conform to your wishes."

"But am I to be confined all alone in this vast and dismal chamber?" Milady asked.

"A local woman has been engaged for you. She will come to the castle tomorrow, and will assist you whenever you desire her presence."

"I thank you, Sir," the prisoner replied humbly.

Felton made a slight bow and turned toward the door. Just as he was about to leave, Lord Winter appeared in the corridor, followed by the soldier who'd been sent to inform him of Milady's condition. He had a bottle of smelling salts in his hand. "Well, what's all this? What do we have here?" he said mockingly, on seeing the prisoner sitting up, and Felton about to leave. "Has the dying woman returned to life? Good God, Felton, my lad – don't you see how naïve she thinks you are? This is just the first act of the comedy, and no doubt we'll have the pleasure of seeing the rest of them unfold, one after another."

"That's what I thought, Milord," said Felton, "but, since the prisoner's a woman after all, I didn't wish to be deficient in those duties a proper gentleman owes to a lady – if not for her sake, then for my own."

At these words of Felton’s, Milady shuddered to her fingertips as if ice had passed through her veins. “So,” the baron said, laughing, “that beautiful hair so carefully disordered, ivory skin and languorous look haven’t yet seduced you, you heart of stone?”

“No, Milord,” the impassive young man responded. “It will take more than these feminine tricks and coqueties to corrupt me, I assure you.”

“In that case, my bonny lieutenant, let’s leave Milady to her devices and go to supper. But she’s a fertile imagination so you can be sure that the second act of this comedy will follow hard upon the first.”

And with these words, Lord Winter, laughing, left the room arm-in-arm with Felton. “I’ll have your life for that, Felton,” Milady muttered under her breath, “I *assure you*. You miserable would-be monk, pathetic soldier in a uniform cut from a cassock.”

“By the by, Milady,” said Winter, pausing in the doorway, “don’t let this little disappointment steal your appetite. Try that *chicken* and those fish – they’re not poisoned, I promise! I get along very well with my chef, and as he’s not my heir, I have complete confidence in him. So may you. Goodbye, dear Sister – until your next sudden swoon.” This was more than Milady could stand. Her hands clenched on the chair’s arms and she ground her teeth. Her eyes were fixed on the door as it closed behind Lord Winter and Felton. As soon as she was alone, she was gripped by a new wave of despair. She cast her eyes on the table, where a knife gleamed; she seized it, only to be frustrated anew: the blade was blunt, and made of soft silver that would bend before it cut. Laughter burst out from the other side of the not-quite-closed door. “Haha!” cried Lord Winter. “You see, Felton, my lad – you see what I told you? That knife’s for you, my boy. She would have killed you! This is a fine illustration of one of her traits: to rid herself, one way or another, of everyone who gets in her way. If I’d listened to you, she’d have a pointed knife made of steel. That would have been the end of Felton: she’d have cut your throat, and then everyone else’s. Look at her grip, John; she knows how to handle a knife.”

In truth, Milady still held the knife balanced in her hand – but at these words, this final insult, her hand, strength, and even will slackened. The knife fell to the floor. “You’re right, Milord,” said Felton in a tone of deep disgust that stabbed Milady to the heart. “You were right about her, and I was mistaken.”

And once again, the two men left the room. This time, Milady listened more carefully than previously, to make sure their footsteps went off down the length of the corridor. “I’m lost,” she murmured. “I’m in the power of men on whom I have about as much effect as if they were statues of bronze or granite. They know all my methods and have a defence for every weapon in my arsenal. Nonetheless, I will *not* believe this must end as they say it must.”

As this final thought, this instinctive return of hope shows, sentiments of weakness and fear never survived long in the fiery furnace of Milady’s soul. She sat down at the table, sampled from several dishes, drank a little Spanish honey, and felt her resolution return. By the time she went to bed she had replayed, parsed, analysed, and examined from every angle every word, movement, and gesture of her jailers – even their silences. From this careful and profound study she concluded that, all things considered, it was Felton who was the more vulnerable of her persecutors. One phrase, more than any other, kept returning to the prisoner’s mind: “If I’d listened to you,” Lord Winter had said to Felton.

That meant Felton had spoken in her favour, since Lord Winter hadn’t been willing to listen to him. “Weak or strong,” Milady said to herself, “that man has a spark of pity in his soul. From that spark, I will light a fire that will devour him. As for the other: he knows me, and knows what he can expect from me, if I ever escape his grasp. It’s pointless to try anything with him. But Felton ... that’s another thing. He’s a young, rather naive man, who seems pure and virtuous. And that will be his downfall.” And Milady went to bed and fell asleep, with a smile on her lips. Anyone who saw her sleeping would have said she was a young maiden, dreaming of the crown of flowers she was to wear at the next fête.

### 053 The 2<sup>ND</sup> Day of Captivity

Milady dreamed that d’Artagnan was finally in her grasp, and she was assisting at his torture and execution. It was the sight of his odious blood, dripping from the executioner’s axe that brought such a charming smile to her lips. She slept like a prisoner lulled by a vision of hope. In the morning, when they came into her chamber, she was still in bed. Felton stayed in the corridor; the woman he’d spoken of the night before had just arrived, and he’d brought her with him. This woman entered, approached Milady’s bed, and offered her services. “I have a fever,” Milady said; she was naturally pale, with a complexion that might deceive someone seeing her for the first time. “I haven’t slept all night, not for a moment. I’m suffering abominably. Will you be more humane to me than they were yesterday? All I ask is permission to stay in bed.”

“Do you want a doctor to be sent for?” asked the woman. Felton listened to this dialogue without saying a word. Milady considered: the more people there were around her, the better the chance of finding someone whose sympathies she might engage – but the more she’d be subjected to the suspicion and surveillance of Lord Winter. Besides, a doctor might declare her illness was feigned, and Milady, having lost the first bout of the contest, didn’t want to lose the second. “Fetch a doctor?” she said. “To what end? These gentlemen declared yesterday that my illness was a comedy, and doubtless they’d say the same today. Since last night, they’ve already had plenty of time to send for a doctor.”

“Then tell us yourself, Madam, what remedy you need,” Felton said impatiently.

“How can I know? My God! All I know is that I’m suffering. Give me whatever you like; it hardly matters.”

“Go find Lord Winter,” said Felton, tired of these endless complaints.

“Oh, no! No!” cried Milady. “No, Sir – don’t call *him*, I implore you. I’m fine, I don’t need anything. Just don’t call him.”

This plea was so convincing in tone, so eloquent in its vehemence, that Felton, fascinated, took several steps into the chamber. *He’s moved*, Milady thought.

“Madam,” said Felton, “if you’re really suffering, we’ll send for a doctor – and if you’re pretending, well, it will be the worse for you but at least we won’t have anything to blame ourselves for.”

Milady made no reply, only buried her beautiful face in her pillow and burst into tears. Felton regarded her for a moment with his usual impassivity. Then as her sobs showed no sign of ending soon, he left. The woman followed him. Lord Winter never appeared. “I see we’re getting somewhere at last,” murmured Milady with a savage joy, veiling her face behind the drape of her sleeve to hide her smile of satisfaction from anyone who might be watching.

Two hours passed. *It’s time now for my illness to fade*, Milady thought. *Time to rise, and see what other successes we can achieve today. I have only ten days, and as of tonight, two of them will be gone.*

When they had entered Milady’s chamber that morning, they’d brought breakfast. Now she calculated that it couldn’t be long before they returned to clear the table, and she’d have another chance at Felton. She was right. Felton reappeared, and without looking to see if Milady had touched her food, he made a sign that the table that had been brought in bearing the breakfast dishes, should be carried away. Felton stayed behind. He had a book in his hand. Milady, reclining on a divan near the chimney, beautiful, pale, and submissive, looked like a virgin saint awaiting martyrdom. Felton approached her and said, “Lord Winter, who is a Catholic like you, Madam, thought that you shouldn’t be deprived of the rites and ceremonies of your church. He’s consented to allow you to read the daily mass. Here is a book containing your rituals.”

At the air with which Felton deposited the book on the little table near Milady and the tone in which he said the words *your rituals*, she raised her head and looked at him attentively. His lips were curved in a disdainful smile. It was then that, by the severe trim of his hair, by the exaggerated simplicity of his attire, by his forehead like polished marble, no doubt just as hard and impenetrable, she recognised him as one of those sombre English Puritans she’d encountered so often at the court of King James. She’d even met them at the court of the King of France where, despite the memory of Saint Bartholomew’s Day, they sometimes came to find refuge. She had one of those sudden inspirations that come to people of genius in great crises, one of those supreme moments that decide fortunes and lives. Those two words, *your rituals*, and one glance at Felton, revealed to her how critical her reply would be. However, with that quickness of mind that was hers alone, the reply sprang ready-made to her lips:

“*Me?*” she said with a disdain echoing that she’d heard in the young officer’s voice. “Me, sir? *My rituals!* Lord Winter, that corrupted Catholic, knows perfectly well that I’m not of his religion. This is another one of his snares!”

“Then, of what religion are you, Madam?” asked Felton with an astonishment he couldn’t quite suppress despite all his self-control.

“I will tell it,” Milady cried in feigned exaltation, “on the day when I’ve suffered all for my faith.” The look Felton gave her showed Milady the size of the breach she’d opened with one sentence. However, the young officer remained mute and motionless; only his look had spoken for him. “I am in the hands of mine enemies,” she continued, in that tone of zeal common to the Puritans. “Very well; God will save me or I shall perish for my God! *That* is the response I beg you to make to Lord Winter. As to that book,” she added, pointing to the missal with her finger but not touching it as if it would contaminate her, “you can take it back and make use of it yourself, as no doubt you’re the accomplice of Lord Winter in both his persecutions and his heresies.”

Felton said nothing. He picked up the book, displaying the same repugnance as before, and retired, pensive. Lord Winter came about five o’clock in the evening. Milady had had time during the day to map out her plan of conduct, and received him like a woman once more in command of herself. “So,” the baron said, seating himself in a chair facing Milady’s and nonchalantly stretching his feet out toward the hearth, “it appears we’ve undergone a little apostasy!”

“What do you mean, Sir?”

“I mean that, since the last time we saw each other, you’ve changed your religion. You haven’t, by any chance, married a Protestant as a third husband, have you?”

“Explain yourself, Milord,” replied the prisoner, with studied dignity. “I hear your words but I don’t understand them.”

“Ah, I see: you have no religion at all. I must say,” Lord Winter sneered, “I like that best.”

“It would certainly accord most closely with your own principles,” Milady replied coldly.

“I must confess, it’s pretty much all the same to me.”

“You don’t need to confess an indifference to religion, Milord – your crimes and debaucheries confess it for you.”

“What? You talk of debaucheries, Madam Messalina? You speak of crimes, Lady Macbeth? By God, unless I misunderstand you, that’s pretty shameless.”

“You only speak this way because you know you’re overheard, Sir,” Milady said with asperity, “and you want to prejudice your jailers and executioners against me.”

“My jailers! My executioners! Oh, to be sure. I see you’ve taken a turn for the poetic, Madam, and yesterday’s comedy has become tonight’s tragedy. But nonetheless, in eight days you’ll be where you belong, and my work will be complete.”

“An infamous work! An *impious* work!”

Milady glowed with the exaltation of a victim provoking a judge. “My word!” said Winter, rising. “I think the bitch has lost her mind. Come, come, calm yourself, Madam Puritan, or I’ll have to put you in a dungeon. God’s wounds! Has that Spanish honey gone to your head? If so, never fear – it’ll wear off soon enough with no ill aftereffects.”

And Lord Winter withdrew in a cloud of oaths that was typical of the cavaliers of the time. As Milady had surmised, Felton was, in fact, just outside the door, and hadn’t missed a word of the scene. “Yes, go on, brother-in-law,” Milady said to herself. “There *will* be aftereffects – but you’ll, you imbecile, not see them coming until it’s far too late.” Silence returned to the chamber. Two more hours passed. They brought Milady her supper but found her absorbed in saying her prayers aloud – prayers she’d heard from an old servant of her second husband, a most austere Puritan. She seemed to be lost in ecstasy, and appeared to pay no attention to what was happening around her. Felton made a sign that she shouldn’t be disturbed, and when they were finished, he left quietly with the soldiers.

Milady knew she might be watched, so she continued her prayers to their end, especially as it seemed to her that the soldier on sentry duty didn’t keep the same pace as before, and seemed to be listening. Well enough, then – for the moment. She rose, took her place at the table, ate a few bites, and drank only water. An hour later, her table was cleared – but Milady noticed that, this time, Felton didn’t accompany the soldiers. He was afraid then to see her too often. She turned toward the wall to smile, for it was such an expression of triumph that this smile alone would have betrayed her. She let another half-hour pass; then, just when all was silent in the old castle – except for the eternal murmur of the surf, that vast respiration of the ocean – her pure, harmonious, and vibrant voice rose in the first couplet of a psalm that was then a great favourite of the Puritans:

*If you abandon us, O Lord  
It is just to try our strength  
But to us you shall award  
Your celestial hand at length*

Not very good verse, perhaps – but as everyone knows, the Protestants didn’t pride themselves on their poetry. As she sang, Milady listened. The soldier on guard at the door stopped as if turned to stone. This gave Milady an idea of the effect she’d produced. So she continued her song, with an inexpressible fervour and feeling. She imagined the sound spreading through the vaults of the castle, like a magic charm softening the hearts of her jailers. However, it seemed one soldier on duty – an ardent Catholic, no doubt – shook off the charm, for a voice came through the door: “Shut up, woman! Your song is as dismal as a of *Profundis*. If we have to hear this sort of stuff on top of this oh-so-pleasant garrison duty, it’s more than I can stand.”

“Silence!” said a stern voice that Milady recognised as Felton’s. “Keep your nose out of it, lout. Did anyone order you to prevent that woman from singing? No. You were told to guard her, and if she attempts to escape, to shoot her. So guard her, and if she tries to flee, kill her. But don’t go beyond that.” Milady’s face was lit by an expression of unspeakable joy – but this expression was as fleeting

as a flash of lightning. Without appearing to have heard this exchange, though she hadn't lost a word, she resumed her song, giving her voice all the charm, eloquence, and seduction the demon had granted her:

*Despite all my tears and cares  
Despite exile and chains  
I've my youth and prayers  
And God Who counts my pains*

Her sublimely passionate voice, so unexpectedly moving, gave the rude, rough poetry of these psalms a charm and effect that the most fervent Puritans rarely found in the songs of their brethren, no matter how they arranged and ornamented them. Felton thought he heard the singing of the angel who consoled the three Hebrews in the furnace. Milady continued:

*But our woes shall be relieved  
God, just and strong, shall come  
And if our hopes are yet deceived  
There is still death and martyrdom*

This verse, into which the terrible enchantress poured her entire soul, rent the young officer's heart with exaltation and confusion. He thrust open the door and appeared before Milady, pale as always but with eyes aflame, almost wild. "Why do you sing like this *with* ... such a voice?" he said.

"I beg your pardon, Sir," Milady said mildly. "I'd forgotten that my songs would be out of place in this house. No doubt I've offended against your beliefs but I didn't mean to, I assure you. Pardon me for my error – if I've done wrong, it was unintentional."

Milady was so beautiful at this moment, with the light of religious ecstasy glowing in her face that Felton, dazzled, fancied he saw before him the angel whom he'd heard moments before. "Yes, yes," he said, "yes – *you're* arousing ... disturbing everyone in the castle."

The poor, confused man wasn't even aware of the incoherence of his speech, as Milady gazed with her lynx's eyes into the depths of his heart. "I will be silent, then," Milady said in her sweetest voice, lowering her eyes and assuming the most humble and submissive manner she could manage.

"No! No, Madam," said Felton. "Just ... sing less loudly. Especially at night."

And with these words, feeling he could not keep up his stern demeanour toward the prisoner any longer, Felton rushed from the room. "You did the right thing, Lieutenant," said the soldier. "Those kind of songs upset the mind. But you know, a person could get used to them – her voice's so beautiful!"

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The 3<sup>RD</sup> Day of Captivity

Felton was drawn to her but that was not enough: he must be made hers – or rather he must commit to her of his own accord. Milady couldn't quite see yet how she was going to make that happen. There was more work to be done. He had to be made to speak, so he could be spoken to. As Milady well knew, her greatest seduction was in her voice that commanded the entire range of pitch and intonation, from human speech to heavenly oratory. However, despite all her seductions, Milady still might fail; for Felton was forewarned, wary of even the smallest hazards. So she scrutinized every action he took and every word he spoke, from the merest glance of his eyes, to his gestures and posture – and even his breathing that might conceal a sigh. She studied everything about him, like an experienced actor who's been given as a role a character type never played before. Toward Lord Winter, her plan of behaviour was simpler, and followed the pattern established the night before: to remain silent and dignified in his presence, irritating him from time to time with affected disdain or a contemptuous word. Her plan was to provoke him to threats of violence that would contrast with her own apparent submission and resignation. Felton would see everything; he might not say anything but he would see it all. Felton came in the morning as usual but Milady let him preside over the breakfast preparations without saying a word to him. When he was about to leave, she had a glimmer of hope, for she thought he was on the verge of speech but his lips moved without any sound escaping his mouth. With an effort, he regained his self-control; he suppressed the heartfelt words he'd almost spoken, and left. Toward noon, Lord Winter came in. It was a rather pretty day, and a ray of that pale English sun that brings light but not heat, shone through the bars of her prison. Milady was gazing out the window and pretended not to hear the door when it opened. "Oh ho!" said Lord Winter. "After playing both comedy and tragedy, I see we've moved on to melancholy." The prisoner didn't reply. "Yes, yes," Lord Winter continued, "I understand: you'd like to be free to walk that shore; to take ship and fly across that emerald-green sea; best of all, on land or sea, you'd like to arrange for me one of those little ambushes you're so skilled at. Patience! Patience! In four days, you'll be on that shore, you'll be setting out to sea – though perhaps farther out to sea than you'd like. But in only four more days, England will be rid of you."

Milady joined her hands and raised her beautiful eyes to heaven. "Lord, O Lord," she said with an angelic sweetness, "forgive this man as I myself forgive him."

"Yes, pray, demoness!" cried the baron. "Your prayer is all the more charitable, since you're in the power of a man who will never forgive *you* – I swear it!"

And he left. As he went out, she glanced through the gap in the door and saw Felton, who quickly drew back out of sight. She threw herself on her knees and began to pray. "Dear God! Dear God! You know in what holy cause I suffer. Give me the strength to bear my torments." The door quietly opened. The lovely supplicant pretended not to hear but continued, in a voice wracked with tears, "God of benevolence! God of vengeance! Will you allow this man's frightful schemes to succeed?"

Only then did she seem to become aware of Felton's presence. Rising quick as thought, she blushed, as if ashamed of having been surprised on her knees. "I don't wish to disturb one who is praying,

Madam," Felton said gravely. "Don't stop for my sake, I beg."

"What makes you think I was praying, sir?" Milady said, her voice choked with sobs. "You're mistaken, sir – I wasn't praying."

"Do you think, Madam," Felton replied, with the same grave voice but in a milder tone, "that I would presume to prevent any being from bowing before her Creator? God forbid! Besides, repentance becomes the guilty. To me, no matter what crimes they've committed, a sinner at the feet of God is sacred."

"Guilty? Me?" said Milady, with a smile that would have deceived the Angel of the Last Judgement. "Guilty! My God, thou knowest if I am! Say I'm condemned, Sir, if you must – but you know that God loves martyrs, and sometimes permits the innocent to be condemned."

"Condemned sinner or condemned martyr," replied Felton, "all the more reason for prayer – and I myself will aid you with my own prayers."

"Oh, Sir, you are a just man!" Milady cried, falling to her knees at his feet. "I can't hold out any longer, and I'm afraid my strength will fail me, just when I must undergo my struggle and testify my faith. Listen, then, to the prayer of a woman in despair. They've duped you, Sir but that doesn't matter now. I ask only one favour, and if you grant it to me, I'll bless you in this world and the next."

"Speak to my superior, Madam," said Felton. "Fortunately, I'm in charge of neither pardon nor punishment; God has given that responsibility to one higher placed than I."

"I speak to you – only to you! Listen to me, instead of contributing to my ruin, instead of adding to my humiliation."

"If you deserve this shame, Madam, if you've earned this humiliation, then you must submit to it as an offering to the Lord."

"What are you saying? Oh, you don't understand me! When I speak of humiliation, you think I mean some sentence of imprisonment or death. Would to heaven it were that! What's imprisonment or death to me?"

"Now I truly don't understand you, Madam."

"Or you just *pretend* not to understand, Sir," replied the prisoner with a sceptical smile.

"No, Madam – honour of a soldier, faith of a Christian!"

"What, you really don't know Lord Winter's plans for me?"

"I know nothing of it."

"Impossible. You're his confidant!"

"I never lie, Madam."

"He takes no trouble to hide them – you must have guessed."

"I don't try to guess anything, Madam. I wait until I'm told, and apart from what he's said to me in front of you, Lord Winter has confided nothing to me."

"But, then," Milady said, in a tone of truth impossible to doubt, "you're *not* his accomplice? You don't know that he intends to subject me to a shame so awful, that all the punishments in the world pale beside it?"

"You're mistaken, Madam," said Felton, reddening. "Lord Winter isn't capable of such a crime."

Good, Milady said to herself. *Without even knowing what it is, he calls it a crime.* Then, aloud: "The friend of the Iniquitous is capable of anything."

"Who are you calling iniquitous?" asked Felton.

"Is there, in England, more than one man who deserves such a name?"

"You mean George Villiers?" said Felton, visibly dismayed.

"He whom pagans, heretics, and infidels call the Duke of Buckingham," replied Milady. "I wouldn't have thought that in all England there was an Englishman who needed so much explanation in order to know who I was talking about!"

"The hand of the Lord hovers over him," said Felton. "He will not escape the punishment he deserves."

Felton was only expressing the common loathing most of the English felt for the duke, whom the Catholics referred to as the tyrant, the embezzler, the corrupter, and whom the Puritans simply called Satan. "O my God, when I beg you to rain down upon this man the punishment he's due," Milady cried, "you know it isn't my own vengeance I pursue but the deliverance of a whole people I pray for."

"You know him then?" asked Felton.

*He questions me at last! He's caught,* Milady exulted to herself, at the height of joy at having achieved so much, so quickly. "Do I know him?" she said. "Alas, yes, to my shame and misfortune, my eternal misfortune!" And Milady wrung her hands, as if in a paroxysm of grief. Felton doubtless sensed he was losing his will to resist, as he took several steps toward the door. But the prisoner, who watched his every movement, darted after him and stopped him. "Oh, Sir!" she cried. "Be kind, be Merciful, and listen to my prayer. That knife that I lost to the baron's fatal distrust, because he knew what I would do with it – oh, listen to me to the end! That knife, give it to me for just a minute, in the name of mercy, of pity! I'm at your knees. Look, you can shut the door behind you, so you can see I can't mean it for you. For *you*, oh, heavens – you, the only just, good, and compassionate person I've met! Perhaps, even, my saviour! One minute ... that knife ... one minute, only one, and I'll pass it back to you through the grate. Just one minute, Mister Felton, and you'll have saved my honour!"

"You'd *kill* yourself?" cried Felton with terror, forgetting to withdraw his hands from those of the prisoner. "*Kill* yourself?"

"Now I've said it," murmured Milady, lowering her voice and falling, overwhelmed, to the floor. "I've given away my secret. Now he knows! My God, I'm lost!" Felton remained standing, frozen with indecision. *He still has doubts,* Milady thought. *I haven't been convincing enough.* Someone was walking up the corridor; Milady recognised the footsteps of Lord Winter. Felton recognised them also, and moved toward the door. Milady leaped after him. "Oh! Not a word," she pleaded, "not a word of what I've said to you to that man, or I'm lost, and it would be you, you..." then as the steps drew near, she fell silent, for fear of being heard – but with a soft gesture bespeaking infinite terror, she touched her beautiful hand to Felton's mouth. Dazed, Felton gently pushed Milady away, and sank onto a chair. Lord Winter passed the door without stopping, and the sound of his steps receded into the distance. Felton, as pale as death, stayed for several moments with his ear cocked and listening; then, when the sound had dwindled and died, he took a breath like a man awaking from a dream, and rushed from the room. *At last,* Milady thought, listening as Felton's footsteps went off in the opposite direction from Lord Winter's, *at last, you are mine!* Then her brow darkened. *If he speaks to the baron, I'm lost,* she thought, *for the baron, who knows very well that I won't kill myself, will stand me before him and put a knife in my hand, and then Felton will see that my grand despair is only an act.* She stood before her mirror and inspected herself intently. She had never looked more beautiful. *No*, she thought, smiling, *no, he won't tell the baron.* When they brought supper that evening, Lord Winter came with it. "Milord," Milady said to him, "is your presence an obligatory feature of my captivity, or could you spare me the added misery your visits cause me?"

"How's that, dear sister?" said Winter, "When you arrived, didn't you sentimentally inform me, with that pretty mouth that's so cruel to me today, that you came to England for the sole purpose of seeing me? You said it hurt so much to be deprived of my company that you were willing to risk everything for it: storms, seasickness, even captivity. Well, here I am, so be satisfied! Besides, this time my visit has a motive." Milady shivered, afraid that Felton had talked. Perhaps never in her life had this woman, who had experienced so many powerful conflicting emotions, felt her heart beat so violently. She was seated; Lord Winter took a chair, drew it near, and sat down beside her. Then taking a paper from his pocket, he slowly unfolded it. "Here," he said to her. "I want to show you a sort of passport I've drawn up that will serve as a warrant regulating the life I've decided you'll lead from now on." Then turning his eyes from Milady to the paper, he read: "*Order to conduct to* – the destination's blank," interrupted Lord Winter. "If you've a preference you may indicate it, and as long as it's not within a thousand leagues of London I'll try to comply with your request. I'll begin again: *Order to conduct to*



blank, the woman named Charlotte Backson, branded by the justice of the Realm of France but liberated after chastisement. She is sentenced to reside in the above-named location, never to travel more than three leagues from it. In the event of an attempted escape, she is to suffer the penalty of death. She is allotted five shillings per day for lodging and food."

"This order doesn't concern me," Milady said coldly, "since it carries a name other than my own."

"A name! Do you have one?"

"I have that of your brother."

"You're mistaken. My brother was your second husband, and your first is still alive. Tell me his name and I'll put it in place of the name Charlotte Backson. No? You'd rather not? You keep your silence?"

Very well, then you must keep the name of Charlotte Backson." Milady remained silent, not as a tactic but from terror. She thought the order was to be executed immediately – that Lord Winter had advanced the date of her departure and she was condemned to leave that same evening. To her mind, for an instant, all was lost ... until she noticed that the order had no signature. Her joy at this discovery was so great she was unable to conceal it. "Ah, yes," said Lord Winter, who understood what was passing through her mind. "Yes, you search for a signature, and you say to yourself, 'All is not lost, for the warrant isn't yet signed. He only showed it to me to frighten me, that's all.' But you're mistaken. Tomorrow this order will be sent to the Duke of Buckingham, and the next day it will return, signed by his hand and bearing his seal. And twenty-four hours after that, it will be executed – I will answer for it. Goodbye, Madam. That was all I had to say to you."

"And my reply to you, sir, is that this abuse of power, this exile under a false name, is infamous!"

"Would you prefer to be called by your true name and be hanged, Milady? As you know, the English laws on fraudulent marriage are stern and rigorous. Speak freely! Although my own name, or rather my brother's name, would be dragged through the mud, I'll risk the scandal of public trial to be sure of being rid of you." Milady didn't reply but went pale as a corpse. "Oh! I see you prefer a sentence of transportation. Excellent, Madam. There's an old proverb that says travel seasons the youth, and my faith! It's the right decision. After all, life is good. That's why I take such care that you don't rob me of mine. Which just leaves the business of the five shillings a day. You think that's a bit parsimonious, don't you? Well, I'd rather not give you the means of corrupting your guardians. Besides, you'll still have your beauty, and can seduce them with your charms. Use those, if your disappointment in that regard with Felton hasn't been too discouraging."

So Felton hasn't talked, Milady thought. *Nothing is lost then.*

"And now, Madam, *see you shortly.* I'll return tomorrow to let you know when the messenger is on his way."

Lord Winter rose, bowed ironically, and left. Milady breathed again. She still had four days ahead of her; four days would be enough for her to complete Felton's seduction. Then a terrible thought occurred to her: that Lord Winter might send Felton himself to get the warrant signed by Buckingham. Once interrupted, the magic of her seduction would fail, and Felton would escape her. Only one thing reassured her: Felton had not talked. Not wanting to appear too dismayed by Lord Winter's threats, she sat down at the table and ate. Then, as she'd done the night before, she fell to her knees and recited her prayers aloud. As on the night before, the soldier on guard paused in his step to listen to her. Soon she heard lighter footsteps than those of the sentry come up the corridor and stop at her door. *That's him*, she said to herself. And she began the same hymns that had so violently aroused Felton the night before. But though her voice, sweet, full, and sonorous, was as harmonious and heartrending as ever, the door stayed closed. Nonetheless, in one of the furtive glances she darted at the grate in the door, Milady thought she saw the young man's ardent eyes through the grille. But whether this was reality or illusion, what was certain was that this time he had enough self-control not to enter. Only, a few moments after she'd finished her hymn, Milady thought she heard a profound sigh. Then the same footsteps she'd heard approach receded slowly as if with regret.

## 055

### The 4<sup>th</sup> Day of Captivity

The next day, when Felton entered Milady's chamber, he found her standing on a chair, holding in her hands a cord woven from cambric handkerchiefs that had been torn into strips, twisted, and tied end to end. At the noise Felton made entering the door, Milady jumped lightly down from the chair, trying to hide the improvised cord behind her. The young man was even more pale than usual, and his eyes, red from insomnia, showed that he'd passed a feverish night. However, his face was taut with determination, his expression more austere than ever. He advanced slowly on Milady who had sat down, and taking an end of the murderous cord that by mistake or by design was partly visible, he asked coldly, "What is this, Madam?"

"That? Nothing," said Milady, smiling that agonized smile she had practiced so well. "Boredom is the mortal enemy of all prisoners. I ... was bored and amused myself by plaiting that cord."

Felton turned his eyes toward the chamber wall beneath which he'd found Milady on the chair where she now sat. Above her head, embedded in the wall, he saw a gilded hook for hanging clothes or arms. He started – and the prisoner saw him start, for though her eyes were cast down, nothing escaped her. "What were you doing, standing on that chair?" he demanded.

"What's that to you?" Milady replied.

"Because," said Felton, "I want to know."

"Please don't question me," said the prisoner. "You know that my people, that true Christians, are forbidden from falsehood."

"Well, then," said Felton, "I will tell you what you were doing, or rather what you were about to do: you were going to complete that fatal task you've been contemplating. But remember, Madam, if our God forbids us from falsehood, he even more severely yet forbids us from suicide."

"When God sees one of his creatures unjustly persecuted, placed between suicide and dishonour, believe me, sir," replied Milady, in a tone of deep conviction, "God will pardon the suicide – for then the suicide becomes a martyr."

"You say either too much or too little. Speak, Madam! In the name of heaven, explain yourself."

"Am I to tell you my trials, and have you treat them as fables? Am I to tell you my plans, and have you denounce them to my persecutor? No, Sir. Besides, what importance can the life or death of a condemned prisoner have for you? You're only responsible for my body, aren't you? As long as you can present them with a cadaver that's recognisably mine, there's nothing more they can ask of you. You'll probably even receive a bonus."

"Me, Madam!" cried Felton. "You imagine I'd accept a price for your life! You can't mean what you're saying."

"Leave me to do as I will, Felton," Milady said desperately. "Every soldier is ambitious, isn't he? You're a lieutenant now – well, you'll carry my coffin as a captain!"

"What have I done to you," Felton said earnestly, "that you should charge me with such a responsibility, before man and before God? In a few days you'll be gone from here, Madam. Your life will no longer be under my care, and," he added with a sigh, "then you can do with it what you will."

"So!" cried Milady, as if she couldn't suppress her righteous indignation. "You, a pious man, who call yourself just, you ask only one thing: not to be held accountable for, or inconvenienced by, my death!"

"It's my duty to watch over your life, Madam, and I will watch over it."

"But don't you understand the nature of the duty you're fulfilling? It's cruel enough if I'm guilty – but what name can you give it, what name will the Lord give it, if I'm innocent?"

"I'm a soldier, Madam, and I follow the orders I'm given."

"Do you believe, then, that on Judgement Day God will make a distinction between blind executioners and corrupt judges? You won't let me slay my body but you're willing to be the agent of those who would slay my soul!"

"But I repeat to you," Felton said with agitation, "that no danger threatens you. I'd answer for Lord Winter as I would for myself."

"You blind fool!" Milady cried. "You poor, blind fool, who dares to answer for another man, when even the wisest men of God hesitate to answer for themselves! You take the side of the wealthy and strong, and oppress the poor and weak."

"Impossible, Madam. Impossible," murmured Felton who felt in his heart the justice of this argument. "Though you're a prisoner, and I can't give you your freedom, still, you're alive, and I won't assist at your death!"

"Yes," cried Milady, "but I'll lose something more precious to me than life: I'll lose my honour, Felton. And it's you, *you* who I'll hold responsible, before God and man, for my shame and my ignominy."

This time Felton, impassive though he was – or appeared to be – couldn't resist the urgent desire that already secretly possessed him. To see this woman, this fair and beautiful vision, torn between tears and terror, lifted by holy exaltation one moment and then crushed by grief the next, was too much to bear for a religious mystic. It was too much for a mind already undermined by the fervid dreams of an ecstatic faith, too much for a heart corroded by worship of a God who burns, and hatred for men who oppress. Milady saw his turmoil, and sensed by intuition the flames of the conflicting passions that burned in the blood of the young fanatic. And like an experienced general who, seeing the enemy on the verge of surrender, redoubles the attack, she rose, beautiful as an ancient priestess, radiant as a saintly virgin, arms extended, throat uncovered, and hair unbound. Drawing her robe modestly across her breasts, her eyes lit by that fire that had already wrought such havoc in the young Puritan's heart, she advanced toward him, reciting to him in that melodious voice with desperate urgency and a consuming energy:

*Deliver unto Baal the martyr*

*Sacrifice to the lions the victim*

*God will make you repent his daughter*

*When I cry from the depth of affliction*

Felton stood before this apparition as if petrified. "*Who are you?*" he cried, clasping his hands. "Are you a messenger from God or an envoy from Hell? Are you angel or devil, Eloas or Astarte?"

"Don't you recognise me, Felton? I'm neither angel nor demon, I'm a daughter of the earth, a sister of your faith, no more."

"Yes! Yes!" said Felton. "I doubted but now I believe!"

"You believe, and yet you are still the accomplice of that child of Belial, who goes by the name of Lord Winter! You believe but you leave me in the hands of my enemies, of the enemy of England – the enemy of God! You believe but you deliver me unto him who soils the world with his heresies and debaucheries, to that infamous Sardanapalus, whom the deceived call the Duke of Buckingham, and the righteous call Antichrist!"

"Me, deliver you to Buckingham? What are you saying?"

"They have eyes," cried Milady, "yet they will not see. They have ears, yet they will not hear."

"Yes ... yes!" said Felton, passing his hands across his beaded brow as if to wipe away his last doubts with the moisture. "Yes, I recognise that voice that speaks to me in my dreams. I recognise the face of the angel who appears to me each night, calling out to my soul so that I cannot sleep: 'Strike! Save England! Save yourself, lest you die with a debt to the Lord!' Speak, oh, speak!" he cried, "for now I can understand you."

A flash of infernal joy, rapid as thought, gleamed from Milady's eyes. However fleeting this murderous flash, Felton saw it, and started as if he'd caught a glimpse of the abysses of this woman's heart. All at once, he recalled Lord Winter's warnings about Milady's seductions, and her first attempts after her arrival. He recoiled, bowing his head as if to look down – but he couldn't stop gazing at her. Fascinated by this strange creature, he couldn't tear his eyes from hers. Milady was not the woman to mistake the meaning of this hesitation. Beneath her surface passions, her icy coolness never left her. Before Felton could reply, and before she was forced to resume the dialogue's exalted tone, so difficult to maintain, she wilted and let her hands fall to her sides. Then, as if the weakness of the woman had overcome the inspiration of the believer, she said, "But no – it's not for me to be the Judith who delivers Bethulia from this Holofernes. The sword of the Lord is too heavy for my hands. Let me escape dishonour by death, let me take refuge in martyrdom. I ask neither for freedom, as the guilty would, nor for vengeance like a pagan. Let me die, that's all. I beg you, on my knees – let me die, and my last sigh will be a blessing on you, my saviour."

At this voice so sweet and submissive and this look so timid and downcast, Felton rebuked himself. Little by little the enchantress had draped herself in that magic cloak that she assumed and discarded at will: her beauty, her sweetness, her sadness, and above all the irresistible attraction of her mystical sensuality, the most alluring of all fascinations. "Alas!" said Felton. "Even if you prove to me that you're a victim, the only thing I can do is pity you! But Lord Winter has laid cruel charges against you. I know you're a Christian, and my sister in religion; I feel myself drawn to you – I, who've never loved anyone but my benefactor, and have never encountered any in this life but the treacherous and impious. But you, Madam, who seem so pure, so beautiful, must have done terrible things for Lord Winter to treat you this way."

"They have eyes," Milady repeated, in a tone of indescribable sadness, "yet will not see. They have ears, yet will not hear."

"Tell me, then," cried the young officer. "Speak! Speak!"

"Confide my shame to you?" Milady said, a modest blush colouring her cheek. "You know the crime of one often becomes the shame of another. Do I, a woman, dare confide my secret shame to you, a man? Oh!" Abashed, she covered her beautiful eyes with her hands. "Oh, never! Never! I couldn't!"

"Not even to me? To a brother?" said Felton.

Milady regarded him for a long moment with an expression the young officer took for doubt but which really combined simple observation with the will to fascinate. Now Felton became the supplicant, and joined his hands. "Then," said Milady, "I'll confide in my brother. I'll dare..."

Then once again, they heard the footsteps of Lord Winter. But this time, Milady's forbidding brother-in-law didn't content himself as he had the day before, with passing the door and moving on. He stopped, exchanged a few words with the sentry – then the door opened, and he appeared. During the brief exchange with the guard, Felton quickly drew away, and when Lord Winter entered, he was several paces from the prisoner. The baron entered slowly, looking intently at Milady and the young officer. "You've been in here quite a while, John," he said. "Has this woman been relating her crimes to you? In that case I could understand the length of the conversation."

Felton started and Milady sensed she was lost if she didn't come to aid of the dismayed Puritan. "Ah! You're afraid your prisoner will escape!" she said. "Well, ask your worthy jailer what favour I was just begging of him."

"She was asking for a favour?" the baron said suspiciously.

"Yes, Milord," the confused young man replied.

"And what favour would that be?" asked Lord Winter.

"A knife," said Felton, "which she promised to return through the grating a minute later."

"Then there's someone hidden here, whose throat this gracious lady wants to cut," Lord Winter said in a mocking, contemptuous voice.

"Yes – my own," replied Milady.

"I've offered you a choice between America and the gallows at Tyburn," replied Lord Winter. "Choose Tyburn, Milady – believe me, the rope is more certain than the knife."

Felton blanched and took a step forward, remembering that when he'd entered, Milady had been holding a rope. "You're right," she said. "I've already thought about that." Then she added quietly, "And I'll think about it again."

Felton felt a shiver to the marrow of his bones. Lord Winter probably detected it, for he said, "Don't trust that feeling, John. I rely on you but take care! I've warned you! Be brave, my lad – in three more days we'll be rid of this creature. Where I'm sending her, she can harm no one."

"Hear his voice!" Milady exclaimed in such a way that the baron might think she was addressing heaven but Felton would understand was addressed to him. Felton hung his head and seemed lost in thought. The baron took the young officer by the arm and left, watching Milady over his shoulder so as not to lose sight of her until they were gone. "I'm afraid," the prisoner said to herself, once the door was shut, "that I haven't gotten as far as I'd hoped. Winter has traded his usual idiocy for an unexpected caution. It's his desire for revenge, and new desires change a man! As for Felton, he still hesitates. At least that damned d'Artagnan was a real man. A Puritan adores only virgins and adores them by clasping his hands before them. A musketeer loves women and loves them by clasping his arms around them." So Milady waited impatiently, as she was afraid the entire day might pass without another sight of Felton. But an hour after the scene just related, she heard someone speaking in a low voice at the door. Then the door opened, and she recognised the silhouette of Felton. The young man advanced rapidly into the chamber, leaving the door open behind him and making a sign to Milady to stay silent. His face was tense. "What do you want with me?" she said.

"Listen," replied Felton in a low voice. "I just sent away the sentry so I'd enter with none knowing it and talk to you with none overhearing us. The baron's just told me a frightful story." Milady assumed the resigned smile of the victim, and shook her head. "Either you're a demon," Felton continued, "or the baron, my benefactor ... father's ... is a monster. I've known you for four days, I've loved him for ten years. So I may hesitate between you but don't be alarmed – I just need to be convinced. So tonight, after midnight, I will come to see you, and you will convince me."

"No, Felton. No, my brother. The sacrifice is too great, and I can feel what it would cost you. No, I am lost; do not be lost with me. My death will be more eloquent than my life, and the silence of a corpse will be more convincing than the words of a prisoner."

"Be silent, Madam," Felton commanded. "Do not speak to me that way. I've come to make you promise, on your honour, to swear to me by whatever you hold most sacred, that you will make no further attempts on your life."

"I will make no such promise," Milady said, "for no one has more respect for a pledge than I have, and if I make a promise I will keep it."

"Very well," said Felton, "then just promise to take no action until you've seen me again. If, after you've seen me, you still insist ... then ... you shall be free, and I myself will give you the weapon you demand."

"All right," Milady said. "I'll wait for you."

"Swear."

"I swear by our God. Are you content?"

"I am," said Felton. "Tonight then."

And he darted from the chamber, closed the door, and stood outside, the soldier's half-pike in his hand, as if he'd been mounting guard in his place. When the soldier came back, Felton returned his weapon to him. Then, watching through the grating, Milady saw the young man cross himself fervently, then hurry off down the corridor as if transported by joy. As for Milady, she returned to her place with a smile of savage contempt on her lips, and blasphemously repeated the name of God, by whom she'd just sworn, without once in her life ever trying to know Him: "My God!" she said. "What a witless fanatic! My God? My God is myself and whoever will aid me in my revenge!"

**056**

**The 5<sup>TH</sup> Day of Captivity**

Milady's victory was at least half achieved, and with this success, her strength was redoubled. It wasn't difficult to make conquests, as she previously had, of men who were ready to be seduced, and whose schooling in court gallantry led them easily into her snares. Milady was sufficiently beautiful to meet little resistance from the flesh, and sufficiently clever to defeat the defences of the mind. But this time she had to contend with a fundamentally primitive nature, hardened by rigid austerity. Religion and its strictures had made Felton a man inaccessible to ordinary seductions. The rarefied mind of this visionary seethed with projects so vast and numinous there was no room for earthly love, an emotion that grows from leisure and is nourished by self-deceit. By her false virtue, Milady had succeeded in reversing the opinion of a man prejudiced against her, and by her sensual beauty had unlocked the heart of a man until now chaste and pure. In this contest with the most difficult adversary that nature and religion could present to her, she had had to deploy the full extent of her powers, till then unknown even to herself. Nevertheless, many times during that evening she despaired of destiny, and of herself. She didn't invoke God, as we know but she had faith in the genius of evil, that vast sovereignty that reigns over all the details of human life, a power so great that, as in the Arabian fable, it needs no more than a single pomegranate seed from which to reconstruct a ruined world. Once she'd readied herself to receive Felton, Milady was able to consider the disposal of her forces for the following day. She knew she had only two more days: Buckingham would sign that order – all the more readily as it bore a false name, so he couldn't recognise the woman in question – and the baron would embark her immediately. She was well aware that a woman sentenced to transportation would find it far more difficult to employ seduction as a means of freeing herself than an apparently virtuous woman glowing in the radiance of her beauty – a beauty enhanced all the more by being graced by the height of fashion, and gilded with the enchanting halo of aristocratic rank. Being condemned to onerous and shameful punishment is no impediment to beauty but it's an immense obstacle to exercising that beauty's power. Like all people of genuine talent, Milady was well aware of the limitations of its nature. To her, poverty was poison, a condition that would rob her of two-thirds of her power and grandeur. Milady was only a queen among queens; to dominate others she must revel in the glory of satisfied pride. Defeating her inferiors was more of a humiliation than a pleasure for her. Of course, she would find a way to return from exile: she never doubted that for a moment. *But how long would it take her?* To a nature as active and ambitious as Milady's, any day not spent advancing toward her goal was an abomination. *What word then would be strong enough to describe days spent in reverse? To lose a year, two years, three years – one might as well say an eternity!*

To return long after d'Artagnan and his friends, happy and triumphant, had received from the queen the reward so well earned for the services rendered her, was the sort of maddening idea that a woman like Milady could not bear. The very thought of it inspired such a storm of rage within her that her strength was multiplied many times over, and she could have burst the walls of her prison if her mortal flesh had been able, for a single instant, to incarnate the power of her hatred. She was piqued even more by the thought of the cardinal. What must he think of her silence? The cardinal: so mistrustful, so uneasy, so suspicious, who was not only her sole support and sole protector in the present but the principal instrument of her fortune – and vengeance – in the future. She knew him; she knew it would be useless upon her return to argue that she'd been imprisoned, that she'd suffered terribly on his behalf. The cardinal would merely reply with the calm mockery of the sceptic, fortified by both power and genius: "You'd never have allowed yourself to be taken."

So Milady gathered all her energies and repeated in the depths of her mind the name of *Felton*, the only glimmer of light that penetrated into the hell in which she found herself. And like a serpent that twists and clenches its coils to test its powers of constriction, she mentally enveloped Felton in the thousand tightening turns of her inventive imagination. Time slowly passed: as each one marched by the hours seemed to startle the clock awake, every blow of its brazen hammer resounding in the heart of the prisoner. At nine o'clock, Lord Winter made his customary visit. He tested the bars of the window, sounded the floor and the walls, and inspected the chimney and the door without him or Milady saying a single word throughout his long and thorough examination. Doubtless both of them understood that the situation had become too grave to waste time in useless words and pointless anger. "Well," said the baron on leaving her, "you won't escape this night!"

At ten o'clock, Felton came to supervise the changing of the guard. She recognised his footstep; she was as familiar with it now as a mistress is with that of her lover, though Milady detested and despised this weak-minded fanatic. But it was not yet the appointed hour; Felton would not come in. Two hours later, as midnight sounded, the sentry was relieved. Now the hour had come, and Milady fell prey to impatience. The new sentry began his march in the corridor. At the end of ten minutes, Felton came. Milady was more than ready. "Listen," said the young man to the sentry, "you are not, under any conditions, to leave this door. You know that last night Milord punished a soldier for leaving his post for a moment, even though I took his place during his absence."

"Yes, I know that," the soldier said.

"I advise you, then, to maintain the strictest possible watch. I," he added, "am going inside for a second visit to this woman. I'm afraid she has sinister intentions on her own life, and I've received orders to keep close watch on her."

Good, thought Milady. *Our righteous Puritan has learned how to lie.*

As for the soldier, he only smiled. "Lord love us, Lieutenant," he said, "I never heard of an easier order to carry out, especially if Milord has authorised you to look in her bed."

Felton blushed. Under any other circumstance he'd have reprimanded the soldier for making such a crude joke but now his conscience spoke too loud for him to dare such a reproach. "If I call, come in," he said. "If anyone else comes, call me."

"Aye-aye, Lieutenant," said the soldier.

Felton entered the chamber.

Milady rose. "You've come?" she said.

"I promised you I'd come," Felton said, "and I am here."

"You promised me something else besides."

"My God! What?" said the young man who felt his knees tremble and cold sweat bead his brow in spite of his self-control.

"You promised to bring me a knife, and to leave it with me after we talked."

"Don't speak of that, Madam," said Felton. "There is no situation, no matter how terrible it may be, that can justify one of God's creatures taking her own life. I've thought hard about this, and I could never be guilty of being involved in such a sin."

"Oh? You've thought about this?" said the prisoner, seating herself on her armchair with a smile of disdain. "I, too, have thought."

"About what?"

"That I have nothing to say to a man who doesn't keep his word."

"O God, my God!" murmured Felton.

"You may retire," said Milady. "I have no more to say."

"Here is the knife!" said Felton, drawing the weapon from his pocket.

He had brought it, as promised but still he hesitated to give it to the prisoner. "Let me see it," said Milady.

"To what end?"

"Upon my honour, I'll return it to you instantly. You can set it on that table, and stay between it and me."

Felton handed the weapon to Milady, who tested its edge, then tried its point on the end of her finger.

"Good," she said, returning the knife to the young officer. "That's fine steel; you're a faithful friend, Felton."

Felton took back the weapon and laid it on the table, as agreed. Milady followed him with her eyes, and made a gesture of satisfaction. "Now," she said, "listen to me."

These words were entirely unnecessary, as the young officer stood before her expectantly, ready to devour her every word. “Felton,” Milady said, with a sad solemnity, “suppose your sister, the daughter of your father, said to you, ‘While still young and unfortunately fair to look at, I was lured into a snare. I resisted; though ambushed and threatened again and again, I resisted; though the religion I serve, and the God I adore, were blasphemed because I prayed for help from that religion and that God, I resisted; and then I was subjected to the vilest outrages, for if they couldn’t crush my soul, they could forever defile my body. In the end...’”

Milady stopped, and a bitter smile touched her lips. “In the end,” Felton said, “in the end – what did they do?”

“In the end, they decided to paralyse the resistance they couldn’t overcome. One night, they introduced a powerful narcotic into my drinking water. I’d scarcely finished my meal when I felt myself slowly falling into a strange torpor. Though I wasn’t suspicious at first, I felt a vague fear, and tried to fight off sleep. I got up and tried to get to the window to call for help but my legs refused to carry me. It seemed as if the ceiling was descending on my head, crushing me with its weight. I reached out my arms, I tried to speak but all I could make were inarticulate sounds. An irresistible drowsiness came over me. Feeling as if I was about to fall, I leaned on a chair but soon my arms grew numb and even that support failed me. I fell to one knee, then both; I tried to pray but my tongue was frozen. So God must have neither heard nor seen me, and I slipped to the floor, succumbing to a sleep that resembled death. Of all that happened during that sleep, or the time that passed while it lasted, I have no memory. I recall nothing until I awoke in a luxurious bed, in a round chamber, sumptuously furnished, and into which light penetrated only through an opening in the ceiling. No door seemed to give entrance into this room. You might call it a magnificent prison. It was a long time before I was able to clearly make out what sort of place I found myself in, or take in the details I now describe. I couldn’t seem to fully awaken, and my mind struggled to throw off the heavy shadows of sleep. I had vague recollections of movement, of a rolling carriage, of a horrible dream that had drained away all my strength. But all this was so dark and indistinct in my mind that the events seemed to belong to another life than mine, though merged somehow with my own in a fantastic distortion of reality. At times, my condition seemed so strange that I thought I was dreaming. I staggered to my feet. My clothes were near me, on a chair. I didn’t remember either undressing or going to bed. Then, little by little, reality dawned on me, and my modesty was outraged. I was no longer in the house where I lived! As far as I could tell by the light of the sun through the opening above, the day was already mostly gone. It was evening when I’d fallen prey to sleep, so I must have slept for almost twenty-four hours. What had happened during this long slumber? I dressed as rapidly as I could but my dizziness and slow movements showed that the narcotic hadn’t yet entirely worn off. My chamber had apparently been furnished for a woman, and the most accomplished coquette couldn’t have wished for anything more than what could be found in that apartment. Certainly, I wasn’t the first captive to find herself locked in this splendid prison – but you understand, Felton, that the more beautiful the prison seemed, the greater was my fear. For it was a prison, and I tried in vain to escape. I sounded all the walls, hoping to discover a door but everywhere they seemed solid. I went around that chamber maybe twenty times, looking for a way out – but there was none. I sank, exhausted with fatigue and terror, into an armchair. Now night was coming fast, and with the night my terrors redoubled. I didn’t know if it was safe to stay where I was seated; it seemed to me I was surrounded by unknown dangers that I might fall prey to at any moment. Though I’d eaten nothing since the night before, my fear overrode all feelings of hunger. No noise came from outside that might enable me to measure the passage of time. I could only suppose it was seven or eight o’clock in the evening, as it was the month of October and it was already dark. All at once, the creak of a door turning on its hinges made me start. A globe of flame appeared above the glazed opening in the ceiling, throwing a bright light into my chamber, and I realised with terror that a man was standing within a few paces of me. A table, with two covered dishes bearing a complete dinner, stood as if by magic in the middle of the chamber. The man was he who had pursued me for a full year, he who had vowed my dishonour, and who, at the first words from his mouth, made me understand that he had achieved it the previous night.”

“Lascivious beast!” murmured Felton.

“A beast? Oh, yes!” Milady cried.

The young officer’s soul seemed to hang on her every word, so fascinated was he by this incredible story. “Yes, a lascivious beast, who seemed to think that, having conquered me in my sleep, his battle was won. He came in hopes I would be overcome by my shame, now that my dishonour had been consummated. He came to offer his fortune in exchange for my love. All the disgust that the heart of a woman can contain, I poured in words of contempt and disdain on this man. No doubt he was used to such reproaches, for he was calm and smiling as he listened to me, arms crossed on his chest. Then, when he thought I was finished, he advanced toward me. I sprang toward the table, seized a knife, and placed it at my breast. ‘Take one step more,’ I said, ‘and on top of my dishonour, you’ll have my death to reproach yourself with.’”

“He couldn’t doubt it, for my look, my voice, my entire being conveyed a conviction that would persuade even the most perverse mind. He stopped. ‘Your death!’ he said to me. ‘Oh, no! You’re far too charming a mistress for me to consent to lose you this way, after having possessed you only once. Goodbye, sweetheart! I’ll wait to pay you another visit until your mood has improved.’ At these words, he blew a whistle. The globe of flame that lit the room rose and disappeared, and I found myself again in darkness. The sound of the door opening and closing was repeated an instant later, then the flaming globe descended anew, and I found myself alone. It was a horrible moment. If I’d had any doubts about my terrible situation, those doubts had vanished in the face of the desperate reality. I was in the power of a man whom I not only detested but actively despised – a man capable of anything, and who had already given me proof of the extent of his depravity.”

“But who was this man?” demanded Felton.

“I passed the night in a chair, starting at the smallest sound – for, toward midnight, the lamp had been put out, and I was again in darkness. But the night passed without any fresh attempts at outrage on the part of my persecutor. Day came, and I saw the table had disappeared – but I still had the knife in my hand. That knife was my only hope. I was exhausted. My eyes burned from insomnia, as I hadn’t dared sleep for a single moment. But the light of day reassured me and I threw myself on the bed, though without losing hold of my ally, the knife that I hid under my pillow. When I awoke, a fresh table had appeared. This time, in spite of my terrors, in spite of my anguish, I felt a consuming hunger. It was forty-eight hours since I’d eaten. I had some bread and some fruit; then, recalling the narcotic dissolved in the water I’d drunk, I shunned the water that was on the table and filled my glass at a marble fountain in the wall, near my vanity. However, despite this precaution, I was prey for some time to an awful anxiety. But in this case, my dread was unfounded, and I passed the day without experiencing any of the things I feared. I did take the precaution of emptying half the water from the carafe, so my suspicions might not be noticed. The evening came, and with it, the dark. But no matter how deep the darkness, my eyes grew used to it. I saw, through the shadows, the table sink through the floor. A quarter-hour later it reappeared, bearing my supper. An instant after that, thanks to the lamp, my chamber was once again illuminated. I resolved to eat only those items that couldn’t possibly have had a sedative introduced into them. My meal consisted of two eggs and some fruit. I then filled another glass of water at my trusty fountain and drank it. After the first few swallows, I noticed that it didn’t seem to taste the same as it had that morning. I was seized by suspicion and stopped but I had already drunk half the glass. I threw away the rest with horror, and waited, the cold sweat of fear on my brow. No doubt some invisible watcher had observed me drawing my water from the fountain and had taken advantage of my confidence in it to ensure my ruin – so coldly calculated, so cruelly pursued. Not half an hour had passed before I began to feel the same symptoms as before: only this time, as I’d had only half a glass of water, I was able to fight it off longer, and instead of falling completely asleep, I sank into a state of lethargy that left me aware of what was happening around me, while robbing me of the strength to defend myself or flee. I dragged myself toward the bed, to seek the only defence I had left – my knife, my saviour – but I couldn’t reach the pillows. I fell to my knees, my hands clenched on a bedpost, and I was certain I was lost.” Felton became dangerously pale, and a convulsive shudder ran through his body. “And what was most frightful,” Milady continued, her voice altered, as if she were reliving the agony of that terrible moment, “was that, this time, I was fully conscious of the danger I was in. It was as if my soul were awake while my body was asleep. I could still see; I could still hear; and though it felt as if I were in a dream, it was not the less dreadful for that. I saw the lamp ascend and leave me in darkness; then I heard the creak of the door, so familiar to me, though I’d heard it only twice before. I felt instinctively that someone was approaching me. They say those lost in the American desert have the same feeling at the approach of a deadly serpent. I forced myself to make an effort, to try to cry out, and through an incredible act of will I managed to rise up ... only to immediately collapse, and fall into the arms of my persecutor.”

“Tell me, who was this man?” cried the young officer.

Milady saw with a glance the agonies she was putting Felton through by dwelling on every detail of her story – but she was determined not to spare him a single pang of torture. The more pain he suffered, the more certain it was that he’d avenge her. She continued, then, as if she hadn’t heard his exclamation, or as if she thought it was not yet the moment to reply to it. “But this time, the beast didn’t have to deal with a kind of dead body, without feeling. As I told you, though I couldn’t regain control of my faculties, I still had a feeling of acute danger. I struggled, then, with all the force I could muster, and I must have put up a long resistance, weak though I was, for I heard him cry out, ‘These miserable Puritans! I knew they were a trial to their executioners but I never imagined they’d be so hard on their seducers.’”

“Alas! My desperate resistance couldn’t last long. I felt my strength fail me, and this time it wasn’t sleep that enabled the coward to take advantage of me but overpowering dizziness.” Felton listened without a sound except for a sort of suppressed moan but the sweat streamed from his marble brow, and his hand, under his clothes, pawed at his chest. “When I came to, my first impulse was to feel under my pillow for the knife I hadn’t been able to reach. If it hadn’t served me as a defence, at least it might grant me expiation. But on taking up this knife, Felton, a terrible idea came to me. I’ve sworn to tell you everything, and I will tell you everything – I promised you the whole truth and you’ll have it, even if it means my ruin.”

“The idea came into your mind to avenge yourself on this man, didn’t it?” cried Felton.

“Yes!” Milady said. “This was no thought for a Christian, I knew – but doubtless that eternal enemy of our souls, that lion roaring ceaselessly around us, breathed it into my ear. What can I tell you, Felton?” Milady continued, in the tone of a woman accusing herself of a crime. “This idea came to me, and wouldn’t leave. It’s because of this homicidal thought that I’m now being punished.”

“Go on,” Felton said. “I want to see you wreak your revenge.”

“I resolved it would take place as soon as possible. I had no doubt he would return the following night. During the day I had nothing to fear. So when the hour of breakfast came, I didn’t hesitate to eat and drink. I was determined to only pretend to eat supper but to actually take nothing. The meal from the morning would have to make up for the fast of the evening. Only I hid a glass of water that had come with my breakfast, as thirst had been the worst of my sufferings during that forty-eight hours without eating or drinking. The day passed away, with no other effect on me other than to affirm the resolution I’d taken. But I took care that my face shouldn’t betray what was in my heart, for I had no doubt that I was watched. Several times I even felt a smile touch my lips. Felton, I don’t dare tell you the idea that made me smile; you would feel such horror...”

“Go on, go on,” said Felton. “You can see how I’m listening. I must know the end!”

“Evening came, with its usual routine: during the darkness, my supper was served, and when the lamp was relit, I sat down to table. I ate nothing but a little fruit, and though I pretended to pour water from the carafe, I drank only what I’d saved in my glass. This substitution was made so carefully that spies, if there were any, could have had no suspicions. After supper, I displayed the same signs of lethargy as the night before – but this time, as I succumbed to the dizziness, or as if I’d become used to it, I dragged myself to my bed and pretended to fall asleep. And this time, I found my knife under the pillow, and while feigning sleep, I gripped the handle desperately. Two hours passed during which nothing happened. Dear God! If only I could have said that of the night before! I even began to fear he would *not* come. Eventually I saw the lamp rise softly and disappear into the heights of the ceiling. My chamber filled with shadows but I tried intently to see through the darkness. Nearly ten minutes passed. I could hear nothing but the sound of the beating of my heart. I prayed to heaven for him to come. Finally I heard the familiar sound as the door opened and closed. I heard, despite the thickness of the carpet, a step that made the floor creak; I saw, despite the darkness, a shadow approach my bed.”

“Faster! Faster!” Felton said. “Can’t you see that every word burns me like molten lead?”

“Then,” continued Milady, “I gathered all my strength, as I told myself that the hour of vengeance – or rather, of justice – had struck. I saw myself as another Judith; I readied myself, my knife in my hand, and when I saw him near me, reaching out his arms to find his victim, then, with a final cry of anguish and despair, I struck him in the middle of the chest. The wretch! He’d foreseen everything. His chest was covered with a coat of mail, and the knife turned against it. ‘Ah ha!’ he cried, seizing my arms and wrestling from me the knife that had served me so poorly. ‘So you want to take my life, my pretty Puritan? But that’s worse than hatred – that’s ingratitude! *Come*, calm yourself, my girl. I thought you might be ready now to be more congenial. Well, I’m not one of these tyrants who holds women by force. So you don’t love me? With my usual egotism, I doubted it – but now I’m convinced. Tomorrow, you’ll be free.’”

“But by then my only desire’s that he should kill me. ‘Take care,’ I told him, ‘for my freedom will be your dishonour. Yes, as soon as I’m away from here, I’ll tell everything! I’ll describe the violence you’ve used against me; I’ll describe my captivity; I’ll denounce this palace of infamy. You have a lofty position, Milord but tremble! Above you is the king, and above the king is God.’”

“Despite his self-possession, at this my persecutor let slip an angry movement. I’d not see the expression on his face but I felt his arm tremble under my hand. ‘Then you mustn’t leave here,’ he said.

‘Good!’ I cried. ‘Then the place of my suffering will be the same as my tomb. Here I will die, and you’ll see if an accusing phantom isn’t more terrible than a living threat!’

‘You’ll be allowed no weapons.’

‘But there’s a weapon that despair gives to every creature who has the courage to use it. I’ll allow myself to die of hunger.’

‘Come, now,’ the wretch said, ‘isn’t peace better than that sort of war? I’ll set you free this very moment. I’ll proclaim your virtue far and wide, and name you the Lucretia of England.’

‘And I’ll say you are the *Sextus*! I’ll denounce you before men as I’ve denounced you before God, and if, like Lucretia, I must sign my accusation in my own blood, I’ll do so.’

‘Indeed?’ said my enemy, in a tone of mockery. ‘Well, that’s quite another thing. Faith! All things considered, you’re fine right here. You’ll want for nothing, and if you let yourself die of hunger, it will be your own fault.’ At these words, he retired. I heard the door open and shut, and I was left, dismayed – though less by grief, I must confess, than by the shame at having failed to avenge myself. He kept his word. The day, the night, and the next day passed without my seeing him again. But I also kept my word, and neither ate nor drank; I was, as I’d told him, resolved to let myself die of hunger. I passed the day and night in prayer, for I hoped that God would pardon my suicide. The second night, the door opened. I was lying on the floor, for my strength had begun to abandon me. At the noise I raised myself on one arm. ‘Well,’ said a voice that was graven too deeply on my memory to ever be forgotten, ‘well, have we softened a little and will we not pay for our liberty with a single promise of

silence? Come, I'm a good sort of prince, and though I don't usually care for Puritans, I do them justice – especially female Puritans, if they're pretty. Come, take a little oath for me on the cross, and I won't ask anything more of you.'

'On the cross!' I cried, rising, for at the sound of that detested voice I'd recovered all my strength. 'On the cross! I swear that no promise, no threat, no torture shall ever silence me – on the cross! I swear to denounce you everywhere as a murderer, a coward, and a despoiler of honour – on the cross! I swear, if ever I leave this place, to demand vengeance on you from the whole human race.'

'Beware!' said the voice in a tone of menace I hadn't heard before. 'I've extraordinary means that I'll use only as a last resort to shut your mouth or at least ensure that no one will believe a word you say.' I gathered all my strength to reply with a burst of laughter. He saw then that between us was total war, a war to the death. 'Listen,' he said, 'I'll give you the rest of tonight and all day tomorrow to reflect. Promise to be silent, and I'll surround you with wealth, preferment, and even honour. Threaten to talk, and I'll condemn you to shame and infamy.'

'You,' I cried, 'will condemn *me*?'

'To shame and infamy, eternal and irreversible!'

'You!' I repeated. Oh, I tell you, Felton, I thought he must be mad!

'Yes, me,' he replied.

'Get out,' I said. 'Get out, unless you want to see me dash my head against that wall before your eyes!'

'Very well,' he said, 'as you wish. Until tomorrow night!'

'Tomorrow night!' I echoed, falling to the floor and biting the carpet with rage...

Felton leaned himself against a table, and Milady saw with demonic glee that his strength might not even last until the end of her story. After a moment of silence that Milady spent in observing the young man who listened to her, she continued her story: "It was almost three days since I'd eaten or drunk anything, and I was suffering terribly. At times my mind was clouded, and my vision was veiled: this was delirium. When evening came, I was so weak I was constantly fainting, and every time I fainted I thanked God, for I thought I was about to die. During one of these swoons I heard the door open, and terror restored me to my senses. My persecutor entered, followed by a masked man. My nemesis was also masked but I recognised his step, and the imposing air that Hell has granted him for the affliction of humanity. 'Well,' he said to me, 'have you decided to swear the oath I've asked for?'

'As you know, a Puritan only gives his word once, and mine you have heard: that I'll pursue you on earth for the justice of man, or in heaven for the justice of God!'

'You persist then?'

'I swear before God, who hears me that I will bear witness of your crime before the entire world, and never stop until I've found an avenger.'

'You're a whore,' he said in a voice of thunder, 'and you'll suffer the punishment of whores! Branded in the eyes of the world you wish to rouse, try to prove to that world that you are neither guilty nor mad!' Then addressing the man who accompanied him, he said, 'Executioner, do your duty.'

"His name! *His name!*" cried Felton. "Tell me!"

"Despite my cries, despite my resistance, for I began to understand that I was about to be subjected to something worse than death, the executioner seized me and threw me to the floor, restraining me in his brutal grasp. Then suffocated by sobs, almost losing my mind, calling out to God, who didn't hear me, I suddenly screamed with pain and shame – for a searing fire, a red-hot iron, the iron of the executioner, had been burned into the flesh of my shoulder." Felton uttered a moan. "Here," said Milady, rising with the majesty of a queen, "here, Felton, behold the new martyrdom invented for a pure young girl, victim of the brutality of a depraved scoundrel. Learn to know the heart of men, and henceforth don't be so easily made into the instrument of their unjust revenge."

Milady, in a single rapid movement, opened her dress, tore back the cambric that covered her upper body, blushing with feigned anger, and shame, displayed to the young man the ineffaceable brand that dishonoured her beautiful shoulder. "But that's a *fleur-de-lys*!" cried Felton.

"That shows the full extent of their infamy," Milady replied. "With an English brand, there would be a record of what court had imposed it on me, and I could make a public appeal to prove no such record exists. But the brand of France ... oh, by that, I was branded indeed."

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A Scene from Classical Tragedy

This was too much for Felton. Pale, paralysed, overcome by this frightful revelation, dazzled by the superhuman beauty of this woman, who unveiled herself before him with an immodesty that seemed to him sublime, he fell to his knees before her, as the early Christians did before those pure and holy martyrs whom the persecuting emperors offered up in the circus to a bloody-minded populace. In his eyes the brand disappeared, and only the beauty remained. "Forgive me! Forgive me!" cried Felton. "Oh, forgive me!" But in his eyes, Milady read: *Love me!*

"Forgive you? For what?" she asked.

"Forgive me for having joined with your persecutors."

Milady held out her hand to him. "So young! So beautiful!" Felton cried and covered her hand with kisses. Milady favoured him with one of those looks that makes a slave out of a king. Felton was a Puritan: he gave up her hand and began kissing her feet. He no longer loved her – he worshipped her. Once this crisis was past, and Milady seemed to have regained that self-possession that had never really left her; once Felton had watched her replace her veil of modesty over those treasures of love that were only hidden from him to make him desire them all the more, he said: "Now, I have only one more thing to ask of you: the name of your one, true executioner – because for me there is only one; the other was nothing more than a tool."

"What, Brother?" said Milady. "Must I name him again? Haven't you guessed?"

"You mean, *him*?" said Felton. "Again? Him, always? Then, the real culprit..."

"The real culprit's," Milady said, "the pillager of England, the persecutor of true believers, the cowardly ravisher of the honour of so many women; he who, to satisfy the lust of his corrupt heart, is about to shed the blood of two realms; who protects the Protestants today, only to betray them tomorrow..."

"Buckingham! It's Buckingham!" cried Felton in a frenzy.

Milady hid her face in her hands, as if she couldn't bear the shame this name recalled to her. "Buckingham, the executioner of *this* ... angel?" Felton frothed. "And thou hast not struck him down, my God? Thou hast left him noble, and honoured, and powerful, to the ruin of us all!"

"God abandons him who abandons himself," Milady said quietly.

"But he shall draw upon his head the punishment meant for the damned!" Felton continued in rising exaltation. "The Lord wills that human vengeance shall precede heavenly justice!"

"But men fear him and will spare him."

"But I," said Felton, "don't fear him and won't spare him!" Milady felt her soul bathed in infernal joy. "But how can Lord Winter, my protector, father be mixed up in all this?" Felton asked.

"Listen, Felton," Milady replied. "At the side of craven and contemptible men one often finds great and generous natures. I had a fiancé, a man whom I loved, and who loved me – with a heart like yours, Felton, a man like you. I went to him and told him everything; that man knew me, and didn't doubt me for an instant. He was a great noble, a man equal to Buckingham in every respect. He said nothing, only belted on his sword, enveloped himself in his cloak, and went directly to Buckingham Palace."

"Yes, yes," said Felton. "I know how he felt! But with such men as Buckingham, you can't use a sword – it must be the dagger."

"Buckingham had left England the night before, sent as ambassador to Spain to demand the hand of the Infanta for King Charles, who was then only Prince of Wales. My fiancé returned.

"'Listen to me,' he said. 'That man is gone, so for the moment, at least, he's escaped my vengeance. But let us be united, as we'd planned – and then you may leave it to Lord Winter to maintain his honour and that of his wife.'

"Lord Winter!" cried Felton.

"Yes," said Milady, "the late Lord Winter. And now you can see it all, can't you? Buckingham was on the Continent for nearly a year. A week before his return, the elder Lord Winter suddenly died, leaving me his sole heir. Who killed him? God knows, doubtless, as He knows all but I accuse no one..."

"Oh, what an abyss of evil!" Felton cried.

"Lord Winter died without revealing anything to his brother. He'd planned to conceal the terrible secret until it burst like thunder over the head of the culprit. Your protector saw nothing more than a misalliance between his elder brother and a penniless girl. I knew I couldn't look for support to a man cheated out of his hope of inheritance. I went to France, resolved to live there for the rest of my life. But my entire fortune was in England; when communications were cut by the war, I ran out of money and had to return. Six days ago I landed at Portsmouth."

"And so?" said Felton.

"So, Buckingham had doubtless heard somehow of my return. He spoke of me to Lord Winter, who was already prejudiced against me, and told him his sister-in-law was a whore, a branded woman. The pure, noble voice of my husband was no longer there to defend me. Lord Winter believed everything he was told, all the more easily because it was in his interest to believe it. He had me arrested, conducted here, and placed under your guard. You know the rest: the day after tomorrow, he banishes me to transportation – the day after tomorrow, I shall descend to the level of a convict. Oh, the web is tightly woven! It's a clever plot, and my honour will never survive it. So you see, Felton, there's nothing left for me but death. Felton – *give me that knife!*"

And at these words, as if all her strength was exhausted, Milady fell limp and languishing into the young officer's arms – and he, intoxicated with love, fury, and repressed sensuality, received her with exhilaration. He pressed her against his heart, trembling at the breath from her beautiful mouth, lost in the feeling of her breast against his own. "No, no," he murmured. "No, thou shalt live, in honour and purity – thou shalt live to triumph over thy enemies."

Milady slowly pushed against him with her hand, while drawing him nearer with her look; while Felton, on his part, took hold of her again, and implored her like a divinity. "Oh, death! Death!" she said, raising her voice and her eyes. "Death rather than shame! Felton, my Brother, my friend – I beg you!"

"No," cried Felton. "No, thou shalt live, and be avenged!"

"Felton, I bring misfortune to everyone around me! Abandon me, Felton! Felton, let me die!"

"Then let us die together!" he cried and pressed his lips on those of the prisoner.

Several sharp knocks sounded from the door. This time, Milady really pushed him away. "Listen," she said. "We've been overheard. Someone's coming! It's all over! We're lost!"

"No," said Felton. "It's only the sentry warning me of the changing of the guard."

"Then run to the door and open it yourself."

Felton obeyed; this woman already ruled his mind and his soul. He found a sergeant commanding a guard patrol. "Well, what is it?" the young lieutenant demanded.

"You told me to open the door if I heard anyone call for help," said the sentry, "but you forgot to leave me the key. I heard you cry out but couldn't understand what you said. I tried to open the door but it was locked from inside, so I called the sergeant."

"And here I am," said the sergeant.

Felton, bewildered and nearly out of his head, stood there speechless. Milady realised she had to take hold of the situation. She ran to the table, took up the knife Felton had placed there, and cried, "And by what right do you prevent me from dying?"

"Great God!" cried Felton, seeing the knife glitter in her hand.

At that moment, a burst of ironical laughter reverberated from the corridor. The baron, attracted by the commotion, stood in the doorway in his nightgown, his sword under his arm. "Ha ha ha! Here we are, at the final act of the tragedy," he said. "You see, Felton, the drama's followed all the steps I predicted. But don't worry, no blood will flow here."

Milady realised that all was lost unless she gave Felton immediate and terrible proof of her courage. "You're wrong, Milord, blood *will* flow – and may it drown those who are responsible for it!"

Felton cried out and threw himself toward her but too late: Milady stabbed herself. But the blade fortunately – or rather, skilfully – struck the banded metal corset that, at this period, defended a woman's abdomen like a cuirass. It slid along this, tearing her dress, and penetrated at a slant between the flesh and the ribs. Milady's dress was nonetheless drenched with blood in a second. She fell to the floor in seeming unconsciousness. Felton seized the knife. "See, Milord," he said, wrapped in gloom, "see here a woman under my guard, who's killed herself!"

"Easy, Felton," said Lord Winter. "She's not dead – demons don't die so easily. Be easy, and go wait for me in my rooms."

"But Milord..."

"Go. That's an order." At this command from his superior, Felton obeyed; but while leaving, he slid the knife into his jacket. As to Lord Winter, he contented himself with calling for the woman who served Milady. When she had come, he commended the still-fainting prisoner to her care and left the woman alone with her. However, since despite his suspicions the wound might be serious, he immediately sent a rider to fetch a doctor.

## Escape

As Lord Winter had thought, Milady's wound wasn't dangerous. As soon as Milady was alone with the woman whom the baron had called, and who hastened to undress her, she opened her eyes. However, it was important to pretend to be weak and in pain – no hard thing for an actress like Milady. The poor woman was completely duped by the prisoner, so much so that she insisted on staying to watch over her all night, despite Milady's feeble protests. Fortunately, the woman's presence didn't interfere with Milady's thinking. There could be no more doubt but that Felton was convinced: Felton was hers. In his current state of mind, if an angel appeared to him to accuse Milady of sin, he'd take the celestial being for an agent of Satan. Milady smiled at this thought; though Felton was now her only hope, her only means of salvation, he was hers. But Lord Winter might suspect him, and might have Felton watched. Toward four in the morning the doctor arrived. However, in the time since Milady had stabbed herself, the wound had closed; the doctor couldn't measure either its direction or its depth. He could tell only, from Milady's pulse, that the case was not serious. In the morning, Milady sent away the woman who'd attended her, under the pretext that she hadn't slept well during the night and needed rest. She was focused on a single hope, that Felton would come at the breakfast hour – but Felton did not come. *Had her fears been realised? Was Felton, under suspicion by the baron, about to fail her at the decisive moment?*

She had only one more day: Lord Winter had announced her embarkation for the 23rd and it was already the morning of the 22nd. Nevertheless, she still waited patiently for the hour of dinner. Although she'd eaten nothing in the morning, dinner was brought at the usual time. And Milady saw with a shock that the soldiers guarding her now wore different uniforms. She then risked asking what had become of Felton, and was told he'd left the castle on horseback an hour before. She asked if the baron was still in the castle. The soldier said he was, and had given orders to be informed if the prisoner wanted to speak with him. Milady replied that she was too weak at the moment, and her only desire was to be left alone. The soldier went out, leaving the dinner covered. Felton had been sent away, and the marines he commanded had been replaced – so Felton was no longer trusted. This was the final blow to the prisoner. Once she was alone, she got up. The bed in which she'd remained so they would believe her seriously wounded now burned her like a hot brazier. She inspected the door: the baron had had a plank nailed over the grating, no doubt fearing she would use the opening in some diabolical way to seduce her guards. But Milady was pleased. She was now free to indulge her rage without being seen. She paced her chamber with the fury of a mad woman, like a tigress trapped in an iron cage. Certainly, if she'd been left with the knife, instead of killing herself, she'd have been trying to devise some way to kill the baron. At six o'clock Lord Winter came in, armed to the teeth. This man, whom before these events Milady had regarded as a gentleman buffoon, had become an admirable jailer: he seemed prepared for anything, informed of everything, and able to guess whatever he couldn't know. A single look at Milady told him what had been passing through her mind. "So it's come to that," he said. "Well, you won't kill me today. You have no more weapons, and besides, I'm on my guard. You had begun to pervert my poor Felton; he was succumbing to your infernal influence but I'll save him. It's all over, and he'll never see you again. Gather your things, for tomorrow you go. I'd postponed the embarkation to the 24th but I think it's more likely to happen if it happens sooner. Tomorrow by noon I'll have the order for your exile, signed by Buckingham. If you speak a single word to anyone before boarding the ship, my sergeant has orders to blow your brains out. If, on the ship, you speak a word to anyone before the captain permits it, he has orders to cast you into the sea. That's settled. Goodbye then. That's all I've to say to you today. Tomorrow I'll see you again to take my final leave of you."

And upon these words, the baron left. Milady had listened to this menacing tirade with a smile of disdain on her lips but with rage in her heart. Supper was served. Milady felt she must gather all her strength and resources. She didn't know what might happen in the night that approached so menacingly, for dark clouds were rolling across the sky, and distant lightning portended a storm. Toward ten o'clock, the storm broke. Milady felt some consolation in seeing nature mirror the turmoil in her heart. Thunder growled in the sky like an echo of the rage in her spirit. It seemed to her that the squall, as it bent the branches of the trees and tore away their leaves, also roared through her head; she howled like a hurricane, and her voice was lost in the great voice of nature, who, like her, seemed to cry out in despair. All at once she heard a rap at the window, and in a flash of lightning, she saw a man's face appear beyond the bars. She ran to the window and opened it. "Felton!" she cried. "I'm saved!"

"Yes!" said Felton. "But silence, silence! I need time to saw through these bars. Just make sure I can't be seen through the grating in the door."

"They've put a plank over the grating," Milady said. "It's proof that the Lord is on our side!"

"Good! God's blinded them!" Felton said.

"But what should I do?" asked Milady.

"Nothing, nothing – just shut the window. Go to bed, or even better, stay dressed but get under the covers. When I'm done here, I'll knock on the window. Will you be able to follow me?"

"Oh, yes!"

"What about your wound?"

"It hurts but it won't stop me."

"Then be ready the moment I signal."

Milady shut the window, put out the lamp, and went, as Felton had suggested, to huddle in bed. Amid the groaning of the storm she heard the grinding of the file against the bars, and with every flash of lightning she saw the shadow of Felton against the sky. She passed an hour unable to breathe, panting, and cold sweat on her brow, her heart hammering in an agony of fear at every movement she heard from the corridor. There are hours that last a year. At the end of that hour, Felton rapped again. Milady sprang from her bed and opened the window. Two bars were gone, leaving an opening large enough for a person to pass through. "Are you ready?" Felton asked.

"Yes. What should I bring with me?"

"Money if you have any."

"Fortunately, they left me what I had."

"All the better, for I've spent all mine in hiring a vessel."

"Take this," said Milady, putting a sack of the cardinal's gold into Felton's hands.

Felton dropped the sack to the foot of the wall. "Now," he said, "are you ready to go?"

"I'm coming."

Milady climbed up on a chair and passed her upper body through the window. She saw that the young man was suspended over the abyss by a ladder of rope. The void below terrified her, and for the first time, she was reminded that she was a woman. "I was afraid of this," said Felton.

"It's nothing, it's nothing," Milady said. "I can climb down with my eyes closed."

"Do you trust me?"

"Need you ask?"

"Put your hands together. Cross them – that's right."

Felton tied her wrists together with his handkerchief and then over the handkerchief he looped a cord. "What are you doing?" Milady asked, surprised.

"Put your arms around my neck, and don't be afraid."

"But I'll make you lose your balance and we'll fall to our death!"

"Trust me; I'm a sailor."

There wasn't a second to lose. Milady put her arms around Felton's neck and let herself slip out the window. Felton began to climb slowly down, rung by rung. Despite the weight of their bodies, the gusts from the hurricane made them swing in the air. All at once Felton stopped. "What is it?" Milady asked.

"Quiet," said Felton. "I hear footsteps."

"We've been discovered!"

There was silence for a few moments, except for the wind. "No," Felton said, "it's all right."

"But what was that noise?"

"It's the patrol, making their rounds."

"Where will they go?"

"Right below us."

"We'll be seen!"

"Not unless there's a flash of lightning."

"They'll bump into the foot of the ladder."

"Fortunately, it's six feet too short."

"Here they come! My God!"

"Silence!" They hung there, motionless and breathless, twenty feet in the air, the whole time the soldiers passed beneath them, laughing and talking. It was a terrible moment for the fugitives. The patrol passed: the sound of their steps receded and the murmur of their voices dwindled and died away. "Now," said Felton, "we're safe." Milady let out her breath in a deep sigh and fainted. Felton continued the descent. When he arrived at the bottom of the ladder and found no more support for his feet, he clung to the ropes by his hands alone. When he reached the bottom rung, he let himself down by the strength of his wrists until his feet touched the ground. He bent over, picked up the sack of gold, and gripped its closed end between his teeth. Then he took Milady in his arms and set off briskly in the opposite direction from the patrol. Soon he left the path beneath the walls and climbed down across the rocks. When he reached the edge of the sea, he whistled. A similar signal replied, and five minutes later a boat appeared, rowed by four men. The boat approached as close as it could to the shore but it was too shallow to come in all the way. Felton went into the surging water up to his waist, unwilling to trust his precious burden to anyone else. Though the storm had begun to abate, the sea was still violent. The little boat was tossed on the waves like a nutshell. "To the sloop," Felton ordered. "Lively, now!"

The four men plied their oars but the sea was too rough for them to make much headway. But every moment they were farther from the castle – that was the main thing. The night was very dark, and soon it was almost impossible to make out the shore from the boat, so it wasn't likely anyone would be able to see the boat from shore. A black shadow appeared to rise from the sea. It was the sloop. While the boat ploughed through the waves with all the force its four rowers could muster, Felton untied the cord and then the handkerchief that bound Milady's hands. When her hands were free, he scooped up some seawater and sprinkled it on her face. Milady sighed and opened her eyes. "Where am I?" she said.

"Saved," the young officer replied.

"Saved!" she cried. "Saved! Yes, there's the sky, and here is the sea! I'm breathing the air of freedom. Ah! Thank you, Felton ... thank you."

The young man pressed her to his heart. "But what's wrong with my hands?" Milady asked. "It feels like my wrists have been crushed in a vice."

She held out her arms; her wrists were bruised. "I'm so sorry!" said Felton, looking at her beautiful hands and shaking his head with remorse.

"No, no, it's nothing!" Milady cried. "I remember now."

She looked around, as if searching for something. "It's here," Felton said, nudging the sack of gold with his foot.

They neared the sloop. The sailor on watch hailed the boat, and the boat replied. "What ship is that?" asked Milady.

"The one I've hired for you."

"Where will it take me?"

"Wherever you like, after you've put me ashore at Portsmouth."

"What are you going to do at Portsmouth?" Milady asked.

"Execute Lord Winter's orders," Felton said with a grim smile.

"What orders?"

"You don't understand?"

"No," Milady said. "Please explain what you mean."

"Since he mistrusted me and decided to guard you himself, Lord Winter sent me in his place to get Buckingham's signature on your order of transportation."

"But if he mistrusted you, how could he confide such an order to you?"

"How would I know what I was carrying?"

"I suppose that's true. So you're going to Portsmouth?"

"I have no time to lose. Tomorrow is the 23rd, and tomorrow Buckingham sets sail with his fleet."

"He sets sail tomorrow? For where?"

"For La Rochelle."

"But he mustn't sail!" cried Milady, forgetting herself in a momentary panic.

"Don't worry," Felton replied. "He will not sail."

Milady started with joy. She could read to the depths of the young man's heart, and there she saw written the death of Buckingham. "Felton, you..." she said, "you are as great as Judas Maccabeus! If you die, I'll die with you. That is all I can say."

"Quiet!" said Felton. "We've arrived." In fact, the bow of the boat was touching the side of the ship. Felton climbed first onto the ladder, then gave his hand to Milady, while the sailors assisted her, as the sea was still quite rough. A moment later they were on deck. "Captain," said Felton, "here is the person I spoke of, whom you must convey safe and sound to France."

"For a thousand pistoles," said the captain.

"I've already given you five hundred."

"That's right," said the captain.

"And here are the other five hundred," said Milady, resting her hand on the sack of gold.

"No," said the captain. "I've already made a deal with this young man that the other five hundred pistoles aren't due until we arrive at Boulogne."

"And will we arrive there?"

"Safe and sound," said the captain, "as sure as my name's Jack Butler."

"Well," said Milady, "if you keep your word, I won't give you five hundred pistoles, and I'll give you a thousand."

"Hurrah for you then, my pretty lady," said the captain, "and may God send me customers like Your Ladyship more often!"

"In the meantime," said Felton, "take me to the small bay at Chichester near Portsmouth as we agreed." The captain responded by giving the necessary orders, and toward seven in the morning the little ship dropped anchor in the designated bay. During this passage, Felton told Milady everything: how, instead of going to London, he had hired the small ship; how he'd climbed the wall by fixing marlinspikes in the gaps between the stones, to give him footholds as he climbed; and how, once he'd arrived at the bars of the window, he'd attached the ladder. Milady knew the rest. For her part, Milady undertook to encourage Felton in his scheme but soon saw that the young fanatic had more need of restraint than encouragement. It was agreed that Milady would wait for Felton until ten o'clock. If he didn't return by ten o'clock, she was to set sail. Then, if he was still free, he was to rejoin her in France at the Carmelite convent in Bethune.

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What Happened at Portsmouth on 23 August 1628

Felton took his leave of Milady the way a brother about to go for a stroll says goodbye to his sister: he kissed her hand. At first glance he seemed to be in his customary state of calm but there was a strange light in his eyes, as if he had a fever. His brow was unusually pale, his jaw was clenched, and he seemed to bite off his words, all indications something dark was working within him. As long as he was in the boat carrying him to shore, he kept his face turned toward Milady, who stood on the deck, following him with her eyes. Neither was worried about pursuit, as no one ever entered Milady's chamber before nine, and it would take three hours to get from the castle to Portsmouth. Felton set foot on shore, climbed the narrow trail that led to the top of the cliff, saluted Milady a final time, and took the path toward town. The path sloped downward, and after a hundred paces he could see nothing of the sloop but its mast. He hurried toward Portsmouth that he could see less than half a league away, its houses and steeples emerging from the morning mist. Beyond Portsmouth the sea was covered with vessels, whose masts, like a forest of poplars made leafless by winter, rocked with each breath of wind. Felton, marching briskly, reviewed what ten years among the Puritans had provided him with accusations, true or false, against the royal favourite. When he compared the public crimes of this minister – shocking crimes that seemed to him almost Continental – with the private crimes of which he was accused by Milady, Felton thought that, of the two sides of the man who was Buckingham, the side unknown to the public was the guiltier. This was because his love, so strange, so new, so ardent, made him regard the infamous (though imaginary) accusations of Lady Winter as if through a magnifying glass, expanding atoms smaller than ants into frightful monsters. The speed of his march fanned the fire in his blood; the idea that he'd left behind him, exposed to a terrible vengeance, a woman he loved – or rather, worshipped as a saint – combined with fatigue and the tumult of his emotions to excite his mind to inhuman, feverish heights. He entered Portsmouth about eight in the morning. The entire population was afoot: drums were beating in the streets and at the port, and the troops to be embarked were marching down to shore. Felton arrived at the headquarters of the Admiralty covered with dust and streaming with sweat; his face, ordinarily so pale, was purple with anger and passion. The sentry wanted to turn him away but Felton appealed to the officer of the guard and drew the letter he carried from his pocket. "An urgent message from Lord Winter," he said.

At the name of Lord Winter, who was known to be one of His Grace's closest friends, the officer of the guard allowed Felton to pass, all the more easily as he wore the uniform of an officer of the Marines. Felton rushed into the mansion that housed the Admiralty headquarters. Just as he entered the vestibule, another man entered the courtyard, likewise covered with dust and out of breath. He alighted at the gate from a post-horse that immediately sank to its knees, exhausted. Felton and the new arrival addressed Patrick, the duke's confidential valet, at virtually the same moment. Felton said he represented Lord Winter but the stranger wouldn't say from whom he came, insisting he could reveal that only to the duke. Each was determined to gain entrance before the other. Patrick, who knew that Lord Winter had ties of both friendship and service to the duke, gave the preference to the man who came in his name. The other was forced to wait, aggravated and cursing the delay. The valet led Felton across a large hall, in which were waiting the emissaries from La Rochelle, headed by the Duke of Soubise. They entered a private room where Buckingham, just out of the bath, was finishing his grooming, to which, as always, he was paying extraordinary attention. "Lieutenant Felton," said Patrick, "on the behalf of Lord Winter."

"From Lord Winter!" repeated Buckingham. "Show him in." Felton entered. Buckingham was just tossing aside a rich *robe of chambre* edged with gold brocade to don a blue velvet doublet embroidered with pearls. "Why didn't the baron come himself?" Buckingham asked. "I expected him this morning."

"It is my duty to inform Your Grace that he very much regretted not having that honour," Felton replied, "but that he was detained by the guard that he is obliged to keep at the castle."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Buckingham. "He has a prisoner."

"And it is of that prisoner that I wish to speak to Your Grace," Felton said.

"Well, then, speak."

"What I have to say is only for your ears, Milord."

"Leave us, Patrick but stay within sound of the bell," said Buckingham. "I'll call for you shortly." Patrick went out. "Now, sir, we're alone," said Buckingham. "Speak."

"Milord," Felton said, "Baron Winter wrote to you the other day to request your signature on an order of transportation regarding a young woman named Charlotte Backson."

"That's correct, Lieutenant, and I replied that if he would bring or send me that order, I would sign it."

"Here it is, Milord."

"Give it here," said the duke.

Taking the paper from Felton, he scanned it quickly. Recognising it as the expected order, he placed it on the table and picked up a plume to sign it. "Begging your pardon, Milord," said Felton, stopping the duke, "but is Your Grace aware that Charlotte Backson isn't the real name of this young woman?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, I know that," replied the duke, dipping the plume in the inkwell.

"Then, Your Grace knows her real name?" Felton asked sharply.

"I know it."

The duke put the pen to the paper. "And, knowing her real name, Milord, you'd sign it all the same?" Felton said.

"Absolutely. Given the chance, I'd sign it twice," Buckingham said.

"I cannot believe," continued Felton, his voice becoming sharper and more ragged, "that Your Grace knows this order concerns Lady Winter..."

"I do know it, perfectly well, though I'm astonished that you know it!"

"And Your Grace still signs that order without remorse?"

Buckingham gave the young man a haughty look. "Gad, Sir," he said, "why do you ask such strange questions, and how can you think me fool enough to answer them?"

"Answer, Milord," said Felton. "The situation is more serious than you may believe."

It occurred to Buckingham that the young man came on behalf of Lord Winter, and doubtless spoke in his name, so he took a more moderate tone. "No, no remorse," he said. "The baron knows that Milady Winter is guilty of serious crimes and it's an act of clemency to reduce her sentence to transportation."

The duke poised his plume over the paper. "You will not sign that order, Milord!" Felton said, taking a step toward the duke.

"I won't sign this order?" said Buckingham. "And why not?"

"Because you will obey the dictates of conscience, and render Milady justice."

"I would render her justice by sending her to Tyburn," said Buckingham. "Milady is a criminal who deserves no better."

"No, Milord – Milady is an angel, as you well know, and I demand from you her freedom."

"Gad!" said Buckingham. "Are you mad, to talk to me this way?"

"Excuse me, Milord! I say what I must, and don't mean to offend. But consider what you're doing, Milord, and beware of going too far!"

"What's that you say? God blind me!" cried Buckingham. "I do believe the man threatens me!"

"No, Milord, I still pray, and I say this: one drop of water is enough to make the full vase overflow and one small sin may be enough to bring punishment down on a head that has been spared despite many crimes."

"Lieutenant Felton, you are dismissed," said Buckingham. "Withdraw, Sir, and immediately place yourself under arrest."

"You'll hear me to the end, Milord. You've seduced this young girl – you have outraged and defiled her. Make restitution for your crimes against her, let her go free, and I will require nothing else of you."

"You, require of me?" said Buckingham, regarding Felton with a look of astonishment and drawing out each syllable of the words as he said them.

"Milord," Felton continued, growing more excited as he spoke, "Milord, take care! All England is weary of your iniquities. Milord, you have abused the royal power, nearly usurped it; Milord, you are an abomination in the eyes of God and men. God will punish you later but I will punish you now."

"Bah! This is too much!" cried Buckingham, taking a step toward the door.

Felton barred his passage. "I ask you humbly," he said, "to sign the order that sets Lady Winter at liberty. Think, Milord: you owe it to this woman you have dishonoured."

"Withdraw, Sir," said Buckingham, "or I will call and have you put in irons."

"You will not call," said Felton, throwing himself between the duke and the bell that stood on a silver-chased end table. "Beware, Milord, for you are in the hands of God!"

"In the hands of the devil, you mean," cried Buckingham, raising his voice to attract attention without directly calling for it.

"Sign, Milord. Sign the liberty of Lady Winter," said Felton, holding a paper before the duke.

"By force? You can't be serious. Hey, there! Patrick!"

"Sign, Milord!"

"Never."

"Never?"

"Guards!" the duke shouted and at the same time sprang for his sword.

But Felton didn't give him time to draw it. He pulled out the knife that Milady had stabbed herself with and was upon the duke in one bound. At that moment Patrick entered the room, calling out, "Milord, a letter from France!"

"From France!" cried Buckingham, forgetting everything else at the thought of from whom that letter came. Felton took advantage of Buckingham's distraction to plunge the knife into his side up to the hilt. "Ah! Traitor!" cried Buckingham. "You've killed me..."



"Murder!" Patrick howled.

Felton spun around, looking for a way out. Seeing the door open, he darted into the antechamber, rushed past the emissaries from La Rochelle, and made for the staircase. But on the first step he met Lord Winter who seeing him pale and wild with blood staining his hands and face, took hold of him, crying, "I knew it! I guessed it! But too late by a minute, damn me! Damn me for a fool!"

Felton put up no resistance. Lord Winter turned him over to the guards, who took him out onto a little terrace overlooking the sea while awaiting further orders. The baron hurried into Buckingham's chamber. At the duke's cry, and Patrick's scream, the man Felton had met outside had also rushed into the duke's chamber. He found the duke lying on a sofa, his hand clenched on his wound. "La Porte," said the duke, his voice weak, "La Porte – do you come from her?"

"Yes, My Lord," replied Anne of Austria's loyal servant, "but perhaps too late."

"Hush, La Porte! Someone might hear you. Patrick, no one's to enter. My God, I'm dying! I'll never know what she had to say to me!"

And the duke fainted. Meanwhile, Lord Winter, the emissaries, the commanders of the expedition, and the officers of Buckingham's household had all pushed into the chamber, and cries of despair arose on all sides. At the news, the headquarters echoed with groans and laments, and word soon spread throughout the city. A cannon was fired to announce that some new and unlooked-for event had occurred. Lord Winter tore his hair. "Too late by a minute!" he cried. "Too late by a minute! Oh, my God! My God, what a thing! What a terrible thing!"

They had awakened the baron at seven that morning with the news that a rope ladder had been found hanging from one of the castle windows. He had immediately run to Milady's chamber and found it empty, with the window open and the bars filed through. He remembered the verbal warning d'Artagnan had sent with his messenger; fearing for the duke, he'd run to the stable. Without waiting to have his horse saddled, he'd jumped onto the first one he'd come to, and ridden belly to the ground to Portsmouth. In the courtyard he'd leaped from the horse, run up the stairs – and met Felton on the top step, coming out. But the duke was not dead. He came to, opened his eyes, and hope revived in all their hearts. "Gentlemen," he said, "leave me alone with Patrick and La Porte. Ah! Is that you, Winter? You sent me a strange madman this morning. Look what a state he's put me in!"

"Oh, Milord!" the baron cried. "I'll never forgive myself for this."

"And you would be quite wrong, old friend," said Buckingham, giving him his hand. "I don't know any man for whom it's worth destroying your life with regrets."

The baron went out, sobbing, leaving only the wounded duke, La Porte, and Patrick. A doctor had been sent for but hadn't yet come. "Milord, *you'll live*," repeated Anne of Austria's messenger, kneeling before the sofa.

"What does she write to me?" Buckingham said feebly, streaming with blood but fighting back the pain to speak of the woman he loved. "What does she write to me? Read me her letter."

"Oh, Milord!" La Porte said.

"Obey, La Porte. Can't you see I have no time to lose?"

La Porte broke the seal and held the parchment so the duke could read it but Buckingham was unable to focus on the writing. "Read it!" he said. "I can't see – read it! For soon I may not be able to hear, and then I'd die without knowing what she's written to me." La Porte put up no more resistance and read:

*Milord:*  
*By what, since I've known you, I have suffered by and for you, I implore you, if you have any care for my repose, to halt your mighty armament against France. Give up this war, for which it's said aloud that religion is the ostensible cause but for which it's whispered that your love for me is the real motive. This war may not only bring great catastrophes upon France and England but also upon you, Milord – and for that I could never forgive myself. Guard your life that is threatened, and which will be the dearer to me when I am no longer obliged to regard you as an enemy.*  
*Your affectionate,*  
**ANNE**

Buckingham had gathered all his remaining strength to listen. When the reading was over, he seemed to have suffered a bitter disappointment. "Is that all you were told to tell me, La Porte?" he said.

"No, My Lord. The queen charged me to warn you to take special care of your life, as she'd been informed there would be an attempted assassination."

"And that's all? That's all?" Buckingham said impatiently.

"She also told me to tell you ... that she's always loved you."

"Ah!" said Buckingham. "God be praised! So she won't take my death like the death of a stranger ...!" La Porte broke down and wept. "Patrick," said the duke, "bring me the coffer that contained the diamond studs." Patrick brought the coffer that La Porte recognised as having belonged to the queen. "Now the white satin packet that has her initials embroidered in pearls." Patrick obeyed. "Here, La Porte," said Buckingham. "These are the only souvenirs I've from her, this rosewood coffer and packet of letters. Restore them to Her Majesty and as a final memento, you'll add..." he looked around for some precious object but his vision was clouded by approaching death, and he could find nothing but the knife that had fallen from Felton's hands, his blood still steaming from its blade. "And you will add this knife," the duke said, clutching at La Porte's hand.

He was just able to get the satin packet into the coffer and drop the knife on top of it. He made a sign to La Porte that he could no longer talk, and then, with a final, irresistible convulsion, he slid from the sofa onto the floor. Patrick cried out. Buckingham tried to smile one last time but death cut it short. It remained impressed on his face like a last kiss of love. At that moment the doctor arrived, quite distraught. They'd had to bring him from the admiral's ship that he'd already been aboard. He approached the duke, took his hand, held it for an instant in his own, and let it fall. "Nothing can be done," he said. "He's dead."

"Dead! *Dead!*" cried Patrick.

At this cry the whole crowd came back into the chamber, and everywhere there was nothing but consternation and turmoil. As soon as Lord Winter saw that Buckingham was dead, he ran to Felton, who was still being held by the soldiers on the terrace. "Miserable wretch!" he said to the young man who since the death of Buckingham, had regained that calm, cool demeanour that never again left him. "Miserable wretch! What have you done?"

"I have avenged myself," he said.

"Yourself!" said the baron. "Say instead you were the tool of that damnable woman! But I swear to you, this crime will be her last."

"I don't know what you mean," Felton replied coolly. "I don't know who you're talking about, Milord. I killed the Duke of Buckingham because he twice refused your request to promote me to captain. I've punished him for his injustice, that's all." Winter, stupefied, looked on as the soldiers manacled Felton as if he didn't know what to make of such nonsense. Only one thing darkened Felton's pale brow: at every noise, the naïve Puritan thought he heard the arrival of Milady, come to throw herself into his arms and die by his side. All at once he started, his eyes fixed on a point out to sea that the terrace overlooked. With the eagle eyes of a sailor he recognised, where another would have seen only a gull gliding over the waves, the sail of the sloop setting course for the coast of France. He paled, and put a hand to his breaking heart. At once, he understood the extent of his betrayal. "One last favour, Milord!" he said to the baron.

"What's that?"

"The time – what time's it?"

The baron pulled out his watch. "It's ten minutes to nine," he said.

Milady had moved up her departure by an hour and a half. As soon as she'd heard the cannon announce the fatal event, she'd ordered the ship to weigh anchor. The sloop was making good headway under a blue sky and was already well out from the coast. "Thus God wills it," Felton said with the resignation of a fanatic.

But he still couldn't take his eyes from that ship, on which he might have thought he could make out the white phantom of her for whom he'd sacrificed his life. Winter followed his look, saw his pain, and guessed everything. "You may be going to your punishment alone, wretch," he said to Felton who still gazed out to sea as he was being dragged off, "but I swear to you, on the memory of my beloved brother that your accomplice will not escape." Felton hung his head and said nothing. As for Lord Winter, he hurried down the stairs and went directly to the port.

### 060 In France

Upon learning of the death of the duke, the first fear of the King of England, Charles I, was that such terrible news would dishearten the Rochelois. He tried, says Richelieu in his *Memoirs*, to conceal it from them for as long as possible, closing all the ports of his realm, and taking care that no vessel should sail before Buckingham's army could depart, an effort he undertook to manage personally after the loss of Buckingham. He enforced this order so strictly that it detained in England the Danish ambassador, who had already officially taken his leave, and the *Ambassador Ordinaire* of Holland, who was to sail back to the port of Flushing in the captured India merchantmen that Charles I was returning to the United Provinces. But it didn't occur to the king to give this order until five hours after the event – in other words, not until two in the afternoon, by which time two ships had already left the port. The first, of course, was the one carrying Milady. The success of her plot had been confirmed by sight of the black flag that had been run up the mast of the admiral's ship. As to the second vessel, who it contained, and how it departed – that will be dealt with later. Meanwhile, nothing new occurred in the camp before La Rochelle, except that the king, as ever subject to ennui, perhaps even more so in camp than elsewhere, resolved to travel incognito to Saint-Germain for the Festival of Saint Louis, and asked the cardinal to order up a small escort of no more than twenty musketeers. The cardinal, who sometimes wearied of the presence of the king, was more than happy to grant this leave of absence to his royal lieutenant, who promised to return in mid-September. Sir Tréville, informed by His Eminence, packed up his portmanteau. As he was aware of the urgent desire, even desperate need of his four friends to return to Paris – though without knowing the cause – he naturally named them as part of the escort. The four young men heard the news a quarter of an hour after Sir Tréville, as they were the first ones he told. It was then that d'Artagnan fully appreciated the favour the cardinal had done him by finally ordering his admission into the musketeers, as otherwise he would have had to remain behind in camp. Their impatience to return toward Paris was mainly due to the danger to Madam Bonacieux of being found at the Bethune convent by Milady, her mortal enemy. As previously related, Aramis had written to Marie Michon, the lingerie maid at Tours who had such high connections, to obtain authority from the queen for Madam Bonacieux to leave the convent and take refuge in either Lorraine or Belgium. They didn't have to wait long for a response, for within a week, Aramis had received the following letter:

*My Dear Cousin,*  
*Enclosed with this is the authorisation from my sister for our little servant to leave the convent at Bethune, where you think the air may not agree with her. My sister is very pleased to send you this order, as she dearly loves the little girl, and intends to do better by her in the future. I embrace you,*  
**Marie MICHON**  
Folded inside this letter was the following order:  
*The Superior of the Convent at Bethune will remit into the charge of the person who presents this letter the novice who entered the convent on my recommendation and under my patronage.*  
*At the Louvre,*  
*10 August 1628*  
**ANNE**

One can easily imagine how amused the young men were by this relationship between Aramis and a lingerie maid who called the queen "her sister." But Aramis, after flushing two or three times at Porthos's crude jokes, told his friends to drop the subject, declaring that if he heard another word about it, he would never again ask his cousin to act as an intermediary in such affairs. So there was no further mention of the name of Marie Michon among the four musketeers, who in any event had what they wanted: an order to remove Madam Bonacieux from the Carmelite convent at Bethune. It's true that this order wasn't much use while they were stuck in the camp at La Rochelle, halfway across France. D'Artagnan had been planning to ask for a leave of absence from Sir Tréville, intending to confide to him the critical importance of his departure, when he and his three comrades received the news that the king was about to leave for Paris with twenty musketeers and they were to form part of his escort. Joy was the order of the day. They sent their lackeys on ahead with their baggage, and set out on the morning of August 16th. The cardinal accompanied His Majesty from Surgères to Mauzé, where the king and his minister took their leave of each other with effusive declarations of mutual regard. However, the king, though he said he desired to travel as rapidly as possible, since he wanted to be in Paris by the 23rd, at the same time craved distraction. He stopped from time to time to fly his falcon, a pastime he was very fond of, having acquired the taste for it from of Luynes. When this happened, sixteen of his twenty musketeers were delighted with the time off but the other four cursed the delay. D'Artagnan in particular suffered from a constant buzzing in his ears that Porthos explained by saying, "A very great lady told me it means someone is talking about you somewhere."

The escort finally reached Paris on the evening of the 23rd. The king thanked Sir Tréville and allowed him to give out leaves of absence for four days, on condition that the lucky recipients stay out of the public eye, under penalty of the Bastille. The first four leaves granted, as may be imagined, were to the four friends. Furthermore, Athos persuaded Sir Tréville to give them six days instead of four, plus two extra nights, as they set out on the evening of the 24th and Tréville had kindly post-dated the beginning of their leave to the morning of the 25th. "*My God*, it seems to me we're making a big deal out of a simple thing," said d'Artagnan, the eternal optimist. "In two days by using up two or three horses – that I can afford to do, as I have plenty of money – I'll be in Bethune. I present the queen's letter to the superior, collect the dear treasure I've gone for, and head, not to Lorraine or Belgium but back to Paris. It'll be much easier to hide her there, especially since the cardinal is at La Rochelle.

Then, once we've returned to the campaign, we can get what we need to protect her from the queen, relying on the influence of Aramis's cousin, as well as what we've personally done for her. The rest of you might as well stay behind – there's no point in wearing yourselves out. A simple expedition like this doesn't call for anyone more than myself and Planchet."

To this, Athos calmly replied, "We, too, have some money, for I haven't yet drunk my whole share of the diamond, and Porthos and Aramis haven't eaten theirs. We can just as easily wear out four horses as one. And consider, d'Artagnan," he added, in a voice so sombre that it gave the young man shivers, "Bethune is a town where the cardinal has set a rendezvous with a woman who creates misery wherever she goes. If it was only four men you had to deal with, d'Artagnan, I'd let you go by yourself – but as you have to deal with that woman, we will all go, and I hope to God that the four of us, plus our lackeys, are enough to handle her."

"You're scaring me, Athos," d'Artagnan said. "Dear God, what are you afraid of?"

"Everything!" replied Athos.

D'Artagnan examined the expressions of his comrades, who seemed just as anxious as Athos. So they continued on their way as fast as their horses could go without saying another word. On the evening of the 25th, as they were entering Arras, and d'Artagnan was just alighting at the Golden Harrow Inn in hopes of drinking a glass of honey, a cavalier emerged from the post-stable, where he'd just transferred to a fresh horse, and set off at a gallop down the road to Paris. As he passed through the gateway into the street, the wind blew back the cloak in which he was enveloped, though it was the month of August, and lifted his hat that the traveller clapped back onto his head and quickly pulled down over his eyes. D'Artagnan, who'd had his eyes fixed on this man, grew very pale and dropped his glass. "What's wrong, Sir?" said Planchet. "Oh! Quick, Gentlemen, my master is sick!"

The three friends came running, and found d'Artagnan, far from seeming ill, racing for his horse. They stopped him at the gateway. "Where the devil do you think you're going?" Athos said to him.

"It's him!" cried d'Artagnan, pale with anger. "It's him! Let me go after him!"

"Him! What him?" demanded Athos.

"That man is him!"

"*What* man?"

"That cursed man, my archenemy, who always appears when I'm threatened by something terrible; the one who was with that awful woman the first time I met her; the one I was chasing when I provoked Athos; the one I saw the morning Madam Bonacieux was abducted! *The man of Meung!* He just went past! I recognised him when the wind blew his cloak open."

"The devil you say," said Athos thoughtfully.

"Saddle up, Gentlemen, saddle up! After him, before he gets away."

"D'Artagnan," said Aramis, "allow me to observe that he's going in a direction opposite to ours, and he has a fresh horse where ours are tired, so we'll kill our horses before we ever have a chance to catch him. Let's save the woman and let the man go."

"Hey, Sir!" shouted the stable boy, who came running out after the stranger. "Sir! Hey! This paper fell out of your hat!"

"*My friend*," said d'Artagnan, "a *half-pistole* for that paper!"

"My faith, sir, with pleasure! Here."

The stable boy congratulating himself on his luck, went back into the courtyard. D'Artagnan unfolded the paper. "Well?" demanded his friends, surrounding him.

"Only a single word!" d'Artagnan said.

"Yes," said Aramis, "but that word is the name of a town or village."

"Armentieres," said Porthos. "Never heard of it."

"But this name of a town or village is in *her* handwriting!" cried Athos.

"I think we'd better take good care of this paper," said d'Artagnan. "Maybe I've not thrown away my *half-pistole*. To horse, my friends, to horse!" And the four friends left at a gallop on the road to Bethune.

061

The Carmelite Convent at Bethune

Great criminals seem to have made a sort of infernal bargain that enables them to surmount all obstacles and escape all dangers, until that moment when Providence, weary of the game, places before them the rocks that wreck their impious careers. So it was with Milady. She passed between the cruisers of two warring nations and arrived at Boulogne without incident. When landing at Portsmouth, Milady had been an Englishwoman whom the persecutions of France had driven from La Rochelle; upon landing at Boulogne, after a two-day passage, she passed herself off as a Frenchwoman whom the English had harassed at Portsmouth out of their hatred for France. Milady had, besides, the best of all passports: her beauty, her grand manner, and the generosity with which she spread around her *pistoles*. Relieved of the usual formalities by the affable smile and gallant manners of the old Governor of the Port, who kissed her hand, she remained at Boulogne only long enough to post the following letter:

*To His Eminence My Lord le Cardinal of Richelieu,*  
*At his Camp before La Rochelle:*  
*My Lord,*  
*Your Eminence may be assured that His Grace the Duke of Buckingham will not set out for France.*  
*Boulogne,*  
*The evening of the 25th.*  
*MILADY DE –*  
*P.S.: In accordance with Your Eminence's desires, I proceed to the Carmelite convent at Bethune, where I'll await your orders.*

That same evening, Milady took to the road. Night overtook her, and she stopped at an inn to sleep. She left at five o'clock the next morning, and three hours later she entered Bethune. She asked directions to the Carmelite convent and went there immediately. The superior came out to meet her. Milady showed her the cardinal's order; the abbess found a chamber for her and had breakfast served. In Milady's eyes, the shadows of the past were entirely gone; with her vision fixed on times to come, she saw only the bright future the cardinal would bestow on her – the cardinal, whom she'd served so well in this bloody affair, without ever involving his name. The ever-changing passions that drove and consumed her made her life resemble those clouds that tumble across the sky, sometimes tinted with azure, sometimes with flame, and sometimes with the opaque darkness of the tempest that leaves nothing in its wake but devastation and death. After breakfast, the abbess came to pay her a visit. There are few diversions in the cloister, and the good superior was eager to make the acquaintance of her new pensioner. Milady wanted to please the abbess, an easy thing for a woman as genuinely accomplished as she was. She was amiable, charming, won over the good superior with her clever conversation, and considerable social graces. The abbess, who was a daughter of the nobility, loved nothing more than Court gossip that travels slowly to the far corners of the realm, and even then rarely makes it through a convent's walls, before which all such worldly noises seem to die away. Milady, of course, was *au courant* with all the intrigues of the aristocracy, her milieu for the last five or six years, so she undertook to entertain the good abbess with a description of the daily life of the French Court. She told of the king's exaggerated religious devotions, gave her a rundown of the current scandals involving the lords and ladies at Court, all of whom the abbess knew by name, and touched lightly on the affair between the queen and the Duke of Buckingham, talking a great deal in order to induce the superior to talk a little. But the abbess seemed content to listen and smile without saying a word. However, Milady could see how much she enjoyed this sort of talk, so she went on – only now she dropped in the name of the cardinal. Her problem was, she didn't know if the abbess was a Royalist or a Cardinalist, so she steered a prudent middle course. But the abbess, for her part, maintained a reserve even more prudent, contenting herself with bowing her head respectfully every time her visitor pronounced the name of His Eminence. Milady began to think she was going to be deathly bored in this convent. She decided to take a little risk to see how far she could go. To test the limits of the good abbess's discretion, she began to cast aspersions on the cardinal – vague at first, then more specific, relating the amours of the minister with Madam of Combalet, Marion Delorme, and various other *gallant women*. The abbess listened attentively, smiled, and showed a bit more life. *Good*, Milady thought, *she likes this kind of talk. If she is a Cardinalist, at least she's not fanatical about it.*

She passed on to the cardinal's persecutions of his enemies. The abbess only crossed herself, without indicating either approval or disapproval. This confirmed Milady in her opinion that the abbess was more Royalist than Cardinalist. She continued in the same vein, speaking of ever-greater outrages. "I know very little of such things," said the abbess at length, "but despite our distance from Court, and our position apart from worldly affairs, we have among us sad examples of what you're talking about. One of our pensioners in particular has suffered a great deal of persecution at the hands of His Eminence."

"One of your pensioners!" said Milady. "Oh, my God! The poor woman, how I pity her."

"With good reason, for there's much to pity: imprisonment, threats, and mistreatment – she's suffered it all. But who knows?" the abbess said. "The cardinal may have good reason for these acts. Though she seems a perfect angel, we mustn't judge people by appearances."

*Who knows indeed?* Milady said to herself. *I seem to be on to something here. Let's follow this up.*

She assumed an expression of perfect candour. "Alas!" she said. "So they say. We're told we shouldn't trust appearances but what can we believe in, if not the most beautiful works of the Lord? As for me, I may be fooled all my life but I'll always trust a person whose face inspires me with sympathy."

"So you would be tempted to believe this young woman is innocent?" asked the abbess.

"His Eminence doesn't punish only for crimes," Milady said. "There are certain virtues he pursues more severely than some offences."

"Permit me, Madam, to express my surprise," said the abbess.

"At what?" Milady asked ingenuously.

"Well, at the language you use."

"What do you find so surprising in my language?" Milady asked, smiling.

"You're the cardinal's friend, since he sent you here, and yet..."

"And yet I speak ill of him," Milady said, finishing the superior's thought.

"At least, you don't speak very well of him."

"That's because I'm not his friend," Milady sighed, "but his victim."

"But, this letter that recommends you to me...?"

"Is an order for me to confine myself in a sort of prison until I'm removed by one of his creatures?"

"But why haven't you fled?"

"Where would I go? Do you think there's anywhere on earth the cardinal can't reach, if he troubles to reach out his hand? If I were a man, I might try for it but a woman? What can a woman do? This young pensioner of yours, has she tried to flee?"

"No, that's true. But it's another thing with her, as I think she stays in France for love."

"Then," Milady sighed, "if she's in love, she's not completely miserable."

"So in you," the abbess said, with a livelier interest, "I see another poor persecuted woman?"

"Alas, yes," said Milady.

The abbess paused and regarded Milady with uneasiness, as if struck with a new idea. "You're not an enemy of our holy faith?" she asked uncertainly.

"Me?" said Milady. "Me, a Protestant? Oh, no – on the contrary! I swear to God who hears us that I'm a fervent Catholic."

"Then don't worry, Madam," said the abbess, smiling. "This house won't be a very hard prison, and we'll do all we can to make you cherish your captivity here. Moreover, you'll find here that other persecuted young woman – the victim, no doubt, of some court intrigue. She is amiable and well-mannered."

"What is her name?"

"She was commended to my care by someone of very high rank under the name of Kitty. I haven't tried to learn her real name."

"Kitty!" Milady cried. "What? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Madam – so we were told. Do you know her?"

Milady smiled to herself at the idea that the young woman might be her old chambermaid. Then it evoked a wave of frustrated anger, and the desire for revenge distorted Milady's features – but, woman of a hundred faces, she immediately recovered the calm and benevolent expression she'd momentarily lost. "And when could I see this young lady, for whom I already feel such great sympathy?" Milady asked.

"Why, this evening," said the abbess, "or even this afternoon. But you've been travelling for four days, as you told me yourself, and you've been up since five this morning; I'm sure you'd like a rest. Go to bed and sleep, and we'll call you at dinner time."

Milady could very easily have done without sleep, as her mind, always avid for intrigue, was stimulated by the idea of a new adventure but she nonetheless decided to accept the superior's offer. During the past two weeks she had been torn by so many different emotions that even if her body could have fought off further fatigue, her soul was in need of repose. So she took her leave of the abbess and went to bed, rocked softly to sleep by the ideas of revenge brought to mind by the name of Kitty. She recalled the cardinal's promise of almost unlimited license if she was successful in her mission. She had succeeded, and revenge on d'Artagnan was now within her power. Only one thing alarmed Milady: the memory of her husband, the Count of La Fère, whom she had thought dead, and whom she'd found again in Athos, the best friend of d'Artagnan. However, if he was d'Artagnan's friend, he must have helped him assist the queen in thwarting His Eminence's plans; if he was d'Artagnan's friend, he was the cardinal's enemy, and she would doubtless succeed in including him in the vengeance that would destroy the young musketeer. All these hopes were sweet visions to Milady, and, lulled by them, she soon fell asleep. She was awakened by a soft voice at the foot of her bed. She opened her eyes and saw the abbess, accompanied by a young woman with blond hair and a delicate complexion, who regarded her with a look of benevolent curiosity. This young woman's face was completely unknown to her. They examined each other carefully, while exchanging the customary compliments. Both were very attractive, though their styles of beauty were quite different, and Milady smiled as she recognised that the young woman possessed nothing like her grand air and aristocratic bearing – though it's true the young woman was dressed in the habit of a novice nun that didn't help her much in that sort of comparison. The abbess introduced them to each other, and having completed that formality, returned to her religious duties, leaving the two young women alone. The novice seeing Milady still in bed, was about to follow the superior but Milady stopped her. "What, Madam?" she said. "We've barely met, and already you want to deprive me of your company? I must confess, I've been counting on you to help me pass the time here."

"No, Madam," the novice replied. "I simply thought I might have chosen a bad time; you were asleep, you must be tired."

"Well," Milady said, "what's the best thing a sleeping person can ask for? A happy awakening. You've given me that, so please allow me a chance to enjoy it."

And taking the novice's hand, she drew her toward a chair beside the bed. The novice sat. "Dear God, how miserable I've been," she said. "I've been here more than six months, without the shadow of a diversion. Now you arrive, sure to provide me with some charming company, just when, in all probability, I'm about to leave the convent!"

"Really! You're leaving soon?" Milady said.

"At least, I hope so," said the novice, with a joyful expression she didn't try to disguise.

"I heard that you've suffered at the hands of the cardinal," continued Milady, "which would have been another reason for sympathy between us."

"So what I heard from the good mother is true, that you've also been a victim of that awful cardinal?"

"Hush!" said Milady. "We shouldn't talk about him that way, not even here. All my troubles started from having said no more than you've said, to a woman I thought was my friend – and who betrayed me. Are you also the victim of treachery?"

"No," said the novice, "rather of my devotion to a woman I loved, for whom I would have given my life, and for whom I still would."

"And who has abandoned you, is that it?"

"I was unjust enough to think so but in the last few days I've received proof to the contrary, thank God! I hated to think she might have forgotten about me. But you don't appear to be under any constraint, Madam," continued the novice. "If you want to flee, then surely you can."

"Where would you have me go, without friends, without money, in a part of France I don't know, and where I've never been before?"

"Oh!" cried the novice. "As to friends, I'm sure you'd have them wherever you went – you're so beautiful, and seem so good!"

Milady softened her smile into an angelic expression. "That doesn't prevent me from feeling alone and persecuted."

"Listen to me," said the novice. "We must trust in heaven. There always comes a time when the good you've done pleads your cause before God. And maybe it's a lucky thing you met with me because, though I'm humble and powerless, I have powerful friends – and if they help me to leave here, afterward they may be able to help you."

"Oh, when I said I was alone," Milady said, hoping to draw the novice out by speaking of herself, "it's not because I lack friends in high places, it's because these friends are themselves afraid of the cardinal. The queen herself doesn't dare to oppose that terrible minister. I have proof that Her Majesty, good-hearted though she is, has more than once had to abandon to His Eminence's persecution people who had served her."

"Believe me, Madam, the queen may seem to have abandoned these people but we shouldn't be fooled by appearances. The more they are persecuted, the more she thinks of them – and when they least expect it, she shows she remembers them."

"Yes, you're right," said Milady. "The queen is so good."

"You must know her, to talk about her this way!" the novice said excitedly. "Our queen, so lovely and noble!"

"That is to say," replied Milady, driven back into her entrenchments, "I don't have the honour to be acquainted with her personally but I know a number of her most intimate friends: I've met Sir Putanges; I knew Sir Jars in England; I know Sir Tréville..."

"Sir Tréville!" said the novice. "You know Sir Tréville?"

"Yes – very well, in fact."

"The Captain of the King's Musketeers?"

"Himself."

"Why, then, we practically know each other," cried the novice. "We're almost friends already. If you know Sir Tréville, you must have visited his hôtel?"

"Often!" said Milady who having started down this path, and seeing her deceit successful, decided to follow it to its end.

"While there, did you meet any of his musketeers?"

"All the ones he receives most often," replied Milady, for whom this conversation was beginning to take on real interest.

"Name some of those you know and you'll see that they're my friends."

"Well," said Milady, somewhat embarrassed, "I know Sir Louvigny, Sir Courtivron, Sir Férrusac..."

The novice let Milady speak but once she stopped, she said, "Don't you know a gentleman named Athos?"

Milady went as pale as the sheets she was lying on and, mistress of herself though she was, she couldn't stop herself from crying out. She seized the novice's hand and devoured her with her eyes.

"What's wrong? Good God," asked the poor woman, "have I said anything to hurt you?"

"No, it's just that the name struck me, because ... I, too, know that gentleman, and it seemed strange to find someone else who knew him as well."

"I do know him! And not just him but also his friends, Gentlemen Porthos and Aramis."

"Really! Why, I know them, too!" cried Milady who felt a chill enter her heart.

"Well, if you know them, you know what good and loyal friends they are. If you need help, why not ask them?"

"What ... what I mean is," stammered Milady, "that I'm not really all that close with them. I know them from having heard one of their friends talk so much about them – a Sir d'Artagnan."

"You know Sir d'Artagnan!" cried the novice.

It was now her turn to seize Milady's hand and devour her with her eyes. Then, noticing the strange expression on Milady's face, she said, "Pardon me, Madam but in what sense do you know him?"

"Well," said Milady, unsure of herself for once, "well ... in the sense of a friend."

"You aren't telling me the truth, Madam," said the novice. "You've been his mistress!"

Then Milady knew. "No, Madam," she said, "it's you who've been his."

"Me!" said the novice.

"Yes, you. I know you now: you are Madam Bonacieux."

The young woman recoiled in surprise and terror. "No use denying it," Milady said. "You are, aren't you?"

"Well ... yes, Madam! I love him," the novice said. "Are we rivals?"

Milady's face lit with such a fierce flame that, under any other circumstances, Madam Bonacieux would have fled in fear – but she was too wrapped up in her own jealousy. "Tell me!" said Madam Bonacieux, with surprising intensity. "Madam! Are you, or have you been his mistress?"

"Oh, no!" cried Milady, in a tone that left no doubt of its truthfulness. "Never! Never!"

"I believe you," said Madam Bonacieux. "But why did you react that way?"

"Don't you understand?" said Milady who was herself again and had regained her presence of mind.

"How can I understand? I know nothing."

"Can't you understand that Sir d'Artagnan, being my friend, might take me into his confidence?"

"Really?"

"Don't you see that I know everything? Your abduction from that little house in Saint-Germain, his despair and that of his friends, their search, so useless up to this moment! How could I not be astonished when, all unsuspecting, I find you in front of me – you, of whom we've so often spoken together – you whom he loves with all his soul and I've learned to love before even meeting you! Ah, dear Constance, I've found you! Here you're at last!"

And Milady extended her arms to Madam Bonacieux who was convinced by what she'd said. She saw this woman, whom a moment before she'd believed was her rival, as nothing more than a sincere and devoted friend. "Oh, forgive me! Forgive me!" she cried, burying her face in Milady's shoulder. "I love him so!"

The two women embraced each other for a long moment. Certainly, if Milady had been as strong as her hatred, Madam Bonacieux would never have left that embrace alive. But since Milady couldn't strangle her, she smiled upon her. "Oh, you little dear! You dear, sweet thing!" Milady said. "How happy I am to see you! Let me look at you." Milady ran her eyes over every inch of Madam Bonacieux.

"Yes, it's you – no doubt about it. I should have recognised you immediately, after everything he's said."

The poor young woman had no idea what frightful cruelties were brewing behind that brow so pure, behind those eyes so brilliant, in which she read nothing but friendship and compassion. "Then you know what I've suffered," said Madam Bonacieux, "since he's told you what he's suffered – but to suffer for him is happiness."

"Yes, that is happiness," Milady replied mechanically.

She was thinking of something else. "And now," continued Madam Bonacieux, "my trial is coming to its end. Tomorrow, maybe even tonight, I'll see him again, and then what's past will no longer exist."

"Tonight? Tomorrow?" asked Milady, jolted from her reverie by these words. "What do you mean? You expect news about him?"

"I expect him personally."

"D'Artagnan – here?"

"Himself."

"But that's impossible! He's at the siege of La Rochelle with the cardinal. He can't return to Paris before the city is taken."

"You may think so but is anything impossible to my d'Artagnan? That noble, loyal gentleman!"

"I just can't believe you!"

"Well, read, then!" Madam Bonacieux said, bursting with joy and pride.

And the unfortunate young woman presented a letter to Milady. *Ah! The handwriting of Madam of Chevreuse!* Milady said to herself. *I always thought she must be involved in this somewhere.* And she avidly read the following lines:

*Make ready, my dear child. Our friend will see you soon, for the sole purpose of liberating you from that prison where you had to be hidden for your own safety. Prepare then for your departure – and never despair of us.*

*Our charming Gascon's shown himself as brave and faithful as ever. Tell him that someone is very grateful for the warning he's given.* "Yes," said Milady, "the letter is quite definite. Do you know what the 'warning' was?"

"No – though I suspect he warned the queen against some new scheme of the cardinal's."

"Yes, no doubt that's it!" said Milady, returning the letter to Madam Bonacieux and allowing her head to sink thoughtfully to her chest.

Suddenly they heard the sound of a galloping horse. "Oh!" cried Madam Bonacieux, darting to the window. "Can it be him already?"

Milady remained in her bed, petrified with surprise. So many unexpected things had happened all at once that for the first time she was at a loss. "Him?" she murmured from the bed, eyes staring. "Can it be him?"

"Alas, no!" said Madam Bonacieux. "It's a man I don't know – but he seems to be coming here. Yes, he's tied up his horse at the gate, and is ringing."

Milady almost sprang from the bed. "You're sure it isn't him?" she said.

"Oh, yes, quite sure!"

"Maybe you didn't get a good enough look at him."

"Oh, no! If I saw just the plume of his hat, or the edge of his cloak, I'd recognise him instantly!"

Milady was dressing rapidly. "Never mind. The man is coming here, you say?"

"Yes, he's already entered."

"He must be here either for you or for me."

"My God! You seem so distressed!"

"Yes, I admit it. I don't have your confidence – I'm terrified of the cardinal."

"Hush!" said Madam Bonacieux. "Someone's coming!"

In fact, the door opened, and the superior entered. "Have you come from Boulogne?" she asked Milady.

"Yes, I have," she replied, trying to recover her self-possession. "Who's asking for me?"

"A man who won't tell me his name but says he's from the cardinal."

"And he wants to talk to me?" asked Milady.

"He wants to talk to a lady just arrived from Boulogne."

"Then let him come in, Madam, if you please."

"My God!" Madam Bonacieux said. "Do you think it's bad news?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'll leave you with this stranger but if you'll permit me, I'll return as soon as he's gone."

"By all means!" The superior and Madam Bonacieux went out. Milady was left alone, her eyes fixed on the door. A moment later she heard the jangle of spurs on the stairs. Footsteps approached, the door opened, and a man appeared. Milady gasped with joy: for the man was the Count of Rochefort, the demon familiar of His Eminence.

062

2 Varieties of Demon

"Ah!" said Milady and Rochefort together. "It's you!"

"Yes, it's me," said Rochefort.

"And you come...?" asked Milady.

"From La Rochelle. And you?"

"From England."

"Buckingham?"

"Dead, or seriously wounded. I left without being able to get anything from him. He was assassinated by a fanatic."

"Ah!" Rochefort smiled. "What a lucky event! His Eminence will be most gratified. Have you informed him?"

"I wrote to him from Boulogne. But how is it you're here?"

"His Eminence was uneasy, and sent me to look for you."

"I arrived here only yesterday."

"And what have you been doing since yesterday?"

"I haven't wasted my time."

"Oh, I'm certain of that!"

"Do you know who I've found here?"

"No."

"Guess."

"How could I?"

"That young woman the queen took from prison."

"The mistress of that pipsqueak d'Artagnan?"

"Yes – Madam Bonacieux, whose refuge the cardinal couldn't find."

"Well, well," said Rochefort. "Two birds in the same hand. His Eminence was truly born under a star."

"Imagine my astonishment," continued Milady, "when I found myself face to face with this woman."

"Does she know you?"

"No."

"Then she regards you as a stranger?"

Milady smiled. "I am her best friend!"

"Upon my honour," said Rochefort, "only you, my dear Countess, can perform such miracles."

"And just as well, Count," said Milady. "Do you know what's about to happen here?"

"No."

"Tomorrow, or the day after, she's going to be taken away from here by order of the queen."

"Indeed? And by whom?"

"D'Artagnan and his friends."

"If they really do that, we'll have no choice but to clap them in the Bastille."

"Why aren't they there now?"

"What can I do? His Eminence has a weakness for these men that I cannot understand."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, tell him this, Rochefort: our conversation at the inn at Colombier-Rouge was overheard by these four men, and after his departure one of them came up and took from me, by violence, the safe-conduct the cardinal had given me. Tell him that they warned Lord Winter of my voyage to England, and that this time they nearly prevented me from completing my mission, as they did with the diamond studs. Tell him that of these four men, only two, d'Artagnan and Athos, are truly to be feared. The third, Aramis, is Madam of Chevreuse's lover, and can be left alone, since we know his secret. The fourth, Porthos, is a dolt and a braggart, and not worth bothering about."

"But surely these four men must be at the siege of La Rochelle."

"I thought the same thing but a letter Madam Bonacieux had received from Madam of Chevreuse, and which she was foolish enough to show me, leads me to believe otherwise. I think these four men are on their way here to carry her away."

"The devil! What should we do?"

"What are the cardinal's instructions regarding me?"

"I was to take your dispatches, written or verbal, for delivery. Then, once he knows what you've done, he can decide what you should do next."

"Meanwhile I must stay here?" Milady asked.

"Here, or nearby."

"You can't take me with you?"

"No, the order is quite explicit. Near the camp you might be recognised – and your presence, you must understand, would compromise the cardinal, especially after what's just happened across the Channel. Just tell me where you'll be waiting for word from the cardinal so I'll know where to find you."

"I certainly won't be able to stay here."

"Why?"

"You forget that my enemies may arrive at any moment."

"That's true; but then, is that little woman to be allowed to escape His Eminence?"

"Ha!" said Milady, with that smile unique to her. "Have you forgotten that I'm her best friend?"

"Yes, that's right! Then I can tell the cardinal, as regards this woman..."

"Not to worry."

"Is that all?"

"He will know what that means."

"He'll certainly guess. Now, what should I do?"

"Return without a moment's delay. It seems to me the news you have to report is worth expending some effort."

"My carriage broke an axle coming into Lillers."

"Good."

"What's good about it?"

"I need it," said the countess.

"And how am I supposed to travel?"

"In the saddle."

"That's easy for you to say. It's a hundred and eighty leagues!"

"So?"

Rochefort shrugged. “I’ve done worse. What then?”

“When you pass through Lillers, send me your carriage, with orders to your driver to place himself at my disposal.”

“Very well.”

“No doubt you have an order from the cardinal?”

“I have a warrant of full authority.”

“Show it to the abbess. Tell her that someone will come for me, today or tomorrow, and that I’m to go with the person who presents himself in your name.”

“Fine.”

“Don’t forget to speak harshly about me when you talk to the abbess.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I am a victim of the cardinal. I must inspire confidence in that poor little Madam Bonacieux.”

“But of course. Now, will you write me a report of everything that’s happened?”

“I’ve told you everything, and a paper might be lost. You have a good memory; repeat what I’ve said.”

“You’re right. But let me know where to find you, so I don’t have to waste time looking.”

“All right – wait a moment.”

“Do you need a map?”

“Oh, I know this area quite well.”

“You do? When were you here before?”

“I grew up here.”

“Indeed?”

“One has to grow up somewhere, so one might as well make use of it.”

“So you’ll wait for me, then…?”

“Let me see … ah, yes – at Armentieres.”

“Where is this Armentieres?”

“A little town on the Lys. I have but to cross the river to be in a foreign country.”

“Perfect! Just so you only cross that river in the event of danger.”

“Of course.”

“If that happens, how will I know where you are?”

“You don’t need your lackey?”

“No.”

“Is he a reliable man?”

“Proven.”

“Then give him to me. No one knows him; I’ll leave him behind, and he can lead you to me.”

“So you’ll wait for me at this Armentieres?”

“At Armentieres,” Milady replied.

“Write the name down on a piece of paper, in case I forget it. The name of a town can’t compromise you, can it?”

“Who knows? Never mind, I’ll do it.” Milady wrote the name on a scrap of paper.

“Fine,” said Rochefort, taking the paper from Milady, folding it, and putting it in the lining of his hat. “Besides, in case I lose the paper, I’ll do as children do, and repeat the name to myself as I go along. Now, is that all?”

“I think so.”

“Let’s go over it: Buckingham dead or seriously wounded; your conference with the cardinal overheard by the four musketeers; Lord Winter warned of your arrival at Portsmouth; d’Artagnan and Athos to the Bastille; Aramis the lover of Madam of Chevreuse; Porthos a fool; and Madam Bonacieux rediscovered. I’m to send you the carriage as soon as possible, place my lackey at your disposal, make you out to be a victim of the cardinal so the abbess won’t be suspicious, and meet you at Armentieres on the banks of the Lys. Anything else?”

“In truth, my dear Count, you’re a paragon of memory. Just one thing more…”

“What’s that?”

“I saw a pretty little wood adjacent to the convent garden; tell the abbess that I’m to be permitted to walk in that wood. Who knows? I may need a back door to escape through.”

“You think of everything.”

“On the other hand, you’ve forgotten something.”

“What?”

“To ask me if I need any money.”

“Just so. How much do you want?”

“All the gold you have.”

“I have about five hundred *pistoles*.”

“So do I; with a thousand *pistoles* I can face anything. Empty your pockets.”

“At your service, Countess.”

“A pleasure, my dear Count. When do you leave?”

“In an hour. Time enough to have a bite to eat, while I send someone after a fresh post-horse.”

“Wonderful. Goodbye, Count!”

“Goodbye, Countess.”

“Commend me to the cardinal,” said Milady.

“Commend me to Satan,” Rochefort replied. Milady and Rochefort exchanged a smile and parted. An hour later, Rochefort set out at a gallop; five hours after that, he passed through Arras. There, he was recognised by d’Artagnan – that inspired fresh fear in the hearts of the four musketeers, and imparted new urgency to their mission.

063  
A Drop of Water

Rochefort had scarcely left when Madam Bonacieux re-entered. She found Milady wearing a smile. “What you feared has happened,” the young woman said. “Tonight or tomorrow, someone will come from the cardinal to take you away.”

“Who told you that, my child?” asked Milady.

“I heard it from the messenger’s own mouth.”

“Come sit near me,” Milady said.

“All right.”

“I want to make sure no one can hear us.”

“Why all these precautions?”

“I’ll tell you – but first…” Milady rose and went to the door, opened it, looked down the corridor, then returned, and seated herself near Madam Bonacieux. “So he’s played his part well,” she said.

“Who is that?”

“The man who presented himself to the abbess as an emissary of the cardinal.”

“He was playing a part?”

“Yes, my child.”

“Then, he wasn’t…”

“That man,” said Milady, lowering her voice, “is my brother.”

“Your brother!” said Madam Bonacieux.

“Quietly! No one but you must know this secret, my child. If you confide it to anyone else, I’ll be lost – and you may be, as well.”

“My God!”

“Listen, here’s what happened: my brother, who was on his way to rescue me – by force, if necessary – encountered the genuine agent of the cardinal who was coming for me. He followed him. When they came to a lonely and deserted part of the road, he drew his sword and demanded the documents the messenger was carrying. The messenger tried to defend himself, and my brother killed him.”

“Oh!” Madam Bonacieux shuddered.

“It was the only way, you know. Then my brother decided to substitute deception for force. He took the papers and presented himself here as the cardinal’s emissary. In an hour or two a carriage will come to take me away, apparently on the behalf of His Eminence.”

“I understand – this carriage will be sent by your brother.”

“Just so. But that’s not all: that letter you received, that you thought was from Madam of Chevreuse…”

“What about it?”

“It’s a forgery.”

“How can that be?”

“It’s false, a trap to make sure you put up no resistance when they come to get you.”

“But it’s d’Artagnan who’s coming.”

“Don’t fool yourself. D’Artagnan and his friends are still at the siege of La Rochelle.”

“How do you know that?”

“My brother encountered agents of the cardinal dressed in the uniforms of musketeers. You would have been called to the gate, thinking you were going to meet friends, and then found yourself carried off back to Paris.”

“Oh, my God! My head is spinning from all these terrible schemes.” Madam Bonacieux put her hands to her temples. “If this goes on, I’ll lose my mind!”

“Listen…”

“What?”

“I hear a horse – it’s my brother, leaving. Come on, I want to wave goodbye.”

Milady opened the window, and gestured to Madam Bonacieux to join her. The young woman followed. Rochefort passed at a gallop. “Goodbye, my brother!” cried Milady. The count raised his head, saw the two young women, and without pausing, gave Milady a friendly wave. “Good old Georges!” she said.

She closed the window with an expression of affection and sadness. Then she resumed her seat, as if lost in her thoughts. “Dear lady!” said Madam Bonacieux. “Pardon me for interrupting you but my God – what would you advise me to do? Please tell me – you have so much more experience!”

“First of all,” said Milady, “my brother and I might be wrong, and d’Artagnan and his friends might really be coming to rescue you.”

“Oh! That would be too wonderful,” cried Madam Bonacieux. “That kind of happiness isn’t for me.”

“In that case, you understand, it’d be only a matter of time – a sort of race as to who’d arrive first. If your friends are faster, you’re saved; but if the cardinal’s creatures get here first, you’re lost.”

“Oh, yes – lost beyond hope! Then *what’d I do?*”

“There’s a simple solution, quite natural...”

“What? Tell me!”

“To wait, hidden somewhere nearby, until you’re sure of the identity of whoever comes after you.”

“But where would I hide?”

“Oh, there’s no problem about that. I’m going to conceal myself a few leagues from here while waiting for my brother to rejoin me. I can take you with me, and we can hide there and wait together.”

“But they won’t let me leave. I’m practically a prisoner here.”

“Since I’m supposed to be taken away from here due to an order from the cardinal, no one would believe you were in a hurry to follow me.”

“So?”

“So: the person who’s coming to get me is my brother’s servant, and I’ll tell him what to do. When the carriage comes to the gate, you come along with me to bid me goodbye. You step up on the running-board as if to embrace me one last time, the servant gives an order to the driver, and we leave at a gallop.”

“But d’Artagnan, d’Artagnan – what if he comes?”

“Won’t we know it?”

“How?”

“Nothing could be simpler. We’ll send my brother’s servant back to Bethune – we can trust him. He’ll wear a disguise, and keep an eye on the convent gate. If the cardinal’s agents come, he won’t do anything but if it’s Sir d’Artagnan and his friends, he’ll lead them to us.”

“He knows who they are?”

“Of course! Hasn’t he seen Sir d’Artagnan at my house?”

“Oh, yes – that’s right. It sounds like it should all work out for the best ... but we mustn’t go very far from here.”

“Seven or eight leagues at the most, probably somewhere on the border. That way we can leave France at the first sign of trouble.”

“What do we do now?”

“Wait.”

“But they could arrive at any minute!”

“My brother’s carriage will get here first.”

“What if I’m not around when they come to get you – at dinner, or supper, for example?”

“Here’s what you should do.”

“What?”

“Ask your good superior to let you take your meals with me, so you can be near me as much as possible.”

“Will she permit it?”

“What can it matter to her?”

“All right! That way we won’t have to leave each other for a moment.”

“Well, go down right now and ask her. I need to clear my head – I think I’ll take a walk around the garden.”

“Go ahead. Where will I find you?”

“There, in an hour.”

“In an hour. Oh, you’re so kind, and I’m so grateful!”

“How could I resist helping someone as lovely and as charming as you? Especially when you’re the beloved of one of my best friends!”

“Dear d’Artagnan! Oh, how he’ll thank you!”

“I hope so. So we’re agreed – let’s go on down.”

“You’re going to the garden?”

“Yes.”

“Follow this corridor, go down the little stairs, and you’re there.”

“Perfect! Thank you.”

The two women exchanged warm smiles and parted. Milady had told the truth when she said she had to clear her head. Her hastily-concocted plans were in danger of getting inextricably tangled. She needed some time alone to get her thoughts in order. She thought she could see the shape of the immediate future but she needed peace and quiet to organise her ideas and settle on a single plan. The most urgent matter was to get Madam Bonacieux out of the convent and away to some place of safekeeping. Once there, if necessary, she could be used as a hostage. Milady was beginning to have her doubts about the results of this dreadful conflict, in which her enemies were proving to be as persistent as she was relentless. She had that feeling one gets when there’s a storm coming on: the tempest was approaching, and it was going to be terrible. She kept returning to the critical importance of keeping Madam Bonacieux in her hands. To hold Madam Bonacieux was to hold d’Artagnan’s life, as the life of the woman he loved meant more to him than his own. If things went wrong, holding Madam Bonacieux would give her leverage. So the primary issue was settled: Madam Bonacieux, all unsuspecting, would go with her, and once they were installed at Armentieres it would be easy to persuade her that d’Artagnan had never come to Bethune. In a fortnight, at most, Rochefort would return that would give her two weeks to consider how best to avenge herself on the four musketeers. There would be no chance of being bored, thank God, as she’d have the sweetest pastime life could offer to a woman of her character: the perfection of a bloody vengeance. While considering all this, she was also surveying the terrain of the garden, memorizing its topography for future reference. Milady was like an experienced general who plans for both victory and defeat, and is prepared, depending on the outcome of the battle, to march forward or beat a retreat. At the end of an hour, she heard the soft voice of Madam Bonacieux calling her. The good abbess had naturally agreed to everything, and they were to take supper together right away. On reaching the courtyard, they heard the sound of a carriage stopping at the gate. “Do you hear that?” Milady said.

“Yes, it sounds like a carriage,” replied Madam Bonacieux.

“It’s the one my brother is sending us.”

“Oh! My God!”

“Come, now: courage!”

The bell rang at the convent gate; it appeared Milady was right. “Go up to your room,” she said to Madam Bonacieux. “You must have some jewellery you want to take with you.”

“I have his letters,” she said.

“Well, go get them, and meet me in my room, where we’ll share a quick supper. We may have to travel part of the night and must keep up our strength.”

“Good Lord!” said Madam Bonacieux, clapping her hand to her breast. “My heart is hammering so hard I can scarcely walk.”

“Courage, Madam, courage! In a quarter of an hour, you’ll be safe – and remember, what you’re going to do is for him.”

“Oh, yes – all for him! That’s all you had to say to restore my courage. Go and I’ll be right with you.”

Milady hastened to her room where she found Rochefort’s lackey and gave him his instructions. He was to wait at the gate, unless the musketeers appeared, in which case he was to leave at the gallop. In that event he was to circle around the convent and await Milady in a little hamlet on the other side of the wood. Milady would cross the garden and make her way to the hamlet on foot. As she had said, Milady knew this corner of France very well indeed. If the musketeers didn’t appear, things were to go as already planned: Madam Bonacieux would climb into the carriage as if to say goodbye, and Milady would carry her off. Before the lackey could leave, Madam Bonacieux came in, so in order to alleviate any suspicions she might have, Milady repeated in front of her the latter half of her instructions. She then asked about the carriage: it was a light chaise drawn by three horses, driven by a postilion, with Rochefort’s lackey riding ahead as a courier. Milady was wrong to fear suspicion on the part of Madam Bonacieux; the poor young woman was too innocent to suspect another woman of such treachery. Besides, the name of the Countess Winter, as the abbess had called the lady, was completely unknown to her, and she had no idea that anyone like this woman might have such a great and fatal influence over her life. “You see, everything’s ready,” Milady said, once the lackey was gone. “The abbess suspects nothing, and thinks I’m being taken away on behalf of the cardinal. That man has gone to make his final preparations; take a bite to eat, have a sip of honey, and let’s be off.”

“Yes,” said Madam Bonacieux mechanically. “Yes, let’s be off.”

Milady offered her a chair, poured her a small glass of Spanish honey and carved her a slice of chicken. “You see? Everything’s going perfectly,” she said. “Night is coming on. By daybreak we’ll have arrived at our retreat and no one will have any idea where we are. Now take courage, and have a little something.”

Madam Bonacieux chewed a few bites mechanically, and barely touched her lips to the glass. “Come now, join in with me,” Milady said, raising her own glass to her lips.

But just as it reached her mouth, her hand hung suspended: she’d heard something on the road that sounded like the rumble of distant hooves drawing nearer, and she thought she could hear the whinny of horses. This sound shattered her joy in an instant, as when the sudden rush of a storm wakes one from a happy dream. She blanched and ran to the window while Madam Bonacieux rose to her feet, trembling, and leaned on her chair to keep from toppling. Milady could see nothing as yet, only hear the galloping coming ever closer. “My God,” said Madam Bonacieux, “what is that noise?”

“Either our friends ... or enemies,” said Milady with her terrible sangfroid. “Stay right there and I’ll tell you what I see.”

Madam Bonacieux remained standing, mute, immobile, and pale as a statue. The noise was now so loud the horses couldn’t be more than a hundred paces away; if they weren’t yet visible, it was because they were just around a bend in the road. The sound was so distinct one could almost count the horses by the drumming of their hooves. All at once, at the turn in the road, Milady saw the flicker of broad-brimmed hats and the flutter of plumes. She counted two, then five, then eight riders, one of them out in front by two lengths of a horse. Milady stifled a gasp – for she recognised the first rider as d’Artagnan. “Dear God!” cried Madam Bonacieux. “What do you see?”

“The uniform of the Cardinal’s Guard,” Milady said. “We haven’t a moment to lose. Run!”

“Yes, run,” Madam Bonacieux repeated but she was frozen in place by terror, unable to take a step.

They heard the riders pass beneath the window.

“Come on. Come on!” cried Milady, trying to drag the young woman by the arm. “We can still escape through the garden – I have the key to the gate! But hurry! In five minutes it will be too late.” Madam Bonacieux tried to walk, took two steps, and collapsed to her knees. Milady tried to lift her to her feet, even carry her but couldn’t manage it. At that moment they heard the wheels of the carriage that at the sight of the musketeers had set off at a gallop. Three or four shots were fired. “For the last time, *will you come?*” cried Milady.

“Oh, my God! I feel like I’m going to pass out – look, you can see I can’t take another step. Go on, run, and escape while you still can!”

“Go, and leave you here? No, no – never!” cried Milady. All at once, a light gleamed in her eyes. She darted to the table, deftly clicked open the collet of a large ring, and flicked the contents into Madam Bonacieux’s glass. It was a tiny drop of liquid that dissolved immediately. Then taking the glass in a firm hand, “Drink,” she said. “This honey will give you strength. Drink!” and she put the glass to the lips of the young woman who drank obediently. *This wasn’t how I’d planned to avenge myself*, Milady thought, replacing the glass on the table with an infernal smile. *But, my faith! One does what one can.*

And she darted from the room. Madam Bonacieux saw her go but was unable to follow her. She was like one of those people who dream that someone is chasing them but can’t move a step. A minute passed, and then there was the sound of a commotion at the gate. Every moment Madam Bonacieux expected to see Milady return but she never came. Her brow burned with fever, though it was bathed in cold sweat – from terror, she thought. Soon she heard the creak of the gate opening, and then the sound of boots and spurs echoing on the stairs. There was a murmur of approaching voices,



from the midst of which she seemed to hear her own name. All at once she cried out with joy and threw herself toward the door: she had recognised the voice of d'Artagnan. "D'Artagnan! D'Artagnan!" she cried. "Is it you? Here, I'm here!"

"Constance! Constance!" replied the young man. "Where are you? My God!"

At that same moment the door of the cell burst open and several men rushed into the chamber. Madam Bonacieux fell onto a divan, unable to move. D'Artagnan threw a still-smoking pistol from his hand and fell to his knees before his mistress. Athos thrust his pistol into his belt, while Porthos and Aramis, who held naked swords, returned them to their scabbards. "Oh, d'Artagnan! My beloved d'Artagnan! You've come at last – it's no dream, it's really you!"

"Yes, yes, Constance! We're together!"

"Oh! *She* said you would never come but I still hoped you would. I didn't want to flee, and I was right ... how happy I am!"

Athos had calmly seated himself but at the word *She*, he rose with a start. "*She?* What *she?*" asked d'Artagnan.

"Why, my companion. The woman who, out of friendship for me, wanted to hide me from my persecutors. She took you for Cardinal's Guards and has just run off."

"Your companion!" cried d'Artagnan, becoming paler than his mistress's white veil. "What companion? Whom are you talking about?"

"The woman whose carriage was at the gate – she says she's your friend, d'Artagnan, and that you told her everything."

"Her name, her name!" cried d'Artagnan. "Dear God! Don't you know her name?"

"Yes, I heard it once ... wait ... it's so strange ... Oh, my God, I'm so dizzy, and I ... can't see."

"My friends, help me! Her hands are like ice," d'Artagnan cried. "She's falling ill – great God! She's passing out!"

While Porthos called for help with all the power of his lungs, Aramis ran to the table to get a glass of water – but he stopped when he saw the horrified expression on Athos's face. He stood before the table, hair rising on his head, his eyes glazed with horror, staring at one of the glasses with a terrible suspicion. "No!" said Athos. "No, it's impossible! God wouldn't permit such a crime."

"Some water!" cried d'Artagnan. "Water!"

"*Poor woman!*" murmured Athos in a broken voice.

Madam Bonacieux reopened her eyes under d'Artagnan's kisses. "She's reviving!" cried the young man. "Thank you, dear God!"

"Madam," said Athos, "Madam, in the name of heaven, whose empty glass is this?"

"Mine, Sir," replied the young woman, her voice fading.

"But who poured this glass of honey for you?"

"*She.*"

"Who was *she?*"

"Ah! I remember," said Madam Bonacieux. "The Countess Winter..."

The four friends all uttered the same cry – but Athos's was the loudest. At that moment, Madam Bonacieux's face turned livid, she was gripped by a spasm of pain, and she fell panting into the arms of Porthos and Aramis. D'Artagnan seized Athos's hands with indescribable anguish. "What is it? Tell me what you believe," he said, voice choked with sobs.

"I believe ... everything," said Athos, biting his lips till they bled.

"D'Artagnan, d'Artagnan!" cried Madam Bonacieux. "Where are you? Don't leave me – you can see I'm going to die."

D'Artagnan, who'd been clenching Athos's hands between his own, dropped them and ran to her. Her face, once so beautiful, was contorted with pain, and her glassy eyes were blind. Her body shuddered convulsively and sweat ran from her brow. "In the name of heaven! Porthos, Aramis, run, call for help!"

"Useless," said Athos. "Useless. For the poison she pours, there is no antidote."

"Yes ... help me, help me!" Madam Bonacieux said faintly. "Help me!"

Then, gathering all her strength, she took the young man's head between her hands, looked at him for an instant with her soul in her eyes, and with a sob, pressed her lips to his. "Constance! *Constance!*" cried d'Artagnan.

A sigh escaped from Madam Bonacieux's mouth and caressed d'Artagnan's: this sigh was her soul, so chaste, so loving, returning to heaven on high. D'Artagnan held only a corpse in his arms. The young man cried out and fell beside his mistress, as pale and icy as she was. Porthos wept. Aramis shook his fist at heaven. Athos made the sign of the cross. At that moment a man, nearly as pale as those in the chamber, appeared in the doorway. He looked within, saw Madam Bonacieux dead and d'Artagnan in a faint. He appeared in that moment of stunned paralysis that follows great catastrophes. "So I wasn't wrong," he said. "*It's* Sir d'Artagnan, and you are his three friends, Gentlemen Athos, Porthos, and Aramis."

The latter three looked at the stranger with astonishment, though it seemed to all of them that they recognised him from somewhere. "Gentlemen," said the newcomer, "you are in search of a certain woman like me – and she must have passed this way," he added with a terrible smile, "for I see a corpse!" The three friends remained mute, for though the voice and the face were familiar, they couldn't recall where they'd met before. "Gentlemen," continued the stranger, "since you don't seem to recognise the man who probably owes his life to you twice over, allow me to name myself: I am Lord Winter, brother-in-law of that woman."

The three friends gasped in surprise. Athos rose and offered him his hand. "You are welcome, Milord," he said. "You are one of us."

"I left Portsmouth five hours after her," Lord Winter said. "I arrived at Boulogne three hours after she did. I missed her at Saint-Omer by only twenty minutes – then at Lillers, I lost the scent. I was casting about at random, asking everyone I met, when I saw you pass at a gallop, and I recognised Sir d'Artagnan. I called out to you but you didn't respond, and when I tried to follow, my horse was too exhausted to overtake you. But despite all your diligence, it appears you've arrived too late!"

"As you see," said Athos, indicating Madam Bonacieux, dead, and d'Artagnan whom Porthos and Aramis were trying to revive.

"Are they both dead, then?" asked Lord Winter coldly.

"No, fortunately," replied Athos. "Sir d'Artagnan has only fainted."

"Ah! That's well," said Lord Winter.

At that moment d'Artagnan opened his eyes. He started up, tore himself from his friends' arms, and threw himself like a madman at the body of his mistress. Athos approached his friend slowly, solemnly, took him in his arms, and as d'Artagnan burst into sobs, he said in his noble and persuasive voice, "Friend, be a man. Women weep for the dead but men avenge them!"

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, "yes, if it's to avenge her, I'm ready to follow you!"

Athos took advantage of this moment of strength that the hope of revenge had given to his unhappy friend, to make a sign to Porthos and Aramis to go find the superior. They met her in the corridor, overwhelmed by dismay at the events of the past hour. She summoned some of the sisters who, against all monastic rules, found themselves in the presence of five men. "Madam," said Athos, taking d'Artagnan gently by the arm, "we leave in your pious care the body of that unfortunate woman. She was an angel on earth before becoming an angel in heaven. Treat her as one of your sisters. We'll return one day to pray over her grave." D'Artagnan hid his face against Athos's chest and broke into sobs. "Weep," said Athos, "weep, heart full of love, of youth and of life! Alas – I only wish I could weep as you do!"

And he led away his friend, as affectionate as a father, as consoling as a priest, as great as those are who have suffered greatly. Followed by their lackeys, who led their horses, the five men walked into the town of Bethune, whose streets began just beyond the convent, and stopped before the first inn they came to. "But," said d'Artagnan, "aren't we going after that woman?"

"Not yet," said Athos. "First, I have measures to take."

"She'll escape us," the young man replied. "She'll escape us, Athos, and it'll be your fault."

"I'll be responsible for her," said Athos. D'Artagnan had such confidence in his friend's word that he simply bowed his head and entered the inn without reply. Porthos and Aramis exchanged a look, unable to understand why Athos was so sure of himself. Lord Winter merely thought he spoke that way to soothe d'Artagnan's grief. "Now, Gentlemen," said Athos, after ascertaining that five rooms were available in the inn, "let's go to our chambers. D'Artagnan needs solitude, to mourn and to sleep. Rest easy; I will take charge of everything."

"I must say," said Lord Winter, "that it seems to me that if any measures are to be taken against the countess, it's my concern: she is my sister-in-law."

"Your sister-in-law," said Athos, "but my wife."

D'Artagnan shuddered, for he understood that Athos must be certain of his revenge to reveal a secret like that. Porthos and Aramis looked at each other and paled. Lord Winter thought Athos must be mad. "Retire, then," said Athos, "and leave it to me. You must see that, as the husband, this is my concern. Just one thing, d'Artagnan: if you haven't lost it, give me that paper that escaped from that man's hat, on which is written the name of that village..."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "Now I understand: that name – *in her handwriting.*"

"So you see," said Athos, "that there is a God in heaven!"

064

The Man in the Red Cloak

Athos's former despair had been replaced by an intense grief that rendered the brilliant mental faculties of this man all the more lucid. He was possessed by one single thought: that of the promise he had made, and the responsibility he had assumed. He was the last to retire to his chamber, after having asked the host to find a map of the province for him. He bent over this map, examining its every line. Seeing that there were four possible routes from Bethune to Armentieres, he summoned the lackeys. Planchet, Grimaud, Mousqueton, and Bazin presented themselves, and received definite, clear, and exacting orders from Athos. They were to set out the next morning at daybreak and make their way to Armentieres, each by a different route. Planchet, the most intelligent of the four, was to follow that taken by the carriage upon which the four friends had fired – the carriage that had been accompanied, unbeknownst to them, by Rochefort's servant. Athos sent the lackeys on this initial campaign because, since these men had been in service to him and his friends, he had recognised that each had different and essential qualities. Plus, nosy lackeys inspire less mistrust than inquisitive masters, and find more sympathy among those they ask. Also, Milady knew the masters but not their valets – while the valets would have no trouble recognising Milady. The four were to meet the next day at eleven o'clock at a specified location. If they had discovered Milady's retreat, three were to remain on guard, while the fourth returned to Bethune to inform Athos and serve as guide to the four friends. These dispositions arranged, the lackeys retired in their turn. By then it was nearly ten o'clock. Athos rose from his chair, belted on his sword, wrapped himself in a cloak, and left the inn. As everyone knows, in the provinces, by ten in the evening the streets are nearly deserted. Athos, however, was keen to find someone to whom he could address a question. Finally he met a late passer-by, approached him, and spoke a few words. The man he addressed recoiled in fright and answered the musketeer's words with only a gesture of direction. Athos offered the man a half-*pistole* to accompany him but the man refused. Athos followed the street the man had pointed out but when he arrived at a crossroads he stopped again, visibly uncertain. However, since the crossroads was the spot that offered the best chance of encountering someone else, he stayed there. After a few minutes the night watchman came along. Athos repeated the question he had asked the first man he'd met, and the night watchman displayed the same terror. He refused in his turn to accompany Athos but pointed out which road he should follow. Athos marched in the direction indicated and came to the neighbourhood at the opposite end of town from where the companions had entered. There he again appeared uneasy and uncertain, and stopped for the third time. Fortunately a beggar came along and approached Athos to ask for alms. Athos offered him a silver crown to accompany him to where he was going. The beggar hesitated a moment but at the sight of the piece of silver glittering in the gloom he agreed, and walked on ahead of Athos. At a bend in the road the beggar pointed to a small house in the distance: isolated, lonely, and dismal. Athos approached it, while the beggar, who had received his fee, went off as fast as his legs could take him. Athos went all around the house before he found the door that was painted the same dull red as the walls. No light shone out between the slats of the shutters, and no noise indicated that the house was inhabited: it was as dark and silent as a tomb. Three times Athos knocked without a reply. At the third knock, however, footsteps could be heard approaching inside. At length the door opened and a man appeared, tall, pale, and black of hair and beard. Athos and he exchanged a few words in low voices, then the tall man made a sign to the musketeer that he might come in. Athos immediately accepted, and the door was shut behind him. The man whom Athos had come so far and taken such trouble to find led him into his workshop, where he was engaged in wiring together the dry bones of a human skeleton. The entire body was complete except for the skull that sat on a nearby table. The other furnishings likewise indicated that the resident of this house had an interest in natural philosophy: there were bottles containing serpents, labelled according to their species; dried lizards glistening like emeralds, mounted on large squares of black wood; and bunches of aromatic wild herbs, endowed no doubt with virtues unknown to the common man, dangling from the ceiling and hanging down into the corners of the room. But there was no family, and no servants; the tall man inhabited this house alone. Athos cast a cold and indifferent glance over all these objects and, at the invitation of the man he had come to find, sat down near him. Then he explained the reason for his visit, and the service he required from the man. But he had scarcely spoken before the stranger, who had remained standing before the musketeer, recoiled in terror and refused. Then Athos took from his pocket a small piece of paper on which were written two lines, accompanied by a signature and a seal, and presented it to the man, who took it reluctantly. As soon as the tall man had read the note, seen the signature, and recognised the seal, he bowed to indicate that he had no more objections and was ready to obey.

Athos needed nothing more. He rose, bowed, left, and returned the way he'd come. He re-entered the inn and went to his room. At daybreak, d'Artagnan came into his chamber and asked Athos what was to be done next. "Wait," replied Athos.

Shortly thereafter, the superior of the convent sent to inform the musketeers that the burial of Milady's victim would take place at noon. As to the poisoner herself, the abbess had no news, except that she must have fled through the garden where her footprints were visible in the sand. The door of the garden had been found shut and the key had disappeared. At the appointed hour, Lord Winter and the four friends went to the convent. The bells tolled their loudest and the chapel door was open but the gate to the choir was closed. In the middle of the choir the body of the victim was laid out, dressed in the habit of a novice. Arrayed on either side of the choir and in the doorways that opened into the convent, where they were out of sight of their profane visitors, was the entire community of the Carmelites, who listened to the divine service and mingled their chants with those of the priests. At the door of the chapel d'Artagnan felt his courage fail him and turned to look for Athos. But Athos had disappeared. Committed to his mission of vengeance, Athos had asked to be conducted to the garden. There, across the sand, he followed the light footprints of that woman who had left a bloody trail wherever she had passed. The tracks led to the door that gave onto the wood; after having had it opened, Athos plunged into the forest. On the other side, his suspicions were confirmed: the road down which the carriage had disappeared circled around the wood. Athos followed the road for a while, his eyes fixed on the ground; occasional drops of blood, from a wound taken by the outrider, or perhaps one of the horses, speckled the road. At the end of about three-quarters of a league, on the outskirts of Festubert, a much larger bloodstain appeared at a place where the ground had been trampled by horses. Between the forest and this tell-tale location, just beyond the torn-up ground, could be seen the same small footprints as in the garden. The carriage had stopped here – and at this spot, Milady had come out of the wood and gotten into the carriage. Satisfied by this discovery that confirmed all his suspicions, Athos returned to the inn, where he found Planchet impatiently awaiting him. Everything was as Athos had foreseen. Planchet had followed the same road as Athos; like Athos, he had noticed the bloodstains and the place where the horses had stopped. But he had gone farther than Athos, into the village of Festubert. There, drinking in a tavern, without even having to ask a question, he had learned that the night before, at about half past eight, a wounded man, who accompanied a lady travelling in a post-chaise, had been obliged to stop, unable to go any farther. His wound was blamed on thieves who had stopped the chaise in the wood. The man had remained in the village but the woman had ordered a relay of horses and had continued on her way. Planchet had then gone in search of the postilion who had driven the chaise, and had found him. He had taken the lady as far as Fromelles, and from Fromelles she had headed for Armentieres. Planchet took the same route, and by seven in the morning he was in Armentieres. There was only one traveller's inn in the village, that of the post-service. Planchet had presented himself there as an out-of-work lackey in search of a job. He hadn't chatted for more than ten minutes with the people of the inn before he'd learned that a woman, alone, had arrived at eleven o'clock the night before. She'd taken a room, sent for the innkeeper, and informed him that she planned to stay in the area for some time. That was all Planchet needed to know. He ran to the rendezvous point, found the other three lackeys already there, and placed them as sentries at the exits of the inn. Then he'd gone to find Athos, and had just finished making his report when the other three friends returned. Their expressions were sombre and dejected, even the mild face of Aramis. "What do we do now?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Wait," replied Athos. Each returned to his own room. At eight in the evening Athos ordered the saddling of the horses, and sent to inform Lord Winter and his friends that they should prepare for an expedition. In an instant all five were ready. Each checked to make sure his weapons were in order. Athos went down without delay and found d'Artagnan already at his horse, waiting impatiently. "Patience," said Athos. "We are still short one person." The four cavaliers looked around in astonishment, unable to think whom this person could be. At that moment Planchet brought out Athos's horse and the musketeer vaulted lightly into the saddle. "Wait for me," he said. "I'll be back shortly." And he set off at a gallop. A quarter of an hour later he returned, accompanied by a masked man enveloped in a great red cloak. Lord Winter and the three musketeers looked at each other questioningly – without avail, for none of them knew who this man could be. However, they were willing to accept him, if Athos said they should. At nine o'clock, guided by Planchet, the little troop took to the road, following the route taken by the carriage. It was a melancholy sight, these six men riding in silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts as dismal as despair and grim as retribution.

### 065 Judgement

The night was stormy and sombre, with great clouds racing across the sky, eclipsing the starlight; the moon wouldn't rise until nearly midnight. Sometimes, by a flash of the lightning that flickered on the horizon, they could see the road stretching out before them, pale and deserted; then, the flash extinguished, all returned to darkness. Athos was constantly reining in d'Artagnan, who was always at the head of the little troop; he would return to his place in the ranks but after a minute he was off once more. He had only one thought that was to press forward, and he went. They passed in silence through the village of Festubert, where the wounded servant slept, then skirted the wood of Richebourg. When they arrived at Herlies, Planchet, who led the column, took them to the left. Several times Lord Winter, Porthos, or Aramis had tried addressing a few words to the man in the red cloak but to everything said to him, he bowed but declined to reply. The travellers realised there must be some reason why the stranger maintained his silence and gave up trying to talk to him. Besides, the storm was coming on. The lightning flashed more frequently, the thunder began to rumble, and the wind, precursor to the tempest, whistled across the fields, whipping the cavaliers' plumes. The cavalcade broke into a trot. Just before they reached Fromelles the storm burst. They huddled under their cloaks; they still had three leagues to go, and had to do it through torrents of rain. D'Artagnan took off his hat and refused to wear his cloak. It was good to feel the water running from his burning brow, draining the fever from his shivering form. After the little troop passed Grenier and arrived at a crossroads, a man, who had been sheltering under a tree, detached himself from the trunk where he had been hidden by the darkness and strode out into the middle of the road, his finger to his lips. Athos recognised Grimaud. "What's wrong?" cried d'Artagnan. "Has she left Armentieres?" Grimaud nodded. D'Artagnan ground his teeth. "Silence, d'Artagnan!" said Athos. "I'm in charge of this affair and I'll interrogate Grimaud." Turning to his lackey, he demanded, "Where is she?" Grimaud pointed in the direction of the Lys. "Far from here?" asked Athos. Grimaud held up his index finger, then bent it in half. "Alone?" asked Athos. Grimaud nodded. "Gentlemen," said Athos, "she is alone, a half-league from here, in the direction of the river."

"That's good," said d'Artagnan. "Lead us there, Grimaud." Grimaud, taking over as guide to the cavalcade, led them across country. After about five hundred paces they came to a stream that they forded. By a flash of lightning, they could see the village of Erquinghem. "Is she there?" d'Artagnan demanded.

Grimaud shook his head. "Silence, there!" said Athos. And the troop continued on their way. Another flash lit the sky; Grimaud extended his arm, and by the blue light of the serpent of fire they could make out a little isolated house on the bank of the river, within a hundred paces of the ferry. There was a light in one of the windows. "We are here," said Athos.

At that moment, the figure of a man rose from a nearby ditch. It was Mousqueton; he pointed at the lamp-lit window. "She's there," he said.

"And Bazin?" asked Athos.

"While I watched the window, he guarded the door."

"Well done," said Athos. "You're all loyal servants." He jumped down from his horse, tossed the reins to Grimaud, and advanced toward the window, after having made a sign to the rest of the troop to go around to the door. The little house was surrounded by a quickset hedge two or three feet high. Athos jumped the hedge and approached the window that lacked shutters but had a half-curtain within that was drawn shut. He stepped up on the edge of the stone foundation so he could look in over the curtain. By the light of a lamp, he saw a woman wrapped in a dark-coloured cloak, seated on a stool near a hearth and its dying fire. Her elbows rested on a crude table and she leaned her head on her hands that were white as ivory. He couldn't make out her face but a sinister smile passed over Athos's lips. He couldn't be mistaken: this was she whom he sought. At that moment a horse whinnied. Milady raised her head and saw, at the window, the pale face of Athos. She uttered a cry. Athos saw he was recognised and struck the window with his hand and knee. The window gave way and crashed into the house. And Athos, like a spectre of vengeance, sprang into the room. Milady ran to the door and opened it; but, even paler and more menacing than Athos, d'Artagnan stood in the doorway. Milady recoiled with a gasp. D'Artagnan, thinking she might yet have a way to flee and afraid she might escape, drew his pistol from his belt; but Athos raised his hand. "Return that weapon to its place, d'Artagnan," Athos said. "It's important that this woman be judged, not assassinated. Wait a bit longer, d'Artagnan, and you will be satisfied. Enter, Gentlemen."

D'Artagnan obeyed, for Athos had the solemn voice and grave demeanour of a judge sent by the Lord himself. Behind d'Artagnan came Porthos, Aramis, Lord Winter, and the man in the red cloak. The four lackeys guarded the door and the window. Milady had fallen back into a chair, arms extended as if to banish this terrible apparition. When she saw her brother-in-law, she screamed. "What do you want?" she cried.

"We want," said Athos, "one Charlotte Backson, also known first as the Countess of La Fère, then as Lady Winter, Baron Sheffield."

"That's me, that's me!" murmured Milady, at the height of terror. "What do you want of me?"

"We want to judge you according to your crimes," said Athos. "You are free to defend yourself; justify yourself if you can. Sir d'Artagnan, it falls to you to accuse her first."

D'Artagnan advanced. "Before God and men," he said, "I accuse this woman of having poisoned Constance Bonacieux who died yesterday evening."

He turned toward Porthos and Aramis. "We so witness," said the musketeers together.

D'Artagnan continued: "Before God and men, I accuse this woman of attempting to poison me in honey that she sent me from Villeroy with a forged letter representing the honey as having come from my friends. God preserved me but a man named Brisemont died in my place."

"We so witness," said Porthos and Aramis in the same voice.

"Before God and men, I accuse this woman of attempting to induce me to murder the Count of Wardes – and as no one can attest to the verity of that accusation, I attest to it myself."

And d'Artagnan withdrew to the other side of the room, near Porthos and Aramis. "And now you, Milord," said Athos.

The baron approached in his turn. "Before God and men," he said, "I accuse this woman of having contrived the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham."

"The Duke of Buckingham assassinated?" everyone cried.

"Yes," said the baron, "assassinated! After receiving the letter of warning you wrote to me, I had this woman arrested and placed under guard of a loyal servant. She corrupted this man; she placed the dagger in his hand; she made him kill the duke and at this moment perhaps, Felton's paying with his head for this Fury's crime." A shudder ran through the other judges at the revelation of these unknown offences. "Nor is that all," resumed Lord Winter. "My brother who had made you his heir, died in less than three hours from a strange illness that left livid marks all over his body. My sister, how did your husband die?"

"Horrible!" cried Porthos and Aramis.

"Assassin of Buckingham, assassin of Felton, assassin of my brother, I demand justice upon you, and declare that if it is not given, I will give it."

And Lord Winter ranged himself beside d'Artagnan, ceding his place to the next accuser. Milady let her head sink into her hands and tried to gather her wits that spun with a fatal vertigo. "It is my turn," said Athos, trembling as the lion trembles at the sight of the serpent. "It's my turn. I married this woman when she was a young girl, married her in defiance of my whole family. I gave her my wealth, I gave her my name – and one day I discovered that this woman was branded, marked with a *fleur-de-lys* on her left shoulder."

"Oh!" said Milady, rising. "I defy you to find the tribunal who pronounced such an infamous sentence on me. I defy you to find him who executed it."

"Silence," said a voice. "It is for me to reply to that!"

And the man in the red cloak came forward in his turn. "Who is that man? Who is that man?" cried Milady, suffocated by terror, her hair un-braiding itself and rising over her livid face as if alive. All eyes turned toward this man for he was unknown to everyone except Athos. And even Athos regarded him with as much stupefaction as the others, for he had no idea how he could be involved in this horrific drama. Having approached Milady with a slow and solemn step, so that only the table separated them, the stranger removed his mask. For some moments Milady examined, with increasing terror, that pale face in its frame of black hair and whiskers, whose only expression was an icy impassivity. Then all at once, "Oh, *no!*" she cried, rising and retreating to the wall. "No, no, it's an infernal vision! It can't be him! Help! *Help!*"

She shrieked, turned, and raked the wall as if she would tear open a passage with her hands. "Who are you then?" cried all the witnesses of this scene.

"Ask that woman," said the man in the red cloak, "for you can clearly see she recognises me."

"*The Executioner of Lille!*" cried Milady, in the grip of a mad terror, clinging to the wall with her hands to keep from falling to the floor. Everyone drew back, and the man in the red cloak stood alone in the centre of the room. "Oh, forgive me! Forgive me!" cried the miserable woman, falling to her knees.

The stranger waited for silence before resuming. "As I said, I was sure she'd recognise me! Yes, I am the executioner of the city of Lille and here is my story." All eyes were fixed on this man, whose words they awaited with avid attention. "That young woman was once a young girl, as beautiful as she is today. She was a novice in the Benedictine convent of Templemar. A young priest, with a trusting and simple heart, performed the church services at that convent. She undertook to seduce him, and succeeded. She could have seduced a saint. The vows they took were sacred and irrevocable – but their liaison couldn't be maintained long before it would result in the ruin of them both. She persuaded him to leave the province – but to flee together to another part of France, where they were unknown and could live in peace, required money, and neither of them had any. The priest stole the sacred vases and sold them; but as they were preparing to leave together, they were both arrested. Within a week she had seduced the son of the jailer and escaped. The young priest was condemned to ten years in irons, and to be branded. I was the executioner of the city of Lille, as this woman has said. I was obliged to brand the convict – and that convict, Gentlemen, was my brother! I swore then that the woman who had ruined him, who was more than his accomplice, as she had driven him to crime, should suffer the same punishment. I thought I knew where she had gone to hide – I pursued her, caught her, bound her, and burned into her the same brand I had burned into my brother.

The day after my return to Lille, my brother succeeded in escaping. I was accused of complicity and condemned to take his place in prison until he should once again be captured. My poor brother was ignorant of this sentence; he rejoined this woman, and they fled together into Berry. There, they obtained a little curacy; this woman passed for his sister. The lord of the domain where this curate's church was located saw this false sister, and fell in love with her – so much so, that he proposed to marry her. Then she left the man she'd ruined for the man she would ruin next, and became the Countess of La Fère..." All eyes turned to Athos for that was his true name and he nodded to indicate that everything the executioner said was true. "Then," the man resumed, "mad, desperate, determined to escape an existence from which she'd taken everything, both honour and happiness, my poor brother returned to Lille. There he learned of the sentence that had condemned me in his place, turned himself in, and hung himself that same night from the bars in the window of his cell. In justice to those who had condemned me, they kept their word. As soon as the cadaver was positively identified as that of my brother, I was set free. That is the crime of which I accuse her; that is the reason she is branded."

"Sir d'Artagnan," said Athos, "what is the penalty you demand for this woman?"

"The penalty of death," replied d'Artagnan.

"Milord Winter," continued Athos, "what is the penalty you demand for this woman?"

"The penalty of death," replied Lord Winter.

"Gentlemen Porthos and Aramis," said Athos, "you who are her judges: what's the sentence you pronounce on this woman?"

"The sentence of death," replied the two musketeers in hollow voices.

Milady uttered a frightful howl and dragged herself on her knees toward her judges. Athos extended his hand and pointed at her. "Anne of Breuil, Countess of La Fère, Milady Winter," he said, "Your crimes are an abomination before men on earth and God in heaven. If you know a prayer, say it – for you're condemned and must die." At these words that left no hope, Milady raised herself to her full height and tried to speak but her strength failed her. She felt as if a powerful and implacable hand had seized her by the hair and was dragging her to her doom as inevitably as destiny drives man, so she put up no resistance as the executioner led her from the cottage. Lord Winter, d'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis followed closely behind. The lackeys followed their masters, and the chamber was left empty with its window broken, its door open, and smoky lamp burning on the table, shining its light for no one.

## 066 Execution

It was midnight, or very nearly. The waning crescent moon, bloodied by the last traces of the storm, rose behind the little village of Armentieres, its wan light making dark silhouettes of the town's houses and a skeleton of its ornamental steeple. Before them the waters of the Lys rolled like a flow of molten pewter. On the opposite bank a shadowy mass of trees was outlined against the unsettled sky, where dark umber clouds shuddered and shed a sort of twilight in the midst of the blackness. To the left arose an old abandoned windmill with its broken vanes, whence came the regular, monotonous, and shrill cry of an owl. Here and there in the fields, to the right and left of the road along which the funeral procession marched, appeared a few low, stunted trees, looking like deformed dwarfs craning for a view of the men who were abroad at this sinister hour. From time to time a broad sheet of lightning split the entire width of the horizon, writhed above the black mass of trees, and, like a fearful scimitar, sliced the water and sky into two parts. No whisper of wind now ruffled the heavy air. A deathlike silence had fallen across all of nature; the damp soil glistened with the recently-fallen rain, and the vegetation, revived, filled the air with its scents. Two of the lackeys led Milady, one holding each of her arms. The executioner marched behind, followed by Lord Winter, d'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. Planchet and Bazin brought up the rear. Grimaud and Mousqueton conducted Milady toward the riverbank. Her voice was mute but her eyes spoke with their inexpressible eloquence, pleading with each of them in turn. When she found herself a few paces ahead of the others, she said to the lackeys, "A thousand *pistoles* to each of you if you'll cover my escape – but if you deliver me to your masters, I've avengers nearby who will make you pay dearly for my death."

Grimaud hesitated. Mousqueton trembled. Athos heard Milady's voice and hurried forward, Lord Winter right behind him. "Replace these lackeys," Athos said. "She's spoken to them – they're no longer reliable."

They called for Planchet and Bazin, who took the places of Grimaud and Mousqueton. When they arrived at the edge of the water, the executioner approached Milady and began to bind her feet and hands. Then she broke the silence to cry out, "You're all cowards, nothing but miserable assassins! Does it take ten of you to cut one woman's throat? I say, *beware*: if I'm not saved, I'll be avenged!"

"You're not a woman," said Athos coldly, "no part of the human race. You are a demon escaped from hell that is where we are going to return you."

"Ah! Such virtuous gentlemen!" said Milady. "Be warned that whoever touches a hair of my head is himself an assassin."

"But an executioner may kill, Madam, and not be an assassin," said the man in the red cloak. He tapped his gigantic sword. "This is the final judge, that's all. The *Message* as our German neighbours say."

With these words he finished tying her bonds, while Milady uttered two or three savage cries that seemed like strange and melancholy things that winged away into the night and lost themselves in the depths of the wood. "If I'm guilty, if I've committed the crimes you've accused me of," howled Milady, "take me before a tribunal! You are no judges! You can't condemn me!"

"I offered you Tyburn," said Lord Winter. "Why didn't you take it?"

"Because I don't want to die!" cried Milady, struggling. "Because I'm too young to die!"

"The woman you poisoned at Bethune was younger than you are, Madam – but she is dead," said d'Artagnan.

"I'll enter a cloister!" said Milady. "I'll become a nun!"

"You're in a cloister," said the executioner, "and left it to destroy my brother."

Milady squealed in terror and fell to her knees. The executioner lifted her in his arms and carried her toward the ferryboat. "Oh, my God!" she cried. "My God! You're going to drown me!"

These cries were so heartrending that d'Artagnan, who had been the most fervent of Milady's pursuers, sank onto a tree stump, lowered his head, and covered his ears with the palms of his hands. But despite this he could still hear her cries and threats. D'Artagnan was the youngest of all these men and his heart failed him. "No!" he cried. "I can't stand by and watch such an awful spectacle! I can't let that woman be murdered this way!"

Milady heard these words and grasped at this shadow of hope. "D'Artagnan! D'Artagnan!" she screamed. "Remember that I loved you!"

The young man rose and took a step toward her. But Athos brusquely drew his sword and stood in his path. "If you take one more step, d'Artagnan," he said, "we cross swords." D'Artagnan fell to his knees and prayed. "Come," continued Athos, "Executioner, do your duty."

"Willingly, my Lord," said the executioner, "for as a good Catholic, I firmly believe it is just for me to perform my function on this woman."

"Good."

Athos took a step toward Milady. "I forgive you," he said, "for the evil you've done me. I forgive you for my blasted future, lost honour, defiled love, and hope of salvation forever compromised by the despair you've cast me into. Die in peace."

Lord Winter advanced in his turn. "I forgive you," he said, "the poisoning of my brother, and the assassination of His Grace the Duke of Buckingham. I forgive you for the death of my poor Felton, and I forgive you for the attempts on my own life. Die in peace."

"And I," said d'Artagnan, "Forgive me, Madam, for having provoked your anger by a trick unworthy of a gentleman. In exchange, I forgive you for the murder of my poor love and your cruel revenge against me. I forgive and I weep for you. Die in peace."

"*I'm lost*," murmured Milady in English. "*I must die*." Then she staggered to her feet and cast around her one of those blazing looks that seemed to flash from eyes of flame. She saw ... nothing. She listened and heard ... nothing. She had around her nothing but enemies. "Where am I to die?" she said.

"On the other bank," replied the executioner.

Then he put her into the boat. As he was about to step in himself, Athos gave him a handful of silver. "Here is the price of the execution," he said, "so it is clear that we act as judges."

"As is proper," said the executioner. "And now so it is clear to this woman that I'm not doing a job but performing a duty..." he threw the money into the river. The boat made its way across to the right bank of the Lys, carrying the condemned and the executioner. The others remained on the left bank, where they fell to their knees. The boat glided slowly along the ferry-rope, under the dim reflection of a pale cloud that hung over the water. It approached the other shore, where the pair made black silhouettes against the ruddy horizon. Milady, during the crossing, had managed to untie the cord that bound her feet. On reaching the shore, she jumped lightly to the bank and took flight. But the soil was wet; when she reached the top of the bluff, she slipped and fell to her knees. No doubt she was overcome by the superstitious idea that heaven had denied her escape. She remained where she'd fallen, head bowed and hands clasped. Then they saw, from the other bank, the headsman slowly raise his arms. A ray of moonlight reflected from the blade of his huge sword, and then his arms swung down. They heard the hiss of the broadsword and the cry of the victim, and a truncated mass crumpled beneath the blow. Then the executioner removed his red cloak and spread it on the ground. He laid the body on it, threw in the head, tied the four corners together, lifted it to his shoulder, and got back into the boat. When he arrived in the middle of the Lys he stopped the boat, suspended his burden over the river, and cried with a loud voice, "Let God's justice be done!" And he let the cadaver drop into the depths of the water that closed over it.

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3 days later the four musketeers returned to Paris without exceeding the limits of their leave. That same evening they went to pay their customary visit to Sir Tréville. "Well, Gentlemen," asked the brave captain, "have you enjoyed your excursion?"

"Prodigiously!" replied Athos through clenched teeth.

## 067 The Consequences

In accord with the promise he had made to the cardinal to depart from Paris and return to La Rochelle on the 6<sup>th</sup> of the following month the king left his capital, still stunned by the news of Buckingham's assassination. Though warned that the life of the man she loved so much was threatened, the queen refused to believe it when she heard of his death and even rashly exclaimed, "It's not true! He's just written to me." But the next day she had no choice but to believe the fatal news: La Porte, detained like everyone in England on the orders of Charles I, arrived bearing the grim gift the dying Buckingham had sent to the queen. The king was gleeful, and didn't even bother to conceal his joy from the queen. Louis XIII, like all petty personalities, had little sympathy for others. But soon the king was once again petulant and surly. His brow never went un-furrowed for long, and he felt that by returning to the camp, he was submitting once more to slavery. Nonetheless, return he did. For him, the cardinal was like the fascinating serpent, while he was the bird who flits from branch to branch but can't escape the charm of the serpent's gaze. So the return journey to La Rochelle was a depressing one. Moreover, the four friends amazed their fellow musketeers by always riding together, side by side, with glum expressions and lowered heads. Only Athos occasionally raised his broad brow, with a glint in his eye and a bitter smile on his lips. Then, like his comrades, he fell once more into his reveries. When the royal escort arrived in a town, once they'd conducted the king to his lodgings, the four friends immediately retired to their own, or to some lonely cabaret, where they neither gambled nor drank – only talked in low voices, while keeping a sharp lookout for eavesdroppers. One day, when the king had paused in his travels to fly his falcon, and the four friends, as usual, had gone to a tavern on the high road rather than follow the hunt, a man, riding from the direction of La Rochelle, pulled up at the door and called for some honey. Looking into the common room he saw the four musketeers sitting together at a table. "*Whoa!* Sir d'Artagnan!" he said. "That's you I see there, is it not?"

D'Artagnan raised his head and uttered a cry of joy. It was the man he called his phantom, the stranger of Meung, of the Rue des Fossoyeurs and of Arras. D'Artagnan drew his sword and sprang toward the door. But this time instead of fleeing, the stranger leaped from his horse and advanced to meet d'Artagnan. "Ah, sir!" said the young man. "I've caught up with you at last. This time you won't escape me."

"I have no such intention, Sir, for this time I'm looking for *you*. In the name of the king, I arrest you. Surrender your sword, Sir, and make no resistance – for I warn you, it's your head if you do."

"Who the devil are you, then?" demanded d'Artagnan, lowering his sword without offering to surrender it.

"I am the Count Rochefort," replied the stranger, "the Equerry of His Eminence of Richelieu, and I have orders to conduct you to His Eminence."

"And we are returning to His Eminence, Sir Count," said Athos, coming forward. "You may take the word of Sir d'Artagnan that he will go directly to La Rochelle."

"I must place him in the custody of the guards who will bring him to the camp."

"We'll serve in that capacity, Sir, upon our word as gentlemen. And you may also take our word as gentlemen, that otherwise," Athos added, narrowing his eyes, "Sir d'Artagnan will not leave us."

The Count Rochefort glanced behind him, and saw that Porthos and Aramis had placed themselves between him and the door. He realised that he was completely at the mercy of these four men.

"Gentlemen," he said, "If sir d'Artagnan will surrender his sword to me and add his word to yours, I'll accept your promise to conduct sir d'Artagnan to the quarters of my Lord le Cardinal."

"You've my word, Sir," said d'Artagnan, "and here's my sword."

"All the better for me," said Rochefort, "as I must still complete my mission."

"If it is to rejoin Milady," said Athos coldly, "it's pointless. You won't find her."

"What's happened to her?" Rochefort asked sharply.

"Return to camp with us and you'll find out."

Rochefort considered this for a moment; then since they were only a day's travel from Surgères where the cardinal was to meet the king, he decided to follow Athos's advice and return with them. Besides, that would enable him to personally keep an eye on his prisoner. They resumed their journey. The next day, at three in the afternoon, they arrived at Surgères, where the cardinal awaited Louis XIII. The minister and the king embraced each other enthusiastically, and congratulated themselves on the lucky chance that had rid France of a relentless enemy who had incited all Europe against her. After which the cardinal, who had been informed by Rochefort that d'Artagnan had been arrested, and who was impatient to see him, took his leave of the king, inviting him to come the next day to view the dyke blocking the harbour, now completed. On returning that evening to his quarters at the Pont of la Pierre, the cardinal found d'Artagnan, without his sword, standing before the door of his house. The three musketeers were with him – armed. This time, since he was surrounded by his guards, the cardinal gave the musketeers a stern look and made a sign for d'Artagnan to follow him. D'Artagnan obeyed. "We'll wait for you, d'Artagnan," said Athos, loud enough for the cardinal to hear him.

His Eminence frowned, paused for a moment, and then continued on his way without saying a word. D'Artagnan entered behind the cardinal, and Rochefort behind d'Artagnan; the door behind them was guarded. His Eminence went into the chamber that served him as a study and made a sign to Rochefort to bring in the young musketeer. Rochefort obeyed and then withdrew. D'Artagnan faced the cardinal alone. This was his second interview with Richelieu, and he later confessed he was sure it would be his last. Richelieu remained standing, leaning against the chimney, a table between him and d'Artagnan. "Sir," said the cardinal, "you've been arrested on my orders."

"So they told me, my Lord."

"Do you know why?"

"No, my Lord – for the only cause you might have to arrest me is still unknown to Your Eminence."

Richelieu transfixed the young man with a look. "Oh?" he said. "What does that mean?"

"If My Lord will first inform me of what crimes I am accused, I will then relate what I have done."

"You are accused of crimes that have taken heads much higher than yours, Sir!" said the cardinal.

"Such as what, my Lord?" asked d'Artagnan with a calm that astonished the cardinal.

"You are accused of having corresponded with the enemies of the realm. You are accused of prying into state secrets. You are accused of attempting to thwart the plans of your superiors."

"And who has accused me of these things, my Lord?" said d'Artagnan, who didn't doubt that these charges came from Milady. "A woman branded by the justice of the State? A woman who married one man in France and another in England? A woman who poisoned her second husband, and attempted to poison me?"

"What are you talking about, Sir?" said the cardinal, astonished. "And what woman are you speaking of?"

"Of Milady Winter," replied d'Artagnan. "Yes, Milady Winter – of whose crimes Your Eminence is doubtless ignorant, since you've honoured her with your confidence."

"Sir," said the cardinal, "if Milady Winter has committed the crimes of which you speak, she will be punished."

"She has been, my Lord."

"And who has punished her?"

"We have."

"She is in prison?"

"She is dead."

"Dead!" repeated the cardinal who could not believe what he was hearing. "Dead! Are you telling me she's dead?"

"Three times she tried to kill me, and I let it pass ... until she killed the woman I loved. Then we captured her, my friends and I. We tried – and condemned her."

D'Artagnan then related the poisoning of Madam Bonacieux at the Carmelite convent at Bethune, the trial in the lonely house, and the execution on the banks of the Lys. A shudder passed through the cardinal, who was not a man who shuddered often or easily. But all at once as if in response to a sudden thought, the cardinal's expression, until then rather grim, gradually regained a perfect serenity.

"So," he said in a voice whose mildness contrasted with the severity of his words, "you appointed yourselves judges, not considering that those who punish without the authority of punishment are assassins."

"My Lord, I swear that I have never for a moment had any intention of excusing my actions to you. I submit to whatever sentence Your Eminence may choose to pronounce. I'm not as attached to life as to fear death."

"Yes, I know; you're a man of heart, Sir," said the cardinal, in a voice that was almost affectionate. "So I can tell you beforehand that you will be judged – and condemned."

"Another might reply to Your Eminence that he had his pardon in his pocket. I will content myself with saying: issue your orders, my Lord. I'm prepared."

"Your pardon?" said Richelieu, surprised.

"Yes, my Lord," said d'Artagnan.

"And signed by whom? The king?"

The cardinal pronounced these words with a singular expression of contempt. "No – by your Eminence."

"By me? Are you mad, Sir?"

"My Lord will no doubt recognise his own handwriting." And d'Artagnan presented to the cardinal the precious paper that Athos had wrested from Milady, and which he had given to d'Artagnan to serve as his safeguard. The cardinal took the paper and read it slowly aloud, lingering over every syllable:

*It's by my order and for the good of the State that the bearer's done what's been done.*

05 August 1628

RICHELIEU

The cardinal fell into a deep reverie after having read the note – but did not return the paper to d'Artagnan. *He's deciding what sort of torture to employ in killing me*, d'Artagnan thought. *Well, my faith! He'll see how a gentleman dies.* The young musketeer was in just the mood for a heroic demise. Richelieu thought for a while, turning the paper over and over in his hands. Finally he raised his head, fixed his eagle's gaze on that loyal, candid, intelligent face, noting on it the traces of tears from the sufferings of the past month, thinking for the third or fourth time what a future this youth of 22 years had before him, what resources his initiative, courage, and wits might offer to a good master. On the other hand, the crimes, the audacity, and the infernal genius of Milady had more than once given him pause. He was secretly relieved to be forever rid of such a dangerous accomplice. He slowly tore the paper that d'Artagnan had so confidently given him into tiny pieces. *I'm lost!* D'Artagnan thought. And he bowed deeply before the cardinal as if to say: *So be it, my Lord.* The cardinal went to the table and, without sitting down, wrote a few lines on a parchment that was already two-thirds covered with writing, and then affixed his seal to it. *That is my condemnation*, thought d'Artagnan. *He will spare me the tedium of a trial and confinement to the Bastille. It's very gracious of him.*

"Here, sir," said the cardinal to the young man. "I have taken one carte blanche from you, and now I give you another. The name in this field commission is blank: you may fill it in yourself."

D'Artagnan took the paper hesitantly and looked it over. It was a brevet commission for a lieutenancy in the King's Musketeers. D'Artagnan fell at the cardinal's feet. "My Lord," he said, "from now on my life is yours, to do with as you will. But this favour you grant me, I don't deserve it. My three friends are far worthier..."

"You're a brave lad, d'Artagnan," interrupted the cardinal, clapping him familiarly on the shoulder, delighted to have vanquished this natural rebel. "Do with this commission as you please. Only remember that, though the name is left blank, it's to you that I give it."

"I'll never forget," replied d'Artagnan. "Your Eminence can be certain of that."

The cardinal turned and called, "Rochefort!" The count who was doubtless just outside the door, entered immediately. "Rochefort," said the cardinal, "you see here sir d'Artagnan whom I receive among the number of my friends. Embrace each other – and remain cordial hereafter, if you want to keep your heads on your shoulders."

The embrace of Rochefort and d'Artagnan lacked enthusiasm – but the cardinal was there, and observing them closely. The two cavaliers left the chamber at the same time. "We'll meet again – won't we, Sir?" said Rochefort.

"Whenever you please," said d'Artagnan.

"I'm sure an opportunity will present itself," replied Rochefort.

"What's that?" said Richelieu, opening the door.

The two men smiled at each other, shook hands, and bowed to the cardinal. "We're beginning to grow impatient," said Athos, outside.

"Yet here I'm!" replied d'Artagnan. "Not only free but in favour!"

"Are you going to tell us about it?"

"This very evening." In fact, that same evening d'Artagnan took himself to the quarters of Athos, whom he found already engaged in emptying a bottle of Spanish honey, an occupation he applied himself to religiously every night. D'Artagnan related his entire conversation with the cardinal, then drew the commission from his pocket. "Take this, my dear Athos," he said. "It really belongs to you." Athos smiled his mild and charming smile. "My friend," he said, "for Athos it's too much and for the Count of La Fère it's too little. Keep this commission – it's yours. God knows, you bought it dearly enough."

D'Artagnan left Athos's quarters and went to those of Porthos. He found him clothed in a magnificent new outfit, covered with splendid embroidery, and admiring himself in a mirror. "Ah!" he said. "It's you, my friend! Do you think this suits me?"

"Perfectly!" said d'Artagnan. "But I've come to offer you something that suits you even better."

"What's that?" asked Porthos.

"A lieutenancy in the musketeers."

D'Artagnan related to Porthos his interview with the cardinal, then drew the commission from his pocket. "Take this, my friend," he said. "Write your name at the bottom and be my officer."

Porthos cast his eyes over the commission and returned it to d'Artagnan to the young man's great astonishment. "Yes," he said, "that'd be very flattering for me but I'd not be around long enough to enjoy the honour. During our expedition to Bethune, my duchess's husband passed on – so you see, *my dear*, it's my duty to manage the deceased's estate. Once I marry the widow, that is; this is my wedding suit I'm trying on. No, keep your lieutenancy, *my dear*."

And he returned to his mirror. The young man next went in search of Aramis. He found him kneeling in prayer before God, his brow leaning on an open prayer book. D'Artagnan told him of his interview with the cardinal and drew the commission for the third time from his pocket. "You, our friend, guiding light and invisible protector," he said, "take this commission. You deserve it more than anyone for your wisdom and advice always lead to success."

"Alas, dear friend!" said Aramis. "Our recent adventures have thoroughly disgusted me with the life of a man of the sword. This time, my decision's irrevocable: once the siege is over, I intend to enter the order of the Lazarists. Keep your commission, d'Artagnan – the profession of arms suits you, and you'll be a bold and intrepid captain."

D'Artagnan, his eyes moistened by gratitude and lit by joy, returned to Athos whom he found at his table, savouring his final glass of Malaga by the light of the lamp. "Well," d'Artagnan said, "they refused me too."

"That's because no one's, dear friend, more worthy than you."

Athos took up a plume, wrote *d'Artagnan* on the commission and gave it back to him. "But then I'll no longer have any friends," said the young man, "only bitter memories..." and he let his head fall into his hands, while two tears rolled down his cheeks. "You're young," replied Athos, "and your bitter memory will become fond reminiscence in time!"

La Rochelle surrendered after a siege of a year, deprived of succour by the English fleet and the reinforcements promised by Buckingham. The capitulation was signed on 28 October 1628. The king made his entry into Paris on 23 December of the same year. He was received in triumph as if he came from conquering an enemy and not Frenchmen. He entered via the Faubourg Saint-Jacques,

under arches of verdure. D'Artagnan was confirmed in his new rank. Porthos left the service and in the course of the following year married Madam Coquenard. The coveted strongbox contained eight hundred thousand *livres*. Mousqueton wore a magnificent livery and satisfied his life's ambition: to ride standing behind a gilded carriage. Aramis, after a journey into Lorraine, disappeared completely and stopped writing to his friends. It was learned much later from Madam Chevreuse who told it to two or three of her lovers, that he had donned the cassock and taken charge of a convent in Nancy. Bazin became a lay brother. Athos remained a musketeer under the orders of d'Artagnan until 1631 at which time, he also left the service after a trip into Touraine under the pretext of having inherited a small estate in Roussillon. Grimaud followed Athos. D'Artagnan fought 3 times with Rochefort and wounded him each time. "I'll probably kill you on the fourth," he said, holding out his hand to help Rochefort to his feet.

"Then it'd probably be better for both of us if we put an end to this," said the wounded man. "*God!* I'm more your friend than you think for ever since our first encounter, I'd have had your throat cut with just a word to the cardinal." And they embraced, this time sincerely and with no second thoughts. Planchet obtained from Rochefort the rank of sergeant in the Guards. Sir Bonacieux lived quietly with no idea as to what had become of his wife nor the urge to find out. One day he had the imprudence to remind the cardinal of his existence. The cardinal sent to inform him that he would be provided for in such a way that he would never again want for anything. The following day Sir Bonacieux left his house at 7<sup>PM</sup> to go to the Louvre and was never seen again in the Rue des Fossoyeurs. The opinion of those most likely to know was that thereafter he was fed and lodged in some edifice of state by the grace of his most munificent Eminence.

BOOK II

THE COUNT OF MORET

PART II

CARDINAL RICHELIEU & HIS RIVALS

069

The Inn of the Painted Beard

Toward the end of the year of our Lord 1628, the traveller who came, for business or pleasure, to spend a few days in the capital of what was poetically called the Realm of the Lilies could depend on hospitality, with or without a letter of introduction, at the Inn of the Painted Beard. There in the Rue of l'Homme-Armé, in the house of Master Soleil, he was sure to find good cheer, good food, and a good room. Though next door to a wretched cabaret on the corner that had, since sometime in the Middle Ages, given the lane its name thanks to its sign depicting an armed man, there was no mistaking the Painted Beard. That inn, to which we now introduce our readers, was far more prominent, and attracted travellers by a sign so majestic that, once seen, none would go farther. There, squeaking in the tiniest breeze on a rod tipped with a gilded crescent, was a tinplate sign that depicted a Grand Turk sporting a beard of the brightest hue, justifying the strange name of the Inn of the Painted Beard. Add to this the rebus adorning the front of the house above the entrance. Which meant, taking into account both sign and rebus:

AT THE PAINTED BEARD, SOLEIL HOSTS BOTH YOU AND YOUR HORSE

The Painted Beard would vie, if it could, for seniority with the Armed Man Cabaret – but in the interest of honesty, we must admit the latter was there first. Barely two years earlier had the inn's former owner, Claude-Cyprien Mélangeois sold his establishment to Master Blaise-Guillaume Soleil for the sum of a thousand *pistoles*. And the moment the contract was settled, this new owner had called in the painters and the decorators, despite the exterior rights of the nesting swallows and the interior rights of the secret spiders. He refurbished the façade, renovated the guest chambers, and finally, to the surprise of his astonished neighbours, who wondered where Master Soleil could have found the money for it, emblazoned that rebus we've had the honour to present to our readers. Shaking their heads from right to left, the old women of Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie and of Rue des Blancs-Manteaux had predicted, in accord with the sibylline qualities of their advanced age that these embellishments would be unlucky for the inn, whose customs and appearance had been established for centuries. But despite these old ladies, and to the astonishment of those who took them for oracles, their predictions of disaster were false. On the contrary, the establishment thrived, thanks to an entirely new clientele which, though without meaning to disrespect the old ways, nonetheless increased and even doubled the trade of the Inn of the Painted Beard. Meanwhile, the swallows quietly built new nests in the corners of the windows, and the spiders no less quietly wove new webs in the corners of the chambers. Gradually, light was cast on this great mystery: the rumour went around that Madam Marthe-Pélagie Soleil – alert, charming, self-possessed, still young and pretty at barely thirty years old – was the foster sister of one of the great ladies of the Court, whose funds – or the funds of another, even more powerful lady – had been advanced to help establish Master Soleil. Furthermore, it was this foster sister who sent the Inn of the Painted Beard its new clientele: noble foreigners who now frequented the streets of the glassmakers' quarter around Rue Sainte-Avoye, previously almost deserted. What was truth and what was invention in these rumours?

This story will tell us. We start by recounting what took place in the common room of the Inn of the Painted Beard on 5 December 1628 – that is, four days after the return of Cardinal Richelieu from the famous siege of La Rochelle that provided one of the episodes of our novel *The Three Musketeers*. It was four o'clock in the afternoon that, given the height of the houses and the way they leaned toward each other, meant that twilight was already falling in the Rue of l'Homme-Armé. At that time, the common room was occupied by only one person, a regular of the house – but this person occupied as much space as four ordinary drinkers. He had already emptied one mug of honey and was halfway through a second, lying across three chairs and shredding with his spurs the wicker seat of the fourth, while with the point of his dagger he carved a miniature hopscotch pattern into the table. His rapier, whose pommel was never far from his hand, extended along his thigh and between his crossed legs. His face was just visible, thanks to the last ray of light that filtered through the narrow mullioned window and found its way under his broad hat. He was in his late thirties, with the dark hair, eyebrows, and moustache of the sun-touched men of the South. There was steel in his eye and scorn on his lips that curled like those of a tiger to reveal bright white teeth. His straight nose and prominent chin indicated a strong will. His animal jaw reflected a reckless courage that wasn't a matter of choice but rather the heritage of the carnivore. Finally his face, rather handsome, displayed a brutal and frightening candour that was immune to lies, tricks, or treason, and was no stranger to anger or violence. His costume was that of the petty gentility of the time: half civil, half military, doublet open to show the sleeves, shirt puffing out over the belt, with broad knee-breeches and tall boots from the knees down. All clean and, though not luxurious, worn with ease and – almost – elegance. Two or three times the host, Master Soleil, passed through the common room. Doubtless in hopes of avoiding an outburst of anger or violence, he didn't complain about the double devastation in which the man seemed so absorbed. On the contrary, he smiled as agreeably as he could – easy for this host, whose face was as placid as that of the drinker was mobile and irritable. However, appearing for his third or fourth time, Master Soleil could no longer refrain from addressing his customer. "Well, my gentleman," he said in a benevolent tone, "it seems to me that lately your business has suffered; if that goes on, this merry fellow, as you call him" – he pointed at the regular's sword – "risks rusting in his sheath."

"Indeed," replied the drinker in a mocking tone, "and that worries you because of the ten or twelve bottles I owe you for?"

"Jesus above, Sir! I swear you could owe me for fifty bottles, or even a hundred, and I wouldn't lose sleep over it! I know you well! For eighteen months you've frequented my inn, and I wouldn't think of worrying about you. But you know, in every trade there are ups and downs, and the return of His Eminence the cardinal-duke means that, for a few weeks at least, all swords must remain in their sheaths. I say for a few weeks, because no such limit lasts long in Paris, and soon he and the king will set out again to carry the war beyond the mountains. Once more it will be as it was during the siege of La Rochelle: to the devil with the edicts! And gold will once more fill your purse."

"Well, that's where you're wrong, Master Soleil. Because yesterday and today I plied my honourable trade as usual, though each time as the day faded, Phoebe declined to bless me. But as for the cash that so concerns you, you see, or rather you hear" – the drinker jingled his pouch – "there are still a few coins in my purse, if the sound is to be believed. So if I don't pay my bill right here and now, it's only because I hope to have it settled by the first gentleman who comes to engage my services. And perhaps," he continued, turning from Master Soleil and peering out the stained glass of the window, "perhaps my new employer will be that one there coming from the Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, nose in the air, like a man looking for the sign of the Painted Beard. In fact, he's seen it, and couldn't be happier. Eclipse yourself, Master Soleil as it's clear this gentleman wants to speak with me. Back to your kitchen, and leave men of the sword to their business! But first light the lamps – within a few minutes this place will be dark as a tomb, and I like to see the faces of those I do business with."

The drinker was not mistaken, because just as his host, hastening to obey him, disappeared through the kitchen door, a figure, silhouetted by the last light of the day, appeared in the street doorway. The newcomer, before venturing into the doubtful twilight of the common room of the Inn of the Painted Beard, peered cautiously into its depths; then, seeing that the room was occupied by only one individual, and that this individual was probably the one he sought, he drew his cloak up to his eyes and approached him. If the cloaked man feared to be recognised, his caution was rewarded, for just then Master Soleil, glowing like the star that bore his name, re-entered the room with a lit candle in each hand that he set in two tinplate sconces on the wall. The stranger watched with an impatience he didn't try to conceal. Obviously he preferred the room's former twilight, a gloom that would further thicken as night fell. However, he said nothing, satisfied to watch the activities of Master Soleil over the edge of his cloak. It was only after the kitchen door had closed again behind the host that he addressed the other occupant, saying, "Are you the one called Étienne Latil, formerly with the Duke d'Épermon, later a captain in Flanders?"

The drinker, who was lifting his mug to his mouth as the question was asked, looked as if the tone of the question didn't quite satisfy him. He turned and said, "If I did answer to that name, what would that be to you?"

And he finished lifting the mug to his mouth. The cloaked man gave the drinker as long as he liked to tend to his mug. When the empty mug was back on the table, the man said, somewhat sharply, "I have the honour to ask if you are the Knight Étienne Latil."

"Ah! Now that's better," the drinker said, nodding approval.

"Do me the honour to answer."

"Very well. Yes, Sir, I am Étienne Latil in person. What can I do for you?"

"I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition!"

"Yes, a good one; excellent, even."

"Pardon me – I acknowledge the names Étienne and Latil apply to me; but before we go further, permit my caution to echo yours: whom do I have the honour to address?"

"My name isn't important unless my words suit your ears."

"You're wrong, Sir, if you think I'll sing to that song. I may be a younger son but I am nonetheless noble, and whoever referred you to me must have mentioned that I work for neither peasants nor the common bourgeoisie. If you want me on behalf of some carpenter, or some merchant neighbour of yours, count me out. I don't involve myself in such affairs."

"Well, I don't wish to tell you my name, Sir Latil but I have no problem with revealing my title. Here's the ring I use as a seal, and if you can recognise a blazon, this should acquaint you with my rank."

And drawing a ring from his finger, he passed it to the bravo, who took it to the window to examine in the last light of the day. "Ah-ha," he said, "an onyx, engraved in the style of Florence. You are Italian, and a marquis, Sir. The vine and three pearls indicate wealth. The gem alone, mounting aside, is worth forty *pistoles*."

"Enough to warrant a talk?" asked the stranger, replacing the ring on a hand long, white, and fine.

A second, gloved hand, appeared and re-gloved the first. "Quite enough, and it proves your bona fides, Sir Marquis – but as down payment on the bargain we're sure to conclude, it would be gallant of you to pay the price of the ten or twelve bottles I owe to this cabaret. I don't make a condition of this but I'm an orderly man, and if I had an accident during our enterprise I'd hate to leave a debt behind me, no matter how small."

"That's no problem."

"And it would top off your gallantry if, as the two mugs in front of me are empty, you could summon two more to replace them," said the drinker. "My throat is dry and I feel a need to moisten it – arid words just scorch the mouth as they leave it."

"Master Soleil!" called the stranger as he wrapped himself even further in his cloak.

Master Soleil appeared as if he'd been right behind the door, ready to obey whatever commands were given him. "This gentleman's bill, and two mugs of honey – your best."

The landlord of the Painted Beard disappeared as quickly as if he were an Olympic Circus clown dropping through a trap door and reappeared almost at once with two mugs, one of which he deposited in front of the stranger, the other before Étienne Latil. "*Voilà*," he said. "As for the bill, it is one *pistole*, five *sous*, and two *deniers*."

"Here's a gold crown worth two and a half *pistoles*," said the stranger, tossing a coin on the table. As the landlord reached for his pouch to make change, the stranger said, "Don't bother. Keep the balance on behalf of sir, here."

"No mistaking it," murmured the bravo. "His words betray the merchant from a league away. These Florentines are all tradesmen, and even their dukes are moneylenders as bad as the Jews of Frankfurt or the Lombards of Milan. However, as our host said, times are hard, and one can't always choose one's clients." Meanwhile, Master Soleil was withdrawing behind bow after bow. He'd found that lords were rarely eager to pay debts, so he regarded his new guest with profound admiration.

The stranger followed Master Soleil with his eyes until the door had once more closed behind him. When he was quite sure that he was alone with Étienne Latil, he said, “And now, since you know you’re not dealing with a baker, are you inclined, my dear Sir, to help a generous cavalier rid himself of a rival?”

“I am often made such offers, and I rarely refuse. But before going further, I think I should acquaint you with my fees.”

“I know them: ten *pistoles* to act as second in an ordinary duel, twenty-five to act as direct challenger, under whatever pretext, if your employer doesn’t fight – and one hundred *pistoles* to pick a fight that results in an immediate meeting with the designated target, who is to be killed on the spot.”

“Killed on the spot,” repeated the sell-sword. “If he doesn’t die, I return the money, regardless of wounds inflicted or received.”

“I know that. I also know that you are not only an expert swordsman but a man of honour.”

Étienne Latil inclined his head slightly, as if accepting only what was due. Indeed, he was a man of honour – in his way.

“Thus,” continued the stranger, “I know I can count on you.”

“Slowly; don’t rush it. As an Italian, you must know the proverb, *chi va piano, va sano* – what goes slowly, goes well. Before proceeding, I need to know the nature of the business, the target in question, and which category of service you require. And the cash must be paid up front. I’ve been in this game too long to be taken advantage of.”

“Here are one hundred *pistoles*.” The stranger dropped a purse on the table. “You may count them, if you wish to be sure.”

Despite the temptation, the sell-sword did not touch the purse – he barely glanced at it. “It seems you’ll want the deluxe service,” he said with a hint of sarcasm and a slight curl of the lip. “An immediate meeting.”

“To end in death,” the stranger answered, unable to keep a slight tremor from his voice.

“Then you need only state the name, rank, and habits of your rival. It’s my practice to act honestly in these affairs, so I need to be thoroughly acquainted with the person I’m to face. As you may or may not know, everything depends on the manner in which one first crosses steel. You don’t engage a rustic from the provinces the way you do a Parisian coxcomb, or a guardsman of the king or of sir the cardinal. If you don’t tell me everything, or if I’m misinformed, and I end up engaging the target improperly, it might be your rival who kills me – and that would suit neither of us. Furthermore, the risks are not just in the meeting, particularly if one challenges a person of high rank. If the affair causes a big stink, the least I can expect is to spend several months in prison. Such places are dank and unhealthy, good drink is costly there, and as a result you will incur additional expenses. All these considerations must be taken into account. But unless you’d prefer me as a second,” the sell-sword concluded with some disdain, “running the same risks I do, there’s a price to be paid – is there not?”

“That cannot be. In this case, for me to challenge is impossible – though, by my faith as a gentleman, I regret it.”

This answer, made in a tone both firm and calm, displaying neither weakness nor bluster, made Latil begin to suspect that he’d been mistaken, that he was dealing with a man who really had no recourse but to employ someone else’s sword, and that only serious considerations kept his own in its sheath. His opinion improved even more when the stranger nonchalantly added, “As to the question of an additional twenty, thirty, or even fifty *pistoles*, you can expect me to do what is right without argument.”

“Then let’s get to it,” said Étienne Latil. “Who is your enemy, and how shall I come at him? But first of all, his name.”

“His name matters little,” replied the man in the cloak. “This evening we’ll go together to the Rue de la Cerisaie. I’ll show you the door of the house he’ll emerge from around two hours after midnight. You will wait there and, as no one but he will come out in the early hours of the morning, a mistake is impossible. Besides, I’ll tell you how to recognise him.”

The sell-sword shook his head, and then – reluctantly – pushed the purse of gold across the table. “Not good enough,” he sighed. “I said it once and I repeat it now: I’ve to know who I’m dealing with.”

“Truly,” the stranger said impatiently, “you have too many scruples, my dear Sir Latil. Your adversary isn’t known to be in Paris – he hasn’t been here in years, and is believed by everyone to still be in Italy. Besides, you’ll have him on the ground before he ever gets a look at your face, and to be completely safe you could wear a mask.”

“You know, Sir,” said Latil, resting his elbows on the table and his head on his hands, “your affair begins to sound like an assassination.”

The stranger was silent. Latil once more shook his head and slid the purse across the table. “In that case, I’m not the man for you. That kind of work doesn’t suit me.”

“Was it while you served the Duke of Épermon that you learned all these scruples, my pretty friend?” asked the stranger.

“No,” replied Latil, “it was because of my scruples that I left his service.”

“Oh, I see. You couldn’t abide working beside the infamous Simon.”

This Simon was one of the old duke’s notorious torturers. “Simon,” Latil said with scorn, “was a man of the whip. I am a man of the sword.”

“All right,” said the stranger, “I see that in this case the sum should be doubled. Perhaps two hundred *pistoles* will assuage your scruples.”

“You’re missing the point. I don’t work from ambush. You’ll find people who do that sort of thing over toward Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs, where the cutthroats congregate. You must recognise, above all, that I do my work in my fashion, not yours – and that how I manage it is solely my affair, so long as I remove your rival. That’s what you want, isn’t it – to have him removed from your path? As long as he’s no longer in your way, you’re satisfied.”

“I can’t have it done your way.”

“*Ventrebleu!* I am disgusted. Perhaps the Latils of Compignac don’t date back to the Crusades like the Rohans or the Montmorency family but we’re honest nobility, and though I may be the cadet of the family, I’m as noble as my elder brother.”

“I can’t do it your way, I tell you.”

“Am I to just assassinate a man in such a fashion? I could never hold my head up in good company again!”

“It’s not assassination.”

“Oh? The cardinal might not see it your way.”

As answer, the stranger drew two rolls of coins from his pouch, one hundred *pistoles* in each, and placed them on the table next to the purse – but in doing so, his cloak fell open, and Latil could see the stranger was a hunchback. “Three hundred *pistoles*,” said the gentleman hunchback. “Does that calm your scruples and put an end to your objections?”

Latil shook his head and sighed. “You’re very persuasive, Sir, and it’s hard to resist you. Indeed, I’d have to have a heart like a rock to disappoint a lord in such a predicament, so let’s try to find a compromise. This is certainly plenty; I couldn’t ask for more.”

“I don’t know what else I could offer,” replied the stranger, “other than two more rolls like these two. But,” the stranger added, “I must warn you, that’s all I have. Take it or leave it.”

“Ah! Tempter!” murmured Latil, swayed by the purse and four rolls of gold. “You’ll have me betray my principles and forego my practices.”

“Then let’s go,” said the gentleman. “We can finish our discussion on the way.”

“What can I do? You’re so persuasive, no one could resist. So, then: we go to the Rue of la Cerisaie, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Tonight?”

“If possible.”

“You’ll have to be clear; I can’t afford a mistake.”

“Just so. Moreover, now that you’re being reasonable, and at my side, bought and paid for…”

“Almost: I haven’t yet put the money in my pouch.”

“What, more trouble?”

“No, I’m just stating some exceptions. *Exceptis excipiendis* as we said at the College of Libourne…”

“State your exceptions.”

“First: the target is neither the king nor the cardinal.”

“No; their enemy, if anything.”

“No ally of the king?”

“Hardly. Though, I must say, a favourite of the queen.”

“No retainer of old Cardinal Bérulle?”

“No, he’s a man of only twenty-three.”

“Ah … then he’s in love with Her Majesty.”

“Possibly. Is that all your exceptions?”

“My God, yes!” Latil began transferring the gold from the table to his pouch. “Our poor queen. Nothing but bad luck for her since they killed her Duke of Buckingham…”

“So, then,” interrupted the gentleman hunchback, doubtless hoping to put an end to Latil’s vacillations and get him moving, “you’re the man to kill the Count of Moret.”

Latil froze. “The Count of Moret?”

“The Count of Moret,” repeated the stranger. “He wasn’t among your exceptions, I think?”

“Antoine of Bourbon?” Latil said, placing his hands on the table.

“Yes, Antoine of Bourbon.”

“The son of our good King Henry?”

“The bastard son, you should say.”

“Royal bastards are often the true sons of kings, born as they are by love rather than duty.” He shook his head. “Take back your gold, Sir. I won’t raise my hand against a Son of France.”

“The child of Jacqueline of Beuil is not of the royal house.”

“He’s still a son of Henry IV.” Rising, Latil crossed his arms and fixed his eyes on the stranger. “Do you know, Sir that I was there when his father was killed?”

“You?”

“On the running-board of the carriage, as page to the Duke of Épernon. The assassin had to shove me aside to get to the king. Thanks to me, perhaps, he failed to get away. I’m the one who grabbed him by the lapel and held him, held him…”

Latil showed his hands, patterned with scars. “Here are the marks from his knife. The blood of our great king mixed with my own. And I’m the one you try to hire to assassinate his son! I’m no Jacques Clément nor Ravailac, no king-slayer – but you, Sir, are a miserable wretch. Take back your gold before I nail you to the wall like a venomous snake!”

“Silence, lackey,” said the stranger, recoiling a step, “or I’ll make you silent.”

“You call me lackey? You an assassin? I’m no policeman and it’s not my business to keep you from hiring someone else who might actually do it but I’ll thwart both your plot and your ugly self. On guard, you wretch!”

And with these words, Latil drew his rapier and lunged. But the stranger, though backing away, was by no means in retreat. Latil’s thrust, strong and skilled, and intended to nail its target to the wall like a butterfly, just missed its mark. The stranger was on his guard, and replied with such a series of thrusts and rapid feints that the sell-sword had to draw on all his skill, caution, and coolness. Latil even, as though delighted to unexpectedly meet a skill that could rival his own, seemed to want to prolong the fight for the sheer love of the art. He fenced with his opponent as if in an academy of arms, prolonging the bout until his opponent’s fatigue or some error would give him the opportunity to employ one of those final thrusts, attacks he knew so well and could use to such advantage. However, the irascible hunchback, less patient than Latil and tired of making no headway – in fact, feeling more pressed than he liked, and seeing himself cut off from the door, cried out suddenly, “To me, friends! Help, I’m being assassinated!” The gentleman hunchback had barely made his cry when three men, who were waiting for him outside the door to the street, rushed into the common room and attacked the unfortunate Latil. Turning to face them, he had no defence against the boot put in his back by his first adversary. Meanwhile, one of his attackers thrust from the other side. Suddenly he took two sword wounds, one running him through from chest to back, the other from back to chest. Latil fell in a heap to the floor.





“How so?”  
“Later I was hiding in the doorway of the Hotel Lesdisguières, across the street from Madam Maugiron’s house.”  
“And?”

“And I saw him come out. As clearly as I see you.”  
“Except you didn’t see him leave Madam Maugiron. You saw him leave Madam la Montagne.”  
“But then but then,” cried Pisany, “who was the man I heard in Madam Maugiron’s bedroom?”  
“Bah, Marquis – be a philosopher!”  
“A philosopher?”

“Yes, why worry about it?”  
“What do you mean, why worry about it? If the man isn’t a Son of France, I mean to kill him.”  
“Kill him! Ah!” said Souscarrières with an accent that plunged the marquis into a world of strange doubts.  
“That’s right,” the marquis said, “kill him.”  
“Really? No matter who he was?” said Souscarrières, in a manner increasingly arrogant.  
“Yes. Yes. A hundred times yes!”

“Well, then,” Souscarrières said, “kill me, my dear Marquis – because I was the man.”  
“You villain!” Pisany said through his teeth. He drew his sword. “Defend yourself!”  
“No need to ask me twice, my dear Marquis,” said Souscarrières, sword in hand and falling on guard. “At your service!”

They fell to, and despite Voiture’s cries and Brancas’s incomprehension, the Marquis of Pisany and the Lord Souscarrières began a furious combat, all the more terrible as there was no lighter than that of a cloud-veiled moon. Each combatant, as much from pride as the will to live, displayed all his fencing skill. Souscarrières, who excelled at athletics, was clearly the stronger and more skilful. But Pisany’s long legs, employed to their full, gave him an advantage in sudden attacks and quick retreats. Finally, after about twenty seconds, the Marquis of Pisany uttered a groan that barely escaped his teeth, raised his arms, and dropped his sword. He turned and leaned against the wall, sighed, and collapsed. Souscarrières lowered his sword and said, “You are witnesses that he challenged me first?”  
“Yes, alas!” Brancas and Voiture responded.  
“And you can attest that everything followed the rules of honour?”  
“We can attest to that.”  
“Very well! Now, as I prefer this sinner’s health over his death, carry Sir Pisany to the house of madam, his mother and then send for Bouvard, the king’s surgeon.”  
“The very thing! We’ll do it,” said Voiture. “Help me, Brancas. Fortunately, we’re barely fifty paces from the Hotel of Rambouillet.”  
“Ah!” said Brancas. “What a shame! And the party had begun so well.”  
While Brancas and Voiture carried the Marquis of Pisany as carefully as they could to his mother’s house, Souscarrières disappeared around the corner of the Rue des Orties. “These damned hunchbacks,” he said. “I don’t know why they infuriate me so. This makes three I’ve had to dispose of by running them through.”

072  
The Hotel of Rambouillet

The Hotel of Rambouillet was located between the church of Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre that was built in the late twelfth century to commemorate Saint Thomas the Martyr, and the Hospital of the Three Hundred, founded during the reign of Louis IX upon his return from Egypt, to house those three hundred gentlemen whose eyes had been gouged out by the Saracens. The Marquise of Rambouillet, who had built the hotel – we’ll tell how later – was born in 1588, that is, the year the Duke of Guise and his brother were murdered at Blois by order of Henry III. She was the daughter of Jean of Vivonne (the elder Marquis of Pisany) and Julie Savelli, a Roman lady of a family so illustrious that it sired two popes, Honoré III and Honoré IV, and a saint of the church, Saint Lucina. At the age of twelve, she married the Marquis of Rambouillet of the house of Angennes, another illustrious family, renowned for both the famous Cardinal of Rambouillet, and that Marquis of Rambouillet who was Viceroy of Poland before Henry III assumed that title. The Rambouillet family was known for both wit and propriety. A parable of the grandfather of the Marquis of Rambouillet bears witness to the one, as an anecdote about his father illustrates the other. The grandfather, Jacques of Rambouillet, had married a woman of questionable character. One day he was arguing with her in a dispute that was becoming an actual fight, when he stopped suddenly, lowered his voice, and speaking as calmly as can be, said, “Madam, pull on my beard.”

“Why?” she asked in amazement.  
“Just pull on it. I’ll tell you afterwards.”  
The Marquis of Rambouillet’s grandmother grabbed her husband’s beard and pulled on it.  
“Harder,” he said to her.  
“But I’ll hurt you!”  
“Don’t worry.”  
“That’s what you want?”  
“Yes but much harder. Harder still. Now, with all your might. There! That didn’t hurt me. Now it’s my turn.”

He yanked on a lock of her hair. She shrieked.  
“You see, Madam,” he said calmly, “I’m stronger than you. Argue with me if it pleases you. But don’t try to fight me.”  
In that way this new Xanthippe was warned that, though her husband might be as wise as Socrates, he was not as patient. The Marquis of Rambouillet’s father was, as we’ve said, appointed Viceroy of Poland while that country awaited the arrival of Henry III. While performing this duty, he had saved a hundred thousand crowns in cash that he presented to the king. “Do you mock me, Sir de Rambouillet?” said Henry III. “A hundred thousand crowns isn’t much to a king.”

“Take them, Sire,” said Sir Rambouillet. “If you don’t need them on this day, you’ll need them on another.”  
He made the king accept them – and later Henry wasn’t sorry he had. At the battle of Jarnac, where the Prince of Condé was so brutally murdered, this same Sir Rambouillet had worked wonders, so much so that the Duke of Anjou had sent his brother, King Charles IX, a letter in which he gave Rambouillet credit for the victory. The family displayed that letter in a golden frame. In 1606, that is to say after six years of marriage, Sir Rambouillet found himself in financial difficulty and sold the Hotel of Pisany to Pierre Forget-Dufresne for 34,500 *livres*. In 1624, Forget-Dufresne turned around and sold it, at a great profit, to the cardinal-minister. By the time of our story, Richelieu was busy building on that site what would later become the Palais Cardinal. While waiting for this palace of marvels to be made habitable, Richelieu had two country houses, one at Chaillot, the other at Rueil, as well as a town house in the Place Royale, next door to that of the celebrated courtesan Marion Delorme. Meanwhile, for thirty years Paris expanded, building daily. You could say that it was Henry IV who laid the groundwork for what would become modern Paris. At the end of the reign of Henry III, Paris had covered an area of 1,414 acres. During the reign of Henry IV, the Tournelles Park, the suitable parts of the Marais, and the neighbourhood around the Temple were all built up with new houses. The Rue Dauphine and the Place Royale were constructed, the suburbs of Saint-Antoine, Montmartre, Saint-Martin, Saint-Denis, and Saint-Honoré were increased by half, and the new Faubourg Saint-Germain became the seventeenth quarter. Paris grew to enclose over 1,660 acres. In 1604, the Pont Neuf, begun by Henry III in 1578, was finally completed. In 1606, the Hotel of Ville (City Hall), begun by François I in 1533, was likewise completed. In 1613 were built the Saint-Gervais gate and the aqueduct of Arcueil. From 1614 to 1616, the houses and bridges of the new Île Saint-Louis were constructed. The equestrian statue of Henry IV was placed on the Pont Neuf, and the foundations of the Palais du Luxembourg were laid. Marie de Médicis, during her regency, established the long ranks of trees along the Course-la-Reine. In a new burst of building, from 1624 to 1628, Paris grew even further. The western walls were extended to contain the Palais des Tuileries, the neighbourhood of Butte-des-Moulins, and that of Ville-Neuve. The new walls began at the Seine at the Porte of la Conference, at the far end of the Tuileries gardens, ran to the Rue Saint-Honoré, with its new Porte Saint-Honoré, to Rue Galion, where they built the Porte Montmartre, and joined the old walls at the corner of the Rue Neuve-Saint-Denis, at the gate of the same name. The Marquise of Rambouillet, after the sale of the Hotel of Pisany, resided in her father’s small house in Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre but this dwelling was too cramped for the lady, her six children, and numerous domestics. It was then that she decided to build the famous Hotel of Rambouillet, so celebrated thereafter. However, dissatisfied with the plans submitted by the architects that she felt didn’t make good use of the available area, she decided to draw up the plans herself. For a long while she laboured uselessly at this endeavour, until one day she cried like Archimedes, “Eureka!”

She took pen and paper and quickly sketched both the interior and exterior of the mansion, all with such excellent taste that it impressed Queen Regent Marie de Médicis, then employed in building the Luxembourg. She, who had seen in her youth in Florence the most beautiful palaces in the world, and who had brought to this new Athens the leading architects of the time, sent them to ask for advice from Madam Rambouillet and to use her mansion as an example. The eldest child of the Marquise of Rambouillet was the beautiful Julie-Lucine d’Angennes, more celebrated even than her mother. Since the days of Helen, that adulterous wife of Menelaus who drew Europe into war with Asia, no woman’s beauty had been more highly praised, in every key and with every instrument. No one whose heart she stole ever recovered it. The wound inflicted by the surpassingly lovely eyes of Julie d’Angennes, the famous Madam Montausier, was mortal, or at least incurable. Ninon of Lenclos may have had her *martyrs* but Julie’s admirers were known as *the perishing*. Born in 1600, she was now aged twenty-eight, and though her first youth was past, she had arrived at the full bloom of her beauty. Though Madam Rambouillet had four other daughters, her eldest eclipsed them all, and today the younger are nearly forgotten. Three of them took the veil: Madam d’Hyères, Madam Saint-Étienne, and Madam Pisany. The youngest, Claire-Angélique d’Angennes, was the first wife of Sir de Grignan. In our previous chapters, we made the acquaintance of her eldest son, the Marquis of Pisany. Madam had had a second son who died at the age of eight when his nurse, who’d visited a plague victim at the hospital, had recklessly kissed the child upon her return. Within two days, the plague had taken them both. The early fame of the Hotel of Rambouillet was due to the passion the beautiful Julie inspired in every man of breeding, and to the curious devotion of the family servants. The Marquis of Pisany’s tutor was Chavaroché, who had been Voiture’s opponent in one of those three duels we mentioned, fighting him by torchlight and giving him a flesh wound in the thigh. Chavaroché was, always had been, and always would be one of the lovely Julie’s “perishing” admirers. When Julie, after being married for twelve years, finally decided at the age of thirty-nine to fulfil her husband Sir Montausier’s desire for a child, she had a very difficult labour. Because they knew he’d be willing to go, they sent Chavaroché to the Abbey of Saint-Germain for the Girdle of Saint Marguerite, a holy relic known to help with childbirth. Chavaroché went at once but as it was three in the morning, he found the monks in their beds and was obliged, despite his impatience, to wait nearly half an hour. “By my faith!” he cried. “The nerve of these monks, sleeping while Madam Montausier is in labour!” And after that, Chavaroché spoke naught but ill of the monks of the Abbey of Saint-Germain. One degree of domestic rank below Chavaroché, we find Louis of Neuf-Germain, with his long sword slapping his leg and his goatee almost brushing his chest, and who bore the title Poet-at-Large to Sir, the king’s brother. He had an easy facility for trackerel. One day, Madam Rambouillet had asked him to improvise something for Sir d’Avaux, brother of the President of Mesme, the ambassador extraordinaire who had signed the Peace of the North. Neuf-Germain rattled off an entire ode on d’Avaux’s name, with rhymes on *da* and *Vaux*. Here is the first stanza:

Jove, one day in heaven, had a  
Job for Mercury, his bravo,  
To have the gods sing a cantata  
In praise and honour of great Devaux

Those who wish to read his other works will find them collected by Voiture. Neuf-Germain had a mistress in the Rue des Gravilliers, the last street in Paris where a gallant was likely to find a mistress. A certain rogue, who insisted he had a prior claim to the damsel, encountered Neuf-Germain and they quarrelled in the street. The rogue grabbed Neuf-Germain by his goatee and yanked so hard, it came off in his hand. Neuf-Germain, who always wore a sword and had given the Marquis of Pisany his first lessons in arms, drew and struck his attacker a blow that made him drop his handful of beard. The rogue, wounded, fled screaming, pursued by half the watching mob, while Neuf-Germain gleefully slashed the air with his rapier, mocking the rogue and loudly calling for him to return. After Neuf-Germain left, a cobbler who knew that the victor belonged to the Hotel of Rambouillet, the reputation of which had reached even the lowest commoners, noticed that the goatee torn from his chin was still on the battlefield. He picked it up to the last hair, folded it carefully in white paper, and proceeded to the Hotel of Rambouillet. The household was at dinner when the Marquis of Rambouillet was told that a cobbler from the Rue des Gravilliers wished to speak with him. This was such unexpected news that Rambouillet was curious as to what this cobbler had to say. “Let him enter,” he said. It was done. The cobbler came in, bowed humbly, and approached Rambouillet. “Sir Marquis,” he said, “I’m pleased to present the beard of Sir Neuf-Germain that he had the misfortune to lose in front of my door.”

Without really knowing what that meant, Sir Rambouillet took from his pouch one of those new crowns struck with the image of Louis XIII, called a *Louis d'argent*, and gave it to the cobbler. The man retired completely satisfied, not for having received a crown but for having had the honour of seeing at table, eating like mere mortals, Sir Rambouillet and his family Rambouillet and family were still looking incomprehendingly at this handful of beard when Neuf-Germain came in with his stubbly chin, surprised that despite his quick return to the mansion, his beard had arrived before him. One floor down we meet Silésie the equerry, or rather the *quinola* as a sub-equerry was known at the time. Everyone at the Hotel of Rambouillet had his quirks and caprices but Silésie was a madman of a different stripe. Madam Rambouillet called Neuf-Germain their indoor madman and Silésie their outdoor madman, as he lived with his wife and children outside the main house, albeit only a few steps away. One morning, everyone who lived in the same house as Silésie came to complain to the marquis, saying that since the weather had grown hot, it was impossible to sleep under the same roof as his equerry. Sir Rambouillet called Silésie before him. "What were you doing last night," he asked, "that all the neighbours complain about not being able to sleep for a moment?"

"With respect, Sir Marquis," replied Silésie, "I was killing my fleas."

"And how can you make so much noise killing fleas?"

"Because I kill them with a hammer."

"A hammer? Explain that, Silésie!"

"Sir Marquis is aware that no animal's life is harder to take than that of a flea."

"That's true."

"Well, to make sure mine don't escape, once I catch them, I carry them to the staircase and crush them with a large hammer."

And Silésie continued to kill his fleas in this fashion, until one night, when he was probably half asleep, he missed the first step and tumbled from the top of the stairs to the bottom. When they found him, he had a broken neck. After Silésie comes Master Claude the silversmith, a sort of comic buffoon. He was crazy about executions, and despite the cruelty of the spectacle, he never missed one. But once three or four were held in quick succession, and yet Master Claude never left the house. Worried, the marquise asked him the cause of this aberration. "Ah, Madam la Marquise," replied Master Claude, shaking his head with an air of melancholy, "I can no longer take pleasure in criminals' death throes."

"And why is that?" she asked her servant.

"Because since the beginning of the year, the executioners have been strangling the condemned before hanging them. Can you believe it? If, someday, they return to hanging them outright, on that day I'll return to the execution ground."

One night, he went to see the fireworks in honour of Saint-Jean but as they launched the first rockets, he found himself behind a very tall onlooker whose large head blocked his view. He thought, rather than bother anyone, he would go up to Montmartre, only to find when he arrived breathless at the top of the hill and turned toward the Hotel of Ville that the fireworks were over. Thus instead of seeing poorly, Master Claude saw nothing at all. So instead he went to Saint-Denis to see the treasures, and greatly enjoyed himself. Upon his return, when questioned by the marquise, he said, "Ah, Madam, what beautiful things they have, these rascals of churchmen!"

And he began to list the bejewelled crosses, the surplices studded with pearls, the golden monstrance and silver candlesticks. "But there was one thing most important of all," he added.

"What thing do you think the most important, Master Claude?"

"Ah, Madam, they have our neighbour's arm."

"Which neighbour?" asked Madam Rambouillet who wondered who among their neighbours could spare a limb to donate to the treasure-trove of Saint-Denis.

"Why, *for the love of God*, the arm of our neighbour Saint Thomas, Madam; his church is so close we can practically touch it."

There were also two other servants at the Hotel of Rambouillet who were a credit to the collection: the secretary Adriani and the embroiderer Dubois. The first published a volume of poetry dedicated to Sir Schomberg. The second, who felt called to the vocation, became a Capuchin monk. But the calling didn't last, and he left his monastery before the end of his novitiate. Not daring to reapply for a place with Madam Rambouillet, he became supervisor of the actors at the Hotel of Bourgogne. "Because that way," as he said, "if Madam Rambouillet ever chanced to go to the theatre, I might see her."

Indeed, the Marquis and Marquise of Rambouillet were worshiped by their servants. One evening, the lawyer Patru, so influential on the modes of polite speech at the Académie Française, was dining at the Hotel of Nemours with the Abbot of Saint-Spire. One of the two mentioned the Marquise of Rambouillet. The sommelier, Audry who was crossing the room after telling the waiters which honey to serve, heard the marquise's name and stopped. When the two guests continued to talk about her, the sommelier sent all the other servants from the room. "Why the devil did you do that?" Patru asked.

"Ah, *Gentlemen!*" the sommelier said. "I was with Madam Rambouillet for twelve years. If you have the honour to be friends of the marquise, no one shall serve you but me." And despite the dignity of his position, he placed a waiter's towel over his arm, stood behind the guests, and served them until the end of the meal. Now that we have made the acquaintance of the masters and servants of the Hotel of Rambouillet, we will bring our readers inside the mansion on a night when it was host to the leading celebrities of the age.

073

The Regulars of the Hotel of Rambouillet

If we give precedence to aristocratic illustrations over literary illustrations to conform to the rules of etiquette in use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, our first sketch –for we do not claim to draw portraits in a few lines – will be that of Madam Princess, one of the most assiduous people at the parties of the Marquise de Rambouillet. Madam Princess was that beautiful Charlotte de Montmorency, granddaughter of the Constable Anne, first Duke of Montmorency, killed at the Battle of Saint-Denis by Robert Stuart, and daughter of Henri de Montmorency, whose sole merit, any Constable of France that he was, like his father, was to be the first squire of the kingdom: he put a silver coin between the bar of his stirrup and his boot and worked for a quarter of an hour on the most difficult horse without the silver coin fell. It was at a ballet which the queen-mother had performed in the month of February 1609 that Miss Montmorency, then aged fourteen, made her first attempt at her beauty. She represented a nymph and raised her javelin so gracefully towards King Henry IV as if she wanted to strike him with it, that Henry IV, easy to such wounds, instantly fell in love with her and did his last follies for her in the middle of which Ravaiillac's stab came to stop him. We will tell later how she married M. le Prince, that doubtful heir to the Condés who made a mark in the noble family of the Bourbons, how she was abducted by him, and how, however beautiful she was, nothing less was needed three years' imprisonment in the Bastille for the marriage to be consummated and for Charlotte de Montmorency, who had married her husband for eight years without being his wife yet, to become the mother of the great Condé and Madam de Longueville. She was then a very beautiful princess of thirty-five who had been intimate for twenty years with the Marquis of Rambouillet, and forgot in her salon that she was a princess, remembering only that she was a woman of wit. Beside her, her rival in beauty, if not in rank and fortune, shone the most illustrious precious of the time, Miss Angélique Paulet, a year older than herself, who was designated by the name of Parthénie. Because of the tawny colour of her hair, she had been given the name: The Lioness. To this beauty that no one disputed, she added the talents most appreciated at that time: she danced to delight, played the lute admirably, and sang so well that it was accepted that one would have found on the edge of a fountain, where she had sung every day, two nightingales' dead of jealousy. His friendship with the marquise dated from the day of that same ballet in which Madam Princess had played such a great part. She played there, she, the role of Arion and seemed mounted on a dolphin. The king, who had noticed her as the most beautiful after Charlotte de Montmorency, went to console himself with her for his failure with Madam Princess, and it was to her that he was going when he was killed in the rue de la Ironwork. Madam de Rambouillet had such great consideration for her that the first time she came to Rambouillet, she had her received at the entrance to the village by the prettiest girls of the place and of her house, all dressed in white and wearing crowns, flowers. One of them, better dressed than her companions, presented her with the keys of the chateau on a silver platter, and when she crossed the bridge, fire was fired, as for a queen, from the two small silver coins, artillery that were on the towers. Beside these two elegant persons stood out by a dress so severe that one would have thought that the one who wore it belonged to some religious order, the niece of the cardinal, the beautiful Madam de Combalet, who was later Duchess of Sting. She had conceived such a dislike for her husband that it was claimed that the marriage had never been consummated. The poet Dulot had found in her maiden name – Marie de Vignerot – the anagram "virgin of your husband". Also, when M. de Combalet was killed in the wars of the Huguenots, his widow made a vow rather abruptly - for fear that she would not be sacrificed again for some reason of State - not only never to remarry but also to become a Carmelite. From then on, she dressed as rigidly as a fifty-year-old devotee. For three or four years she had worn a cheesecloth dress and, although the queen's lady-in-waiting, had added nothing to that toilet which clashed with the elegance of the ladies of the Court. By the time we arrived, the beautiful widow was beginning to look up and smile. In spite of this wish, in spite of a severity of costume, since the cardinal had been appointed minister, there was no lack of suitors for Madam de Combalet. The Count de Bethune presented himself first, then the Count de Sault, one of the richest gentlemen in France. For a moment they had spoken of the Count de Soissons. Finally, it was said, even M. de Nevers, who was in the process of claiming the duchy of Mantua, had not joined the ranks. All had been refused. This persistence in widowhood made the uncle and niece hold the wickedest talk. It was said that the cardinal did not marry the beautiful widow because he reserved her for himself, and it was affirmed that if Madam de Combalet went into society with a high dress and without ornament, she received his Eminence at home., in a low-cut dress with a bouquet in the middle of her breast, a bouquet that the cardinal, who was very fond of flowers, did not fail to take. It is true that it was also said that it was the Marshal de Brézé, who, enraged that Madam de Combalet, niece of his wife, did not want to love him, spread all these nasty rumours. He added that the three sons of the cardinal's sister, Françoise de Richelieu, who had married René de Vignerot, lord of Pontcourlay, were children of Mme de Combalet and the cardinal, whom Mme de Pontcourlay had the kindness to raise as his. He even spoke of a fourth, whom the Cardinal's sister, complacent as she was, had not wanted to take charge of her and who was being brought up in Paris. These rumours, although not adopted in the society of Madam de Rambouillet, made the Court smile that hated the cardinal and his niece, and gave rise to this epigram in which one can take the measure of the feelings of benevolence that the young queen to the poor widow, whose rigidity of dress and behaviour made a stain in her entourage:

Philis, to ease his pain,  
Yesterday complained to the queen  
That she had four sons by Armand.  
But the queen, with a very gentle air,  
Said to him: "Philis, console yourself.  
Everyone knows that Brézé only likes to gossip.  
Those who, for you, have the least friendship  
Do him too much honour, all he can say  
To only believe half of it."

There was still, at Madam de Rambouillet's evenings, a tall, dry, dark-haired person, Sicilian of origin who according to Madam Cornuel, seemed to be sweating from ink, and had Frenched her name from Scudéry in Colin de Scudéry. She came accompanied by her brother, a kind of blustering captain, who wrote tragicomedies, none of which had yet been performed, just as Miss Scudéry wrote books, none of which had yet been printed. The brother was twenty-seven, the sister twenty-one. Needless to say, it was later that Madeleine de Scudéry was the author of Ibrahim or Illustrious King, Grand Cyrus, Clelia and five or six other novels which were all the rage towards the middle of the seventeenth century, and Georges de Scudéry, the author of *The Deceiver Punished* and of fifteen or sixteen other plays, the very name of which has now been forgotten. Our courtesy for the ladies made us slip the future governor of Fort de la Garde under the shadow of his sister. If we had, in the least in the world, followed for men the order that we had imposed on ourselves for women – to pass from aristocratic illustrations to literary illustrations – we should have started with the two Montausier brothers, veritable pillars of bronze from the Hotel de Rambouillet. The two loved the beautiful Julie in turn, the eldest first, the Marquis but Madam de Rambouillet, having had the idea one day of looking into her hand, thought she recognised in certain lines that it was in her destiny to kill a woman and fearing that it was his daughter, she cut short the first words he said to her concerning a project of marriage with the beautiful Julie. Unable to possess her, he at least claimed the happiness of continuing to see her that was granted to him. Admitted into the house, he introduced his younger brother, the Count de Salles, who, after the death of his eldest, was the famous Marquis de Montausier who served as Molière's type for his Misanthrope. Needless to say, seeing his brother rebuffed, the Count de Salles took his place; we have said elsewhere that he sighed fourteen years for the beautiful Julie, who did not consent to marry until the age of thirty-nine. The young Count de Salles wrote correctly in prose, even wrote verse but could not compete with the literary illustrations which made the Marquise's salon shine and in the forefront of which we will name Chapelain, Gombauld, Racan and the Bishop from Grasse; as for Malherbe, he had died that same year. We would have started with Car if it had not already been mentioned in the first chapters of this book. Jean Chapelain had been introduced to the Hotel Rambouillet around the time of the siege of La Rochelle, that is to say a year earlier. Madam Rambouillet said, "I'd ever seen nothing new in you."

Indeed, he usually and invariably wore a coat of columbine satin lined with green brocade and trimmed with small columbine trimmings in bird's-eye green, with the most ridiculous boots in the world and even more ridiculous stockings and network instead of lace. He left this coat only for a jerkin of speckled taffeta which he had had made from an old petticoat of the woman with whom he lived. His wig and hat dated back to fabulous times, and yet he still had an older hat and an older wig that he put on when he got home. Tallemant des Réaux tells how he saw a crepe so old that, from black it was, it had become a dead leaf. He had already done at that time his translation of Guzman d'Alfarache, the story of the Unicorn and the Ode to Cardinal de Richelieu, plus the first songs of his Pucelle,

on the first two books of which M. de Longueville had given him gave two thousand pounds pension. Despite his avarice, Chapelain passed for the most honest man in the world and Bois-Robert related that, on a payment he had made to him on behalf of the cardinal, Chapelain had sent him back a penny that was too much.

Jean-Ogier de Gombauld was one of the stars of this brilliant Pleiades; although he was, at the time when we arrived, fifty-eight years old, he was as pretty and as neat as Chapelain was little. It is true that he boasted - which, moreover, may well be true - of having been loved by a queen. This queen was Marie de Medici. Coming young to Paris, without fortune, being the youngest of a fourth marriage, he made the acquaintance of the Marquis of Ixelles who recommended him to Henri IV for whom he wrote poetry and who gave him a pension. It was at the king's coronation that Queen Marie de Medici seemed to notice him. He was with Sir Uxelles who was red-haired and whom Marie de Medici called her Rousseau. "Go," she said to Miss Catherine, her maid, "inquire from my Rousseau who is this cavalier he is leading with him."

Miss Catherine made a mistake, addressed herself to another Rousseau than M. d'Uxelles, and returned to tell the Queen: "He does not know him."

"You're mad," said the queen impatiently, "and you will have taken one Rousseau for another." But she was so anxious to know who this cavalier was that she spoke about it herself to the Marquis d'Uxelles and knowing what to expect, she put Gombauld for twelve hundred crowns on the state of the house of the King. Being of the king's household, Gombauld had his entrances to the queen. One day, he entered his room unannounced and found Marie de Medici lying on her bed and her skirts lifted because of the great heat. It was so hot that the queen just said, "Who goes there?" and that Gombauld having named herself, she contented herself with saying: "That's good." What passed between the poet and the queen no one ever knew, for Gombauld was very discreet and we only know of this gallant adventure what he wanted to say in the following sonnet:

Quick, my eyes, with a reckless gaze  
And what my thought do you dare to talk about?  
What various feelings make me live and die!  
Force me to speak as much as to be silent.  
What innocent mistake, what voluntary misfortune  
Is also feared and cherished,  
Was it to lose me or to acquire me?  
To be favourable to me or to be against me?  
What trick of love, what object surprised me?  
Often the image alone disturbs my mind,  
And out of extreme good, I do extreme harm.  
Often I still doubt and senseless  
In this doubt where I am to believe myself,  
I think I thought what my eyes saw.

But discreet as he was, Gombauld did not confine himself to sonnets. He made the Endymion that caused a great stir, for the moon, it was said, was none other than the queen-mother, who, in fact, in the intaglio engravings that were made of her, was always depicted with a crescent on her head. Moreover, Gombauld had the pretension of having no privacies except with the ladies of the Court, and as, one day, Madam de Rambouillet, who knew his weak spot there, reproached him for having written verses for a peasant woman, and even to have called her Philis: "Ah! Madam Marquis," he said, "was the daughter of a rich farmer from Saintonge, who had more than ten thousand crowns in marriage."

He had made a tragedy of the Danaïdes that had been much hissed, so Madam Cornuel said as she left the performance: "Give me back half my money.

"Why?"

"Because I only heard half of the piece."

He was, as we have said, very clean and very neat, choosing when it had rained or the streets were dirty – his little fortune forcing him to walk – the cleanest cobblestones to lay the end of his boot. Now as he was of a certain strength in arms, very obstinate and very pugnacious, it happened that, having quarrelled with a gentleman about a lodging to which they both claimed, he said to him: "Here is my address, come by my door at two o'clock in the afternoon. I will come out with a sword, in this way our fight will not be a duel but an encounter; as for the witnesses, we will not miss them, the neighbours will help us."

The gentleman accepted and came at the appointed time. Gombauld came out with his sword and charged him so roughly that he let go and the neighbours, witnesses of the fight who had seen Gombauld pass by so many times, taking a thousand precautions to avoid soiling his breeches, said: "How could this gentleman, who chooses the cobblestones so well and who walks so neatly, not regret pushing his adversary through the mud and the streams?" Madam Rambouillet called him the Beautiful Dark One. Racan was then in the full flower of his reputation. He was born four years after the death of Ronsard, thirty-four years after the birth of Malherbe, who was, it is said, his master of poetry but who became jealous of him on this stanza of the Ode de la Consolation addressed to Sir Bellegarde on the death of Sir de Termes, his brother, and which had a success equal to that of Malherbe to Duperrier on the death of his daughter. Here is the stanza:

He sees what is most marvellous in Olympus,  
He sees there at his feet these proud torches  
Who turns his fortune and wheel as they please  
He sees like ants marching our legions  
In this little pile of dust and mud  
Of which our vanity makes so many regions.

"Never," says Tallemant des Réaux, "did the force of genius appear so clearly in an author as in this one; for, apart from the verses, it seems that he has no common sense. He looks like a farmer, he stutters and has never been able to say his name. The R and the C, unfortunately, being two letters that he could never pronounce, the first only as an L, the second only as a T, several times he was forced to write his name to do so. To hear..."

He was the most distracted man in the world – after Sir de Brancas however. One day, alone and on a big horse, he left to go to see one of his friends in the country. A third of the way, he needed to get off. But unable to find a mount to put his foot in the stirrup, he continued his journey on foot. At his friend's door, he finally finds a mount, gets back on horseback, turns around and retraces his steps without having seen his friend. He was very familiar in M. de Bellegarde's house. One day, returning from the hunt all wet and all muddy, he enters Madam de Bellegarde's room thinking he is entering his own, and does not see Madam de Bellegarde at one corner of the fire and Madam Lorges at the other. They stand mute and motionless to see what Racan will do. He sits down, gets kicked out, and says to his lackey: "Go clean my boots, I'll dry my stockings here." The lackey pulls his master's boots and leaves. He then pulls off his stockings, approaches the fire, and puts one on Madam Bellegarde's head, the other on Madam Lorges' head. No matter how hard they bit their lips to keep from laughing, they finally burst out. "Ah! A thousand times sorry, ladies!" said Racan without undressing himself. "I took you for two andirons." The day he was received from the Academy, all literary Paris was gathered to hear his acceptance speech but the disappointment of the listeners was great when they saw him take a torn piece of paper from his pocket. "Gentlemen," he said, "I intended to read you my harangue as is customary but my big white greyhound has chewed it all up, here it is, get what you can out of it, for I don't know it by heart and have no copy."

And it was necessary that not only the listeners but also the academicians be satisfied with this excuse. Racan however, had the Academy in great veneration. Forced, for a trial he had, to take a prosecutor, without knowing whether he was good or bad, he took Chaplain's brother-in-law. "And why," asked Madam Rambouillet, "did you choose this one rather than another?"

"Because it seems to me," replied Racan, "that being Sir Chaplain's brother-in-law, he was brother-in-law of the Academy."

Racan was Marquis of the Bueil family, cousin of M. de Bellegarde. As for Sir Antoine Godeau, Bishop of Grasse, who was so small that he was called Princess Julie's dwarf, and Montausier's daughter - when Mme de Montausier had a daughter - asked why he was not did not go to bed at the same time as his dolls, although he had had thirty thousand crowns from his family and from the cardinal two bishoprics, he was always on the last necessities, so much so that he worked on biographies, translations, an ecclesiastical story, and in his spare time prayed for people of all walks of life. One of them bore the title of Prayer for a prosecutor and if need be for a lawyer. He had been introduced to the marquise by Mlle Paulet, so he was at his best in the house. It was these illustrations that we have just named who, with Colletet, Conrart, Desmarests, Rotrou, Mairet, Armand d'Andilly and Voiture, held the Marquise's salon. They were, so to speak, an integral part of what was called the Hotel Rambouillet for the Hôtel Rambouillet was not only the building and the family but also all the fine minds who gathered around this family and in this building.

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### What Occurred in the Hotel de Rambouillet as Souscarrières was disposing of his 3<sup>RD</sup> Hunchback

On the evening of December 5, 1628 that we began at the Inn of the Painted Beard in the first chapter of this book, all the literary luminaries of the era, those whose society was ridiculed by Molière as they ridiculed him in return, were gathered in the marquise's mansion. That night they were not ordinary visitors to the marquise's salon but specially invited guests, each having received a note from Madam Rambouillet announcing a special soirée. The guests had rushed to attend. This event took place during that happy era when women were beginning to have an influence on society. Poetry was in its infancy, born in the previous century with Marot, Gamier, and Ronsard, and was just then prattling out its first tragedies, pastorals, and comedies by way of Hardy, Desmarests, and Raissiguiér. Dramatic literature would follow, thanks to Rotrou, Corneille, Molière, and Racine, elevating France above all other nations, while perfecting that beautiful language created by Rabelais, purified by Boileau, and distilled by Voltaire. Due to its clarity, French would become the diplomatic language of all civilized nations. In language, clarity is integrity. William Shakespeare, the great genius of the sixteenth century – or rather, of all centuries – had been dead only twelve years, and was as yet known only to the English. Make no mistake, the European popularity of Elizabeth's great poet is a modern phenomenon; none of the fine minds gathered at Madam Rambouillet's had even heard the name of the man who, a century later, Voltaire would call a barbarian. Moreover, at a time when the theatre was dominated by plays such as *The Deliverance of Andromeda*, *The Conquest of the Boar of Calydon*, and *The Death of Bradamante*, works like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *Romeo and Juliet* would have seemed harsh to the delicate French palate. No, due to the influence of the queen and of the Catholic League of the Guises, it was Spain who set the fashion in literature, through Lope of Vega, Alarcón, and Tirso of Molina; Calderon had not yet appeared. To end this long digression that began of its own accord due to the force of circumstance, we'll repeat our own words: this event took place during a happy era, and we would add that an invitation from Madam Rambouillet made it doubly special. All knew the marquise's grand passion for surprising her guests. For example, consider the day she'd presented the Bishop of Lisieux, Philippe of Cospéan with a quite unexpected surprise. In the park at Rambouillet was a large, round boulder from which a fountain sprang. Veiled by a curtain of trees, it was dedicated to the memory of Rabelais, who had worked sometimes in his study and sometimes in his dining room. One bright morning, the marquise led the Bishop of Lisieux toward the fountain. The prelate squinted as he approached, trying to make out something that shone through the branches. Soon he could clearly distinguish seven or eight young women dressed as nymphs – that is to say, barely dressed at all. Leading them was Miss of Rambouillet attired as Diana: quiver on her shoulder, bow in her hand, and circlet on her brow. Beyond her, all the demoiselles of the household posed prettily on the great rock, presenting, according to Tallemant des Réaux, the loveliest tableau in the world. A bishop of our day might be scandalized by such a spectacle but Lord Lisieux, on the contrary, was quite charmed. He never saw the marquise thereafter without asking for news of the rocks of Rambouillet. In a similar circumstance, Actæon was transformed into a stag and torn apart by dogs but the marquise held that this case was entirely different, as the good bishop was so ugly that, while the nymphs might make an impression on him, he was unlikely to impress the nymphs, other than to make them flee at his approach. Besides, the Bishop of Lisieux was well aware of how ugly he was, going so far as to joke with the Bishop of Riez that he was far from being an Adonis. "That's why I owe you my thanks," replied the Bishop of Riez, "because before you became my colleague, I was the ugliest bishop in France."

It may be that Madam Rambouillet's male guests who outnumbered the females, rushed to the mansion in hopes that the marquise was staging a surprise like the one she'd prepared for Lord Lisieux. Certainly the exquisites invited that evening had elevated hopes, and were ready for whatever the evening might reveal. Their conversation turned on all matters of love and poetry but most particularly on the recent piece performed by the actors of the Hotel of Bourgogne that the exquisites had begun to patronize since the team of Bellerose, la Villiers, Mondory, la Beaupré, and his wife, Miss Vaillot, had taken over direction of the theatre. Madam Rambouillet had made plays fashionable by staging *Fredegonde* and Hardy's *Chaste Love* in her home. After that, it was decided that decent women, who until then had avoided it, could go to the Hotel of Bourgogne. The play under discussion that evening was a piece titled *The Hypochondriac*, the debut work of a young protégé of the marquise named Jean Rotrou. Though of middling rank, thanks to the support of the Rambouillets he had enjoyed enough success for Cardinal Richelieu to hire him into his household at the Place Royale. There he joined the company of Richelieu's famous *collaborators*: Mairet, L'Estoile, and Colletet, as well as the even more celebrated Desmarests and Bois-Robert. As they were discussing the merits of Rotrou's questionable comedy that Scudery and Chapelain were chopping into mincemeat, a handsome young man in an elegant suit came in. With the air of a complete cavalier, he crossed the salon to pay his respects to the ladies in order of precedence, starting with Madam la Princess, who in her quality as wife of Sir Condé, first prince of the blood, was entitled to pre-eminence. After her he

addressed the marquise, then the lovely Julie. He was followed by a companion, two or three years older and dressed all in black, who advanced into the midst of this learned and imposing company a step behind his friend. "Here he is now," said the marquise, indicating the first of the two men, "the conqueror himself. It must be fine to ride to the Capitoline at such a young age – and without, I hope, someone behind you in the chariot saying, 'Caesar, remember you are mortal.'"

"On the contrary, Madam la Marquise," replied Rotrou, for that's who it was. "No critic could ever complain of my poor work more than I do myself. I swear I'm only here because I received a direct order from the Count of Soissons to leave off work on my *The Dead Lover*, as if it were actually dead, in order to begin on the comedy I'm working on now."

"So, what is the subject of this comedy, my fine cavalier?" asked Miss Paulet.

"A ring that no one would wish to put on his finger once he's seen you, adorable Lioness: the Ring of Forgetfulness."

A nod greeted this flattery from the one to whom it was addressed. Meanwhile, the young man dressed in black stayed as far in the background as he could. But as he was totally unknown to everybody, and as everyone to be presented to the marquise either had a name already or was on his way to making one, all eyes were fixed upon him nonetheless. "And how do you have time to write a new comedy, Sir Rotrou," asked the lovely Julie, "now that you've accepted the honour of working with the cardinal's company?"

"Sir Cardinal had so much to do at the siege of La Rochelle that we were left to ourselves," replied Rotrou, "so I took the opportunity to do some work on my own."

Meanwhile, the young man dressed in black continued to attract all the attention that was not devoted to Rotrou. "He's not a man of the sword," said Miss of Scudery to her brother.

"No, he has an air more like that of a law clerk," he replied.

The young man in black overheard this exchange, and acknowledged it with a good-natured smile. Rotrou heard it as well. "But yes!" he said. "In fact he is a law clerk – and a law clerk, I assure you, who will one day outdo us all."

Now it was the turn of the men in the company to smile, half in disbelief and half in disdain. But Rotrou's extravagant prediction only made the women all the more curious. Despite his youth, the man in black had an austere look to him. He had a broad brow already lined with the wrinkles of thought, beneath which were eyes flickering with flame. The rest of his face was more commonplace, with a large nose above thick lips, partly concealed by a burgeoning moustache. Rotrou decided it was time to satisfy the company's curiosity. "Madam la Marquise, allow me to introduce my dear compatriot Pierre Corneille, son of the Advocate General of Rouen – and soon to be a son of genius."

The name was completely unknown. "Corneille," repeated Scudery. "The name of a bird of ill omen."

"Yes ... to his rivals," Rotrou said.

"*Ab ilice cornix*," Chapelain whispered to the Bishop of Grasse. "The raven cries from the oak."

"Corneille," the marquise repeated in her turn but with more warmth.

"Ah!" Rotrou said to Madam Rambouillet. "You're trying to remember on what title page or frontispiece you've read that name. On none, Madam, as yet. It appears only at the head of a comedy he brought with him yesterday from Rouen. Tomorrow I'll take him to the Hotel of Bourgogne and present him to Mondory – and a month from now, we'll be applauding him."

The young man lifted his eyes to heaven, as if to say, "May God grant it be so!"

The female guests approached the two friends with more curiosity. Madam la Princess was in the lead, seeing in every poet a potential rhapsodist on her beauty that was beginning to fade. While the men, especially the poets, stayed firmly in their places, she eagerly took a seat in the group forming around Rotrou and his companion. "So, Sir Corneille," she said, "what is the title of this comedy of yours?"

Corneille turned curiously toward the source of this haughty voice. As he did so, Rotrou whispered a word in his ear. "It's called *Mélite*," Corneille said, "unless Your Highness would care to grace it with a better name."

"*Mélite*," repeated the princess. "*Mélite*. No, we'll leave it as is. *Mélite* is charming – and if the story is as well..."

"What's charming about it is that it's not a story," Rotrou said, "but rather a history."

"A history? How so?" asked Miss Paulet. "Do you mean it's a true tale?"

"Come now," Rotrou said to his companion, "tell the ladies the story, you rascal."

Corneille blushed to the ears. No one could seem less of a rascal than he did.

"The question is whether the story can safely be told at all," said Madam Combalet, covering her face with her fan in case Corneille's story should be indelicate.

"Instead of just telling the story," Corneille said timidly, "I'd rather recite some verses."

"Bah," said Rotrou, "you're embarrassed over nothing. I can recount the plot in two sentences. But there's no merit in that, since the story is true, and as my friend is the hero he gets no credit for inventing it. Imagine, Madam, that this libertine had a friend..."

"Rotrou, Rotrou!" interrupted Corneille.

"Ignoring the interruption, I continue," said Rotrou. "Imagine that this libertine had a friend who introduced him into a decent household in Rouen, in which the friend was engaged to the family's charming daughter. What do you think Sir Corneille did? He, the best man, no less, waited until the wedding was over, and then – well ... you understand, don't you?"

"Sir Rotrou!" said Madam Combalet, drawing her Carmelite's veil over her eyes.

"And then – what?" said Miss Scudery with a roguish air. "Others may understand you, Sir Rotrou but I certainly do not."

"I hope they do, beautiful Sappho" (for so Miss Scudery was called in that company of exquisites). "Ask Miss Paulet and my Lord the Bishop of Grasse, since they understood it – didn't they?"

Miss Paulet gave Rotrou a provocative little tap on the fingers with her fan, and said, "Go on, you villain. The sooner you finish, the better."

"Then I will follow Horace's maxim of *ad eventum festina* and hasten on," Rotrou said. "Well, Sir Corneille, in his capacity as a poet, followed the advice of the friend of Maecenas: there's no point in putting things off. He found the lady alone, demolished her Edifice of Fidelity, and in the ruins of his friend's happiness built a temple to his own joy, a joy so powerful that a stream of poetry gushed from his heart, that same stream from which the Nine Muses drink."

"The Stream of Hippocrene gushing from the heart of a law clerk?" said Madam la Princess. "That's not to be believed."

"Unless proven otherwise, Madam la Princess. And that proof my friend Corneille will give you."

"Then this *Mélite* is a very lucky lady," said Miss Paulet. "If Sir Corneille's comedy is as successful as you predict, Sir Rotrou, she'll be immortalized."

"Yes," Miss Scudery said drily, "but I doubt that this immortality, even if it lasts as long as that of the Cumaean Sibyl, will result in bringing her a husband."

"Oh? And do you find it such a great misfortune to remain unmarried?" said Miss of Paulet. "As long as one is pretty, of course. But ask Madam Combalet if being married is such divine joy!"

Madam Combalet's only reply was to sigh, raise her eyes to heaven, and shake her head sadly. "This is all very well," said Madam la Princess, "but Sir Corneille has offered to recite us some verses from his comedy."

"And he's quite ready to do so," said Rotrou. "Asking for verses from a poet is like asking for water from a spring. Come now, friend Corneille!" Corneille blushed, stammered a bit, put his hand to his forehead, and then in a voice that seemed made more for tragedy than for comedy, recited the following verses:

I admit, my friend, my disorder is so incurable  
That only one remedy offers me relief;  
And after the disdain *Mélite* has treated me with,  
It would be only just to quit her for another.  
But in spite of all her cruelty, she rules with  
Such powerful sway o'er my heart that I dare to murmur  
Only in her absence. In vain, I make every effort to  
Surmount this passion, and make a thousand  
Resolutions when she is not present; then, I no sooner  
See her again when a single glance rivets my  
Fetters stronger, and throws such a pleasing and delightful  
Veil over my reason, that I pursue my disorder,  
And fly from every remedy I proposed. But this  
Flattering hope, this pleasing delusion only rekindles  
Up my flame, and confirms me the more her slave.

These verses were greeted two or three times by approving murmurs, indicating that the muse of poetry did not reside only in Paris but sometimes visited the provinces, and that not all the wits of France were to be found at the Hotel of Rambouillet or the Place Royale. At the final verse, "...And confirms me the more her slave," general applause broke out. Madam Rambouillet was the first to clap that was the signal for the others to follow. Only a few of the men protested by their silence, among them the younger Montausier brother, who couldn't abide this sort of poetry. But the poet heard only the approval and, intoxicated by the applause from the assembled wits of Paris, bowed and said, "Next comes the sonnet to *Mélite*. Should I go on?"

"Yes, yes," cried Madam la Princess, Madam Rambouillet, the beautiful Julie and Miss Paulet all together along with all those who echoed the tastes of the mistress of the house. Corneille continued:

What beauty with *Mélite* can compare,  
What more than my passion can prove,  
So matchless her charms, I declare,  
Can be equalled by nought but my love.  
"Though new beauties appear to my eyes,  
Though her coldness embitters my heart,  
Too cruel, she hears not my sighs,  
Too lovely, she fixes the dart.  
"But no wonder she's deaf to my flame,  
To the power of the god I submit,  
Since love's whole power I must feel,  
But she only beauty and wit.

The sonnet exceeds all other forms of poetry in exciting admiration – though Boileau, who wouldn't be born for another eight years, hadn't yet said, "A faultless sonnet is still just a long poem."

And this sonnet was hailed as faultless, particularly by the women, who applauded loud and long. Even Miss Scudery deigned to bring her hands together. Rotrou, his loyal heart overflowing, enjoyed his friend's triumph more than any. "In truth, Sir Rotrou, you were right!" said Madam la Princess. "Your friend is a young man who must be championed."

"If you think so, Madam, do you suppose that, through Sir Prince, you might find him a position?" asked Rotrou, lowering his voice so as to be heard by Madam Condé alone. "Because he has no fortune, and, as you can see, it would be a shame if, for lack of a few coins, a career of genius should die unborn."

"Ah, well, Sir Prince! There's no use trying to talk to him about poetry. The other day, he found me dining with Sir Chapelain. Later he asked, 'Who was that little black bird dining with you?' When I told him it was Sir Chapelain, he said, 'Ah. And who is this Sir Chapelain?'

'The creator of *La Pucelle*.'

'Oh, he's a sculptor, then.' Hopeless. But I will speak to Madam Combalet, who will speak to the cardinal. Do you think he would agree to work on His Eminence's tragedies?"

"He would agree to anything that would enable him to stay in Paris. If he was capable of *Mélite* as a law clerk, imagine what he could do in this world where you are the queen and the marquise is prime minister."

"It's a good play, this *Mélite*, whether or not it succeeds. We will see to it that something is arranged."

And she held out her lovely, near-royal hand to Rotrou, who took it in his own and looked at it, as if considering its beauty. "Well, what are you thinking?" asked Madam Princess.

"I look on this hand, and wonder if it can really feed two poets. Alas, no – it's too small a thing."

"Fortunately," Madam Condé said, "God gave me two of them: one for you, and one for him you ask about."

"Corneille, Corneille," Rotrou called, "come here! Madam la Princess, in honour of the sonnet to Mélite, permits you to kiss her hand."

Corneille nearly fainted. To be applauded by Madam Rambouillet and to kiss the hand of Madam la Princess, all on the evening of his debut in Paris – never in his most ambitious dreams had he aspired to even one of these favours but who really was honoured here? Was it Corneille and Rotrou who kissed the hands of the wife of the first prince of the blood? Or was it Madam Condé, whose hands were kissed by the future authors of *Wenceslas* and *The Cid*?

Posterity says that the one honoured was Madam la Princess. Meanwhile, Master Claude, white wand in hand like Polonius in *Hamlet*, came whispering to the Marquise of Rambouillet. She listened, gave him some quiet orders and directions, and then lifted her head to make an announcement. "Noble lords and dear ladies, my precious and excellent friends, had I invited you to spend the evening with me just to hear the verses of Sir Corneille, you would have no reason to complain. But I've gathered you tonight for a purpose less ethereal and more material. I have often spoken of the superiority of the sorbets and ice creams of Italy to those of France. After long search, I've found a glacier of sorbet that comes straight from Naples, and at last I can have you taste it. Don't follow me because you love me – follow me because you love sorbet! Sir Corneille, give me your arm."

"And here's my arm, Sir Rotrou," said Madam la Princess who that evening was determined to follow the example of the marquise in everything. Corneille, trembling and awkward, the man of genius just arrived from the provinces, held out his arm to the marquise while Rotrou, gallantly and like a complete cavalier, extended his to Madam Condé. The Count of Salles, the younger of the Montausier brothers, volunteered to escort the beautiful Julie, while the Marquis of Montausier led in Miss Paulet. Gombauld escorted Miss Scudery, and the others arranged themselves as seemed best. Madam Combalet, the severity of her Carmelite habit mitigated by a corsage of violets and rosebuds, accepted no man's arm but followed immediately behind Madam la Princess. Beside her was Madam Saint-Étienne, the marquise's second daughter, who also aspired to a life of religion. However, there was a difference between her and Madam Combalet, in that every day she took a step further into that life, while Madam Combalet took another step out. Up to that point, there'd been no surprises for Madam Rambouillet's guests but then the marquise, in her quality as guide, walked past the princess to a spot on the wall that wasn't known to have a door. There she tapped the wall with her fan. Instantly, the wall opened as if by magic, and they stood on the threshold of a beautiful room decorated with furniture of blue velvet trimmed with gold and silver. The wall hangings, like the furniture, were blue velvet with similar trim. In the middle of this room was a table laden with flowers, fruits, cakes, and ice cream, presided over by two little cherubs who were none other than the younger sisters of Julie d'Angennes and Madam Saint-Étienne. The company gave a unanimous cry of admiration; all had thought that beyond that wall was the neighbouring garden of the Three Hundred but here was a chamber so marvellously furnished and wondrously painted that it seemed as if the architect must be a fairy and the decorator a magician. While everyone raved about the tasteful opulence of the chamber that was to become famous as the Blue Room, Chapelain took pencil and paper into one corner of the salon, sat, and sketched out the first three stanzas of his *Ode to Zirphée*, a work that was to be nearly as celebrated as his *La Pucelle*. The guests had seen what Chapelain was up to, so there was a profound silence when he who was considered the first poet of his time stood up, extended a hand, placed one foot forward, and with eyes alight pronounced the following verses:

Urgande once knew well  
The favour of Amadis and his noble band.  
By her charms she broke the laws  
Of time, that heaven shall take all it gives.  
I had to show your eyes what she did by charm:  
Keep Artemisia with the art that Urgande  
Had used to keep Amadis.  
"By the power of this art,  
I built this lodge to keep  
Time and fate at bay,  
To outstrip the corruption of change –  
For what passes in this paradise passes not at all.  
Where rushing time hides its terrible face,  
Old age trespasses not.  
"This incomparable beauty  
That a hundred evils could not bring to surrender,  
Enchanted by this building,  
Baffled by its defences,  
Shining from her throne with a divine radiance  
That then, over mortals, spreads out  
Without cloud, eclipse, or end.

Cries of enthusiasm and three rounds of applause greeted this improvisation – when suddenly, in the middle of the cheers, Voiture rushed into the room. Pale and covered in blood, he cried, "A doctor! A doctor! The Marquis of Pisany had a fight with Souscarrières and is badly wounded!"

And right behind him the Marquis of Pisany, unconscious and pale as death, was carried into the salon in the arms of Brancas and Chavaroché. "My son!"

"My brother!"

"The marquis!"

The cries went up and forgetting the pleasures of the Blue Room, everyone rushed to the side of the wounded man. Even as the unconscious Marquis of Pisany was borne into the Hotel of Rambouillet, back at the Inn of the Painted Beard an unexpected event, one that would greatly complicate things, threw everything there into disarray. Lying atop the table where previously he had set his mugs of beer, believed dead and just awaiting his shroud, was Étienne Latil – who sighed, opened his eyes, and said in a low but perfectly intelligible voice, these two words: "I'm thirsty."

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Marina & Jacquelino

A few minutes before Latil uttered the two words that so often signify the return of the wounded to life – and which, in any case, were entirely typical of our swordsman – a young man presented himself at the Inn of the Painted Beard and asked if room number thirteen was occupied by a peasant woman from Pau named Marina. He added that she would be easily recognised by her beautiful hair, her lovely dark eyes, and by her red bonnet, of the style worn in the rugged mountains of Coaraze where Henry IV had, bareheaded and barefoot, so often climbed as a child. Madam Soleil took her time in replying, admiring her inquirer's youthful good looks while favouring him with her most charming smile. Finally she admitted, with a knowing look, that a young woman called Marina was in the room referred to, and had been waiting for half an hour or so. And Madam Soleil, with the sort of graceful gesture that women of thirty to thirty-five like to make before handsome lads of twenty to twenty-two – with this graceful gesture Madam Soleil indicated the stairs, at the top of which the young man would find room number thirteen. The young man was, as we've said, a handsome lad of twenty to twenty-two, of medium height but a good figure, every move of which showed elegance and strength. He had the blue eyes of the Northerner, sheltered by the dark eyebrows and hair of the South. His complexion, tanned by the sun, was slightly pale from fatigue. A thin moustache and a nascent goatee enhanced a pair of fine, smiling lips that, when opened, revealed a double row of white teeth that any lady of the Court might envy. His costume of a Basque peasant, was both comfortable and elegant. It began at the top with a red, or rather oxblood, beret, decorated with a black tassel and two drooping feathers that framed his face charmingly. Below, he wore a doublet of the same colour as the beret, trimmed with black lace, with the left sleeve open and hanging loose so that it could, in this period of assaults by day and ambushes by night, serve as a quick defence against the slash of a dagger or sword. This doublet was buttoned from top to bottom, as was no longer the fashion in Paris, where one now wore the doublet partly unbuttoned to show off one's lace-trimmed shirt beneath. Below the waist the young man wore a sort of buff grey trousers, and a pair of high-heeled shoes rather than boots. A dagger was thrust through the leather belt at his waist, from which a long rapier hung down along his legs. These were the arms of a gentleman, not exactly compatible with the costume of a peasant. He arrived at the door, made sure the room was in fact number thirteen, and then carefully knocked in a deliberate pattern: two quick taps, a pause, two more taps, and then finally a fifth. At the fifth knock the door opened, indicating that the visitor was expected. The person who opened the door was a woman of twenty-eight to thirty, a lush flower at the peak of her beauty. Her eyes that the young man had mentioned downstairs, sparkled like two black diamonds under the velvet shadow of her long eyelashes. Her hair was so dark and lustrous that no comparison with India ink or a raven's wing could do it justice. Her pale cheeks were flushed with the heat that speaks of sudden passion rather than enduring regard. Her neck, draped in strings of coral, descended to a generous bosom that trembled provocatively with each breath. Though her contours, sculpturally speaking, were more those of Niobe than of Diana, she was nonetheless rather petite, slim of waist above the flare of her rather Spanish hips. Her skirt that was on the short side, was striped red and white, and displayed a lower leg rather more aristocratic than her costume would indicate, and feet that seemed almost too small to support the bounties above. It was wrong to say that the door opened, as in fact it was only half opened until the young man said *Marina*, spoken more as a password than a name. The reply was *Jacquelino*, at which the door opened completely. The guardian stood aside to let the man enter, after which the door was shut and bolted. She turned quickly and surveyed him, as if to make sure of whom she was dealing with. They regarded each other with equal curiosity – Jacquelino, arms crossed, head high, smile on his lips; Marina, head forward, her figure relaxed yet slightly coiled, in a manner reminiscent of a panther ready to spring. "*By the belly of the Grey Saint!*" the young man said suddenly. "I'd no idea I had such a delicious cousin!"

"Neither did I, upon my soul, 'cousin,'" the young woman replied.

"And, by my faith," Jacquelino continued, "relatives like we are, who've never even met before, should certainly get acquainted with a kiss."

"That seems to me a very appropriate welcome between ... cousins," said Marina, offering her cheeks that were coloured with a glow that an observer might take for the flush of desire rather than the blush of modesty.

And they kissed. "Ah! By the merry soul of my father," said the young man in a good-natured tone that seemed natural to him, "it's the finest thing in the world, I think, to embrace a beautiful woman – especially as what follows may be a finer thing yet."

And he spread his arms again to put the idea into action. "Gently, cousin," said the young woman, stopping him short. "Not that I don't think that's a fine idea but time is short. And that's your fault. Why did you keep me waiting for half an hour?"

"*For the love of God!* What a question! Because I thought I would be met by some fat German nanny or some dried-up Spanish duenna, not, God knows, a cousin as fair and succulent as the one I actually found waiting."

"I accept that excuse but right now I have to be able to report to the one who sent me that I saw you, and that you're ready to obey her orders in all respects – as befits a noble cavalier when addressed by a great princess."

The young man dropped to one knee. "I await these orders humbly and eagerly."

"Oh! You can't kneel to me, my Lord!" Marina cried, lifting him to his feet. "What are you thinking?"

Then she added, with a sly smile, "What a shame you're so charming."

"Come," said the young man, taking the hands of his supposed cousin between his own and seating her beside him, "tell me whether my return is regarded with at least some satisfaction."

"More than that," she said, "with joy."

"And she's not unhappy to grant me this audience?"

"More than happy."

"And the message I carry will be greeted with sympathy?"

"With enthusiasm."

"And yet it's eight days since I arrived, and I've been waiting two days since our first contact!"

"You're charming, my cousin but charm can't mint days. How long has it been since we returned from La Rochelle? Two and a half days."

"That's true."





"In that case, dress warmly and bring a good cloak. It's a cold night!"

"I'm ready!" said the young page. His master frequently employed him as a street runner, so he was an old hand at such matters. "Will I be guarding your horse?"

"Better: you'll be an honour guard at the Louvre. But not a word, Galaor, even to your master."

"Say no more, my Lord," said the lad, smiling and placing a finger to his lips. He moved toward the door.

"Wait," said the Count of Moret. "I have further instructions."

The page bowed. "Get a horse ready to go and put loaded pistols in both holsters."

"Just one horse?"

"Yes, just one – you'll ride behind me. A second horse would attract attention."

"Just as My Lord orders."

Ten o'clock sounded. The count listened, counting each bronze beat. "Ten o'clock," he said. "Go, and have everything ready within a quarter of an hour."

The page bowed and went out, proud of being in the confidence of the count. As to the latter, he went to his wardrobe and dressed in the outfit of a cavalier, simple but elegant, with a red doublet and blue breeches, both of velvet. His fine cambric shirt was trimmed with magnificent Brussels lace, showing through his doublet's slashed sleeves at cuffs and wrist. He drew on tall knee boots and donned a grey felt hat decorated with feathers that echoed the colours of his clothes, red and blue, pinned in place with a diamond brooch. Then he draped a rich baldric over his shoulder, and hung from it a red-hilted sword, a weapon both handsome and practical. Finally, with that vanity natural to youth, he spent a few minutes on his appearance, making sure his naturally curly hair framed his face correctly, and that his fashionably long love-lock – which he wore because his moustache and goatee refused to grow as thick as he would have liked – fell properly to the left. He took a purse from a drawer to replace the one he'd left with Latil, and then, as if that reminded him, murmured, "But who the devil would want me killed?" He reflected for a moment but as he could think of no satisfactory answer to his question, with the insouciance of youth he set the matter aside. He patted himself to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, glanced once more at the mirror, then went down the stairs singing the last verse of the song he'd begun at the Inn of the Painted Beard.

"Song, go where I'm thinking of,  
Into the chamber of my love,  
There to kiss those fingers  
That brought to me such healing.  
Promise them all the feeling  
That in my heart still lingers."

At the street door, the count found the page waiting for him with a horse. He leaped into the saddle with the lightness and elegance of a consummate horseman. At his invitation, Galaor climbed up behind. After making sure the page was well seated, the count set his horse at a trot down Rue Maubué, took the Rue Troussevache to the Rue Saint-Honoré, and finally reached the Rue des Poulies. At the corner of the Rue des Poulies and the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, beneath a lamp-lit Madonna, a young lad sat on a borne. Seeing a cavalier with a page on his crupper, and thinking it was probably the gentleman he was waiting for, he rose and opened his cloak. Beneath it he wore a jacket of buff and blue: the livery of Madam la Princess. The count recognised the page as the one he was to meet. He set Galaor on the ground, dismounted, and approached the lad. The page got down from his borne and waited respectfully. "Casale," the count said.

"Mantua," the page replied.

The count gestured to Galaor to stay back, came near his guide, and said, "So I'm to follow you, my pretty lad?"

"Yes, Sir Count, if you would," the page replied in a voice so musical, the prince immediately suspected he was dealing with a woman.

"Well, then," he said, abandoning the tone a man takes with a boy, "please be so kind as to show me the way."

The count's altered tone didn't escape the notice of the person he addressed. The page gave him a sidelong glance, tried and failed to stifle a laugh, then gestured in the direction they were to go and marched on before him. At the drawbridge, the page whispered a password to the sentry, and they crossed over to the gate of the Louvre. Passing into the courtyard, they headed for the northeast corner. Arriving at the inner gate, the page removed his cloak, displaying his livery of buff and blue, and said, in as masculine a voice as possible, "Household of Madam la Princess."

But in doing so, the page's face was exposed to the light from the gate lantern. The rays glanced from golden hair that fell to rounded shoulders, glinted from blue eyes full of mischief and merriment, and glowed on a mouth both full and fine, as ready to bite as to kiss. And the Count of Moret recognised Marie of Rohan-Montbazon, Duchess of Chevreuse. He caught up with her at the turn of the stairs, saying, "Dear Marie, did my friend the duke send you to make me jealous of him?"

"No, my dear Count," she said, "especially since he knows you're making a fool of yourself over Madam la Montagne."

"Good answer," laughed the prince. "I see that as well as the most beautiful, you're still the wittiest creature in the world."

"If the end result of my journey from Holland is to hear compliments from you, My Lord," she said with a bow, "then the trip was worth it."

"Indeed! But I thought you'd been exiled after that little intrigue in the garden at Amiens."

"Oh, that! In recognition that I and Her Majesty were both quite innocent – and at the insistence of the queen – the cardinal has deigned to forgive me."

"Unconditionally?"

"Well, I did have to take an oath to forego meddling in intrigue."

"And how are you keeping that oath?"

"Scrupulously, as you see."

"Does your conscience have nothing to say to you?"

"Why should it? I have a papal dispensation."

The count laughed. "And besides," she continued, "is it intrigue to conduct a brother-in-law to meet his sister-in-law?"

"Dear Marie," said the count, taking her hand and kissing it with the passion he had inherited from his royal father, as we already saw with his "cousin" at the Inn of the Painted Beard. "Dear Marie, will you surprise me by revealing that your room is on the way to the queen's chamber?"

"Ah, you truly are the only genuine son of Henry IV! All the others are just ... bastards."

"Even my brother, Louis XIII?" laughed the count.

"Especially your brother, Louis XIII – whom God preserve! How can he have so little of your blood in his veins?"

"We don't have the same mother, Duchess."

"And maybe not the same father, either."

"Ah, Marie!" the Count of Moret cried. "You're too adorable not to be kissed!"

"Are you crazy? Trying to kiss a page on the staircase? It will be the ruin of your reputation – especially for one who just came from Italy."

"We can't have that," said the count. "And that's it – there goes my mood."

He dropped the duchess's hand. "Well!" she said. "The queen sends one of her loveliest women to meet him at the Inn of the Painted Beard, and he complains!"

"My cousin Marina?"

"Your 'cousin Marina,' who else?"

"Ah! *By the belly of the Grey Saint!* Who's that little enchantress?"

"What! You don't know?"

"No!"

"You don't know Fargis?"

"Fargis, the wife of our ambassador to Spain?"

"Exactly. She was given a position near the queen after that affair in the Amiens garden got the rest of us exiled."

"Well, well!" the Count of Moret laughed. "I see the queen is well guarded, with the Duchess of Chevreuse at the head of her bed and Madam Fargis at the foot. My poor brother Louis! You must admit, Duchess, he has no luck at all."

"You're so delightfully impertinent, my Lord, that it's a good thing we've arrived."

"We're there?"

The duchess took a key from her pouch and opened the door of a dark corridor. "Here is your path, my Lord," she said.

"You're not going to take me all the way?"

"No, you're going by yourself."

"Am I? Well, I swore an oath I'd do this. Now a trap door will open beneath my feet, and it'll be good night to Antoine of Bourbon. Not that I have much to lose, since the women treat me so badly."

"Ingrate. If you knew who waited for you at the other end of this corridor..."

"What! Does another woman await me at the end of the passage?"

"Yes, the third one this evening. Any more complaints?"

"No, no complaints from me! *Au revoir*, Duchess."

"Watch out for that trap door."

"I'll risk it."

The duchess shut the door, and the count found himself in complete darkness. He hesitated for a moment. He had no idea where he was. He considered turning back but the sound of the key turning in the lock forestalled that idea. Finally, after hesitating a few more seconds, he decided to press on. "*By the belly of the Grey Saint!*" he said. "After all, the lovely duchess says I'm the true son of Henry IV, and it's no lie."

Arms extended in the dark, he advanced slowly toward the far end of the corridor. In complete darkness, even the bravest man will hesitate. He'd gone scarcely twenty paces when he heard the rustling of a dress and the intake of a breath. He stopped. The rustling and breathing stopped as well. He was trying to decide what to say to the source of this charming sound, when a soft and trembling voice asked, "Is that you, my Lord?"

The voice was no more than two steps away. "Yes," said the count. He stepped forward and an outstretched hand found his own. But she instantly withdrew it, and he heard a faint cry, as melodious as a sylph's sigh or the sound of a wind-brushed harp. The count started at the sound. He felt a new and unknown sensation. It was delicious. "Where are you?" he murmured.

"H-here," the voice stammered.

"I was told I would find a hand to guide me on my way. Are you ... refusing it?"

The timid presence hesitated a moment, then said, "Here it is."

The count took the hand between his own and tried to bring it to his lips but stopped as the voice cried, in alarm and appeal, "My Lord!"

"Your pardon, Miss," the count said as respectfully as if speaking to the queen.

He lowered her hand, already halfway to his lips, and both fell silent. He yet kept her hand in his, and she didn't try to remove it, standing as still as if she'd lost the power, or the will, to move. Her hand, resting in his, was as still as she was. But that didn't keep the count from realising that it – that she – was small, fine, elegant, aristocratic, and virginal above all. He stood, motionless and silent, holding her hand, entirely forgetting what had brought him there. "Are you coming, my Lord?" the sweet voice asked.

"Where do you want me to go?" asked the count, somewhat at random.

"But ... the queen is waiting for you. The queen."

"Oh, yes! I'd forgotten." He sighed. "Let's go."



But Cardinal Richelieu was a man of genius, while Cardinal Bérulle was a fool. Meanwhile, Sir, the king's brother, for whom Richelieu had arranged a marriage, used the immense fortune he'd gained from Miss of Montpensier to conspire against the cardinal. A secret council was organised around Doctor Bouvard, who'd replaced the brave Doctor Héroard as the king's physician. Sir would be successor to Louis XIII should Louis die without an heir, and through Bouvard he had his finger on the pulse of the patient – for Bouvard, a man devoted to the Spanish cause, and who lived for the Church, was the evil genius of the two queens. Everyone knew that this melancholy king, consumed by ennui, wrought by care, who felt loved by none and hated by all, whom the doctors plagued with the lethal medicine of the time, purging relentlessly and bleeding repeatedly, might vanish from one moment to the next, disappearing into the black humours that defined his life. If the king died, Richelieu would be at the mercy of his enemies and, within twenty-four hours of the death of the king, would be hanged. The Count of Chalais was disinclined to wait for this event, however, and offered to kill the cardinal. Marie de Médicis seconded the motion, Madam Conti bought the daggers but sweet Anne of Austria voiced an objection of only three words: "He's a priest."

Thus the king, who since the assassination of Henry IV had hated his mother, since the conspiracy of Chalais had suspected his brother, since the love affair with Buckingham and, especially, since the scandal of the garden of Amiens despised the queen – the king, who abhorred his wife as he loathed all women, lacking the virtues of the Bourbons but with only half the vices of the Valois, became increasingly cold and aloof from his family. He knew that his projected war in Italy, or rather the cardinal's projected war, was anathema to Marie de Médicis, Gaston d'Orléans, and particularly Anne of Austria, because it was really a war against Ferdinand II and Philip IV, and the queen was half-Austrian and half-Spanish. So when, under the pretext of a violent headache, the queen declined to attend the ballet being danced that evening in honour of the capture of La Rochelle – that is, in honour of the victory of her husband over her lover – Louis XIII suddenly suspected her of conspiring. Throughout the evening he'd had his eye not on the dancers but on the queen mother and Gaston d'Orléans, meanwhile sharing in a low voice with the cardinal, who stood beside him in his box, comments that had nothing to do with the choreography. When the ballet ended, instead of returning to his chambers, Louis had the idea of paying a surprise visit to the queen, to see her situation for himself. And that's why we've seen him arrive so unexpectedly, preceded by two pages, accompanied by his two favourites, and followed by Beringhen, appearing in the hall just as the Count of Moret and his guide disappeared into the closet. Five minutes after entering the queen's chambers, Louis XIII left them. Here's what happened during those five minutes. Royal etiquette decreed that, when the king slept under the same roof as the queen, it was forbidden to bar the doors of the queen's chambers. The king thus had no difficulty in passing through the three doors that separated the gallery from the queen's bedroom. Upon entering her bedroom, he took a quick look around, peering into all the darkest shadows and farthest corners. Everything was in perfect order. The queen was sleeping with a calm that spoke only of chastity, breathing smoothly and deeply as Louis XIII, more jealous of his power as king than of his rights as a husband, left the doorway and approached the bed. But queens are light sleepers, and though thick Flanders carpets muffled the footsteps of her august husband, her breathing fluttered and paused, and a hand of wonderful whiteness and elegance drew aside the bed-curtain. A head, hair adorably disarranged, rose from the pillow, and two large astonished eyes fixed for a moment on the unexpected visitor, as a voice, trembling with surprise, exclaimed, "What, is it you, Sire?"

"Myself, Madam," the king coldly replied while taking his hat in his hand, as every gentleman must before a lady.

"And by what happy chance do you favour me with a visit?" continued the queen.

"I heard that you were unwell, Madam. Concerned for your health, I wanted to come myself to say that, unless you take the trouble to visit me, I will probably not have the pleasure of seeing you tomorrow or the day after."

"Your Majesty goes hunting?" asked the queen.

"No, Madam; Bouvard felt that after all these festivals that are fatiguing for me, I should be purged and bled. So tomorrow, and the day after, I shall bleed. Goodnight, Madam, and excuse me for having awakened you. By the way, who is serving you tonight, Madam Fargis or Madam Chevreuse?"

"Neither, sire – it is Miss Isabelle of Lautrec."

"Ah! Very good," said the king, as if the name were reassuring. "But where is she?"

"In the next room, where she sleeps fully clothed on a couch. Does Your Majesty wish me to call her?"

"No, thank you. *Au revoir*, Madam."

*"Au revoir*, Sire." And Anne, with a sigh of regret – feigned or real but, under the circumstances, we suspect feigned – released the curtain of the bed and dropped her head to the pillow.

As for Louis XIII, he resumed his hat, gave the room a final look that showed he was still suspicious, and went out, muttering, "It seems this time the cardinal was mistaken."

He entered the antechamber where his retinue awaited him. "The queen's indeed very ill," he said. "Follow me, Gentlemen!" And in the same order they had come, the procession resumed its march toward the chambers of the king.

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What Passed in the Bedchamber of Queen Anne of Austria after the Departure of King Louis XIII

No sooner was the sound of footsteps fading down the hall, along with the last reflections of the flickering torches, when the door of the closet in which the Count of Moret had taken refuge was gently opened by his guide, and the head of the young lady peeked from the opening. Then, seeing that all had returned to silence and darkness, she ventured out and looked down the gallery, where the last rays of the pages' torches were disappearing. Finding that the danger passed, she returned to the closet and said to the count, light as a bird, "Come out, my Lord."

Then, remaining always at a distance where the young man could not quite see her face clearly, she opened one after another the three doors which the king had closed behind him. The young man followed her, speechless, breathless, bewildered. In the narrow, dark closet, the girl had had no choice but to squeeze up against him, and, although protected by the powerful hand of chastity, she couldn't prevent the count from becoming drunk on her breath, absorbing through every pore the sensuous scent that emanates from the body of a young woman, the very fragrance of nubile youth. Before opening the last door, hearing his footsteps approaching, she extended her hand toward the count and said, in a voice not entirely steady, "My Lord, be as kind as to wait here. When she wants to receive you, Her Majesty will call."

And she went in to the queen. This time, Anne of Austria was neither sleeping nor pretending to sleep. "Is that you, dear Isabelle?" she asked, drawing aside the curtain more quickly and rising more eagerly than she had for the king.

"Yes, Madam, it's me," the young woman replied, standing so her head was in shadow and the queen couldn't see the flush that lit up her face.

"You know the king just left?"

"I saw him, Madam."

"He doubtless suspects."

"Perhaps but he can't be sure."

"The count is here?"

"In the next chamber."

"Light a taper and give me a hand mirror."

Isabelle obeyed, giving the mirror to the queen, and holding the candle to illuminate it. Anne of Austria was pretty rather than beautiful. Her features were very small, the nose undistinguished but her skin was clear and she had the glorious blond hair of the Flemish dynasty she shared with Charles V and Philip II. A thorough coquette, she was well aware of its effect on men, even her brother-in-law Sir, so she took the trouble to arrange a few locks that had become ruffled, straightened the folds of her long silk robe, and raised herself to pose on one elbow. Returning the mirror to her maid of honour with a smile of thanks, she indicated that she was ready. Isabelle put the mirror and the candle on the vanity, bowed respectfully, and retired through the door where the queen had told the king her maid of honour was asleep on a couch. The bedchamber remained lit by the double glow of the candle and a small lamp, both placed so as to shed their rays on the side of the bed where Anne of Austria had spoken to the king, and now waited to give audience to the Count of Moret. However, left alone, the queen, before calling him, seemed to be awaiting someone or something. Several times she turned toward the rear of the room, gesturing and muttering impatiently. Finally, almost together, two doors opened at the back of the room. From one came a young man of twenty, with a lively face, black hair, and hard eyes that softened into insincerity. He was splendidly attired in white satin, with a red cloak embroidered with gold. He wore the Order of Saint-Esprit at his neck, as shown in contemporary portraits of him, and held a white felt hat decorated with two feathers the colour of his cloak. This young man was Gaston d'Orléans, usually referred to as Sir, and according to the scandal-mongers of the Louvre was the particular favourite of his mother because he was the son of the handsome Concino Concini. And anyone who sees the image of the one next to the other, as we did the other day at the Museum of Blois, where hang the portraits of the Marshall d'Ancre and the second son of Marie de Médicis, would note the extraordinary resemblance between the two that gives credence to that grave accusation. We said that since the Chalais affair, the king had held Sir in contempt. Indeed, Louis XIII did have a kind of conscience – he was sensitive to what was then called the honour of the crown, and is now called the honour of France. His egotism and vanity had, in Richelieu's hands, been moulded from vices into a sort of virtue. But Gaston, both disingenuous and cowardly, had been deeply implicated in the conspiracy of Nantes. He had wanted to enter the King's Council; and to keep the peace, Richelieu had consented; but when Sir wanted to bring with him his adviser, the corrupt Ornano, Richelieu had refused. The young prince had shouted, sworn, stormed, and declared that the Council could either accept Ornano voluntarily or by force. Richelieu, who couldn't arrest Gaston, instead arrested Ornano. At that, Gaston had burst through the door of the Council, and in a haughty voice demanded to know who had dared to arrest his adviser. "It's I," Richelieu calmly responded.

And that would have been the end of it, leaving Gaston seething in quiet shame, if Madam Chevreuse, at the urging of Spain, had not herself urged Chalais on. Chalais went to Sir and offered to rid him of the cardinal. This is what he proposed, or rather whispered, to Gaston: he would go with his followers to dine with Richelieu at his château of Fleury, and there at his table, betray his hospitality by having his men-at-arms assassinate the defenceless priest. For sixty years, Spain had extended its hideous yellow-stained hand in this way to remove anyone great enough to oppose it. In politics, removal means death. Thus she had removed Coligny, William of Nassau, Henry III, Henry IV – and now it was Richelieu's turn. It was a process as crude as it was effective. But this time, it failed. After that incident, Richelieu, like Hercules in the Augean stables, began cleaning the Court of its treacherous princes. The Vendomes, two bastards of Henry IV, were arrested. The Count of Soissons fled, Madam Chevreuse was exiled, and the Duke of Longueville was disgraced. As for Sir, he signed a confession in which he denounced and renounced his friends. He was then married and enriched but dishonoured. Chalais bore the shame of the conspiracy alone, and it cost him his head. And yet Sir, already so deep in dishonour, was then only twenty years old. Entering by the other door, at almost the same time as Sir, was a woman of fifty-five or fifty-six, royally dressed, wearing a small gold crown atop her head, a long ermine-trimmed purple robe, and a dress of white satin with gold embroidery. The ensemble was new but neither beautiful nor distinguished. Her corpulent bulk showed why Henry IV had called her his *fat banker*. Marie de Médicis, resentful and discontented, delighted in intrigue. Though she was the mental inferior of Catherine of Médicis, she eclipsed her in debauchery. If we are to believe all that was said, only one of her children belonged to Henry IV: Henriette, later Queen of England. But of all her children, she loved none but Gaston. She was willing to advance his interest even if it meant the death of her eldest son, an event she already welcomed as inevitable. As with Catherine of Médicis and her son Henry III, her obsession was to see Gaston on the throne. But Louis XIII hated her as much as she hated him for a more serious charge than that. It was said that she as good as placed the knife in the hands of the assassin Ravailiac, who killed Henry IV. A confession taken from Ravailiac on the wheel had been said to implicate both her and the Duke of Épernon – but a fire at the Palace of Justice had removed all trace of this confession. The day before, mother and son had been summoned by Anne of Austria, who informed them that the Count of Moret who had arrived in Paris a week earlier, had letters for them from the Duke of Savoy. They came to the queen, as we have seen, by two different doors that led to their own apartments. If caught, they planned to plead concern for the indisposition of Her Majesty, learned of only at the ballet, an illness that so worried them that they came directly, without even changing their clothes. As for the Count of Moret, in the event of surprise, he was to hide somewhere. A young man of twenty-two is always easy to hide; Anne of Austria had experience with that sort of conjuring trick. Meanwhile, the Count of Moret waited in the next room where he, to the bottom of his heart, thanked God for the delay. How could he appear before the queen troubled and trembling after parting from his unknown guide? The ten-minute reprieve was barely enough to enable him to calm the beating of his heart and steady his voice. From this agitation he passed into a reverie, more sweet than any he'd known before.

All at once, the voice of Anne of Austria made him start and break out of his reverie. "Count," she asked, "are you there?"

"Yes, Madam," replied the count, "here and awaiting the orders of Your Majesty."

"Come in then, for we're eager to receive you."

079

Letters Read Aloud & Letters Read Alone

The Count of Moret shook his young and graceful head, as if to dispel his dreams, and, pushing open the door before him, stood on the threshold of Anne of Austria's bedchamber. We must admit that his first glance, despite the high-ranking people present, was to look for his charming guide, who had left him without ever revealing her face. But though his eyes sought the most obscure corners of the room, eventually he had to give up and set his gaze and mind on the group within the light. This group, as we've said, consisted of the queen mother, the reigning queen, and the Duke of Orléans. The queen mother was standing beside the bed; Anne of Austria was upon it; and Gaston was sitting beside his sister-in-law. The count bowed deeply, advanced toward the bed, and fell on one knee

before Anne of Austria, who presented her hand to kiss. Then, stooping to the floor, the young prince touched his lips to the hem of Marie de Médicis's robe, and finally, still on one knee, turned to Gaston to kiss his hand – but Sir lifted him up and said, "Come into my arms, my brother!"

The Count of Moret, who as a true son of Henry IV had a frank and honest heart, could not believe all that was said of Gaston. He'd been in England during the Chalais conspiracy, and afterward had known Madam Chevreuse there, who'd been careful in what she'd said about the affair. He'd been in Italy during the siege of La Rochelle, when Gaston had pretended illness to avoid going to the front. And, having avoided the enticements of the Court, he had taken no part in those intrigues which had furthered the jealousies of Marie de Médicis against her husband's other children. He thus went joyfully into Gaston's embrace, honouring his brother with the warmth of his heart. Then, saluting the queen, he said, "Your Majesty should know, given the joy I feel at admission to the royal presence on his behalf, that I am profoundly grateful to the Duke of Savoy."

The queen smiled. "Indeed," she said, "it is for us to be thankful for your kind help to two poor disgraced Princess, one rebuffed from the love of her husband, the other from the affection of her son, beside a brother who's been refused his brother's embrace – because you bear, as you say, letters that must bring us consolation."

The Count of Moret took three sealed envelopes from his doublet. "This, Madam," he said, handing a letter to the queen, "is a letter addressed to you from Don Gonzales of Cordova, Governor of Milan and representative in Italy of His Majesty Philip IV, your august brother. He begs you to use all the influence you have to keep Sir Fargis as ambassador to Madrid."

"My influence!" repeated the queen. "I might have influence over a king who was a man but who could have influence over a king who is a ghost but a necromancer such as the cardinal-duke?"

The count bowed, then turned to the queen mother and presented her with a second letter. "As to this note, Madam, all I know is that it's very important, and in the personal handwriting of the Duke of Savoy. Everything within it is secret, and it was to be given to Your Majesty in person."

The queen mother took the letter eagerly, opened it, and, as she could not read it where she was, approached the candle and the lamp on the vanity. "And finally," continued the Count of Moret, presenting the third letter to Gaston, "here is a note addressed to Your Highness from Madam Christine, your august sister, who is more beautiful and charming than August itself."

As each read the letter addressed to him or her, the count took advantage of the time to sweep his gaze once more into every corner of the room – but it held only the two queens, Gaston, and himself. Marie de Médicis returned to her daughter-in-law's bedside and said, addressing the count, "Sir, when we deal with a man of your rank who makes himself available to a disgraced prince and two such oppressed women, it's best to keep no secrets from him. Better to accept his word of honour that, as an ally or a neutral, he will religiously keep any secret entrusted to him."

"Your Majesty," said the Count of Moret, bowing and pressing his hand to his chest, "you have my word of honour to remain silent, whether as neutral or ally. But my silence should not be regarded as a commitment of devotion."

The two queens exchanged a look. "You have reservations, then?" Marie de Médicis asked with her voice as Anne of Austria and Gaston asked with their eyes.

"I have two, Madam," replied the count in a soft but firm voice. "To my regret, I must remind you that I am the son of King Henry IV. I cannot draw my sword against the Protestants or against the king my brother. Likewise I cannot refuse to draw steel upon any foreign enemy against whom the King of France makes war, if the King of France calls for this honour."

"Neither the king nor the Protestants are our enemies, Prince," said the queen mother, emphasising the word *prince*. "Our sole, mortal *enemy* who's sworn our destruction is the cardinal."

"I've no affection for the cardinal, Madam but I have the honour to point out that it's difficult for a gentleman to make war on a priest. However, on the other hand, if it pleases God to send him adversity, I shall regard it as punishment for his improper conduct toward you. Is that enough for Your Majesty to trust me?"

"I believe you already know, Sir, what Don Gonzales of Cordova wrote to my daughter-in-law. Gaston will tell you what his sister Christine wrote to him. Gaston?"

The Duke of Orléans held out his letter to the Count of Moret, inviting him to read it. The count took it and did so. The Princess Christine wrote to her brother reasons why it was best to give her father-in-law, Charles-Emmanuel of Savoy, possession of Mantua and Montferrat rather than allowing the Duke of Nevers the legacy of the Gonzaga, as the duke was no friend to Louis XIII – while the heir to the Duke of Savoy, her husband Victor-Amadeus, was brother-in-law to the King of France. The Count of Moret returned the letter to Gaston with a friendly salute. "What do you think, brother?" asked the latter.

"I am no politician," replied the Count of Moret, smiling; "but as regards the family, it certainly sounds reasonable."

"And now, for my turn," said Marie de Médicis, presenting to the Count of Moret her letter from the Duke of Savoy. "It's only right that you know the contents of what you were carrying."

The count took the sheet and read the following: "Do everything possible to prevent the war in Italy – but if war's declared despite the efforts of our friends, be confident that Susa Pass will be defended vigorously."

That was, ostensibly at least, all the letter contained. The young man bowed before Marie de Médicis with every mark of profound respect. "Now," said the queen mother, "it remains for us to thank our young and able messenger for his skill and dedication, and promise that if we succeed in our projects, his fortune will follow ours."

"A thousand thanks to Your Majesty's good intentions but as soon as devotion sees the hope of reward, it is tainted by calculation and ambition. My own fortune is sufficient to my needs, and I ask little personal glory to justify my birth."

"Then," said Marie de Médicis, while her daughter-in-law presented her hand for the Count of Moret to kiss, "any such obligations are ours alone. Gaston, give your brother your love. But quickly: when midnight strikes, he must be out of the Louvre."

The count sighed and took one last look around. He'd hoped that the same guide who'd brought him here would lead him to the exit. With a sigh of regret, he gave up that hope. He saluted the two queens, and then, somewhat agitated, followed the Duke of Orléans. Gaston led him to his own apartments, where he opened a door to a secret staircase. "Now, my brother," he said, "receive my thanks once more and believe in my sincere gratitude."

The count bowed. "Is there a password?" he asked. "Something I need to say to escape?"

"None. Just knock on the window of the Swiss Guards and say 'Household of the Duke of Orléans, night service,' and they'll let you pass."

The count took one last look behind him, sent his most tender sigh toward his unknown guide, then went down two flights, knocked on the window of the Swiss Guards, spoke the necessary words, and immediately found himself in the courtyard. Then, as one needed a password to enter the Louvre but none to leave it, he crossed the drawbridge and found himself again at the corner of the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain and the Rue des Poulies. There waiting for him were his page and his horse, or rather the page and the horse of the Duke of Montmorency. "Ah," he whispered, "I'll wager she's less than eighteen and ravishingly beautiful. *By the belly of the Grey Saint!* I think I must conspire against the cardinal if that's the only way to see her again."

Meanwhile, Gaston d'Orléans, after making sure the Count of Moret had made it safely into the courtyard, returned to his chambers, locked himself in his bedroom, closed the curtains to ensure that no prying eyes could see him, and, taking the letter from his sister Christine from his pocket, held it with trembling hand over the flame of a candle. Slowly, under the influence of the heat, in between the lines written in black, new lines appeared – written in the same hand but traced in secret ink, now appearing in yellow and red. These newly revealed lines read: "Continue your apparent courtship of Marie de Gonzague but secretly reassure the queen. It is only upon our older brother's death that Anne of Austria can assume the crown – and if she does not, my dear Gaston, then with the support of Madam Fargis and Madam Chevreuse, she must find a way to be, if not queen, then regent."

"Oh," murmured Gaston, "don't worry, my dear little sister, I'll be on guard."

And opening a desk, he locked the letter in a secret drawer. As for the queen mother, as soon as the Duke of Orléans had departed, she took leave of her daughter-in-law and returned to her apartment, where she undressed, donned her night-clothes, and then dismissed her women. Left alone, she pulled a bell-sash hidden by curtains. Within moments, a man of forty-five to fifty, with a yellow face and black hair, eyebrows, and moustache, answered the bell, entering through a door hidden by the tapestry. This man was musician, physician, and astrologer to the queen mother. He was, sad to say, the successor of Henry IV, of Vittorio Orsini, Concino Concini, Bellegarde, Bassompierre, and Cardinal Richelieu: the Provençal Vautier, who had made himself a doctor to manage her body and an astrologer to manage her mind. Richelieu's fall, if you can call it such, had been succeeded by the rise of Cardinal Bérulle, a fool, and of Vautier, a charlatan – and those who knew what influence he had on the queen mother said that, if anything, his exceeded that of the cardinal. Vautier came into the antechamber outside the queen's bedroom. "Quick, quick," she said, "bring here, if you have it, the liquid that reveals the invisible writings!"

"Yes, Madam," Vautier said, drawing a flask from his pouch. "Your Majesty's needs are never forgotten! Here it is. Did Your Majesty finally receive the letter she was expecting?"

"Right here," said the queen mother, taking the letter from her bosom. "Just a few insignificant lines from the Duke of Savoy. But it's obvious he has something more important to tell me, or he wouldn't send such a banal letter in care of one of my husband's bastards."

She handed the letter to Vautier, who unfolded and read it. "Indeed," he said, "there must be more to it than that."

The apparent writing, as previously shown, was five or six lines at the top of the page in the hand of Charles-Emmanuel. But given the axiom that one must always read between the lines, it was clearly time to call on the chemical expertise of Vautier. One thing was certain: if some invisible message was hidden in the letter from the Duke of Savoy, it would be below the last line, on the remaining three-quarters of the page. Vautier dipped a brush in the liquid he'd prepared and carefully washed the bottom part of the letter. As the brush moistened the white surface, lines immediately began to form here and there and after five minutes of such treatment, the following advice was distinctly visible: "Pretend to oppose your son Gaston's fervent courtship of Marie de Gonzague. If an Italian campaign is decided upon despite your opposition, get Gaston command of the army as a pretext for separating him from La Gonzague. The cardinal-duke, whose sole ambition is to be the foremost general of our age, will resign in protest. The king will accept the inevitable!"

Marie de Médicis and her adviser shared a look. "Do you have any better advice to offer me?" asked the queen mother.

"No, Madam," he replied. "I have always found it wise to follow the advice of the Duke of Savoy."

"Then let's follow it," Marie de Médicis said with a sigh. "We can't be in a worse position than we are now. Have you consulted the heavens, Vautier?"

"This evening I spent an hour atop Catherine of Médicis's observatory."

"And what say the stars?"

"They promise Your Majesty complete triumph over your enemies."

"So be it," said Marie de Médicis, and presented the astrologer a hand somewhat distorted by fat but still attractive that he kissed respectfully. And they withdrew into the bedchamber together and closed the door behind them. Alone in her room, Anne of Austria listened to the receding footsteps of Gaston d'Orléans and of her mother-in-law. When the sound had completely faded, she slowly rose, pushed her petite feet into her Spanish slippers of sky-blue satin embroidered with gold, and sat down next to her vanity. From a drawer she took out a small canvas bag containing iris powder, a perfume she preferred for her clothes above all others, and which her mother-in-law had brought her from Florence. This powder she sprinkled on the blank second page of the letter from Gonzales of Cordova – just as, by different means, the same result was obtained from the note from Christine to Gaston, and from that of Charles-Emmanuel to the queen mother. Under the powder, letters soon appeared on the sheet sent from Gonzales of Cordova to the queen. This message was from King Philip IV himself. She read:

*Sister, I know from our good friend Sir Fargis of the plan by which, in the event of the death of King Louis XIII, you promise to marry his brother and heir to the throne, Gaston d'Orléans. However, it would be even better if, at the time of Louis's death, you were with child. The Queens of France have a great advantage over their husbands in that they can produce dauphins without them, an ability their husbands lack. Ponder this incontestable truth, and as you do not need my letter to inspire your meditations – burn it.*

– Philip

The queen, after reading this letter from her brother the king a second time, no doubt in order to engrave its every word upon her memory, took it by one of its corners, put it to the candle, set it alight, and held it in the air until the fire consumed it, illuminating her beautiful hand and making the tips of her fingernails glow pink. Only then did she drop the letter that dissolved into thousands of sparks before it struck the floor. But, to reinforce her memory, she then transcribed the entire letter on paper, and locked it in a secret drawer in her desk. She then returned slowly to her bed and slipped her satin dressing gown from her shoulders to her hips, emerging like Venus in a wave of silver. She lay down slowly and with a sigh dropped her head on her pillow, murmuring, "Oh, Buckingham! Buckingham!" And thereafter only a few stifled sobs troubled the silence of the royal chamber.

## 080 The Red Sphinx

In the gallery of the Louvre there hangs a portrait by the Jansenist painter Philippe of Champagne depicting Cardinal Richelieu as he truly was, a figure fine, keen, and vigorous. Unlike the Flemish, his countrymen, or the Spanish, his masters, Philippe of Champagne was spare in his use of colour, avoiding the bright hues seen in the palettes of Rubens and Murillo. In fact, he bathed the sombre minister in a flood of half-light, as if emerging from the twilight of politics, he whose motto was *Aquila in Nubibus* – an eagle in the clouds. The image could be more flattering but that would elevate a lie above the truth. Study this portrait, all you men of conscience who would, after two and a half centuries, resurrect the illustrious dead and get a sense of this physical and moral genius, a man maligned by his contemporaries, ignored and almost forgotten during the following century, who found the respect he was entitled to by posterity only after two hundred years in the grave. This portrait has the power to stop one short and almost force contemplation. Is it a man or is it a ghost, that creature in the red robe, white *cappa magna* [big cap], Venetian collar, and red biretta, with the broad forehead, grey hair and moustache, piercing grey eyes, and hands fine, though thin and pale? This figure, burning with eternal fever, seems alive only in the flush of the cheeks. Does it not feel like the

more you contemplate this portrait, the less you know if it's a living being or, like Saint Bonaventure, a dead man returned from beyond the grave to write his own memoirs? Does it not seem as if he might suddenly emerge from the canvas, step out of the frame, and walk up to you, causing you to recoil as if from a ghost?

What is clear and undeniable in this painting is that it depicts a man of mind and intelligence, and nothing more. Here is neither heart nor spirit – fortunately for France. In the vacuum of the monarchy between Henry IV and Louis XIV, with a king so weak and diffident and a Court so turbulent and dissolute, among princes so greedy and faithless, to bring order out of chaos required a brain above all. God created this terrible automaton, placed by Providence exactly between Louis XI and Robespierre, in order to crush the great nobles, as Louis XI had crushed his “grand vassals,” and as Robespierre would crush the aristocrats. From time to time, like red-stained comets, there appear these machines of history, these great harvesters that advance of their own accord, cropping the field of state, remorseless, relentless, stopping only when their work of scything is done. So Richelieu would have appeared to you on that evening of 5 December 1628 when aware of the hatred that surrounded him, he was nonetheless intent on the great projects he contemplated: exterminating heresy in France, driving the Spanish from Milan, and expelling Austria from Tuscany. He it is who appears before you in his study, trying to speak without betraying himself, to see without revealing, that impenetrable minister whom the great historian Michelet called the Red Sphinx. He had left the ballet when his intuition told him that the queen's absence had a political cause behind it that could only mean a threat to him. Something poisonous was brewing in the royal chambers, those few narrow rooms that caused him more toil and trouble than the whole rest of the wide world. He went home sad, tired, almost disgusted, murmuring like Luther, “There are times when our Lord seems to tire of the game and just lays His cards on the table.”

He was well aware that what was threatened was not just his power but his life. His hair shirt was made of the points of daggers. He felt that he was in 1628 where Henry IV had been in 1606: everyone wanted his death. Worst of all was that even Louis XIII hated him. The king was Richelieu's sole support but at any moment the cardinal might take the fall for any royal failure. A man of genius, he might have borne this if he'd been healthy and vigorous, like his idiot rival Bérulle; but the ongoing shortage of money, the continual need to invent new resources, the fact that at any given moment there were a dozen Court plots against him, kept him in constant anxiety. That was the source of the fever that reddened his cheeks, while making his forehead and hands as pale as ivory. Add to this endless religious disputes, the rage they inspired in him, and the need to suppress all his bitterness and fury, and he was burning up from within, never more than inches from death. It was a wonder that he wasn't dead twice over. Fortunately, the king somehow sensed that, if Richelieu were gone, his kingdom was lost. On the other hand, Richelieu knew that if the king died, he had less than twenty-four hours to live: hated by Gaston, by Anne of Austria, by the queen mother, by Sir Soissons from exile, by the two jailed Vendomes – hated by the whole nobility – hated, moreover, by all of Paris for having forbidden public duels, he knew the best he could hope for was to die the same day the king did – in the same hour, if possible. Only one person was faithful to him in this endless game of seesaw, when good and bad fortune followed each other so rapidly that the same day brought both storm and sun. This was his niece and adopted daughter, Madam Combalet, whom we've seen at the Hotel of Rambouillet in the Carmelite habit she'd worn since the death of her husband. The first thing the cardinal did upon entering his house in the Place Royale was to knock on a certain panel. Three doors opened simultaneously: from one appeared Guillemot, his confidential valet; from another appeared Charpentier, his secretary; from the third came Rossignol, his decoder of dispatches.

“Has my niece returned?”

“This very moment, my Lord,” replied the valet.

“Tell her I need to spend tonight at work, and ask her if she wants to visit me here or would prefer that I go to her.”

The confidential valet closed his door and went to execute his orders.

The cardinal turned to Charpentier. “Have you seen Father Joseph?” he asked.

“He's been here twice tonight,” said the secretary, “and says he must speak to my Lord this evening.”

“If he comes back a third time, bid him enter. Sir Cavois commands in the guard chamber?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Tell him not to leave. I may need his services tonight.”

The secretary retired. “And you, Rossignol,” asked the cardinal, “did you solve the cipher in the letter I gave you? You know, the one taken from the papers of Senelle, the royal physician on his return from Lorraine.”

“Yes, My Lord,” the code-master replied in a pronounced southern accent. He was a small man of forty-five to fifty whose habit of stooping made him almost hunchbacked. His most salient feature was a long nose that could have supported three or four pairs of glasses, though he made do with only one. “It couldn't have been simpler. The king is called Céphale, the queen Procris, your Eminence the Oracle, and Madam Combalet Venus.”

“Good,” said the cardinal. “Give me the key to the cipher. I'll read the dispatch myself.”

Rossignol bowed and began to withdraw. “By the way,” added the cardinal, “remind me tomorrow to give you a bonus of twenty *pistoles*.”

“My Lord has no other orders for me?”

“No, return to your office and prepare the cipher key for me. Have it ready when I call for it.”

Rossignol backed away, bowing to the ground. As the door closed behind him, a bell quietly sounded from within the cardinal's desk. He opened a drawer and found the bell still trembling. His immediate response was to press his finger upon a small button that must have communicated with the apartment of Madam Combalet, for less than a minute later she appeared across the room in yet another doorway. A great change had taken place in her attire: gone were her veil and bandeau, her scapular and wimple, and now she was dressed only in a sheer tunic confined at the waist by a leather belt. Her beautiful auburn hair, released from restraint, fell in silken curls to her shoulders above a décolletage considerably more generous than a strict Carmelite would have allowed, displaying the curve of her bosom beneath a bouquet of violets and rosebuds – a bouquet indicating both birth and beauty, and one we've previously remarked upon, though at Madam Rambouillet's it had been on her shoulder. The deep brown of her blouse highlighted the white satin of her elegant neck and her beautiful hands; and, as its fabric was not imprisoned in the iron corset common at that period, its folds were free to drape her shapely form. At the sight of this adorable creature who appeared in a heavenly cloud of perfume and was in the full flower of her beauty at 25 made even lovelier, more graceful by the simplicity of her outfit, the cardinal's furrowed forehead relaxed, his sombre face lit up, and he stretched his arms toward her, saying, “Oh! Come to me, Marie.”

The young woman needed no encouragement and came to him with a charming smile. She detached her bouquet, brushed it against her lips, and presented it to her uncle. “Thank you, my lovely child,” said the cardinal, who, under the pretext of scenting the bouquet, brought it to his own lips. “Thank you, beloved daughter.”

Then, drawing her toward him and kissing her on the forehead as a father would his child, he said, “I love these flowers, as fresh as you, and scented like you...”

“We are yours a hundred times over, dear Uncle. You said you wanted to see me? It would make me happy to know you needed me.”

“I always need you, my dear Marie,” said the cardinal, regarding his niece with delight, “but tonight I need you more than ever.”

“Oh, my good Uncle!” said Madam Combalet, trying to kiss the cardinal's hands, who resisted by drawing her own hands to his lips. “I see you're worried again tonight.” She added, with a sad smile, “By now, I think you'd be accustomed to worries. What do they matter, so long as you succeed?”

“Yes,” said the cardinal, “I know. I shouldn't be simultaneously high and low, happy and unhappy, powerful and helpless – but so I am, as you know better than anyone, Marie. Public success brings no private happiness. You love me with all your heart – don't you?”

“With all my heart! With all my soul!”

“After the death of Chalais, you remember, I seemed to have won a major victory: I had the queen, the two Vendomes, and the Count of Soissons on their knees before me. I pardoned them – and what did they do in return for my pardon? They chose to attack me in my very heart. They know I love nothing in the world so much as you, that your presence is as necessary to me as the air I breathe, as the sun that shines. Yet they condemn you for living with that ‘damned priest,’ that ‘man of blood.’ Live with me? Yes, you live with me, and more than that – I live because of you! Yet this life, so devoted on your side, so pure on mine, so that even seeing you as lovely as you are now, within my arms, no idea of sin has crossed my mind – this life, of which we should be proud, they denounce as a disgrace. You were so frightened of them, you renewed your vow to take the veil and enter a convent. I even had to ask the Pope, with whom I was in conflict, for the favour of a brief delay of your retreat. Worried? How should I not be worried? They can kill me, that's nothing – at the siege of La Rochelle I risked my life twenty times over. But if I'm dismissed, exiled, or imprisoned, how am I to live apart from you?”

“My beloved Uncle,” said the beautiful Carmelite, bestowing on the cardinal a look that seemed to reflect more than the tenderness of a niece for her uncle, and perhaps even more than the love of a daughter for her father. “when I took that vow, though you'd been as good as it's possible to be, I didn't know you as I know you now – didn't love you as I love you today. I made a vow but the Pope has waived it; and today, that vow is no more. Today I swear that no matter what, I'll follow you wherever you go: palaces and prisons are all the same to me. Wherever a heart may be, it lives where it loves. Well, my dear Uncle, my heart is with you, for I love you and will always love you.”

“Yes but when they defeat me, will the victors allow you to continue your devotion to me? Look, Marie, what I fear more than dismissal, more than lost power, more than thwarted ambition, is to be separated from you. Oh! If I had to fight only Spain, Austria, and Savoy, that would be nothing. But to have to fight the very people who surround me, those whom I made rich, happy, and powerful! I dare not raise my foot to crush them, vipers and scorpions though they are. This is what wearies me to despair. My foreign enemies, Spinola, Wallenstein, Olivares – who are they? I can deal with them; they're not my true enemies, my true rivals. My real rival is this Vautier, my real enemy is Bérulle – or else some stranger awaiting me in a shadowy alcove, a man whose name I don't know, of whose existence I'm entirely unaware. Me, I write tragedies – yet I know of no play darker than the drama I enact! Thus, even while battling the English fleet, while tearing down the walls of La Rochelle by sheer force of genius – I say it, though I speak of myself – I had to reach beyond our current army to raise twelve thousand more French troops so the Duke of Nevers, legitimate heir to Mantua and Montferrat, can win his inheritance. It would be enough if I just had to fight Philip IV, Ferdinand II, and Charles-Emmanuel, that is to say, Spain, Austria, and Savoy. But this astrologer Vautier ‘sees in the stars’ that the army will never pass over the mountains, while the pious Bérulle fears that the success of Nevers might imperil the ‘understanding’ between His Catholic Majesty of Spain and His Most Christian Majesty of France. They send word through the queen mother to Créqui, that same Créqui I made a peer of the realm, a Marshal of France, the Governor of Dauphiné – that Créqui who also hopes to become constable, at the expense of Montmorency, that Créqui whom nothing will sate. And suddenly there is hunger in the army that causes desertion, and who benefits but Savoy? And who is it who prepares to roll boulders from the mountains of Savoy upon French troops – who but a Queen of France, Marie de Médicis? She who is the daughter of an assassin, and the niece of a defrocked cardinal who poisoned his own brother and sister-in-law. “But the astrologer Vautier saw it in the stars! Very well, let them try to stop me – or, rather, my army. They hope to undermine me here, to sabotage me and forestall our march. But for the good of France we march to Mantua and Montferrat, small domains perhaps but in strategic positions. The fortress of Casale is the key to the Alps! In the hands of Savoy, that key would be at the disposal of Austria and Spain. “Then there's Mantua, the domain of the Gonzaga family, after Venice the last centre of the arts in Italy. Mantua that at once overlooks Tuscany, Venice, and the Papal States. What use to raise the siege of Casale if one fails to save Mantua? I'm negotiating with Gustavus Adolphus but what use to ally with the Protestants of the north before I have crushed the Protestants of the south? If this southern campaign succeeds, I could concentrate in these hands power both spiritual and temporal, and guide France for the rest of my life. And to think that what stands in my way is a charlatan, Vautier, and an idiot, Bérulle!”

He rose. “And moreover,” he added, “to think that I'm balked by this daughter-in-law and this mother-in-law, when I hold proof of the adultery of one and the complicity in the murder of Henry IV of the other. But though the words are nearly bursting from my mouth, I dare not breathe them – because it would mean a stain upon the glory of the crown of France!”

“Uncle!” cried Madam Combalet, in alarm.

“Oh, I have my witnesses,” the cardinal said. “For Queen Anne of Austria, there's Madam Bellier and *Patroclus*. For Marie de Médicis there's the Escoman woman. I'll yet find her, maybe in the dungeon of the Daughters of Repentance – and if she's dead, poor martyr, I'll nonetheless have words with her cadaver.” He strode back and forth in agitation.

“My dear Uncle,” said Madam Combalet, placing herself in his path. “Don't talk about this tonight. Leave it for tomorrow.”

“You're right, Marie,” Richelieu said, stopping himself by sheer force of will. “What have you done today? Where have you been?”

“I went to Madam Rambouillet's.”

“What happened there? Anything good? What says the illustrious *Arthenice*?” asked the cardinal, trying to smile.

“She presented us with a young poet just arrived from Rouen.”

“Do they make poets in Rouen? It's only three months since Rotrou arrived, fresh off the boat.”

“In fact, it was Rotrou who presented him.”

“And what is this poet called?”

“Pierre Corneille.”

The cardinal shrugged, as if to say: *an unknown*. “And I suppose he arrives with a tragedy in his pocket?”

“With a comedy, in five acts.”

“And the title?”



“*Méliste*.”

“That’s not a name from history.”

“No, its source is pure fantasy. Rotrou says the work is destined to eclipse all poetry, past, present, and future.”

“Sheer impertinence!”

Madam Combalet delicately changed the subject. “Then Madam Rambouillet presented us with a real surprise: she’d secretly had constructed, beyond the wall facing the Three Hundred, and unknown to anyone but the masons and carpenters, an addition to her hotel – a beautiful new chamber, all hung in blue velour, gold, and silver. I’ve never seen anything decorated in such exquisite taste.”

“Would you like something like it, Marie? Nothing could be easier – I’ll include it in the palace I’m building.”

“Thank you but for me, please remember, all I need is an austere monastic cell – so long as it’s near you.”

“Is that all the news?”

“Not quite all – though I’m not sure if I should tell you the rest.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the rest involves ... a sword.”

“Duels! Always duels!” Richelieu hissed. “What must I do to rid France of this insane obsession with honour?”

“This time it wasn’t a duel, just a simple encounter. The Marquis of Pisany was brought to the Hotel of Rambouillet disabled by a wound.”

“A dangerous wound?”

“No, because he has the luck to be a hunchback: the blade hit the top of his hump and, unable to penetrate, slid down his side. ‘My God,’ the surgeon said, ‘it slid along the side of his chest and went through his left arm.’”

“Do we know the cause of this fight?”

“I think he mentioned the Count of Moret.”

“The Count of Moret,” Richelieu repeated, frowning. “I think I’ve heard that name in these last three days. And he gave this pretty sword wound to the Marquis of Pisany?”

“No, it was one of the marquiss’s friends.”

“His name?”

Madam Combalet hesitated, knowing how much her uncle hated duelling. “My dear Uncle,” she said, “you know what I said: this wasn’t a duel, or a summons of honour, or even a meeting. The opponents just had a disagreement at the door of the hotel.”

“But who was this opponent? His name, Marie.”

“A certain Souscarrières.”

“Souscarrières!” said Richelieu. “I know that name.”

“Perhaps but I can assure you, my dear Uncle, that he’s not to blame.”

“Who?”

“Sir Souscarrières.”

The cardinal drew a notebook from his pocket and consulted it. He seemed to find what he sought. “The Marquis of Pisany,” continued Madam Combalet, “drew first and lunged like a madman, according to Voiture and Brancas, who were witnesses.”

“Here he is – the very man,” murmured the cardinal.

And he knocked on a panel. Charpentier appeared. “Call for Cavois,” said the cardinal.

“Uncle! You’re not planning to arrest this young man and bring him to trial?” exclaimed Madam Combalet, clasping her hands.

“On the contrary,” the cardinal said, laughing: “I just might make his fortune.”

“Oh! Don’t mock, Uncle!”

“With you, Marie, I never mock. This Souscarrières has, at this moment, his fortune in his hands. Even better, it’s the fortune he needs. It’s up to him not to fumble it.”

Cavois came in. “Cavois,” said the cardinal to the captain of his guards, who was still half asleep, “go to the house at Rue Traversière and Rue Sainte-Anne and seek out a certain cavalier who calls himself Pierre of Bellegarde, Marquis of Montbrun, Sieur of Souscarrières.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“If you find him at home, tell him that despite the late hour, I would like the pleasure of a brief chat with him.”

“And if he refuses to come?”

“Oh, Cavois, I think you can handle a little problem like that. Willing or unwilling, I want to see him. Is that clear?”

“Within the hour he’ll be at Your Eminence’s service,” Cavois said, bowing. At the door, the captain of the guards met a new arrival. He deferred to the newcomer with such respect that he was obviously important. And in fact, it was none other than that famous Capuchin, du Tremblay, known to all as Father Joseph, or His Grey Eminence.

081

His Grey Eminence

Father Joseph was so well known as the cardinal’s *second soul* that upon seeing him, the minister’s confidential servants withdrew at once, so that in Richelieu’s chambers the *Eminence grise* had the privilege of respectful space about him. Madam Combalet, no less than the others, was subject to the unease inspired by this silent apparition. At the sight of Father Joseph, she presented her forehead to the cardinal for a goodbye kiss. “Please, dear Uncle,” she said, “don’t work too late.”

Then she retired, eager to escape through the door opposite the one through which the monk had entered, keeping half the room between herself and the new arrival as he approached the cardinal. By the date of our story, the religious orders – except the Oratory of Jesus, founded by Cardinal Bérulle in 1611 and confirmed, after long opposition, by Pope Paul V in 1613 – had mostly fallen under the influence of the cardinal-minister. He was recognised as the protector of the Benedictines of Cluny, the Cistercians of Saint-Maur, the Premonstratensians, the Dominicans, the Carmelites, and finally the whole hooded family of the monks of St. Francis: the Miners, Minims, Franciscans, Capuchins, and so on. In recognition of this protection, all these orders, whether preaching, begging, teaching, or spreading propaganda, wherever they travelled, acted as a covert source of intelligence, all the more trustworthy since the main source of information was the confessional. Chief over all this religious police, zealous in its duty of surveillance, was the Capuchin Father Joseph, experienced in the ways of diplomacy and intrigue. Like those who came after him, such as Sartine, Lenoir, and Fouché, he had a genius for espionage. Through his influence his brother, Leclerc du Tremblay, had been named Governor of the Bastille, so that a prisoner detected, denounced, and arrested by du Tremblay the Capuchin was shackled, jailed, and guarded by du Tremblay the Governor. And if the unfortunate died in prison as was so often the case, his confession and last rites were administered by du Tremblay the Capuchin – which kept it all in the family. Father Joseph’s ministry was divided into four divisions, each headed by a Capuchin. He had a secretary named Father Ange Sabini who acted as Joseph to Father Joseph. When his business required him to travel, he rode on horseback, followed by Father Ange on a second horse. But one day, Father Joseph rode a mare while Father Ange’s mount was a stallion, and the two animals formed a conjunction in which their riders found themselves in roles so grotesque that Father Joseph felt his dignity required him to abandon that means of mobility. Thereafter, he rode in a litter or carriage. However, in the usual course of his duties when he needed to remain incognito, Father Joseph travelled on foot, pulling his cowl down over his eyes so as not to be recognised – easy enough in the Paris of that time, thronged as it was with monks of every order. That very night, Father Joseph had been out, anonymous and afoot. The cardinal, sitting keen-eyed at his desk, waited until the first door had closed on his captain and the second on his niece, then turned to Father Joseph. “Well,” he said, “so you have something to tell me, my dear du Tremblay?”

The cardinal had retained the habit of calling the monk by his family name. “Yes, My Lord,” he replied, “and this is the second time I’ve had the honour of trying to see you!”

“I’ve heard. It led me to hope you might have learned something about the Count of Moret – of his return to Paris, and of the reasons for that return.”

“I don’t know exactly what Your Eminence wants to know but I think I’ve picked up the trail.”

“Ah-ha! Your white-cloaks have been at work. They’ve found...?”

“Nothing special. They’ve learned only that the Count of Moret was staying at the Hotel of Montmorency with Duke Henry II, and came out at night to visit a lady who lives in the Rue of la Cerisaie opposite the Hotel Lesdiguières.”

“Rue of la Cerisaie, opposite the Hotel Lesdiguières ... but that’s the house of the two sisters of Marion Delorme!”

“Yes, My Lord, of Madam la Montagne and Madam Maugiron but it’s uncertain which of the two is his lover.”

“Well, I’ll soon know,” said the cardinal. And signalling the Capuchin to pause in his report, he began to write on a slip of paper:

*Which of your two sisters is the Count of Moret’s lover? And who is the other’s lover? Is there an unhappy rival?*

Then he turned to a panel above the desk that opened when he pressed a button. This panel communicated with the neighbouring house, and when opened revealed a gap the thickness of the wall to another panel on the other side. Between the doors were two doorbells, one left, one right, that activated an invention so new that it was unknown to any but the cardinal.

The cardinal placed the paper in between the doors, rang the bell on the right, and then closed his panel. “Go on,” he said to Father Joseph who had watched without any evidence of surprise.

“I was saying, My Lord, that the white-cloaks had done some work for us but that Providence that watches over My Lord’s affairs, had done the most.”

“You’re sure, du Tremblay that Providence watches over me in particular?”

“What better occupation, my Lord?”

The cardinal, who asked nothing better than to believe it, smiled and said, “Let’s hear the report of Providence on Sir Count of Moret.”

“Well, My Lord, I’d learned from the white-cloaks, as I’d had the honour to tell Your Eminence, that the Count of Moret had been in Paris for eight days that he lodged with Sir Montmorency and had a mistress in the Rue of la Cerisaie that was little enough.”

“I think you are unfair to the good fathers. Who does what he can, does all he must – and there is always Providence that can do all. Let’s hear what Providence has done.”

“Only set me face to face with the count himself.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“As certain as I have the honour to see you, my Lord.”

“And he, he saw you?” asked Richelieu anxiously.

“He saw me but didn’t recognise me.”

“Sit down, du Tremblay, and tell me all about it!”

Richelieu was accustomed to offer the Capuchin the false courtesy of a seat, knowing he wouldn’t take it. Joseph nodded and continued: “Here’s how the thing happened, my Lord. I had just left the white-cloaks and was on my way to bring their information to you when I saw people running toward the Rue of l’Homme-Armé.”

“Speaking of the Rue of l’Homme-Armé, isn’t there an inn there which you’ve had under your eye? The Inn of the Painted Beard?”

“That’s where the crowd was running, my Lord.”

“And you joined the crowd?”

“Your Eminence knows well I wouldn’t fail to do so. It seems a kind of assassination had been performed upon a poor devil named Étienne Latil, a former retainer of Sir d’Épemon.”

“Of Sir d’Épemon? Then remember this Étienne Latil, du Tremblay – he may be useful someday.”

“I doubt it, my Lord.”

“Why is that?”

“I think he’s taken a voyage from which no one returns.”

“Ah, yes – you said he’d been murdered.”

"Exactly, My Lord. Believed dead at first, he'd revived and called for a priest ... and there I was."

"Providence indeed, du Tremblay! And you gave him his confession, I presume?"

"In full."

"And there was something of import in it?"

"My Lord shall judge," said the Capuchin, with a laugh, "but only if you absolve me of revealing his confession."

"Very well, very well," said Richelieu, "I absolve you."

"Well, my Lord, Étienne Latil was assassinated for refusing to assassinate ... the Count of Moret."

"And who would have a motive for killing this young man who, at least till now, has joined neither faction nor cabal?"

"A rival in love."

"You're sure?"

"I believe so."

"But you don't know who killed this man?"

"No, my Lord, and neither did he. He knew only that it was a hunchback."

"We have two hunchbacked swordsmen in Paris: the Marquis of Pisany and the Marquis of Fontrailles. It might be Pisany, who himself received a sword-wound last night at nine o'clock, at the gate of the Hotel of Rambouillet, at the hands of his friend, Souscarrières. But Fontrailles should be watched nonetheless."

"I'll have him watched, my Lord but stay a moment – I've something even more extraordinary to tell Your Eminence."

"Speak, speak, du Tremblay. Your story is captivating."

"Well, My Lord, here's what's even more extraordinary: while I was hearing Latil's confession, who should walk into the room but the Count of Moret himself?"

"What, at the Inn of the Painted Beard?"

"Yes, My Lord, at the Inn of the Painted Beard. The Count of Moret himself came in, dressed as a Basque esquire; he stepped up to the wounded man and laid a purse of gold on the table next to him. 'If you recover,' he said, 'take yourself to the hotel of the Duke of Montmorency. If you die, die in the faith of the Lord, certain that there will be prayers at mass for the salvation of your soul.'"

"The intention is good," Richelieu said, "but nonetheless, let's send my doctor Chicot to have a look at this poor devil. Are you sure the Count of Moret didn't recognise you?"

"Yes, My Lord, quite sure."

"What was he doing, disguised, at that inn?"

"We may yet find out. Your Eminence, would you care to guess who I met at the corner of the Rue du Plâtre and the Rue of l'Homme-Armé?"

"Who?"

"Disguised as a peasant of the Pyrenees..."

"Tell me instantly, du Tremblay! It's getting late, and I don't have time to spare."

"Madam Fargis."

"Madam Fargis!" the cardinal exclaimed. "And she was coming from the inn?"

"It seems probable."

"She as a Catalan, he as a Basque. It was a meeting."

"That's what I thought – but there's more than one kind of meeting, my Lord. The lady is a libertine, and the young man is the son of Henry IV."

"It was no love rendezvous, du Tremblay. The count comes from Italy, by way of Piedmont. He had, I'd wager my head, letters to the queen – or even queens. He must take care!" Richelieu said, glowering. "I already have two other sons of Henry IV in prison!"

"In short, my Lord, that was my evening. I thought it important enough to report it."

"With good reason, du Tremblay. And you say this young man is staying with the Duke of Montmorency?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"So he's in it as well? Has Montmorency forgotten that I've already had to behead one of his family? He wants to be constable, like his father and grandfather before him. He already has a rival in Créqui, who thinks he deserves the title because he married a daughter of the Lesdigières. As if it were so easy to bear the sword of du Guesclin! At least Montmorency is a true knight who values honour. Well, he who wants the constable's sword must go look for it before the walls of Casale. It's been a good evening so far, du Tremblay, and I hope to complete it as well."

"Does My Lord have anything else he'd like me to do?"

"Keep an eye, as I've said, on the Inn of the Painted Beard but discreetly. Don't lose sight of that wounded man until he's either healed or buried. I thought the Count of Moret was already busy with another woman than Fargis, who's already juggling Cramail and Marillac. But if Providence points to her, du Tremblay, that changes the entire affair. But Providence, as you know, doesn't do everything for us."

"And on this occasion, we should recall the proverb, or rather the maxim, 'Heaven helps those who help themselves.'"

"You are bursting with insight, my dear du Tremblay, and I would have been sad to have missed you. Let me just help the pope by ridding him of the Spanish, whom he fears, and the Austrians, whom he hates, and we'll arrange so that the first red hat that arrives from Rome fits the measurements of your head."

"If it were not for the size of my head, I would beg my Lord just to give me one of his old hats as a sign that, whatever favours heaven brings me, I will always be his servant and never his equal."

And crossing his hands on his chest, Father Joseph bowed humbly. At the door he met Cavois, who stood aside to let him leave, as the others had withdrawn upon his arrival. His Grey Eminence having left, Cavois said to the cardinal, "He is here, my Lord."

"Souscarrières?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"He was at home, then?"

"No but his servant told me he'd be in a gambling den he frequents on Rue Villedot, and in fact, there he was."

"Have him enter."

Cavois stood immobile, eyes cast down. "Well?" asked the cardinal.

"My Lord, I wish to ask a favour."

"Do so, Cavois. You know I esteem you and will do what I can."

"I only hoped that, once Sir Souscarrières departs, I might be permitted to spend the rest of the night at home. Since our return to Paris, My Lord, it's been eight days, or rather eight nights, and I've yet to spend one in my own bed."

"And you're tired from your duties?"

"No, My Lord. But Madam Cavois is tired of sleeping ... alone."

"Madam Cavois is amorous then?"

"Yes, My Lord. But it's her husband she's amorous for."

"She would be a good example for the ladies of the Court. Cavois, you may spend the night with your wife."

"Oh! Thank you, my Lord!"

"I authorise you to go and find her."

"Find Madam Cavois?"

"Yes – and bring her here."

"Here, My Lord? To what end?"

"I'd like to speak with her."

"Speak? To my wife?" Cavois cried, astonished.

"I have a gift to bestow in recompense for these sleepless nights on my account."

"A gift?" Cavois said, beyond astonished.

"Bring in Sir Souscarrières, Cavois, and while I talk with him, go fetch your wife."

"But, My Lord," said Cavois, "she'll have gone to bed."

"Get her up."

"She won't want to come."

"Take two guards with you."

Cavois laughed. "Very well, I'll do it, my Lord," he said, "but I warn you, Madam Cavois says what she thinks, and plenty of it."

"Good. Candour is all too rare at Court, Cavois."

"So, My Lord's order is ... serious?"

"I've never been more serious, Cavois."

"Then My Lord will be obeyed." Cavois, still sceptical, bowed and withdrew. The cardinal took advantage of his brief solitude to open the panel above his desk. In the same place where he had put his request he found a reply, written with the brevity he required in dispatches:

*The Count of Moret is the lover of Madam la Montagne, the Lord of Souscarrières of Madam Maugiron. The unhappy rival: the Marquis of Pisany.*

"It's astounding," murmured the cardinal as he closed the panel, "how everything tonight seems to tie together. It's almost enough to make one believe, like that fool du Tremblay, that there really is a Providence."

Just then his secretary, Charpentier, assuming the role of a footman or steward, opened the door and announced, "Lord Pierre of Bellegarde, Count of Montbrun and Lord of Souscarrières."

082

In Which Madam Cavois Becomes Partner to Sir Michel

As our readers know, the man announced with such a pompous display of titles was none other than our friend Souscarrières, whose portrait we sketched at the beginning of this volume. Souscarrières entered with such an air of nonchalance, giving His Eminence such a casual greeting, that it was tantamount to effrontery. The cardinal cast his gaze about, as if searching for someone who might have entered with Souscarrières. "Pardon, My Lord," Souscarrières said, putting one foot gallantly forward and posing with his hat in his right hand, "but is Your Eminence looking for something?"

"I'm looking for those other people who were announced along with you, Sir Michel."

"Michel?" repeated Souscarrières, astonished. "Who bears that name?"

"Who? I believe you do, my dear Sir."

"Oh! I mustn't let my Lord make such a grave error. I'm the acknowledged son of Lord Roger of Saint-Larry, Duke of Bellegarde and Grand Equerry of France. My illustrious father still lives and would be happy to so inform you. I am Lord of Souscarrières thanks to an estate which I acquired. I was made a marquis by Madam Duchess Nicole of Lorraine upon my marriage with the noble Demoiselle Anne of Rogers."

"My dear Sir Michel," replied Richelieu, "allow me to relate your history. I know it better than you do, and will instruct you."

"I'm aware," Souscarrières said, "that great men such as Your Eminence, after days of hard work, sometimes enjoy an hour of amusement. Blessed are those who can provide such a genius with some amusement, even if it's at their own expense."

And Souscarrières, delighted with the compliment he'd concocted, bowed before the cardinal. "You are wrong from start to finish, Sir Michel," the cardinal continued, stubbornly clinging to that name.

"I'm not tired, am in no need of amusement, and wouldn't take such at your expense. But as I have a proposal for you, I'd like to demonstrate that I do so because of your personal merit, and not because I'm deceived by your purported names and titles."

The cardinal accompanied this last sentence with one of those wry smiles that, in his moments of good humour, were particular to him. "Then let Your Eminence speak without any beating around the bush," said Souscarrières.

"Shall I begin then, Sir Michel?"

Souscarrières, in no position to resist, just bowed. "You know the Rue des Bourdonnais, do you not, Sir Michel?" asked the cardinal.

"One would have to be from Cathay not to know of it, my Lord."

"Well! In your youth there was a notable baker who kept the Inn of the Chimneys there. This worthy man, who was a fine cook and whose fare I sampled many times when I was Bishop of Luçon, was named Michel and had the honour to be your father."

"I thought I'd already mentioned to Your Eminence that I'm the acknowledged son of the Duke of Bellegarde," insisted the Lord of Souscarrières, albeit with less confidence.

"Quite so," replied the cardinal. "And I can tell you how this recognition came about. This worthy baker had a wife, very pretty, to whom all the gentry who came to the Inn of the Chimneys paid court. One happy day she gave birth to a son. This son was you, my dear Sir Michel, and as you were born during a marriage in which your father – or, if you will, your mother's husband – was still living, you must bear the name of your parents. Remember, my dear Sir Michel, that only kings have the right to legitimize the children of adultery."

"The devil!" muttered Souscarrières.

"Let's get to your acknowledgement. A pretty child, you became a handsome young man, excelling at athletics, fleet of foot, playing tennis like d'Alichon, and flashing a sword like Fontenay. Having reached such a degree of perfection, you resolved to turn these talents to making your fortune. To commence your campaign, you crossed over to England, where your success at sports won you five hundred thousand francs. Is that accurate?"

"Yes, My Lord, give or take a few *pistoles*."

"It was there that you had, one morning, a visit from a certain Lalande, who was Tennis Master to His Majesty the King. Here's what he said, more or less: '*For the love of God*, Sir Souscarrières! Ah, pardon me, I forgot – I don't know why you've never liked the name Michel that is a very pleasant name but the first time you came into some money, you spent a thousand *pistoles* to buy a crumbling hovel in the country near Grosbois that went by the name of Souscarrières. Thereafter you were no longer Michel but Souscarrières, and eventually the Lord of Souscarrières. I apologise for the long digression but I think it's essential to understanding the story.'" Souscarrières bowed. "So this Lalande said to you, '*for the love of God*, Sir Souscarrières, you've done well: you have spirit, you have heart, you excel at sports, and you're lucky in love. You lack only the advantage of birth. I know one is unable to choose one's father and mother, or we'd all choose for father a Peer of France and for mother a Duchess of the Queen's Circle. But when one is wealthy, there are ways to correct these small aberrations of chance.' I wasn't there, my dear Sir Michel but I imagine that your eyes widened at this preamble. Lalande continued, 'You have only to choose, you understand, between all the great nobles who made love to madam your mother, and select the least fastidious. Sir Bellegarde, for example: his heavenly reward is approaching. Your mother will be delighted to make you a gentleman; she need only inform Sir Grand that you're not the baker's son but his, and his conscience won't allow such a fine youth to call the wrong man his father. Since his memory is failing, he won't even remember if he was her lover or not; he'll acknowledge you, and that acknowledgement will be worth thirty thousand francs.' Isn't that how it went?"

"More or less, my Lord. But I must say Your Eminence has overlooked one thing."

"What's that? Though my memory may be better than Sir Bellegarde's, if it's at fault, I'm ready to acknowledge my mistake."

"That in addition to the five hundred thousand francs Your Eminence mentioned, I brought back from England the innovation of the sedan chair and for the last three years I've sought the French patent for it."

"You're mistaken, dear Sir Michel. I've forgotten neither that invention nor your application to me for the patent – on the contrary, that's exactly why I've sent for you. But everything in its turn. 'A proper order,' says the philosopher, 'is one-half of genius.' First let's discuss your marriage."

"Couldn't we skip that, my Lord?"

"By no means. Where did you get your title of marquis, if not from the Duchess Nicole of Lorraine on the occasion of your wedding? At the time, there were many rumours linking you and the worthy duchess, rumours you were careful not to deny, and when she died six months ago, you dressed your five-year-old child in mourning. But everyone has the right to dress their children as they will, so I won't admonish you for that."

"My Lord is very good," said Souscarrières.

"Anyway, you returned from Lorraine with a young girl you brought away with you, Miss Anne of Rogers. You claimed she was the daughter of a *grand lord* but in fact she was simply the daughter of the duchess. It was on the occasion of your marriage with her that you were, you say, made Marquis of Montbrun; but for that elevation to be valid, it would have to have been Sir Michel who was made marquis and not Sir Bellegarde, for an illegitimate son could not be so recognised. Since you don't have the right to use the name Bellegarde, you couldn't become a marquis of that name that is not and cannot be yours."

"My Lord is very hard on me!"

"On the contrary, dear Sir Michel, I'm as sweet as syrup, as you'll see. Madam Michel, who had no idea what circumstance she'd fall into by marrying a man like you – Madam Michel allowed herself to be beguiled by Villaudry. You know Villaudry, the younger son of the man Miossens killed. You caught wind of something going on when you heard she'd given Villaudry a bracelet made from a lock of her hair. You threatened to throw her into the canal of Souscarrières – but you weren't quite sure of her betrayal, and, as you're not a bad man at heart, you waited upon further proof. When you had that proof – a letter written entirely in her hand that left no doubt as to your dishonour – you followed her into the garden, drew your dagger, and told her to pray to God. She could see that this wasn't like when you'd threatened to throw her into the canal, that this time you were serious. You stabbed twice but fortunately only struck her hand, cutting off two of her fingers. Seeing her blood, you pitied her, spared her life, and sent her back to Lorraine. As for Villaudry, because you'd been lenient to your wife, you decided to show him no mercy. You found him at mass at the church of the Minims near the Place Royale and charged in, sword in hand but he refused to commit sacrilege and kept his own blade in the scabbard. Not that he didn't want to fight you; he even said, 'I'd draw on you if I had a reputation to protect but as I don't, there's no reason to fight here.' And indeed, he then formally called you out, as if you really were the son of Sir Bellegarde, and met you in the Place Royale, the same place where Bouteville fought Beuvron. You carried off the affair extremely well, accepting all your opponent's requirements, then giving him six wounds with the point of your sword and any number of blows with the flat of your blade. But Bouteville, too, had carried off his affair extremely well that didn't stop me from having him beheaded. I'd have shortened you as well, Sir Michel, if you'd really been Pierre of Bellegarde, Marquis of Montbrun, and Lord of Souscarrières – because, worse even than Bouteville, you'd drawn your sword in a church that would have meant cutting off your hands as well as your head. Do you hear me, my dear Sir Michel?"

"*For the love of God!* Yes, my Lord, I hear you," Souscarrières replied. "And I must say that I've heard conversations much more welcome than this one."

"Then it's just as well you didn't meet your end that time, although this evening you returned to your former ways with the poor Marquis of Pisany. He must have been mad with rage to get in a fight with a buffoon like you."

"I didn't pick a fight with him, my Lord; he's the one who attacked me."

"Well, at least this poor marquis wasn't so unlucky as to pick his fight in the Rue of la Cerisaie, where he'd have had to face both you and the Count of Moret."

"My Lord! What do you know...?"

"What I know is that if the point of your sword hadn't struck his hump and slid down, and that if his ribs didn't overlap each other like an iron breastplate, you'd have nailed him like a beetle to the wall. You really have a rotten temper, dear Sir Michel."

"I swear, my Lord, I wasn't looking for a fight. Voiture and Brancas will tell you so. I was just overheated from having followed him from the Rue of l'Homme-Armé almost all the way to the Louvre."

At this mention of the Rue of l'Homme-Armé, Richelieu was suddenly all attention. "He'd had a quarrel in a cabaret," Souscarrières continued, "and was all worked up about it."

"Indeed he had," said Richelieu, following the line the unsuspecting Souscarrières had opened for him, "in the Inn of the Painted Beard."

"My Lord!" cried Souscarrières, astonished.

"Where he went," Richelieu continued, at the risk of overplaying his hand but keen to know everything, "to see if, by means of a certain Étienne Latil, he might be able to rid himself of his rival, the Count of Moret. Fortunately, instead of finding a cutthroat, he found an honest swashbuckler who refused to dip his hands in royal blood. So you see, my dear Sir Michel, that between drawing your sword in a church, duelling with Villaudry, complicity in the murder of Étienne Latil, and having an encounter with the Marquis of Pisany, I could have you beheaded four times over – if only you had two quarters of nobility instead of being a full-blooded commoner."

"Alas, My Lord!" said Souscarrières, badly shaken. "But you heard me declare that I owe my life to your magnanimity!"

"And your wits, my dear Sir Michel."

"Ah! If only my Lord would allow me to use my wits in the service of Your Eminence," Souscarrières cried, throwing himself at the cardinal's feet, "I'd be the happiest of men!"

"God forbid I should refuse – for I have need of men like you."

"Yes, My Lord, men of wit and – dare I say it – devotion!"

"...Whom I will hang on the day their devotion ends."

Souscarrières started. "Oh! But that will be never," he said. "How could I ever forget all I owe to Your Eminence?"

"Hmm. Consider, my dear Sir Michel: you hold your fortune in your hands – but I hold the end of the noose in mine."

"If only Your Eminence would deign to tell me how to employ these wits that he's been as good as to recognise."

"As to that..."

"I listen with full attention!"

"Well, then ... suppose I grant you the patent on this invention from England?"

"The patent on sedan chairs?" cried Souscarrières who was beginning to see, taking shape before him that fortune that the cardinal said he held in his hands but until now had been no more than a dream.

"Half of it," said the cardinal, "only half. I reserve the other half for a boon I wish to grant."

"My Lord wishes to reward another's wits as well?" ventured Souscarrières.

"No, something rarer than brains. Devotion."

"My Lord is the master. If I'm given half the patent, half is what I'll settle for."

"Indeed. So you'll have half the sedan chairs in Paris; two hundred, let's say."

"Yes, as you say, my Lord, two hundred."

"That makes four hundred chair porters. Well Sir Michel, let's suppose that these four hundred porters are intelligent, they note where they take their customers and pay attention to what they say. Suppose further that the head of their company was also intelligent related to me and me alone all that's seen and heard. Finally, suppose this man took in twelve thousand francs a year – though it could easily be twenty-four thousand – and that, instead of being called merely Michel, he wished to be called Lord Pierre of Bellegarde, Marquis of Montbrun and Lord of Souscarrières. I'd say, my dear friend, take as many names as you like – the more, the better! As for the names you've already appropriated, you may have to defend them against those you've claimed them from but, rest assured, I won't give you the slightest trouble about them."

"You're serious about this, my Lord?"

"Quite serious, my dear Sir Michel. I'm granting you the patent for half the sedan chairs in circulation in Paris. Tomorrow your partner, who will already have signed for the other half, will bring you a letter for you to sign in your turn. Does that suit you?"

"And what will this letter state about my obligations to you?" Souscarrières asked hesitantly.

"Nothing at all, dear Sir Michel. That matter, you understand, is between you and me. Complete confidentiality is essential. *Plague!* If my connection were known, all would be lost. It must not be revealed to Sir or the queen. You must always speak of me as a tyrant who persecutes the queen, and say you can't understand how King Louis XIII can live under a yoke as heavy as mine."

"But I could never say such things!" cried Souscarrières.

"Well, if you try hard enough, you might find that you can. So, we're agreed. Your chairs will become all the rage, stifling the competition, and the entire Court will refuse to travel anywhere except by chair – especially if yours have two seats and very thick curtains."

"Does My Lord have any specific instructions for me?"

"Indeed! I particularly recommend the ladies to you: Madam la Princess first of all, then Miss Marie de Gonzague, Madam Chevreuse, and Madam Fargis. Then the men: the Count of Moret, Sir Montmorency, Sir Chevreuse, and the Count of Cramail. I leave out the Marquis of Pisany; thanks to you, we don't have to worry about him for a few days."

"My Lord shall have nothing to worry about at all. And when should I start this operation?"

"As soon as possible. You should begin within the week, unless you lack the funds to do so."

"No, My Lord. Indeed, this is the kind of affair I'll attend to personally."

"In that case, proceed – but if you need to, you can contact me directly."

"You yourself, my Lord?"

"Yes. Haven't I an interest in the matter? But pardon me, here's Cavois, who seems to have something to say. He's the one who will bring you the little agreement to sign tomorrow, and as he will be aware of all its conditions – even those between us alone – he's the one who will remind you of them, should you forget. Come in, Cavois, come in. You see sir here, do you not?"

"Yes, My Lord," Cavois said, obeying the cardinal's order.

"Good. He's my friend – but only among those who come to see me between ten o'clock at night and two in the morning. To me, and to me alone, he'll be known as Sir Michel; to everyone else he's Lord Pierre of Bellegarde, Marquis of Montbrun, and Lord of Souscarrières. Goodbye, dear Sir Michel."

Souscarrières bowed to the ground and departed, unable to believe his good luck and wondering if the cardinal was serious, or was merely mocking him. But considering the cardinal's many concerns, he eventually realised that the cardinal didn't have time to make fun of him, and in all probability had been quite serious. As for the cardinal, convinced that he'd managed to recruit the efforts of a capable ally, his good humour had returned, and it was in his most pleasant voice that he called out, "Madam Cavois! Come in, Madam Cavois!"

083

In Which the Cardinal Begins to See the Chessboard Clearly

The words were barely out of his mouth before the cardinal saw a petite woman enter, aged twenty-five to twenty-six, nimble, dainty, with her nose in the air, and seemingly not at all intimidated by being in his presence. "You called, my Lord," she said, speaking first, with a strong Languedoc accent. "Here I am!"

"Good! And yet Cavois said you might not want to come."

"I, not come when you do the honour to call for me? What should I fear? Your Eminence didn't ask me to come alone."

"Madam Cavois!" the captain of the guards growled in warning.

"Madam Cavois' all you like. My Lord called me here for a reason, for this or for that. Does he want to talk to me? Let him talk to me. Does he want me to talk to him? Then I'll talk to him."

"For this and for that, Madam Cavois," said the cardinal, signalling his guard captain not to interfere with the conversation.

"No need to silence him, my Lord," said Madam Cavois. "If I tell him to shut up, he'll shut up. Or maybe he wants us to think he's in charge here?"

"My Lord, please excuse her! She doesn't know the Court, and..."

"Let My Lord ask my pardon! Look at you yawning, Cavois. Why, it's my Lord who owes me an apology."

"What!" said the cardinal, laughing, "I'm the one who needs to be pardoned?"

"Certainly! Is it Christian to keep people who love each other eternally separated, as you do?"

"Ah! So you love him, then – your husband?"

"How could I not love him? You know how I first knew it, my Lord?"

"No but please tell me, Madam Cavois. It interests me enormously."

"Mireille, Mireille!" said Cavois, trying to call his wife to order.

"Cavois, Cavois!" laughed the cardinal, imitating his guard captain.

"Well, I'm the daughter of a gentleman of quality from Languedoc, you know. While Cavois is the son of a Picardy squire."

Cavois twitched. "That doesn't mean I look down on you, Louis. My father's name was of Serignan, and in Catalonia he was a brigadier, no less. I was a widow by name of Lacroix, very young, childless, and, I can say without bragging, very pretty."

"You still are, Madam Cavois," said the cardinal.

"Well, I was pretty. I was sixteen then, and I'm twenty-six now, with eight children, my Lord."

"What, eight children? You've had eight children from your wife, you dog, yet you complain to me when I keep you from sleeping with her?"

"Why, you complained, my dear Cavois!" cried Mireille. "Oh, you little love, let me kiss you!"

And, despite the presence of the cardinal, she threw her arms around her husband's neck and kissed him.

"Madam Cavois!" cried the guard captain, trembling, while the cardinal, his good humour completely restored, choked with laughter.

"To go on, my Lord," said Madam Cavois, still carelessly embracing her husband. "He was with Sir Montmorency in those days, so it wasn't surprising that, though he's a Picard, he'd come to Languedoc. Once there, he sees me and falls in love with me but he isn't very rich, and I'm well off, so the idiot won't declare himself. But he picks a quarrel with somebody, and the day before he's to fight, he goes to a notary and makes a will in my favour, leaving me what? Everything he has, no more and no less – to me, who didn't even know he loved me. So I go to the notary's house to visit his wife, who is a friend of mine, and she says, 'Do you know what? If Sir Cavois dies, you inherit all he has.' 'Sir Cavois? Who's that?' 'You know, that handsome lad.' And he was good-looking in those days, My Lord. He's declined a bit since then but no matter: I don't love him any the less for it. Isn't that so, Cavois?"

"My Lord," Cavois said beseechingly, "You'll forgive her, won't you?"

"What do you say, Madam Cavois?" said Richelieu. "Shall we put this whiner out the door?"

"Oh, no, my Lord! I see him little enough as it is. So, my friend tells me he loves me like crazy, that he's fighting a duel the next day, and that if he's killed he leaves me his entire estate. This moves me, you understand, and I tell my father, my brothers, and my friends all about it. The next morning I ride out to try to stop this encounter between Cavois and his opponent. But I arrive too late! Sir, here, who has a deft hand, has already given his opponent two sword wounds. Himself, nothing – he comes through safe and sound. I throw my arms around his neck and say to him, 'If you love me so, you must marry me. You shouldn't suppress such desires.' And he married me."

"His desires weren't long suppressed, it seems," said the cardinal.

"No but now, My Lord, he's no happier than that other rascal. Since he's been in service to Your Eminence, I have to manage all his affairs. On the rare occasions he comes home, he's sluggish and dull. I caress him, call him my little Cavois, my little husband, and make myself as pretty as I can to please him. He never hears any whining, any complaints or reproaches. But I swear, it's as if he's all used up."

"I can see by all this that Master Cavois is more important to you than the rest of the world."

"Oh, yes, my Lord!"

"More than the king?"

"I wish the king every prosperity – but if the king dies, I won't die, whereas if my poor Cavois died, the only thing I'd want would be to go with him."

"More than the queen?"

"I respect Her Majesty. However, I find that, for a Queen of France, she doesn't have enough children. If the king had a misfortune we'd all be in trouble, and for that I blame her."

"More than ... me?"

"I believe even more than you, My Lord. You don't do it to hurt me but he wears himself out for you, and sometimes you take him away with you, even to war, as you did for almost a year at La Rochelle, and that doesn't please me."

"But," said Richelieu, "if the king died, if the queen died, if I died – if everybody died – what would you two do on your own?"

Madam Cavois laughed and gave her husband a sidelong glance. "Well!" she said. "We'd do..."

"Yes, what would you do?"

"We'd do what Adam and Eve did, My Lord, when they were alone together."

The cardinal laughed with them. "So," he said, "you have eight children in the house?"

"Your pardon, My Lord but there are only six. It pleased the Lord to take two of them."

"Oh. You will make up your loss, I'm sure."

"I hope so – isn't that so, Cavois?"

"Well, then; we must provide for these poor children."

"They're not suffering, My Lord, thank the Lord."

"Yes but if I'm taken by death, they will suffer."

"Heaven preserve us from such a misfortune!" the two spouses cried.

"I hope it will preserve you, and me as well. Meanwhile, we must look to the future. Madam Cavois, I am granting you, in share with Sir Michel, called Pierre of Bellegarde, Marquis of Montbrun, and Lord of Souscarrières, one-half of the monopoly on all sedan chairs in Paris."

"Oh! My Lord!"

"And now, Cavois," continued Richelieu, "go off with your wife, if she's still satisfied with you, or I'll put you under arrest and confine you to her bedroom for a week."

"Oh, My Lord!" cried the husband and wife, throwing themselves at his feet and kissing his hands.

The cardinal held his hands out to them. "What the devil are you muttering there, My Lord?" asked Madam Cavois, who didn't know Latin.

"The loveliest phrases of the Gospel that, unfortunately, cardinals are forbidden to preach. Now go!"

And he pushed them out of that study where, in just two hours, so much had happened. Left alone, the cardinal's expression resumed its usual gravity. "Come," he said, "let's summarise and recapitulate the events of the evening." And, drawing a notebook from his pocket, with a pencil he wrote the following:

*The Count of Moret arrived eight days ago from Savoy. In love with Madam la Montagne. Rendezvous with La Fargis at the Inn of the Painted Beard. He, disguised as a Basque, she as a Catalan. Charged, in all probability, with letters to the two queens from Charles-Emmanuel. Étienne Latil assassinated for refusing to kill the Count of Moret. Pisany, rejected by Madam Maugiron, wounded by Souscarrières. Saved by his hump. Souscarrières granted patent for sedan chairs and recruited as intelligence chief in secular counterpart to du Tremblay, chief of religious intelligence. The queen absent from the ballet due to a migraine.*

"And what else? Let's see." He searched his memory. "Ah!" he suddenly said. "There's that letter taken from the bag of the king's doctor, Senelle, and sold to du Tremblay by his valet. Let's see what it says, now that Rossignol has had time to solve the cipher."

And he called, "Rossignol! Rossignol!"

The little man in spectacles reappeared. "The letter and its code?" asked the cardinal.

"Right here, My Lord."

The cardinal took them. "Very good," he said. "Until tomorrow, then – and if I'm pleased with the translation, it's worth forty *pistoles* to you instead of the usual twenty."  
"Then I hope Your Eminence will be satisfied."

Rossignol withdrew. The cardinal opened the letter and read it. Here, verbatim, is what it said:

If Jupiter is driven from Olympus, he can take refuge in Crete. Minos will offer him hospitality with great pleasure. But Cephalus's health can't be sustained. In the event of his death, why shouldn't his wife marry Jupiter's Procris? The rumour at Court is that Oracle wants to get rid of Procris so as to marry Cephalus to Venus. Meanwhile, if Jupiter continues to woo Hebe in a pretence of passion, Juno must feign disapproval. It's important, even at this late hour, that Oracle be fooled into believing Jupiter is in love with Hebe.

– *Minos*

“Now,” said the cardinal, after reading this, “let’s see the cipher.” The cipher, as we’ve said, accompanied the letter. We reproduce it here for our readers.

CEPHALUS – THE KING  
PROCRIS – THE QUEEN  
JUPITER – SIR  
JUNO – Marie de Médicis  
OLYMPUS – THE LOUVRE  
THE ORACLE – THE CARDINAL  
VENUS – Madam COMBALET  
HEBE – MARIE DE GONZAGUE  
MINOS – CHARLES IV, THE DUKE OF LORRAINE  
CRETE – LORRAINE

Replacing the real names with their substitutes created the following dispatch that shows that Rossignol had not exaggerated its importance:

*If Sir is driven from the Louvre, he can take refuge in Lorraine. The Duke of Lorraine will offer him hospitality with great pleasure. But the king's health can't be sustained. In the event of his death, why shouldn't Sir marry the queen? The rumour at Court is that the cardinal wants to get rid of the queen so as to marry the king to Madam Combalet. Meanwhile, if Sir continues to woo Marie de Gonzague in a pretence of passion, Marie de Médicis must feign disapproval. It's important, even at this late hour, that the cardinal be fooled into believing Sir is in love with Marie de Gonzague.*

– Charles IV, Duke of Lorraine

Richelieu read the dispatch one more time and then said, with the smile of a triumphant player, "So! I begin to see the chessboard more clearly."

## PART III

084  
The State of Europe in 1628

We've arrived at a point where we believe there would be no harm in helping the reader, like Cardinal Richelieu, to see the chessboard more clearly. This clarity will be easier for us, after two hundred and thirty-seven years, than for the cardinal, surrounded as he was by a thousand different schemes, conspiracy upon conspiracy, fending off one plot after another, while smoke and mists veiled the far horizon he needed to perceive in order to see past the parochial interests blocking his overall vision. If this was merely one of those books bought to show off next to a picture album or scrapbook, a book for the coffee table so visitors could admire its engravings, or a book for a little light reading in the dressing room after one has enjoyed sometime in the boudoir, we'd pass over the details that some frivolous minds might find boring. But, as we presume to hope that our books will become, if not during our lifetime then after it, part of society's standard library, we ask our readers for permission to pass before them, at the beginning of this chapter, a review of the situation in Europe. This will clarify the coming chapters and, in retrospect, illuminate the previous ones. During the final years of the reign of Henry IV, and increasing in the early years of Richelieu's ministry, France not only joined the ranks of the great nations, she became the object upon which all eyes were fixed. Already at the head of the other European kingdoms due to her culture and intelligence, she was about to advance to the same rank in material and martial power. Here, in a nutshell, is the state of the rest of Europe. We'll start with that great centre of religion, influencing at once Austria, Spain, and France – we'll start with Rome. Ruling over Rome physically and the rest of the Catholic world spiritually is a morose little old man of sixty, born in Florence and glorying in Florentine greed. An Italian first, a prince always but above all a grasping patriarch, he is forever pondering how to add territory to the Holy See and thus wealth for his many nephews, who include three cardinals – Francis and the two Antonios – as well as a fourth nephew, Thaddeus, general of the Papal troops. Rome has been plundered to feed this nepotism. For Marforio, that Cato, that scourge of the popes, has said, it needed no barbarians to do that, just the Barberini. And indeed, Matteo Barberini, elevated to the papacy as Urban VIII, has reunited the lands of St. Peter under the ducy that bore that saint's name. Under him, Jesuit propaganda, begun by that good nephew of Gregory XV, Monsignor Ludovico, flourishes and spreads. Under the flag of Ignatius Loyola, the Jesuits have become the world's religious police, using propaganda as their weapon of conquest. From Rome marches their army of preachers, as gentle in China as they are severe in Europe. At the moment, the pope is hoping to contain the Spaniards in their duchy of Milan and keep the Austrians from crossing the Alps, so long as it can be done without personal effort or risk. He presses France to secure Mantua and lift the siege of Casale but declines to commit one man or a single Roman *baiocco* to the effort. In his spare time, he revises Church hymns and composes Anacreontic poetry. In 1624, Richelieu had taken his measure, seeing past its pope into the hollowness of Rome, whose dithering politics had already drained it of religious prestige and who borrowed what little strength it had first from Austria, and then from Spain. Spain: since the death of Philip III, Spain has hidden its decline behind big words and grand airs. She has for a king Philip IV, brother of Anne of Austria, a lazy sort of monarch who reigns through his prime minister, Count-Duke Olivares, as Louis XIII rules through the Cardinal-Duke of Richelieu. However, where the French minister is a man of genius, the Spanish minister is a mere reckless autocrat. The Spanish West Indies, from which a river of gold rolled during the reigns of Charles V and Philip II, produces under Philip IV only five hundred thousand crowns a year. Meanwhile, Admiral Piet Hein of the United Provinces has captured galleons in the Gulf of Mexico loaded with ingots worth, it's estimated, over twelve million. In her last gasp, Spain is so weak that even the Duke of Savoy, the hunchback Charles-Emmanuel, known derisively as the Prince of Marmots, has twice held in his hand the fate of that empire upon which Charles V boasted the sun never set. Spain has nothing left and can no longer even bankroll Ferdinand II, who complains she sends him no money. The holy bonfires of Philip II, the king of flames, had burned the spirit from a people who once abounded with it, and Philip III, in driving out the Moors, had destroyed the fresh stock that could have revived that spirit. She has leagued herself with the bandits who burned Venice; her greatest general, Spinola, is an Italian mercenary; and her most effective ambassador, Rubens, is a Flemish painter. Germany, since the beginning of the Thirty Years War, that is, since 1618, has been a human slaughterhouse, with butchers retailing death in its east, north, west, and centre. Anyone desperate to avoid being killed – or turning monk, the suicide of the middle Ages – has to find a way to buy passage across the Rhine, the Danube, or the Vistula. Europe's eastern marches are held by old Bethlen Gábor, who calls himself King of Hungary and who will die having taken part in forty-two battles, after having invented all those tricks of military costume – the bearskins of the Uhlans, the billowing sleeves of the hussars – which our modern troops use to intimidate each other. His army is the school that teaches all Europe the principles of light cavalry. And what does he promise his recruits? No pay, no food, just whatever they can find to eat and whatever they can take to enrich themselves. He gives them war without law, loot without limits. The northern marches are held by Gustavus Adolphus – good-hearted Gustave who, unlike Bethlen Gábor, catches looters and hangs them. This illustrious captain, student of the Frenchman La Gardie, has through his victories in Poland gained the strongholds of Livonia and Polish Prussia. He is occupied at the moment in making an alliance with the German Protestants against Emperor Ferdinand II, the mortal enemy of the Protestants, who despise his Edict of Restitution – that document which will serve as a model for Louis XIV fifty years later when repealing the Edict of Nantes. Gustavus Adolphus is the master of his epoch and, in the military arts, the creator of modern warfare. His grand spirit will have no part of the gloom of Coligny, the severity of William the Silent, or the bitter anger of Maurice of Nassau. Unflappable and serene, a smile plays on his lips even in the midst of battle. Six feet tall and broad into the bargain, he rides an enormous horse, and though his obesity is sometimes a problem, it can serve him as well: a bullet that would have killed that lean Genoese Spinola only lodged in Gustave's fat that closed over it, never to be seen again. The western marches are held by Holland that is confused and divided against itself. Holland had two heads, Barneveldt and Maurice, and severed them both. Barneveldt, that gentle spirit, was a friend of freedom but placed peace above all; leader of the provinces and supporter of decentralization (and, therefore, weakness), ambassador to Elizabeth, Henry IV, and James I, when travelling through Brille, Flushing, and Ramekan, was seized as a heretic and traitor and slain on the scaffold. It was Maurice of Nassau who'd killed Barneveldt, and though he'd saved Holland ten times over, by this murder he lost his popular support. Prince Maurice wishes to be loved but fears he is hated. One morning, crossing the Gorcum market, he greets the populace with a smile, believing the people will throw their hats in the air and cry happily, "*Long live Nassau!*"

But the people are silent, and their hats stay on their heads. From that moment on, he suffers the death of unpopularity. The ever-vigilant sentinel, the captain without fear, becomes a sleepwalker caught in a trance, a dreamer who cannot wake. Maurice is succeeded by his younger brother, Frederick Henry, who handles his inheritance as if buying and selling in a market of men: investing in only a few but those few well chosen, well clothed, well fed, and regularly paid. A strategist, he occupies the key roads anchored by the remaining marshes, siting his men scientifically, even if that means placing them in knee-deep water. The brave men put up with it, though the thrifty Dutch government, when it sees its soldiers exposed to guns and musketry, cries, "Careful, there! Each of those men represents a capital expense of three thousand francs!"

But the key battlefield isn't to the east, the north, or the west. It's the centre of Germany, occupied by a man of doubtful race, a leader of robbers and bandits whom Schiller will later make out to be a hero. Is he a Slav? Is he a German? His round head and blue eyes proclaim him Slavic; his red-blond hair says he's a German; his olive complexion declares him Bohemian. In fact, this lean, grim captain, who signs himself Wallenstein, was born in the ruins, fires, and massacres of Prague. He holds to neither faith nor law. But he does have a belief – or, rather, three. He believes his fate is ruled by the stars. He believes in luck. And he believes in money. Wallenstein has established in Europe the reign of the soldier, just as sin established in the world the reign of death. Enriched by warfare, protected by Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II (who will eventually have him assassinated), he is a general wearing the mantle of a prince, though he has neither the serenity of Gustavus nor the agility of Spinola. Bereft of emotion, even anger, he is as insensible to the cries, tears, and complaints of women as he is to the curses, threats, and accusations of men. Worse than that: he treats the world as a contest, and life as a lottery. He lets his soldiers play for any stake: the lives of men, the honour of women, and the blood of the people. Now anyone with a whip in his hand may play the prince; anyone with a sword at his side can be a king. Richelieu has long studied this demon. In his eulogy for Wallenstein, he cites not the crimes he committed but the crimes whose commitment he enabled; and to characterise his diabolical amorality, he merely repeated the man's own words: "As for all that, so what?"

But the Thirty Years War is not yet through with Germany – far from it. Its first, or Palatine, period ended in 1623 when the Elector Palatine, Frederick V, attempted to assume the crown of Bohemia and was defeated by the Emperor. Now the Danish period is in full swing, as Christian IV, King of Denmark, contends with Wallenstein and Tilly. Not for long: a year from now the war will enter its final, Swedish period. So much for Germany. Let's move on to England. Though richer than Spain, England is no less sick. The king is simultaneously at odds with his country and his wife, and quarrelling with half of Parliament. Soon he will dissolve his Parliament – though, as with his wife, he'll want it back again. Charles I had married Princess Henriette of France, that daughter of Henry IV who was probably his only true child. Henriette was a lively and witty brunette, seductive rather than agreeable, pretty rather than beautiful, peevish and obstinate, sensual and flirtatious. She'd had a difficult childhood. Brought to England when only seventeen, she'd been escorted there by Bérulle, who'd recommended that she adopt the repentant Mary Magdalene as her model. Compared to France she thought England morose and uncivilized; accustomed to our cheerful and boisterous folk, the English seemed grim and austere. She found her husband lukewarm at best. Danish on his mother's side, Charles I had a bit of the arctic in his veins. Marriage to a king, especially one so cold, haughty, and disparaging, seemed a penance. At least he seemed honest. She tried exerting her power with petty squabbles but the king always won out. Still unafraid, she became even more difficult, and began to scold. The king's marriage had opened the door to a Catholic invasion. Bérulle, who'd escorted Henriette to her husband, and who'd advised her to emulate Magdalene's forbearance, knew how much the English had come to hate the "popish" religion. But his new bishop's hat filled him with zeal and ambition, especially after the weak King James had allowed him to confirm eighteen thousand Catholics in London in one day. Bérulle thought to test his new strength by demanding that, since the children of Catholics were allowed to remain in their mothers' care until the age of thirteen, and as the young queen had a Catholic bishop, the bishop and his clergy should be allowed to appear in the streets of London in full regalia. When the king granted this request, the queen took it as a sign of weakness, and as a result Charles I found in his bed, instead of a loving wife and grateful subject, a severe and scolding Catholic who wouldn't submit to the king in the desires of religion – or of the flesh. It didn't stop there. One beautiful May morning, the young queen, accompanied by her bishop, her almoner, and all her women, crossed the length of London to the gallows at Tyburn where, twenty years earlier during the Gunpowder Conspiracy, Father Garnet and his Jesuits had been hanged. There, before the outraged eyes of London, she prayed for the souls of those notorious assassins who, with thirty-six barrels of powder, had planned to blow up the king, his ministers, and Parliament. The king was stunned by this public insult to the people and religion of the state. He flew into a violent rage at this commemoration of those who ought to have been forgotten. "Let them be driven away like wild beasts," he decreed, "these priests and women who would pray at the gallows of murderers!"

The queen lamented, the queen cried. Her priests cursed the unbelievers and threatened excommunication. Her women wailed like the daughters of Zion being led into slavery, though really they were only being sent back to France. As they were leaving, the queen, wailing in her grief, ran to the window to call out her farewells. Charles I, entering her room at that moment, asked her to refrain from

further scandalizing the morals of the English. The queen only cried all the louder. Charles grabbed her around the waist to pull her away from the window but the queen clung to the bars. Charles dragged her away by force. The queen swooned, lifting her bleeding hands toward the sky to call the vengeance of God down upon her husband. God answered on another day when, from another window, this one in Whitehall, King Charles stepped out and walked to the scaffold. This quarrel between wife and husband that prefigured the quarrel between France and England, caused all the queens of Christendom to condemn Charles I as a British Bluebeard. Pope Urban VIII was outraged, and told the Spanish ambassador, "If your master doesn't draw his sword in defence of this persecuted princess, he's neither a Catholic nor a gentleman." Meanwhile the young Queen of Spain, Henriette's sister, wrote to Cardinal Richelieu, appealing to his nobility to ask him to come to the aid of the oppressed Queen of England. The queen mother and the Infanta of Brussels both appealed to King Louis. Bérulle added his own voice. As you may readily believe, Louis XIII, ever petty and mean of spirit, regarded King Charles's expulsion of the French from his court as an insult to the French Crown. Richelieu alone stood firm in opposition. From this act of resolve came the aid the English would send to the Protestants of La Rochelle, the assassination of Buckingham, the broken heart of Anne of Austria, and the universal league of queens and Princess against Richelieu. Now back to Italy, where we will find, in the political situation of Montferrat and Piedmont, and the conflicting interests of the Duke of Mantua and the Duke of Savoy, the explanation of the letters borne by the Count of Moret to the queen, the queen mother, and Gaston d'Orléans. Charles-Emmanuel, the Duke of Savoy, all the more ambitious as his sovereignty was cramped, some years before had violently annexed the Marquisate of Saluzzo. When he couldn't get France under Henry IV to acknowledge the legitimacy of his conquest, he supported Biron's conspiracy with Spain against King Henry – which was not only treason against the king but against the land and country of France that Biron intended to dismember. The southern provinces were to go to Philip III of Spain, Savoy was to have Lyonnais, Provence, and Dauphiné, while Biron was to get Burgundy and Franche-Count, with the hand of a Spanish *Infanta* into the bargain. The conspiracy was discovered, and Biron was shortened by a head. Henry IV would have left Savoy alone if he hadn't been pushed into war by Austria. The need for money forced him into marriage with Marie de Médicis. Thus funded, he marched on Savoy and defeated the Duke soundly, leaving him the Marquisate of Saluzzo but taking all of Bresse, Bugey, Valromey, the Gex district, both banks of the Rhône from Geneva to Saint-Genix, and finally, Château-Dauphin at the head of the Goito valley. Outside of Château-Dauphin, Charles-Emmanuel retained the rest of Piedmont. However, instead of being astride the Alps, he was now confined to their eastern slopes, though he remained master of the passes leading from France to Italy. It was on this occasion that our witty King Henry had referred to Charles-Emmanuel as the Prince of Marmots – and the nickname had stuck. After that, the Prince of Marmots was an Italian prince, and looked to Italy for further expansion of his state. He made several unsuccessful attempts to do so, until an opportunity presented itself that he regarded as both opportune and predestined. Francis IV of the Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Montferrat, died, leaving the young princess Marie de Gonzague as the only child from his marriage to Margaret of Savoy, daughter of Charles-Emmanuel. The Duke of Savoy claimed the right of governorship of Montferrat in the name of his granddaughter Marie. He hoped to marry Marie to his eldest son, Victor-Amadeus, and reunite Mantua and Montferrat with Piedmont. But Cardinal Ferdinand Gonzaga, brother of the late duke, rushed up from Rome, seized the regency of Mantua, and confined his niece to Goito Castle to keep her from falling into the hands of her maternal uncle. Cardinal Ferdinand died in his turn, and Charles-Emmanuel knew a moment of hope but the third brother, Vincenzo Gonzaga, came and, uncontested, assumed the Mantuan regency. Charles-Emmanuel had patience. Riddled with infirmity, the new duke couldn't last long. He fell ill, and the Duke of Savoy felt sure that this time Montferrat and Mantua would fall to him. But he didn't see the storm that was forming against him on the other side of the mountains. There was in France a certain Louis de Gonzague, Duke of Nevers, the eldest of a cadet branch of the Gonzaga family. His son, Charles of Nevers, was the uncle of those last three sovereigns of Montferrat, so his grandson, the Duke of Rethel, was the cousin of Marie de Gonzague, the heir to Mantua and Montferrat. Now, the interest of Cardinal Richelieu – and the interest of Cardinal Richelieu was always that of France – was in having a zealous supporter of the *fleurs of lys* amid the powers of Lombardy that were always ready to declare for Austria and Spain. The Marquis of Saint-Chamont, the French ambassador to Mantua, was sent his instructions, and he passed his master's wishes on to Vincenzo Gonzaga. And Vincenzo Gonzaga, when dying, named Charles, the Duke of Nevers, as his heir. The Duke of Rethel took possession on behalf of his father, with the title of Vicar General, and Princess Marie was sent to France, where she was placed under the care of Catherine de Gonzague, Dowager Duchess of Longueville. She was the widow of Henry I d'Orléans-Longueville, the daughter of Louis de Gonzague, and thus Marie's aunt. One rival to Charles of Nevers was Caesar Gonzaga, the Duke of Guastalla, whose grandfather had been accused of having poisoned the dauphin, the elder brother of Henry II, and of murdering the infamous Pierre-Louis Farnese, Duke of Parma and son of Pope Paul III. The other rival, as we know, was the Duke of Savoy. The policies of France pushed him closer, moment by moment, to Spain and Austria. On his behalf the Austrians marched into Mantua with an army commanded by Spinola, while Don Gonzales of Cordova undertook to wrest from the French Nice-de-la-Paille, Montcalvo, the Pont of Sture, and Casale. The Spaniards took everything except Casale, and within two months the Duke of Savoy found himself master of the valleys of the Po, Tanaro, and Belbo, and all the land in between. This all occurred while the French were occupied with the siege of La Rochelle. When it was able to do so, France sent a force to aid the Duke of Rethel, sixteen thousand men under the Marquis d'Uxelles. However, due to lack of experience, poor judgement, neglect, and very likely the betrayal of Créquy, they were repulsed by Charles-Emmanuel, much to the aggravation of the cardinal. But there remained, in the centre of Piedmont, a town that continued to hold out under the flag of France: Casale, defended by a brave and loyal commander named the Knight of Gurrón. Despite Richelieu's many statements to the effect that France intended to support the rights of Charles of Nevers, the Duke of Savoy had high hopes that this would be a fight that Louis XIII would eventually give up, as he knew Nevers was hated by Queen Mother Marie de Médicis. In his youth, Nevers had refused to marry her on the grounds that the Médicis weren't noble enough to be allied with the Gonzaga, who had been princes when the Médicis were still lowly gentry. Thus, the cardinal's support of Nevers was another cause of the resentment that surrounded him, and of which we heard him complain bitterly to his niece. The queen mother hated Cardinal Richelieu for many reasons. The first and most bitter is that he was once her lover, and was her lover no more; she had started out obeying him in all things, and eventually came to oppose him in all things. Where Richelieu wanted to enhance the greatness of France at the expense of Austria, she desired the expansion of Austria and the humiliation of France. And if he wanted to support Charles of Nevers as Duke of Mantua, she, driven by her old grudge, must oppose it. Queen Anne of Austria hated Cardinal Richelieu because he'd frustrated her love affair with the Duke of Buckingham, exposed the scandalous episode of the gardens of Amiens, exiled her accomplice Madam Chevreuse, and balked the English to the benefit of France. Worse, she harboured the ugly suspicion, never stated aloud, that the cardinal had somehow induced Felton to bury his knife in Buckingham's chest. And finally, she hated him because he monitored her closely to prevent the advance of any new lovers and knew that nothing she did, no matter how hidden, escaped his knowledge. The Duke of Orléans hated Cardinal Richelieu because he knew the cardinal recognised his true nature: ambitious, cowardly, and vicious. Gaston eagerly anticipated his Brother King Louis's death, and was even willing to hasten the event. He had been denied entry to the King's Council, his mentor Omano had been imprisoned, friend, and accomplice Chalais beheaded for conspiring to kill the king – while Sir's reward for the same crime had been to be dishonoured, though enriched. Furthermore, though he loved no one but himself, he hoped, upon his brother's death, to marry his queen, although she was seven years his elder – most especially if she was pregnant. Finally, the king himself hated the cardinal because he felt that Richelieu embodied genius, patriotism, and a genuine love of France, while he reeked of selfishness, indifference, and mediocrity; because he felt he would never really rule while the cardinal lived, and rule only badly if the cardinal died. But one thing always drew him back to the cardinal, though it, too, was a source of resentment. Was it a potion he'd drunk, some magic talisman he wore around his neck, an enchanted ring that had been placed on his finger? No: the magic charm was an ever-full chest of gold, one that was always open for the king. Concini had kept him in misery, Marie de Médicis in poverty; Louis XIII had never had any money until this wizard had touched his wand to the ground, and under the wondering eyes of the king, the golden River of Pactolus sprang forth. Richelieu was careful to ensure that the king always had money to spend, even when he himself had none. Now, in the hope that everything on the chessboard is as clear to our readers as it was to Richelieu, we will resume our story where we left off.

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Marie de Gonzague

8 days have passed since the events last told of. To resume our story where we left off, we ask our readers to be so good as to follow us to the Hotel of Longueville that, backed up against that of the Marquise of Rambouillet, shared with it the block between Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre and the Hospital of the Three Hundred. But the Hotel of Longueville was entered from Rue Saint-Nicaise, opposite the Tuileries, while the marquise's mansion, as we've said, faced Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre. This mansion had belonged to Prince Henry of Condé – the same who'd mistaken Chapelain for a sculptor – and formerly had been occupied by himself and Madam la Princess, his wife, whom we met at Madam Rambouillet's soirée. He abandoned it in 1612, two years after his marriage to Miss of Montmorency, when he bought the great hotel in Rue Neuve-Saint-Lambert and caused the street to be re-baptised as the Rue of Condé, the name it bears to this day. At the time of our story – that is to say, on December 13, 1628 (events are so critical at this point that it's wise to be specific about dates) – this former mansion of the Prince of Condé was occupied by the Dowager Duchess of Longueville and her ward, Her Highness Princess Marie, daughter of François de Gonzague (whose estate was causing such tumult not only in Italy but in Austria and Spain) and Margaret of Savoy, the daughter of Charles-Emmanuel. Marie de Gonzague, born in 1612, had then attained her sixteenth year. All historians of the time agree that she was ravishingly beautiful, and from contemporary chroniclers, whose statements are more trustworthy, we learn that her beauty was the pinnacle of those perfectly shaped, dark-complexioned women born in Mantua – who, like the women of Arles, blossoming in the mists of the surrounding marshes, are blessed with black hair, blue eyes, pearly teeth, eyebrows and eyelashes like velvet, and lips that didn't even need to speak to offer sweet promises. As fiancée of the duke of Rethel, son of Charles of Nevers, who was heir to Duke Vincenzo, it goes without saying that her role would be important in the events to follow. Marie de Gonzague, whose beauty was sufficient, like the pole star, to draw the gaze of all the young cavaliers of the Court, caught the attention as well of those men of any age whose interest or ambition was in politics. It was known that she was under the particular protection of Cardinal Richelieu – which was just one more reason for those who wanted to pay their respects to the cardinal to pay assiduous court to Marie de Gonzague. It is evidently thanks to the sponsorship of the cardinal – of which the presence of Madam Combalet is proof – that we see, arriving at the doors of the Hotel of Longueville about seven in the evening, several of the new sedan chairs, the monopoly of which is shared between Souscarrières and Madam Cavois, and which are suddenly the favoured transport of everyone of importance. The passengers are admitted into the front salon that is hung with tapestries, below a ceiling painted with scenes representing the life of the bastard Dunois, founder of the house of Longueville. Candelabra flicker from mantels and sconces, and an immense chandelier is suspended in the centre of the room, beneath which stands Princess Marie. One of the first to arrive was Sir Prince. As Sir Prince has a certain part to play in our story, and a major role in the time both before and after it, a part both shady and sad, we ask permission to acquaint the reader with that dubious offspring of the royal house of Condé. While the first Condés were brave and jovial, this one was sombre and aloof. He'd been heard to say "I may be a coward but I'm not as bad as my cousin Vendome" – as if that was some consolation, assuming he needed any. How to explain this difference from his forefathers? The first Prince of Condé, though he was small and a little hunchbacked, was every woman's darling. Of him it was sung:

The little prince so fair,  
That laughing, singing lad,  
With lovers everywhere,  
God guard him, though he's bad.

Upon his death, slain at Jarnac by Montesquieu, this charming little Prince of Condé left a son who, along with the young Henry of Navarre, became one of the leaders of the Protestant party. That man, Henry of Condé the first, was a worthy son of his father, leading a charge at the Battle of Jarnac at the head of five hundred gentlemen, despite having one arm in a sling and a broken leg with its bone jutting from his boot. When, on Saint Bartholomew's Day, Charles IX demanded, "Death or the mass."

Condé replied, "*Death.*"

Henry of Navarre, more prudent, replied, "*The mass.*"

He was the last great Condé of the early race of that name. However, he didn't die on the battlefield, gloriously covered with wounds and slain by another Montesquieu – he died from being poisoned by his wife. After an absence of five months, he returned to his Château des Andelys to find his wife, a daughter of the house of La Trémouille, pregnant courtesy of a Gascon page. At the dinner celebrating his return, she served her husband a peach for dessert. Two hours later, he was dead. The page fled to Spain that same evening. There was a public outcry, and the poisoner was arrested. Her son of adultery was born in prison, where his mother languished, no one daring to bring her to trial, as she was sure to be found guilty. After eight years, King Henry IV, who didn't want to see the end of the Condés, that lovely branch of the Bourbon tree, ordered her released from jail without trial. The widow was absolved by royal clemency, though convicted in the eye of the public. Her son was the second Henry, Prince of Condé, the one who mistook Chapelain for a sculptor, and we can relate in just a few words how he came to marry Miss of Montmorency. It's a curious story that deserves its own parenthesis, despite the risk of making this digression overlong. But there's no harm in learning about history from a novelist, especially those details that historians find unworthy to relate, assuming they even know them. In 1609, Queen Marie de Médicis put on a court ballet. During rehearsals, King Henry IV sulked because, though the ballet had all the prettiest women of the Court for its dancers, the queen had refused to admit Henry's mistress Jacqueline of Beuil, mother of the Count of Moret. And since all the dancers on their way to the rehearsal hall in the Louvre were obliged to pass the door of Henry IV, the king, to show his displeasure, had shut that door. One day, he left it ajar – and through the gap beheld Miss Charlotte of Montmorency. "There's nothing under heaven," said Bassompierre in his memoirs, "more beautiful than Miss of Montmorency, nothing more graceful or perfect."

She was a vision so radiant that the king's bad mood immediately took wing and fluttered off like a butterfly. He rose from his chair and followed her, drawn like Aeneas following cloud-wrapped Venus. On that day, for the first time, he attended the ballet. There was one scene in which the ladies dressed as nymphs – and scanty as the costume of a nymph is today, it was scantier in the seventeenth century – and there was a point at which all the nymphs raised their spears, as if to strike at once. At this moment, Miss of Montmorency turned with hers and almost ran the king through. The king, not anticipating any danger, wasn't wearing a cuirass, and could easily have been stabbed to the heart. Which, he later said, is exactly what happened when he saw the beautiful Charlotte's graceful thrust. Madam Rambouillet and Miss Paulet were both at the ballet that day, and immediately befriended Miss of Montmorency, though they were five or six years older than her. From that day on, good King Henry IV completely forgot Jacqueline of Beuil. (He was forgetful that way, as we know.) Thereafter, his only thought was to find a way to possess Miss of Montmorency. His plan was to find the beautiful



Charlotte a complaisant husband who, for a dowry of four or five hundred thousand francs, would look the other way when the king sought to take advantage of his wife's proximity. He'd done the same thing for the Countess of Moret when he'd found her a husband in Sir Césy whom he'd sent overseas as an ambassador on the night of her wedding. The king thought he had just the man close at hand. Because if a son of murder and adultery married the daughter of a Constable of France, with the king as his patron, the stain on his birth would disappear. The man was open to such a negotiation, and all his conditions were agreed to. The constable gave his daughter a dowry of a hundred thousand crowns, and Henry II of Condé, who the day before had an income of ten thousand, found himself on the morning of his wedding with fifty thousand a year. Of course, that evening he would have to depart. Only he didn't. However, he did stick to his agreement insofar as to spend his wedding night in a room separate from that of his wife. Meanwhile Henry IV, the eager fifty-year-old lover, obtained Charlotte's promise that, to prove she was alone and mistress of herself, she would appear on her balcony between two torches with her hair down on her shoulders. When he saw her there, the king nearly died from joy. It would take too long to follow Henry IV through all the turns of his final *amour*, his mad fury when Condé fled with his wife to the Netherlands, his royal mania cut short by the knife of Ravallac while he was on his way to visit the lovely Miss Paulet, for what consolation the charming Lioness could provide. After the king's death, Sir Condé returned to France with his wife, who was still technically Miss of Montmorency, as the marriage wasn't consummated until during the three years they spent together in the Bastille. It's probable that, given Sir Condé's preference for the schoolboys of Bourges, without those three years in the Bastille neither the Grand Condé nor Madam Longueville would ever have been born. Sir Prince was best known for his greed and parsimony. When going to visit his attorneys, he rode through the streets of Paris on an everyday hackney, accompanied by a single valet. La Martelière, a famous lawyer of the time had those days when he would consult with clients for free like doctors. Condé visited him on those days. Though always badly clothed, on the evening of which we speak he had dressed more carefully than usual, perhaps because he knew his brother-in-law, the duke of Montmorency, would be paying his respects to Princess Marie, and the duke had said that, should he encounter Condé dressed in a manner unworthy of a prince of the blood, he would pretend not to know him. Indeed, Henry II, duke of Montmorency, was the complete opposite of Henry II, Prince of Condé. He was the brother of the beautiful Charlotte, and was as elegant as Sir Condé was coarse, as generous as Sir Condé was stingy. One day, upon hearing that a certain gentleman's fortune would be made if he could find twenty thousand crowns to borrow for two years, he said, "Seek no further: they are found." Taking a piece of paper, he wrote on it, *Good for twenty thousand crowns*. "Bring this to my steward tomorrow," he said to the gentleman, "and may you prosper." And indeed, two years later the gentleman offered to return Sir Montmorency his twenty thousand crowns. "Go, sir," the duke said. "It's enough that you offer them to me; keep them with my good wishes." He was deeply in love with the queen, as was Roger of Bellegarde, whose throat he almost cut over it. The queen flirted with both, and though Sir Montmorency had thirty years while Sir Bellegarde had sixty, she couldn't decide between them – until Buckingham came to Court and settled the matter. The older gentleman made so much noise about the affair that the younger duke coined a couplet that was soon heard in all the alcoves:

Roger's star shines  
No more at the Louvre;  
Everyone finds  
He's had to move.  
The arrival from Dover  
Has shoved him over.

Kings, when they marry, are no more tolerant than other husbands, so Louis XIII had exiled Sir Montmorency to Chantilly. Restored to favour through the influence of Marie de Médicis, he had returned to spend a month at Court, then left for his governorship of Languedoc. It was there that he heard the news of the duel and execution of his cousin François of Montmorency, Count of Bouteville. The queen mother's fondness for Montmorency came from the fact that his wife, Maria Felice Orsini, was the daughter of that Virginio Orsini who'd accompanied Marie de Médicis to France. This made Montmorency her nephew-in-law. Maria Orsini, who according to the poet Théophile was as white as heavenly snow, was Italian – which is to say, jealous. She tormented her husband, who, as Tallemant des Réaux tells us, couldn't keep from pursuing every woman with the least bit of coquetry to her. The duke and his wife finally reached a compromise whereby he was allowed to act as gallant whenever he pleased – so long as he told her all about it. One of her friends told her she couldn't understand how she could give her husband such latitude, and then insist on hearing the details. "Well," she replied, "I always wait to ask till we're about to go to bed, and then I get everything I'm owed."

And indeed, it's no surprise that women, especially in this lusty period, would succumb to passion for a handsome prince of thirty-three years of the first family of France: a millionaire, governor of a province, Admiral of France at seventeen, Duke and Peer at eighteen, Knight du Saint-Esprit at twenty-five, who counted among his ancestors four constables and six marshals, and whose entourage was composed of a hundred gentlemen and thirty pages. That evening, the duke of Montmorency was more handsome than ever. Upon his arrival, all eyes turned his way, and there was general amazement when, after greeting Princess Marie, he respectfully kissed the hand of Madam Combalet. Since the death of his cousin Bouteville – a wound felt more deeply in his pride as a Montmorency than in his affection for a relative – this was the first such advance he'd made to the cardinal. But no one was fooled by this demonstration: war with Savoy, Spain, and Austria was imminent, and like Sir Créquy, the duke of Montmorency was ambitious to bear the sword of the Constable of France that had been borne with distinction at the king's knee by both his father and grandfather. He who best understood the duke's ambition, as he'd had similar hopes which had been thoroughly crushed, was Charles of Lorraine, duke of Guise, son of the Guise known as the Scarface who had perpetrated the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day. The younger Guise was born in 1571, the year before the massacre, and was known more for his love affairs than for his deeds of war – though he'd served valiantly at the siege of La Rochelle, where he'd continued to fight even after his ship was completely afire. He ought to have a fair claim to the constabulary, or at least a prominent position in the army. Indeed, even if he were a simple gentleman like Bassompierre, Bellegarde, Cramail, or even Schomberg, he would have had the precedence but against the duke of Montmorency he could never hope for anything better than a secondary position. Given his birth, Montmorency's victory over the Calvinists in destroying the fleet commanded by the duke of Soubise, from whom he'd also retaken the islands of Oléron and Ré, placed him above all other captains of the time. There was another rivalry between them: the conquests of love. Although Sir Guise had a broad, flat nose and was short in stature, he had inherited from his father some of the airs of royalty that made him quite the ladies' man. The women found him guilty of only one great fault, his age – a thing which only Henry IV had briefly made fashionable and converted into an asset. But as we know from the date of his birth, the duke of Guise was now approaching his sixtieth year, a condition he tried to regard as a new adventure. One night he was standing in for a counsellor – not, however, in his role on the council but in his bed. The counsellor, who was travelling, wasn't expected to return before noon but arrived unexpectedly at about five in the morning. He had the key to the house, and made his way to the door of his bedchamber, where his wife, fortunately, had thrown the lock. The counsellor knocked loudly and called her name. His wife, acting without haste, as that might give rise to suspicion, took a few moments to thrust Sir Guise, naked, into the counsellor's wardrobe, picking up the lace collar he'd left on a chair and shoving it into her pocket. Then, rubbing her eyes as if surprised from sleep, she opened the door to the counsellor, thinking he would go right to bed, giving her lover a chance to escape. Upon entering, the counsellor drew the curtains to let in the daylight, and the first thing he saw was the rest of the duke's clothes. "So," he asked, frowning, "what clothes are these, my love?" "Clothes I have on approval from a second-hand merchant, and which I can get for almost nothing if they suit you. But lie down and rest – you must be tired."

"No," the counsellor said, "I have an early appointment at the palace, and must go there directly." Then, taking off his travel-stained garments, he put on those of the duke that were resplendent. "By my faith," he said, "these fit like they were made for me. Pay your second-hand merchant, my dear, and if he has any more like this, tell him to bring them. I'm off to the palace."

And indeed, taking only the time needed to get some papers from his desk, he threw his cloak over his clothes and left for the palace. Behind him, his wife closed the bedroom door and opened the closet. "Dear me, My Lord," she said, "You must be frozen!"

"Faith, no," replied the duke. "While your husband was donning my clothes, I dressed in his. Don't you think I make a good attorney?"

And with these words, he clapped a lawyer's cap on his head and stepped out, dressed in the complete outfit of a counsellor. The counsellor's wife laughed, finding it all very amusing. But for the duke of Guise, the best part of the joke was yet to come. As he had an audience at the Louvre that morning with King Henry IV, he thought it would be funny to go in his counsellor's garb. The king didn't recognise him at first, and when he finally did, he asked, half seriously and half laughing, what was the meaning of his masquerade. Sir Guise recounted his adventure, and as he told it well, and the king laughed heartily, he decided to press the point. "Sire," said the duke, "if you doubt me, send a guard to the palace to escort the counsellor back to the Louvre. You'll see that he's dressed in my clothes."

The king who never passed up an opportunity for amusement, approved of this joke, and summoned the counsellor to appear before him within the hour. The counsellor, dumbfounded with no idea what could have earned him this honour, hastened over to the Louvre. The king who was never at a loss when it came to *gouailler* (to use the old Gallic word for shenanigans, a term much in vogue at the time that we're sorry to see has almost been lost from the language), drew the counsellor aside, and while chatting with him about a hundred trivialities, began undoing the man's cloak. The counsellor, astonished, didn't dare to protest. Suddenly the king cried, "Hey! *By the belly of the Grey Saint!* Sir Counsellor, you're wearing the clothes of Sir Guise!"

"Of who? Sir Guise?" asked the counsellor, fearing the king had gone mad. "My wife bought these from a merchant."

"My faith!" said the king. "I didn't think the House of Guise had fallen so low that its head was reduced to selling his old clothes. Thank you, sir Counsellor, for showing me something I didn't know." And he sent the proud counsellor off, glorying in the knowledge that he wore the clothes of a Prince of Lorraine. When he arrived at home, the first thing he said to his wife was, "Do you know, my dear, whose clothes I'm wearing?"

"My faith, no!" she replied anxiously.

"Well! These are the clothes of my Lord the duke of Guise," said the counsellor, preening.

"Who told you that?" asked his wife in alarm.

"The king himself. And if you can find any more at the same price, buy them."

"Very well, my love," said his wife. "Under those conditions, I believe I may be able to get his entire wardrobe."

Sir Guise was absent-minded, and his wool-gathering had once led him into an amorous adventure. One evening he'd lingered over cards at Sir Créquy's until it was too late to send for his carriage. The Hotel of Guise was quite far, so Sir Créquy offered to lend the prince his own horse. Sir Guise mounted the horse but his mind was astray, so instead of guiding the horse he just gave it his head. At this time of night, the horse was used to taking Sir Créquy to visit his mistress, so it bore Sir Guise there and stopped at her door. Guise didn't recognise the door but he was amused and amenable: wearing his hooded cloak, he dismounted and knocked. The door was opened by a pretty maidservant, who slapped the hackney, sending it straight back to the stable where it knew it would find its oats. Then the maid led Sir Guise up a staircase lit just well enough to keep him from breaking his neck, to a room no more well-lit than the stairs. The rider was apparently as expected as his horse, and he fell into a pair of open arms. No one spoke. Everything happened in the dark. Sir Guise, who was a friend of Sir Créquy, must have known him well enough to imitate his performance, as the lady fell asleep without noticing her mistake. But in the morning she was awakened by Sir Guise as he turned in the bed. "*By God*, my love," she said, "why do you turn so?"

"Because," said Sir Guise, who was as indiscreet as he was absent-minded, "I need to get up so I can go tell all my friends that, instead of spending the night with Sir Créquy, you've spent it with Sir Guise."

Sir Guise offset his faults with the virtue of generosity. One morning the President of Chevry sent him by way of Raphael Corbinelli, father of that Jean Corbinelli famous for his friendship with Madam Sevigne, fifty thousand *livres* that the duke had won the day before at cards. The sum was divided into five sacks, four large bags each containing ten thousand *livres* in silver, and a smaller bag containing ten thousand *livres* in gold. Corbinelli wanted to count it out for him but the duke wouldn't allow it. He just saw that one bag was smaller than the others, and without looking inside it, said, "Here, my friend. Take this for your trouble."

Corbinelli went home, opened the bag, and found ten thousand *livres* in gold. He immediately returned to Sir Guise. "My Lord," he said, "I think you made a mistake and gave me a bag of gold believing it was a bag of silver."

The duke drew himself up as far as his small stature would allow. "Keep it, keep it, Sir," he said. "The princes of my house don't make a practice of taking back what we once have given." And Corbinelli kept his ten thousand *livres*. When Sir Montmorency was announced, the duke of Guise immediately sought out Sir Grammont in order to commence a quarrel as only he could. "Well, my friend," he said, "I must say I have a bone to pick with you."

"It can't be about gaming, Duke," Grammont responded. "Every year, good or bad, you win from me around a hundred thousand *livres*. My wife even offered you ten thousand crowns a year if you'd promise not to play with me."

"Which I refused! No, my faith, there's no question of that."

"What is it, then?"

"What? Why, since I know that after me you're the most talkative of men, last week I told you that I'd won Madam Sable's ultimate favours. I assumed you'd tell all of Paris but you haven't said a word."

Sir Grammont laughed. "I was afraid to get on Sir Montmorency's bad side."

"Oh," said Sir Guise, "I thought it was all over between them."

"You can see by the way they argue that it isn't."

And indeed, the marquise and the duke were arguing. “Find out what it’s about, my dear Count,” said the duke, “and then come and tell me.” The count approached. “Sir,” said the marquise, “it’s intolerable. I’ve heard that at the last ball at the Louvre, you took advantage of the fact that I was sick and danced with all the most beautiful women of the Court.”

“But my dear Marquise,” said the duke, “what would you expect me to do?”

“To dance only with the ugly ones, Sir!”

The Count of Grammont, who’d arrived in time to hear this dialogue, reported it to the duke. “My faith, Count,” replied the duke, “this is the moment, I think, to go to Sir Montmorency and share with him what I confided to you.”

“By my faith, no!” said the count. “I wouldn’t say such a thing to a husband, let alone a lover.”

“So,” said the duke with a sigh, “I’ll go and tell him myself.”

But as he took his first step toward Montmorency, both halves of the double door were thrown open and the usher announced, “His Royal Highness My Lord Gaston d’Orléans.”

All conversation stopped, those who stood remained that way, and everyone sitting arose, including Princess Marie herself. “Well,” said Madam Combalet, the confidante of the cardinal, as she rose in her turn, bowing more respectfully than anyone, “now the comedy begins. I mustn’t miss a word of what’s said in the theatre – and if possible, behind the scenes.”

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The Commencement of the Comedy

And indeed, it was the first time, publicly and in the midst of a grand soirée, that the Duke of Orléans had presented himself to Princess Marie de Gonzague. It was easy to see he’d paid particular attention to his appearance. His doublet was white velvet laced with gold, as was his cloak that was lined with scarlet satin. His velvet breeches were the same colour as the lining of his cloak. Below he was clad in silk stockings and white satin slippers. He wore, or rather had in his hand, because, against his usual custom, he’d entered the room uncovered, a white felt hat with diamond braid and scarlet feathers. Ribbons in the two colours he’d adopted flowed and curled from every seam. My Lord Gaston wasn’t much liked, let alone esteemed. We’ve mentioned how much damage had been done to his reputation in this brave, elegant, and chivalrous society by his conduct at the trial of Chalais; his entrance was greeted by a general silence. Hearing the announcement, Princess Marie cast a knowing glance toward the Dowager of Longueville. That day, Madam Longueville had received a letter from His Royal Highness notifying her of his intended visit and requesting, if possible, a few minutes’ conversation with Princess Marie, to whom he had matters of the utmost importance to communicate. He advanced toward Princess Marie, whistling a little hunting tune but as everyone knew he never stopped whistling, even before the queen, no one worried about the impropriety – not even Princess Marie, who gracefully offered him her hand. The prince kissed it, holding it long and firmly against his lips. Then he bowed courteously to the dowager, bowed slightly less to Madam Combalet, and, addressing both lords and ladies, said, “My faith, Mesdames and Gentlemen, I must recommend this new invention of Sir Souscarrières’s. Upon my honour, nothing could be more convenient. Have you tried it, Princess?”

“No, My Lord, I’ve only heard of this vehicle from some who used it to come here tonight.”

“It’s quite comfortable, and although Sir Richelieu and I aren’t great friends, I can only applaud his award of the rights to this invention to Sir Bellegarde. His father, who is Master of the Horse, never in all his life invented anything the like, and I propose to give his son as much income as I can from this service. Imagine, Princess, a sturdy wheelbarrow, lined with velvet, where one sits comfortably, with windows when one wants to see, and curtains when one does not want to be seen. Some carry only one but others can take two. I was carried by some lads from Auvergne who could walk, trot, or gallop as required, without damaging the car. I tried it slowly within the Louvre, then at a trot once we were outside. Their pace was strong but gentle. When the weather is bad, they can come right into a hall at the carriage door, so one can step in without even getting muddy. A marvellous convenience. They put the chair – they call it a chair, you know – right down on the floor, so one needn’t step up. I will make it my business, I swear, to ensure that this invention becomes fashionable. I recommend it, Duke,” he said, addressing Montmorency with a little bow of his head.

“I’ve used it today,” said the duke, bowing, “and I am entirely of the opinion of Your Highness.”

Gaston d’Orléans next turned to the duke of Guise. “Greetings, cousin. What news from the war?”

“It’s you we must ask about that, My Lord. The closer one is to the sun, the more its light reveals.”

“Yes, when it doesn’t blind us. As for me, I find politics quite over-dazzling. If this continues, I may need to ask Princess Marie to lend me a room so I can ask for news from her neighbours the Three Hundred Knights.”

“If Your Highness wishes to hear some news, I can give it to him: I’ve been told that tonight, after she completes her duties to the queen, Miss Isabelle of Lautrec will bring us a letter she received from the Baron of Lautrec, her father, who as you know is in Mantua with the duke of Rethel.”

“But,” asked My Lord Gaston, “is this news that can be made public?”

“The baron believes so, My Lord, and said as much in his letter.”

“In exchange,” Gaston said, “I’ll give you some hallway gossip that is the only kind of news that interests me, since I’ve given up politics.”

“Tell us, My Lord! Tell us!” said the ladies, laughing.

Madam Combalet, as was her habit, covered her face with her fan. “I’ll wager,” said the duke of Guise, “you’re going to talk about my scoundrel of a son.”

“Just so. You know that he now insists on being presented his shirt, like a prince of the blood. Eight or ten people have been foolish enough to do him this honour. But a few days ago he designated the Abbot of Retz, who pretended to be nervous and dropped it into the fire, where it scorched. After that, the Abbot picked up his hat, bowed, and left.”

“Well done, by my faith, well done,” said the duke of Guise, “and I’ll compliment him on it next time I see him.”

“If one dared to speak,” said Madam Combalet, “one might say your son’s done even worse than that.”

“Oh, tell us, tell us, Madam!” said Sir Guise.

“Well, on his last visit to his sister Madam Saint-Pierre, the abbess in Reims, he dined with her in the parlour, and then went right into the convent like a prince. There he was, sixteen years old, and chasing after the nuns. He caught the most beautiful and, willy-nilly, began to kiss her. ‘My brother!’ cried Madam Saint-Pierre, ‘My brother! Don’t joke like this! These are the Brides of Christ!’ ‘Good,’ replied the villain, ‘God is powerful enough to keep me from embracing his brides, if that was His will.’ ‘I’ll complain to the queen!’ cried the nun, who was quite pretty. This frightened the abbess. ‘Embrace that other one, too,’ she said to the prince. ‘But, sister, she’s very ugly!’ he replied. ‘All the more reason – it will look like you were acting childish and didn’t know any better.’ ‘Must I, sister?’ ‘If you don’t, the pretty one will complain.’ ‘Well, then, ugly it is!’ And he kissed the ugly one, who was grateful, and kept the pretty one from complaining.”

“And how, beautiful widow, do you know of this?” the duke asked Madam Combalet.

“Madam Saint-Pierre made her report to my uncle – but my uncle has such a weakness for the House of Guise, he only laughed!”

“When I saw the lad last month,” said Sir Prince, “he had a yellow silk stocking as a feather in his hat. What does that folly mean?”

“It means,” said sir d’Orléans, “that he was in love with La Villiers of the Hotel of Bourgogne, and she was playing a role in which she wore yellow stockings. He sent Tristan l’Hermite to pay her a compliment on her legs. She pulled off one of her stockings and gave it to Tristan, saying, ‘If Sir Joinville wears this as a plume on his hat for three days, he can then come and ask me for whatever he wants.’”

“Well?” asked Madam Sable.

“Well, he wore it for three days, and my cousin of Guise, his father, can tell you that on the fourth, he returned to the Hotel of Guise at eleven in the morning.”

“A fine life for a future archbishop!” said Madam Sable.

“But these days,” His Royal Highness continued, “he’s in love with Miss of Pons, a great big blonde. The other day she went for a purgative. He asked for the address of her apothecary and took the same drug, writing her, ‘No one can say that if you’re being purged, I’m not being purged as well.’”

“Ah!” said the duke. “This *amour* with an actress explains why, the other day, the great ninny invited every trained-dog buffoon in Paris to the Hotel of Guise. Imagine me coming into the mansion and finding the courtyard full of dogs dressed in all sorts of costumes. There were about three hundred, with about thirty clowns standing around, each with his pack. ‘What are you up to now, Joinville?’ I asked. ‘I’m putting on a show, Father,’ he replied. Guess why he’d invited all these buffoons? He promised each one a crown if, three days hence, three hundred trained dogs of Paris would jump at once for Miss of Pons.”

“By the way,” said Gaston, too impatient to stay with one subject for long, “as his neighbour, dear Dowager, have you heard about poor Pisany? Voiture saw him yesterday and said he’s not doing too badly.”

“I called this morning, and was told that the doctors were still hovering around him.”

“I have fresher news than that,” said the duke of Montmorency. “I left the Count of Moret at the door of the Hotel of Rambouillet, where he’d decided to go in person.”

“What, the Count of Moret?” said Madam Combalet. “The man whom Pisany wanted killed?”

“Quite so,” said the duke. “It seems it was all a misunderstanding.”

At that moment, the door opened and the usher announced, “My Lord Antoine of Bourbon, Count of Moret.”

“Stay a moment,” said the duke, “here he is. He’ll tell you all about it himself, and much better than I would, as I start mumbling every time I have to say more than twenty words.”

The Count of Moret came in, and all eyes turned toward him – especially, we must say, those of the women. Having not yet been presented to Marie de Gonzague, he waited at the door till Sir Montmorency came to lead him to the princess that the duke hastened to do with the same elegant grace he did everything. No less elegant, the young prince bowed to the princess, kissed her hand, gave her the regards of the duke of Rethel whom he’d seen in passing in Mantua, kissed the hand of Madam Longueville, and picked up her bouquet that had fallen from her bodice as she’d stepped aside to make room for Madam Combalet. He returned it with a charming gesture, bowed profoundly before My Lord Gaston, and then took a modest place near the duke of Montmorency. “My dear prince,” Montmorency said when the ceremony was over, “we were talking about you just before you came in.”

“Me? Bah. What could you have to say about me in such celebrated company?”

“You’re right, My Lord,” said a female voice. “A man wants to murder you just because you’re a lover of Marion Delorme’s sister. Why ever would we care about that?”

“Ah!” said the prince. “There’s a voice I know. Is that not my little cousin?”

“Indeed, Master Jacquelino!” replied Madam Fargis, approaching and holding out her hand.

The Count of Moret bent over her hand, whispering, “You know I must see you again, simply must speak with you. I’m in love.”

“With me?”

“A little – but with another, a lot.”

“Impudence! What’s her name?”

“I don’t know her name.”

“Is she pretty, at least?”

“I don’t know what she looks like.”

“Is she young?”

“She must be.”

“And why do you think that?”

“From the voice I heard, the hand I touched, the breath I drank in.”

“Ah, my cousin. How can you say things like that?”

“I’m twenty-one. I say what I feel.”

“Oh, youth! Youth!” said Madam Fargis, “Priceless diamond that tarnishes so quickly!”

“My dear Count,” interrupted the duke, “You’re making all the ladies jealous of your ‘cousin,’ as I believe you called Madam Fargis. They want to know why you were visiting a man who tried to have you assassinated.”

“First,” said the Count of Moret, with a charming air, “because I’m a cousin of Madam Rambouillet.”

“A cousin? How?” asked Sir d’Orléans, who prided himself on his knowledge of noble genealogy. “Please explain, Sir Moret.”

"Through my little cousin Fargis, who married Sir Fargis of Angennes, cousin of Madam Rambouillet."

"And how are you the cousin of Madam Fargis?"

"That," said the Count of Moret, "is our secret – isn't that so, Cousin Marina?"

"Yes, Cousin Jacquellino," laughed Madam Fargis.

"Then, besides being a cousin to Madam Rambouillet, I'm one of her friends."

"But I've seen you at her house only once or twice," said Madam Combalet.

"She asked me to stop paying visits."

"Why's that?" asked Madam Sable.

"Because Sir Chevreuse was jealous of me."

"Had he the right to be?"

"Hmm. How many of us are there in this salon? Thirty or so. I'd tell each one for a thousand. That makes thirty thousand."

"To dogs, we give our words away," said sir.

"Then he had the right – on behalf of his wife."

A roar of laughter greeted the count's admission. "But," said Madam Montbazon who was afraid she might not get the whole tale to pass on to her stepsister Chevreuse, "that still doesn't tell the story of the assassination."

"Ah! *By the belly of the Grey Saint!* That's simple enough. Who compromised Madam la Montagne by saying I was her lover?"

"None other than Madam Chevreuse," said Madam Sable.

"Well, poor Pisany believed it was Madam Maugiron who was my delight. Certain issues with his shape make him touchy, while certain truths told by his mirror make him positively irascible. Instead of calling me out for a duel that I would've been happy to grant him, he decided to pay a bravo to pick a quarrel. His luck was out: he tried to hire an honest man, who refused. He tried to kill the bravo but failed. He tried to kill Souscarrières, and failed. And that's the story."

"But that's not what we want to hear," insisted Sir. "Why did you go to visit a man who tried to assassinate you?"

"Because he couldn't come to me. I'm a good soul, My Lord. I thought poor Pisany might think I was out to get him, and would have nightmares. So I shook his hand and told him that if, in the future, he believes he has reason to complain of me, he should just call me out for a duel. I'm just a simple gentleman, and have no right to refuse someone who believes his honour offended. Though I'd rather not offend anyone."

As the young man spoke these words so gently and yet, at the same time, so firmly, a murmur of approval answered the frank and honest smile on his lips. He'd hardly finished speaking when the door opened again and the usher announced, "Miss Isabelle of Lautrec."

As she entered, they could see behind her the footman, wearing the livery of her château, who'd accompanied her. At the sight of the young woman, the Count of Moret felt a strange feeling of attraction and took a step toward her. She walked, blushing and graceful, to Princess Marie, and bowed respectfully before her. "Madam," she said, "I come from Her Majesty bearing you a letter from my father, with good news for you, and I beg leave with respect to place this letter at your feet."

At the first words spoken by Miss of Lautrec, the Count of Moret's heart leaped. He seized Madam Fargis's hand and, pressing it, he murmured, "It's she! It's she! The one I love!"

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Isabelle & Marina

As the Count of Moret had foreseen without truly knowing anything, even a name but by the wonderful insight of youth that makes a feeling more reliable than the senses, Miss Isabelle de Lautrec was perfectly lovely, albeit with a beauty different from that of Princess Marie. Marie de Gonzague was a brunette with blue eyes, while Isabelle de Lautrec was blond with eyes, eyelashes, and eyebrows of black. Her skin was a dazzling white, fine and transparent, with the delicate shading of a rose petal. Her neck had that long lovely curve seen in women painted by Pérugin and in the early work of his pupil Sanzio. Her hands were long, slim, and white, the very model of the hands of Leonardo da Vinci's La Ferronnière. Her long flowing dress didn't reveal even the shadow of her feet but one could guess that if they were in harmony with her hands, they would be slender and delicate. As Isabelle knelt before the princess, Marie embraced her and kissed her forehead. "God forbid," she said, "I should allow to kneel before me the daughter of one of the best servants of our house. Just give me your good news. Now, daughter of our dear friend, does your father say this is news for me alone, or may I share it with those who love us?"

"As you'll see in the postscript, Madam, His Majesty's Ambassador, Sir de La Saludie, has authorised the news to be spread in Italy – and Your Highness may, in turn, let it be known in France."

Princess Marie turned an inquiring look toward Madam de Combalet who, with a slight nod, confirmed what the beautiful messenger had said. Marie read the letter to herself. While she was reading it, the young woman turned her eyes to the rest of the assembly. Until then, she'd seen only the princess, the other twenty-five or thirty people in the salon appearing as in a mirage. When her look reached the Count of Moret, their eyes met, and along their gaze flashed an electric jolt that went right to both their hearts. Isabelle paled and leaned against the princess's chair. The Count of Moret saw the emotion strike her, and seemed to hear a choir of heavenly angels singing. *Glory to God!*

The usher had named her as a member of the old and illustrious family of Lautrec, whose noble history almost equalled that of the princes.

And she had never been in love. He knew it: he had hoped as much but now he was sure. Meanwhile, Princess Marie had finished her letter. "Gentlemen," she said, "Here's the news from my dear Isabelle's father. On his way to Mantua he met Sir de La Saludie, His Majesty's Envoy Extraordinaire to the Italian powers. Sir de La Saludie was charged by the cardinal with telling both the Duke of Mantua and the Venetian Senate of our conquest of La Rochelle. He was also responsible for declaring that France was prepared to come to the aid of Casale and to support Charles de Nevers in the possession of his new dominions. Passing through Turin he had seen the Duke of Savoy, Charles-Emmanuel, and had enjoined him, in the name of his son-in-law our king, and on the behalf of the cardinal, to abandon his claim to Montferrat. He was empowered to offer the Duke of Savoy, in return, the city of Trino with a sovereign income of twelve thousand crowns a year. Sir de Bautru has departed for Spain and Sir de Charnace for Austria, Germany, and Sweden, with the same message."

"I hope," said Sir, "this doesn't mean the cardinal plans to ally us with the Protestants."

"As for me," said Sir Prince, "if that was the only way to keep Wallenstein and his bandits in Germany, I wouldn't be against it."

"That's your Huguenot blood talking," replied Gaston d'Orléans.

"I would think," laughed the prince, "that there's more Huguenot blood in Your Highness's veins than in mine. Between our fathers Henry de Navarre and Henry de Condé, the only difference is that one took the mass to gain a kingdom, and the other didn't."

"Just the same, Gentlemen," said the Duke of Montmorency, "this is great news. Do we have any idea who will be given command of the army we send to Italy?"

"Not yet," replied Sir, "but it's likely, Sir Duke, that the cardinal, who paid you a million for the office of Admiral so he could conduct the siege of La Rochelle as he saw fit, will spend another million for the right to direct the Italian campaign in person – even two million, if need be."

"But confess, My Lord," said Madam de Combalet, "that if he ran the campaign as well as he led the siege of La Rochelle, neither the king nor France would have cause for complaint. Some others might demand a million to undertake the task, and yet not fare as well."

Gaston bit his lip. He hadn't appeared for a moment at the siege of La Rochelle, after having received five hundred thousand crowns for his campaign expenses. "I hope, My Lord," said the Duke of Guise, "that you won't let this opportunity to assert your rights escape you."

"If I go," said Sir, "so will you, cousin. I've received quite a bit from the House of Guise through the hands of Miss de Montpensier, and would be glad for a chance to show I'm not ungrateful. And you, my dear Duke," Gaston said, going up to Montmorency, "would be particularly welcome, as it would give me an opportunity to correct some injustices. Among your father's trophies of arms is the Sword of the Constable that I don't think would be too heavy for the son. But remember, my dear Duke, in that event I would be delighted to see at your side, making his debut under such a fine mentor, my dear brother the Count of Moret."

The Count of Moret bowed while the duke, flattered in his supreme ambition by Gaston's speech, said, "Those words are not planted in sand, My Lord. If the opportunity presents itself, Your Highness will see that I'll remember them."

Just then, the usher came in through a side door and said something to the Dowager Duchess de Longueville, who immediately left with him by the same door. The gentlemen all gathered around Sir. The chance of a war – all the more likely as everyone knew Savoy had no intention of raising the siege of Casale, and that the Spanish were determined to deny Mantua to the Duke of Nevers – granted Sir sudden importance. It was impossible that such an expedition could be undertaken without him, and in that case his high position in the army would give him the disposal of some important commands. The usher returned after a moment and spoke quietly to Princess Marie, who followed him through the same door Madam de Longueville had used. Madam de Combalet, who was nearby, heard the name *Vautier* and shuddered. Vautier, the reader will recall, was the secret confidant of the queen mother. Five minutes later, it was to My Lord Gaston that the usher came to ask him to join Madam de Longueville and the Princess Marie. "Gentlemen," he said, bowing, "remember that I am no one special, that I aspire to nothing in the world other than to be a devoted knight to Princess Marie. And being no one, I can promise nothing to anyone!"

With these words, he put his hat on his head and skipped off, both hands tucked into the top of his breeches, as was his habit. He was hardly gone before the Count of Moret, taking advantage of the general astonishment at the successive disappearances of the Duchess de Longueville, the Princess Marie, and His Royal Highness Sir, went straight across the salon to Isabelle de Lautrec. Bowing before the blushing and tongue-tied young woman, he said, "Miss, please know that there is in the world a man who, the night he met you without even glimpsing you, vowed to be yours through life and death – and tonight, after seeing you, he renews that oath. This man is the Count of Moret."

And, without waiting for an answer from the young lady, more blushing and tongue-tied than ever, he bowed respectfully and left. Passing through a dim-lit corridor leading to an antechamber, itself poorly lit, as was customary at the time, the Count of Moret felt an arm slipped through his, while a black hood lined with rose satin appeared before his face. He felt a breath like flame from beneath the hood, and a voice in tones of mild reproof said, "And thus is poor Marina sacrificed."

He recognised the voice, and even more he recognised the hot breath of Madam de Fargis that had once before touched his face at the Inn of the Painted Beard. "The Count of Moret flees, it's true," he said, leaning toward that breath so avid it seemed to come from the Venus Astarte herself, "but..."

"But what?" demanded his interrogator, lifting herself at his side on tiptoe, so that despite the gloom, the young man could see her eyes glowing within the hood like two black diamonds, above teeth like a string of pearls.

"But," continued the Count of Moret, "Jacquellino is still here, and if that will satisfy her..."

"Then Marina will be content," said the lady magician.

She leaned forward. The young man immediately felt on his lips the sweet taste and the acrid bite of antiquity that had a word for such a thing and a name for such a feeling – and that word and name was Eros. Then, dazed by the voluptuous thrill that coursed through his veins and into his heart, Antoine de Bourbon, eyes closed, head thrown back, leaning against the wall with an anguished sigh, heard the lovely Marina, light as the bird of Venus, release his arm, step into a sedan chair, and say, "To the Louvre."

"My faith," said the Count of Moret, detaching himself from the wall with an effort, "*Long live France for love*. There's no shortage of them! I returned only a fortnight ago, and am already involved with three – though I really love only one of them. But *by the belly of Saint Grey!* I'm not the son of Henry IV for nothing! And if I could have six amours instead of three, well, bring on three more fair faces!" Drunk, dazed, and stumbling, he reached the porch, called his porters, climbed into his chair, and dreaming of his three amours, was carried to the Hotel de Montmorency.

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In Which Lord Gaston puts on his Little Comedy like King Charles IX

Having seen the Dowager of Longueville, Princess Marie, and My Lord Gaston called by the same usher and leave by the same door, the other guests thought maybe something extraordinary had happened. On the other hand, since eleven o'clock was striking as Sir withdrew, it might simply have been an indication that it was time to retire, so after a few minutes the guests began to leave. Madam de Combalet began to depart with the rest but the usher, who seemed to be waiting for her in the dim passage we already mentioned, drew her aside and whispered, "Madam the Dowager would be obliged if you would wait to leave until you've seen her."

And he opened the door to a little drawing room where she could wait. Madam de Combalet hadn’t been wrong when she thought she’d heard the name *Vautier*. He had indeed been sent to Madam de Longueville to convey the queen mother’s disapproval, as he had on the two or three previous visits Gaston d’Orléans had made to Marie de Gonzague. Upon his arrival, Madam de Longueville had called her niece to hear the message from the queen mother. Princess Marie, who was honest and forthright, proposed at once to call the prince and ask for an explanation. Vautier was about to retire but the dowager and the princess insisted he remain and repeat his message to the prince. We’ve already seen how the prince left the salon. Guided by the usher, he was led to the room where he was awaited. At the sight of Vautier he appeared, or pretended to appear, surprised. Giving him a hard look, he approached and said, “What are you doing here, Sir, and who sent you?” Vautier was well aware that Gaston’s anger was feigned, as he’d read the letter from the Duke of Savoy – he just hadn’t known until then when the apparent quarrel that would divide mother and son was supposed to begin. “My Lord,” he said, “I’m only a humble servant of your august mother the queen. I’m forced, therefore, to execute her commands. And I come at her command to beg Madam de Longueville and the Princess Marie not to encourage a courtship that is contrary to the wishes of the king and of herself.” “You hear, my Lord,” said Madam de Longueville. “A royal desire so expressed is almost a command. We must wait for Your Highness to inform Her Majesty the Queen as to the purpose of your visits.” “Sir Vautier,” said the Duke of Orléans in the superbly haughty tone which he could assume at need, “you are too well aware of this century’s key events at the Court of France to be ignorant of the day and year of my birth.” “God forbid, my Lord. Your Highness was born on twenty-fifth April sixteen-hundred-and-eight.” “Well, Sir, today is thirteen December sixteen-hundred-and-twenty-eight – that makes my age twenty years, seven months, and nineteen days. I’m no longer of an age to take lessons from women. Moreover, when I was married before, it was against my will. I am wealthy enough now to enrich my wife if she is poor, and of high enough rank to ennoble her if she is common. The State has no say over who a younger son may marry, and this time I intend to marry as I see fit.” “My Lord,” said both Madam de Longueville and her niece, “you need not insist, out of regard for us, that Sir Vautier take such a response to Her Majesty the Queen, your mother.” “If it suits Sir Vautier, he can say I told him nothing. When I return to the Louvre, I’m the one who will reply to Madam my mother.” And he motioned for Vautier to leave. Vautier bowed his head and obeyed. “My Lord…” said Madam de Longueville. But Gaston interrupted. “Madam, for several months now, in fact ever since I first saw her, I’ve loved Princess Marie. The respect I have for her and for you is such that I would probably not have confessed this before my twenty-first birthday, as, being only sixteen, she has time to wait, God willing. But since, on the one hand, I face the ill will of a mother who would keep me from her, while on the other hand is the policy of state that would marry her to a petty Italian prince, I must say to Your Highness: Madam, my rosy-cheeked youth may undermine my attempts at gallantry but if I was older and paler I could love her no less. It’s up to you to consider my offer – because, as you must know, to offer my heart is to offer my hand. So choose, then, between the Duke of Rethel and me, between Mantua and Paris, between a petty Italian prince and the brother of the King of France.” “Oh, My Lord!” said Madam de Longueville. “If you were as free to act as a simple gentleman, if you weren’t accountable to the queen, the cardinal, the king…” “The king, Madam? I am accountable to the king, it’s true. But it’s my business to obtain his permission for this marriage, and I’m determined to do so. As to the cardinal and the queen, well, soon they may well be accountable to me.” “How so, my Lord?” asked the two ladies. “My God, do I have to tell you?” said Gaston, all candour and sincerity. “My brother, Louis XIII, has been married for thirteen years and had no children – and considering his health, he never will. And considering his health further, you know that someday he will leave me the throne of France.” “So,” said Madam de Longueville, “you think the early death of the king, your brother – is inevitable?” The Princess Marie said nothing but her heart’s ambition was in her eyes, and she hung on Sir’s every word. “Doctor Bouvard considers him as good as dead, Madam, and is amazed he still lives. And on this point, the auguries agree with the doctor.” “The auguries?” asked Madam de Longueville. Marie redoubled her attention. “My mother consulted Fabroni, Italy’s premier astrologer, and he said Louis would bid the world goodbye before the sun traversed the sign of Cancer in the year 1630. Fabroni gives him eighteen months to live. And I and my retainers heard the same prophecy from a certain Doctor Duval. Unfortunately, Duval has come to a bad end, for the cardinal, who’d heard he’d cast the king’s horoscope, had him arrested and secretly condemned to the galleys, invoking the old Roman laws that forbid fortune-telling on the lives of princes. Well, madam, my mother is aware of all this. Like the queen and myself, my mother sadly awaits the death of her eldest son. That’s why she wants to preserve me, as she did my brother, for a royal wife who’ll bring me a crown. But that won’t happen. By God, I swear it! I love you, Marie, and unless you absolutely can’t stand me, I’ll make you my wife.” “But,” asked the dowager, “Do you have any idea what Cardinal Richelieu might think about this marriage?” “Don’t worry, we have an answer for the cardinal.” “What’s that?” “This, Madam,” said the Duke of Orléans, “is where you can help us out.” “In what way?” “The Count of Soissons is tired of exile, isn’t he?” “He’s in despair but can’t think how to persuade Sir de Richelieu to allow his return.” “What if he married the cardinal’s niece?” “Madam de Combalet?” Both ladies stared at him. “The cardinal,” said Gaston, “wants to join his family to the royal house, no matter what it takes.” The ladies’ eyes opened even wider. “Is My Lord serious?” asked Madam de Longueville. “I couldn’t be more serious.” “And my daughter, who has such influence over her brother-in-law Soissons – that’s what you want me to tell her?” “That’s it, Madam.” Then, turning to Princess Marie, “But this effort is all in vain, Madam, if your heart isn’t in it.” “Your Highness knows that I’m engaged to the Duke of Rethel,” Marie said. “I can’t personally break such a bond nor speak against it – but the day that bond is broken and I’m free to speak for myself, I believe Your Highness will have nothing to complain about my answer.” The princess curtsied and began to withdraw but Gaston grabbed her hand and kissed it passionately. “Ah, Madam!” he said. “You’ve made me the happiest of men! We’ll succeed in the end, and my happiness is assured.” Then, as Princess Marie left by one door, Gaston rushed out the other, with the haste of a man who needs fresh air to cool his passion. Madam de Longueville, who remembered that she’d asked Madam de Combalet to wait, opened a third door – and almost gasped in astonishment. For the usher had imprudently left the cardinal’s niece in the next room to the one where the interview with Gaston had taken place. “Madam,” the dowager said, “insofar as my Lord le Cardinal is our friend and protector, and we wish to conceal nothing, I arranged for you to overhear that discussion about the Queen Mother’s disapproval of the visits paid us by His Royal Highness Sir.” “Thank you, dear Duchess,” said Madam de Combalet, “and I appreciate your thoughtfulness in allowing me to slightly open the door between the rooms so I wouldn’t lose a word of the conversation. “And,” the dowager asked with some hesitation, “you heard the parts concerning yourself? As for me, after the pleasure of seeing my niece as Duchess d’Orléans, nothing could make me happier than to see you enter our family, Madam. My daughter will use all her powers of persuasion on the Count of Soissons to that end – assuming that’s what’s desired.” “Thank you, Madam,” replied Madam de Combalet, “and I fully appreciate what an honour it would be for me to be the wife of a prince of the blood. But when I donned widow’s weeds, I made two vows: first, never to remarry, and second, to devote myself entirely to my uncle. But believe me, Madam, I would dearly regret it if your connection with Sir didn’t happen because of me.” And bowing respectfully, showing a tiny yet gracious smile, she took her leave of Madam de Longueville, who couldn’t believe that any oath, no matter how proudly taken, could keep a lady from becoming the Countess of Soissons.

**089**  
**Eve & the Serpent**

“To the Louvre!” Madam de Fargis had said. And obeying her order, the porters had carried her chair to the foot of the stairs that led to both the king’s and queen’s chambers. The door opened to admit her, though it was after ten o’clock at night, when that grand staircase was officially closed. Madam de Fargis was to serve the queen for the next week, resuming her service that very evening. The queen was very fond of her, and loved her much as she still loved Madam de Chevreuse. But the Duchess de Chevreuse had been involved in a whole host of indiscretions, and the king and the cardinal had their eyes on her. Her eternal laughter irritated Louis XIII who, even as a child, had never laughed ten times in his life. When Madam de Chevreuse was exiled, her place, as we’ve said, was taken by Madam de Fargis, who was pretty, bold, passionate, and even less inhibited than La Chevreuse. Her good luck in being placed so near the queen was due partly to the prominence of her husband, Sir de Fargis d’Angennes, cousin to Madam de Rambouillet and ambassador to Madrid, and even more so to the three years she’d spent at the Carmelite convent of the Rue Saint-Jacques, where she’d become acquainted with Madam de Combalet, who’d recommended her to the cardinal. The queen was waiting impatiently. This romantic princess, while still weeping for her lost Buckingham, was nonetheless ready for new emotions and other loves. Her twenty-six-year-old heart, in which her husband had never been tempted to take the slightest place, needed at least the semblance of love. In the absence of real passion, her heart cried out, like an Aeolian harp from the top of a tower, to every other heart that passed. The future promised no more joy than the past. This morose king, this sad monarch, this husband without desire, was keen to keep her from fulfilling her own desires. What more could she hope for than the happy hour of his death that everyone insisted was imminent? Then she might marry Sir, who though seven years her junior would be eager to wed her, for fear that, out of personal ambition or love for another, she might get herself declared regent, and keep him from the throne forever. If the king did die, she had three possible fates: marry Gaston d’Orléans; assume the regency; or abdicate and return to Spain. So she waited, sad and dreaming, in a small room next to her bedchamber where only her most trusted ladies were admitted, her eyes staring past the book she held, a new tragicomedy by Guilhem de Castro called *The Youth of the Cid* given her by Señor Mirabel, the Spanish Ambassador. When she heard scratching at the door, she knew from the sound that it was Madam de Fargis. Tossing aside the book that, a few years later, was to have such a great influence on her life, she called out a sharp and happy “Enter!” Encouraged by her call, Madam de Fargis didn’t just enter; she actually burst into the room and fell at Anne of Austria’s feet, seizing both her beautiful hands and kissing them with a passion that drew a smile from the queen. “Do you know,” Anne said, “I sometimes imagine, my beautiful Fargis, that you’re secretly a lover disguised as a woman – and one day, when you’re completely assured of my friendship, you’ll suddenly reveal yourself.” “And if that were so, my beautiful Majesty,” she said, teeth shining and lips parted, her burning eyes fixed on Anne of Austria, “would you be so desperate as to accept me?” “Desperate, yes, because then I’d have to ring the bell and show you to the door – to my great regret, because other than Chevreuse, you’re the only one who can distract me.” “My God, virtue like that is perverse and against nature, since it must result in the separation of loving hearts. Indulgent souls, like mine, are more in the spirit of a loving God – not like those prudish hypocrites who take even the tiniest compliment the wrong way.” “Do you know that I haven’t seen you for a week, Fargis?” “That’s all? Good God, my sweet Queen, it seems more like a century!” “And what have you been doing for the last century?” “Not much good for myself, dear Majesty. I fell in love with an idea.” “With an idea?” “Yes.” “My God, you say such crazy things, we should clap our hand to your mouth at the first word.” “Your Majesty should try it and see how her hand would be received.” Anne put her own hand to her lips, laughing into the palm that Madam de Fargis, still kneeling before her, had kissed so passionately. She dropped it suddenly. “Don’t kiss me so, my sweet, you’ll give me a fever. So, who is it you love?” “A dream.” “A dream? How’s that?” “Yes, it must be a dream, in this age of such men as Vendome, as Condé, as Grammont, as Courtauvaux and Baradas, to find a young man of twenty-two who’s so handsome, noble, and amorous.”

“So that’s your dream?”

“Yes but only a dream. For he loves another.”

“Truly, Fargis, you’re mad, and I don’t understand a word you say.”

“And I believe, Your Majesty, that you must truly be religious.”

“And you’re not? Didn’t you learn anything from the Carmelites?”

“I did, if only from Madam de Combalet.”

“So you say you’re in love with a dream?”

“Yes – and my dream is of someone you know.”

“Me?”

“When I think that I may be damned for this sin, and it will be all for Your Majesty that I’ve lost my soul!”

“Oh, my poor Fargis, don’t carry on so.”

“Didn’t Your Majesty find him charming?”

“Who?”

“Our messenger, the Count of Moret.”

“Indeed, he seemed a worthy gentleman, who gave the impression of being a true knight.”

“Ah, my dear Queen, if another son of Henry IV I know were at all like him, I believe the throne of France wouldn’t lack an heir, as it does now.”

“As to an heir,” the queen said thoughtfully, “I must show you the letter the count brought me. It was from my brother, Philip IV, and I confess I don’t quite understand some of his advice.”

“I’m sure I can explain it. You know there are few such things I don’t understand.”

“Sibyl!” said the queen, who had no doubt her friend was right. She smiled and began to rise.

“Can I save Your Majesty some trouble?” Madam de Fargis asked.

“No, I’m the only one who knows how to open the secret drawer.”

Anne went to a small vanity, pulled open a drawer, removed a tray, and took from its false bottom a copy of the letter brought by the count. The letter, ostensibly from Don Gonzales de Cordova, bore instructions, we recall, that it should be read by the queen alone. With this letter in her hand, she returned to her seat. “Sit here, near me,” she said, patting the divan.

“What, on the same seat as you!”

“Yes, we need to speak privately.”

Madam de Fargis glanced over the paper the queen was holding. “So,” she said, “I’ll listen while you interpret. What do these first three or four lines say?”

“Nothing. They just advise me to keep your husband in Spain as long as possible.”

“Nothing? Your Majesty calls that nothing? I think it’s quite important. Indeed, Sir de Fargis must stay in Spain as long as possible. Ten years – twenty years, even! This is good advice indeed. If the rest is as good as the first, then Your Majesty is advised by King Solomon himself. More, more!”

“Can you never be serious, even in the gravest matters?” The queen shrugged but smiled. “Now, here’s the advice from my brother, Philip IV.”

“And that’s the part Your Majesty doesn’t quite understand?”

“The part I don’t understand at all, Fargis,” said the queen, adopting a perfect air of innocence.

“Let’s hear it.”

“My sister,” the queen read, “I know from our good friend Sir de Fargis of the plan by which, in the event of the death of King Louis XIII, you promise to marry his brother and heir to the throne, Gaston d’Orléans.”

“A vile plan,” interrupted Madam de Fargis, “by which you’d trade bad for worse.”

“Wait, there’s more.” The queen continued: “However, it would be even better if, at the time of Louis’s death, you were with child.”

“Oh, yes,” murmured Madam de Fargis, “that would be better for everyone.”

“The Queens of France,” Anne of Austria continued, seemingly trying to find the meaning in the words, “have a great advantage over their husbands in that they can produce dauphins on their own, an ability their husbands lack.”

“And that’s the part Your Majesty doesn’t understand?”

“Or, at least, I don’t understand how it’s possible.”

“What a pity,” said Madam de Fargis, raising her eyes to heaven, “in matters like these that involve not only the happiness of a great queen but the future of a great people – what a pity on top of everything else to have to deal with an honest woman!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if, in the gardens of Amiens, you’d done what I’d have done in your place, in the arms of a man who loved Your Majesty more than life itself, and who gave that life for you – if, instead of calling for Laporte and Putange, you hadn’t called at all…”

“Well?”

“Well! Perhaps your brother wouldn’t need to give you the advice he does, and a dauphin wouldn’t be so hard to find.”

“But that would have been a double crime!”

“Does Your Majesty really see crime in an act advised not only by a great king but by a king renowned for his piety?”

“I would have wronged first my husband, and second the throne of France by placing on it the son of an Englishman.”

“That first wrong is, in every country of the world, no more than a venial sin, and Your Majesty has only to look around to see that the majority of her subjects share that opinion. Furthermore, to deceive a husband like King Louis XIII, who’s so far from being a husband he’s unworthy of the name, is more virtue than vice.”

“Fargis!”

“You know, Madam, in your heart of hearts, what you lost by that untimely scream, when by your silence you could have won all.”

“Alas!”

“So that addresses the first matter, and your ‘Alas’ tells me you agree. But the second matter, that of a foreigner’s dauphin, remains – and there I must say Your Majesty and I are in agreement.”

“Do you say so?”

“But consider this: suppose, for example, that instead of dealing with an Englishman, who though charming was nonetheless a foreigner – suppose you were dealing with a man no less charming” – Anne gave a sigh – “but a Frenchman, and even better, a Frenchman of royal blood, a true son of Henry IV – unlike King Louis, who seems to me, by his tastes, his habits, and his character, to instead be the son of a certain Virginio Orsini.”

“You, Fargis – you believe these slanders?”

“Slanders, perhaps but they come from Your Majesty’s home country. But suppose, in short, that you’d taken the Count of Moret in place of the Duke of Buckingham. Would the crime be so great? Or, on the contrary, would it be an act of Providence that brought the true blood of Henry IV to the throne of France?”

“But, Fargis, I’m not in love with the Count of Moret!”

“Well, there, Madam, you’d have to sacrifice that would atone for the sin – and in this case, your sacrifice would be more to the glory and future of France than to your own interests.”

“Fargis! I don’t understand how a woman could give herself to a man who isn’t her husband and not die of shame the first time she comes face to face with him.”

“Oh, Madam, Madam!” said Fargis. “If all women thought as Your Majesty, how many husbands would be in mourning for their wives without knowing why they’d died? Perhaps in the past facing a lover was such a problem but since the invention of fans, deaths from shame have become far less frequent.”

“Fargis, Fargis! You must be the most immoral person in the world. I don’t know if even Chevreuse is as perverse as you. And this is the dream lover you speak of?”

“No, not mine. He loves your protégée Isabelle.”

“Isabelle de Lautrec, who brought him to me the other night? But where did he see her?”

“He didn’t see her. This love came over him while playing blind man’s-buff with her in the dark.”

“The poor boy! This isn’t going to go his way – I believe there’s an agreement between her father and a certain Viscount of Pontis. Anyway, Fargis, we’ll talk more of this later. I want to thank you for the service you’ve rendered me.”

“And which the count could still render you.”

“Fargis!”

“Madam?”

Anne spoke as calmly as if they hadn’t been discussing great affairs. “Fargis, my dear, just help me to bed. My God, what foolish dreams I’ll have after listening to your stories.” And the queen, getting up, walked into her bedchamber, more casual and languid than usual, leaning on the shoulder of her confidante Fargis. The queen had many faults but no one could say she didn’t love her friends.

**In Which the Cardinal Uses the Invention for on his own behalf that he had granted Souscarrières the Patent**

Since he’d been warned by the letter found on Doctor Senelle and deciphered by Rossignol, the cardinal wasn’t surprised by the scene between Sir, the Dowager of Longueville, the Princess Marie, and Vautier (as described to him by Madam de Combalet). It accorded perfectly with the plan agreed between his enemies and Marie de Médicis. Marie de Médicis was, indeed, his most implacable enemy – we’ve gone into the reasons for her hatred elsewhere – and she was also the enemy he feared most because of her influence over her son and through her control of Cardinal Bérulle, who sat on the King’s Council. So it was the fatal influence of the queen mother that Richelieu had to remove, an influence that had grown since her return from exile. Louis XIII needed to be purged of his mother far more than he needed to be purged of the black humours feared by Doctor Bouvard. There was one sure way to do this but the means was terrible. Richelieu had always shrunk from it in the past but it seemed that the time had come for heroic measures. It was time to prove to Louis XIII that his mother had been an accomplice in the death of Henry IV. For Louis XIII respected his father King Henry so much that it almost amounted to worship. When Louis had punished Concini by having him assassinated and then hung from the bridge of the Louvre, it was more for being an accomplice in the king’s murder than for being his mother’s lover and for plundering the French treasury. So the cardinal was sure of one thing: the moment Louis XIII was convinced of his mother’s complicity in Henry’s assassination, that moment would be the beginning of her final exile. When his office clock sounded half past eleven, Richelieu took two documents from his desk, both already signed and sealed, and called his valet Guillemot. He removed his red robe and lace-edged fur cloak, donned a simple Capuchin robe like Father Joseph’s, and sent for a sedan chair. Pulling his hood over his face, he entered the chair and gave orders to be taken to the Inn of the Painted Beard in the Rue de l’Homme-Armé. From the Place Royale to the Rue de l’Homme-Armé wasn’t far. They went by way of Rue Neuve-Sainte-Catherine and the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, turned left on the Rue du Temple, then right past the convent of the Blancs-Manteaux and onto the Rue de l’Homme-Armé. The cardinal noticed something that, to his mind, spoke well of Master Soleil: though midnight was ringing from the belfry of the Blancs-Manteaux, his inn was still well lit, ready to receive travellers, and a lad was posted at the door to welcome potential customers. The cardinal ordered his porters to wait at the corner of the Rue du Plâtre. He descended from the chair and made his way to the door of the Inn of the Painted Beard, where the lad, taking him for Father Joseph, asked if he wanted to see the penitent Latil. It was for just that purpose that the cardinal had come. Latil was the kind of man who, since he hadn’t been instantly killed, had immediately begun to recover. He’d taken so many previous sword wounds that new ones just followed the tracks of the old. Though still very weak, he could foresee the day when he could be carried to the Hotel de Montmorency, with what was left of the Count of Moret’s gold still jingling in his purse. Father Joseph, to whom he’d confessed all unknowing, hadn’t returned but to his amazement he’d been visited by the cardinal’s own doctor, who’d been ordered by His Eminence’s secretary to take good care of him. Latil had no idea to what he should attribute this good fortune. No longer laid out on a table in the lower hall, Latil had been carried up to the bed in room number eleven that was adjacent to number thirteen, the room the beautiful Marina – or Madam de Fargis, if you will – kept on a monthly retainer. He awoke to the glow of the candle borne before the minister by the lad from the door. The first thing he saw by this

candle that the lad set on a table before withdrawing, was a long grey figure in a hooded robe. Latil thought here was yet another Capuchin monk, possibly even the same one – because it must be admitted, even if it offends our more religious readers, that that confession had been his first acquaintance with that ancient and venerable branch of the tree of Saint Francis. It occurred to him that perhaps the worthy friar thought he was worse, and might need to be confessed a second time, or was even dead and ready to be buried. “Hold on, Father,” he said. “No need to rush. By the grace of God, and thanks to your prayers, there’s been a miracle on my behalf. It seems Étienne Latil is going to live on, in his poor honest way, despite marquises and viscounts who, four against one, try to cut his throat.”

“I know of your noble conduct, brother, and I congratulate you on your convalescence.”

“The devil!” Latil said. “Is that why you got me up at such an hour? Couldn’t you wait until daytime to pay me such compliments?”

“No, my brother,” said the seeming Capuchin, “for I needed to speak with you urgently and secretly.”

“On affairs of State, I suppose?” Latil laughed.

“Exactly. On affairs of State.”

“Well,” continued Latil, still laughing, “if you need to speak to me despite my two injuries and four wounds, you must be no less than His Grey Eminence!”

“Oh, better than that,” said the cardinal, laughing in his turn. “I am His Red Eminence.”

And he lowered his hood so Latil could see who he was. “What!” Latil started back in fear. “By my patron saint, stoned before the gates of Jerusalem – it really is you, my Lord.”

“Yes, and that should tell you the importance of my business, since I come to speak to you by night and alone, despite the risk that entails.”

“My Lord will find me his obedient servant, so far as my strength allows.”

“Good. Now take a moment and collect your memory.”

There was a moment of silence during which the cardinal’s eyes were fixed on Latil, as if to penetrate the depths of his mind. “Though young at the time, you must have been devoted to the late king,” the cardinal said, “since you refused to kill his son, despite the enormous sum you were offered.”

“Yes, My Lord – I must say that I’ve remained loyal to his memory. That was one of the reasons why I left the service of Sir d’Épernon.”

“I’m told you were on the running board of the king’s carriage when he was assassinated. Can you tell me what you remember about the murderer at the time, and afterward? And how did the Duke of Épernon take this catastrophe?”

“I was at the Louvre beforehand, waiting, with the Duke of Épernon. The king came down at four o’clock.”

“And did you notice,” asked the cardinal, “whether he was happy or sad?”

“Very sad, My Lord. But is this really the time for me to tell, well, everything?”

“Everything!” said the cardinal. “If you have the strength.”

“The king’s sadness wasn’t just a mood – it was due to all the prophecies. You must know about those, my Lord?”

“I wasn’t in Paris at the time; I didn’t arrive until five years later. So speak to me as if I don’t know anything.”

“All right, then! I’ll tell you everything, my Lord, because I feel like your presence gives me strength, and because the cause in which you ask must please the Lord God – who may have permitted the death of my master, the king but that doesn’t mean his death must go unpunished.”

“Take courage, my friend,” said the cardinal, “for what you do is righteous.”

The wounded man continued, making a visible effort to recall his memories despite his loss of blood. “In 1607, several books of astrology appeared at the Frankfurt fair that said the King of France would die in his fifty-ninth year, that is to say, 1610. That same year, a mysterious series of letters stating that the king would be assassinated was found on his altar by a prior of Montargis. “And one day, the queen mother came to see my duke at his hotel. They locked themselves inside his study but, being a curious page, I sneaked into a closet from which I could listen. I heard the queen say that a doctor of theology named Olive had predicted, in a book dedicated to Philip III that the king would die in 1610. Furthermore, the king would die in a carriage – and the king knew of this prediction.”

“Did you ever hear tell of a man named Lagarde?” asked the cardinal.

“Yes, my Lord,” said Latil, “and that reminds me of a detail I’d forgotten, one that greatly disturbed Sir d’Épemon. This Lagarde, upon returning from the wars against the Turks, settled in Naples, where he lived with a man named Hébert, who’d been secretary to the conspirator Biron. As the latter had been executed only two years before, his accomplices were still in exile. One day Hébert invited Lagarde to dinner, and while they dined a big man dressed in purple entered the room and announced that all refugees would soon be able to return to France, because before the end of 1610, he would kill the king. Lagarde asked his name, was told he was called Ravailiac, and that he served Sir d’Épemon.”

“Yes,” the cardinal said, “I knew about that.”

“My Lord would like me to be more succinct?”

“No, don’t leave out a word. Too much is better than not enough.”

“While Lagarde was in Naples, he was taken to visit a Jesuit named Père Alagon. This Jesuit was committed to the assassination of Henry IV. ‘We’ll choose a hunting day,’ he said. ‘Ravailiac will strike him on foot, and I from horseback.’ On his way to France, he received a letter outlining the same plan. When he reached Paris, he took the letter to the king. Ravailiac and d’Épernon were both named.”

“Did you hear whether the king took this letter seriously?”

“Oh, very seriously! Nobody in the Louvre knew why he was so melancholy. For a week, he kept the fatal secret to himself. Then he left the Court to spend some time alone in Ivry, at a small house of the captain of his guards. Finally, too worried to sleep, he came to the Arsenal and told everything to his minister Sully, begging him to lend him a place to stay, just three or four rooms, where he could rest and change his clothes.”

“To this,” murmured Richelieu, “to this he came, so good a king, the best France has had, obliged like the wretched Tiberius to sleep in a different room every night for fear of being murdered! And yet I complain of my problems!”

“Finally, as the king passed by the Cemetery of the Innocents one day, a sullen man wearing a green coat cried out, ‘In the name of our Lord and the Blessed Virgin, Sire, I must speak. Is it true that you plan to make war on the pope?’ The king wanted to stop and talk with this man but we wouldn’t let him. It was these things that made him as sad as a man marching to his death when, on that unfortunate Friday, fourteen May, I saw him come down the stairs of the Louvre and get into his carriage. It was then that Sir d’Épernon called me and told me to get on the running board.”

“Do you recall,” asked Richelieu, “how many people were in the carriage, and how they were sitting?”

“Three people, My Lord: the king, Sir de Montbazon, and Sir d’Épernon. Sir d’Épernon was on the left, and the king in the middle. I distinctly saw a man leaning against the wall of the Louvre, as if waiting for the king to come out. Seeing the open carriage that enabled him to recognise the king, he left the wall and followed us.”

“This was the assassin?”

“Yes, though I didn’t know it at the time. The king was without guards. He was on his way to see Sir de Sully, who was ill but on the Rue de l’Arbre-Sec he changed his mind and directed them to take him to visit Miss Paulet, saying he wanted to ask her to undertake the education of his son Vendome, who was developing nasty Italian tastes.”

“Continue, continue,” the cardinal insisted. “Don’t leave out a single detail.”

“Oh, My Lord! It’s as if I’m still there. It’s a beautiful day, about four o’clock in the afternoon. Though everyone recognised Henry IV, no one shouted ‘*Long live the king!*’ The people’re surly and defiant.”

“When you reached the Rue des Bourdonnais, didn’t Sir d’Épernon bring something to the king’s attention?”

“Ah, My Lord,” Latil said, “it seems you know as much as I!”

“On the contrary, as I said, I know nothing. Continue.”

“Yes, My Lord, the duke gave him a letter. The king began to read it, and paid no further attention to what was happening around him.”

“That’s it,” murmured the cardinal.

“About a third of the way up the Rue de la Ferronnerie, a honey cart and a hay wagon had collided. There was quite a commotion. Our driver steered to the left, his wheels almost touching the wall of Saints-Innocents. I leaned against the door for fear of being crushed. The carriage slowed to a halt. Just then, a man stepped up on a borne, thrust me aside, pushed himself in front of Sir d’Épemon, who leaned back, and struck the first blow at the king. ‘To me,’ the king cried, ‘I’m hurt!’

And he raised the arm that held the letter. This gave the assassin the opening for a second blow. He struck. This time the king could utter nothing but a sigh – he was slain. “The king is only wounded!”

Sir d’Épernon cried, and threw his cloak over him. Meanwhile I fought with the assassin and tried to hold him, as he carved my hands with his knife. My life was nothing. I finally let go when I saw they had him. ‘Don’t kill him,’ cried Sir d’Épermon. ‘Take him to the Louvre.’”

Richelieu placed his hand on that of the wounded man, as if to interrupt, and asked, “The duke said that?”

“Yes, My Lord but only after the murderer was already taken and there was no danger they’d kill him. They took him to the Louvre. I followed. I thought of him as my captive. I waved my bloody hands and cried, ‘That’s him, and he’s the one who killed the king!’

‘Who?’ the people cried. ‘Who?’

‘Him, the one dressed in green!’

They wept, they screamed, they threatened the assassin. At times, the king’s carriage couldn’t even move, so great was the press around it. Halfway back, I saw Concini, the Marshall d’Ancre. Someone told him the fatal news and he forced his way to the castle. He went straight to the queen’s chambers, opened her door, and mentioning no names as if she would know who he meant he cried in Italian, ‘*E ammazzato.*’”

“He is slain!” repeated Richelieu. “This matches the other reports perfectly. Now for the rest.”

“They took the assassin to the Hotel de Retz, next to the Louvre. They put guards at the door but left it open, so anyone could come in. It seemed to me that this man was my captive, so I stationed myself at his door. Among his visitors was Father Coton, the king’s confessor.”

“Coton himself? Are you sure?”

“He came, yes, My Lord.”

“Did he speak with Ravailiac?”

“He spoke with him.”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“Yes, certainly, and I can repeat it word for word.”

“Do so!”

“Coton said, with a paternal air, ‘My friend ...’”

“He called Ravailiac his friend!”

“Yes. He said, ‘My friend, take care not to upset your betters.’”

“And how did the assassin take this?”

“Calmly, like a man who felt he was well protected.”

“Did he stay in the Hotel de Retz?”

“No. Sir d’Épemon took him back to his own mansion, where he was kept from the 14th through the 17th. The duke had plenty of time to talk to him in private. It wasn’t until the 17th that he was taken to the Conciergerie.”

“At what time, exactly, was the king slain?”

“At twenty minutes past four.”

“And by when was his death known throughout Paris?”

“Within nine hours. By half past six the queen had been proclaimed regent.”

“Proclaimed regent, a foreigner who still spoke Italian,” Richelieu said bitterly. “An Austrian, the grand-niece of Charles V, cousin of Philip II – in other words, the Catholic League incarnate. But let’s deal with Ravailiac’s end.”



"No one can tell you better than I how it happened. I was there when he was on the wheel. I had privileges, they said; 'This is Sir d'Épermon's page, who arrested the murderer,' and the women kissed me, while the men shouted 'Long live the king,' though he was dead. The people, who at first had been stunned and oppressed by the news, had gone insane with fury. There were demonstrations outside the Conciergerie, where the people, unable to stone the culprit, stoned the walls in his place."

"Ravaillac never named any accomplices?"

"Not during the interrogations. To me it was evident that, until the very end, he expected some sort of last-minute reprieve. He did say he'd spoken to some priests at Angouleme, confessing that he hoped to kill a heretic king, and instead of dissuading him, they'd given him absolution and a small reliquary that they said contained a piece of the true cross. This reliquary, when opened before the court, was empty. Thank God that at least the priests hadn't dared to make the Lord Jesus an accomplice in such a crime."

"What did he say when he saw he'd been deceived?"

"He only said, 'The guilt of fraud is on the fraudulent.'"

"I've seen myself," the cardinal said, "only a summary of the 'process verbal,' which said, 'What happened when the prisoner was put to the question is the secret of the court.'"

"I wasn't there when the question was put," Latil said, "but I was next to the executioner at the wheel. The sentence was that the prisoner be tortured and quartered but they didn't limit themselves to that. The king's attorney, Sir La Guesle, proposed adding molten lead, pitch, and boiling oil, accompanied by a mixture of wax and sulphur. His proposal was adopted with enthusiasm. "If we'd let the people handle things, Ravaillac would have been torn to pieces in five minutes. When he came out of the prison and marched to the scaffold, there was such a storm of curses, threats, and cries of rage, that only then did he realise the magnitude of his crime. On the scaffold, he turned to the people and begged for mercy, asking, in a doleful voice, for the consolation of a Salve Regina."

"And was he granted this consolation?"

"Oh, yes! With one voice the entire crowd around the scaffold shouted, 'Damnation to Judas!'"

"Continue," Richelieu said. "You were on the scaffold, near the executioner, you say?"

"Yes, I was granted that favour," Latil said, "for having arrested, or at least helped to arrest, the murderer."

"Quite so," the cardinal said. "I've been told he was confessed on the scaffold?"

"Here's what happened, My Lord. Your Eminence understands that, when one has witnessed such a scene, days, months, and years may pass but it will be remembered for a lifetime. "After the first tugs of the horses that failed to pull off any of his limbs, wounds were slashed into his arms, chest, and thighs with a razor, into which they poured, successively, molten lead, boiling oil, and sulphur. By then his body was one great wound, and he cried out to the executioner, 'Stop! Stop! I'll talk!' The executioner paused. The court clerk, who was at the foot of the scaffold, came up and, on a sheet separate from the official process verbal, took down what the prisoner said."

"Well," the cardinal asked eagerly, "in that final moment, what did he confess?"

"I wanted to get closer," Latil said, "but they stopped me. The only words I could clearly hear were the names of d'Épermon and of the queen."

"But the process verbal? And this separate sheet? Did you never hear of them while in the house of the duke?"

"In fact, My Lord, I heard them spoken of often."

"What was said?"

"It was said that the court reporter kept the process verbal hidden in a strongbox in the wall next to his bed. As for the single sheet, it was reputed to be in the possession of the family of Joly de Fleury, who denied having it. However, much to Sir d'Épermon's dismay, he was said to have shown it to some friends, who, due to the clerk's poor handwriting, had found it very difficult to make out the names of the duke and the queen."

"So, after this sheet was written?"

"When the dictation was complete, the execution resumed. The horses provided by the provost were bags of bones, too weak to pull the prisoner apart, so a gentleman offered to lend his own horse to the procedure, and at the first pull it tore off a thigh. As the prisoner was still alive, the executioner moved to finish him but the lackeys of all the lords attending the execution jumped the fence, climbed the scaffold, and cut his body to pieces with their swords. Then the people rushed in and tore it into smaller pieces, and carried off bits of the regicide to burn at the crossroads. On returning to the Louvre, I saw the Swiss Guard roasting a leg right under the queen's windows. So there!"

"And that's all you know?"

"Yes, My Lord, except I've often heard tell how the treasury Sully had gone to such trouble to amass was divided up among the great nobles."

"Indeed. The Prince de Condé alone walked off with four million – but that's not what concerns me. Let's return to the business at hand. Tell me, amid all this, did you ever hear anything about a certain Marquis of Escoman?"

"Yes, I believe I did!" Latil said. "A small woman, with a bent back, whose maiden name had been Jacqueline Le Voyer – and her name wasn't Escoman, it was Coëtman. She was the duke's mistress. And though she was called a marquise, she wasn't really, as her husband's name was just Isaac de Varenne, period. Ravaillac had spent six months at her house. She was accused of being his accomplice in the king's assassination. She told everyone who'd listen that she barely knew Ravaillac, and that it was the queen mother who was behind the plot."

"What happened to this woman?" the cardinal asked.

"She was arrested several days before the king's murder."

"Yes, and she remained in prison until 1619, when she was abducted and taken to some other prison, I don't know which. Do you know?"

"My Lord will recall that in 1613, Parliament called a halt to the investigation, due to the sensitivity of the case. They considered the accusations a threat to the realm. After Concini was killed and Luynes was in the ascendant, the case could have been reopened but Luynes preferred reconciliation with the queen mother to risking an open break that would expose her to Louis XIII's wrath. Luynes, therefore, pushed Parliament into declaring that accusations against the queen were libellous. Marie de Médicis and d'Épermon were cleared, and Madam Coëtman was condemned in their place."

"Indeed, that's when she disappeared. But to what prison was she taken? That's what I asked, and I assume you know the answer, since you evaded the point."

"You're right, My Lord. I can tell you where she is – or at least where she was, for since it's been nine years, only God knows if she's alive or dead."

"God must grant that she lives!" the cardinal exclaimed, with a fervour that showed that his faith was driven by his need. He added, "I've observed that the more the body suffers, the more the soul takes command."

"Well, My Lord," said Latil, "she was confined in a place where the bones can't rest until the flesh is gone."

"And you know where this place is?" the cardinal asked eagerly.

"It was built on purpose to hold her, My Lord, in an angle of the courtyard in the Convent of Repentant Daughters. She was put in a mausoleum whose door was walled shut. She was given food and drink through a window with iron bars."

"You saw this yourself?" demanded the cardinal.

"I saw it myself, My Lord. When we left, children were throwing stones, as if at a wild beast, while she cried, 'They lie! I wasn't the assassin, it was the ones who put me here.'"

The cardinal rose. "There's not a moment to lose," he said. "This is the woman I need." Then, to Latil: "Heal and recover, my friend. And once recovered, have no fears for the future."

*"Plague!* With a promise like that, I certainly won't, My Lord. To be sure, it's time."

"Time for what?" Richelieu asked.

"Time we finished. I feel weak and ... well ... am I dying?" With a gasp, his head fell back on the pillow. The cardinal looked around until he found a small bottle that seemed to contain a cordial. He poured a few drops of the liquor onto a teaspoon and made the man swallow it. Latil opened his eyes and gasped again but in relief. The cardinal then put his finger to his lips to enjoin the man to silence, pulled up the hood of his cloak, and went out.

## 091 The *In Pace*

It was about 1:30AM or so but the advanced hour was just one more reason for the cardinal to continue his investigations. If he presented himself at the door of the infamous convent in the daytime, wherein were collected the most immoral women from the worst places in Paris, he feared he might be recognised, and there might be speculation as to the reason for his visit. He knew the curtain that Concini, the queen mother, and d'Epemon had tried to draw across the terrible tragedy of the assassination of Henry IV. He knew, as we saw in the previous chapter, that all the written evidence had disappeared. He feared that the last living evidence might disappear as well. The attack on Latil demonstrated that he was following a thread that, at any moment, the hand of death could break. Here was this woman whose house, it was said, Ravaillac had shared for six months, and who, having learned a state secret, was now dead or dying in an *in pace* – for so they called those tombs devised by monks, those expert tormenters, to impose physical and mental suffering to the limit of what's possible for strength to endure. The Rue des Postes, the site of the Convent of Repentant Daughters (later replaced by the Madelonettes), was far from the Rue de l'Homme-Armé – or rather the Rue du Plâtre, where the false friar's sedan chair awaited him. But the cardinal forestalled any objections from his porters by placing a silver crown in each one's hand. They took a moment to discuss which route would be shortest, then decided to take the Rue des Billettes to the Rue de la Coutellerie, cross the Pont Notre-Dame, and take Rue Saint-Jacques and the Rue de l'Estrapade to the Rue des Postes, where they'd find, on the corner of the Rue du Knight, the Convent of Repentant Daughters. When the sedan chair stopped at the gate, two o'clock was sounding from the nearby Church of Saint-Jacques du Haut-Pas. The cardinal stuck his head out the door and ordered one of the porters to ring the gate bell loudly. The larger of the two obeyed. After a few minutes, during which the cardinal, impatient, had had the bell rung twice more, a small barred window opened in the gate and the head of the sister on duty appeared to ask what they wanted. "Ask her to tell the mother superior it's a Capuchin monk sent by Father Joseph to speak to her about an important matter," the cardinal said to one of the porters.

The man repeated the sentence word for word. "Which Father Joseph?" the sister asked.

"It seems to me there's only one who matters," said a commanding voice from within the chair. "The one who's the cardinal's secretary."

This voice had such a tone of authority that the sister asked no further questions, just closed her window and disappeared. The chair was set on the ground and the false monk climbed out. "Is the superior coming down?" he asked the sister when she reappeared at the window.

"This very instant. But if Your Reverence has just come to call on one of our prisoners, there was no need to wake the mother superior: I have the authority to let any worthy servant of God into one of our cells, whether that servant wears a frock or a robe."

The cardinal's eyes flashed like lightning. He knew she spoke the truth: the unlucky women who were locked in the convent in order to repent of their sins were often led, on the contrary, to commit new ones. His first indignant reaction was to refuse but then it occurred to him that this might more easily get him to his goal. "Very well," he said. "Lead me to the cell of the Dame de Coëtman."

The sister stepped back. "God!" she said, crossing herself. "What name did Your Reverence say?"

"That is the name of one of your prisoners, I believe."

The sister said nothing.

"Is the prisoner I wish to see dead?" the cardinal asked anxiously for he feared the answer might be yes. The sister continued to remain silent. "I'm asking if she's alive or dead," the cardinal said in a voice beginning to reveal his impatience.

"She's dead," said a voice from the darkness of the convent beyond the window.

The cardinal thrust his keen gaze into the darkness whence the voice came, and saw a human form he recognised as that of another sister. "Who're you," Richelieu demanded, "who respond so peremptorily to a question not addressed to you?"

"I'm the proper person to answer questions of this nature though I don't recognise you as one with the right to ask them."

"I've that right," the cardinal replied, "and you'll answer my question whether you like it or not." Then turning to the first sister, he said, "Bring a light."

There was no mistaking the tone of the speaker: here was a man who had the right of command. The sister, without waiting for confirmation from her superior, went back inside and came out with a lighted candle. "By Order of the Cardinal," said the false monk, drawing a letter from within his robe. He unfolded it to reveal, beneath a few lines of writing, a large red wax seal that gleamed in the light from the candle. He held up the letter to the superior where she could see it through the bars of the window. Meanwhile, the sister passed the candle through the grill, so the superior could read the following lines:

*By order of the Cardinal Minister, all are directed in the name of his spiritual and temporal power on behalf of the Church and the State to answer any questions whatsoever on any subject whatsoever, the bearer chooses to ask, and bring him to any and all prisoners he shall name.*

13 December 1628 CE  
– Armand, Cardinal Richelieu

“Before commandments like these,” said the superior, “I’ve no choice but to bow.”

“Then please order the sister to return inside and lock up.”

“You heard, Sister Perpetua?” the superior said. “Obey.”

Sister Perpetua placed her candle on top of the stairs leading up to the gate, returned inside, and locked the door behind her. The cardinal meanwhile ordered his porters to pick up the sedan chair, back away from the door, and await his signal. The superior opened the gate, and the cardinal entered. “Why did you say, my sister,” he asked in a stern voice, “that the Dame de Coëtman was dead when she is not?”

“Because,” the superior replied, “I regard as dead anyone whom society has completely rejected.”

“The only ones who are truly denied the company of their fellows are the dead and buried,” said the cardinal.

“The stone of the tomb was closed over the one you named.”

“That stone closed on a living person is not a tombstone, it’s the stone of a prison – and any prison door can be reopened.”

“Even,” said the nun, looking the pretend monk in the face, “when a parliamentary decree has ordered that door shut for all time and eternity?”

“There is no judgement higher than justice – and I am the one the Lord has given the power to judge the judges.”

“There’s only one man in France who has that power.”

“The king?” asked the monk.

“No: one who’s above him in genius though below him in rank. Cardinal Richelieu. Are you the cardinal in person? If you are, I’ll obey but my orders are so precise that I must refuse anyone else.”

“Take that light and lead me to the Dame de Coëtman’s prison that is in the left corner of the courtyard. I’m the cardinal.”

And he removed his hood and uncovered his head, with a result much like that of the revelation of Medusa of antiquity. The superior remained motionless for a moment, paralysed not by resistance but by surprise. Then, with that passive obedience that generally followed a command from Richelieu, she bowed, took the candle and his arm. Leading the way, she said, “Follow me, my Lord.”

Richelieu followed. They crossed the forecourt. The night was calm but cold and dark, the stars shining in a black sky, with the sharp glints that foretoken the arrival of the winter frost. The candle flame rose vertically into the air, bent by no breath of wind. It cast a circle of light around the monk and the nun who moved with them, lighting objects as they approached and leaving them in shadow when they passed. Finally, they began to glimpse a small round building like an Arab hut. In the centre of it, about the height of a man’s chest, a small black square took shape. It was the window, and as they approached they could see that it was closed by a grid of iron bars, so tight one could barely pass a fist between them. “She’s here?” the cardinal asked.

“She’s here,” the superior replied. As they got closer, it seemed to the cardinal that two pale hands grasping the bars suddenly let go, and a dim figure within disappeared back into the dark interior of the tomb. The cardinal approached first and, despite the stench issuing from the tomb, put his face to the bars to try to see inside. But the night was so black, he could see nothing but two greenish lights shining in the darkness like the eyes of a wild beast. He stepped back, took the candle from the superior, and passed it through the bars and into the mausoleum. But the air inside was so noxious, so thick, that inside the tomb the flame grew pale, dwindled, and almost went out. The cardinal drew the candle back out, and the flame returned to life. Then, in order to clear the air and light up the interior, he took his signed order that he no longer needed once it had been acknowledged, set it afire, and threw it into the tomb. Despite the thickness of the atmosphere within, the letter gave off enough light for the cardinal to see, crouched against the wall opposite the window, a figure, elbows on knees, chin on fists, and naked but for a scrap of damp cloth that covered her from waist to knees. This figure, pale, hideous, and shivering, watched the monk from hollow eyes with the night inside them, their gaze fixed, almost insane. A groan came from her with every exhalation, painful as the breath of the dying. She had been in constant pain for so long that this groaning had become a part of her. The cardinal shivered from head to toe at this sight, though not particularly sensitive to others’ pain or even his own. He turned a menacing gaze on the superior who said, “That’s the order.”

“Whose order?” demanded the cardinal.

“The order of judgement.”

“And what did this order of judgement say?”

“That Jacqueline Le Voyer, called the Marquise de Coëtman, is to be enclosed in a structure of stone, sealed behind her so no one can enter, and she shall be fed only bread and water.”

The cardinal passed his hand across his brow. Then, approaching the barred window, within which the night had returned, he said, “Is that you?” He turned his face toward where he’d seen the pale figure. “Are you Jacqueline Le Voyer, Dame de Coëtman?”

“Bread! Heat! Clothing!” gasped the prisoner.

“I asked you,” repeated the cardinal, “if you are Jacqueline Le Voyer, Dame de Coëtman.”

“I’m hungry! I’m cold!” replied the voice, ending in a sob.

“First answer my question,” the cardinal insisted.

“If I say I’m the one you named, you’ll just let me starve. For two days they’ve ignored me despite my cries.”

The cardinal glared again at the superior who murmured, “The order! The order!”

“The order was she’s to live on bread and water, not be starved.”

“Why is she so stubborn as to go on living?” said the superior.

The cardinal very nearly said something close to blasphemy. Instead, he crossed himself, saying “If you tell me that this order gives you the right to let her die, I swear to God, you’ll take her place in that tomb.”

Then, turning back to the wretch who was the object of their discussion, the cardinal said, “If you admit you’re really the Dame de Coëtman and if you answer my questions honestly and faithfully within an hour you’ll have clothing, heat, and bread.”

“Clothing! Heat! Bread!” cried the prisoner. “Do you swear it?”

“On the five wounds of Our Lord.”

“Who are you?”

“I am a priest.”

“In that case, I don’t believe you. It’s priests and nuns who’ve tortured me for nine years. Let me die. I won’t talk.”

“But I was a gentleman before taking orders,” said the cardinal, “and I swear on my honour as a gentleman.”

“And what do you think would happen to you if you betrayed these promises?” said the prisoner.

“Then I would be dishonoured in this world and damned in the next.”

“All right, then, yes!” she cried. “Yes! No matter what happens, I’ll tell everything!”

“And if I’m pleased with what you tell me, then in addition to bread, clothing, and heat, you’ll have freedom.”

“Freedom!” the prisoner cried, rushing to the window and pressing her pale face against the bars. “Yes, I’m Jacqueline Le Voyer, Dame de Coëtman! Yes, I’ll tell everything, everything, everything!”

Then she yelled in a fit of crazy happiness, “Freedom!” Her laugh was mad, sinister, and she shook the bars with a strength that should have been impossible to a body so lean and feeble. “Freedom! Oh, you must be Jesus Christ himself if you can say to the dead ‘Get up and walk from your graves!’”

“My sister,” said the cardinal, turning toward the superior, “I’ll forget everything if within five minutes, you’ve tools brought that’ll enable an opening to be made in this tomb large enough for this woman to get out.”

“Follow me,” the superior said.

The cardinal turned to follow. “Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me!” the prisoner said. “If she takes you with her, you’ll never return, I’ll never see you again. The heavenly light that came into my tomb will go out and I’ll be buried once more.”

The cardinal gave her his hand. “Rest easy, poor creature,” he said. “With God’s help, your martyrdom is almost over.”

But, seizing his hand between two fleshless claws that gripped like a vice, she cried, “A hand! I hold a hand! The first human hand that’s been extended to me for ten years! The others were nothing but tigers’ paws. Be blessed, O be blessed, human hand!”

And she covered his hand with kisses. The cardinal didn’t have the courage to remove it. He called out to his porters, saying, “Follow this woman,” indicating the superior. “She’ll give you the tools necessary to rip open this tomb. There are five *pistoles* in it for each of you.”

The two men followed the superior who, light in her hand, led them to a sort of shed where they kept the garden tools. In much less than five minutes they reappeared, the larger of the two with a pickaxe on his shoulder, the other with a crowbar. They sounded the wall with the tools, and where it seemed to be thinnest, they began to work. “What should I do now, My Lord?” asked the superior.

“Go heat up your room,” the cardinal ordered, “and prepare some food.”

The superior withdrew. The cardinal’s eyes followed her, glinting from the candle she carried. He watched her enter the convent. Probably it never even occurred to her to resist what was happening. She knew too well what her situation was, and though the power of the cardinal was far from the height it would reach later, she knew she was at his mercy as his ecclesiastical power at this time was even greater than his temporal power. He was within his rights, having temporal authority over a prison, and religious authority over a convent. When the prisoner heard the pickaxe and the crowbar echoing from the stone, only then did she believe what the cardinal had promised. “So it’s true! It’s true!” she cried. “Oh, who are you, that I may bless you in this world and through all eternity?”

Then she heard the first stones crack, tumble into the interior, and her eyes accustomed to darkness like those of night birds, saw light infiltrating her tomb from an opening other than her barred window that for 9 years had been her only source of light and air. She dropped the cardinal’s hand, rushed to the opening, despite the risk of being struck by the pickaxe, she grabbed the stones, and tugged on them, doing whatever she could to hasten her deliverance. Even before the hole was big enough for her to get out, she stuck her head through, then her shoulders, ignoring cuts, bruises, and saying through her tears, “Help me! Oh, help me! Pull me from my grave, blessed saviours, beloved brethren!”

And since she was already halfway out, they took her under the arms, her body as cold as the stone from which she issued, and dragged her out. Once she was out, the poor creature’s first act was to fill her lungs with the clean air. She extended her arms to the stars with a painful cry of joy and fell on her knees to thank God. Then seeing her saviour, she held out her arms and rushed toward him.

But he either out of pity for this half-naked woman or out of shame for her condition, had already taken off his monk’s robe that for convenience opened in front. He cast it over her shoulders, leaving him in the clothes he wore beneath, a cavalier’s outfit in black velvet with purple ribbons. “Cover yourself with this robe, my sister,” he said, “until you receive the clothes you’ve been promised.” Then, as she staggered from either emotion or lack of strength, he called, “Good men, come here.” Giving them twice what he’d promised, he said, “Take this woman who’s too weak to walk and carry her to the superior’s room.” He went up to the room where the superior had laid a fire in the hearth according to his orders while two candles burned on a table. “Now,” the cardinal said, “bring paper, pen, ink, and leave us!” The superior obeyed. Left alone, leaning on the table, the cardinal murmured, “This time, I think the spirit of the Lord’s truly with me.” At that moment, the larger of the two porters came in, carrying the unconscious prisoner as if she were a child. He placed her where the cardinal indicated, still wrapped in the monk’s robe, near but not too close to the fire. Then he went out, bowing as if aware he was in the presence of great rank.

## 092 Her Tale

The cardinal remained alone with the poor creature, who lay so motionless that one might have thought her dead but for the nervous chills that occasionally agitated the coarse cloth of the robe that covered her. She was so shrouded that no part of her body was showing, and her shape, revealed in relief, seemed more like that of a corpse than a living person. But, little by little, as the warmth of the fire penetrated the robe, the trembling beneath it became more frequent. Two hands that might have been taken for a skeleton’s if they hadn’t had such long nails, emerged from the sleeves, stretching instinctively toward the fire, proving that the body they belonged to had not yet reached its limit of suffering. Then the pale face, eye sockets wide with pain, swarthy cheeks and lips drawn back from the teeth, appeared in its turn, like the head of a turtle protruding from its shell. Legs as well stretched toward the fire, revealing from under the hem of the robe two feet as cold and hard as marble. Then, stiffly, the figure sat up, and a voice came as if from the chest of a corpse: “The fire! Oh, how good’s the fire!”

She crept closer to the flames, like an infant unaware of the danger, too chilled to really feel its heat. “Take care, my sister,” said the cardinal, “lest you burn.”

The Dame de Coëtman shuddered and turned rigidly toward the voice. She hadn't noticed that anyone else was in the room, hadn't seen anything but the fire that to her was as compelling as the dizzying edge of an abyss. She gazed for a moment at the cardinal but didn't recognise him in his cavalier's outfit, having seen him only in a monk's robe. "Who are you?" she asked. "I know your voice but not your look."

"I'm the one who has already given you clothing and heat, and next will give you bread – and freedom."

She made a mental effort to remember, then said, "Oh, yes!" She dragged herself toward him. "Yes, you promised."

But then she looked around and, lowering her voice, said, "But can you keep your promise? I have enemies, terrible and powerful enemies."

"Don't worry – you have a protector more terrible and powerful than they are."

"Who is that?"

"God!"

The Dame de Coëtman shook her head. "He's forgotten me for a very long time," she said.

"Yes but once He remembers, He won't forget again."

"I'm very hungry," she said.

At that moment, as if at her order, the door opened and two nuns came in, bringing bread, honey, a cup of broth, and a plate of cold chicken.

At the sight of them, the Dame de Coëtman screamed with fright. "My tormentors!" she cried. "Protect me!"

And she crouched behind the cardinal's chair, placing her unknown defender between her and the nuns. "Is that enough, My Lord?" the superior asked from the doorway.

"Yes but you see how the sisters are frightening the prisoner. Have them put what they've brought on the table and go."

The nuns placed the broth, chicken, bread, and honey on the table opposite the Dame de Coëtman, with a spoon in the broth, and a fork and knife with the chicken. "Go," said the superior.

The nuns departed. The superior turned to leave but the cardinal raised a finger. The superior saw that the gesture was directed at her and stopped. "Keep in mind," he said, "that I will taste everything this woman will eat and drink."

"There's nothing to fear, My Lord," replied the superior.

And with a curtsy, she withdrew. The prisoner waited until the door was closed before reaching a lean arm toward the table. But she stopped short. The cardinal picked up the cup of broth and took a sip from it, and then turned toward the starving woman, whose arms were stretched toward him. "You say you haven't eaten for two days?"

"Three, My Lord."

"Why do you call me My Lord?"

"I heard the superior call you that – and, indeed, you must be a great noble to dare to defend me like this."

"If you haven't eaten for three days, you must be cautious. Take this cup but drink the soup one spoonful at a time."

"I'll do whatever you tell me, My Lord, in this and in everything."

Eagerly, she took the cup from the cardinal's hand and brought the first spoonful to her mouth. But her throat was so tight, her stomach so shrunken, that the broth went down painfully and with difficulty. Gradually, however, it eased, and by the fifth or sixth spoonful, she was able to drink right from the cup. But by the time she finished it, she was so weak that a cold sweat burst from her forehead, and she was ready to faint. The cardinal tasted the glass of honey, and then passed it to her, telling her to take only a sip. She drank several sips. Her cheeks flushed with sudden fever, and, placing a hand to her chest, she said, "Oh, I'm drinking fire!"

"And now," said the cardinal, "after a moment more, we will talk." And he helped her to get up and sit in a chair near the fireplace.

No one, seeing this man gently nursing this human debris, would recognise in him the terrible prelate, the terror of the French nobility, who had struck off heads that even royalty had been unable to bend. You may say he was a cruel man, and this show of mercy was entirely in his own interest. But to this we answer that a policy of cruelty is only necessary where it serves justice. "I'm still hungry," said the poor woman, looking avidly at the food on the table.

"You'll have plenty of time to eat," said the cardinal. "Meanwhile, I've kept my promise: you're warm, you're fed, you'll have clothes, and you'll be free."

"What do you want to know?"

"How did you know Ravaillac, and where did you first meet him?"

"In Paris, at my home. I was the confidante in all matters of the king's former mistress, Madam Henriette d'Enragues. Ravaillac had been living in Angouleme under the protection of the Duke of Épermon. He'd been involved in two felonies: he'd spent a year in prison on a murder charge and racked up a number of debts. Though he'd been released, he was due to go back inside."

"Have you ever heard about his visions?"

"He told me of them himself. In the first and most important, he lit a fire and, bending over it, saw a vine grow out of it and change shape, becoming the sacred trumpet of the Archangel. It formed itself to his mouth and, without his blowing into it, sounded the fanfare of holy war, while out of it a torrent of the hosts burst right and left."

"Had he studied theology?" asked the cardinal.

"He'd confined his studies to a single question of law: when was it the duty of a Christian to kill an enemy of the pope? When he was released from prison, Sir d'Épermon, knowing he was a religious man who'd been visited by the spirit of the Lord – and knowing the solicitor in charge of his case – had him brought to Paris for the next phase of his trial. As he had to pass through Orléans, Sir d'Épermon arranged for Sir d'Enragues and his daughter, Henriette, to give him a letter of passage allowing him to travel to Paris and lodge in my home."

"What was the first impression he made upon you?" the cardinal asked.

"At first I was scared of him. He was a tall man, powerfully muscled, with brown skin and a dark visage. When I saw him, I thought I beheld Judas. But after I'd opened the letter from Henriette, read that he was very devout, and saw how mildly he behaved, I had no more fear."

"And from your home he went to Naples?"

"Yes, on behalf of the Duke of Épermon. He lodged with a man named Hébert, the traitor Biron's secretary. It was there that he first announced that he planned to kill the king."

"Yes, a certain Latil told me the same thing. Do you know this Latil?"

"Oh, yes! At the time I was arrested, he was Sir d'Épermon's confidential page. He must know quite a lot."

"And what he knows, he's told me. Continue."

"I'm hungry," said the Dame de Coëtman.

The cardinal poured her a glass of honey and allowed her to dip some bread in it. After eating the bread and drinking the honey, she felt more composed. "He sought you out when he returned from Naples?" the cardinal asked.

"Who? Ravaillac? Yes, and twice, on Ascension Day and Corpus Christi, he told me he – that is to say, it had been decided – was to kill the king."

"And why do you think he took you into his confidence?"

"He said he was torn by doubts but he was obliged to do it."

"By what?"

"By the debt he owed Sir d'Épermon, who wanted the king assassinated to get the queen mother out of danger."

"And what danger was the queen mother in?"

"The king wanted to put Concini on trial for extortion and condemn him for treason, and accuse the queen mother of adultery and send her back to Florence."

"And given his revelations, what did you decide to do about it?"

"Ravaillac didn't seem to realise that the queen mother was involved in the plot, so I thought about telling him all. Instead, I wrote to the king, requesting an audience but received no response. And indeed, at that time he was completely preoccupied by his infatuation for the Princess de Condé. So I wrote to the queen, saying that I had something important to tell her, and waited three days for an audience. But the three days passed without a response; and on the fourth, she left for Saint-Cloud."

"Who told you of this?"

"Vautier, who was the queen's apothecary at the time."

"And what conclusion did you draw?"

"That Ravaillac was wrong, and that the queen mother really was involved in the plot."

"So then?"

"I resolved to talk to the king at any cost, so I went to the Jesuits of Rue Saint-Antoine and asked to speak to the king's confessor."

"And how were you received?"

"Poorly."

"But were you able to speak to Father Coton?"

"No, Father Coton was away. I was taken to the father examiner, who told me I was imagining things. 'What, disturb His Majesty's confessor?' he said. 'On what grounds?' 'Because they plan to kill the king!' I cried. 'Bah. Tend to your own affairs,' he said. 'Take care,' I said, 'if any harm comes to the king, I'll go straight to the judges and tell them you refused to listen.' 'Well, then, go tell Father Coton yourself,' he said. 'Where is he?' 'At Fontainebleau. But there's no point in your going there, so I'll go myself.'

"However, I didn't trust the father examiner, so the next day I hired a carriage to take me to Fontainebleau. I was preparing to leave when I was arrested."

"What was the name of this Jesuit examiner?"

"Father Philippe. Then, from prison, I wrote two more letters to the king, and I'm sure one of them got through."

"And the other one?"

"The other letter I sent by way of Sir de Sully."

"Who carried it?"

"Miss de Gournay."

"I know her – an old lady who writes books?"

"Exactly. She took it to Sir de Sully at the Arsenal; but as the letter mentioned the names of d'Épermon and Concini and repeated the warning I gave about the queen, Sir de Sully didn't dare show it to the king. However, he said if there was a real threat, he could send to have me and Miss de Gournay brought to the Louvre. But as the king had received so many such warnings, he just shrugged and dismissed our letter as unreliable."

"What was the date of this letter?"

"That must have been ten or eleven May."

"Do you think Miss de Gournay might have kept it?"

"It's possible but I wouldn't know. I was in prison. One night – it was October 28, 1619, as I know because that was when I could still keep track of time – I was taken from my first prison. A bailiff came into my cell, ordered me to stand, and read me a Parliamentary decree that condemned me to spend the rest of my life bricked up in a tomb, with only a barred window for light and air, and only bread and water for nourishment. I thought it was bad enough to have been imprisoned for trying to save the king but this new sentence almost destroyed me. On hearing it read, I fell unconscious to the floor. I was only twenty-seven years old – how many more years would I have to endure such a sentence? While I was unconscious, they carried me out and put me in a carriage. The breeze blowing across my face from the window brought me around. I sat between two officers, each of whom held a chain gripping one of my wrists. I was dressed in a black frock, the remnants of which I still wear. I knew I was being taken to the Convent of Repentant Daughters but I had no idea where that was located. The carriage went through a gate that opened before it, clattered through a passage into a courtyard, and stopped at the tomb you took me from. They forced me into it through a hole in the wall, and one of the officers came in behind me. I was half-dead, I made no resistance. I leaned against the window. One of my wrist-chains was tied around my neck, and the other was linked to it and passed through the window to the second officer. The first officer went out, and two other men I'd glimpsed in the darkness began to work. They were two masons, and they began walling up the opening. Only then did I really come to myself. I uttered a terrible cry and tried to rush toward them.

I was stopped by the neck chain. For a moment I thought I'd strangle myself and pulled with all my strength. The links of the chain bit into my neck but as the chain had no noose it didn't tighten and I just kept pulling forward. My breath gasped, my vision turned red. The officer yanked back on the chain. I fought toward the opening but by the time I reached it the masons had already gotten it three-quarters closed. I thrust my hands through the gap, trying to pull down the stones while the mortar was still wet. One of the masons covered my hands with mortar and the other pinned them under a heavy rock. I was caught as if in a trap. I cried, I yelled. I foresaw what would happen: since no one would be able to enter my cell, if I was mortared into the wall away from the window, I'd die of hunger, hanging from my hands. I prayed for release. One of the masons, without saying a word, thrust a crowbar under the stone and lifted it. With a violent effort, I tore my half-crushed hands from the wall and collapsed back beneath the window, exhausted by the double effort to try to strangle myself and to stop the masons from walling me in. Meanwhile, they finished their dark and fatal labour. When I came to, I was entombed. The sentence of Parliament had been carried out. For eight days, I was raving mad. The first four, I rolled around the floor of my tomb, howling desperately, and for those four days I ate nothing – I wanted to starve, and thought I'd have the strength to do it. It was the thirst that broke me. On the fifth day, my throat was on fire. I drank a few drops of water, and that was my commitment to continuing to live. Then for a while I thought it was all some kind of error, a mistaken sentence that would soon be overturned. Such a thing had to be impossible in the reign of King Henry's son, under the regency of King Henry's wife. I'd just wanted to save Henry IV; it couldn't be that they'd want to punish me more than they'd punished his murderer, a man whose ordeal had lasted only an hour, while God knows how many hours, how many days, how many years my own ordeal would last. But eventually this hope, too, dwindled and died. Once I'd resolved to live, I asked for straw to make a bed but the superior said I'd been sentenced to bread and water, and if Parliament had wanted me to have straw, they'd have put it in the sentence. So I was refused what we grant to our lowest animals: a mere bundle of straw. I'd hoped that when the harsh winter nights came, I'd die of cold. I'd heard that freezing to death was a gentle way to go. At times during that first winter, chilled to the bone by the freezing temperatures, I drifted into sleep, or rather unconsciousness. But, every time, I awoke – cold, stiff, almost paralysed but alive. I lived till the rebirth of spring. I saw the flowers reappear. I saw the trees grow green. Gentle breezes penetrated to me, and I felt my cheeks dampen with tears. I thought the winter had dried up my tears but with spring, with life, they returned. It's impossible to describe with what sweet melancholy I watched the first ray of spring sunshine slant through my window and into my tomb. I reached my arms into it. I tried to grab it and take it into my heart. Alas! It escaped me, as ephemeral as the hopes of which it seemed a symbol. For the first four years, and part of the fifth, I marked the passing days on the wall with a piece of stone the children had thrown at me during my madness. But when I saw winter return for a fifth time, the heart went out of me. What matter the count of days past? Better to think only of the days I had left. After a year of sleeping on bare stone and leaning against damp walls, my clothes began to wear thin. After two years, they tore like wet paper, and fell to pieces. I waited till my clothing was nearly gone before asking for more but the superior said the sentence spoke of bread and water, and nothing else. Little by little, my clothes tore and fell apart. Winter came again. The terrible nights I'd previously endured wearing a warm woollen dress, I now suffered naked, or nearly so. I picked up the tattered rags that fell from me and tried to reattach them but they fell like leaves in autumn, leaving me bare. Sometimes priests came to peer at me through my window. When I first saw them, those men of God, those angels of humanity, I begged for mercy. They laughed. More of them came after I was naked but I gave up talking to them, and just tried to cover myself with my hands and my hair. I lived the simple, mechanical life of an animal. I drank; I ate; I barely even thought. I slept as much as I could for, while asleep, I couldn't feel the pain of life. Three days ago, they failed to bring me my food at the usual time. I thought it was just some kind of mistake. I waited. Evening came. I was hungry, I called out. There was no answer. That night, though already suffering, I was still able to sleep. The next morning at daybreak, I was waiting at the bars of my window for my food. It didn't come. Nuns passed by; I called to them but they just told their rosaries and said nothing. Night came again, and I saw they planned to starve me. What a sad and weak nature is ours! Once I would have welcomed death but now I was afraid. That second night I slept only an hour or two, and when I did I had terrible dreams. The pain in my stomach and belly was excruciating, and woke me whenever sleep closed my eyes. At daybreak I rose to see if they might bring food, though I knew they wouldn't. That day was one long agony. I cried out, not for bread but because the pain made me scream. Needless to say, no one responded to my cries. I tried to pray, over and over but it was useless. I couldn't find the name of God – that name that comes so easily to me now. Again the day grew dim, the shadows entered my tomb, darkness fell, and it was night. I was in such pain, I thought this night was my last. I could cry no more – I hadn't the strength. I surrendered. Wrapped in agony, I counted each hour of the night, unable to escape a single moment of my pain. Each tolling of the bell seemed to strike in my skull and explode into millions of sparks. Finally, midnight having struck, I heard the sound of the outer gate open and close. It was an unusual noise at that hour, so I dragged myself to my window and peered out, hanging on the bars with both hands and clinging to the sill with my teeth. I saw a light come in the gate, enter the parlour, and then come down into the courtyard and approach. For a moment I dared to hope but when I saw the man with the superior was a monk, it was all over. I let go of the bars, pried my teeth from the sill – they seemed stuck there as if welded to the stone – and then fell back to where you saw me. It was high time. Twenty-four hours later, you would have found nothing but a corpse."

As if she'd been waiting for the Dame de Coëtman's story to end – and, indeed, perhaps she was – upon these last words, the superior appeared in the doorway. "My Lord's orders?" she asked. "First, a question – and, as I've stated, you must reply truthfully." "I hear you, My Lord," the superior replied with a bow. "Who was it who came to you, astonished to find this poor creature still alive, though naked, fed on bread and water, and buried in a tomb?" "Is it My Lord who orders me to talk?" said the superior. "In my dual authority, both spiritual and temporal, I demand to know the name of this woman's executioner – you others being no more than her torturers." "It was Lord Vautier, astrologer and doctor to the queen mother." "He's the one I sent my letters to," said the Dame de Coëtman, "though at the time he was only her apothecary." "Very well," the cardinal said. "The orders of those who've demanded this woman's execution shall be fulfilled." He waved a hand toward the Dame de Coëtman. "For everyone in the world but you and me, this woman has died. That's why you had her tomb opened tonight: to bring out her corpse. And in her grave you will bury a stone, or a log, or an actual corpse you get from a hospital – that's entirely up to you." "As you command, my Lord." "Three of your nuns are in on the secret: the one who opened the gate and the two sisters who brought the food. You will explain to them what happens to those who speak when they should remain silent. After all," and he pointed angrily at the Dame de Coëtman, "they've seen an example with their own eyes." "And is that everything, My Lord?" "Everything! When you go down, have the goodness to tell the taller of my porters that I need, within the quarter of an hour, another sedan chair like the first – only one that can be locked, and has curtains over the windows." "I will relay My Lord's orders."

On the side of his face away from the superior, the cardinal showed the jovial smile we saw the night he gave Souscarrières and Madam Cavois the patent for sedan chairs. It's an expression we'll see again, and more than once, as our story unfolds. "Now," the cardinal said to the Dame de Coëtman, "I think you're well enough to eat a chicken wing or two, and even drink half a glass of honey to the health of our good superior."

3 days later, the chronicler L'Estoile wrote the following in his journal, based on information received from the Convent of Repentant Daughters:  
*On the night of December 13 to 14, in the little stone cell built in the courtyard of the Convent of Repentant Daughters, where she'd been confined for nine years since Parliament sentenced her to bread and water, died the Demoiselle Jacqueline Le Voyer, known as the Dame de Coëtman, wife of Isaac de Varenne, suspected of complicity with Ravallac in the assassination of good King Henry IV. She was buried that same night in the convent's cemetery.*

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Maximillian de Bethune, the Baron of Rosny, the Duke of Sully

The entire time the Dame de Coëtman was telling her story, the cardinal had listened with the utmost attention to her long and sorrowful tale. But though every word the poor victim spoke was a moral proof of the complicity of Concini, d'Épemon, and the queen mother in the assassination of Henry IV, no physical evidence – nothing visible, tangible, and irrefutable – had come out of it. But what was clear as day, more clear than crystal, was not only the innocence of the Dame de Coëtman but her dedication to preventing the terrible regicide of 14 May – a dedication that was paid for by nine years imprisoned in the Conciergerie and nine years in a tomb at the Repentant Daughters. And since the process verbal from Ravallac's trial was burned and lost, it remained essential for the cardinal to obtain, at all costs, that sheet of Ravallac's final revelations written when he was on the wheel. This, then, was the difficulty, one might even say the impossibility that the cardinal faced; it seemed that after all his efforts, he was back where he'd started. But Richelieu had known from the first that the difficulties he faced were almost insurmountable. We believe we've said this sheet had been in the hands of Parliament's court reporter, Lord Joly de Fleury. Unfortunately, Lord Joly de Fleury had died two years before, and it was only after his return from Chalais's trial in Nantes that the cardinal had thought to begin collecting evidence against the queen mother – for it wasn't until Chalais's trial that he'd fully appreciated the extent of Marie de Médicis's hatred for him. Lord Joly de Fleury was survived by a son and a daughter. The cardinal had summoned both of them to his office at his house in the Place Royale to interrogate them about the fate of this sheet, so important to him, and, indeed, to history. But Joly de Fleury's children said the sheet was no longer in their hands. The cardinal had been told that eleven years before, in March 1617, a young man of fifteen or sixteen, dressed all in black and with a large hat pulled down over his eyes, had called on Lord Joly de Fleury, accompanied by another man ten or twelve years his senior. The Reporter of Parliament had received them in his office, where he'd spoken to them for nearly an hour. He'd then conducted them, with every mark of respect, out to the street where a carriage – a rarity at the time – awaited the pair. At dinner that evening, the worthy solicitor had told his son and daughter, "My children, if anyone ever comes to you after my death to claim the sheet containing Ravallac's last confession on the wheel, say that it's no longer in your possession – or, better yet, that it never existed."

So the cardinal had been told, five or six months before the start of our story, when he'd interviewed the son and daughter of Lord Joly de Fleury. They'd tried at first to deny even the existence of the sheet but when pressed by the cardinal they'd consulted with each other for a moment, then decided to tell him everything. However, they were entirely ignorant of the identity of the two mysterious visitors who, it appeared, had come to demand that important piece of evidence from their father. It was only six months later that the seriousness of the threats against him had forced the cardinal to reopen his investigation. More than ever, as we've seen, this piece of evidence was essential to completing the case he was building to defend himself against Marie de Médicis. But more than ever, he despaired of finding it. However, as Father Joseph had said, Providence had already carried the cardinal this far, and surely he could hope it wouldn't stop halfway to his goal. Meanwhile, as supporting evidence, he would go after the letter Madam de Coëtman had written to the king, sending it to Sully by way of Miss de Gournay – a letter which Sully might have kept. If so, it should be easy to obtain. The old minister, or rather the old friend of Henry IV, was still alive, dividing his time between his château in Villebon and his winter house on the Rue Saint-Antoine, between the Rue Royale and the Rue de l'Égout-Sainte-Catherine. It was said that, faithful to his lifelong habits, he was always in his office by five in the morning. The cardinal drew an exquisite watch from his pocket: it was four o'clock. At half past five exactly – after stopping at his house in the Place Royale to get a hat, and to leave word for his crony, Father Mulot de Lafollone, that he'd see him for lunch, and to his jester, Bois-Robert, that he needed to speak to him before noon – the cardinal knocked on the door of the Hotel Sully that was opened by a Swiss Guard dressed in the uniform worn during the reign of Henry IV, the monarch people were already beginning to call *the Great King*.

Let's take advantage of Richelieu's visit to Sully, a minister too often lost in the shadow of the minister who followed him, to present to our readers one of the most interesting personalities of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a man whose character is often misunderstood – especially by historians who have been content to judge him by the face he presented to the public, without bothering to walk around and observe his other sides. Maximillian de Bethune, Duke of Sully, who was, at the time of our story, sixty-eight years old, had singular pretensions regarding his birth. Instead of simply accepting that his father and grandfather were descended from the Counts de Bethune in Flanders, he had concocted a family tree showing that he was descended from a Scotsman named Bethune that would make him a cousin of the Archbishop of Glasgow. He also tried to show he was related to the great House of Guise through the House of Coucy that was connected to the Emperor of Austria and the King of Spain. Sully, who was called Sir de Rosny because his birthplace was the village of Rosny, near Mantes, was only moderately wellborn, despite his purported connections with the Archbishop of Glasgow and the houses of Austria and Spain. When Gabrielle d'Éstrées, the king's mistress, took offence at some rude remarks by Sir de Sancy, the Surintendant des Finances, she'd had Henry IV replace him with Sully, believing him her devoted servant. Henry IV was oblivious to pettiness and ingratitude in his mistresses – it was one of the great faults of this great king – and due to the selfish wheedling of Gabrielle, he'd forgotten that Sir de Sancy, in order to buy the loyalty of the Swiss, had personally pawned the great diamond that still bears his name and was part of the Crown Jewels. In carrying out these sacrifices for France, the poor Surintendant des Finances had so impoverished himself that, in order to provide funds for his successor, Henry IV was obliged to resort to an expedient called a stop-defence that was basically a delaying tactic deployed against his creditors. In fact, when confronted by the king's creditors, the irreverent Sancy sometimes had himself arrested as a common debtor. When conveyed to the door of the prison, he would show the warders the order for his arrest, and then, bowing to the officers, release himself and go on his way. Sully was his successor. But the first time the upright Sully was called upon to prove his loyalty to his patron, it was in a matter that would have required him to be disloyal to his religion. When Henry IV, hoping to convert his children to legitimate heirs, spoke seriously of marrying Gabrielle, he found in Sully one of the fiercest opponents to the union. King Henry's idea of marrying Gabrielle was more than just a lover's fancy: he wanted to give France a French queen, something it had never had. Henry IV, politically astute and aware of his own weaknesses, didn't pretend that the woman he married would have no influence on the destiny of the State. In the two hours per day that he devoted to the business of rule, he settled even the most difficult questions with the decisiveness of a

military commander – but everyone knew that this forceful captain, who wanted to be regarded as an absolute ruler, had at home a wife or mistress who was also, in her bedroom, a ruler quite as absolute. With a king like that, who he married mattered a great deal. It wouldn't matter that the Spanish had been beaten at Arques and Ivry if a queen, Spanish by birth or temperament, ruled the king's bed, and from that bed stretched her hand over the realm. When Henry IV decided to remarry, he was virtually the only sovereign in Europe who'd borne a sword in battle. He was a conqueror on horseback, wearing the white plume of Ivry, the only man of his kind on the continent. But that sword, that French sword, was no threat if it was stolen from his bedside by a queen with foreign loyalties. This is what a great politician, a man of genius like Richelieu, would have understood – but which Sully did not. Sully, whose cold blue eyes and ruddy complexion, even at age sixty, might justify his claim to be of Scottish descent, was more feared than loved, even by Henry IV. As Duplessis-Mornay's secretary Marbault testified, he brought fear with him wherever he went: fear of his deeds, fear of his decisions, and fear even of his gaze. He was a soldier first and foremost, having been at war his entire life; as a minister he was active, energetic, and, rarest of all, an able financier. He exercised general command over all matters military, financial, and nautical – and personal command over his first love, the artillery. He'd come to command the artillery because Gabrielle, who'd wanted higher honours for her sadly mediocre father, had been foolish enough to allow Henry IV to offer the position of Grand-Master of the Artillery to Sully instead – and Sully was wise enough to seize that opportunity without feeling the least bit grateful to Gabrielle. The day Gabrielle decided to insult Sully by offering him his first important office as a throwaway was the day she ensured that she would never become Queen of France. Henry IV had attempted to legitimize his two sons by Gabrielle, granting them the title of prince and having them baptised as such. Afterwards Fresnes, Henry's Secretary of State, had sent Sully the documents recording their baptism as official Children of France. But Sully had said "There are no Children of France," and sent the documents back. And the king hadn't dared to insist otherwise. It was Sully's way of testing his master. Perhaps, if Henry IV had insisted, Sully might have given way. But in the event, it was King Henry who backed down. Sully then realised that the king didn't love Gabrielle quite as much as he respected Sully. Gabrielle was beginning to age – and to sour. So Sully brought in a rival who was still young, still beautiful, and still seductive to oppose her – in short, the complete package. Gabrielle, alas, was a package plundered, opened, and emptied. The new package came straight from the Grand Duke of Tuscany. He'd sent the king a portrait of his niece, a charming miniature of Marie de Médicis in her girlhood, radiating youth and freshness, in which her incipient obesity could be regarded as evidence of health. Gabrielle brushed it off. "It's not her portrait I fear," she said, "it's her coffers of cash."

Indeed, Henry IV was in a position where he had to make a choice between love and money. And he had to decide quickly, before his love's love of money poisoned his own love. In Paris at that time there was a man of Moorish race, an ex-cobbler from Lucca named Zamet who'd made a fortune in France and was now master of over 1.7 million crowns. Zamet had first found success as shoemaker to Henry III, employing his mastery of the tongue (to use a term from the cobbler's trade) in making charming, feminine shoes for the royal foot. Henry III, flattered by this delightful footwear, had made Zamet Preceptor of the Inner Chambers and Director of the Royal Boys' Choir – for this great king was a lover of music. That was the beginning of Zamet's fortune. During the insurgency of the Catholic League, when everyone needed money, Zamet lent money to everyone: the Leaguers, the Spaniards, even the King of Navarre, who hadn't even asked for it. Had Zamet foreseen the greatness of Henry of Navarre, as Croesus had of Caesar?

It seems an apt comparison. Ultimately, Zamet was a tool of Grand Duke Ferdinand of the Empire. But Sully and Zamet understood each other. Sully was just waiting for his opportunity; if it came, and he seized it with a steady hand, he'd win. To Gabrielle, Sully was little more than a servant, as he himself said in his memoirs. One memorable day, Gabrielle had referred to Sully as a mere "valet" – and though Sully might actually be a servant, he certainly didn't want to be called one. He complained about this remark to Henry IV, and the king told Gabrielle, "Better a *valet* like Sully than ten mistresses like you."

Sully's time had come. Duke Ferdinand was on the move and, though an ex-cardinal, had reached across the Alps to poison his brother Francis and his sister-in-law Bianca. Gabrielle was at Fontainebleau with the king. Easter was nigh. Her confessor demanded that she celebrate Easter in Paris. She had the fatal idea of staying at the home of Zamet the Moor – which sealed her fate. Sully, who had quarrelled with her, nonetheless went to see her there. Why? Perhaps because he couldn't believe she'd be so imprudent. The poor woman thought she was already the queen. She acted as if she was, and told Sully she would always be happy to receive the Duchess de Sully at her *levers* and *couchers*, her morning and evening audiences. The duchess was furious at this impertinence. To appease her, Sully said, "Things are not as she believes, and soon you'll see a game well played, so long as the ball keeps moving."

Obviously, he knew everything. What, you say? Sully knew Gabrielle would be poisoned?

No doubt about it. Sully was a statesman, and was careful to leave Paris so the poisoners could operate freely, though he left word that he be kept informed. We say "poisoners" because there were two: the second was named Lavarenne, who died of shock because gossip named him, not a man but a fish. Just as Zamet was an ex-cobbler, Lavarenne was an ex-cook. Ironically, Henry had recommended him to the kitchens of his sister Madam, where he'd earned a reputation as a judge of chickens. She encountered him one day, after he'd made his fortune, and said, "Well done, my dear Lavarenne: you've plucked more chickens than my brother has plucked chicks."

Droll; very droll indeed. But Madam's anecdote highlights the ambitious nature of the former chicken chef. It was to Lavarenne that Sully had said, "Let me be the first to know if by some chance an accident should befall Gabrielle – that is, the Duchess de Beaufort."

Lavarenne took the hint. Thus Sully was one of the first informed; Lavarenne wrote him that Gabrielle had suddenly fallen ill, with a strange malady that had so disfigured her features that he "feared that if King Henry IV came back to Paris, viewing her would repulse him, so he dared to beg him to stay in Fontainebleau, especially since she was dead."

And he added to Sully, "And here I am, holding this poor dead woman in my arms, hardly able to believe that she won't be alive in another hour or so."

Yes, the two were so certain of the quality of their poison that, while Gabrielle was still alive, one of them wrote to tell the other that she was dying and the king that she was dead. Very droll indeed. But she didn't die as quickly as they thought she would. She lingered on, in agony, until Saturday morning. Lavarenne had sent his message to Sully on Friday evening, and it arrived before the night was over. Sully kissed his wife, who was in bed, and told her, "My dear, you will not have to attend the *levers* and *couchers* of the Duchess de Beaufort after all. That cord has broken. Now that she's dead, God grant our king a good life and a long one!"

Sully himself spoke of the matter, in more or less these words, in his own memoirs. With Gabrielle dead, Sully had little trouble persuading Henry to settle on Marie de Médicis. But before Sully could proceed with that marriage, he had one more cord to break: that of Henriette d'Entragues. Of all our Kings of France, it was Henry IV who was most susceptible to *amours*. Gabrielle was barely dead before he fell hard for Henriette d'Entragues, the daughter of Marie Touchet. Before she would give up herself, she asked for a promise of marriage; before he would give up his daughter, her father demanded 500000 francs. The king sent a proposed marriage contract to Sully and ordered him to pay 500000 francs to the father. Sully tore up the marriage contract, then had half a million silver francs poured into the antechamber outside Henry's bedroom. Henry IV, on returning to his room, stepped knee-deep into a pile of coins and looked down into the faces of French kings. There were even some guilders, as some of the money had come from Tuscany. "*Yeah!*" he said. "What's all this?"

"These are the five hundred thousand francs you intend to pay to Sir d'Entragues for the possibility his daughter will love you."

"*By the belly of the Grey Saint!* I'd never imagined five hundred thousand francs took up so much room," the king said. "See if you can arrange it for half this much, my good Sully."

Sully arranged the matter for three hundred thousand francs, and it goes without saying that Henry IV, ignoring the risks, had rewritten his promise of marriage. But as Sully had predicted, despite paying the price, Henriette d'Entragues didn't deliver much in the way of love. Sully was hailed as the restorer of the state's fortunes, and, unlike Sir de Sancy, he didn't expend any of his own money in that restoration. We wouldn't call him a thief or embezzler, rather a canny businessman, who never let an opportunity go missed. Henry was aware of this and often joked about it. In crossing the court of the Louvre one day, while saluting the king, who was watching from a balcony, Sully missed his footing and stumbled. "I'm not surprised to see you stumble," called the king. "If my strongest Swiss Guard had as many drinks in his belly as you have payoffs in your pocket, he wouldn't stumble: he'd fall flat on his face."

Despite being Superintendent of Finance, Sully was as stingy on his own behalf as he was on the state's, and rather than buy a carriage, he always rode across Paris on horseback. And as he was a terrible rider, everyone laughed at him, even the children. But there had never been a Superintendent as tight-fisted as he. An Italian, returning to the Arsenal for the fifth or sixth time to try to get the money that was owed him, saw three criminals being hanged at the Place de Grève and cried out, "Look at those lucky devils! At least they don't have to deal with that scoundrel Sully."

However, Sully didn't treat everyone the way he had the worthy Italian who'd envied the hanged men. A certain Pradel, who'd been head butler to the old Marshall de Biron, kept trying to collect his back wages. Sully didn't want to pay these back wages, and one day went so far as to have the man marched out of his chambers. As he was being escorted through Sully's dining room, Pradel took a knife from the table setting and turned back toward Sully, who slammed the door on his aggrieved petitioner. Pradel went directly to an audience with the king, knife in hand, and told him the king was welcome to hang him, so long as he was first allowed to leave the knife in Sully's belly. Sully paid him. The Duke of Sully was the first to plant the famous elms that line France's highways but he was so hated by some that they would chop them down, saying, "This for Rosny, may he be beheaded like Biron."

Speaking of Biron, Sully said in his memoirs that the marshal, with the twelve leading gallants of the Court, once undertook to put on a ballet they couldn't afford to pay for. The king told them, "You can't get anywhere without a Rosny at your side," and funded the ballet himself.

It may be hard to believe it of the man who historians have portrayed as such a grim and austere figure but Sully loved to dance. Every night until the death of Henry IV – and after his death, even more so – a royal valet named Laroche would play the lute for Sully, performing all the latest dance tunes. From the first note, Sully was up on his feet, dancing alone, waving the extraordinary cap he usually wore in his office. He had as spectators only his two closest cronies, and though the party might have been more complete with a few women in attendance, the duke didn't want to endanger his reputation – or so says Tallemant des Réaux, who is rather hard on Sully. We are entitled to be sceptical of this. The two spectators who may or may not have contented themselves with merely watching, were his friends the President de Chevre and the Lord de Chevigny. Since he was unwilling to dance with loose women, one assumes he could have asked the Duchess de Sully but he doesn't seem to have been bothered by his lack of a female partner. When handing out his monthly pay-checks, he used to say to his people, "Some for the market, some for your wife, and some for your lovers. Don't mix them."

One day, tired of meeting people on the stairs who were on their way to see his wife rather than him, he asked to have a separate staircase built that led to the chambers of the duchess. When it was completed, he said, "Madam, I have had a staircase made expressly for you. Please have your callers use these stairs, because if I meet one of them on my own, I'll hurl him down to the bottom."

The day he was appointed Grandmaster of the Artillery, he took as his seal an eagle holding a bolt of lightning, with the motto *Quo Jussa Jovis* – "I fly at Jupiter's orders."

The seal of Cardinal Richelieu, whom we left ascending Sully's staircase at half past five in the morning, was, we recall, an eagle in the clouds – *Aquila in Nubibus*. "Whom shall I announce?" a servant inquired of the morning visitor.

"Announce?" he replied, smiling in advance at the effect the news would produce. "Announce Sir Cardinal Richelieu!"

## 094

### The 2 Eagles

In truth, Sully had never heard an announcement quite so unexpected. When it struck his ear, he turned to see who had come to disturb the beginning of his day. He'd been occupied in writing those voluminous memoirs he left to us but rose from his chair at the valet's announcement. Sully was dressed in the fashion of 1610, 18 or 20 years before, in black velvet with slashed breeches and a purple satin doublet below a starched neck ruff, short hair, and a long beard, curled up out of the way and held in place, in the manner of Coligny, with a long toothpick. On top he wore an old-fashioned house-robe, while around his neck hung the gold chains bearing the diamond-studded symbols of his orders and offices, as if he were about to attend the King's Council of Henri IV. Dressed this way, except for the house-robe, he would often step out of his mansion (if the weather was good) at around one o'clock in the afternoon. Followed by his four Swiss Guards, he would walk from his hotel to the Place Royale, where he would march slowly around the square under the arcades. Everyone stopped to watch as he walked by, slow and grave, like a ghost of the previous century. The two ministers, who stood in each other's presence for the first time, resembled the eagle each had taken as his symbol: *Aquila in Nubibus*, the eagle in the clouds, who ruled all he surveyed while hidden in the heights, was an apt representation of the minister who was all things to Louis XIII, his king; while on the other side, *Quo Jussa Jovis*, the eagle casting lightning at the behest of Henri IV, described Sully as that king's strong but obedient right arm. (Readers who already know these historical facts may complain that these are unnecessary details that just get in the way of the picturesque and the novel. Such readers are welcome to pass over these details but we include them for those unfamiliar with history or for those who, attracted by the ambitious title of this historical romance, hope to learn something from it.) Richelieu, who was relatively young compared to Sully – the cardinal was only forty-two, while Sully was sixty-eight – approached the old friend of Henri IV with the respect due to both age and reputation. Sully gestured toward a chair, and Richelieu sat in it. The proud old man, familiar with the etiquette of courts, appreciated this. "Sir Duke," said the cardinal, smiling, "does my visit surprise you?"

"I admit," Sully replied, with his typical bluntness, "that it is unexpected."

"But why, Sir Duke? All ministers who work or have worked for the benefit of posterity – and we are among them – are dedicated to the happiness, glory, and greatness of the kingdom of France which they serve. Why shouldn't I, who humbly serve the son, seek out the support, advice, and knowledge of one who so nobly served the father?"

"Who remembers the services of one who is no longer able to serve?" Sully asked bitterly. "The old, dead tree is no good even for firewood, not worth the trouble to put it out of its misery."

"Ah but wood in decay can shine at night, Sir Duke, when living wood is lost in darkness. But I accept the comparison because you are still an oak, thank God and I hope the birds who sing in your branches are the birds of memory."

"Yes, they told me you wrote poetry, Sir Cardinal," Sully said disdainfully.

"I do, Sir Duke, in my spare time but not for myself. I study poetry, not to be a poet but so I can judge poems fairly and reward poets as they deserve."

"In my time," said Sully, "gentlemen did not bother with such things."

"Your time, sir," replied Richelieu, "was a glorious time, when they fought battles such as Coutras, Arques, Ivry, and Fontaine-Française. It was the time when the old policy of François I and Henri II, that is, opposition to the House of Austria, was taken up once more, a policy of which you were one of the leading supporters."

"Over which I quarrelled with the queen mother."

"That policy established French influence in Italy," the cardinal continued without seeming to notice the interruption, though he took careful note of it. "It brought us Savoy, Bresse, Bugey, and Valromey. It supported the Dutch revolt against Spain and encouraged the Lutherans in Germany against the Catholics. You were the instigator of the latter effort that aimed to create a sort of Christian Republic in which all disputes would be resolved in a congress, a body where all sects would meet on an equal footing, and the estates confiscated by Emperor Mathias might be restored to their rightful heirs."

"Yes, and it was amid these glorious efforts that the assassin struck down the king."

Richelieu noted this second interruption as he had the first, intending to return to both matters but for now he continued: "In such glorious days one has little time for literature, for it wasn't under Caesar that Horace and Virgil were born, or rather it wasn't Julius who was their Caesar but Augustus. I admire your generals and your ministers, Monsieur de Sully but do not disdain my poets. The generals and ministers make empires great but it's the poets who kindle a civilization's lights. The future and the past are both dark as night, and only the poets brighten them. Ask now who were Augustus's generals and ministers, and the only one anyone can name is Agrippa. Ask who were the protégés of Augustus's friend Maecenas, and we remember Virgil, Horace, Varius, Tibullus ... even those exiled by Augustus included the immortal Ovid. I can't be an Agrippa, or even a Sully, so let me be Maecenas."

Sully looked with astonishment at this man who had twenty times the authority Sully had known but had come to remind him of his days of power and glory while sitting at the feet of their former master. He drew his toothpick from his beard and slid it between his teeth that were as sound as those of a much younger man, and said, "Very well, you may have your poets, though I'm not sure their works are quite the marvels you say."

"Monsieur de Sully," said Richelieu, "when was it you planted the elms that today shade our roads?"

"Monsieur le Cardinal," said Sully, "that would have been from 1598 through 1604, so twenty-four years ago."

"Are they as beautiful and strong today as the day you planted them?"

"They were well planted and well grown, my elms."

"I know there were people who mistook your intentions and chopped some down, blind to the provident hand of the great man who was sowing shade for the aid of weary travellers. But the ones that survived, they've grown tall, spread their branches, flourished their leaves?"

"In fact, they have," Sully said proudly; "and when I see them so strong, so healthy, so green, I'm almost consoled for the ones that were struck down."

"That's how it is, Monsieur de Sully, with me and my poets. The critics may tear one down but they exalt another, and those who remain grow ever stronger and more fruitful. Today I planted an elm named Rotrou; tomorrow I will likely plant an oak called Corneille. I water them and wait. I can't say which ones would have flourished under your reign: Desmarests, Bois-Robert, Mairet, Voiture, Chapelain, Gombauld, Baro, Raissiguier, La Morelle, and Grand-champ – I couldn't say. It's not my fault if some grow into briars rather than a forest."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Sully. "The greatest labourers – and they say you do know how to work, Monsieur le Cardinal – need such distractions in their spare time. It's no worse, I suppose, than gardening."

"May God bless my garden, Monsieur de Sully, and make it one for the ages."

"But I don't imagine," said Sully, "that you got up at five in the morning to come pay me compliments and tell me all about your poets."

"First of all, I didn't get up at five in the morning," said the cardinal, smiling, "as I haven't yet been to bed. Perhaps in your time you got to sleep late, Monsieur de Sully, although you did work late. In my time, we don't sleep at all. No, I didn't come to pay you compliments and tell you about my poets. But the opportunity arose, and I was careful not to let it escape. In fact, Monsieur, I came to speak with you about two things you first brought up yourself."

"I brought up two things myself?"

"Yes."

"But I haven't said anything!"

"Begging your pardon but when I mentioned your efforts against Austria and Spain, you said, 'Over which I quarrelled with the queen mother.'"

"That's true. For isn't she Austrian by her mother Jeanne, and Spanish by her uncle Charles V?"

"Exactly – but it was because of you, Monsieur de Sully, that she became Queen of France."

"And I was wrong to advise that course to my august master, King Henri IV. Since then, many times, I have repented it."

"Well, today I fight the same struggle you faced twenty years ago, one to which you succumbed. And I may yet succumb in my turn, for I have two queens opposing me, the young and the old."

"Fortunately," Sully said, grinning and chewing his toothpick, "this time it's not the younger who has the more influence. King Henri IV loved too well but his son doesn't love much at all." "Have you ever thought, Sir Duke, about this difference between the father and the son?"

Sully looked quizzically at Richelieu, as if to say "Are you serious?" Then he said, with a strange accent, "The difference between father and son? Yes, I have thought about it, and often."

"You recall the father: all activity, riding twenty miles on horseback by day and then playing tennis in the evening, consulting with ministers and receiving ambassadors as he walked, busy from morning till night, playing to win, cheating when he lost without the slightest remorse, then generously returning his ill-gotten gains. Hurt by slights but reacting with a smile, though his smile was never far from tears. Never doing anything with half a heart, even if his whims led him to mad caprices. Deceiving women but honouring them. He was born with the heaven-sent gift of loving, that same gift that made Saint Theresa weep for Satan, who could only hate."

"Did you know King Henri IV?" Sully asked in surprise.

"I saw him once or twice in my youth," Richelieu said, "that's all. But I have made him my special study. In contrast to him, behold his son: slow as an old man, dour as the dying, standing rather than walking, gazing out a window, looking without seeing. He moves like an automaton, games without caring if he wins, though hating to lose. Sleeping long, crying little, loving nothing and, worst of all, no one."

"I understand," said Sully. "Over a man like that, you can have little influence."

"If I do, it's because, despite all this, he has two virtues: pride in the monarchy and a jealous sensitivity to the honour of France. These are the two spurs with which I drive him. And they would be enough if it were not for his mother, always defending Spain and promoting Austria, though I, pursuing the policy of the great King Henri and his minister Sully, want only to oppose these two eternal enemies of France. So I come to you, my master, whom I study and admire, especially in financial matters, to ask for your aid against that evil genius who was your enemy then and is mine today."

"And how can I help you," Sully asked, "you, who are more powerful than the king?"

"You said it was amid your glorious campaign that the assassin struck down the king."

"Did I say assassin or assassins?"

"You said assassin."

Sully paused.

"So," Richelieu continued, drawing his chair closer to Sully's, "recall if you can all your memories of that fateful May 14, and tell me what warnings you had in advance."

"We had many warnings but unfortunately we paid little attention to them. When men trust in Providence, they let their wits sleep. However, as I see it King Henri committed two key indiscretions."

"What were those?"

"He promised Pope Paul V he would restore the Jesuits to favour but when the Pope pressed him to comply, he refused, saying, 'If I had two lives, I would gladly give one to satisfy Your Holiness but as I have only one, I must preserve it for your service and for the sake of my subjects.' The second mistake was to insult Concino Concini, the queen's favourite, in open Parliament. When her gallant cavalier, a man who set fashions, won tournaments, and eclipsed even the princes, was insulted before mere men of the robe, she took it as a personal affront and vowed revenge – an Italian vendetta, no less. After that, she closed her heart to the king."

"The warnings that were ignored," Richelieu asked: "were any of them delivered by a woman named the Dame de Coëtman?"

Sully started. "Yes, in fact," he said. "But they weren't the only ones. There was a man named Lagarde in the Hébert household in Naples who warned the king that d'Épermon plotted to assassinate him. There was a certain Labrosse, whom we never found, who warned Monsieur de Vendôme on that May morning that a transition from 13 to 14 would be fatal to the king. I don't know if you've considered the influence of the number 14 on the birth, life, and death of King Henri IV."

"No," replied Richelieu, loosening the reins to let Sully run to his goal.

"Then listen," said that supreme calculator, who had reduced everything to the science of numbers. "First: King Henri IV was born fourteen centuries, fourteen decades, and fourteen years after the nativity of Our Lord Jesus. Second: his first day was December 14 and his last May 14. Third: there were fourteen letters in his name, Henri de Navarre. Fourth: he lived four times fourteen years, four times fourteen days and fourteen weeks. Fifth: he was wounded by Jean Chatel in fifteen-ninety-four, fourteen days after December fourteenth, between which and the time of his death was fourteen years, fourteen months, and fourteen times five days. Sixth: he won the Battle of Ivry on March 14. Seventh: Monsieur le Dauphin, who is now the reigning king, was baptized on August 14. Eighth: the king was killed on May fourteenth, fourteen centuries and fourteen lustrums since the incarnation. Ninth: Ravillac was executed fourteen days after the king's death. Tenth and finally: one hundred fifteen times fourteen is sixteen-ten, the year in which he died."

"Yes," said Richelieu, "that is both curious and strange. But everyone has a magic number. This Dame de Coëtman," he continued, "Did she not also address you directly, Sir Duke?"

Sully looked down. "Even the best and most devoted have their blind spots. I did mention her to the king. But the king just shrugged and said, 'What would you have, Rosny' – he continued to use my birth name though he'd made me Duke de Sully – 'What would you have, Rosny? It's all in God's hands.'"

"This warning came in the form of a letter, did it not, Sir Duke?"

"Yes."

"To whom was this letter addressed?"

"To me, to be passed on to the king."

"Who did it come from?"

"From the Dame de Coëtman."

"Did another copy come from another woman?"

"From Miss de Gournay."

"Then I must ask you, Sir Duke – and I do so in the name and the honour of France..."

Sully nodded, indicating that he was ready to answer. "... This letter, why did you not pass it on to the king?"

"Because it openly accused Queen Marie de Médicis, Épermon, and Concini."

"This letter, Sir Duke – did you keep it?"

"No, I gave it up."

"May I ask to whom?"

"To the one who brought it – to Miss de Gournay."

"Do you have any reluctance, Sir Duke, to write me the following note: 'Miss de Gournay is authorised to deliver to Monsieur le Cardinal de Richelieu the letter sent on May 11, 1610, from the Dame de Coëtman to the Duke de Sully'?"

"No, if Miss de Gournay refuses you. But she won't, as she is poor and in need, so it's unlikely you'll need my authorisation."

"But if I do?"

"Send me a messenger and he'll return with the note."

"Now, one final matter, Monsieur de Sully, and you will have earned my heartfelt gratitude."



Sully bowed.

"In the house of Joly de Fleury, at the corner of Rue Saint-Honoré and Rue des Bons-Enfants, behind a brick in the wall, was hidden the process verbal of Ravallac to Parliament."

"No: that document had been kept in the Palais de Justice, where it was destroyed in a fire. What Joly de Fleury had was the statement Ravallac dictated at the scaffold, in between the tongs and the molten lead."

"That statement is no longer in the Fleury family's hands."

"It was, in fact, given up by Monsieur de Fleury before he died."

"You know that for certain?" asked Richelieu.

"Yes."

"You know it!" he cried, unable to suppress a gesture of joy. "So, then, you can tell me where it is? This sheet, it would be my saving grace. It is nothing less than the glory, the grandeur, and the honour of France – it is everything! In the name of Heaven, tell me I may have it."

"Impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

"I have sworn a vow."

The cardinal rose. "If the Duke de Sully has sworn a vow, then I must honour the oath of the Duke de Sully. But in truth," he said, "this may be fatal for France." And without attempting to appeal to Sully by so much as a single word, he bowed deeply, receiving from the old minister in return a polite but moderate salute, and withdrew, beginning to doubt in that Providence that Father Joseph had promised would help him.

095

The Cardinal in his Dressing Gown

At about seven in the morning, the cardinal returned to his house in the Place Royale and discharged his chair porters who found themselves well paid and were therefore satisfied with their night. He slept for two hours and then went down to his study, in his dressing gown and slippers, at about 9:30. This office, where he worked 12 to 14 hours a day, was the centre of Richelieu's world. He broke for lunch with his confessor, along with his cronies, clowns, and hangers-on. Then back to his study, where he would nap on his couch that was as large as a bed, when politics kept him too long at his desk. He usually had dinner with his niece. No one was allowed in his study that was full of state secrets, unless Richelieu was there, the exception being Charpentier, his secretary, whom he trusted as he did himself. Once inside, Charpentier would unlock all the connecting doors, except for the one which led to Marion Delorme's house, of which only Richelieu had the key. Cavois had been indiscreet enough to say that sometimes, instead of going up to sleep in his bedchamber, the cardinal would rest in his clothes on the couch in his office. And once, during the night, Cavois had heard the cardinal conversing with someone else, a voice he'd recognised as a woman's. Word quickly got around, and the gossips all said that the woman had to be Marion Delorme, who was barely eighteen and was then in the flower of her youthful beauty. She was said to pass through the wall like a fairy, or like a sylph through a keyhole, and to talk with the cardinal about matters that had nothing to do with politics. But no one had ever actually seen her within the cardinal's house. However, we who have entered the notorious office and know all its secrets are already aware that it had a private mailbox which the cardinal used to correspond with his beautiful neighbour. Marion Delorme had no need to come to the cardinal, nor the cardinal to go to Marion. That day, he seems to have had something to tell her, for upon entering his study he wrote two lines on a piece of paper, opened the near side of the private mailbox, slipped the sheet within, rang the bell, and closed his door. This sheet, as we can report to our readers, from whom we have nothing to hide, contained the following question: "How many times in the last week has the Count de Moret visited Madam de la Montagne? Is he faithful or unfaithful? In short, what do we know about him?"

It was signed, as usual, "Armand." However, both handwriting and signature were disguised, and had nothing in common with the handwriting and signature of the great minister.

Then he called Charpentier and asked who was waiting in the antechamber. "The Reverend Father Mulot, Monsieur de Lafollone, and Monsieur de Bois-Robert," the secretary replied.

"Very well," said Richelieu, "have them come in."

We've said that the cardinal usually had lunch with his confessor, his cronies, clowns, and hangers-on, and perhaps our readers were surprised to find His Eminence's confessor in such company but Father Mulot wasn't one of these stuffy clerics who burdened his penitents with litanies of *pater nosters* and *ave marias*.

No, Father Mulot was, above all else, the cardinal's friend. Eleven years earlier, after the assassination of the Maréchal d'Ancre, Concino Concini, when the queen mother was exiled to Blois and the young Richelieu, who was then Bishop of Luçon, to Avignon, Father Mulot had done something extraordinary. Either out of friendship for Richelieu or from confidence in his genius to come, Mulot had sold everything he owned, raising three or four thousand crowns, then brought all this money and placed it in the hands of the cardinal-to-be. Thereafter, he became one of Richelieu's closest and most outspoken advisers. And he was a good courtier, though on the subject of bad honey he was quite insufferable. One day while dining at the house of Monsieur d'Alaincourt, the Governor of Lyon, he was outraged by the honey that was put before them. He called over the servant who'd brought it, grabbed him by the ear, and said, "My friend, only a scoundrel would serve such honey to his master. Maybe he doesn't know any better but I do, so take away this swill and bring us some decent honey."

As an enthusiast of the vine, the worthy chaplain had earned a nose like that of Bardolph, the jolly companion of England's Henry V, so red it could almost serve as a lantern. One day, when he was still Bishop of Luçon, Richelieu was trying on some beaver hats, and asked Father Mulot what he thought. "Do you think this one suits me?" he asked.

"It would match your robes better, Your Grandeur," Bois-Robert had interrupted, "if it was the same colour as your confessor's nose."

The stalwart Mulot had never forgiven Bois-Robert this little jest. The second guest waiting on the cardinal was a gentleman of Touraine named Lafollone. He was a sort of watchdog the king had given the cardinal to make sure no one bothered him unnecessarily or disturbed him with trivial matters. This Lafollone was as great an eater as Mulot was a drinker, and to watch the one drink and the other eat was one of the cardinal's daily amusements. Indeed, Lafollone thought of nothing but the table. When others said it was a good day for a walk, a nice day for a hunt, or good weather for a swim, he always replied that it was a good day to eat. The cardinal had other guardians but with Lafollone around he never needed a taster. The third guest, or rather the third person waiting on the cardinal, was François Le Métel de Bois-Robert, one of his literary collaborators as well as his jester. Though no one could say why, Bois-Robert was always irritable. He had come from Rouen, where he'd been a lawyer but had left that city after having been accused by a woman of fathering her two children. Upon arriving in Paris, he first attached himself to Cardinal du Perron but then decided he'd rather enter the service of Cardinal Richelieu. But, as we said, he was an irritable man, whose tongue was sharp when he wasn't accorded the respect he thought he deserved. "Eh, Monsieur," he said one day to the cardinal, "you let dogs eat the crumbs from your table. Am I worse than a dog?"

This humility disarmed the cardinal, who took Bois-Robert into his friendship, and soon found he couldn't do without him. When the cardinal was in a good mood, he called him *Le Bois* for short, repeating a joke made by Monsieur de Châteauneuf about the wood that comes from Normandy. Bois-Robert was the cardinal's morning paper: thanks to him, the cardinal knew everything that was happening in the republic of letters he was nurturing. Bois-Robert, who had a great heart beneath his prickly exterior, guided the cardinal's hand in his efforts as a patron of the arts, sometimes even forcing that hand to open when it was clenched due to hostility or jealousy. Bois-Robert, in his way, helped Richelieu rise above hostility, and convinced him that the powerful should put themselves beyond jealousy. One understands how, given the eternal tension of politics, the continual threat of conspiracy, and his endless struggle against the enemies who surrounded him, the cardinal needed from time to time to escape into levity. It was almost, for him, a matter of mental health: for the bow that is strung too tight can break. It was especially after nights like the one he'd just endured that the cardinal sought the company of these three, who afforded him a few moments of rest from his duties, his cares, and his labours. Moreover, besides the tales he anticipated from the witty and energetic Bois-Robert, he hoped to be able to learn from him where he could find what remained of the former Demoiselle de Gournay. As soon as his letter to Marion Delorme was deposited in their private mailbox, as we've said, he ordered Charpentier to admit his three guests. Charpentier opened the door. Bois-Robert and Lafollone deferred to each other, each desiring the other to enter first but Mulot, who seemed to be in a bad mood, pushed both aside and entered before them. He had a letter in his hand. "Oh, ho!" said the cardinal. "What have you there, my dear abbot?"

"What have I here?" Mulot cried, stamping his foot. "What I have here makes me furious!"

"And why is that?"

"Those who wrote this will never write me another!"

"Who?"

"The ones who write to me on your behalf!"

"*Good God!* What have they put in this letter?"

"What's in the letter is not the problem. In fact, for a letter from some of your people, it's quite polite for a change."

"What's the problem, then?"

"The way it's addressed! You know perfectly well I'm your confessor, not your almoner, since if I ever consent to be someone's almoner, it'll be for someone more important than you. I'm a Canon of Sainte-Chappelle!"

"So, how was this addressed?"

"They wrote: *To Monsieur Mulot, Almoner to His Eminence* – the dolts!"

"Well," said the cardinal, laughing, as he'd expected some such response, "what if it was me who addressed the letter?"

"If it was you, then I am astonished. Though it wouldn't be, God knows, the first nonsense you've ever perpetrated."

"It's good to know just what sort of thing irritates you."

"This doesn't irritate me; it infuriates me!"

"All the better!"

"Why all the better?"

"Because you're so amusing when you're angry. And since I love to see you angry, I will address you from now on as Monsieur Mulot, Almoner to His Eminence."

"Just try it, and you'll see."

"I'll see what?"

"You'll see me leave you to eat lunch by yourself."

"I'll just send Cavois to fetch you."

"I'll refuse to eat."

"He'll force you to eat."

"I won't drink, either."

"He'll shove bottles of Romanée, Clos-Vougeot, and Chambertin right up your nose."

"Quiet, you!" Mulot cried, overwhelmed with fury and advancing on the cardinal with clenched fists. "You, why, I'll tell the world you're a – a terrible man!"

"Mulot! Mulot!" The cardinal was overcome with laughter at Mulot, who was beside himself. "Take care, or you'll find yourself hanged!"

"Hanged? On what pretext?"

"On the pretext that you reveal the secrets of the confessional!"

The other guests burst out laughing as Mulot tore the letter in pieces and threw them into the fire. During this incident, the servants had brought in a table already set. "Ah, let's find out what's for lunch," said Lafollone, "and see if there's anything that will tempt a gentleman who's already had an excellent breakfast." Raising the covers of the dishes one after another, he said, "Ah-ha! White capons *royale*, a sausage of plovers and larks, two roasted woodcocks, mushrooms stuffed with Provençale crayfish *à la Bordeaux* – one could have lunch with that, in a pinch."

"Eh, *for the love of God!*" Mulot said. "As to food, there will always be plenty of that. Everyone knows the cardinal indulges in all the mortal sins, especially gluttony but let's see what he has to offer us in the way of honey. Hmm, a Bouzy red, a Bordeaux *grand cru* – excellent for those who suffer from stomach-ache, like all the honey of Bordeaux. Long live the honey of Burgundy! A Pommard, a *windmill* ... could be better, I suppose but it will do."

"So, abbot, for lunch we have champagne, Bordeaux, burgundy, and that isn't enough for you?"

"I'm not saying it isn't enough," Mulot said in a conciliatory tone; "I'm just saying the choices could be better."

"Are you lunching with us, Le Bois?" asked the cardinal.

"Your Eminence will excuse me. You asked me to come by this morning but said nothing of lunch, so I've already eaten with Racan, whom I met sitting with his heels up on the corner of Rue Vieille-du-Temple and Rue Saint-Antoine."

"The devil you say! Come to the table, Mulot, take a seat, Lafollone, be quiet and listen, as Monsieur Le Bois is going to regale us with some pretty tale."

"The tale, the tale," Lafollone said. "I'm not the one to interrupt you."

"I raise this glass of Pommard to your tale, Master Le Bois," said Mulot, still a trifle cross. "I hope this one is better than usual."

"I'm not here to amuse you," said Bois-Robert. "I speak only the truth."

"The truth," said the cardinal, "is that it's just like you to be sitting with your heels up on a street corner at half past eight in the morning!"

"My Lord shall judge for himself. Your Eminence knows that Malherbe lives not a hundred paces from here, in the Rue des Tournelles."

"I'm aware of that," said the cardinal who ate very little because of his bad stomach, and thus could talk while eating.

"Well! It seems that last night he was carousing with Ivrande and Racan at his place, and all three ended up sleeping, dead drunk, in Malherbe's bedchamber. Racan is the first to awaken – he had business at an early hour. He gets up and puts on Ivrande's trunk-hose for trousers without noticing the mistake, puts on Ivrande's shoes into the bargain, washes his face, and leaves. Five minutes later Ivrande wakes up and can't find his shoes. '*Mordieu!*' he says to Malherbe. 'I'll bet that absent-minded Racan took them!' So Ivrande puts on Malherbe's breeches, despite the poet's protests from his bed, and races off after Racan, whom he can see going down the street in clothes far too large for him. Ivrande catches up to Racan and demands the return of his clothes. 'My faith, you're right!' Racan tells him. And without further ado, as I've had the honour to tell Your Eminence, he sits down on the corner of Rue Saint-Antoine and Rue Vieille-du-Temple, in the view of all the passers-by of Paris, takes off his pants and shoes and trades them with Ivrande. I arrived right about then and offered to buy Racan some lunch. At first he refused, saying he'd risen early because he had a matter of utmost importance to attend to; but when he tried to remember what it was, it slipped his mind entirely. It wasn't until we were almost finished with lunch that he slapped his forehead and said, 'Oh, now I remember what I had to do.'"

"And what was that?" asked the cardinal who took the greatest pleasure in Bois-Robert's stories as usual.

"He'd planned to go inquire about the health of Madam the Marquis of Rambouillet who had come down with a fever since the misfortune that occurred to the Marquis de Pisany."

"Indeed," the cardinal said, "I heard from my niece that she was quite ill – as you probably already know, Le Bois. Please check on her if you pass by her house."

"My Lord."

"No need? Why?"

"Because she has recovered."

"Recovered! Who treated her?"

"Voiture."

"Bah. Since when is he a doctor?"

"Never, My Lord but Your Eminence knows that you don't need a doctor to cure a fever."

"How's that?"

"All you need are two bears."

"What? Two bears?"

"Quite so. Our friend Voiture heard that you could cure a person of fever by giving them a great surprise, so he went out into the streets looking for something Madam de Rambouillet would find surprising. That's where he encountered a travelling animal show. '*For the love of God!*' he said. 'That's just the thing.' He hired this Savoyard and his animals and led them to the Hotel de Rambouillet. The marquise was within, sitting by the fire behind a folding screen. Voiture entered quietly, bringing the bears in behind the screen, and sat them up in two chairs behind the marquise. Madam de Rambouillet heard snuffling behind her, turned around, and saw two beastly snouts in her face. She nearly died of fright but the fever was broken."

"A fine story!" said the cardinal. "What do you think, Mulot?"

"I think that in the eyes of God, all means are good," said the chaplain.

Honey tended to bring out the religion in him, as it put him in a state of grace. "God? You backwoods preacher! You'd put God into the low company of Voiture, a Savoyard, and two bears, all in Madam de Rambouillet's parlour?"

"God is everywhere," the chaplain said beatifically, raising his eyes, and his glass, to heaven. "But you, My Lord – you don't believe in God!"

"What?" the cardinal cried. "I, not believe in God?"

"Are you telling me now that you do believe?" the priest said, regarding the cardinal with a pair of small black eyes illuminated by his nose.

"Of course I believe!"

"Come now, in your last confession you admitted you didn't believe."

"Lafollone! Le Bois! Don't believe a word of what Mulot says. He's so drunk he confuses a confession with a test of conscience," the cardinal cried, laughing. "Are you nearly finished, Lafollone?"

"I am done, My Lord."

"Good. Once you're finished, say your goodbyes and leave us alone. I have to charge Le Bois with a secret commission."

"And I, My Lord," said Le Bois, "have a small petition to present to you."

"Yet another protégé?"

"Say, rather, a protégée, My Lord: a lady."

"Le Bois! You go too far, my friend."

"Oh, My Lord! She's seventy years old!"

"And what does this protégée do?"

"She writes verses, My Lord."

"Verses?"

"Yes, and they're quite beautiful! Would you like to hear them?"

"No, they would put Mulot to sleep and give Lafollone indigestion."

"Please? Just four?"

"Oh, well – four should be no problem."

"Here, My Lord," said Bois-Robert, and he presented the cardinal with an engraving of Joan of Arc.

"But this is an engraving," said the cardinal, "and you spoke of verses."

"Read what is below the engraving, My Lord."

"Ah! Very well." The cardinal read the following four lines:

Can you grant me, Virgin adored,  
Both your sweet eyes and the shining sword?  
My sight is sweetest when I see my kingdom,  
And my sword in fury shall give her Freedom!

"Well, well," said the cardinal, and he read the lines again. "They're quite good, these lines. Proud and powerful. Who wrote them?"

"Read the author's name – it's written below, My Lord."

"Marie Le Jars, Demoiselle de Gournay. What!" the cardinal cried. "These lines are by Miss de Gournay?"

"By Miss de Gournay, yes, My Lord."

"The same Miss de Gournay who published a volume titled *The Shadow*?"

"Yes, the one who published *The Shadow*."

"But she's the exact person I planned to send you to, Le Bois."

"Really!"

"Take my carriage and bring her to me."

"More down-at-heels wretches!" said Mulot. "If you send him chasing after every luckless poet, it will kill My Lord's horses."

"Monsieur Abbot," said Bois-Robert, "God created lord's horses to be used, just as he did almoners of Sainte-Chapelle."

"Ha! For once you have him, *friend*," Richelieu laughed, while Mulot sputtered, speechless.

But the chaplain pulled himself together. "I am not the cardinal's almoner!" he cried, exasperated.

"The Demoiselle de Gournay is already here," Bois-Robert said.

"What? The Demoiselle de Gournay is here?" asked the cardinal.

"Yes. I expected, this morning, to solicit a favour for her from Your Eminence. Knowing My Lord's generosity, I was sure you would grant it, so I asked her to come here between ten o'clock and ten-thirty. So she must be waiting."

"Le Bois, you're a gem of a man. Come, Father, one last glass. Lafollone, one more spoonful of the *confit* and then say grace. I must give an audience to Miss de Gournay, who is a noble lady and the adopted daughter of Montaigne."

Lafollone beatifically crossed his hands on his belly and raised his eyes devoutly to heaven. "Lord God," he said, "please grant us the grace to digest this good lunch upon which we have dined so well." This was what the cardinal called Lafollone's grace. "And now, Gentlemen," said the cardinal, "you may leave."

Lafollone and Mulot both rose at this dismissal, Lafollone beaming, Mulot still surly, and made for the door. Lafollone rolled out, saying, "Decidedly, His Eminence spreads an excellent lunch."

Mulot, staggering like Silenus, raised his hands to heaven and sputtered, "A cardinal who doesn't believe in God! It's an abomination!"

As for Bois-Robert, he had already left His Eminence's office, eager to announce his good news to his protégée. For a moment, the cardinal was alone. But this was enough time for him to arrange his angular features, though his eyes remained thoughtful in his pale, severe face. "Ravaillac's statement still exists," he whispered. "Sully knows who has it. And, oh – I too shall know!" And as Bois-Robert returned, leading the Demoiselle de Gournay by the hand, a smile, an unusual sight on his sombre countenance, appeared momentarily on his lips.

As we have said, the Demoiselle de Gournay was a spinster, born in the mid-sixteenth century. She was of a good family from Picardy. At the age of nineteen she had read, and been amazed by, Montaigne's *Essays*. She decided she had to meet the author. At that very time, Montaigne came to Paris. She quickly found out his address and sent him a letter of greeting, in which she declared her high esteem for him and his book. Montaigne came to see her the next day and was so taken with her youth and enthusiasm that he offered to regard her as a father does a daughter, an offer she gratefully accepted. From that day forward, she added to her signature, "Adopted Daughter of Montaigne."

She wrote fairly good verse, as we have seen. But she had fallen into a state of misery and starvation by the time Bois-Robert, who was known as the Angel of Afflicted Muses, learned of her distress and decided to present her to Cardinal Richelieu. Bois-Robert had seen the power of the cardinal, and he'd told her "To be blessed in this world by My Lord le Cardinal is nearly as good as to be blessed in the next by Our Lord Jesus Christ."

Bois-Robert didn't hesitate to introduce his protégée to the Place Royale, and by a strange coincidence he'd brought her to the cardinal's waiting room on the very day His Eminence meant to send him to summon her. The needy spinster was punctual, as if having been warned of the habits of the cardinal. So it was, as we've said, that he received her with a smile and, knowing literary Paris as he

did, added an *à propos* compliment about her book, *The Shadow*. But the lady, unabashed, said, “You laugh at a poor old woman – but I suppose a genius must laugh, and who in all the world would begrudge you entertainment?”

The cardinal, astonished at such humility combined with presence of mind, was moved to apologise. Then, turning to Bois-Robert, he said, “Come, Le Bois, what you would ask of us for Miss de Gournay?”

“It is not for me to set bounds on Your Eminence’s generosity,” said Bois-Robert with a bow.

“Well, then,” said the cardinal, “I shall grant her a pension of two hundred crowns.”

That was a great deal at the time, especially for a poor spinster. Two hundred crowns in that period were twelve hundred *livres*, equal to four to five thousand francs in our time.

The Demoiselle de Gournay made a gesture of gratitude and began to utter her thanks but Bois-Robert, who was not yet satisfied, interrupted her in mid-sentence. “My Lord said two hundred crowns?”

“Yes,” said the cardinal.

“That’s all very well for her, My Lord, and thank you. But Miss de Gournay has dependents.”

“Ah, she has servants?” said the cardinal.

“Yes, a daughter of the nobility cannot serve herself. My Lord understands that.”

“I do indeed. And how many domestics does Miss de Gournay have?”

The cardinal was determined to meet if not exceed whatever Bois-Robert asked for. “Well, she has Miss Jamyn,” replied Bois-Robert.

“Oh! Monsieur Bois-Robert,” murmured the spinster, “please don’t take liberties with the cardinal’s charity.”

“Trust me, trust me,” said Bois-Robert, “I know His Eminence.”

“And who is this Miss Jamyn?” asked the cardinal.

“The illegitimate child of Amadis Jamyn, and Miss de Gournay thanks you on her behalf,” said the persistent muse. “But there is also darling Piaillon.”

“Darling Piaillon?” asked the cardinal while poor Miss de Gournay desperately gestured at Bois-Robert to stop, signals which Bois-Robert ignored.

“Darling Piaillon. Your Eminence doesn’t know darling Piaillon?”

“I must admit I do not, Le Bois.”

“But that is Miss de Gournay’s cat.”

“My Lord!” cried the poor spinster. “I must apologise!”

The cardinal waved his hand reassuringly. “I grant darling Piaillon an annual pension of twenty pounds, on the condition she be served tripe often.”

“Tripe it shall be, even *à la mode de Caen*, if Your Eminence demands it.”

“Thank you on behalf of my darling Piaillon,” said Miss de Gournay, “but ...”

“What, Le Bois?” said the cardinal who couldn’t help laughing, “There is a ‘but’?”

“There is, My Lord. For darling Piaillon has just had kittens.”

“Oh!” said the Demoiselle de Gournay, chagrined and rubbing one hand over the other.

“How many kittens?” asked the cardinal.

“Five!” said Bois-Robert.

“My!” said the cardinal. “Darling Piaillon is fruitful. No matter, Le Bois, I add a *pistole* for each kitten.”

“And now, Miss de Gournay,” said Bois-Robert, delighted, “I permit you to thank His Eminence.”

“Not yet, not yet,” said the cardinal. “It’s too soon for Miss de Gournay to thank me, as I hope to soon be thanking her.”

“What?” said Bois-Robert.

“Leave us alone, Le Bois. I have a favour to ask of Miss.”

Bois-Robert gazed in surprise, first at the cardinal, then at Miss de Gournay. “Oh, I see what’s in your mind, Master Droll,” said the cardinal. “But if I hear any remarks from you about Miss de Gournay’s honour, you’ll have me to deal with. Await Miss in the antechamber.” Bois-Robert bowed and left. He had no idea what this was about. The cardinal waited until the door was closed before approaching Miss de Gournay who had no more idea than Bois-Robert what he had in mind. “Yes, Miss,” he said, “I have a favour to ask of you.”

“What is it, My Lord?” the poor spinster asked.

“I need you to recall some memories. I’m sure it will be easy, for you have a good memory, don’t you?”

“Excellent, My Lord, as long as we don’t go back too far.”

“What I’d like to ask you about is something, or rather two things, that happened between May ninth and eleventh in sixteen-ten.”

Miss started at that date, and looked anxiously at the cardinal. “May ninth to eleventh,” she repeated. “May ninth and eleventh in sixteen-ten – that is to say, the year they assassinated our poor dear King Henri IV, the Beloved.”

“Exactly, Miss. And the question I need to ask you relates to his death.”

Miss de Gournay said nothing but her anxiety increased.

“Don’t be upset, Miss,” said Richelieu. “My investigation doesn’t concern you and yours, only your devotion to the truth. The awards that Bois-Robert has solicited for you are not in question, for what I’ve granted you is far below your merit.”

“You must pardon me, My Lord,” said the poor spinster, “for I don’t understand.”

“Two words will make you understand. You knew a woman named Jacqueline Le Voyer, Dame de Coëtman, did you not?”

Miss de Gournay started and turned pale. “Yes,” she said. “She was from the same province as I. But thirty years my junior, if yet she lives.”

“I believe it was on the 9th or 10th of May, I’m not sure which, that she sent a letter addressed to Monsieur de Sully, to be given to the king.”

“Yes, it was on May tenth, my Lord.”

“You know what was in that letter?”

“It was a warning that the king would be assassinated.”

“The letter named the conspirators?”

“Yes, My Lord,” the Demoiselle de Gournay said, trembling.

“You remember whom the Dame de Coëtman denounced?”

“I remember.”

“Would you tell me their names?”

“This is a very grave matter you ask me about, My Lord.”

“Indeed it is. I’ll name them and be satisfied if you answer, yes or no, by a nod.” He paused. “Those named by the Dame de Coëtman were the queen mother, Concini the Maréchal d’Ancre, and the Duke d’Epernon.” The young lady de Gournay, more dead than alive, nodded her head in the affirmative. “That letter,” continued the cardinal, “you gave to Monsieur de Sully, who to the fatal harm of the king did not show it to him – but you felt you had done all you could.”

“That’s it exactly, My Lord,” said Miss de Gournay.

“This letter – you kept it?”

“Yes, My Lord, for only two people had the right to ask it of me: the Duke de Sully, to whom it was addressed, and the Dame de Coëtman, who had written it.”

“You never heard a word about this from the Duke de Sully?”

“No, My Lord.”

“Nor the Dame de Coëtman?”

“I heard she’d been arrested on the 13th. I haven’t seen her since and have no idea if she’s dead or alive.”

“So you have this letter?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Then I must ask, my dear Demoiselle, for you to give it up to me.”

“Impossible, My Lord,” said the Miss de Gournay with a firmness that, a moment before, would have seemed inconceivable.

“Why is that?”

“Because, as I’ve had the honour to tell Your Eminence a moment ago, only two people have a right to ask it of me: the Dame de Coëtman, who has been accused of complicity in this dark and terrible affair, and for whom it may serve as an exoneration; and Monsieur le Duke de Sully.”

“The Dame de Coëtman no longer needs exoneration, as she died last night between the hours of one and two in the morning, at the Convent of the Repentant Daughters.”

“God rest her soul,” said Miss de Gournay, crossing herself. “She was a martyr!”

“And as for the Duc de Sully,” continued the cardinal, “since he hasn’t cared about this letter for the last eighteen years, it’s unlikely he cares about it today.”

Miss de Gournay shook her head. “I can do nothing without the permission of Monsieur de Sully,” she said, “especially since the Dame de Coëtman is no longer of this world.”

“But suppose,” said Richelieu, “I said that the pensions I’ve granted you are the price of this letter?”

Miss de Gournay rose with supreme dignity. “My Lord,” she said, “I am a daughter of the nobility and therefore a gentlewoman, as you are a gentleman. I will starve to death if I must but I will do nothing to betray my conscience.”

“Daughter of the nobility, you shall not starve to death, nor need you do anything to betray your conscience,” said the cardinal, visibly pleased to see such courage in a poor writer of books. “I guarantee that Monsieur de Sully will give you the permission you require. You may go yourself to the Hotel de Sully, with my Captain of the Guards as your escort, if you wish.”

He called Cavois and Bois-Robert, who each entered through a different door. “Cavois,” he said, “take my carriage and drive Miss de Gournay to the home of Monsieur le Duke de Sully. Announce that you’ve come in my name and you’ll be admitted immediately. Then accompany her, again in the carriage, to her home, where she will give you a letter that you will bring directly to me.”

Then, addressing Bois-Robert, he said, “Le Bois, I hereby double the pensions of Miss de Gournay, of the bastard of Amadis Jamyn, of darling Piaillon, and of her kittens. Is that correct? Did I forget anyone?”

“No, My Lord,” said Bois-Robert, overcome with joy.

“Work it out with my treasurer so they will begin on first January sixteen-twenty-eight.”

“Ah! My Lord!” cried Miss de Gournay, seizing Richelieu’s hand and kissing it.

“It’s I who should kiss your hand, Miss,” said the cardinal.

“My Lord! My Lord!” said Miss de Gournay, clasping his hand in hers. “For an old woman of my age...!”

“A noble hand’s ever youthful,” said the cardinal. And he kissed her hand as earnestly as if she were a maid of 25. Then Miss de Gournay left with Cavois by one door, while Bois-Robert went out another.



Michel, called Souscarrières

"By God," said the cardinal, "he is a cunning rascal. Cavois! Cavois!"

His guard captain entered. "My Lord?"

"The man who brought this report, is he still here?"

"My Lord," Cavois replied, "Unless I'm mistaken, it is Monsieur de Souscarrières himself."

"Bring him in, my dear Cavois, bring him in."

As if the Lord de Souscarrières had anticipated this very invitation, he appeared at the office door, wearing an outfit simple yet elegant, and bowed deeply to the cardinal. "Come in, Monsieur Michel," said His Eminence.

"Here I am, My Lord," said Souscarrières.

"It was no mistake to place my trust in you. You're a clever man."

"If My Lord is pleased with me, I'm also a happy man."

"Quite pleased. But I don't like riddles, as I don't have time to solve them. How can you recount all my personal details so accurately?"

"My Lord," Souscarrières replied with a self-satisfied smile, "I had no doubt Your Eminence would personally avail himself of this new form of transport which you have authorised."

"So?"

"So I tarried in the Rue Royale until I saw His Eminence come out."

"And thereafter?"

"Thereafter, My Lord, the largest porter, who knocked on the convent door, who carried the Dame de Coëtman to the hearth, and so forth – that was me."

"My faith!" said the cardinal. "Is that so?"

PART IV

098

The King [Louis XIII] goes Larding

And now, for the purposes of our story, our readers must allow us to better acquaint them with King Louis XIII, whom we've only glimpsed at night in the queen's bedchamber, where he was driven by Cardinal Richelieu's suspicions that she might be plotting against him. We recall him announcing that, by order of Doctor Bouvard, he would be purged the next day and bled the day after that. He was purged, he was bled, and it made him neither happier nor healthier: on the contrary, his melancholy and his pallor had only increased. No one knew the cause of this melancholy, though it had afflicted the king since he was fourteen or fifteen. The mood drove him to try, one after another, every form of diversion or amusement he'd never tried before. Worse, in the middle of his crowded court he was virtually alone and friendless, accompanied only by his fool l'Angely, who always dressed in black that added to the general air of gloom. Nothing could be sadder than his lonely suite of rooms, where no woman ever entered, with the exception of Queen Anne and the queen mother, who did so only to keep him from coming to their own apartments. If you had an audience scheduled with him, upon arriving at the designated time, often you would be received first by Monsieur de Tréville, or Monsieur de Guitaut, or by Beringhen, who in his capacity as Premier Valet was known as "Monsieur le Premier." One or another of these gentlemen would introduce you into a seemingly empty chamber where you might look about and wonder if the king was there at all. Then you would notice him, standing in an embrasure and staring out the window, possibly with one of his gentlemen, whom he has honoured by saying, "Come, Monsieur So-and-So, let us be weary together." Anyone who heard the tone in which he said this knew he spoke with complete sincerity. More than once, the queen, trying to gain some leverage over this dreary personality and none too sure of being able to do it herself, had, on the advice of the queen mother, brought in a young beauty of whose loyalty she was certain in hopes that the girl might catch his eye, then exert some influence but always in vain. This was the king whom Luynes, after four years of marriage, had been forced to carry into his wife's bedchamber. This was a king whose favourites were always men, never women. The Italians thought they understood his preferences and summed him up with a phrase, *La buggera ha passato i monti* – that is, "Sodomy has come over the mountains." Even "La Irresistible," the stunning Madam de Chevreuse, had tried to catch his eye; but despite the triple allure of youth, beauty, and wit, she had failed.

"But Sire," she said to him one day, exasperated by his chilly indifference, "wouldn't you like to have a mistress?"

"Yes, Madam, I would," the king said.

"Ah! And how would you like to have her, then?"

"Only above the belt," replied the king.

"Well," said Madam de Chevreuse, "the next time I come to the Louvre I'll dress like the actor Gros-Guillaume, who's so fat he wears a belt above and a belt below: but I'll just wear the belt below, on my thigh."

It was in the hope of engaging the king that the chaste and beautiful damsel we have presented to our readers as Isabelle de Lautrec had been brought to Court. We have seen how devoted she was to the queen, though her father was a retainer of the Duke de Rethel. And indeed, Isabelle was so lovely that even Louis XIII had noticed. He'd chatted with her and found her personality quite charming. She, for her part, quite ignorant that she was part of a scheme, had spoken to the king with modesty and respect. But that was all 6 months before the time of our story, and since then the king had acquired a new page as a personal servant, with whom he was so taken that he had little time for Isabelle, let alone the queen. In fact, with this king, favourite succeeded favourite so rapidly that at any given moment it was hard for the courtiers to know who, as they say at the horse races, had the inside track. First there had been Pierrot, the peasant farmer we mentioned. Then had come Luynes, the chief of his Cabinet of Birds. Then came d'Esplan, his Arbalest Bearer, whom he made Marquis de Grimaud. Then Chalais, who wound up beheaded. Then Baradas, the favourite of the moment. And now, at last, came Saint-Simon, who, hoping to become a permanent favourite, was conspiring at the disgrace of Baradas – a disgrace that was all too predictable, given the fragile moods of King Louis XIII, a man who kept his favourites in that impossible place between friendship and love. Next beyond his favourites was his loyal entourage. This included Monsieur de Tréville, his Captain of Musketeers, who may be familiar to the reader from some other books we won't bother to mention here; the Count de Nogent-Bautru, brother of that Bautru the cardinal had sent to Spain, a man who, the first time he'd been presented at Court, had chanced to meet the king at a path in the Tuileries flooded with water, and had carried the king over it on his shoulders as St. Christopher had carried Jesus Christ, and who had the rare privilege, shared only with the fool l'Angely, of being allowed to say anything in the presence of the king, even attempt to jolly him out of his gloomy moods; Bassompierre, made a marshal in 1622, more for service in the bedchamber of Marie de Médicis than for his exploits in battle, a man, moreover, of wit, charm, and heart who kept an outstanding memoir of his time, from the end of the 16th century through the early part of the 17; Sublet-Desnoyers, the king's secretary, or rather his valet; La Vieuville, Superintendent of Finances; Guitaut, his Captain of the Guards, a man entirely devoted to him and to Queen Anne of Austria, who replied to all offers to join the service of the cardinal with "Impossible, Your Eminence – I'm a man of the king, and the Gospel says no one can serve two masters"; and finally Maréchal de Marillac, brother of the Keeper of the Seals, whose execution was later to be a bloody stain on the reign of Louis XIII – or rather the ministry of Cardinal Richelieu. It so happened that, the day after Souscarrières had delivered his uncannily accurate report to Richelieu about the events of the night before, the king, after lunching with Baradas, had formed an impromptu party with Nogent and called for two of his musicians, Molinier and Justin, to accompany them with lute and viola while he engaged in his latest diversion. He then turned to Bassompierre, Marillac, Desnoyers, and La Vieuville, who had just come in, and said, "Gentlemen, let's go to the kitchens and lard some meat."

"Yes, gentlemen, let's go larding!" said l'Angely in snotty hauteur. "How well they go together: royalty and larding."

And, with this rather mediocre joke, he popped his hat on his head and pulled Nogent's down over his ears. "What are you doing, buffoon?" Nogent said.

"Covering your head and mine," said l'Angely.

"In front of the king? What are you thinking?"

"Bah! Etiquette doesn't apply to buffoons like us."

"Sire, please silence this insolent clown!" Nogent cried, furious.

"What, Nogent?" said Louis XIII, "You think anyone could keep l'Angely quiet?"

"You pay me to speak my mind," l'Angely said. "If I shut up, I'd be as dull as Monsieur de La Vieuville whom you made Superintendent of Finances even though he has no finances and has to pay himself from yours. At least I steal my money honestly."

"Didn't Your Majesty hear what he said?" Nogent persisted.

"I did but I think you should mind how you speak yourself."

"How I speak ... to you, Sire?"

"Indeed. When we were playing tennis and I just missed the ball, you said, 'See that? There's Louis the *Just Missed*.' You must be a buffoon just like l'Angely, Nogent, if I allow you to say such things to me. Now come, gentlemen, let's go larding." These words, *let's go larding*, deserve an explanation, as we don't want to leave our readers in the dark. The explanation is as follows. As we've already mentioned, to fight his melancholy the king engaged in all kinds of diversions, though he was rarely diverted by them. As a child he'd made squirt-guns out of leather scraps, as a young man he'd daubed colours on canvas that his courtiers were required to call "paintings," then played what they were obliged to call "music" (though he was quite a good drummer, according to Bassompierre). He had hammered together frames and cages with Monsieur Desnoyers; he had made preserves and jam, and excellent jam at that; he had taken up gardening, managing to grow green peas in February that were sold at market where Sir de Montausson had bought some; and finally, he had learned how to be a barber. One day, in his enthusiasm for this new hobby, he had summoned and shaved all his officers, leaving on each chin only that slim goatee that became known as the *royale*. A satire about this went briefly around the Louvre:

Alas, my poor beard!  
Who trimmed you thusly?  
The great King Louis,  
Thirteenth of the name,  
Chief barber of his manse.  
"Monsieur de La Force,  
You should do it, too!"  
"Alas, Sire, thank you,  
I don't dare to try,  
Your soldiers won't give me the chance."  
Let's all wear the beard  
Of Cousin Richelieu.  
Yes, that will do.  
For only a fool would dare  
To out-barber the King of France!

However, King Louis had tired of shaving his men's beards, as he tired of everything. A few weeks before this, he had gone down to the kitchens to test a theory of more economical recipes, so General Coquet could afford his milk soup and Monsieur de La Vrillière could still have his biscuits in the morning. There he saw his chef and cooks larding lams and wagyu fat into cutlets of veal, loins of beef, and whole hares and pheasants, a process he found fascinating. As a result, for the last month His Majesty had been larding meat in his kitchens, and had insisted that his courtiers go larding with him. I don't know if the art of cooking was improved by the involvement of the royal hands but the king certainly improved its presentation. Loins of veal and beef filets that were large enough to be trimmed artistically, started coming up from the kitchens in novel shapes: trees, houses, dogs, wolves, deer, and *fleurs-de-lys* were seen. Nogent and some of the others went from cutting heraldic shapes to making rather lewd images that earned them severe reprimands from the priggish Louis, who forbade such tasteless viands from being served on the royal tables. And now our readers know enough that we can proceed with our story. When the king said "Gentlemen, let's go larding," his entourage hastened to follow him down the stairs. Bassompierre took advantage of the time it took to get the chamber prepared for the king's latest pursuit, where there were five or six marble-topped tables, each with its loin of veal, its fillet of beef, its hare or its pheasant, and where the squire Georges waited with plates of pre-cut beef bacon and larding needles that he handed to those who wished to humour His Majesty by submitting to his latest whimsy – Bassompierre, we say, took advantage of this

moment to place a hand on the shoulder of the Superintendent of Finance and say, in a low voice but loud enough to be heard by everyone, "Monsieur le Surintendant, if it's not being too curious, might I ask when you plan to pay me my quarterly stipend as Colonel-General of the Swiss Guard, an office for which I paid a hundred thousand crowns in cash?"

Instead of answering, Monsieur de La Vieuville, who, like Nogent, was sometimes given to playing the fool, began to spin his arms like the hands on a clock, saying, "I'm late, I'm late, I'm late ... !"

"My faith," said Bassompierre, "in my life I've solved many a riddle but I don't know the answer to this one."

"Monsieur le Maréchal," said La Vieuville, "when one is late, he is not current, no?"

"... Yes."

"Well, I have no currency, so I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!"

Just then the party was joined by the Duke d'Angoulême, the bastard of King Charles IX and Marie Touchet, and the Duke de Guise, whom we last saw at the soirée for Princess Marie and whom the Duke d'Orléans had promised a corps in the army, assuming he would be lieutenant general to the king in the Italian offensive. Both waited to approach until they were recognised by the king. Bassompierre, who was at a loss for a reply to La Vieuville, bravely went up to the Duke d'Angoulême – we say bravely because as Angouleme turned to face him, he brought to bear one of the most formidable noses of the époque. "You're late, you're late, you're late – fine, so is your wife," said Bassompierre. "What's that to me? Ah, *by mu troth*, if I could only counterfeit money like Monsieur d'Angoulême, here, I'd have no worries."

The Duke d'Angoulême, who had no ready response, turned his nose and looked away, pretending he hadn't heard – but King Louis XIII had heard, and maliciously interjected, "Cousin, did you hear what Monsieur de Bassompierre said?"

"No, Sire, I am deaf in my right ear," replied the duke.

"Like Caesar," said Bassompierre.

"He wonders if you make counterfeit money."

"Pardon, Sire," replied Bassompierre. "I do not wonder if Monsieur d'Angoulême makes counterfeit money, I assert it as a known fact."

The Duke d'Angoulême shrugged. "For twenty years I've been putting up with this nonsense."

"Is there some truth to it, Cousin? Tell us," said the king.

"Ah, *my God*, very well: here is the truth. In my Château de Grosbois I rented a room to an alchemist called Merlin who claimed the location was perfect for finding the Philosopher's Stone. He gave me four thousand crowns a year on condition I not inquire into what he was doing, and allow him to live in a house of a Son of France where the law couldn't reach him. You understand, Sire, that since I was being paid more for a single room than I could get for the whole mansion, I wasn't about to pry and risk losing such a good tenant."

"You see how you slander him, Bassompierre?" said the king. "What could be more honest than the entrepreneurship of our cousin?"

"Besides," said the Duke d'Angoulême, "what's a little counterfeit money to me, the son of King Charles IX of France, when your father, of glorious memory, son of Antoine de Bourbon and King of Navarre, was such a thief?"

"What – my father, a thief!" cried Louis XIII.

"Aha!" said Bassompierre. "Perhaps that's why he said to me one day, 'It's a good thing I'm the king, or else I'd be hanged!'"

"Sire, with all due respect owed to Your Majesty," continued the Duke d'Angoulême, "the king, your father, was a thief when gaming."

"And I," said Louis XIII, "I'll just point out to you that stealing in a game isn't stealing, it's just cheating. Besides, after the game, he returned the money."

"Not always," said Bassompierre.

"What do you mean, not always?" said the king.

"Upon my word, it's the truth, and your august mother will support me. One day, or rather one night, I had the honour of playing with the king. There were fifty *pistoles* in the pot but we noticed some half-*pistoles* were mixed in. 'Sire,' I said to the king, 'is Your Majesty trying to pass off half-*pistoles* as full *pistoles*?' 'No, it's you,' replied the king. So I took all the half-*pistoles*, opened a window, threw them down to the servants waiting in the courtyard, and then returned to the game with all the full *pistoles*."

"You did that, Bassompierre?" said the king.

"Yes, Sire, and your august mother said, 'Today Bassompierre is the king, and the king is Bassompierre.'"

"Faith of a gentleman, that was well said," cried Louis XIII. "And what did my father say?"

"Sire, no doubt memories of his marital woes with Queen Marguerite led him to speak unfairly, for he said, 'Yes, you'd like it if he was the king, as you'd have a younger husband.'"

"So, who won the game?" asked Louis XIII.

"King Henri IV, Sire. He took the entire pot, and he must have been preoccupied by Her Majesty's remarks, as when he pocketed his winnings he also took some of my spare coins that were still on the table."

"Oh," said the Duke d'Angoulême, "I saw him steal much more than that..."

"My father?" asked Louis XIII.

"I once saw him steal a cloak."

"A cloak ...?"

"Though it's true that, at the time, he was still just King of Navarre."

"Very well," said Louis XIII, "tell us about that, Cousin."

"King Henri III was dying in Saint-Cloud, assassinated in the same house where he and Monsieur de Gondy had plotted the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, though he was then still just Duke d'Anjou. Anyway, it was the anniversary of the day of the decision, and the King of Navarre was there; it was in his arms that Henri III died, bequeathing him the throne. Navarre's outfit of purple velvet wasn't appropriate for mourning, and he didn't have enough money to buy a black doublet and breeches, so he rolled up the dark mantle of death that covered the king, put it under his arm, and stole away, thinking no one would be paying attention to him. But His Majesty had an excuse – assuming kings need an excuse to steal – as, without that cloak, he wouldn't have been able to mourn properly!"

"And now you complain, Cousin, that you can't afford to pay your servants," said the king, "When you have a room you could rent for four thousand crowns a year to a counterfeiting alchemist."

"Your pardon, Sire," said the Duke d'Angoulême. "It's possible my servants complain that I can't pay them but I've never complained about it. The last time they came to me to demand their wages, saying they didn't have so much as a silver piece between them, I simply replied, 'This is within your own power to solve, fools that you are. Four dark streets lead to the Hotel d'Angoulême, a perfect setup. Put yourselves to work there.' They took my advice. There have been some complaints lately about robberies in the Rue Pavée, the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Catherine, and the Rue de la Couture but those clowns no longer bother me for their wages."

"Yes," said Louis XIII, "and one day I'll hang your clowns from the gate of your hotel."

"If you can get the cardinal's permission, Sire!" laughed the Duke d'Angoulême.

"Gentlemen, let's lard," said the king, furious.

And he threw himself on a loin of veal and began to pierce it with no less fury than if his larding needle was a sword and the veal was the cardinal. "My faith, Louis!" said l'Angely. "I think this time it's you who got larded!"

## 099

### As the King was larding

It was remarks like these – from his own entourage, even, who spared him nothing – that put the king into a rage against his minister and made him take those sudden and unexpected resolutions that were the bane of the cardinal's policy and patience. If the enemies of His Eminence took advantage of Louis XIII in one of those moments of fury, he could be persuaded to adopt the most desperate decisions, or make them the most wonderful promises, even if he couldn't keep them. However, as the bile evoked by the Duke of Angouleme's words rose in his throat, the king, still stabbing his loin of veal, looked around, seeking someone who would give him a plausible excuse to vent his anger. His eyes fell on his two musicians, who stood on a low dais, one scratching at his lute and the other scraping his viola, with the same ill-temper as the king stabbing his veal. He noticed something he'd paid no attention to earlier: each was only half-dressed. Molinier wore a doublet but no hose, while Justin, clad in a jerkin and hose, had no doublet. "Hey!" said Louis XIII. "What is this, a masquerade?"

"Hold on!" said l'Angely. "I've got the answer to that."

"Fool," said the king, "you'd better not disappoint me." Louis XIII gave privileges to l'Angely granted to no one else. Unlike other kings, when he was alone with his fool, instead of being amused, Louis XIII usually talked with him of death. The king was fascinated by the most morbid and fantastic concepts. L'Angely often accompanied him on his thought-journeys beyond the grave. He was the Horatio to this other Prince of Denmark who was seeking – who can say? – Perhaps, like the first, the murderers of his father. Their talks were like Hamlet's conversation with the gravedigger but far more grave. In verbal jousts with l'Angely, it was usually the king who eventually gave up and gave in to the jester. This occasion was no different. "Come," said Louis XIII, "explain yourself, fool!"

"Louis, called Louis the Just because you were born under the sign of Libra, be worthy for once of that name, despite the way my colleague Nogent insulted you earlier. Yesterday, based on who knows what folly, you, King of France and Navarre, pleading poverty, cut the annual salary of these musical wretches in half. However, Sire, people who are paid only half their salaries can only halfway afford to dress. So you see, if you must quarrel with someone about their outfits, quarrel with me, as I was the one who advised them to dress this way."

"The advice of a fool!" said the king.

"Only if it fails them," replied l'Angely.

"Well, then," said the king, "I forgive them."

"Thank His Most Gracious Majesty Louis the Just," said l'Angely.

The two musicians stood up and bowed. "Fine, fine!" said the king. "Enough!"

Then he looked around to see who was properly imitating him in his diversion. Desnoyers prodded a hare, La Vieuville a pheasant, Nogent a beef tenderloin, while Saint-Simon, who wasn't too proud for it, assailed the plate of steak. Bassompierre was talking with the Duke of Guise, Baradas was playing with a cup-and-ball while the Duke of Angouleme lay back in a chair, sleeping or pretending to sleep. "What are you saying to the Duke of Guise, Marshal?" asked the king. "It must be very interesting."

"It is to us, yes," replied Bassompierre. "The Duke of Guise is seeking to quarrel with me."

"About what?"

"It seems Sir de Vendome is bored in his prison."

"Good!" said l'Angely. "Though he always seemed equally bored at the Louvre!"

"And so," continued Bassompierre, "he wrote to me."

"To you?"

"He probably thinks I'm in favour."

"And what does my brother of Vendome want?"

"He wants you to send him one of your pretty pages," said l'Angely.

"Quiet, fool!" said the king.

"He wants to be released from Vincennes to join the Italian campaign."

"Right!" said l'Angely. "Let the Piedmontese watch out if they turn their backs on him."

"And you replied to him?" asked the king.

"Yes, saying it was a waste of time unless he wanted to try asking to join the staff of Sir de Guise."

"Why is that?"

"Because Madam de Conti, the duke's sister, is my mistress."

"And how did you respond to that, de Guise?"



"I told him that meant nothing, as all Vendome's aunts have been my mistresses, and I didn't like him any the better for it."

The king turned. "And you, my cousin of Angouleme, what are you doing?"

"I dream, Sire."

"Of what?"

"Of the war in Piedmont."

"And what do you dream?"

"I dream, Sire, that Your Majesty leads his army on a march into Italy, and on one of the highest rocks in the Alps he finds his name inscribed beside that of Hannibal and Charlemagne. What do you think of my dream, Sire?"

"We approve of this dream," said l'Angely. "See to it that others dream the same way."

"And who commands the troops for me? My brother, or the cardinal?" asked the king.

"Pay attention," said l'Angely. "If it's your brother, he'll command as your subordinate but if it's the cardinal, he'll be your superior."

"Where the king is," said the Duke of Guise, "no one else commands."

"Right!" said l'Angely. "That's exactly how it was with your father, General Scarface, in the time of King Henry III."

"Which didn't turn out very well for him," said Bassompierre.

"Gentlemen," said the king, "the war in Piedmont is no small affair, and despite the disagreement between me and my mother, it has been decided upon in the King's Council. My Cousin of Angouleme and Sir de Guise, I must warn you, the queen mother's party is very much in favour of Sir having the command."

"Sire," replied the Duke of Angouleme, "I say openly and in advance, I believe it should be Sir Cardinal. After his success at La Rochelle, I think it would be doing him a great disservice to deprive him of the command – subordinate to the king, of course."

"That's your opinion?" said the king.

"Yes, Sire."

"Do you know that two years ago, the cardinal wanted to put you in Vincennes, and I was the one who prevented it?"

"Your Majesty was in error."

"How so?"

"If His Eminence wanted to put me in Vincennes, I'm sure I deserved it."

"Profit from the example of your cousin of Angouleme," said l'Angely. "He is a man of experience."

"I presume, Cousin," said the king, "that if I offered you command of the army, your opinion would be different?"

"If my king, whom I respect and must obey, ordered me to take command of the army, I would do so. But if I could, I would take that command and offer it to His Eminence, saying, 'Just give me a subcommand equal to that of Gentlemen de Bassompierre, de Bellegarde, de Guise, and de Créquy, and I will be happy.'"

"*Plague!*" said Bassompierre. "Sir d'Angouleme, I had no idea you were so modest."

"I am modest in my judgements, Marshal but proud when I compare myself to others."

"And you, Louis, who would you choose?" asked l'Angely. "The cardinal, Sir, or yourself? As for me, as I've told you, I'd pick Sir."

"And why is that, fool?"

"Since he was 'ill' all through the Siege of La Rochelle, he should be well rested in time for Italy. Perhaps hot countries suit your brother better than cold countries."

"Not when they're too hot," said Baradas.

"Oh, so you decide to get a word in, then?" said the king.

"Yes, when I have something to say," Baradas replied. "Otherwise, I am silent."

"And why aren't you larding?"

"Because my hands are clean and I don't want to soil them, and because I'm in a good mood and don't want to be in a bad one."

"Well," said Louis XIII, drawing a flask from his pocket, "this will restore your scented hands."

"What's that?"

"Orange-water."

"You know I detest your orange-water."

The king stepped up to Baradas and splashed orange-water on his face. Scarcely had the drops touched the young man when he leaped up, snatched the bottle from the king's hands, and smashed it on the floor. "See, gentlemen," said the king, turning pale. "What would you do to a page if he was as guilty of such an insult to you as this ruffian has been to me?"

Everyone was quiet. Only Bassompierre was unable to keep his tongue still. "Sire, I would thrash him."

"So, you would thrash me, Sir Marshall?" Baradas cried.

And drawing his sword in the presence of the king, he charged the marshal. The Duke of Guise and the Duke of Angouleme seized him. "Sir Baradas," said Bassompierre, "as it's forbidden under penalty of the loss of the offending hand to draw a sword before the king for the respect that I owe him I'll stand in his place and give you the lesson you've earned. Georges, give me a larding needle."

Taking the small cooking implement from the squire, Bassompierre said, "Release Sir Baradas."

They let Baradas go, and, despite the king's cries, he made a furious attack upon the marshal. But the marshal was an old and experienced fencer who, if he'd rarely drawn sword against an enemy, had often sparred with his friends. With perfect form, and without taking so much as a step back, he parried the favourite's every blow, and at the first opportunity thrust the needle into his opponent's shoulder and left it there. "Take that, little man," he said. "It's better than a thrashing, and you'll remember it longer."

Seeing the blood stain Baradas's sleeve, the king let out a cry. "Sir de Bassompierre," he said, "leave me, and never return!"

The marshal took up his hat. "Sire," he said, "will Your Majesty allow me to appeal this judgement?"

"To whom?" asked the king.

"To the king – once he awakes."

And while the king shouted, "Doctor Bouvard! Get Doctor Bouvard," Bassompierre shrugged and went out, waving goodbye to the Duke of Angouleme and the Duke of Guise, while muttering, "Him, the son of Henry IV? Never!"

**100**  
**The Shop of Ildefonse Lopez**

Our readers may recall from Souscarrières's report to the cardinal that Madam de Fargis and Sir de Mirabel, the Spanish Ambassador, had exchanged a letter in Lopez's jewellery store. But what Souscarrières didn't know was that the jeweller Lopez belonged body and soul to the cardinal that was very much in his interest because in his dual capacity as a (Sunni)Muslim and a Jew – he could pass at will for either a Jew or a (Sunni) Muslim – he needed a patron who could defend him in the event of an accusation of heresy, despite the care he took to eat beef every day to prove he was a follower of neither Moosaa ('A) nor Muhammad (S). And yet, one day, he almost fell afoul of the stupidity of a Master of Requests. He was accused of secretly paying agents on Spain's behalf, so the Master of Requests appeared one day, audited his books, and found the following entry incriminating:

Guadamassil for Señor de Bassompierre

Lopez, warned that he could be accused of high treason on the basis of this *payment* to Marshal Bassompierre, hastened to consult Madam de Rambouillet who was, along with the lovely Julie, one of his best customers. He begged for her protection, protesting that his only crime was the entry in his ledger that read:

Guadamassil for Señor de Bassompierre

Madam de Rambouillet called down her husband and told him about the case. He immediately went to the Master of Requests who was his friend and asserted Lopez's innocence. "And yet, my dear Marquis, one thing is clear," said the Master of Requests. "Guadamassil!"

The marquis paused. "Do you speak Spanish?" he asked the court official.

"No."

"Do you know what *Guadamassil* means?"

"No – but by the name alone, I deem it must be very significant!"

"Well, my dear sir, it means that Sir de Bassompierre ordered ... a Guadamassil tapestry for his wall."

The Master of Requests refused to believe it. The marquis had to bring him a Spanish dictionary so the Master of Requests could see for himself what the word meant. In fact, Lopez was of Moorish origin; but as the last Moors were expelled from Spain in 1610, Lopez had gone to France to plead for the interests of the fugitives. It was then that he'd become acquainted with the Marquis de Rambouillet, who spoke Spanish. Lopez was sharp. He advised a Parisian merchants' guild on a fabric shipment to Constantinople, and the enterprise was successful. The merchants cut him in on the profits. With this he bought a diamond in the rough and had it cut, polished, and sold so profitably that soon everyone was sending him their raw diamonds. In no time he was the leading jeweller in Paris, and since he employed the most skilled gem-cutters, all the most beautiful jewels of the era passed through his hands. One of his men was so skilled that he was able to split a flawed diamond into two perfect halves with a single blow. During the Siege of La Rochelle, the cardinal had sent Lopez to Holland to commission new ships and buy up everything available that could float. While he was there, he acquired a large collection of items from India and China and brought them back to France for sale, thus creating the French market for Oriental bric-a-brac. By the time he'd finished his sojourn in Holland, he'd made his fortune as an importer, meanwhile covertly completing his mission for the cardinal. Lopez had also taken note of the coincidence of the simultaneous visits to his shop of the Spanish Ambassador and Madam de Fargis, and his diamond cutter had spotted the exchange of the letter. Thus the cardinal had dual confirmation of this intelligence that only gave him a greater regard for the efforts of Souscarrières. The cardinal therefore knew that, when the queen, on the morning of the fourteenth, ordered sedan chairs for guests to be carried to Lopez's shop, it wasn't a sign of a woman who wanted to buy jewellery but rather of one who wanted to sell a kingdom. Thus on December 14, at around eleven in the morning, while Sir de Bassompierre was planting a larding needle in Baradas's shoulder, the queen was stepping out with Madam de Fargis, Isabelle de Lautrec, Madam de Chevreuse, and Patrocle, her first esquire. Madam de Bellier, her premier lady-in-waiting, arrived with a covered parrot cage in one hand and a letter in the other. "Oh, *my God*, what do you have there?" asked the queen.

"A gift for Your Royal Majesty from Her Highness the Infanta Claire-Eugénie."

"So this comes from Brussels?" the queen asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty – and here is a letter from the princess explaining the gift."

"Let's have a look," said the queen, overcome by feminine curiosity and reaching for the cage's cover.

"Not yet," said Madam de Bellier, drawing back the cage. "Your Majesty must read the letter first."

"And who brought this cage and its letter?"

"Michel Dause, Your Majesty's apothecary. Your Majesty knows that he is our correspondent in Belgium. Here is Her Highness's letter." The queen took the letter, opened it, and read:

*My Dear Niece,*

*I send you a wonderful parrot which, if you do not frighten it, you will discover can complement you in five different languages. It is a good little animal, very sweet and loyal. You will never, I am sure, have reason to complain of it.*

*Your Devoted Aunt,*

*Claire-Eugénie*

"Ah!" said the queen, "*It talks!*"

Immediately, a small voice came from under the cloth that said, in French, "Queen Anne of Austria is the most beautiful princess in the world."

"Ah! How wonderful!" cried the queen, "Now I'd like, my dear bird, to hear you speak Spanish."

“Yo quiero Doña Ana hacer por usted todo para que sus deseos lleguen.”

“Now in Italian,” said the queen. “Do you have something to say to me in Italian?”

The bird didn’t delay – immediately they heard the same voice say, in an Italian accent, “*Darei la mia vita per la carissima padrona mia.*”

The queen clapped her hands with joy. “And what are the other languages my parrot speaks?” she asked.

“English and Dutch, Your Majesty,” replied Madam de Bellier.

“In English, in English!” said Anne of Austria.

And the parrot, without further ado, immediately said, “*Give me your hand and I shall give you my heart.*”

“Ah!” said the queen. “I didn’t quite understand. Do you know English, my dear Isabelle?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“What did it mean?”

“The parrot said, ‘Give me your hand and I shall give you my heart.’”

“Oh! Bravo!” said the queen. “And now, what was that last language you said it speaks, Bellier?”

“Dutch, Madam.”

“Oh, what bad luck!” cried the queen. “None of us here understands Dutch.”

“Wait, Your Majesty,” said Madam de Fargis. “Beringhen is from Friesland, he knows Dutch.”

“Call Beringhen,” said the queen. “He should be in the king’s antechamber.”

Madam de Fargis went and brought back Beringhen. He was a tall and handsome lad, with blond hair and a red beard, half Dutch and half German, though he’d been raised in France. The king was very fond of him, and he was devoted to the king in return. Madam de Fargis came in tugging him by the sleeve; he didn’t know what he was wanted for and, faithful to his orders, it was only at the express command of the queen that he left his post in the royal antechamber. But the parrot was so smart that the moment Beringhen entered, it knew he could speak Dutch, and without waiting for a request for the fifth compliment, it said, “*Och, myne welbeminde koningin, ik bemin u, maar ik u meer in hollandsch, myne liefste geboorte taal.*”

“Oh!” Beringhen said, astonished. “This parrot speaks Dutch as if it was from Amsterdam.”

“And what did it say to me if you please, Sir de Beringhen?” the queen asked.

“It told Your Majesty, ‘Oh, my beloved Queen, I love you but I love you most of all in Dutch, my dear native language.’”

“Well done!” said the queen. “And now we shall see it! I have no doubt it’s as beautiful as it is well-educated.”

And so saying, she drew back the cloth to reveal what she already suspected: in the cage, instead of a parrot, was a pretty little dwarf woman, barely two feet tall and wearing a Frisian outfit. She made a nice bow to Her Majesty. She then stepped out of the cage through the door that was tall enough for her to use without stooping, and made a second bow, even more graceful than the first. The queen took the dwarf in her arms and kissed her just as she would a child, and in fact, though she was fifteen years old, she was no bigger than a girl of two. At that moment, someone was heard calling from the corridors, “Sir Premier! Sir Premier!”

According to the custom of the Court, that was the title of the king’s Premier Valet. Beringhen, who had finished his service to the queen, stepped quickly to the door and met the Second Valet, who was looking for him. Through the open door, the queen could hear the following exchange: “What is it?”

“The king is asking for Doctor Bouvard.”

“*My God!*” said the queen. “Has some misfortune happened to His Majesty?” She went to the door to inquire further but all she saw was the backs of the two valets as they raced off, each in a different direction. “Oh!” she said. “How can I find out what’s happened to the king?”

“Is Your Majesty going to see?” asked Miss de Lautrec.

“I dare not,” said the queen. “The king hasn’t called for me.”

“It’s a strange country,” murmured Isabelle, “where a worried wife dare not ask about her husband.”

“Do you think I should go take a look?” said Madam de Fargis.

“But what if the king is angry?”

“Well, he’s not likely to eat me – not King Louis XIII!” Then, approaching the queen, she whispered, “I’ll just take a couple of peeks and find out what’s happening.”

And just like that, she was gone. Five minutes later, she returned, laughing all the way. The queen breathed a sigh of relief. “So it was nothing serious, then?”

“Oh, quite serious: there was a duel.”

“A duel?” said the queen.

“Yes, in the presence of the king himself.”

“Who dared to do that?”

“Sir Baradas and Sir de Bassompierre. Sir Baradas was wounded.”

“By a sword?”

“No, a larding needle.”

And Madam de Fargis, who had assumed a serious look, broke out again into one of those rippling laughs like a string of pearls, a hallmark of those of joyous nature. “Well, ladies, now that we’ve been informed,” said the queen, “I don’t think we should let this accident interfere with our visit to Señor Lopez.”

Baradas, handsome though he was, didn’t inspire much sympathy in the queen or the ladies of her suite, so nobody had any objection to the queen’s proposal. She set the dwarf in Madam de Bellier’s arms and, asking her name, was told it was Gretchen that means both *Daisy* and *Pearl*. The sedan chairs were waiting at the foot of the Louvre’s grand staircase. Each could carry two passengers. The queen went with Madam de Fargis and tiny Gretchen. Ten minutes later, they were at Lopez’s place that was at the corner of Rue du Mouton and the Place de Grève. When the porters set the queen’s chair down in front of Lopez’s door, a young man who stood on the threshold, hat in hand, stepped forward to open the chair and offer his arm to the queen. This young man was the Count of Moret. A note from “Cousin Marina” to “Cousin Jacquolino” had apprised him that the queen would be at Lopez’s shop from eleven to noon, and he had hastened to be there. Had he come to greet the queen and salute Madam de Fargis, or to exchange glances with Isabelle? We cannot say – but what we can say is that as soon as he had bowed to the queen and shaken hands with Madam de Fargis, he ran to the chair that followed and offered his arm to Miss de Lautrec with as much respect as he had paid to the queen. “Pardon me, Miss,” he said to Isabelle, “for not coming to you first, as my heart desired; but in the presence of the queen, respect must come before all, even love.”

And bowing to the young woman, he conducted her to the entourage forming around the queen, and then took a step back before she could answer with anything but a blush. The attentions of the Count of Moret were so different from those of other gentlemen, and on the three occasions in which he’d been face-to-face with Isabelle, he had shown her so much love and respect that it was impossible that these meetings could have failed to leave an impression on the girl’s heart. She spent the entire time in Lopez’s shop standing in a corner, preoccupied, oblivious to the treasures displayed around her. Once inside, the queen looked around until she spotted the Spanish Ambassador, who was chatting with the diamond cutter, apparently asking the value of some of the stones. She, for her part, had brought Lopez a beautiful string of pearls, some of which were damaged and needed to be replaced. But the price of replacing the eight or ten damaged pearls was so high that she was reluctant to give Lopez permission to do it. Madam de Fargis, conversing with the Count of Moret, had been listening to him with one ear and to the queen with the other. She came over and asked, “Begging your pardon, Your Majesty but how much are you short of what you need?”

“Look here, my dear,” said the queen. “I desire this beautiful crucifix but this Jew of a Lopez won’t sell it to me for less than a thousand *pistoles*.”

“Bah!” said Madam de Fargis. “It’s quite unreasonable of you, Lopez, to sell this imitation cross for a thousand *pistoles* when your kind paid only thirty silver pieces for the original.”

“First of all,” said Lopez, “I am not a Jew, I’m a Muslim.”

“Jew, Muslim, it’s all one to me,” said Madam de Fargis.

“And then,” continued the queen, “I need a dozen pearls to repair my necklace, and he wants to charge me fifty *pistoles* apiece.”

“Is that all you need?” asked Madam de Fargis. “I have seven hundred *pistoles* of yours right here.”

“Where is it, my dear?” asked the queen.

“In the pockets of that big dark fellow there, standing by that tapestry from India.”

“Ah! Isn’t that Particelli?”

“No, Madam, that’s Sir d’Émery.”

“Particelli or d’Émery, does it matter?”

“Only to the king, Madam.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You may not know that when the cardinal appointed Sir d’Émery to be the Keeper of the Cutlery, the king said, ‘Good, let us have this Sir d’Émery in the position as soon as possible.’ ‘Why is that?’ asked the cardinal, astonished. ‘Because I’d heard that a rascal named Particelli wanted the post,’ said the king. ‘Particelli? He was hanged,’ said the cardinal. ‘I’m glad,’ said the king, ‘because it’s said he was a terrible thief.’”

“Yes, well, so...?” said the queen.

“So,” said Madam de Fargis, “you have but to whisper in the ear of Sir d’Émery and he will give you your seven hundred *pistoles*.”

“But how will I repay him?”

“Simply by not pointing out to the king that d’Émery and Particelli are one and the same.”

Madam de Fargis then ran over to d’Émery who had not noticed the queen, occupied as he was with inspecting some fabrics. But as soon as he saw her, and Madam de Fargis had whispered a few words in his ear, he came over as quickly as his short legs and big belly would allow. “Now, Your Majesty,” said Madam de Fargis, “you remember Sir Particelli!”

“D’Émery,” said the bursar.

“*My God*, of course,” said the queen.

“As soon as Sir Particelli knew of your embarrassment...”

“D’Émery, d’Émery,” repeated the bursar.

“...He offered to open for Your Majesty a line of credit with Sir Lopez for twenty thousand *livres*.”

“Twenty thousand *livres*!” cried the little man. “The devil!”

“Do you feel that isn’t enough for such a great queen, Sir Particelli? Do you think it should be more?”

“D’Émery, d’Émery, d’Émery,” he repeated despairingly. “Only too happy to be of assistance to Her Majesty; but in the name of heaven, call me d’Émery.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Madam de Fargis. “Particelli was hanged, wasn’t he?”

“Thank you, Sir d’Émery,” said the queen. “In truth, you’re doing me a genuine service.”

“It is I who am obliged to Your Majesty – but I would be very grateful if you were to ask Madam de Fargis, who is quite mistaken, not to call me Particelli.”

“Agreed, Sir d’Émery, agreed,” said Madam de Fargis, “so long as you tell Sir Lopez that you’re covering the queen for up to twenty thousand *livres*.”

“Yes, yes but there will be no more talk of Sir Particelli, no?”

“No, Sir d’Émery! Of course not, Sir d’Émery!” said Madam de Fargis, steering him over to Lopez.

Meanwhile, the queen and the Spanish ambassador had exchanged a glance, then gradually moved toward each other. The Count of Moret was leaning against a pillar and watching Isabelle de Lautrec, who was pretending to play with the dwarf and talk with Madam de Bellier, though she, feeling the burning gaze of Antoine de Bourbon upon her, was unable to play with the one nor converse with the other. Madam de Fargis was ensuring that Her Majesty would have twenty thousand *livres* credit, and d’Émery and Lopez were discussing the terms. Everyone was so busy with their own

affairs that no one paid any attention to the ambassador and the queen, who drifted together until they were side by side. There was a brief exchange of compliments before they passed on to more interesting matters. “Her Majesty has received a letter from Don Gonzales?” the ambassador asked.

“Yes, by way of the Count of Moret.”

“And Her Majesty read not only the visible lines, written by the Governor of Milan...”

“...But also the invisible lines written by my brother.”

“And the queen has considered the advice she was given?”

The queen blushed and looked down. “Madam,” the ambassador said, “there are necessities of State before which even those of the highest rank must bow. If the king died...”

“God save us from that misfortune, Sir!”

“But – if the king did die ... what would happen to you?”

“God would decide that.”

“We need not leave the decision to God, Madam. Do you trust Gaston’s word?”

“That wretch? No!”

“They would send you back to Spain, you know, or confine you in a French convent.”

“I do not hide from myself that that would be my fate.”

“Could you depend on support from your mother-in-law?”

“Oh, no. She pretends to love me but I know that beneath it all she hates me.”

“Indeed. But if Your Majesty were with child at the time of the king’s death, you would be declared regent, and everyone would fall at your feet.”

“I know that, Sir.”

“Well?”

The queen sighed. “But ... there’s no one I love who...”

“What you mean is that you still love someone who, unfortunately, it’s futile to love.”

Anne of Austria wiped away a tear. “Lopez is looking at us,” said the ambassador. “I don’t much trust this Lopez. We must part but first promise me one thing.”

“What’s that, Sir?”

“I ask only this but I ask it at the behest of your august brother, and on the behalf of both Spain and France.”

“What do you want me to promise, Sir?”

“That, if the grave circumstances we’ve discussed come to pass, you will close your eyes and allow yourself to be led by Madam de Fargis.”

“You have the queen’s promise on that,” said Madam de Fargis, appearing between the queen and the ambassador. “I promise it myself, in the name of Her Majesty.”

Then she added in a whisper, “Lopez is looking at you – and the diamond cutter has been listening.”

“Madam!” said the queen loudly. “It must be two o’clock in the afternoon. We must return to the Louvre for dinner, and to inquire after poor Sir Baradas!”

101

The Advice from a Jester

As we have seen, King Louis XIII was offended at first by the insolence of his favourite Baradas, when he tore the bottle of orange-water from the king’s hands and threw it at his feet. But as soon as he saw the wound inflicted by Sir de Bassompierre, spilling the precious blood of his precious Baradas, his anger changed to agony. Throwing himself upon the wounded youth, he drew the larding needle from his shoulder and, against all advice, citing his knowledge of medicine, insisted on treating the wound himself. But the gifts and privileges Louis XIII had showered on his favourite, reminiscent of the favours Henry III had granted his *mignons*, had turned him into a spoiled child. Baradas pushed the king away, pushed everyone away, vowing he would never forget this insult to himself and to the king. He shouted that justice demanded the Marshall de Bassompierre must be sent to the Bastille, unless he agreed to a public duel to settle the matter, like the one under Henry II that had ended in the death of La Châtaigneraie. The king tried to calm him but Baradas, who might have forgiven a wound from a sword, even from the proud Marshal Bassompierre, couldn’t forgive being wounded with a larding needle. He gave the king an ultimatum: nothing would do but either a legal duel in the presence of King and Court, or Bassompierre sent to the Bastille. Baradas then stalked off to his room, like the majestic Achilles retiring to his tent after Agamemnon refused to give up the lovely Briséis. This event threw all the larders into disarray, even those who weren’t larding. The Duke of Guise and the Duke of Angoulême, wanting no part of this domestic quarrel, put on their hats, walked to the door, and went out together. Once the door had closed behind them, the Duke of Guise paused and asked the Duke of Angoulême, “So, what do you think of that?”

Angoulême shrugged his shoulders. “I say that poor old King Henry III, much maligned though he is, was less dismayed by the deaths of his favourites Quélus, Schomberg, and Maugiron than our good King Louis XIII is by a scratch to Sir Baradas.”

“Is it possible for a son to be so unlike his father?” said the Duke of Guise in a low voice, glancing around as if looking for an escape route. “My faith, I must admit I preferred King Henry IV, even if he was still a Huguenot at heart.”

“You say that now that he’s dead; but when he was alive, you detested him.”

“He’d done so much damage to our noble house, it was impossible to be friends.”

“I can accept that,” said the Duke of Angoulême. “but what I can’t accept is this insisting on a similarity between a child and his father. Such a resemblance is not granted to every family. Let’s take you, for example, my dear duke,” said Angoulême, gently prodding de Guise’s arm. “I, who have had the honour of knowing your mother’s husband, and the pleasure of knowing you, I dare say, without the slightest malice intended, that there is no resemblance at all between you and him.”

“My dear Duke!” said Sir de Guise, not quite sure whether Angoulême was mocking him.

“But no!” Angoulême insisted, with that air of bonhomie of which he was a master, so that no one could ever tell whether he was quite serious. “But no! It’s obvious enough, *for the love of God*. Your late father was large where you are small, had an aquiline nose where yours is snubbed, and had dark eyes where yours are grey.”

“Next you’ll say he had a scar on his cheek, where I do not!”

“Only because you’ve never gone to war as he did.”

“What!” cried de Guise. “I, never gone to war? And what of La Rochelle, then?”

“That’s right, I forgot. You have seen war – from the battlements.”

“Duke,” said Sir de Guise, detaching his arm from Angoulême’s, “I think you’re having a bad day, and it’s time we parted.”

“Me, having a bad day? Is that what you think? If I said anything disagreeable, that was certainly not my intention. If you don’t look like your father, you must understand that that’s just a matter of chance. For example, do I resemble my father, Charles IX, who had red hair and a ruddy complexion? Not a bit. There’s no point in getting upset about it – everyone must look like someone. Our king, for example, looks a lot like Virginio Orsini, that cousin of the queen mother who came to France with her. You remember Orsini, don’t you? While Sir, in turn, looks as much like Concino Concini as one drop of water does to another. You yourself can have no doubt whom you resemble.”

“No, I’ve no idea, and I don’t care to know.”

“Quite so, you couldn’t have known, since six months before your birth he was killed by your uncle Mayenne. Well, you resemble no one so much as the Count of Saint-Mégrin. Or did you know that already?”

“I am sorry, my dear Duke but I must warn you to stop there.”

“I’m afraid that now you’re the one speaking in anger and malice, not I. Did I lose my temper when Sir de Bassompierre said I was passing counterfeit money? I did not. I’m afraid it’s you who’ve fallen into a bad mood, not me, and I who should take my leave.”

“I believe you’re right,” said Sir de Guise who strode off down the Rue de l’Arbre Sec that led to the Rue Saint-Honoré.

In fact, he left his caustic interlocutor so rapidly that Angoulême stood there for a moment wearing the astonished look of one surprised not to have gotten the last word. Eventually he walked on toward the Pont Neuf, hoping to find there another victim upon whom he could resume the petty torment he’d inflicted on the Duke of Guise. Meanwhile, the other courtiers had left one by one, until the king found himself alone with l’Angely. The jester, pleased to find himself in sole possession, planted himself before the king, who was sitting with his head down, melancholy eyes fixed upon the ground.

“Hum!” l’Angely sighed heavily.

Louis raised his head. “Well?” he asked in the tone of a suffering man who expects sympathy.

“Well!” l’Angely repeated in the same tone.

“What have you to say about Sir de Bassompierre?”

“I say,” l’Angely replied, in a tone that betrayed a mocking admiration, “that anyone so adept with a larding needle must have been a cook in his youth.”

A flash briefly lit the dull eyes of Louis XIII. “L’Angely,” he said, “I forbid you to joke about Sir Baradas’s accident.”

L’Angely’s face assumed an expression of deepest pain. “Because the Court cannot bear to lose him?”

“One more word, Fool,” said the king, rising and stamping his foot, “and I’ll thrash you till you bleed.”

He began marching around the room in agitation. “I see,” said l’Angely, hopping up onto the chair the king had just left. “First your pages misbehave, and who do you threaten to thrash? Me. And now here I am, threatened again. Ah! My colleague Nogent was right: they don’t call you Louis the Just for nothing. Plague take it!”

“Oh!” cried Louis XIII, without bothering to reply to his fool’s jests, not that he would have known what to say. “I shall have my revenge upon Sir de Bassompierre!”

“Did you ever hear the story about the snake who bit a steel saw, and found out he wasn’t the only one who had teeth?”

“What do you mean? Are you making excuses for him?”

“I mean, my son that king though you are, you can’t afford to throw away your true friends in order to preserve your false ones. Consider our minister, Richelieu. Though you’re the one who’s called the Just during your lifetime, it may well be that he will be the one called the Just after his death.”

“What?”

“You don’t see it that way, Louis? I certainly do. Remember when the cardinal came and told you, ‘Sire, while I’ve been labouring on your behalf and for the glory of France, your brother has been conspiring against me that is to say against you. He came to my château of Fleury with his entourage in order to dine with me, during which Sir de Chalais was to pass his sword through my body. Here’s the proof. Ask your brother about it.’ So you interrogated your brother. He collapsed in terror, as always, fell at your feet, and confessed to everything. Ah! It was a crime of high treason, and he should have lost his head on the block. And now you will go tell Sir de Richelieu, ‘I went larding but Baradas wouldn’t lard. I tried to make him but he snatched my orange-water, without any respect for my majesty, and smashed the bottle on the floor. I asked what a page who so insulted his king deserved, and Marshal Bassompierre, a sensible man, replied, ‘The whip, Sire.’ Upon which Sir Baradas drew his sword and lunged at Sir de Bassompierre who, in deference to my majesty, declined to draw his own blade, merely taking a larding needle from the hands of Georges and planting it in Sir Baradas’s shoulder. I demand, therefore, that Sir de Bassompierre be sent to the Bastille.’ But your minister – whom I will support against everyone, even you – your minister, who is the personification of justice, will say, ‘But it is Sir de Bassompierre who is in the right. Though I have sent other nobles and even princes to the Bastille, I will not send him. However, I will have your page beaten for having snatched your bottle from your hand, and put in the pillory for drawing his sword in your presence – this, I, your minister, the most important man in France after you – this I will do.’ And how will you reply to him, your loyal minister?”

“All I can say is, I love Baradas and hate Sir de Richelieu.”

“So you can’t just be wrong, you have to be wrong twice over: you hate a great man who does everything he can to make you great as well, and you love a little lout who can’t advise you as well as Luynes, or even betray you as well as Chalais.”

“Didn’t you hear his request for a trial by combat? There’s a precedent for it, the duel of Jarnac and La Châtaigneraie, under Henry II.”



"When I was told to stay behind in France, while my father went to Italy with the Duke of Nevers, My Lord, he argued his case with two points: First that the long journey would fatigue me, and only end at a city that might be besieged and sacked. Second, that he had found for me a place near Her Majesty, a position that ought to satisfy any young woman, even one more ambitious than I."

"Go ahead and tell me of the dangers you perceive in this new position of yours."

"Yes, My Lord. It seemed to me that there was some uncertainty about my youth and the sincerity of my devotion to my royal mistress. The king, either on his own account or pressed by others' advice, seemed to pay me more attention than I deserved. My respect for His Majesty blinded me at first to the meaning of these attentions, though his shyness always kept him within the bounds of gallant courtesy. However, one day I felt as if I needed to account to the queen for the kind of things the king was saying to me. But to my amazement, the queen just laughed and said, 'It would be quite marvellous, dear child, if the king were to fall in love with you.' I thought about her words all night long, and it seemed to me that in my sojourn at Court and my position near the queen, there was more than had appeared at first. The next day, the king redoubled his attentions. That week, he had visited the queen's inner circle three times, something that never happened. This time he approached me directly, and spoke to no one but me. But at the first word he said to me, I bowed and excused myself on the pretext of being indisposed, asking the queen for permission to withdraw. Queen Anne seemed to disapprove of my behaviour. When I asked her why she was so cool to me, she replied, 'I have nothing against you; I only regret that you seem unable to do for us something that would be of genuine service.' The queen mother was even colder to me than the queen."

"And," asked the cardinal, "did you understand what kind of service the queen had hoped for?"

"I had a vague idea, My Lord, and at the realisation I felt myself blush to my brows. However, as the queen continued to favour me, I set my qualms aside and have tried to serve her these past months as best I could. But yesterday, My Lord, to the amazement of myself and of the two queens, His Majesty, who for weeks had not come near the queen's circle of ladies, unexpectedly showed up, and for once he was smiling. He greeted his wife, kissed his mother's hand, and walked straight up to me. The queen has allowed me to sit in her presence but at the sight of the king I stood up. But he made me sit down again and, while playing with Gretchen, the dwarf who'd been sent to the queen by her niece, the Infanta Claire-Eugénie, the king spoke to me. He inquired after my health, and told me that the next time he invited the queens to join him in a hunt, he would like me to accompany them. These attentions from the king to a woman were so extraordinary that I felt all eyes were upon me, and I blushed more fiercely than ever. I don't know what I said to His Majesty – or, rather, I didn't say anything, just stammered disconnected words. I tried to get up. The king held me by the hand. I felt paralysed on my chair. To hide my embarrassment, I took little Gretchen in my arms. But to do that, I had to look up, and when he saw my face, he said, 'Why are you crying?' And I realised that tears were flowing silently from my eyes and rolling down my cheeks. I don't know what meaning the king gave to my tears but he stroked my hand and gave a bonbon to the dwarf, who took it with a wicked laugh, and then she slid from my arms and went to whisper to the queen. I felt I had no one to turn to; I didn't dare to get up and I didn't dare to stay. It was unbearable – I felt the blood roaring in my ears, my temples throbbed, the furniture seemed to tremble and the walls to sway. My senses left me, and I fainted. When I came to myself, I was lying on my bed with Madam de Fargis near at hand."

"Madam de Fargis," repeated the cardinal with a smile.

"Yes, My Lord."

"Go on, my child."

"I ask nothing more. For what she told me was so astounding, her knowing congratulations were so humiliating, her suggestive advice so strange and unforeseen, that I hardly know how to describe them to Your Eminence."

"Yes," said the cardinal. "She told you the king was in love with you, did she not? She congratulated you for accomplishing a miracle that even the queen could not, and encouraged you to return His Majesty's love as best you could, so that once you were within his good graces you could replace his sulky favourites and apply your newfound influence to serve the political interests of my enemies."

"Your name was not mentioned, My Lord."

"No, it wouldn't be, not at first. But otherwise I guessed what she told you, did I not?"

"Almost word for word, My Lord!"

"And how did you reply?"

"I didn't. All the vague premonitions of evil I'd felt when the king was first paying me his attentions were coming true. They wanted to make a political tool out of me. I started to cry and couldn't stop. The queen came in and hugged and kissed me but this embrace, instead of consoling me, froze me to the heart. It seemed to me that such a kiss must hide a secret poison, a kiss given from a queen to encourage a girl to love and desire her own husband! The queen took Madam de Fargis aside and exchanged a few quiet words with her, and then said, 'Good night, dear Isabelle. You can believe everything Fargis says, especially when she assures you of the appreciation we shall have for your devotion.' And she left the room. Madam de Fargis remained. She told me that I was free to do what I wanted – in other words, free to love the king. She spoke for a long time while I remained silent, trying to make me understand that it was a good thing to have won the king's love and would all be for the best. No doubt she thought she'd me convinced for finally she kissed me in her turn and left. But no sooner had she closed the door behind her than my mind was made up: I would come to you, My Lord, to throw myself at your feet and tell you everything."

"What you have told me, my child," said the cardinal, "is no more than the story of your fears. These fears are neither a sin nor a crime but, on the contrary, proof of your innocence and your loyalty, so I don't see why you need to come to me on your knees and tell your story in the form of a confession."

"But I haven't told you everything, My Lord. This antipathy, or rather this fear the king inspires in me, is not something I feel toward all men. My only hesitation in coming to you, Your Eminence, is not that I must tell you 'The king loves me,' but rather that I must say 'My Lord, I fear because I love another.'"

"And this other, is it a crime to love him?"

"No, My Lord – but it is ... dangerous."

"Dangerous? Why? At your age, both society and nature agree that it's the purpose of a woman to love and to be loved."

"But not when she fears that her love is above her in rank and in birth."

"Your birth, my child, is quite good, and your family name, though it doesn't shine with the lustre it did a hundred years ago, is still on par with the finest names in France."

"My Lord, My Lord, don't encourage me in a foolish and dangerous hope!"

"Do you fear the one you love does not love you?"

"On the contrary, My Lord, I believe he does love me ... and that's what frightens me."

"You believe in this love?"

"I have confessed it to you."

"And now that your confession is made, you said you had a plea for me."

"A prayer, rather, My Lord: the king's love has put me in a position where, even if he doesn't pursue it, I will be pressured into returning it. And while I may manage to put them off for a while, at some point they'll see that I'm not going to do what they wish, and then ... My prayer, My Lord, is that you will send me to join my father. However dangerous it is there, it is less dangerous for me than here."

"If I were dealing with a heart less pure and less noble than yours, I would join with those who aren't afraid to tarnish your purity and break your heart – I too would say, let this king, who has never loved anything in the world, fall in love with you, and maybe, in time, you will love him in return. I would say, pretend to be the tool of these women who conspire at the humiliation of France, while working for her greatness as my secret ally. But you are not made for such intrigues. If you want to leave France, you shall go. If you want to join your father, I will give you the means to do so."

"Oh! Thank you!" the girl cried, seizing the cardinal's hand and covering it with kisses before the cardinal could do anything to resist.

"The road you choose will not be without danger."

"For me, My Lord, the real dangers are at this Court, where I feel threatened by mysterious and unknown perils, where I feel as if the ground trembles beneath me as I walk, and where I fear I shall lose the innocence in my heart and the purity of my thoughts. Keep me from these queens who conspire, these princes who pretend love they do not feel, these scheming courtiers who advise women to do impossible things as if they were easy and natural, these regal voices that promise to reward shame with honour. Save me from all this, My Lord, so that I may keep what the Lord has given me honest and pure, and I will be forever grateful."

"I am unable to refuse one who makes me such a plea as that. Rise. Everything will be ready for you within the hour – at least, there will be nothing to prevent you from leaving."

"Am I absolved, My Lord?"

"One who is not at fault needs no absolution."

"Bless me, at least, and your blessing will ease my troubled heart."

"The hands I extend to you, my child, soiled as they are with politics and worldly concerns, are less pure than your heart, troubled though it is. It is up to God to bless you, not to me, and I pray that he will bless you with his supreme goodness rather than my poor reverence."

At this, the clock struck nine. Richelieu went to his desk, rang a bell, and Guillemot stepped in. "Have the people I was expecting arrived yet?" the cardinal asked.

"This very moment. The duke is in the portrait gallery."

"Alone or accompanied?"

"With a young man."

"Miss," said the cardinal, "before answering you fully or at least in more detail, I need to speak with the two people who have just arrived. Guillemot, escort Miss de Lautrec to my niece's house, and return in half an hour to see if I'm free." And bowing respectfully to Miss de Lautrec who followed his footman out, he opened the door to the portrait gallery where he'd kept waiting, albeit briefly, the Duke of Montmorency and the Count of Moret.

## 103

### In Which Cardinal Richelieu Writes a Comedy without the Help of his Collaborators

The two princes had been waiting only a moment, and as they were aware of the cardinal's many responsibilities and how much his time was in demand, they would have been willing to wait considerably longer before taking offence. Though he hadn't yet reached the heights of power he would command after the famous event that history would call the Day of Dupes, the cardinal was already regarded, in fact if not officially, as the prime minister. This was especially true in matters of peace and war, where his opinion and the weight of his genius were eternally opposed by the hatred of the two queens and their allies on the Council of State, who met at the queen mother's Luxembourg Palace under the leadership of Cardinal Béruille. When the two sides could not agree, the king intervened, approving or disapproving. This approval sometimes favoured Richelieu and sometimes the queen mother, depending on the mood of King Louis XIII. The critical matter to be decided in the next two or three days was not whether to go to war in Italy – that had already been decided on – but who would command the army. It was this important issue as regarded the two princes that the cardinal had in mind when he had written to ask the Duke of Montmorency to visit him, along with the Count of Moret; but his interview with Isabelle de Lautrec had caused him to alter his intentions for the count. This was the first time Montmorency had come face to face with Richelieu since the execution of his cousin, the duellist Bouteville but we have seen that the noble Governor of Languedoc had taken the first step toward a reconciliation at Princess Marie de Gonzague's soirée, where he had approached Madam de Combalet, who hadn't failed to report such an honour to her uncle. The cardinal was too wise a politician not to recognise that this show of respect for the niece was a message to the uncle, and that the prince was making an overture of peace. As for the Count of Moret, that was something else. This young man, so forthright, so French in character though surrounded by Italians and Spaniards, only twenty-two yet already known for his courage, was someone the cardinal wanted to conciliate, protect, and encourage – especially since he was the only son of Henry IV who had never openly conspired against him. The Count of Moret, away from court intrigues, honoured with a command in the army, serving France and the policies of the Duke of Richelieu, would be a counterweight against his half-brothers the Vendomes who were in prison for conspiring against the cardinal. In the cardinal's opinion, it was high time the young prince was taken in hand. Embroiled in the intrigues of Queen Anne and the queen mother, or taken as a lover by Madam de Fargis or Madam de Chevreuse, he would soon be bound too tightly to escape, even if he wished to do so. The cardinal offered his hand to Sir de Montmorency, who accepted it and shook it sincerely but he did not allow himself such familiarity with the Count of Moret who was of royal blood and bowed almost as if he was before sir. After the initial exchange of compliments, the cardinal said, "Duke, when it came to war at La Rochelle, I wanted sole command of the naval campaign, so I purchased the title of Admiral of France from you and paid the price you requested. Today, I'm not here to sell you something but to give you better than I've taken."

"His Eminence believes," said the duke with his most gracious smile, "that when it comes to service and the good of the State, to ensure my dedication it would be best to start with a promise?"

"No, Sir Duke, I know that no one is more generous than you with your energy and blood. And it is because I recognise your courage and loyalty that I speak to you so directly."

Montmorency bowed.

"When your father died, though you were heir to his fortune and his titles, there was one charge you could not inherit because of your extreme youth: that of Constable of France. The *fleur de lys* sword cannot be borne by a child. Moreover, there was a strong arm already available to take it and wield it faithfully, that of the Lord de Lesdiguières. He was appointed constable, and retired only when he reached the age of eighty-five. Since then his son, Marshal Créquy, has aspired to replace him. But the sword of the constable is no family heirloom. This year, Sir de Créquy had his chance at conquest when he was offered the command of the expedition formerly led by the Duke of Nevers but instead he declared for the queen mother, against me and against France. While I live, he will never be constable!"

The Duke of Montmorency could not contain his gasp of pure joy, an evidence of his satisfaction that did not escape the cardinal's notice. Richelieu continued, "The dedication I failed to find in Marshal Créquy I expect to find in you, Prince. Your relationship with the queen mother must not influence your love for France, because, make no mistake about it, the result of this war in Italy is crucial to the power and standing of France."

The Count of Moret appeared to be listening attentively, so the cardinal turned to him. "You do well to pay heed, my young prince, for no one should love our France more than you, that France for which your august father gave everything, even his life."

And then, as he could see that the Duke of Montmorency eagerly awaited the conclusion of his speech, he said, "To get to the point, with the same frankness and honesty I hope for in return, if I am granted responsibility for the conduct of this war, you, my dear Duke, will have the main command of the army. And if, when the siege of Casale is lifted, you are the first one through the gate, you will find behind that door the sword of the constable that will thus be borne by your family for the third time. If you wish to pass that sword on to someone else, you may but I want you to bear it, and I offer it freely. Reflect on that, Sir Duke."

"Your hand, my Lord," said Montmorency. The cardinal held out his hand. "In the name of France, My Lord, be my liege and accept my service. I swear to obey Your Eminence in every respect, except where it would compromise the honour of my name."

"I am no prince to be a liege, Sir Duke," said Richelieu with supreme dignity, "but I am a gentleman. Rest assured, I would never ask a Montmorency to do anything he would be ashamed of."

"When do we move, my Lord?"

"As soon as we can, Sir Duke. Assuming the direction of the war is entrusted to me, I expect to take the field at the beginning of next month."

"Then there is no time to lose, my Lord. I shall depart for my province this evening, and on the tenth of January I will be in Lyon with a hundred gentlemen and five hundred cavalry."

"But shouldn't you consider that someone else might be put in charge of directing the war?" said the cardinal. "What would you do if that happened?"

"No one but Your Eminence deserves to lead this enterprise, and I will obey no one but you and His Majesty Louis XIII."

"Go, then, Prince. And know that I fully expect you to earn the constable's sword."

"Shall I take my young friend the Count of Moret with me?"

"No, Sir Duke. I have a particular mission in mind to offer Sir Count of Moret. If he turns me down, he will be free to join you. I intend to propose a mission to him that'll require courage, a steady hand, and the dedication of those who accompany him."

The duke and the Count of Moret exchanged a few words in voices too low for the cardinal to hear, and Moret said to the duke, "Lend me Galaor."

Then with joy in his heart, the duke seized the cardinal's hand, gripped it gratefully, and rushed from the study. Left alone with the Count of Moret, the cardinal approached him and said, with respect and warmth, "Count, given my position and my age that is twice yours, I hope you will pardon me when I say that of all King Henry's children, you are the only one who truly resembles him, and I hope to love the son as I loved the father."

The young prince was facing Richelieu for the first time, hearing for the first time that voice against which everyone had warned him, and he was astonished at how that stern face could brighten with warmth, and how that commanding voice could soften. "My Lord," he replied, with a laugh edged with emotion, "Your Eminence is very good to concern himself with a young fool whose only thought is to amuse himself as best he can, and who, if asked how he might do better, wouldn't know what to say."

"A true son of Henry IV is good at everything, Sir," said the cardinal, "because with that blood comes courage and intelligence. And that is why I cannot stand idly by and watch you go wrong, falling prey to the dangers that surround you."

"Me, My Lord?" said the young man, surprised. "What are these dangers, and in what way might I go wrong?"

"Will you grant me a few minutes of your attention, Sir Count? And for those few minutes, will you listen to me seriously?"

"At my age and with my heritage, My Lord, that is my duty, even if you weren't a minister of state and a man of genius. So I will listen to you – perhaps not seriously but definitely with respect."

"You arrived in Paris at the end of November – on the twenty-eighth, I believe."

"The 28th, yes, My Lord."

"You came bearing letters from Milan and Piedmont for Queen Marie de Médicis, for Queen Anne of Austria, and for sir."

The count stared at the cardinal, astonished and uncertain how to answer. But finally, faced by the truth and the brilliant man who spoke it, he said, "Yes, my Lord."

"But as the two queens and Sir had gone to meet the king, you were obliged to wait in Paris for a week. Rather than remain idle, you wooed Madam de la Montagne, the sister of Marion Delorme. Young, handsome, wealthy, and the son of a king, you didn't have too long to wait; within two days you were her lover."

"So is that the wrong track you worry about, and the danger from which you'd protect me?" laughed the Count of Moret, surprised that an important minister would concern himself with such trivia.

"No, Sir – we're getting to it. No, I would hardly call taking a courtesan's sister as a lover a dangerous diversion, though it was not entirely free of peril. That madman Pisany thought you were Madam de Maugiron's lover, and wanted to murder you out of jealousy. Fortunately, his chosen assassin turned out to be more honest than heinous and, faithful to the memory of the great king, refused to lay a hand on his son. In the end he was a victim of his honesty; you saw him yourself, lying on a table and making his dying confession to a Capuchin."

"Did I? And just exactly when was it," said the Count of Moret, hoping to embarrass Richelieu. "that I witnessed this painful spectacle?"

"Fifth December at about six in the evening, in the common room of the Inn of the Painted Beard. Disguised as a Basque gentleman, you had just left Madam de Fargis who, herself disguised as a Catalan, had instructed you to meet with Queen Anne of Austria, Queen Marie de Médicis, and Sir at the Louvre between eleven o'clock and midnight."

"My faith, My Lord! I have to admit the reputation of your police is entirely justified."

"You are kind, Count. Now, do you think I went to the trouble to gather such information because I was worried you might become a threat to me?"

"I don't know. It seems Your Eminence has taken a great deal of interest in me."

"A great deal, Count. I wanted to save the son of Henry IV from becoming a threat to himself."

"How so, My Lord?"

"The fact that Queen Marie de Médicis, who is Italian and Austrian, and Queen Anne, who is Austrian and Spanish, conspire against France is a crime – but family ties often outweigh even the duties of a crown. But to have the Count of Moret, son of a Frenchwoman and of the most French king who ever lived, conspire with those two queens on the behalf of Spain and Austria, that I must prevent – by persuasion and prayer if possible but by force if necessary."

"Who told you I was conspiring, my Lord?"

"So far you have not conspired, Count, possibly thanks to your inborn noble instincts. And what these instincts should be telling you is that, as the son of Henry IV, who dedicated his life to opposing domination of France by Spain and Austria, you should not be serving their cause at the expense of the interests of France. Son of Henry IV, your father was murdered by Austria and Spain – do not sink so low as to ally with his assassins!"

"But why does Your Eminence say this to me instead of to Sir?"

"Sir has nothing to do with it – he is the son of Concini, not of Henry IV."

"Sir Cardinal, consider what you're saying!"

"Yes, I know I risk the wrath of the queen mother, the wrath of Sir, even the wrath of the king, if the Count of Moret leaves here determined to do me ill. But I prefer to think the Count of Moret will be grateful for my concern that has no source other than the great love and admiration I had for the king his father. I think, rather, that the Count of Moret will keep what I say to himself, for his sake and for the sake of France."

"Is Your Eminence asking me to give him my word?"

"We do not ask for such things from the son of Henry IV."

"But Your Eminence didn't invite me here just to give me advice. I believe I heard something about entrusting me with a mission."

"Yes, Count, a mission that will take you far away from the dangers I fear."

"So you wish me to put this danger behind me?" Richelieu nodded. "And therefore I am to leave Paris?"

"I would have you return to Italy."

"Hmph!" said the Count of Moret.

"Is there some reason why you don't wish to return to Italy?"

"No, I would just rather stay in Paris."

"So you refuse, Sir Count?"

"No, not completely – not if the mission can be delayed."

"You must leave tonight; tomorrow, at the latest."

"Impossible, My Lord," said the Count of Moret, shaking his head.

"What?" cried the cardinal, "France goes to war, and you decline to take part?"

"Not at all. But I intend not to leave Paris until the last possible moment."

"This is your firm resolve, Sir Count?"

"It is my firm resolve, My Lord."

"Your reluctance to leave is a sad blow to me. I was counting on your courage, your devotion, and your nobility in acting as escort for a young lady, the daughter of a man for whom I have the highest regard. I'm afraid I'll just have to look elsewhere for someone willing to safeguard the travels of Miss Isabelle de Lautrec."

"Isabelle de Lautrec!" cried the Count of Moret. "It's Isabelle de Lautrec you wish escorted back to her father?"

"Her very self. Why? Does that name surprise you?"

"Oh, pardon, My Lord, pardon!"

"No, don't worry about it, Count. I'm sure I can find her another escort."

"No, no, My Lord, look no further – the escort, the protector, the defender to the death of Miss de Lautrec is here before you! It is me, My Lord! It is me."

"Oh?" said the cardinal. "So you'll do it, then? I have nothing to worry about?"

"Nothing, My Lord!"

"You accept this charge?"

"I accept!"

"Well. In that case, here are my instructions."

"I am listening."

"I place in your charge Miss de Lautrec who, during the course of this journey, you will hold as safe and sacred as if she were your sister..."

"I swear it!"

"...And conduct her to her father, who is in Mantua. Then you will return to join the army and take a command under the orders of Sir de Montmorency."

"Yes, My Lord."

"And if it should happen – for you understand, a man of foresight must take everything into account – if it should happen that you should fall in love..."



The Count of Moret started. “Just supposing, you understand, because such things have been known to happen. Well, if that occurs, understand there is nothing I can do for you, Sir, who are the son of a king – but there’s a lot I can do for Miss de Lautrec and her father.”

“You can make me the happiest of men, My Lord. For I already love Miss de Lautrec.”

“Do you indeed? How are we to account for this? Is it, perhaps, that you came secretly to the Louvre one night, and were conducted up the back stair by Madam de Chevreuse disguised as a page, who admitted you to a dark corridor that led you to the queen’s chambers, where you met a certain someone? Could that be it? Why, what a miraculous coincidence!”

“My Lord,” said the Count of Moret, regarding the cardinal with wonder, “my admiration for you almost matches my gratitude! But…”

The count paused, worried. “But what?” asked the cardinal.

“There’s just one thing I’m anxious about.”

“What’s that?”

“I love Miss de Lautrec but … I don’t know if Miss de Lautrec loves me. I don’t know if, despite my devotion, she’ll accept me as her escort.”

“Well, Sir Count, it seems to me that that part is up to you.”

“But how? I don’t see how I’ll have a chance to make sure, if this departure, as Your Eminence says, must take place tonight, or tomorrow morning at the latest. How is this going to work out?”

“You’re quite right, Sir Count, there must be an interview between the two of you as soon as possible. However, I have other things to attend to. Please wait here for a moment, as I must issue some instructions that cannot wait.” The Count of Moret bowed, his eyes following this man in admiration mingled with astonishment, this man who manipulated all Europe from this study, and who, despite the threats that surrounded him, nonetheless found time to pay attention to the smallest of details. The door closed behind the cardinal. The Count of Moret remained behind, his eyes fixed on the portal until it opened again – and he saw in its frame not just the cardinal but Miss de Lautrec herself. The two lovers, simultaneously struck as if by an electric shock, gasped in astonishment. Then, with the rapidity of thought, the Count of Moret darted to Isabelle, fell to his knees before her, seized her hand, and kissed it with such passion that the young woman knew she had found, not a dangerous heartbreaker but an ardent admirer. Meanwhile the cardinal, who had achieved his goal of prying the son of Henry IV away from the Court and making him an ally, celebrated the victorious conclusion to a heroic comedy written without the help of his usual collaborators, Gentlemen Desmarests, Rotrou, L’Estoile, and Mairet. (Corneille, it will be remembered, had not yet had the honour of being presented to the cardinal.)

## 104 The Council of the King

The next big event, anxiously awaited by all – especially Richelieu, who was as sure of the king as anyone could be of Louis XIII – was a meeting of the King’s Council. This was to be held at the queen mother’s Luxembourg Palace that had been built during her regency on the model of the palaces of Florence, and which contained the gallery of paintings Rubens had done ten years before, those magnificent works depicting the most important events in the life of Marie de Médicis, and which are now among the principal ornaments of the gallery of the Louvre. This event was to be held that evening. The council was primarily composed of the creatures of Queen Marie de Médicis. It was chaired by Cardinal Bérulle but conducted by Vautier, and included Marshall de Marillac, who had been made a marshal without ever having been in a battle, and who the cardinal, in his memoirs, always referred to as Marillac the Sword, since his duel at the tennis courts with one Caboche, whom he’d killed before he had a chance to defend himself. The other member of the council was the Sword’s elder brother, Michel de Marillac, Minister of Justice and Keeper of the Seals, who was one of Madam de Fargis’s lovers. When meeting on important matters, the King’s Council was augmented by some others our readers already know, namely the Duke of Angouleme, the Duke of Guise, the Duke of Bellegarde, and Marshal Bassompierre. Sir, also, had returned to the council, as it was now some time since his disgrace in the Chalais conspiracy. The king attended whenever there was a decision before the council important enough to require his presence. The council’s decisions had to be ratified by the king who could approve, disapprove, or even completely change whatever it resolved. Cardinal Richelieu, who was prime minister in practice if not yet in name, and who was to gain absolute power in later years, was at this point just one more voice in the council, though he was usually able to persuade the king to adopt his position, supported by the Marillacs, the Duke of Guise, the Duke of Angouleme, and sometimes Marshal Bassompierre. He was consistently opposed by the queen mother, Vautier, Cardinal Bérulle, and two or three others who took their cues from Marie de Médicis. This evening, Sir, on the pretext of his pretended quarrel with the queen mother, had sent word that he would not attend the council, though he knew that despite his absence, his mother would look out for his interests. The King’s Council was scheduled to begin at eight o’clock. By a quarter past eight, everyone summoned was in attendance, standing behind their chairs and waiting for the queen mother to take her seat. At half past eight, the king arrived. He saluted his mother, who rose to greet him, kissed her hand, and then sat beside her on a chair slightly higher than hers. Then he pronounced the traditional words, “You may take your seats, Gentlemen.”

The ministers and the honorary councillors all sat in the chairs provided for them around the table, one for each member. The king slowly looked around at everyone present, then said, in the same flat and melancholy tone in which he said everything, “I do not see my brother Sir. Where is he?”

“He has disobeyed your orders, so doubtless he dares not appear before Your Majesty,” said Vautier. “Is it your pleasure that we proceed without him?”

The king nodded. Then, addressing both the ministers and the honorary members, he said, “Gentlemen, you all know why we are here today. We are considering whether we shall raise the siege of Casale and rescue Mantua in the name of the claims of the Duke of Nevers – claims we have affirmed and supported – and oppose the schemes of the Duke of Savoy in Montferrat. Although the right to declare war and peace is a royal right, we wish to hear your opinions in the hope they will cast some light on the matter before we make our decision, while reserving the right to make that decision regardless of your advice. I call upon our minister, Cardinal Richelieu, to summarise the state of affairs.”

Richelieu rose, bowed to the king and the queen mother, and said, “I will keep this brief. In his dying statement, Vincent de Gonzague, the Duke of Mantua, bequeathed all his rights to the Duchy of Mantua to the Duke of Nevers, who was his closest relative since he had no male heir. The Duke of Savoy had hoped to marry his son to Gonzague’s daughter, who as heiress to Mantua and Montferrat would thus augment his domain and make him a power in Italy. It is that ambition that has so often led him to betray his promises to France. This minister of His Majesty Louis XIII thinks it good policy to support Nevers, as placing a Frenchman on the thrones of Mantua and Montferrat will give us a position of strength in Lombardy. There, in between the Pope and the Venetians, we will be able to offset the power of Spain and Austria and neutralize their influence in northern Italy. “The recent actions of this servant to His Majesty have been in service to this policy. It was to prepare the way for this Italian campaign that we sent a preliminary force south several months ago. That army, under the command of Marshal Créquy, was defeated, not by the Duke of Savoy, as the enemies of France have been quick to declare but by incompetence almost amounting to treason, as our infantry and knights, unfed and unsupplied, deserted in the face of starvation. “However, our policy is unchanged, and we have only been awaiting a favourable opportunity to continue the campaign. This minister of His Majesty believes that that time has come. With La Rochelle taken, our army and fleet are freed up for new commitments. The question before Your Majesty is, do we act now or wait? This minister believes we should proceed with the war immediately and I’m ready to respond to any and all objections.”

And then bowing to the king and to Queen Marie, the cardinal resumed his seat, leaving the floor to his opponents – or rather his only opponent, Cardinal Bérulle. The latter, in his turn, knowing that this was his cue to respond, glanced at the queen mother. She replied with a small gesture, at which he rose, bowed to their Majesties, and said, “This project of pursuing a war in Italy, despite the apparent good reasons put forth by Cardinal Richelieu, seems upon closer inspection not only dangerous but outright impossible. Germany is now nearly subdued that provides the Emperor Ferdinand with far more armies than France can muster. Moreover His Majesty Philip IV, the august brother of the queen, has from the mines of the New World sufficient treasure to raise more armies than even the ancient kings of Persia. Instead of meddling in Italy, the Emperor is certain to devote his efforts to further suppression of the unruly Protestants, to recover the bishoprics, monasteries, and other Church property they have unjustly seized. Why should France, the eldest daughter of the Church, oppose such a noble and Christian pursuit? Wouldn’t it be better for the king to emulate this policy and devote our efforts to eradicating heresy within our own borders, while the Emperor and the King of Spain do the same within the borders of Germany and the Netherlands? And yet, in direct opposition to such pious efforts, Sir de Richelieu proposes peace with England and an alliance with heretical powers, acts which can only tarnish His Majesty’s glory. Instead of making peace with England, should we not, while we have the chance, continue our war against Charles I and stop his persecution of English Catholics? Must France forget how the ladies and servants of Queen Henriette were driven from her, in violation of a solemn treaty? Will not the Lord reward the restoration of the true religion in England, as well as the expungement of heresy in France, Germany, and the Netherlands? In the sincere belief that I speak in the interests of France and throne, I place my humble opinion at their Majesties’ feet.”

And Cardinal Bérulle sat in his turn, after acknowledging the supporting nods of those in Queen Marie’s faction, including that of Keeper of the Seals Marillac, brought into the fold thanks to Madam de Fargis. The king then turned to Cardinal Richelieu. “You hear, Sir Cardinal?” he asked. “If you have a response, respond.”

Richelieu rose. “I think my honourable colleague, Sir Cardinal de Bérulle,” he said, “is misinformed about both the political situation in Germany and the financial condition of Spain. The armies of the Emperor Ferdinand, though formidable, are not yet in command of Germany. And this minister of His Majesty knows that some of these Imperial armies of which Cardinal Bérulle speaks really owe their allegiance to Maximilian, Duke of Bavaria and head of the Catholic League. Rather than siding with the emperor, we should press the lion of the north, the great Gustavus Adolphus, to move against him. A few hundred thousand *livres* in bright, shining gold are all it will take to persuade him. Between the Protestant forces of Gustavus Adolphus and the Catholic forces of Maximilian, Ferdinand’s armies will have plenty to keep them occupied. As to the imaginary treasures of King Philip IV, allow this minister to clarify their true value. The King of Spain takes in just five hundred thousand crowns per year from the West Indies, and two months ago the Council of Madrid was quite dismayed to learn that Admiral Hein of the Netherlands took and sank the Spanish treasure fleet from South America in the Gulf of Mexico, a loss of twelve million crowns. This was such a disaster that His Majesty the King of Spain found himself unable to send the Emperor Ferdinand the million in gold he had promised. Now, to address the second part of my colleague’s discourse, this minister will humbly observe that His Majesty cannot submit with honour to the eviction of the rightful Duke of Mantua, whom we have not only recognised but who was named heir thanks to the persuasive influence of our ambassador, Sir de Saint-Chamont, upon the late and former duke. His Majesty must not only come to the aid of his allies in Italy but also protect that lovely European country from the schemes of Spain, who intends to subdue it forever, increasing its power where it is already too powerful. If we do not strongly support the Duke of Mantua, he will be unable to resist the power of Spain, and will be forced to become just one more tributary to the Court of Spain. Furthermore, don’t forget that the late Duke Vincent was about to commit Montferrat to us as well, in order to spite Charles-Emmanuel and confound the plots of Savoy. Finally, it is the opinion of this minister of the crown that it is our duty to punish the temerity of the Duke of Savoy, who has opposed our interests for the past thirty years. If he is not called to account for his numberless intrigues against us, including his involvement in the conspiracies of Chalais and Biron, and his alliance with the English in their trespasses at the Island of Ré and at La Rochelle, it will be to France’s eternal shame.”

Then, turning to the king and addressing him directly, the cardinal said, “By taking the rebellious city of La Rochelle, Sire, you not only won glory, you put the State in a most advantageous position for Your Majesty’s next move. Italy, oppressed for years by the troops of the King of Spain and the Duke of Savoy, cries out for the aid of your victorious arms. Will you refuse to take up the cause of your neighbours and allies, who are about to be unjustly stripped of their rightful heritage? As for me, Sire, I, your minister, dare promise you today that if you take up this noble resolution, your success will be no less than at the siege of La Rochelle. I am no prophet” – and Richelieu looked with a smile toward his colleague, Cardinal Bérulle – “nor the son of a prophet but I can assure Your Majesty that, if we lose no time in carrying out this plan, you will deliver Casale and bring peace to northern Italy before the end of May. And then, returning with your army through Languedoc, you will finish by completely reducing the Huguenots in July. Then Your Majesty, victorious everywhere, can take his rest in Fontainebleau, or wherever he desires, during the beautiful days of autumn.”

(Our readers may find this chapter a bit long and dry but our respect for the facts of history leads us to reproduce every detail of this great meeting in the Luxembourg that decided on the war in Italy, including all the speeches of the two cardinals. Our claim is that a historical novel should entertain both those readers who know the history it’s based upon, and those who are learning about it from what we write.) At this, gestures of approval were seen among the auxiliary gentlemen invited to the meeting, especially from the Duke of Angouleme and the Duke of Guise. The king spoke. “His Eminence,” he said, “when he speaks of himself and our policy, refers to himself as ‘the minister of the king,’ because that policy is based upon my direct orders. Indeed, we believe that this war in Italy is necessary, that we must support our allies, and that we must maintain our position by opposing both the power and the influence of Spain. Our honour is at stake.”

Despite the respect owed to the king, the only applause to this came from the friends of the cardinal, while those of the queen mother’s faction could barely restrain their mutterings of disapproval.

Marie de Médicis and Cardinal Bérulle exchanged a few words in a lively undertone. The king’s expression was stern. He cast a sidelong, almost threatening glance toward the mutterers, and continued:

“The issue we must now deal with is not peace or war, as war has been decided upon but rather when we shall take the field. Opinions will be solicited, on the understanding that we reserve the ultimate decision to ourselves. Please speak to this, Sir de Bérulle, recognising the respect we have for your advice, even when we do not follow it.”

Marie de Médicis made a nod of thanks toward Louis XIII, then said to Bérulle, “An invitation from the king is an order. Speak, Your Eminence.”

Bérulle rose. “The minister of the king,” he said, emphasising the title, “proposes an immediate commencement to this war but I am sorry to say that I am diametrically opposed to such haste. If I am not mistaken, His Majesty has expressed a desire to lead this war in person. However, there are at least two reasons to delay. The first is this: the king’s army, fatigued from the long siege of La Rochelle, needs to recuperate in winter quarters. Marching the troops from the shores of the ocean to the foothills of the Alps, without giving them time to rest, risks seeing them desert in droves. It would be cruel to subject these good soldiers to the rigors of winter in the snow-covered mountains, even if led there by the king. Even if we had the necessary funds for this that we do not, as shown by the fact that it’s been barely a week since Your Majesty’s august mother requested a hundred thousand *livres* and was told by his minister that she could have no more than fifty thousand – to summarise, even if we had the funds, all the mules in the kingdom would not suffice to carry the food the army would need. Not to mention the fact that it’s impossible to move our artillery in the winter, especially along unknown routes our engineers have never studied. Wouldn’t it be wiser to wait until the spring? In the meantime, we can make all the necessary preparations for moving our men and

materiel by sea. The Venetians, who have a far greater stake in the affairs of Mantua than we do, have made no move to oppose the invasion of Montferrat by Charles-Emmanuel, and will do nothing to support this enterprise of the king. If the oppression of the Duke of Mantua is such an important issue, why does Venice that is so much closer than France, do nothing? Finally, the matter that should concern His Majesty above all others should be to avoid an open break with that most powerful of all Catholic monarchs, the King of Spain. That would be a far greater injury to the State than the fall of Casale and Mantua. I have spoken!"

Cardinal Bérulle's speech made a definite impression upon the King's Council. Rather than opposing a war which the king supported, he had outlined the probable costs and liabilities of that war. The officers invited to the council – Bellegarde, the Duke of Angouleme, the Duke of Guise, General Marillac – were no longer as young as they had been, and perhaps were less eager for the opportunities of war than to avoid its fatigues and dangers. Cardinal Richelieu rose once more. "I will respond to all the points made by my honourable colleague," he said. "First, though I don't think His Majesty has made a final decision on the matter, I do believe he plans to conduct this war in person. His Majesty, in his wisdom, must make that decision, though I fear he may sacrifice his own interests to those of the State, as a king, in his duty, must do. As to the question of the army's fatigue that Cardinal Bérulle is so anxious about, if the troops are transported by sea and landed at Marseilles, they will still have to march to our headquarters at Lyon. Better for them to march at a measured pace through France, well fed, well housed, and well paid. That addresses the issue of desertion. As to the difficulties of taking the army across the Alps, it is better to fight nature now than to fight through our enemies' defences later, if we give them time to fortify the route we must take. It's true that last week I had to grant the king's august mother only fifty thousand *livres* when she asked for a hundred thousand but that reduction had been specifically approved by the king due to the imminent expense of the coming war. The proposed campaign is well within our means, especially since, by engaging my honour and my property, I have managed to borrow six million crowns to support it. As to the route we must take, it has in fact been surveyed and mapped. His Majesty has long had this campaign under consideration, and ordered me to send people into Dauphiné, Savoy, and Piedmont on reconnaissance. Sir de Pontis and Sir d'Escures have already made detailed maps of the terrain. Thus all the preparations for war have been made: the money for the campaign is in the coffers, the troops are ready, the maps are made – and a foreign war, as His Majesty points out, adds much more glory to the throne than a civil war such as that of La Rochelle. Spain's efforts to occupy Italy are vulnerable if we act quickly, so I implore His Majesty to undertake this campaign as soon as we can. And so I, in my turn, have spoken."

The cardinal resumed his seat, while looking toward Louis XIII with a gaze that seemed to plead with the king to support the proposal he had made. The king seemed to pay no attention to the cardinal, raising his hand as soon as the latter had finished speaking. "Gentlemen," he said, "it is my will that you pay heed to my minister, Cardinal Richelieu. We have decided upon war against the Duke of Savoy, and it is our desire that we waste no time in taking the field. Those of you who have requests for your preparations should make them to Sir Cardinal. In good time, I will decide if I will lead this war in person, and if so, who shall be my lieutenant general. Having so decided, this council is at an end." The king rose. "Gentlemen, I pray God shall keep you. Goodnight."

And with a bow to the queen mother, Louis XIII took his leave. The cardinal had won both points he'd pressed: the war against the Duke of Savoy and the immediate commencement of the campaign. So he had no doubt that he would win the third – that is, he would be given charge of the war in Italy, as he had for the siege of La Rochelle. Marie de Médicis marched out, gritting her teeth in anger, accompanied only by Bérulle and Vautier. "I fear we must say," said Bérulle, "like François I after Pavia, 'All is lost save honour!'"

"Not so!" said Vautier. "All is not lost, as the king has not yet named Richelieu as his lieutenant general."

"Don't you see," said the queen mother, "that in the king's mind Richelieu's already been appointed to that post?"

"Maybe," said Vautier, "but it's not yet final."

"Do you see any way to prevent this appointment?"

"Perhaps," said Vautier, "but I need to speak to Sir, the Duke of Orléans, right away."

"I'll get him," said Bérulle, "and bring him to you."

"Go," said the queen mother, "and don't waste a moment." Then, turning to Vautier, she said, "What do you have in mind?"

"When we are in a place where we can be sure of not being overheard, I'll tell Your Majesty."

"Come then." The queen and her adviser hurried down a corridor leading to the private apartments of Marie de Médicis.

### 105 The Plan of Vautier

Though he had rooms in the queen mother's Luxembourg Palace, the king returned to the Louvre to avoid what he felt were the inevitable objections that would come from the two queens. And indeed, after Marie de Médicis returned to her chambers where she heard and approved Vautier's latest plan before resorting to it she decided to make one last attempt to change her son's mind. As for Louis XIII, as soon as he returned home, he called for l'Angely. But only after he'd inquired if there had been any word from Baradas. Baradas had said nothing, and sent no word. It was the stubborn silence of his sulky page that had been the cause of his bad mood at the King's Council. Vautier had guessed that was the reason, and based his new plan upon it. Indeed, Louis XIII, though he'd made a few advances toward Miss de Lautrec, following through on his promise to l'Angely, was still dreaming about Baradas. This was exactly what l'Angely feared, so when he was called, he made haste to come and throw himself at the king's feet. For an unexpected obstacle had arisen in l'Angely's project, a mystery that no one had been able to explain, even to the king. The previous evening, though she was supposed to be attending the queen, Miss de Lautrec had been absent from her circle, and Louis XIII, asking about it, had gotten no answer from the queen's ladies beyond astonishment. Miss de Lautrec had not been seen at the Louvre all day. The queen had inquired at her rooms and around the palace but no one had been able to give her any news. The king, piqued by this absence, had asked l'Angely to make his own inquiries, and that was why he'd called for his fool as soon as he'd returned. But l'Angely, who'd had no more luck than the others, had nothing to report. In fact, Louis XIII was less concerned about the absence of Miss de Lautrec than he was about that of Baradas but he'd come to believe that l'Angely was nearly infallible, and was astounded by his failure. So he was sinking into melancholy, bemoaning the way fate seemed to oppose him at every turn, when Beringhen gently scratched at the door. The king, recognising Beringhen's particular signal, and thinking that here was one more devoted person to share his misery, called out softly, "Enter."

Sir Premier came in. "What do you wish of me, Beringhen?" the king asked. "Don't you know that I hate to be disturbed when l'Angely and I are sunk in ennui?"

"You didn't hear that from me," said l'Angely. "Welcome in, Sir Beringhen."

"Sire," said the Valet, "I never permit myself to disturb Your Majesty when I know you wish to be bored in peace but I couldn't disobey orders from Their Majesties Queen Marie de Médicis and Queen Anne of Austria."

"What!" cried Louis XIII. "The queens, here?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Both of them?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And they want to talk to me?"

"Yes, Sire. Together."

The king looked around, as if he might find some way to escape but at his first move the door opened and in came Marie de Médicis, followed by Queen Anne of Austria. The king turned pale and exhibited the slight tremor he suffered when agitated but he drew himself together, resolving to be impervious to whatever plea was coming. He faced the danger like a sulky and stubborn bull lowering its horns. He turned first toward his mother, his most dangerous antagonist. "Upon my honour as a gentleman, Madam," he said, "I thought that once the King's Council was over, I would be free from further persecutions. What do you want of me? Tell me quickly!"

"My son, I want nothing but you yourself," said Marie de Médicis, while Queen Anne, hands clasped, nodded in support and agreement. "Was it not enough that, weak and suffering though you are, that man forced you to endure six months in the swamps of Aunis? Now he wants to subject you to the cold and snow of the Alps in the dangerous depths of winter!"

"Bah, Madam," said the king. "When God spared me from the fevers of the swamp, was not the Cardinal taking the same risks? And now you say he will expose me and my household further. Well, I won't be braving the snow and ice of the Alps alone. I shall give the soldiers an example of courage and perseverance, and he will be there beside me."

"I don't doubt that, my son – the Cardinal himself made the same point. But how can you compare the importance of his life to that of risking yours? The monarchy can lose ten ministers like Sir Cardinal without suffering but you ...! At your least illness, France trembles with fear, and your mother and your wife pray to God to preserve you."

At this, Queen Anne fell to her knees. "Sire," she said, "we are on our knees not only before the Lord but before you, to beg you as we plead with God not to abandon us. Please consider that what Your Majesty may regard as your duty is to the rest of us a source of profound terror. If Your Majesty suffered a misfortune, what would happen to us, and to France?"

"The Lord God, if he permitted me to die, will have foreseen the consequences and will provide for them, Madam. It is impossible to change what has been resolved."

"Why is that?" asked Marie de Médicis. "If this unfortunate war is so necessary, despite your having decided on it against the advice of all your counsellors–"

"You mean all *your* counsellors, Madam," interrupted the king.

"If it is necessary," Marie de Médicis continued, ignoring the interruption, "why must you go in person? Can't your beloved minister–"

"You know, Madam," the king interrupted for a second time, "I don't particularly like Sir Cardinal. But I respect him, I admire him, and after God, he is this realm's greatest defender."

"Well, Sire, Providence will watch over the realm, whether or not you are with the cardinal. Charge your minister with conduct of the war and stay safely near to us."

"Oh, yes, and open the way for insubordination among the generals! To enable your de Guise, Bassompierre, and Bellegarde to refuse to obey a priest and jeopardise the fortunes of France! No, Madam! To recognise the genius of Sir Cardinal is not enough, I must support him as well. Ah, if only there was a prince of the house I could trust!"

"Don't you have a brother? Don't you have Sir?"

"*Umpf*. Permit me to tell you, Madam, you are too indulgent toward one who has been disobedient as a son and rebellious as a brother!"

"But that's just it, my son. To bring peace back to our family, we must embrace the exile, we must love even the son who, admittedly, deserves to be punished rather than rewarded. But it is at supreme moments like this when logic must cease to drive our policy, when to rule well means to love well. God himself shows us by example that sometimes we punish the good and reward the bad. Sire, charge your prime minister with the conduct of this war, and put Sir subordinate to him as lieutenant general. I'm certain that if you give your brother this responsibility, he will give up his insane pursuit of Princess Marie de Gonzague."

"You forget, Madam," said Louis XIII, frowning, "that it is I who am king, and therefore the master – and if my brother wished to take part in this effort, he could long ago have done so, with my consent rather than at my orders. Defying my right to rule is not the way to earn the right to command. I am resolved, Madam. In the future, I will command, and he will obey. This has been my determination for the last two years – that is to say, since the incident in the garden at Amiens." He emphasised the last words, while looking meaningfully at Queen Anne of Austria. "And for the last two years, I have found this policy a good one."

Anne, who was still on her knees before the king, arose at these harsh words and raised her hands to her eyes, as if to hide her tears. The king made a motion toward her but the move was barely visible and was immediately suppressed. Nonetheless, his mother noticed it, and seized his hands. "Louis, my child," she said, "this is not a dispute, this is simply a plea. I'm not a queen speaking to a king, I'm merely a mother talking to her son. Louis, in the name of my love that you sometimes slight though you always do it justice in the end, yield to our entreaties. You are the king – in other words, the source of all power and wisdom. Revoke your decision, as is your right, and believe me, not only your wife and your mother but all of France will thank you."

"Very well, Madam," said the king, who just wanted this discussion to end. "I will sleep on it tonight, and reflect on what you've said."

And to his mother and his wife he gave one of those curt gestures that kings use to indicate that an audience is finished. The two queens withdrew, Anne of Austria taking the arm of the queen mother. But they'd gone no more than twenty paces down the corridor when a door opened, and around the jamb appeared the head of Sir, Gaston d'Orléans. "Well?" he asked.

"Well," said the queen mother, "we did what we could. It's up to you to do the rest."

"Do you know which room is Sir Baradas's?" asked the king's brother.

"I do. It's the fourth door on the left, almost directly across from the king's chamber."

"Good," said Gaston. "I'll get him to do what we want, even if I have to promise him my Duchy of Orléans – not that I'd give it to him."

The 2 queens and the young prince departed, the queens to return to their chambers, while His Royal Highness my Lord Gaston d'Orléans tiptoed in the opposite direction, to the apartment of Sir Baradas. We don't know exactly what passed between Sir and the young page, whether Sir promised him the Duchy of Orléans, or one of his lesser duchies of Dombes or Montpensier; all we know is that half an hour after entering the tent of Achilles, the modern Ulysses made his way, still on tiptoe, to the chambers of the queens. Once there, he opened the door with a cheerful air and said, in a voice full of hope, "Victory! He's returned to the king." And indeed at almost that very moment, surprising His Majesty when he least expected it, Sir Baradas, without bothering to scratch at the door as etiquette demanded, entered the chambers of King Louis XIII, who recognised his page with a cry of joy and welcomed him with open arms.

### The Overlooked Wisp of Straw & the Unnoticed Grain of Sand

While these low intrigues were plotted against him, the Cardinal was bent over and peering, by the light of a lamp, at a map of what were then called “the Marches of the Realm.” This map showed, in great detail, the border between France and Savoy, as surveyed by the engineer-geographer Sir de Pontis. The Cardinal also had before him the route the army must follow, the towns and villages where it would stop, and the roads and paths by which the food necessary to feed thirty thousand men would get to them. This map, prepared by Sir d’Escures, accurately showed every valley, mountain, river, and even stream. The Cardinal was delighted: it was the most detailed map he’d ever seen. Just as Bonaparte in March 1800, stretched out across the map of Italy, pointed at the plains of Marengo and said “This is where I will defeat Mélas,” so Cardinal Richelieu, more a man of war than of the church, said “This is where I will defeat Charles-Emmanuel.” Delighted, he turned to Sir de Pontis and said, “Sir Viscount, you are a loyal servant of the king – but more than that, you’re clever, and if this war turns out as well as we hope, you are due for a reward. And as I have no doubt of the outcome, you may ask for your reward in advance.”

Sir de Pontis bowed. “My Lord, every man has ambitions, in the head or in the heart. Mine is in my heart, and since Your Eminence asks, I will open my heart to you.”

“Ah!” said the cardinal. “You are in love, Viscount?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And you love above your rank?”

“Not my rank but perhaps my fortune.”

“And how can I serve you in such a case?”

“The father of the woman I love is a faithful servant of Your Eminence, who will do nothing without your permission.”

The cardinal thought for a moment, as if plumbing his memory. “Ah!” he said. “You’ve been close to the queen in the last year, haven’t you – and so you’ve seen Miss Isabelle de Lautrec?”

“Yes, My Lord,” said the Viscount of Pontis, blushing.

“But I don’t believe Miss de Lautrec has been presented to His Majesty as your fiancée, no?”

“No, My Lord – not as my fiancée. In fact, when I spoke to Sir de Lautrec of my love for her, at the first words he said, ‘Isabelle is not yet sixteen. In a couple of years, after the affair in Italy is settled, we may discuss this again – and then, if you still love her, and you have the approval of the cardinal, I would be happy to call you my son.’”

“And Miss de Lautrec – what did she think of her father’s promise?”

“When I told Miss de Lautrec of my love, and that her father permitted me to speak of it to her, she promised – or rather, I should say, admitted to me – that her heart was free, and she had too much respect for her father to disobey him.”

“And when did she say that to you?”

“A year ago, My Lord.”

“And have you discussed it with her since?”

“Not ... frequently.”

“When was the last time you spoke to her of your love?”

“Four days ago.”

“How did she respond?”

“She blushed and stammered out a few words that I put down to embarrassment.”

The cardinal smiled and said to himself, “It seems to me she left something out of her confession.”

The Viscount of Pontis looked anxiously at the cardinal. “Does Your Eminence have an objection to my ambition?” he asked.

“Not at all, Viscount, not at all. If you love Miss de Lautrec, there may be obstacles ... but none of them will come from me.”

The viscount appeared relieved. “Thank you, My Lord,” he said, bowing.

At that moment, the clock struck two in the morning. The cardinal dismissed the viscount with some sadness, for, based on Isabelle’s confession, he knew it would be difficult, if not impossible, to grant this loyal servant the reward he desired. He was preparing to retire to his chambers when the door to Madam de Combalet’s chambers opened and she appeared on the threshold, a smile lighting up her face. “My dear Marie,” said the cardinal, “should you be disturbing yourself at this late hour, when you should be taking the opportunity to get some sleep?”

“My dear Uncle,” said Madam de Combalet, “joy can displace sleep as much as sorrow. When you are sad, you let me share your sorrow. When you are victorious, shouldn’t I share in your victory?”

And you won a victory today, did you not?”

“Yes, Marie – a genuine victory,” he said, his heart swelling in his chest.

“Well,” Madam de Combalet said, “when you are victorious, allow me to share your triumph.”

“You have a right to share my joy, dear Marie, because you are entitled to it. You’re part of my life, a part of everything that happens to me, happy or unhappy. However, for once I can breathe freely, for my victory comes untainted. This time I didn’t have to climb by stepping on another, or by sending an enemy to the scaffold. The greatest victories, Marie, are achieved through peaceful means, and are due to persuasion alone. Those who are coerced by force become our enemies but those who succumb to reason become our allies. If God guides me, my dear Marie, within six months there will be a new power in Europe, feared and respected by all other powers – and that power will be France. All I need is for Providence to protect me for six months more from those two treacherous women! In six months, the siege of Casale will be lifted, Mantua will be rescued, and the Protestants of Languedoc, seeing me return from Italy with a victorious army, will sue for peace without the need, I hope, of further warfare. And then the pope will cease to oppose me, the king will favour me as he does now, and I will be able to exercise both temporal and spiritual power in France. Unless His Majesty encounters on the road one of those overlooked wisps of straw or unnoticed grains of sand that can overthrow even the mightiest project, I will be master of France and Italy! So kiss me, Marie, and go sleep the sleep you deserve. As for me, I’m not sure I’ll sleep but at least I’ll try.”

“But tomorrow you’ll be a wreck.”

“No, in lieu of sleep, this joy will carry me through.”

“May I be permitted, my dear Uncle, to check upon you when I awake tomorrow, to see how you passed the night?”

“Come in early to be my sunrise, or late to be my sunset – so long as I get to see your beautiful eyes, I know the day will be fine. May your night be fine as well.”

And, kissing Madam de Combalet on the forehead, he led her to the door of his study and stood in the doorway, watching until she was lost in the darkness of the stairs. Only then did the cardinal close the door. He was about to go to his bedchamber but as he was leaving he heard a small knock on the panel that led to Marion Delorme’s house. He thought he must have been mistaken but, as he stopped and listened, the knock came again, louder and more urgent. He had not been mistaken: someone was at the door that communicated with the neighbouring house. Richelieu went to the main door to his office and turned the key in the lock, then approached the secret panel. “Who knocks?” he asked quietly.

“It’s me,” a woman’s voice said. “Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me in. I have something to report that I think is more than a little important.”

The cardinal looked around to make sure he was, in fact, alone, and then pushed a spring that opened the secret panel. A handsome young man waited in the doorway, twirling a fake moustache. It was Marion Delorme. “Ah! Here you are, the pretty page boy,” Richelieu said smiling. “I confess that if I had been expecting someone at this hour, it wouldn’t have been you.”

“Didn’t you say to me, ‘Whatever the hour, if you have something important to tell me, ring the bell, and if that doesn’t work, knock on the door?’”

“I said that, my dear Marion, and thank you for remembering it.”

And taking a seat, the cardinal motioned to Marion to sit beside him. “In this costume?” said Marion, laughing and pirouetting on tiptoe to show it off, displaying her natural elegance even in an outfit unsuited to her sex. “No, that would be disrespectful to Your Eminence. I will remain standing, if you please, My Lord, while I make my little report – unless you’d prefer I speak to you on one knee. But I suppose that would be too much like a confession that would be taking things too far.”

“Speak to me however you like, Marion,” said the cardinal, concern lining his forehead, “and quickly, for if I’m not mistaken, you bring me bad news. And in order to react to it, one can never hear bad news too soon.”

“I’m not sure whether the news is bad – though my feminine instincts tell me it isn’t good. You understand.”

“I’m listening.”

“Your Eminence is aware that the king has quarrelled with his favourite, Sir Baradas?”

“Say, rather, that Sir Baradas has quarrelled with the king.”

“That’s so, since Sir Baradas has been the one who was sulking. Well, tonight, while the king was with his fool, l’Angely, the two queens went in and then, after half an hour, came out again. They seemed upset and paused for a moment to speak with Sir, the Duke of Orléans, after which he went to speak with Sir Baradas. After talking in a window embrasure for nearly a quarter of an hour, the prince and the page reached an agreement, and came out into the hallway. Sir waited until he saw Baradas go into the king’s suite, after which he went down the corridor leading to the chambers of the queens.”

The cardinal brooded for some moments, and then said to Marion, without bothering to conceal his anxiety, “Your report is so detailed, I’m sure I have no need to ask if it is accurate.”

“It is – and in any event, I have no reason to hide anything from Your Eminence.”

“If it’s not indiscreet to ask, my dear friend, I’d like very much to know how you learned this.”

“It’s not indiscreet at all, as I hope to be of service to both you and the friend who gave me this news.”

“Who is this friend?”

“One who hopes to be a devoted servant to Your Eminence.”

“His name?”

“Saint-Simon.”

“The king’s new page? The short one?”

“Exactly.”

“Do you know him?”

“I know him but not well. Tonight he came to my house.”

“Before or after midnight?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m able to say, My Lord, and you’ll have to be satisfied with that. He came to my house tonight from the Louvre, all eager to tell me his story. On the way to visit his comrade Baradas, he saw the two queens come out of His Majesty’s chambers. They were so agitated that they didn’t notice him. He saw them stop in a doorway to speak with Sir, the Duke of Orléans but Saint-Simon continued on his way and went in to visit Baradas. The page was still sulking, and said that on the next day he planned to leave the Louvre. At that moment, Sir entered. He didn’t see Saint-Simon, who is rather small. He stood there silently and, as I have said, watched his comrade talk with the prince in the recess of a window. Then both left, Baradas to go to the king, and Sir, in all probability, to run to the queens to report his success.”

“And this rather small Saint-Simon came to tell you all this so you’d repeat it to me, you say?”

“My faith, I’ll give it to you in his own words: ‘My dear Marion, I think all these comings and goings portend a plot against Cardinal Richelieu. You are said to be one of his good friends – I don’t ask whether this is true or not but if it is, please tell him about it. And say that I am his humble servant.’”

“He’s a clever lad. I won’t overlook this service he’s done me, and you can tell him I said so. As for you, my dear Marion, how may I prove my gratitude?”

“Oh, My Lord.”

“I’ll think about it but in the meantime...” The cardinal drew from his finger a beautiful diamond ring. “Here,” he said, “take this diamond as a remembrance of me.”

But Marion, instead of offering her hand, put it behind her back. The cardinal reached around, took her hand, and put the ring on her finger himself. Then, kissing her hand, he said, “Marion, tell me you’re still my good friend and always will be.”

“My Lord,” Marion said, “I’m sometimes mistaken when it comes to lovers but as to friends, never.”

Then, hand on one hip and hat in the other, with the audacity of youth, beauty, she bowed like a real page, with a wink, and smile returned home, admiring her diamond and singing one of Desportes’s villanelles. The cardinal was alone once more, and passed a hand over his darkened brow. “So this,” he said, “is the overlooked wisp of straw, the unnoticed grain of sand. This,” he said with a contempt impossible to describe, “...*Baradas*.”

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The Resolution of Richelieu

The cardinal spent a very restless night. As the beautiful Marion had thought, based on her previous experience with him on momentous occasions, the news she brought was serious: the king had reconciled with his favourite through the intercession of Sir, the cardinal’s bitter enemy. It opened the door to any number of disastrous possibilities, and the cardinal, restless, considered them all. By the next morning – not to say when he awoke but rather by the time he got up – he had a contingency in mind for each of them. Around nine o’clock in the morning, a messenger from the king was announced. The cardinal was already in his office, and the messenger was ushered in. With a deep bow, he handed His Eminence an envelope with a large red seal; without knowing what the letter contained, the cardinal gave him a purse of twenty *pistoles*, as he did whenever he received a letter from the king. The cardinal had purses prepared for these occasions in a nearby drawer. A glance told him the letter came directly from the king, as the address was written in His Majesty’s own hand. So he invited the messenger to wait in the office of his secretary, Charpentier, to carry back an immediate reply. He paused for a moment; then, like an athlete preparing for a physical challenge by rubbing oil on his muscles, he passed his handkerchief over his high forehead, damp with sweat, and prepared to break the seal. Meanwhile, without his noticing it, a door opened quietly, and the anxious face of Madam de Combalet appeared in the gap. She knew from Guillemot that her uncle had slept badly, and from Charpentier that a message had arrived from the king. Thus she ventured to intrude into her uncle’s office where, though uninvited, she felt sure of her welcome. But, seeing her uncle seated and holding in his hand a letter he hesitated to open, her unease was redoubled. Though ignorant of Marion Delorme’s visit, she nonetheless guessed that bad news had arrived since she’d last seen him. Richelieu finally opened the letter. As he read, something like a shadow appeared on his brow and grew to darken his visage. She slipped noiselessly into the room and along the wall, stopping a few feet from him and leaning on a chair. The cardinal started slightly but as he remained silent, Madam de Combalet believed she hadn’t been noticed. The cardinal continued reading, wiping his brow every few seconds. He was obviously dismayed. As Madam de Combalet approached, she could hear his ragged breathing. Then his hand seemed to lose the strength to hold it, and he dropped the letter on the desk. His head turned slowly toward his niece, revealing his pale and feverish face, and he held out toward her a trembling hand. Madam de Combalet seized his hand and kissed it. But the cardinal put his arm around her waist and drew her to him, pressing her hand against his heart, while with the other hand he offered her the letter. “Read it,” he said, trying to smile. Madam de Combalet read the letter to herself. “Read it aloud,” said the cardinal. “In order to face this, I need to hear it from another. And the sound of your voice will be reassuring.” Madam de Combalet read:

*My good friend Sir Cardinal,*

*After careful consideration of the issues, both foreign and domestic, both equally serious, I have concluded that of the two, the domestic question is the most important. Considering the troubles plaguing the heart of our realm at the hands of Sir de Rohan and his Huguenots, we have decided, having confidence in the political genius you have so often displayed, to leave you in Paris to conduct affairs of State in our absence. Meanwhile we shall march south, with our beloved brother Sir as lieutenant general, and Gentlemen d’Angouleme, Bassompierre, Bellegarde, and de Guise as our captains, to raise the siege of Casale and thwart the ambitions of Sir the Duke of Savoy. We shall send daily couriers to you to maintain constant communication, and to ask for your advice should we find ourselves embarrassed by circumstance. Please provide, at your earliest convenience, a report of the exact state of the troops composing our army, as well as the artillery available for the campaign and what funds are available for our disposition, while retaining those you feel necessary to administer your responsibilities. I thought long and hard before making the decision of which I inform you, as I remembered the words of that great Italian poet, forced to stay in Florence due to the unrest in the city, yet wishing to go to Venice to complete an important negotiation: “If I stay, what will go on? If I go, what will stay behind me?” I am luckier than him, for I have you, my good friend Sir Cardinal, another self whom I can leave in Paris, to do everything I would do if I stayed. With that, my good friend Sir Cardinal, as I have no further business with you, I pray the good Lord shall protect you and keep you.*

*Your affectionate,*

*Louis*

As she read this, Madam de Combalet’s voice gradually dwindled until, as she reached the last lines, she could barely be heard. However, though the cardinal had read the letter only once, its contents were already indelibly engraved in his memory, and he had only asked Madam de Combalet to read it in her soft voice to calm his mind that had an effect like that of the harp of David upon the tumult of Saul. When she had finished, she pressed her cheek to the cardinal’s brow. “Oh!” she said. “The scoundrels! They’re out to drive you to your grave!”

“Well, then, Marie – what would you do in my place?”

“Are you seriously asking for my advice, Uncle?”

“Quite seriously.”

“Well – if I were in your place ...!” she hesitated.

“If you were in my place ... what?”

“In your place, I’d abandon the whole lot of them to their fate. We’d soon see how they’d fare without you to manage things.”

“That’s your advice, Marie?”

She drew herself up and said, fiercely, “Yes, that’s my advice! None of these people – kings, queens, princes – are worthy of the efforts you make for them.”

“And what then will we do, if I take my leave of ‘these people,’ as you call them?”

“We’ll go to one of your abbeys whichever one is best, and live on our own. I will love you, and all we’ll care about is nature and poetry, forgetting all about these worms.”

“You are consolation personified, beloved Marie, and you’ve always been a good counsellor to me. And this time, moreover, your advice and my will are aligned. Last night, after you left my office, I was informed, more or less, of the blow that was about to strike. So I had all night to prepare for it and make up my mind as to how to respond.” He reached out his hand, drew a sheet of paper to him, and wrote:

*Sire,*

*I could not be more flattered by this new mark of esteem Your Majesty wishes to bestow but unfortunately I cannot accept it. My health, always fragile, was taxed by the siege of La Rochelle that by the grace of God we concluded with success. But the effort has exhausted me, and my doctor, my family, and my friends all plead with me to avail myself of the absolute rest I can find only in the solitude of the country. Thus I mean to set aside all business, Sire, and withdraw to the house in Chaillot that I purchased for my retirement. I beg you, Sire, to please accept my resignation, while continuing to believe me the most humble, and especially the most devoted, of all your subjects.*

*– Armand, Cardinal Richelieu*

Madam de Combalet had discreetly withdrawn while he was writing. But having signed it, he handed her the letter. As she read it quietly, great tears rolled down her cheeks. “You’re crying!” the cardinal said.

“Yes,” she said, “blessed tears!”

“Why do you call them blessed tears, Marie?”

“Because they spring from joy in my heart, despite the blindness of the king and the misery of his kingdom.”

The cardinal looked up and placed his hand on his niece’s arm. “You’re right,” he said, “but God, who may abandon a king, does not so easily abandon an entire kingdom. Our lives are short and ephemeral but that of a realm lasts for centuries. Believe me, Marie, France has too great a role to play in Europe to think that the Lord would look away from her. What I have begun, another will finish, and one man more or less will not change her destiny.”

“But is it fair,” said Madam de Combalet, “that the man who prepared the path for his country’s destiny should not be the one to accomplish it, that his should be the labour while another reaps the glory?”

“Now there, Marie,” said the cardinal, his brow clearing, “without intending to, you touch upon the great question men have asked the sphinx for three thousand years: why is it that those who create prosperity so often earn only misfortune? The sphinx in our hearts has another name: Doubt. Why should God, the supreme justice, allow such supreme injustice?”

“Dear Uncle, I have nothing to complain of God. I just want to understand.”

“God has the right to be unjust, Marie, for he has all eternity in which to repair injustice. If we could understand His secrets, we would see that what seems unfair to us serves His purposes in the end. The tension between His Majesty and myself, whom God preserve, had to be settled, if not today, then another day. Will the king decide in favour of his family, or in favour of France? Well, I am for France. And God is with France. In the end, who can be against me if God is on my side?”

He rang a bell. At the second ring, his secretary, Charpentier, appeared. “Charpentier,” he said, “compile a list of the troops ready to march to the Italian campaign, with a list of available artillery. I need this within a quarter of an hour.” Charpentier bowed and left. Then the cardinal returned to his desk, picked up his pen, and below the last line of his resignation, he wrote:

*P.S.: Your Majesty will find enclosed a detailed list of the troops of the army, as well as their equipment. As for the funds, the remainder of the six million borrowed on my guarantee – the cardinal consulted a small notebook he always carried with him – 3882000 livres can be found in a strongbox, the key of which my secretary will have the honour to deliver directly to Your Majesty. As there may be those in the Louvre who fear there are state documents entrusted to me that may go astray, I give not only my office but my entire house to Your Majesty. As everything I have comes from you, all that I have is yours. My servants will continue their efforts on your behalf, and their daily reports will be sent to you. As of two o’clock on today’s date, Your Majesty may take full possession of my house. I finish these lines as I finished those above, daring to name myself the most obedient but also the most loyal, subject of Your Majesty.*

*– Armand, Cardinal Richelieu*

As he wrote, the cardinal read what he was writing aloud, so his niece didn’t need to read the postscript to know what it said. Just then, Charpentier came in with his report: thirty-five thousand men were ready for the campaign, with seventy guns. The cardinal sealed the letter, put it and the report in an envelope, recalled the courier, and gave it to him, saying, “To His Majesty in person.” He gave him the usual purse, and added a second to the first. His carriage, according to the cardinal’s orders, was harnessed and ready. The cardinal went down to it, taking nothing from his house but the clothes he wore. He got into the carriage with Madam de Combalet and sent his single servant, Guillemot, up onto the box. He told the driver, “To Chaillot!” Then turning to his niece, he added, “If, within three days, the king himself has not come to Chaillot, we leave on the fourth for my bishopric of Luçon.”

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Birds of Prey

As we have just seen, the advice of the Duke of Savoy had resulted in complete success: “If an Italian campaign is decided upon despite your opposition, get Gaston command of the army as a pretext for separating him from La Gonzague. The cardinal-duke, whose sole ambition is to be the foremost general of our age, will resign in protest. The king will accept the inevitable!”

By ten in the morning, the royalty in the Louvre was awaiting the cardinal’s decision, waiting impatiently but, strange to say, in perfect harmony. These royal personages were the king, the queen mother, Queen Anne, and Sir. Sir pretended to find a reconciliation with the queen mother as insincere as their quarrel had been. However, no matter how he appeared to get along with others, well or ill, Sir despised everyone equally; his cowardly and treacherous heart knew that, despite others’ smiles and praise, he was held in contempt, and he returned their contempt with hatred. The four were gathered in Queen Anne’s boudoir, wherein we last saw Madam de Fargis, with the casual depravity of her corrupt and lascivious nature, giving Her Majesty such good advice. In the chambers of the king, of Marie de Médicis, and of Sir Duke of Orléans, their accomplices stood awaiting their orders: Vieuville, Nogent-Bautru, and Baradas, now ascended to the height of his power, in the king’s suite; Cardinal Bérulle and Vautier in the queen mother’s rooms; while in the Duke of Orleans’s suite waited Doctor Senelle, who had penned the letter in cipher wherein Sir was invited, in the event of disgrace at Court, to take refuge in Lorraine – Senelle, the man whose letter had been sold to Father Joseph. His Grey Eminence, by his valet who, having been well rewarded for his betrayal, stood ready to betray him again. As for Queen Anne, she had her own confederates at hand: Madam de Chevreuse, Madam de Fargis, and the little dwarf Gretchen who, it will be remembered, had been a gift of the Infanta Claire-Eugénie, and who, thanks to her small stature, could be employed to go where those of ordinary size could not. At around half past ten – the time, we recall, when the cardinal was expected – his messenger arrived. As the king ordered he be admitted to the queen’s chambers, and as the cardinal had ordered him to deliver his letter directly to the king, he saw no reason to



down to us is that he dined *tête-à-tête* with his favourite Baradas, and, after an hour and a half, got into his carriage and told his driver, “Place Royale, the house of Sir Cardinal.” He entered the office of his disgraced minister at 2 o’clock, led by the secretary Charpentier and sat in his chair with a sigh of satisfaction. He then said, smiling and without understanding all it meant, “At last! Now I’ll reign.”

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The King Reigns

After the spending spree of the Regency, when all the funds of France were spent on fairs and festivals in honour of that handsome cavalier who’d gathered all power as queen’s favourite; when France, impoverished by the pillaging of the treasury of Henry IV that Sully had so painstakingly amassed, and then had to watch as the realm’s gold passed into the hands of d’Épermon, of de Guise, de Condé, and the other great nobles; when whatever was necessary was spent to stave off the hatred of a populace that suspected the queen of murdering her king – after all that, Louis XIII had known nothing but poverty, until he appointed Richelieu as his minister. It was due to the cardinal’s wise administration, learned from Sir de Sully but pursued with even greater integrity, that order had returned to the king’s finances and he became familiar with a metal he’d previously believed belonged only to Spain: gold. But what a price this iron minister exacted to reach that point! Nobility and clergy were exempt from taxes until 1795, after the general employee tax of 1789 had failed to stave off state bankruptcy. If the cardinal had proposed taxing the exempt classes, it would have been rejected out of hand. Driven by implacable necessity, he therefore turned to the very body of France: her people, the peasants and the poor. The French people were surrounded by enemies – to the west, the English; to the north and east, the Austrians; to the south, the Spanish – and in order to save the people, the cardinal plundered them. In four years, he’d increased tax revenues by nineteen million, necessary to support the army and create a navy. He’d had to close his eyes to the people’s misery, close his ears to the cries of the poor, ignoring their wretched figures and sullen gaze. He had to obtain the king’s attention and favour; but without a magic potion or enchanted ring, he had to resort to money, so money Richelieu found – and Louis XIII, who’d never had any cash, suddenly found it in his hands. This was the source of King Louis’s admiration for his minister – and of his jealousy. *Who could fail to admire a man who could raise six million livres on his word alone when the king by word and even by signature, couldn’t raise fifty thousand?* But the king had never quite been able to believe in the promised 3882000 *livres* – so the first thing he demanded from Charpentier was the key to this famous treasure. Charpentier, without comment, begged the king to get up, and then pushed the desk aside. He lifted the carpet upon which yesterday the cardinal, and today the king, had rested his feet, revealing a trap door. He unlocked it with a key and pulled the door open, revealing a large iron chest. This chest unlocked with a combination that Charpentier shared with the king. It opened with the same ease as the door, and to the dazzled eyes of Louis XIII was revealed the sum he was so eager to see. Then, presumably in response to orders he’d received, Charpentier bowed to the king, gave him the key, and withdrew, leaving the two majesties, monarchy and money, alone with each other. In that era, when banking was in its infancy, before paper money backed by shareholders was widespread, cash money was rare in France. The cardinal’s 3882000 *livres* was therefore in the form of about 1000000 crowns bearing the images of Charles IX, Henry III, and Henry IV, plus almost a million Spanish doubloons and 700000 or 800000 *reales* in Mexican gold. The balance was contained in a small bag of diamonds, each twisted like a candy in a paper wrapper, wearing its value on a label. Louis XIII, instead of feeling that joy which the sight of gold was supposed to evoke, was instead overcome with sadness; after seeing this wealth of coinage, recognising the kings stamped upon their faces, plunging his hand into the coffer’s depths to feel the weight of the bullion, and holding up the diamonds to view their clarity, he straightened and, standing, gazed down at those millions that had been garnered through such pain to the donors, and delivered by such devotion from their gatherer. He thought how easily, from this sum, he had already promised nearly three hundred thousand crowns to reward the devotion of his enemies, who hated the man who’d raised those funds. He wondered, in spite of himself, if, in his hands, that money would be spent in a manner as beneficial to France as if he’d left it in the hands of his minister. Then without withdrawing a single coin, he knocked twice on the panel to summon Charpentier. He ordered the secretary to lock the chest and close the trap door, and then gave him the key. “You’ll disburse nothing from this chest,” he said, “except on my written order.” Charpentier bowed. “With whom will I work?” asked the king.

“My Lord the cardinal,” replied the secretary, “always worked alone.”

“Alone? And what was he working on, all alone?”

“All the affairs of the State, Sire.”

“But no one could handle all the affairs of the State by himself!”

“He had agents who reported to him.”

“Who were his chief agents?”

“Father Joseph, Lopez the Spaniard, Sir de Souscarrières, and others I shall have the honour of naming to Your Majesty as matters arise or they come to present their reports. All have been informed that they will now be dealing with Your Majesty.”

“Very well.”

“In addition, Sire,” Charpentier continued, “there are the agents dispatched by the cardinal to the various powers of Europe: Sir de Bautru to Spain, Sir de La Saludie to Italy, and Sir de Chamassé to Germany. Letters have arrived announcing their return today, or tomorrow at the latest.”

“Upon their return, after having given them the instructions from Sir Cardinal, you will introduce them to me. Is there anyone currently waiting to report?”

“Sir Cavois, the Captain of the Cardinal’s Guard, who wishes the honour of being received by Your Majesty.”

“I have heard that Sir Cavois is an honest man and a courageous soldier. I shall be glad to receive him.”

Charpentier stepped to the outer door. “Sir Cavois,” he said. Cavois appeared.

“Come in, Sir Cavois, come in,” said the king. “You wished to speak with me?”

“Yes, Sire. I have a favour to ask of Your Majesty.”

“Say on. If it will help us to keep a good servant, we’ll grant it with pleasure.”

“Sire, I wish Your Majesty to accept my resignation.”

“Your resignation! But why, Sir Cavois?”

“I belonged to Sir Cardinal while he was a minister; but if he is no longer a minister, I belong to no one.”

“I beg your pardon, Sir but you belong to me.”

“I know that if Your Majesty insists, I shall be forced to remain in his service but I must warn him that I’ll be a poor servant.”

“And why would you be a poor servant in my service if you were not for Sir Cardinal?”

“Because my heart was in my service to him, Sire.”

“And it would not be with me?”

“For Your Majesty, Sire, I must confess I feel only duty.”

“And how did you become so tied to Sir Cardinal?”

“Well, it was because of his deeds.”

“And what if I want to do good deeds, even more so than him?”

Cavois shook his head. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

“It wouldn’t be the same?” repeated the king.

“I owe everything I have to Sir Cardinal. He brought me into his household, provided for my children, and most recently endowed me, or rather my wife, with a privilege that will bring in twelve to fifteen thousand a year.”

“What? Sir Cardinal gave his servant’s wives pensions from the State that pay twelve to fifteen thousand a year! That’s good to know.”

“I did not say a pension, Sire; I said a privilege.”

“And what is this privilege that was granted to Madam Cavois?”

“The right, shared with Sir Michel, to the monopoly on all sedan chairs on the streets of Paris.”

The king thought for a moment, his eyes cast down. Cavois stood, motionless, his hat held in his left hand, his right hand stiff at the seam of his breeches. “And what if I offered you, Sir Cavois, the same high position in my guard that you have in the Cardinal’s Guard?”

“You already have Sir de Jussac, Sire, and an exemplary officer to whom I’m sure Your Majesty wishes no harm.”

“I will promote Jussac to marshal.”

“If Sir de Jussac as I have no reason to doubt, loves Your Majesty as I do Sir Cardinal, he will prefer to remain as a captain near to his king rather than to become a marshal and leave him.”

“But, if you leave our service, Sir…”

“Such is my request, Sire.”

“…Will you accept a bonus of fifteen hundred or two thousand *pistoles* as a reward for your time spent with his Eminence?”

“Sire,” replied Cavois, bowing, “the time I spent with His Eminence has already been rewarded, for its merits and more. We’re going to war, Sire, and war takes money – lots of money. Keep the rewards for those who will fight, not for those who, like me, having devoted their fortunes to a man, will fall with that man.”

“Are all the servants of Sir Cardinal like you, Sir Cavois?”

“I think so, Sire, though some are more worthy.”

“So, you have no more ambitions or desires?”

“Nothing, Sire, other than the honour to follow Sir Cardinal wherever he goes, and continue to be part of his household, no matter how humble.”

“Very well, Sir Cavois,” said the king, piqued at the stubbornness of a captain who refused everything. “You are free.”

Cavois bowed and, backing out, ran into Charpentier as he came in. “And you, Sir Charpentier,” cried the king, “do you, like Sir Cavois, refuse to serve me?”

“No, Sire. I was ordered by Sir Cardinal to stay with Your Majesty until another minister was installed in his place, or His Majesty had a firm grasp of the work involved with the affairs of state.”

“And when I have a grasp of our affairs, or another minister is installed, what will you do then?”

“I will beg leave of Your Majesty to allow me to rejoin Sir Cardinal, who is accustomed to my service.”

“But what if I asked Sir Cardinal to let you stay with me?” asked the king. “When I have a minister who, unlike Sir Cardinal, doesn’t do everything himself, I’ll need an honest and intelligent man as aide, and I’m sure you qualify for the role.”

“I have no doubt, Sire, that Sir Cardinal would instantly grant the king’s request, as I am not worth causing dissension between my master and the king. But then I would have to throw myself at Your Majesty’s feet and say, ‘I have a father of seventy years, and a mother of sixty. Sir Cardinal has provided for them and rescued them from misery. Once I am no longer at the side of Sir Cardinal, my place is with them. Sire, allow a son to tend to his parents, and close their eyes when the time comes.’ And I’m sure Your Majesty would not only grant me my prayer, he would commend it.”

“To honour your mother and father, all their lives,” said the king, piqued even further. “The day a new minister is installed in place of Sir Cardinal, you will be free, Sir Charpentier.”

“Shall I give Your Majesty the key he entrusted me with?”

“No, keep it. If Sir Cardinal, who is so well served that the king must envy his servants, trusted you with it, I’m sure it couldn’t be in more honest hands. Remember, do not dispense any funds except at my written order, in my own handwriting.” Charpentier bowed. “Don’t you have here,” asked the king, “a certain Rossignol, who I’m told is clever at deciphering secret letters?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“I want to see him.”

“If you knock three times on the panel, you can summon him. Would His Majesty like to knock himself, or shall I do it?”

“Knock,” said the king.

Charpentier knocked thrice on the panel and Rossignol came through the door. He had a paper in his hand. “Shall I stay or go, sire?” asked Charpentier.

“Leave us,” said the king. Charpentier left. “You are called Rossignol?” asked the king.

“Yes, Sire,” replied the small man, while continuing to scan the paper.

“They say you are clever at deciphering?”

“In that regard, Sire, I don’t know anyone better.”



“You can decode any code you are given?”

“There is only one that, till now, has resisted me but with God’s help, I hope to master it.”

“What is the most recent letter you deciphered?”

“A letter from the Duke of Lorraine to Sir.”

“To my brother?”

“Yes, Sire, to His Royal Highness.”

“And what did the Duke of Lorraine have to say to my brother?”

“Your Majesty wants the full account?”

“Indeed!”

“I’ll go get it.” Rossignol turned to go, and then asked, “The original, or the translation?”

“Both, Sir.”

Rossignol darted out with the speed of a ferret, albeit one with a furrowed brow, and returned almost immediately with two papers in one hand, while continuing to study the one in his other. “Here they are, Sire,” he said, presenting the original from the Duke of Lorraine and its translation.

The king started with the original, and read, “If Jupiter ...”

“Sir,” said Rossignol, interrupting the king.

“...Is exiled from Olympus ...” continued Louis XIII.

“The *Louvre*,” said Rossignol.

“And why would Sir be exiled from the Court?” asked the king.

“Because he conspires,” Rossignol said calmly.

“Sir conspires? Against whom?”

“Against Your Majesty and the State.”

“Do you know what you are saying, Sir?”

“I am saying that Your Majesty should continue reading.”

“ ...He could,” read Louis XIII, “take refuge in Crete.”

“In *Lorraine*.”

“Minos ...”

“Duke Charles IV.”

“ ...Would take great pleasure in offering him hospitality. But the health of Cephalus ...”

“The health of Your Majesty.”

“He calls me Cephalus?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“I know who Minos was but I’ve forgotten Cephalus. Who was Cephalus?”

“A Thessalian prince, Sire, husband of a beautiful Athenian princess, who drove her from him because she had been unfaithful but with whom he was later reconciled.”

Louis XIII frowned. “So,” he said, “this Cephalus, husband of an unfaithful wife with whom he reconciles despite her infidelity – that’s me?”

“Yes, Sire – that is you,” Rossignol calmly replied.

“Are you sure?”

“*For the love of God*, yes! As Your Majesty will see.”

“Where were we?”

“If Sir’s exiled from the Louvre, he can take refuge in Lorraine. Duke Charles IV would take great pleasure in offering him hospitality. But the health of Cephalus ...’ – that is to say, the king; that’s where you’re, Sire.”

“...Cannot last long.’ What does that mean, *cannot last long*?”

“It means that Your Majesty is ill, very ill indeed – at least, such is the opinion of the Duke of Lorraine.”

“Ah!” said the king, turning pale. “So I’m ill, very ill indeed!” He searched for and found a mirror, looked at himself, and then patted his pockets for medicinal salts. Finding none, he made an effort to pull himself together and, in an agitated voice, continued to read. “‘Why, in the case of his death, should we not marry Procris ...’ – Procris?”

“That is, the queen,” said Rossignol. “Procris was Cephalus’s unfaithful wife.”

“...Why should we not marry Procris to Jupiter?’ To *Sir*?” cried the king.

“Yes, Sire. To Sir.”

“To Sir!” Sweat sprang from the king’s forehead, and he wiped it with a handkerchief, then continued, “‘The rumour at Court is that Oracle ...”

“His Eminence.”

“...Wants to replace Procris with a marriage to Venus ...”

The king looked at Rossignol who continued without replying to the king, to study the paper in his hand. “*Venus*?” repeated the king, impatiently.

“*Madam Combalet*,” Rossignol hastily replied.

“...To Cephalus,” continued the king. “Marry me to Madam de Combalet? Me? Where do they get these ideas? ‘Meanwhile, Jupiter’ – that is to say, Sir – ‘continues to court Hebe ...”

“Princess Marie de Gonzague.”

“...Feigning passion, as well as a falling-out with Juno.”

“The queen mother.”

“‘It is important that, to this end, Oracle’ – that is, the cardinal – ‘must mistakenly believe that Jupiter loves Hebe. Signed, Minos.’”

“Charles IV.”

“Ah!” murmured the king. “That explains his apparent reluctance to sacrifice his great love in order to become lieutenant general. So, my health cannot last, eh? And when I am dead, you will marry my brother to my widow! But, thanks be to God, though I may be ill, ‘very ill indeed,’ as they say, I’m not dead yet. So, my brother conspires, and if his conspiracy is discovered, he can escape to Lorraine and find refuge with the duke! Does he think France couldn’t swallow a mouthful like Lorraine, duke and all? Isn’t it enough that they gave us the Guises?”

Then, turning quickly to Rossignol, “And how,” the king asked, “did this letter come into the hands of Sir Cardinal?”

“He had it from Sir Senelle.”

“One of my own doctors,” said Louis XIII. “Truly, I am well served!”

“Foreseeing an intrigue between the Court of Lorraine and that of France, Sir Senelle’s valet had been suborned in advance by Father Joseph.”

“This Father Joseph seems to be a clever man,” said the king.

Rossignol winked. “He’s the shadow of His Eminence,” he said.

“So Senelle’s valet...?”

“Stole the letter and sent it to us.”

“Where was Senelle, then?”

“Not far from Nancy; the valet returned and said he’d inadvertently burned the letter with some other papers. The duke suspects nothing, and has sent a second letter to His Royal Highness Sir.”

“And how has my brother *Jupiter* responded to the wise *Minos*?” asked the king, laughing nervously, moustache twitching as he awaited the reply.

“I don’t yet know. This is his answer that I’m working on.”

“What! You have his answer there?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Give it to me.”

“Your Majesty won’t understand it, given that I don’t understand it yet myself.”

“Why is that?”

“Because after they lost the first letter, fearing some accident, they invented a new code.”

The king looked at the letter and read these completely unintelligible words: “‘*Astra-so be-the-amb in joy as L.M.T. wants to be.*’ When will you know what this means?”

“I’ll have it by tomorrow, Sire.”

“This is not my brother’s handwriting.”

“No, this time the valet didn’t dare steal the letter, lest he be suspected, so he copied it.”

“And when was this letter written?”

“Today at noon, Sire.”

“And you already have a copy?”

“Father Joseph handed it to me at two o’clock.”

The king remained thoughtful for a moment, then turned again to the little man, who had taken back the letter and was working to guess its meaning. “You’ll stay on with me, won’t you, Sir Rossignol?” he asked.

“Yes, Sire, until this letter is fully decrypted.”

“What, only until this letter is decrypted? Are you planning to rejoin Sir Cardinal?”

“Yes, in fact but only if he is once more a minister. If he isn’t a minister, he has no need for me.”

“But I have a need for you!”

“Sire,” said Rossignol, shaking his head so that his glasses nearly fell off, “I’m leaving France tomorrow.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because in serving Sir Cardinal, and through him Your Majesty, in deciphering the codes invented for their intrigues, I’ve made terrible enemies of the Great Nobles, enemies against whom only the cardinal could protect me.”

“But what if I protect you?”

“His Majesty may have the intention but...”

“But?”

“But he does not have the power.”

“What?” The king frowned.

“Moreover,” continued Rossignol, “I owe everything to Sir Cardinal. I was a poor boy in Alby when it chanced that the cardinal learned of my talent with ciphers. He took me on and gave me a position paying a thousand crowns, then two thousand, then added twenty *pistoles* for each letter I decoded. For six years I’ve deciphered one or two letters a week, so I have a tidy sum saved away.”

"Where?"

"In England."

"So you'll probably go to England and enter the service of King Charles?"

"King Charles offered me two thousand *pistoles* a year and fifty *pistoles* per letter deciphered if I would leave the service of Sir Cardinal. I refused."

"And if I offered you as much as King Charles has?"

"Sire, the most pressing need of a man on this earth is to stay above it. With Sir Cardinal in disgrace, even with Your Majesty's royal protection – or perhaps because of it – I have less than a week to live. When he left this house, it took all of his authority to make me stay here as long as I have but for Your Majesty, I am willing to risk my life ... for another twenty-four hours."

"So you're not willing to risk your life for me beyond that?"

"We owe our devotion to our parents and beyond that to a benefactor. Seek for devotion, Sire, from your parents or those for whom you've done well. I've no doubt Your Majesty will find it there."

"You have no doubt. Well, I have reason to doubt it!"

"Now that I have told His Majesty why I have stayed, that is, to perform a service – now that he knows the risks I run to remain in France even this long, I beg His Majesty not to oppose my departure, for which everything is prepared."

"I will not oppose it but on the express condition that you vow not to enter the service of any foreign prince who might use your talent against France."

"I give Your Majesty my word."

"Go. Sir Cardinal is very lucky to have servants such as you and your colleagues." The king looked at his watch. "Four o'clock. I will be back here at ten in the morning; make sure the translation of the new letter is ready by then."

"It will be, Sire."

As the king was reaching for his hat, Rossignol asked, "Wouldn't His Majesty like to speak with Father Joseph?"

"Of course, of course," said the king, "and when he comes, ask Charpentier to send him in."

"He's right here, Sire."

"Then have him enter, and I'll speak to him at once."

"Here he is, Sire," said Rossignol, withdrawing to defer to His Grey Eminence.

The monk appeared, and stood humbly waiting on the threshold of the study. "Come, come, *Father*," said the king.

The monk approached with every appearance of humility, head down and hands crossed on his breast. "Here I am, Sire," said the Capuchin, stopping four paces from the king.

"You were waiting, Father," said the king, looking at the monk with curiosity, because for him a whole new world was opening before his eyes. "Yes, Sire."

"How long?"

"For an hour or so."

"And you waited that long without anyone letting me know you were there?"

"A humble monk has nothing better to do, Sire, than to await orders from his king."

"I'm told you are a man of great ability, *Father*."

"My enemies may say that, Sire," replied the monk, eyes piously downcast.

"You helped the cardinal to bear the burden of his ministry?"

"As Simon of Cyrene helped Our Lord carry his cross."

"You are a great champion of Christianity, are you not, *Father*? If it was the eleventh century, you would, like Peter the Hermit, preach the crusade."

"I preach the crusade even in the seventeenth century, Sire, albeit without success."

"Indeed? How so?"

"I wrote an epic poem in Latin entitled the *Turciade* to inspire the Christian princes to take up arms against the Muslims. But much time has passed, and they show no signs of being inspired."

"You rendered great service to Sir Cardinal?"

"His Eminence was blocked at every turn but I helped as I could, according to my limited abilities."

"How much did His Eminence grant you per year?"

"Nothing, Sire. It is forbidden for our order to receive anything but alms. His Eminence paid only for my carriage."

"You have a carriage?"

"Yes, Sire but not in gratification of pride. I formerly rode an ass."

"The humble mount of Our Lord," said the king.

"But My Lord found that I did not travel fast enough."

"And so he gave you a carriage?"

"At first, Sire, I refused the carriage out of humility, so he gave me a horse. Unfortunately, this horse was a mare, and one day my secretary, who was riding a stallion..."

"Yes, yes, I understand," said the king hastily. "And that's when you accepted the carriage offered by the cardinal?"

"Yes, Sire – I resigned myself to it. For I thought," said the monk, "it would be pleasing to God to see the humble glorified."

"Despite the cardinal's retirement, *my Father*, I would like to keep you near me," said the king. "Tell me what you require."

"Nothing, Sire. For the sake of my salvation, I may already have been too forward in the acceptance of honours."

"Have you no desires I can satisfy?"

"Only to allow me to return to my monastery that perhaps I never should have left."

"You are too useful in the affairs of state for me to allow that."

"I could see such things only through the eyes of His Eminence, Sire. With that illumination gone, I am blind."

"In every estate, *my Father*, even the religious, it's possible to see ambition awarded according to its merits. God has not given you your talent in order for it to be wasted. Sir Cardinal is an example of the heights one might achieve."

"And from which, therefore, one can fall."

"But no matter how far you fall, if you fall wearing a cardinal's red hat, the descent is bearable."

A flash of avarice glimmered beneath the Capuchin's lowered lashes. This glimmer did not escape the king's notice. "Have you ever thought about a high-ranking post in the Church?" he asked.

"I might have had such thoughts but only with Sir Cardinal."

"Why only with Sir Cardinal?"

"Because it would have taken all his influence with Rome to achieve such a goal."

"And you think my influence doesn't match his?"

"Your Majesty proposed to give the Archbishop of Tours a cardinal's hat but he was an archbishop – not a poor Capuchin monk."

Louis XIII studied Father Joseph as closely as he could but it was impossible to read anything in those downcast eyes or on those features of marble. Only the lips seemed alive. "Furthermore," continued the monk, "there is the single grave fact that overshadows all others in accepting those tasks placed upon me by Sir Cardinal and God; and that is the danger of committing sins that may jeopardize the salvation of one's soul. But with Sir Cardinal, who wields the power of Rome for both penitence and remission, I need have no fear, for if I sin by day, I confess by night. Sir Cardinal absolves me, and I sleep in tranquillity. However, if I serve a secular master, even a king, well ... a king cannot absolve me. I cannot sin for the state and retain a clear conscience."

The king continued to study the monk as he spoke, and the more he said, the more a certain repugnance grew on the king's face. "And when would you like to return to your monastery?" he asked when Father Joseph had finished.

"As soon as I have Your Majesty's permission."

"You have it, *my Father*," the king snapped.

"Your Majesty overwhelms me," said the monk, crossing his hands on his breast and bowing to the ground.

And unlike how he'd entered, neither stiff nor humble, he strode out without even turning to say farewell from the doorway. "Ambitious hypocrite! You, at least, I won't miss," murmured Louis XIII.

Then, after a moment surveying the shadows falling in the study, he said, "No matter. But one thing is certain: if I abdicated the throne tonight, as this morning the cardinal did this office, I wouldn't be able to find four men to follow me into exile and disgrace. Not three, not two, maybe not even one."

Then he said, "Well, maybe one – there's still my fool, l'Angely. Though of course, he's a fool!"

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The Ambassadors

The next morning at ten o'clock, as he'd promised, the king was once again in the cardinal's office. The lessons he was learning, while humiliating, were also fascinating. On his return to the Louvre the day before, he had received no one, closeting himself with his page Baradas, whom he'd sent three thousand *pistoles* via Charpentier as a reward for his help in bringing down the cardinal. He thought it best to delay paying the others, so he'd given Baradas his reward first. Before giving the queen her thirty thousand, the queen mother her sixty thousand, and Sir his one hundred fifty thousand *livres*, he wanted to read Sir's response to the Duke of Lorraine that Rossignol had promised him by ten o'clock the next morning. Thus, as we've said, at ten o'clock the king was once more in the cardinal's office, and even before he threw his cape over a chair and put his hat on the table, he knocked three times on the panel. Rossignol appeared with his usual punctuality. "Well?" the king asked eagerly.

"Well, Sire," Rossignol said, blinking behind his glasses, "we have cracked the code."

"Quick," said the king, "let's see it. The key first."

"Here it is, Sire." And he presented the key. The king read:

Je – The King  
Astre se – The Queen  
Be – The Queen Mother  
L'amb – Sir  
L.M. – The Cardinal  
T. – Death  
Pif-paf – The War  
Zane – Duke of Lorraine  
Gier – Duchess de Chevreuse  
Oel – Madam de Fargis  
O – Pregnant

"And now?" said the king.

"Apply the key, Sire."

"No," the king said, "you do it, you're used to it. My head would break at such a task."

Rossignol took the paper and read, “*The queen, the queen mother, and the Duke of Orléans are in bliss. The cardinal is dead. The king wants to be king: he’s decided on war against the Prince of Marmots but with the Duke of Orléans in charge. The Duke of Orléans is in love with the Duke of Lorraine’s daughter but he’d rather marry the queen, even if she is seven years older than him. His only fear is that, following the advice of Madam de Fargis or the Duchess de Chevreuse, she may be pregnant when the king dies. Signed, Gaston d’Orléans.*”

The king had listened without interrupting, though he had wiped his forehead several times and scored the floorboards with the wheel of his spur. “Pregnant,” he murmured, “pregnant. If she becomes pregnant, it certainly won’t be by me.”

Then, turning to Rossignol: “Is this the first letter of this sort that you’ve decoded?”

“Oh, no, Sire! I’ve deciphered ten or twelve like this.”

“What! And Sir Cardinal never showed them to me?”

“Why torment Your Majesty with a misfortune that might never occur?”

“But when he was accused and harried by these people, why didn’t he use these weapons against them?”

“He was afraid that would also make them enemies to the king.”

The king took a few steps back and forth, from one end of the study to the other, his head low and his hat over his eyes. Then returning to Rossignol, he said, “Make me a copy of each letter, with its decoded version, and the key on top.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Do you think there will be others like this?”

“Most certainly, Sire.”

“Who are the people I’m to receive today?”

“That’s not my concern, Sire. Ciphers are my only business. You should see Sir Charpentier.”

Even before Rossignol was out the door, the king, with a feverish and trembling hand, struck two blows on the panel. These rapid, violent blows indicated his state of mind. Charpentier appeared instantly but stopped on the threshold. The king’s eyes were fixed on the floor, fist clenched on the cardinal’s desk, while he muttered, “Pregnant ... the queen pregnant ... a foreign queen on the throne of France. By an Englishman maybe!”

Then in a lower voice, as if he was afraid himself to hear what he said: “Nothing is impossible. Not in this family, based on what has gone before.”

Absorbed in his thoughts, the king hadn’t noticed Charpentier. Thinking the secretary hadn’t responded to his summons, he looked up impatiently and was about to knock a second time when, seeing the gesture and guessing the intention, Charpentier stepped forward and said, “Here I am, Sire.”

“Good, good,” the king said, trying to regain his composure. “What do we have before us today?”

“Sire, the Count of Bautru has arrived from Spain, and the Count of La Saludie from Venice.”

“What were they doing in those places?”

“I don’t know, Sire. Yesterday I had the honour to tell you that Sir Cardinal had sent for them, as well as for Sir de Charnassé, who will be arriving from Sweden by tomorrow at the latest.”

“You informed them that the cardinal was no longer a minister and that I would receive them in his place?”

“I sent them His Eminence’s orders that were to report on their missions to His Majesty as they would have done to himself.”

“Who is coming first?”

“Sir de Bautru.”

“As soon as he arrives, bring him in.”

“He is here, Sire.”

“Let him come, then.”

Charpentier turned, spoke a few words in a low voice, and then stepped aside to let Bautru enter. The ambassador was still in his travelling clothes, and apologised to appear so before the king but it was thus that he had always met Cardinal Richelieu. Once he’d arrived in the antechamber, he hadn’t wanted to keep His Majesty waiting. “Sir de Bautru,” the king said to him, “the cardinal spoke well of you, saying you were a trustworthy man, and that the honest opinion of a Bautru was worth two of Cardinal Bérulle’s.”

“Sire, I endeavoured to be worthy of the confidence the cardinal placed in me.”

“And you will prove worthy of mine as well, won’t you, Sir, telling me everything you would have told him?”

“Everything, Sire?” Bautru asked, staring at the king.

“Everything. I’m looking for the truth and I want all of it.”

“Well, Sire, you should start by recalling your Ambassador de Fargis who, instead of following the instructions of the cardinal, to the benefit of Your Majesty’s honour and glory, follows those of the queen mother, to the detriment of France.”

“Others have already advised me of this. I will think about it. You’ve spoken with Count-Duke Olivares?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“What were your orders regarding him?”

“To negotiate, if possible, a peaceful settlement on Mantua.”

“And?”

“When I tried to talk business with him, he led me into the henhouse of His Majesty King Philip IV that contains the most curious species in the world, and offered to give me samples to send to Your Majesty.”

“So he was mocking you, then?”

“Both me, Sire, and he whom I represented.”

“Sir!”

“You asked me for the truth, Sire. That’s what I give you. Shall I lie? If the truth is unpleasant, I certainly have wit enough to replace it with pleasant lies.”

“No, give me the truth, whatever it may be. What do people think of our planned Italian campaign?”

“People laugh, Sire.”

“People laugh? Don’t they know what we plan to do?”

“They do, Sire – but they say the queens will make you change your mind, and that Sir, placed in command, will obey the queens rather than you, so the expedition is bound to end up failing to support the Duke of Nevers.”

“Ah! So they think in Madrid?”

“Yes, Sire, they think it and write it – as I know, since I suborned one of the Count-Duke’s secretaries. Olivares wrote to Don Gonzales de Cordova, ‘If the king gives Sir control of the army, have no fear: that army will never cross the Pass of Susa. On the other hand, if the cardinal is in charge of the conduct of the war, with or without the king, the Duke of Savoy will need all the support you can send him.’”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Quite sure, Sire.”

The king resumed pacing back and forth, head down, hat pulled over his eyes, as was his habit when worried. Suddenly he stopped and, fixing Bautru with a penetrating look, asked, “And the queen – have you heard anything about her?”

“Only what’s said at Court.”

“And what do they say at Court?”

“Nothing I can repeat to Your Majesty.”

“Never mind that. I want to know.”

“Slander and calumny, Sire. Don’t disturb yourself with such filth.”

“I tell you, Sir,” said Louis XIII, impatiently stamping his foot, “that slander or truth, I want to hear what is said of the queen!”

Bautru bowed. “Your Majesty orders, and a loyal subject must obey.”

“Obey then.”

“It is said that Your Majesty’s health is failing...”

“My health is failing! So everyone seems to hope. It seems my death is their salvation. Go on.”

“Since your health is failing, the queen will take steps to make sure...” Bautru hesitated.

“Make sure of what?” demanded the king. “Speak! Tell me!”

“To ensure the regency.”

“But there’s only a regency when there’s an heir to the throne!”

“...To ensure the regency,” Bautru repeated.

The king stamped his foot. “So, the same rumour in Spain as in Lorraine – in Lorraine it’s a fear but in Spain, a hope. Indeed, if the queen becomes queen regent, then Paris will be Spanish. So that’s what they’re saying, Bautru?”

Bautru bowed to the king. “You ordered me to speak, Sire. I obeyed.”

“You’ve done well. I told you I was looking for the truth, and you’ve put me on the trail – and now, thank God, I’m hunter enough to follow it to the end.”

“Any further orders, Your Majesty?”

“Go and rest, Sir. You must be exhausted.”

“Your Majesty hasn’t told me whether I’ve had the good fortune to please him, or the misfortune to dissatisfy him.”

“I can’t say I enjoyed hearing what you’d to tell me, Sir Bautru. But you’ve done your duty that’s better. The next time there’s a vacancy among the Councillors of State, I think I may reward you with it.”

And Louis XIII, removing his glove, presented his hand for the Ambassador Extraordinaire to Philip IV to kiss. Bautru, as etiquette required, backed out of the room so as not to turn his back on the king. Left alone, the king murmured, “So – my death is others’ hope; my honour is a joke; and the succession to the throne is a lottery. If my brother assumes the throne, he’ll betray France and auction it to the highest bidder. And my mother, the widow of Henry IV, that great king who was killed because he planned to make France greater still – my mother will help him. Fortunately...” and the king gave a shrill laugh, “...when I die, the queen may be pregnant that will upend everything. Oh, how happy I am in my marriage!”

Then his expression darkened even more, and his voice lowered. “Not so astonishing, then, that they all wanted me to get rid of the cardinal!”

He thought he heard a small sound from the door, and turned. The door opened. “Does Your Majesty wish to receive Sir de La Saludie?” Charpentier asked.

“I believe so,” said the king. “Everything these gentlemen have to tell me is so very interesting.” Then, with another shrill laugh: “They do say that a king never knows what’s happening in his own castle! But though he may be the last to know, he can find out if he wants to.” Then, as Sir de La Saludie appeared at the door, he said, “Come, come, Sir de La Saludie, I’ve been expecting you. You’ve been told, haven’t you, to report to me in place of the cardinal? Speak, and keep no secrets from me that you would share with him.”

“But, Sire,” said La Saludie, “in the situation in which I find myself, I’m not sure if I should repeat...”

“Repeat what?”

“Words of praise from Italy for a man of whom it seems you had complaints.”

“Ah! Do they praise the cardinal in Italy? And what do they say of the cardinal on the far side of the mountains?”

"Sire, they are unaware that the cardinal is no longer your minister, and they congratulate Your Majesty on being served by the leading political and military genius of our century. I was instructed by the cardinal to announce the fall of La Rochelle to the Duke of Mantua, to the Senate of Venice, and to His Holiness Urban VIII. The news was received with joy in Mantua, enthusiasm in Venice, and satisfaction in Rome. Your Majesty's planned expedition into Italy has terrified Charles-Emmanuel of Savoy but reassured all the other princes. Here are letters from the Duke of Mantua, from the Venetian Senate, and from His Holiness, Sire, all of which express the utmost confidence in the plans of the cardinal. And each of these three powers, who wish to support this effort as much as they can, has instructed me to place drafts with their bankers for funds totalling one and a half million crowns."

"And these drafts are in whose name?"

"In the name of Sir Cardinal, Sire. They are payable on demand – he has only to endorse them to collect the money."

The king took the drafts and turned away. "A million and a half," he said, "along with the six million he borrowed – it's with this that we're marching to war. And all the money raised by one man, as if that man was himself the grandeur and glory of France."

Then, at a sudden thought, Louis XIII stepped to the panel and knocked twice. Charpentier appeared. "Do you know," asked the king, "from whom the cardinal borrowed the six million with which he planned to finance the war?"

"Yes, Sire, from Sir de Bullion."

"Did it take much effort to persuade him to make the loan?"

"On the contrary, Sire, it was he who offered the money."

"How's that?"

"Sir Cardinal complained that the army raised by the Marquis d'Uxelles had dispersed, due to their pay having been appropriated by the queen mother, and their food having not been delivered by Marshal Créquui. 'That army is lost,' said His Eminence. 'Well, then!' said Sir de Bullion, 'we must raise another, that's all.' 'And with what?' 'With what? I'll give you enough for an army of fifty thousand men, with a million in gold in reserve.' 'In that case, I'll need six million.' 'When?' 'As soon as possible.' 'Will tonight be too late?' Then the cardinal laughed. 'What, do you have that much in your pocket?' 'No but there's that much in the Treasury. I'll give you a draft to present to Fieubet, the Exchequer.' 'And what guarantees do you require in return, Sir de Bullion?' He rose, bowed to His Eminence, and said, 'Merely your word, My Lord.' The cardinal embraced him. Sir de Bullion wrote a few lines on a piece of paper, the cardinal accepted it, and that was that."

"Very well! Do you know where I'd find Sir de Bullion?"

"At the Treasury, I suppose."

"Wait a moment." The king went to the cardinal's desk and wrote:

*Sir de Bullion,*

*I have a particular need for a sum of fifty thousand livres so I won't have to touch the money that you were kind enough to lend to the cardinal. Please let me know if such a loan would be possible; I give my word to repay it within a month.*

*Your affectionate,*

*Louis*

Then turning to Charpentier, he asked, "Is Beringhen at hand?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Give him this note, and tell him to take a sedan chair to go see Sir de Bullion. He is to wait for a reply."

Charpentier took the note and left but then returned almost immediately. "Well?" said the king.

"Sir Beringhen is on his way but I wanted to inform Your Majesty that Sir de Chamassé has arrived from West Prussia, with a letter for the cardinal from King Gustavus Adolphus."

Louis nodded. "Sir de La Saludie," he said, "do you have anything else to say?"

"Only, Sire, to assure you of my respect, and that I would like to add my voice to those who regret the departure of Sir de Richelieu; it is my duty as a faithful subject to tell Your Majesty that, as far as Italy is concerned, he was the man we needed. I would be happy if I could be allowed to send the cardinal my regards, even if he is in disgrace."

"I'll do better than that, Sir de La Saludie," said the king. "I'll give you the opportunity to see him personally."

La Saludie bowed. "Here are the drafts from Mantua, Venice, and Rome. Go to Chaillot and present your regards to the cardinal, along with these notes. Ask him to endorse the drafts, then take them to Sir de Bullion and collect the money in the name of His Eminence. To speed you on your way, you may take my carriage that is waiting at the door. The sooner you return, the better I'll recognise your zeal and devotion."

La Saludie bowed again and, without wasting another second on compliments and courtesies, left to execute the king's orders. Charpentier was still at the door. "I will see Sir de Chamassé now," the king said.

Never had the king been obeyed at the Louvre as he was at the house of the cardinal; he had no sooner expressed his desire to see Sir de Chamassé than the man appeared before him. "Well, Baron," said the king, "it seems you had a successful trip."

"Yes, Sire."

"Please make your report without losing a second. Only yesterday did I finally learn the value of time."

"Your Majesty is aware of why I was sent to Germany?"

"His Eminence, whom I trusted to act on his own initiative, thought it sufficient to announce your departure and notify me of your return. Otherwise, I know nothing."

"Would His Majesty like me to give him a detailed account of my instructions?"

"Speak."

"These were my orders that I learned by heart in case the written instructions went astray: 'The frequent efforts of the House of Austria to undermine the allies of the king have forced him to take measures on their behalf; with the fall of La Rochelle, His Majesty has decided to muster his finest troops and personally lead them to the aid of his allies in Italy. Accordingly, the king has dispatched Sir de Chamassé to Germany to assure all his allies there of His Majesty's full support, if they will act in concert with the king in the interest of their mutual defence. The Baron de Chamassé is authorised to discuss the most suitable and appropriate means by which His Majesty might aid his allies.'"

"Those were your general instructions," said the king, "but no doubt you had others that were more specific?"

"Yes, Sire. For Duke Maximilian of Bavaria, whom His Eminence knew was very angry with the Emperor, I was to advise the creation of a Catholic League to oppose Ferdinand in both Germany and Italy, while Gustavus Adolphus was attacking the Emperor at the head of his Protestant troops."

"And what were your instructions regarding King Gustavus Adolphus?"

"I was instructed to promise King Gustave that if he would lead a Protestant League, as the Duke of Bavaria would with the Catholics, he would receive an annual subsidy of half a million *livres*, as well as the promise that Your Majesty would support him by attacking Lorraine, the neighbouring province of Germany that has played host to so many conspiracies against France."

"Yes," the king said, smiling, "I see it: Crete and King Minos. But what would the cardinal, or rather I myself, gain by attacking Lorraine?"

"It would force the princes of the House of Austria to divert troops to the defence of Alsace that would take their eyes off Italy and give France the freedom to finish her business in Mantua."

Louis took his forehead between his hands. The intricate plans of his minister staggered him with their size and complexity, until his brain seemed ready to burst. "And," he said after a moment, "Did King Gustavus Adolphus accept?"

"Yes, Sire but with certain conditions."

"What?"

"They are contained in this letter, Sire," said Chamassé, drawing from his pouch an envelope embossed with the arms of Sweden. "Would His Majesty prefer to read this letter himself, or shall I, as may be more appropriate, explain its meaning?"

"I want to read everything, Sir," said the king, taking the letter from his hands.

"Remember, Sire, that King Gustavus Adolphus is rather jolly and informal, indifferent to the forms of diplomacy, and speaks his mind as if from one soldier to another."

"If I'd forgotten that, I'll remember it, and if I'd never known it, I'll learn." And, unsealing the letter, he read it in a low voice:

[At Stuhm after the final Swedish conquest of the forts of Livonia and Polish Prussia.]

*19 December 1628*

*My dear Cardinal,*

*As you know, I'm a bit of a pagan, so don't be surprised by the informality with which I write to a Prince of the Church. You are a great man – more than that, a man of genius – and more than that, an honest man, one with whom one can talk and do business. Let us talk, then, of the affairs of France and of Sweden, and of how they can march together. I am ready to negotiate but only with you. Are you sure of your king? Are you sure he won't turn, at the first cry, to his mother, his wife, his brother, his confessor, or his favourite – Luynes, is it, or Chalais? I can't keep them straight. Meanwhile you, who have more talent in your little finger than all these people, king, queens, princes, favourites, churchmen – don't you fear that someday you'll be brought down by some low intrigue hatched in the harem, as if you were no more than a pasha or vizier? If you are sure of your position, do me the honour to say to me: Friend Gustave, I have at least three years more during which I can dominate these witless lords and ladies who give me so much work and yet make so much trouble. If you can give me your personal assurance that the king will support you, then I will begin my campaign without delay – but not if you tell me it's up to the king. On your word, I'll muster my army and mount my horse, and we will plunder Prague, burn Vienna, and sack Buda and Pest. But solely on the word of the King of France, I will not beat a single drum, load a single musket, or saddle a single horse. If that's the way the wind blows, Eminence, send your reply by way of Sir de Chamassé, and I will sheathe my sword, though it saddens me to do so. But if the Devil allows, we shall campaign together, and drink to each other in the spoils of Hungarian honey! As a man of spirit, I commend you not to the mercy of God but to the care of your own genius. I address you, with joy and pride, as,*

*Your affectionate,*

*Gustavus Adolphus*

The king read this letter with increasing irritation, and when he was finished, he crumpled it in his hand. Then, turning to the Baron de Chamassé, he asked, "Are you aware of the contents of this letter?"

"I know the gist of it, Sire but not the details."

"Barbarian! Uncouth northern bear!" the king whispered.

"Sire," Chamassé remarked, "this barbarian just defeated both the Russians and the Poles. He learned the arts of war from a Frenchman named La Gardie but has exceeded him: he is the inventor of modern warfare and, in short, the only man who can thwart the ambition of Emperor Ferdinand and beat Tilly and Wallenstein."

"Yes, I know that's what they say," replied the king. "I know that in the opinion of the cardinal, the first man of war in Europe is King Gustavus Adolphus but," he added with a laugh intended to be mocking but in the event only nervous, "I may not share that opinion."

"I sincerely regret that, Sire," said Chamassé, bowing.

"Ah!" said Louis XIII. "So, Baron, you wish to return to the King of Sweden on our behalf?"

"That would be a great honour for me and, I believe, of great benefit to France."

"Unfortunately, that is impossible," said Louis XIII, "as His Swedish Majesty wishes to deal only with Sir Cardinal, and the cardinal is no longer involved in such affairs."

There was a scratching at the door. The king turned and said, "Well, what is it?" Then, recognising the scratching as that of Sir Premier, he said, "Is that you, Beringhen? Come in."

Beringhen entered. "Sire," he said, presenting a large letter with a broad seal, "Sir de Bullion's reply." The king opened it and read:

*Sire,*

*I am in despair but, in service to Sir de Richelieu, I have emptied my coffers down to the last crown, and though I wish to please His Majesty, I cannot say when I could give him the fifty thousand livres he asks for. It is with sincere regret and the most profound respect, Sire, that I have the honour to tell Your Majesty that I am his most humble, faithful, and obedient servant.*

*– De Bullion*

Louis gnawed at his moustache. Gustave's letter told him how much political credit he had, and Bullion's told him how much financial credit. At that moment, La Saludie returned, followed by four men, each bending under the weight of the bag he carried. "What's this?" asked the king.

"Sire," said La Saludie, "it's the one-and-a-half million *livres* that Sir de Bullion sends to Sir Cardinal."

"Sir de Bullion?" said the king. "He had this much money?"

"By our lady, Sire!" said La Saludie. "So it seems."

"And who did he send you to for the money this time? Fieubet?"

"No, Sire. He was going to at first but then decided that for such a small amount it wasn't worth it, so he just wrote a note to his first clerk, Sir Lambert."

"Insolent dog!" murmured the king. "He has too little cash to give me fifty thousand *livres* but he has a million and a half to pay Sir de Richelieu for the drafts from Mantua, Venice, and Rome."

He dropped onto a chair, crushed under the weight of the moral whiplash of the last two days. Beginning to glimpse the inevitable truth, he said to Charnassé and La Saludie, "Gentlemen, my thanks. You are good and faithful servants. I'll call you within a few days to tell you my wishes."

He gestured for them to withdraw; they bowed and went out. The four porters had deposited their bags on the floor and were waiting. Louis stretched out his hand to the panel and knocked twice. Charpentier appeared. "Sir," said the king, "put away these one-and-a-half million *livres* – but first pay these men."

Charpentier gave each porter a silver crown, and they went out. "Sir Charpentier," said the king, "I'm not sure if I will come tomorrow. I'm terribly tired."

"It would be unfortunate if Your Majesty couldn't come tomorrow," said Charpentier. "It is the day for reports."

"What reports?"

"Reports from the cardinal's chief agents."

"Who are these chief agents?"

"Father Joseph, though you have given him permission to return to his monastery, so of course he won't be reporting tomorrow; Sir Lopez the Spaniard; Sir de Souscarrières."

"Are these reports made in writing, or in person?"

"Since the cardinal's agents know that tomorrow they will be reporting to the king, it's likely they will report in person."

"I'll be here, then," said the king, rising with an effort.

"So if the agents come in person...?"

"I'll receive them."

"I must warn Your Majesty about the nature of one of these agents, of whom I've not yet spoken."

"Is there a fourth agent, then?"

"An agent even more secret than the others."

"And who is this agent?"

"A woman, Sire."

"Madam de Combalet?"

"Your pardon, Sire but Madam de Combalet is not an agent of the cardinal – she is his niece."

"Then who is this woman? Is she well known?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Her name?"

"Marion Delorme."

"His Eminence received that notorious courtesan?"

"She was one of his most effective agents. Indeed, it was through her that he was warned in advance that he was about to be disgraced."

"Through her?" said the king, astonished.

"When the cardinal wanted to learn secret news of Court intrigues, he turned to her. Perhaps knowing that Your Majesty is in this office in place of the cardinal, she will have something of particular importance to say to Your Majesty."

"I assume she doesn't come here publicly."

"No, Sire. Her house is adjacent to this one, and the cardinal had a door made in the adjoining wall so that one can pass between the houses."

"Are you sure, Sir Charpentier, that His Eminence wouldn't consider it a betrayal to reveal all these secrets to me?"

"On the contrary, I tell Your Majesty all this at his direct order."

"Where is this secret door?"

"Behind this panel, Sire. During work tomorrow, if the king is alone, hears a gentle knock at this panel, and wishes to honour Miss Delorme by receiving her, he can press this button and the door will open. If he does not wish to see her, he can respond with three equal taps on the button. Ten minutes later he will hear a bell, and between the doors he will find a written report."

Louis XIII thought for a moment. It was obvious that his curiosity was fighting a fierce battle with his repugnance for women – especially those in Marion Delorme's trade. Finally his curiosity got the better of him. "If His Eminence, a holy Prince of the Church, was willing to receive Miss Delorme, it seems to me that I may receive her as well. And if that turns out to be a sin, I'll just confess it. Until tomorrow, Sir Charpentier." And the king took his leave, even more pale, tired, dazed than the day before but with a better idea of how hard it is to be a great minister, and how easy to be a mediocre king.

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A Royal Intermission

Anxiety permeated the Louvre: during the days the king went to the Place Royale, he didn't see any members of his family – not the queen mother, the queen, nor the Duke of Orléans – and none of them had received the gifts he'd promised that were to come from a treasure he alone could touch. Furthermore, the new King's Council, reorganised with such enthusiasm by Bérulle and General Marillac after the cardinal's resignation, had received no orders to meet and, therefore, had not deliberated about anything. Each day, according to the rumours spread by Beringhen, who dressed the king in the morning and undressed him at night, and saw him leave and return, His Majesty was sad each morning when he left, and even gloomier when he came back in the evening. Only the king's fool, l'Angely, and his favourite, Baradas, had access to his inner chamber. Of all the birds of prey extending their beaks and claws toward the cardinal's treasure, only Baradas had received his three thousand *pistoles* from Charpentier. It's true he had extended neither beak nor claw, the largesse having come without his asking for it. The page had his faults but he also had the virtues of youth. He was prodigal when he had money but unable to use his influence with the king to extend his extravagance. When money stopped flowing, he waited quietly – for he had fine clothes, beautiful hair, and a graceful form – and eventually the flow would resume, whereupon he would spend it as quickly as before. During the king's absence, Baradas spent his time with his friend Saint-Simon, awaiting the manna that would pour from heaven, and considering with his young comrade what he should do with it. The two youths – for they were barely men: Baradas, the elder, was scarcely twenty – discussed what might best be done with three thousand *pistoles*. They decided they would spend a whole month living like princes. Only one thing worried them: would the king actually pay up? Many a bill carrying the royal signature had been presented to the royal treasurer without being honoured, and they feared that, despite the majesty of Louis's royal name, they might find themselves as disappointed as any minor merchant from the city. Eventually Baradas had withdrawn to his room, taken up pen, paper, and ink, and undertaken the effort of writing a letter, a colossal undertaking for the average gentleman of his time. After much massaging of his brow and scratching of his head, he was finished; he put the letter in his pocket, waited bravely for the king to return, and then, even more bravely, had asked His Majesty when he might present himself to the treasurer to receive his promised sum of money. The king said he could present himself whenever he liked, as the treasurer was his to command. Baradas had kissed the king's hand, then leaped down the stairs four at a time, jumped into one of the sedan chairs of the firm of *Michel and Cavois*, and had himself taken immediately to the cardinal, or rather to the cardinal's former hotel. There he found Secretary Charpentier, faithful to his duty, and duly presented himself. Charpentier received his note, read it, and recognising the king's signature, bowed respectfully to Sir Baradas and asked him to wait for a moment. He left with the note and, five minutes later, came back with a bag of gold containing three thousand *pistoles*. At the sight of this bag, Baradas, unable to believe it, felt his heart leap. Charpentier offered to count out the sum before his eyes but Baradas, who was eager to clutch the blessed bag to his chest, was willing to forego this. However, Charpentier insisted, and Baradas, who still felt weak after his wound, didn't feel that he could wrest the bag away from him. So he waited until Charpentier was done, and then lugged the bag down to his waiting sedan chair. There, Baradas reached into the bag and drew out a handful of gold and silver crowns that he offered to Charpentier. The secretary merely bowed and refused. Baradas was astonished at this, staring at Charpentier as he went back through the door of the hotel. But bit by bit, Baradas got over his amazement. Once recovered, he ordered the chair porters to guard his bag, then went to the next house over, stepped up to the door, and knocked. He drew his laboriously written letter from his pocket and presented it to the elegantly dressed doorman who answered his knock, saying: "For Miss Delorme." He accompanied the letter with two crowns that the doorman refused as scrupulously as Charpentier had. Then Baradas returned to his chair and, with that commanding voice that belongs only to those who have money in their pockets, called out to his porters, "To the Louvre!"

And the porters, who hadn't failed to note the weight and rotundity of Baradas's bag, departed at a rate that would do credit to modern marathon athletes. After a quarter of an hour, Baradas, who had not for a moment stopped stroking the bag that was his travelling companion, was at the door of the Louvre. There he met Madam de Fargis, who was just descending from another sedan chair. The two recognised each other, and a smile curved the sensual lips of the mischievous young woman, as she saw the effort Baradas was making with his injured arm to lift the heavy bag. She asked, with mocking courtesy, "Would you like me to assist you, Sir Baradas?"

"Thank you, Madam," replied the page. "If, on your way, you should happen to see my comrade Saint-Simon, and could ask him to come down here, that would be much appreciated."

"Of course," replied the young coquette. "My pleasure, Sir Baradas."

And she ran nimbly up the stairs, lifting the hem of her dress to reveal the curve of her calf, giving just enough of a look to enable one to guess the shape of the rest. Five minutes later, Saint-Simon came down. Baradas had generously paid off his porters, and now the two men, joining their efforts, managed to lift the heavy bag up the stairs, much as in that painting of Paul Véronese where we see two young men in party dress carrying a large amphora containing enough honey to make twenty men drunk. Meanwhile, Louis XIII had extended his evening dinner for five hours, during which he'd conversed with his fool, who hadn't failed to notice His Majesty's increasing sadness. Louis XIII was sitting on one corner of the broad hearth in his parlour, behind the table, while l'Angely, on the other side, crouched in a high chair like a parrot on its perch, resting his feet on the lowest rung to make a table of his knees, on which he rested his plate with an aplomb in accord with his careful sense of balance. The king lacked an appetite and merely nibbled at a few dried cherries, wetting his lips from a glass that glittered with the gold and blue royal crest. He wore atop his head his black felt hat adorned with black plumes, the broad brim casting a shadow over his features that matched their expression. L'Angely, on the contrary, was ravenous, and had made up for missing his usual second dinner at five or six o'clock by sliding toward himself all the food the king disdained, mainly a huge pheasant paté and a woodcock stuffed with figs. After offering them to the king, who declined, he cut fat slices of both paté and fowl and transferred them to his plate. After attacking first the paté, then the woodcock, and finally the figs, he poured himself a glass of the cardinal's honey that was none other than what we now call Bordeaux. The king and the cardinal, who had the two worst stomachs in the kingdom, always drank this fine honey watered but l'Angely, who could digest anything, drank it straight, enjoying its bouquet and smooth savour. The first bottle of this honey had already been set empty on the hearth, and was soon to be joined by a second – which l'Angely, as a connoisseur, kept at an appropriate distance from the fire. Though it was still standing on the table, it was sufficiently empty to show that it wouldn't be there long, as l'Angely's deep respect for its qualities caused him to give it frequent caresses as he filled his glass. The fool, who like the Greek philosophers was an enemy to redundancy, was almost inclined to set his glass aside and, like a child drinking from a stream, pour the honey directly into his cupped hand. As l'Angely tenderly caressed the bottle once again, he uttered a sigh of satisfaction, just as Louis let out a sigh of sadness. L'Angely paused, the bottle in one hand, a wishbone in the other. "It seems," he said, "that being a king is no fun, especially if *you* happen to be the king."

"Ah, my poor l'Angely," said the king, "I'm so very unhappy."

"Tell me all about it, my son. It will console you," said l'Angely, placing the now-empty bottle on the hearth and cutting himself a slice of pie.

"Everyone steals from me, everyone lies to me, and everyone betrays me."

"True! Did you only just notice this?"

"No, I've just been confirming it."

"Come, come, my son, do not succumb to pessimism. I confess that, for my part, I'm inclined to think things are not so bad. I've dined well, this pie is good, the honey was excellent, the Earth rotates slowly enough that it does not throw me off, and I feel in my whole body a warmth of pleasant well-being that enables me to view life through a rosy glow."

"L'Angely!" Louis XIII said tartly. "No heresy, or I'll have you whipped."

"What?" replied l'Angely. "Is it heresy to view life through a rosy glow?"

"No but it's heresy to say the Earth rotates."

"Well, *my faith*, I'm not the first man to say it. I believe Gentlemen Copernicus and Galileo were ahead of me."

"Perhaps but the Bible says otherwise, and you can't pretend that Copernicus and Galileo were wiser than Moses!"

"Hmm," said l'Angely.

"See here," the king insisted, "if the Earth turned and the Sun were immobile, then how was Joshua able to stop the Sun for three days?"

"Are you quite sure that Joshua stopped the Sun for three days?"

"Not Joshua but the Lord."

"And you think the Lord gave him this extra time because he needed it to chase five Canaanite kings into a cave so he could wall them up? By my faith, if I were the Lord, instead of stopping the Sun, I would have brought on the night, to give those poor devils a chance to escape."

"L'Angely, l'Angely," the king said sadly, "you're worse than a Huguenot."

"Careful, Louis – you're closer to a Huguenot than I am, assuming you're the actual son of your father."

"L'Angely!" snapped the king.

"You're right, Louis," said l'Angely, renewing his attack on the figs. "Let's not talk about theology. So you say, my son, that everyone betrays you?"

"Everyone, l'Angely!"

"Even your mother?"

"Especially my mother."

"Bah! What about your brother?"

"My brother, more than anyone!"

"At last. And here I thought you thought it was only the cardinal who was deceiving you."

"On the contrary, l'Angely, I believe Your Eminence was the only one who *wasn't* deceiving me."

"What? Is the whole world turned upside down, then?"

Louis nodded his head sadly. "And yet I hear that, in your joy to be rid of him, you've promised grand gifts to your whole family!"

"Alas!"

"I hear you gave sixty thousand *livres* to your mother, thirty thousand to the queen, and one hundred fifty thousand *livres* to Sir."

"Well, l'Angely, that's what I've promised them."

"So you haven't given it to them yet? Good!"

"L'Angely," said the king, "I've had a sudden inspiration."

"Not to burn me as a heretic or hang me as a thief, I hope!"

"No, not that. Since I have some money..."

"You have *money*?"

"Yes, my child."

"Word of honour?"

"Faith of a gentleman! And plenty of it."

"In that case, see here," said l'Angely, caressing the bottle once again, "use it to buy more of this honey, my son. Invest it in the 1629 vintage!"

"No, that's not what I'm inspired to do. Besides, you know I drink only water."

"*For God's sake!* And that's why you're so sad."

"No, it would just be crazy for me to be happy."

"Well, I'm crazy but I'm not happy about it. Come, tell me your inspiration!"

"I have decided to make your fortune, l'Angely."

"My fortune? Me? What do I need with a fortune? I have food and shelter here at the Louvre. When I need money, I probe your pockets and take what I find. Not that I ever found much. But it's enough for me, and I have no complaints."

"I know you never complain, and this saddens me."

"Why must you always grieve? What an awful personality you have."

"You never complain – you, whom I give nothing – but they complain continually, though I give to them constantly."

"Let them complain, my son."

"But if I died, l'Angely..."

"Great, another cheerful thought. At least wait until after Carnaval."

"...If I died, they'd drive you away without a *sou*."

"Well, then I'd go."

"But what would become of you?"

"I'd become a Trappist monk! Why not? They have a monastery right near the Louvre."

"They all hope I'll die, you know. What do you say to that, l'Angely?"

"I say you should continue to live, just to infuriate them."

"But life is not much fun, l'Angely."

"Do you think it will be better once you're buried at Saint-Denis?"

"It's no fun anywhere, l'Angely," said the king, mournfully.

"Louis, I warn you, you'll be even more bored when you're dead. You're starting to make my bones rattle."

"So you don't want me to make you rich?"

"I want you to let me finish my honey and paté!"

"I could give you three thousand *pistoles*, like I gave Baradas."

"You gave Baradas three thousand *pistoles*?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must be proud. There's money well spent."

"You think it's a waste of money?"

"On the contrary! He'll share it out with all the pretty boys and beautiful girls."

"You know, l'Angely, I don't think you believe in anything."

"Not even the virtue of Sir Baradas."

"Just speaking with you is a sin."

"Quite so, if speaking truth is a sin. Shall I give you some advice, my son?"

"What's that?"

"Go to the chapel, pray for my salvation, and leave me to eat my dessert in peace."

"Good advice can come even from the mad," said the king, rising. "I will go and pray."

And the king went off to his chapel. "So you will pray for me," said l'Angely, "and I will eat, drink, and sing for you, and we will see which is of most benefit." And indeed as Louis XIII, sadder than ever, closeted himself in his chapel, l'Angely, who had finished the second bottle, opened the third and began a song:

When I'm weary, I invite  
Bacchus in for the night  
Then happily I rest  
As if I'd gold in my chest  
More gold in my coffer  
Than Croesus could offer  
I couldn't ask for more  
Dance around the floor  
No laurels I need  
No honours, no greed  
Kings, queens, nobles, princes  
Can't better my prances  
So pour me champagne  
To distract my brain  
Draw out my troubles  
With a glass full of bubbles  
Better drunk in my room  
Than stone dead in a tomb!

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*And you, Baradas?*

When Louis came out of his chapel, he found l'Angely slumped over the table, head resting on his arms, asleep or pretending to sleep. He looked on sadly for a moment, and then this weak and selfish half-man, who despite his terrible upbringing was occasionally illuminated by an instinctive flash of truth and decency, was seized by a great compassion for his companion in misery. L'Angely was so devoted – not to cheering him up, as other fools had done for their kings but to simply walking with him down the dark corridors of the monotonous hell of depression. Louis remembered the offer he'd made the fool with his typical recklessness that l'Angely had not refused as much as evaded. He remembered the good humour and patience with which l'Angely suffered his bouts of ill temper, his selfless devotion though surrounded by ambition and greed – and then, picking up pen, ink, and paper, he wrote a draft granting l'Angely the same amount he'd given to Baradas, and slipped it into his pocket quietly, so as not to wake him. Then he returned to his suite, where he listened for an hour as his minstrel played the lute. After that, he called Beringhen to help him into bed, then sent for



Baradas to come talk with him. Baradas arrived, still gleeful from having counted and recounted his three thousand *pistoles*, stacking and restacking them. The king had him sit on the foot of the bed, and said with an air of reproach, “Why are you so cheerful?”

“I’m cheerful,” Baradas replied, “because I have no reason not to be – in fact, quite the contrary!”

“Why is that?” asked Louis with a sigh.

“Has Your Majesty forgotten that he granted me three thousand *pistoles*?”

“No, indeed. I remember.”

“Well, then: three thousand *pistoles*! I must admit to Your Majesty that I wasn’t really expecting it.”

“Why not?”

“Ah, man proposes but God disposes!”

“But if the man is a king?”

“Nonetheless, God is still God!”

“And so?”

“So, Sire, it was paid, every coin, cash on the barrelhead! *Plague*! Sir Charpentier is in my opinion a much greater man than Sir de La Vieuville, who when I asked for money just waved his arms and whispered, ‘I swim, I swim, I swim ...’”

“So you got your three thousand *pistoles*.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“And so you’re rich?”

“Yes, haha!”

“What are you going to do now? Are you going to act the bad Christian and spend it all on gambling and women, like the prodigal son?”

“Oh, Sire!” Baradas said, pretending to be hurt. “Your Majesty knows I never gamble.”

“So you say, at least.”

“And as for women, I can’t stand them.”

“Is that really true, Baradas?”

“I am constantly quarrelling with Saint-Simon about this very subject, holding up Your Majesty to him as an example.”

“It’s true, Baradas: women were created for the peril of our souls. It wasn’t woman who was seduced by the serpent – she is the serpent itself!”

“It’s just as you say, Sire! I’m going to commit that maxim to memory and write it down in my prayer book!”

“Speaking of prayer, I had my eyes on you during mass last Sunday, Baradas, and you seemed quite distracted.”

“If so, it was only because my eyes turned the same way as Your Majesty’s, toward Miss de Lautrec.”

The king bit his moustache and changed the subject. “So, what *will* you do with your money?”

“If it was three or four times as much, I’d use it to fund pious works,” said the page, “like dedicating the foundation of a convent or the erection of a chapel but with such a limited amount...”

“You know I’m not rich, Baradas,” said the king.

“Oh, I’m not complaining, Sire, quite the contrary. But with, as I said, such a limited amount, I’ll first give half of it to my mother and sisters.” Louis nodded. “Then,” Baradas continued, “I’ll divide the remaining fifteen hundred *pistoles* into two shares. The first seven hundred fifty will go to buy me two good horses to take on Your Majesty’s Italian campaign, along with weapons, and pay and clothing for a lackey.”

The king nodded his approval. “And as for the remaining seven hundred fifty, what will you do with that?”

“I’ll keep it as a reserve with a bit for pocket money. God bless you, sire,” Baradas continued, raising his eyes to heaven, “for such good deeds that enable others to rescue orphans and console widow.”

“Baradas – *embrace me*!” cried the king, moved to tears. “Use the money as you say, my child, and I will make sure you never want for more.”

“Sire,” said Baradas, “you are magnificent, majestic, and wise as Solomon – plus you have the advantage over him in the eyes of the Lord in not having three hundred wives and eight hundred...”

“The Lord preserve me!” cried the king, terrified by the mere idea, and raising his own hands to heaven. “But this conversation is a sin, Baradas, for it smacks of ideas that contradict morality and religion.”

“Your Majesty is right,” said Baradas. “Shall I go and do some pious reading?”

The page knew that was the quickest way to quell the king. He got up, pulled down Gerson’s *Eternal Consolation* from a shelf, sat down near but not on the bed, and began to read from it in a voice full of unction. By the third page, the king was asleep. Baradas stood up on tiptoe, replaced the book on the shelf, went quietly to the door to let himself out, and then returned to the dice game with Saint-Simon that the king’s summons had interrupted. The next morning, at ten o’clock, the king went down from the Louvre to his carriage, and was borne to the office where, for the last two days, so many things he’d never suspected had appeared in their true guise. He found Charpentier awaiting him. The king was pale, tired, and depressed. He asked if the daily reports had arrived yet. Charpentier replied that as Father Joseph had retired to his monastery, there would be no report from him, only from Souscarrières and Lopez. “And have these reports arrived?” asked the king.

“As I had the honour to tell His Majesty,” said Charpentier, “knowing that today they would be dealing with His Majesty himself, both Gentlemen Lopez and de Souscarrières said they would bring their reports personally. The king may simply read their reports himself, and call upon them for further clarification.”

“Where are these reports?”

“Sir Lopez is here with his; but in order to leave enough time for His Majesty to speak with him and then open the correspondence of Your Eminence, I have made the appointment with Sir de Souscarrières for noon.”

“Ask Lopez to come in.”

Charpentier went out and, a few seconds later, announced Don Ildefonse Lopez. Lopez came in, hat in hand and bowing to the ground. “Fine, Sir Lopez, fine,” said the king. “I know you of old, as one who’s cost me dear.”

“How so, Sire?”

“Isn’t it at your shop the queen buys her jewellery?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Well, the day before yesterday, the queen asked me for twenty thousand *livres* for a string of pearls that she wanted to buy from you.”

Lopez laughed and in laughing, revealed a set of teeth that could have passed for pearls. “What are you laughing at?” asked the king.

“Sire, shall I speak with you exactly as I spoke with Your Eminence?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, then, in today’s report to His Eminence is a full paragraph on this string of pearls – or rather, its significance.”

“Read me this paragraph.”

“As the king commands but Your Majesty will understand it better if I explain a few things first.”

“Proceed.”

“On twenty-second December, Her Majesty the Queen appeared at my shop, under the pretext of buying a string of pearls.”

“Under the pretext, you say?”

“Under the pretext, yes, Sire.”

“What was her real purpose?”

“To meet with the Spanish Ambassador, the Marquis de Mirabel, who happened to be there.”

“He ‘happened’ to be there?”

“Of course, Sire. It is always by happenstance that Her Majesty the Queen meets the Marquis de Mirabel, who can only present himself at the Louvre with advance notice on certain days.”

“That was done by my order – upon the advice of the cardinal.”

“So her Majesty the Queen, if she’s something to convey to the ambassador or to her brother the King of Spain, must meet the ambassador somewhere by chance since she can’t see him otherwise.”

“And this ‘happenstance’ occurred at your shop?”

“With the permission of Your Eminence.”

“So the queen met with the Spanish Ambassador?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Did they have a long conference?”

“They had time to exchange only a few words.”

“We desire to know what those words were.”

“I’ve already told Your Eminence.”

“But he didn’t tell me. His Eminence was very discreet.”

“Let me say in advance that I don’t wish to distress Your Majesty.”

“Just tell me what they said.”

“What I shall repeat to Your Majesty was overheard by my diamond cutter.”

“He understands Spanish?”

“He does, since Your Eminence ordered that he should secretly learn it. But as nobody knows this, the speakers were unguarded. They said:

“The ambassador: ‘Her Majesty has received by way of the Governor of Milan and the Count of Moret, a letter from her illustrious brother?’

“The queen: ‘Yes, Sir.’

“‘Has Your Majesty thought about its contents?’

“‘I’ve thought about them but must think some more before I answer him.’

“‘Answer how?’

“‘By means of a box supposed to contain fabrics but which will actually contain this little dwarf you see playing with Madam de Bellier and Miss de Lautrec.’

“‘You think she can be trusted?’

“‘She was a gift to me from my aunt Claire-Eugénie, Infanta of the Netherlands, and acts in the interest of Spain.’”

“In the interest of Spain...” repeated the king. “It seems everything around me is in the interest of Spain – of my enemies, in other words. And this little dwarf?”

“She was sent off yesterday in her box but before that, she told Sir de Mirabel, in very good Spanish, ‘Madam my mistress told me she has considered her brother’s advice, and if the king’s health continues to deteriorate, she will take measures not to be caught off guard.’”

“Not to be caught off guard,” the king repeated.

“We do not understand what that means, Sire,” Lopez said, lowering his head.

“But I understand,” said the king, frowning, “and that’s enough. Did the queen mention that she’d soon be able to pay for this necklace she’s buying from you?”

“I’ve already been paid, Sire,” said Lopez.

“What, you’ve been paid?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“By whom?”

“By Sir Particelli.”

“Particelli? The Italian banker?”

“Yes.”

“But I was told he’d been hanged.”

“Quite so, quite so,” said Lopez, “but before he died, he sold his bank to Sir d’Émery, a good honest man.”

“Everyone,” murmured Louis XIII, “everyone robs me and deceives me! And the queen has not seen Sir de Mirabel since?”

“The reigning queen, no; the queen mother, yes.”

“My mother? When was this?”

“Yesterday.”

“To what end?”

“To announce that the Cardinal was overthrown, that Bérulle had replaced him, and that Sir had been appointed lieutenant general, so the ambassador could write to King Philip IV or the count-duke and tell them the Italian war is as good as off.”

“What, the war in Italy is off?”

“Those were Her Majesty’s very words.”

“Oh, I see. I understand. They will treat this second army like the first, leaving it without pay, without food, without clothes. Oh, the wretches! The wretches!” cried the king, pressing his forehead into his hands. “Do you have anything else to tell me?”

“Some minor matters, Sire. Sir Baradas visited my shop this morning to buy some jewellery.”

“What kind of jewellery?”

“A necklace, a bracelet, and some hairpins.”

“For how much?”

“For three hundred *pistoles*.”

“Why would he want this necklace, bracelet, and hairpins?”

“Probably for some mistress, Sire.”

“What?” said the king. “Last night he told me he hates all women. Anything else?”

“That’s all, Sire.”

“To summarise: Queen Anne and Sir de Mirabel agreed that, if my condition worsens, she will not be caught off guard. The queen mother told Sir de Mirabel that he can report to His Majesty Philip IV that Sir de Bérulle has replaced Sir de Richelieu and my brother is lieutenant general, so the Italian war is as good as off. Finally, Sir Baradas is using the money I gave him to buy necklaces, bracelets, and hairpins. Well done, Sir Lopez; you’ve told me what I needed to know. Continue to serve me well – or serve Your Eminence that is the same thing – and don’t miss a word of what passes at your shop.”

“I hope Your Majesty will not endanger my business.”

“Come, come, Sir Lopez. I merely hope to have an end to all these treasons. Now, on your way out, if you see Sir de Souscarrières, send him in.”

“I’m here, Sire,” a voice said. Souscarrières appeared in the doorway, hat in hand, bent in an elaborate court bow.

“Ah! You were listening, Sir,” said the king.

“Not at all, Sire! It’s just that my zeal for serving Your Majesty is so great that I guessed Your Majesty wished to see me.”

“Ah-ha! And do you have plenty of interesting things to tell me?”

“Two days’ worth of reports, Sire.”

“Then tell me what happened two days ago.”

“The day before yesterday, Sire, Your Majesty’s august brother hired a chair and was taken to meet the envoy of the Duke of Lorraine and the Spanish Ambassador.”

“No surprise there. Continue.”

“Yesterday, at about eleven o’clock, Her Majesty the queen mother hired a chair to carry her to Lopez’s shop, as did the Ambassador of Spain.”

“I know what they said to each other. Continue.”

“Yesterday, Sir Baradas took a chair from the Louvre to the house of Your Eminence in the Place Royale. He went in and, five minutes later, came out with a heavy sack of money.”

“I’m aware of it.”

“From the cardinal’s door, he went to the door of his neighbour.”

“Which neighbour?” the king asked, agitated.

“Miss Delorme.”

“Miss Delorme! Did he visit Miss Delorme?”

“No, Sire, he just knocked on the door, and when a servant answered, he gave him a letter.”

“A letter!”

“Yes, Sire. Then, the letter delivered, he got back in the chair and was returned to the Louvre. This morning, he went out again…”

“Yes. He was taken to Sir Lopez’s shop, where he bought some jewellery, and then … and then where did he go?”

“He returned to the Louvre, Sire but reserved the use of a chair for the entire night.”

“Do you have anything else to tell me?”

“About what, Sire?”

“About Sir Baradas!”

“No, Sire.”

“Then you may go.”

“But, Sire, I need to report about Madam de Fargis.”

“Go.”

“About Sir de Marillac.”

“Go.”

“About Sir your brother!”

“That’s *enough* for today. Go!”

“But what about that wounded Étienne Latil, who was taken to see Your Eminence at Chaillot?”

“I don’t care. Go.”

“In that case, Sire, I withdraw.”

“Yes. Withdraw.”

“Can I, in withdrawing, dare to hope that the king is pleased with me?”

“Only too pleased!”

Souscarrières bowed and backed out.

The king didn’t even wait till he was gone before knocking on the panel. Charpentier appeared. “Sir Charpentier,” the king said, “when the cardinal had business with Miss Delorme, how did he call her?”

“It’s quite simple,” Charpentier said. He pressed the spring, opened the secret portal, rang the bell between the two doors, and said to the king, “If Miss Delorme is at home, she will come at once. Does His Majesty wish to receive her alone, or does he wish me to stay?”

“Leave me alone.”

Charpentier left. As for Louis XIII, he waited eagerly in front of the secret passage. After a few seconds, his eager ears heard the sound of a light step. “Ah,” he said, “finally I’ll know the truth.”

He’d hardly finished when the door opened and Marion, wearing a white satin dress with a simple string of pearls at her neck, a forest of dark curls falling on her round white shoulders, appeared in all her eighteen-year-old beauty. Louis XIII, though rarely susceptible to the beauty of women, stepped back, amazed. Marion entered, made an adorable little bow in which respect was cleverly mingled with coquetry, then cast down her eyes, modest as a milkmaid. “My king, to whom I have always hoped to have the honour to appear,” she said, “has sent for me. On my knees I must hear his words; at his feet I must receive his orders.”

The king stammered out a few incoherent words that gave Marion a chance to enjoy the effect of her entrance. “Impossible,” the king said, “impossible. Am I wrong or aren’t you Miss Marie Delorme?”

“But no, Sire! For you, I am just Marion.”

“So, if you are Marion…” Marion bowed, eyes downcast in perfect humility. “…If you are Marion,” continued the king, “you’d have received a letter yesterday.”

“I receive many every day,” said the courtesan, laughing.

“A letter that arrived between five and six o’clock.”

“Between five and six o’clock, Sire, I received fourteen letters.”

“Did you keep them?”

“I burned twelve of them. The thirteenth I keep near my heart. Here is the fourteenth.”

“This is his writing,” the king cried. Hastily he took the letter from Marion’s hands. He turned it over and over, and said, “It’s still unopened.”

“As it came from someone near to the king, and as I was aware that today I might have the supreme honour of meeting Your Majesty, I was careful to keep the letter exactly as I received it.”

The king looked at Marion in amazement, then shook the letter angrily. “Bah!” he said. “I want to know what this letter says.”

“There is a way, Sire, to open it without breaking the seal.”

“If I were a police lieutenant, I might do that,” said Louis XIII, “but I am a king.”

Marion gently took the letter from his hands. “But as it is addressed to me, I may open it.” And she unsealed the envelope and gave the letter to Louis XIII. Louis XIII hesitated a moment but all the dark feelings that advise a jealous heart made that moment a short one. He read it aloud in a low voice, his tone sinking ever lower as he read. We must admit, the contents of the letter were not the sort to bring a cheerful expression to Louis’s face – a place where, if such an expression ever appeared, it didn’t last more than a few minutes. Herewith, the contents of the letter:

*Lovely Marion,*  
*I am twenty years of age; some women have not only been good enough to tell me that I'm a pretty lad, they have gone on to do such things that left no doubt but that they believed it. Also, I'm the leading favourite of King Louis XIII, who, though stingy, was just somehow inspired to give me the gift of 3000 pistoles. My friend, Saint-Simon, informs me that you are not only the best-looking girl in the world but moreover the best in every other way as well. Well, I propose we join together to take a month and spend those three thousand pistoles that idiot king gave me. Say, a thousand pistoles on clothes and jewellery, another thousand on horses and carriages, and the last thousand on games and parties. Does this proposition suit you? If you say Yes, I can be there in no time with the*

money bag. If you say No, I'll tie the bag around my neck and throw myself in the river. But you will say yes, won't you? You wouldn't wish to be responsible for the death of a poor lad who has committed no crime other than to love you madly without ever having seen you. Reply by tomorrow night, and my money bag and I will be at your feet.

Your devoted,  
Baradas

Louis read these last lines in a voice so tremulous that it was nearly unintelligible, even if he'd been speaking loud enough to be heard. The letter ended, his arms dropped, nerveless, the hand holding the letter resting on his knee. His face as white as the paper, his eyes rose toward heaven in despair, and, like Caesar, who, barely seeming to feel the stabs of the other conspirators, cried out "*Et tu, Brutus!*" when struck by the only hand that was dear to him, Louis XIII exclaimed in an agonised voice: "*And you, Baradas!*" And, without sparing another glance for Marion Delorme, without seeming to even notice she was there, the king threw his cloak over his shoulder, put his hat on his head, pulling it down over his eyes, ran down the stairs, out the door, and into his carriage. A servant closed the door behind him as he cried, "To Chaillot!"

As for Marion, after seeing the king make this curious exit, she ran to the window, drew aside the curtain, and saw him drive off in his carriage. Then with that mischievous yet charming smile that belonged only to her, she said, "No doubt about it: I shall have to become a page."

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#### How Étienne Latil & the Marquis de Pisany happened to encounter each other, each making his 1st Outing

We have reported how the cardinal had retired to his country estate at Chaillot and left his house in the Place Royale – in effect, his ministry – to Louis XIII. The rumour of his disgrace spread rapidly through Paris, and at a rendezvous between Madam de Fargis and Marillac the Minister of Justice at the Inn of the Painted Beard, she gave him the great news. This great news quickly spread from the chamber where it was reported to the ear of Madam Soleil, and from her to Master Soleil. Together they carried it to Étienne Latil, who had just left his bed three days before and was walking around his room, leaning on his sword. Master Soleil had offered to lend him his own cane, a handsome one with an agate set in the handle, like that of Mudarra the Bastard in Lope de Vega's play. But Latil refused, deeming it unworthy for a man of the sword to rely on something other than his sword. At the news of Richelieu's disgrace he stopped short, leaned with both hands on the hilt of his sword and, looking keenly at Master Soleil, asked, "Is what you say the truth?"

"True as the Gospel."

"And where did you get this news?"

"From a lady of the Court."

Étienne Latil knew all too well that the house wherein he'd suffered the injury that had forced him to take up residence also played host to masked and incognito visitors from all walks of society. He took two or three thoughtful steps and then turned again to Master Soleil. "And now that he's a minister no more, what do you think of the personal safety of Your Eminence?"

Master Soleil grimaced and shook his head. "I think that if he hasn't taken his guards with him, he'd better take to wearing that breastplate he wore over his robes at La Rochelle."

"Do you think that's the only risk he runs?" Latil asked.

"Well, there's his food," said Soleil. "I imagine his niece, Madam de Combalet, will take the precaution of finding a reliable taster for him." Then he added, with that broad smile that often brightened his face, "Now, where do you suppose she might find someone like that?"

"He is found, Master Soleil," Latil said. "Call me a sedan chair."

"What, right now?" Master Soleil cried. "You're not recovered! Are you really reckless enough to leave?"

"Yes, I am that reckless, my host. And since I admit I'm reckless, and that such recklessness may cost me my life, we should settle our little account so that, in the event of my death, you've lost nothing. Let's see: three weeks of recuperation; nine pitchers of tea; two mugs of juice; and the devoted care of Madam Soleil that is beyond price – does that come to more than twenty *pistoles*?"

"Sir Latil, please note that I ask no remuneration! The honour that it's been to house you, to feed you..."

"Ha! Feed me! That's easy enough."

"...And to care for you, is quite sufficient! But of course, if you really insist on giving me twenty *pistoles* to acknowledge your satisfaction..."

"You won't refuse it?"

"God prevent me from insulting you so!"

"Then call me a chair while I count out your twenty *pistoles*."

Master Soleil bowed and retired. Upon returning he went straight to the table upon which the twenty *pistoles* were lined up, counted them at a glance with that knack shared by innkeepers and tax collectors, and said, "Your chair is at hand, Sir."

Latil sheathed his sword, gestured for Soleil to approach, and said, "Lend me your arm."

"I'll give you my arm to help you leave my house, my dear Sir Étienne but it's with great regret that I'll see you go."

"Soleil, *my friend*," said Latil, "I hate to see the slightest cloud cross your resplendent face, so I promise you that when I return to Paris I will stop here first – especially if you still have some of this lovely Coulange honey. I just made its acquaintance two days ago, and I regret not getting to know it more intimately."

"I've laid in three hundred bottles, Sir Latil. I'll save it for you."

"At three bottles a day, that will last me three months. So I'll stay with you for three months, Master Soleil, unless I run out of credit."

"You will never run out of credit. A man who is friends with Sir de Moret, Sir de Montmorency, and Sir de Richelieu – a prince, a duke, and a cardinal..."

Latil shook his head. "An honest farmer might give you less honour but he'd be a better risk, Master Soleil," he declared as he stepped into his sedan chair.

"Where should I tell the porters to take you, Sir?" asked the innkeeper.

"First to the Hotel de Montmorency, where I have a duty to perform, and then to Chaillot."

"To the hotel of My Lord le Duke of Montmorency," Soleil cried, "by way of the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux and Rue Sainte-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie!"

The porters didn't need to be told twice, and furthermore they adopted Master Soleil's additional advice to go easy on their client, as he was recovering from a long and painful illness. They stopped at Montmorency's door. The Swiss doorman, in full regalia, baton in hand, stood on the threshold. Latil beckoned to him, and he approached. "My friend," Latil said, "here's half a *pistole*. Be so kind as to announce me."

The Swiss doffed his hat, and asked whom he should announce. "The wounded gentleman whom the Count of Moret had the honour to visit during his illness, who promised to visit him as soon as he could stand. I am out today for the first time and, as promised, here I am. Please inquire if I may have the honour to be received by Sir Count."

"Sir Count of Moret left the hotel five days ago," said the Swiss, "and no one knows where he went."

"Not even my Lord Duke?"

"My Lord left the previous day for his governorship of Languedoc."

"The dice are against me but at least I've kept my promise to Sir Count. That's all you can ask of a man of honour."

"However," said the Swiss, stepping away from the door, "before departing with the page Galaor, the Count of Moret did have Galaor leave a message with all the doormen and guards, one that may concern Your Lordship."

"What message is that?"

"He left orders that if a certain Étienne Latil presented himself at the hotel, he was to be offered room and board, and be treated as a man of confidence attached to the count's personal house."

Latil tipped his hat to the absent prince, and said, "Sir Count of Moret conducts himself like the worthy son of Henry IV he is. I am indeed that gentleman, and will have the honour, upon his return, to give him my thanks and enter his service. Here, *my friend*, is another half a *pistole* for the pleasure of hearing that the Count of Moret thinks kindly of me. Porters, on to Chaillot – to the estate of Your Eminence!"

The porters picked up their poles and resumed their march, taking the Rue Simon-le-Franc, the Rue Maubué, and the Rue Troussevache so that, by the Rue de la Ferronnerie, they finally gained the Rue Saint-Honoré. But as luck would have it, at the very moment that, at the doors of the Hotel de Montmorency, Latil cried, "On to Chaillot!" – as luck would have it, we say, the Marquis de Pisany, whom we temporarily lost sight of given the important events we had to relate, was just then rising for the first time since receiving his near-fatal sword thrust from Souscarrières. Resolving that his first action once back on his feet should be to apologise to the Count of Moret, he summoned a chair and, after cautioning the porters to tread easily as he was recovering from a wound, concluded by crying, "On to the Hotel de Montmorency!"

Leaving the Hotel de Rambouillet, the porters went down the Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre to the Rue Saint-Honoré, then made their way toward the Rue de la Ferronnerie. The result of these reciprocal manoeuvres was that the two chairs met at the head of the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec. The Marquis de Pisany, preoccupied with how to approach the Count of Moret, failed to recognise Étienne Latil – but Latil, whose mind was free of care, instantly recognised the Marquis de Pisany. One can imagine the effect this apparition had upon the irascible swashbuckler. He uttered a cry that stopped his porters in their tracks and, thrusting his head out the window, shouted, "Hey! Sir Hunchback!"

It might have been wiser for the Marquis de Pisany to pretend the insult was addressed to someone else but he was so sensitive about his hump that his first impulse was to stick his head out the door of his chair, in order to see who was addressing him by his deformity rather than his title. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" asked the marquis as his porters settled to a stop.

"It would be my pleasure if you'd stop a moment. I have a score to settle with you," said Latil. Then, to his porters: "Quick! Set my chair down so my door is lined up with his."

The porters picked up their poles and aligned Latil's sedan chair with Pisany's. "How's this, Sir?" they asked.

"Perfect!" Latil said. "Ah!"

This sigh came from his satisfaction at finally confronting his nemesis whose name was yet unknown but whose rank had been revealed by the ring he'd been shown. For his part, Pisany had finally recognised Latil. "Onward!" he shouted to his porters. "I want nothing to do with this man."

"Perhaps but unfortunately, this man has dealings with you, my darling. Don't move, any of you!" he shouted to the porters of the other chair. "Don't you dare budge or *by the belly of the Grey Saint*, as Henry IV used to say, I'll cut off your ears!"

The porters, who'd been raising Pisany's chair, set it back on the pavement. Meanwhile passers-by, attracted by the fracas, began to gather around the two chairs. "And I say," Pisany cried, "that if you don't carry me on, I'll send my men to beat you!"

The marquis's porters all shook their heads. "Better to be beaten," one said, "than to lose our ears."

"Send your men," said another. "We have sticks of our own."

"Bravo, my friends!" said Latil, who saw that luck was with him. "Here are four *pistoles* with which to drink my health! Now, I dare to give my name that is Étienne Latil. Do you dare to give yours, Sir Hunchback?"

"You wretch!" cried Pisany. "Wasn't being impaled on two swords enough for you?"

"It was not only enough," replied Latil, "it was too much. But I'll settle for impaling you just once."

"Would you abuse a man who can't even stand on his own two legs?"

"Is that the situation?" asked Latil. "In that case, the playing field is even. We shall fight while seated. *On guard*, Marquis ... Oh, dear! Without your three accomplices, who will stab me from behind?"

Latil drew his sword and hovered the tip beneath his opponent's eye. There was no way to decline. Witnesses surrounded the two chairs. Moreover, as we've said, the Marquis de Pisany was no coward. He drew his sword. The fighters, whose only doors faced each other, were obscured to all other observers, who could only glimpse two blades flashing between the chairs. They passed, crossed, parried, fainted, thrust, and riposted, while cries of rage came first from one door, then from the other. Finally, after a duel that lasted nearly five minutes, to the great entertainment of the audience, there was a cry – or rather, a blasphemy – from one of the two combatants. Latil had nailed his opponent's arm to the frame of his chair. "There!" said Étienne Latil. "Take that, my good Marquis – and remember that every time we meet, you'll be served the same way."

The common people love a winner, especially when he's good-looking or generous. Latil was reasonably handsome, and what's more, he'd thrown the porters four *pistoles*. The Marquis de Pisany, on the other hand, was ugly, defeated, and had kept his *pistoles* to himself. If he called upon the audience for aid and justice, he would certainly be mocked and denied. So he made up his mind: "To the Hotel de Rambouillet," he said.

"To Chaillot!" said Étienne Latil.

### The Cardinal at Chaillot

Arriving at Chaillot, the cardinal found himself in much the same situation as Atlas when, after bearing the weight of the world, he was able to place it for a few moments on the shoulders of his friend Hercules. He felt at last he could take a breath. "Ah," he whispered, "I shall have the time to write poetry." Indeed, Chaillot was the retreat the cardinal had bought as an escape from politics, where he could write, if not true poetry, at least a little verse. An office on the ground floor that opened onto a beautiful garden, with an avenue of lime trees dark and cool even in summer, was the sanctuary where he'd taken refuge one or two days a month. Now he'd returned to that repose and renewal. For how long?

He couldn't tell. His first idea, upon setting foot in this poetic oasis, was to call for his usual collaborators, those writers who, in his battles of the mind, were like the generals he sent to war in Spain and Italy. Against such as England's Shakespeare, with Rotrou and Corneille he marshalled his French forces of letters. Then it occurred to him that, though master of his house at Chaillot, he was no longer the powerful minister distributing largesse. Here he was only a private citizen with whom suddenly it was dangerous to associate. He therefore resolved to wait and see which old friends would come to him without being summoned. So he drew forth the outline of his new tragedy, *Mirame* that was nothing less than a retaliation in words against the reigning queen, and reviewed the scenes he'd already begun. Cardinal Richelieu, poor Catholic though he was, was even worse when it came to the Christian virtue of forgiving one's enemies. He'd been devastated by the pernicious plot that had toppled him from power, and blamed Queen Anne as one of its prime movers. So he consoled himself with the idea of taking what revenge he could. We are sorry to have to reveal this petty weakness in such a great minister but we are his historian, not his apologist. The first show of sympathy for his plight came from an unexpected quarter. Guillemot, his valet, announced that a sedan chair had arrived bearing a man who seemed to be recovering from serious illness or injury. He had gotten as far as a bench in the entry hall where he had sunk down in exhaustion, saying "My place is here."

The porters, paid off, trotted away as quickly as they'd come. This man, who wore a somewhat battered felt hat and a cloak the colour of Spanish tobacco, was dressed in a manner more military than civilian, and bore a rapier like those we see in the sketches of Callot, in the style that was just beginning to become fashionable. When asked what name should be announced to the cardinal, "I am nobody," he replied, "So announce no one."

Asked why he had come, he said simply, "His Eminence is short of guards. I'll help ensure his safety."

This seemed strange enough to Guillemot that he thought he'd better inform Madam de Combalet and Your Eminence. The cardinal ordered this mysterious guardian brought before him. Five minutes later, the door opened and Étienne Latil appeared in the doorway, pale and leaning on the jamb, his hat in his right hand, the left on the pommel of his sword. With his knack for remembering faces, Richelieu recognised him at a glance. "Ah!" he said. "Is that you, my dear Latil?"

"In person, your Eminence."

"Are you doing better?"

"Yes, My Lord, so since I'm recovered I've come to offer my services to your Eminence."

"My thanks, Sir," the cardinal laughed, "but there's no one I need you to rid me of."

"That may be," said Latil, "but aren't there those who'd like to be rid of you?"

"Now that you mention it," said the cardinal, "that seems quite likely."

Just then Madam de Combalet entered through a side door, her worried gaze darting quickly from her uncle to the unknown adventurer.

"Come, Marie," said the cardinal, "and help me welcome this brave lad, the first who's come to help me in my day of adversity."

"Oh, I won't be the last," said Latil, "but I'm not sorry to be counted as the first."

"Uncle," said Madam de Combalet, after regarding Latil with the sympathetic eye of a woman, "sir is pale and stricken with weakness."

"Which speaks all the better for him. I know from my doctor, who's been looking in on him, that he only got up for the first time three days ago. This visit, so early, is entirely to his credit."

"Oh," said Madam de Combalet, "so this is the gentleman who was wounded in the brawl at the Inn of the Painted Beard?"

"You're right, fair lady, and my hat's off to you," said Latil. "They got me in an ambush but I finally caught up with that cursed hunchback and sent him home just now with a sword thrust through the arm."

"The Marquis de Pisany?" said Madam de Combalet. "That poor wretch has no luck. He'd just spent over a week recovering from a wound he'd received the same night you were nearly murdered."

"The Marquis de Pisany, eh?" Latil said. "It's good to finally know his name. That explains why, when I told my porters 'To Chaillot,' he said to his 'To the Hotel de Rambouillet' – an address I took care to remember."

"If you were both recovering from wounds, how did you manage to have a duel?" asked the cardinal.

"We fought from our sedan chairs, My Lord. It was most convenient, just the thing for wounded swordsmen."

"And you're telling me this, after my edicts outlawing duels!" said the cardinal. "Though it is a fact that I'm no longer a minister, so it's not my problem. In fact, given a year..." And the cardinal sighed that proved he wasn't so removed from worldly things as he wanted to believe.

"But didn't you say, dear Uncle that Sir Latil – that is your name, is it not? – had come to offer his services?" asked Madam de Combalet. "What services does he offer?"

Latil raised his sword. "Services both offensive and defensive," he said. "Your Eminence lacks both a Captain of the Guards, and guards for him to captain. I will take their place."

"A new Captain of the Guards?" said a feminine voice from behind Latil. "I don't think so. Not so long as he still has his Cavois! ... Who is, of course, also *my* Cavois."

"Ah!" said the cardinal. "There's a voice I know. Come in, dear Madam Cavois, come in."

A lithe and pretty woman, though starting, in her thirties, to be more plump than lithe, slipped into the room, brushed past Latil, and presented herself to the cardinal and Madam de Combalet. "At last," she said, rubbing her hands, "you're free from that awful ministry and all the trouble it gave us!"

"Gave us, you say?" said the cardinal. "So my ministry gave you troubles as well, dear Madam?"

"I should say so! I couldn't sleep day or night, I was so afraid some catastrophe would strike Your Eminence, and take my poor Cavois as well. All day I worried, and jumped at the slightest sound. All night I dreamed, and woke up with a start. You have no idea how bad a woman's dreams can be when she sleeps alone."

"But what of Sir Cavois?" asked Madam de Combalet, laughing.

"When he did sleep with me, you mean? Oh, Cavois! At least we never lost the will for it, thank God. Ten children in nine years that shows we couldn't get enough but as time went on, I was more and more troubled. Then Your Eminence took him to the Siege of La Rochelle that lasted eight months! Fortunately I was already expecting when he left, so no time was lost. But this time, Madam, His Eminence was going to take him away to Italy. Can you believe it? And for God knows how long! But I prayed to God for a miracle, and thanks to my prayers Your Eminence has lost his position."

"Why, thank you, Madam Cavois!" laughed the cardinal.

"Yes, thank you," said Madam de Combalet. "It was a big favour, indeed, that God has granted us. It gives you your husband and me my uncle."

"Fah!" said Madam Cavois. "A husband and an uncle are not the same thing at all."

"But, Madam," said the cardinal, "unless Cavois goes with me into disgrace, he must follow the king."

"To where?" asked Madam Cavois.

"To Italy!"

"Him, go to Italy? Certainly not, My Lord. Him, leave me? Leave his little woman? Never!"

"But didn't he leave you to go on campaign with me?"

"Oh, with you, yes. I think you bewitched him somehow. His wits aren't that quick, poor man, and if he hadn't had me to manage our home and raise our children, I don't know what he would have done. But leave me to go with someone other than you? Never! He's as likely to risk God's wrath by sleeping with another woman."

"But what of his duties?"

"What duties?"

"If he's no longer in my service, he must serve the king."

"If he's no longer in your service, My Lord, he must serve me! I imagine that by this time he's already presented his resignation to His Majesty."

"Did he tell you he was going to do that?" asked Madam de Combalet.

"Does he need to tell me everything he's going to do? Don't I always know what he does before he does it? Isn't he as transparent to me as crystal? When I tell you that by now he's probably done it, then he has!"

"But, my dear Madam Cavois," said the cardinal, "as captain of my guards he earned six thousand *livres* per year. As a private citizen, I can't pay a captain of the guards' six thousand *livres*. That's a lot to lose from your household budget. Think of your eight children!"

"Yes but haven't you already covered that? Half the sedan-chair monopoly is worth at least twelve thousand *livres* a year – and isn't that preferable to depending on a position with the king, from which he might be dismissed at the slightest whim? Our children, thanks be to God, are plump and stout, and you shall see they lack nothing. If you have healthy children, you have everything!"

"What, are your children here?"

"All but the one who was born during the Siege of La Rochelle, who is only five months old and still with the wet nurse. But he's as healthy as the rest."

"With a wet nurse? Then, are you expecting again, Madam Cavois?"

"By the grace of God! After all, my husband's been back for nearly a month. Come in! Come in, everyone! By the cardinal's permission!"

"Yes, I will permit it – but at the same time I must permit, or rather command, Latil to take a seat. Take a chair and sit down, Latil."

Latil didn't speak but he quickly obeyed. Another minute on his feet and he would have fainted. Meanwhile, all the Cavois children trooped into the room in order of age, the eldest first, a sweet boy of the age of nine, then a girl, then another boy, then another girl, all the way down to an infant of two years. Arrayed in front of the cardinal, from tallest to shortest, they looked like a set of pan-pipes.

"Now, then," said Madam de Cavois, "here is the man to whom we owe everything – you, me, and Papa. Kneel before him and offer him your thanks."

"Madam Cavois! We do not kneel save before the Lord."

"And before those who represent him. Kneel, you puppies."

The children obeyed. "Now, Armand," said Madam de Cavois to the eldest boy, "repeat to Your Eminence the prayer I taught you to say every morning and night."

"Lord God," said the child, "grant health to my father, my mother, my brothers, and my sisters, and see to it that His Eminence the Cardinal, to whom we owe everything, shall lose his ministry so that Papa can spend his nights at home."

"Amen!" the children replied in unison.

"Well," said the cardinal, laughing, "it's no surprise to me that such a prayer, offered so earnestly by so many voices, was granted."

"*There!*" said Madam Cavois. "And now that we've said everything to My Lord that we had to say, get up and go on out." The children rose and left the room in the same order they'd come in. "Good!" said Madam Cavois. "Very obedient."

"Madam Cavois," said the cardinal, "If I'm ever restored to my ministry, I shall appoint you as drill instructor to the King's Infantry."

"God forbid, My Lord!"

Madam de Combalet kissed the children and their mother, who loaded them into three waiting sedan chairs, before entering a fourth herself with the two-year-old. The cardinal watched them go with some emotion. "My Lord," said Latil, straightening himself on his chair, "you won't need me as a man of the sword, since Sir Cavois also follows you in your fall from grace but it's not really steel that you have to fear. For your true enemy goes by the name of *Médicis*."

"I am entirely of the same mind," said Madam de Combalet, coming back into the room. "And I fear the same thing: poison."

"You need someone devoted to you, Your Eminence, who will taste everything you drink and everything you eat before you do. I offer myself for this role."

"I'm so sorry, my dear Sir Latil," smiled Madam de Combalet, "but you're too late. Someone else has already offered to do that."

"And has been accepted?"

"I sincerely hope so," Madam said, gazing tenderly at her uncle.







"To who but the king, My Lord?"  
"To the king!"  
"That's what made her think the afternoon wouldn't pass without you receiving a visit from His Majesty."  
"Ah! Now I understand."

Just then they heard the sound of a carriage arriving at speed. The cardinal, suddenly pale, leaned on a chair. Saint-Simon ran to the window. "The king!" he shouted.  
A moment later, the door to the stairs opened and Bois-Robert rushed in, shouting, "The king!"  
The door to Madam de Combalet's chambers opened and she whispered, in a voice trembling with emotion, "The king."  
"Go, all of you," said the cardinal. "Leave me alone with His Majesty."  
Each disappeared through a different door, while the cardinal mopped his brow. Then steps were heard on the stairs, ascending, one at a time, in a measured meter. Guillemot appeared at the door and announced, "The king."  
"By my faith," the cardinal murmured, "in Marion Delorme, I've a great diplomat as a neighbour."

Why Louis XIII Always Dressed in Black

Guillemot disappeared. King Louis XIII came face to face with Cardinal Richelieu. "Sire," Richelieu said, bowing respectfully, "I was so surprised to hear that the king was at the door of my humble home that, instead of rushing downstairs as I should have, I stayed here, as if my feet were nailed to the floor, stunned and doubting that it could really be His Majesty himself who deigned to visit me."  
The king looked around him. "We are alone, Your Eminence?" he asked.  
"Alone, your Majesty."  
"Are you sure?"  
"Quite certain, Sire."  
"So we can speak freely?"  
"Entirely freely."  
"Then close that door and listen to what I have to say."  
The cardinal bowed and obeyed, shutting the door and indicating a chair to the king, who sat, or rather sank, into it. The cardinal stood by and waited. The king slowly raised his eyes to the cardinal, regarding him for a moment, then said, "Your Eminence, I was wrong."  
"Wrong, Sire? In what?"  
"To do what I did."  
It was the cardinal's turn to stare at the king. "Sire," he finally said, "I believe a frank discussion, clear and precise, that leaves not a cloud, a doubt, or a shadow between us, has long been necessary. The words Your Majesty just said lead me to believe that the time for that discussion has come."  
"Your Eminence," said Louis XIII, drawing himself up, "I hope you will not go so far as to forget..."  
"...That you are King Louis XIII, and I am your humble servant Cardinal Richelieu? No, Sire, rest easy. However, given the deep respect I have for Your Majesty, I beg leave to tell him everything. If I have the misfortune to say something hurtful, I will retire to a place so remote, Your Majesty will never be troubled by me again, or even have the need to say my name. If, on the contrary, he recognises that my reasons are good, my issues are real, he will only have to tell me in the same tone in which he just said 'I was wrong.' There's no need to say 'Cardinal, you were right.' We'll just consign what has passed to the oblivion of the past."  
"Speak, Sir," said the king. "I'm listening."  
"Sire, allow me to begin by saying that my honesty and integrity have always been beyond question."  
"Have I ever attacked them?" asked the king.  
"No but Your Majesty has allowed them to be attacked, and it was a great wrong."  
"Sir!" the king said.  
"Sire, shall I speak, or shall I not? Does Your Majesty command me not to speak?"  
"No, *by the belly of the Grey Saint*, as my father used to say. On the contrary, I command you to talk – but please go easy on the reproaches."  
"I am, however, obliged to treat Your Majesty as I think he merits."  
The king stood, stamped his foot, marched to the window, from the window to the door, and from the door back to his chair, where he stared silently at Richelieu – and then finally sat down and said, "Speak. I sacrifice my pride on the royal crucifix. I will hear whatever you have to say."  
"I said, Sire that I would start with my honesty and integrity, so please consider the words that follow."  
Louis XIII gave a formal nod. "I have, from my estate," the cardinal continued, "some twenty-five thousand *livres* a year in rents. The king gave me six abbeys that generate another one hundred twenty-five thousand *livres*. So my annuities bring me one hundred and fifty thousand *livres*."  
"I know all that," said the king.  
"Your Majesty no doubt also knows that, as your minister, I was surrounded by threats and plots, to the point where I had to have guards and a captain to defend myself."  
"I know that as well."  
"Then, Sire, I refused sixty thousand *livres* in pensions that you offered me after taking La Rochelle."  
"I remember."  
"I turned down the salary that came with the Admiralty, worth forty thousand *livres*. I refused the grant that came with the Admiralty, one hundred thousand *livres* – or rather, I donated it to the State. Finally, I refused a million that the bankers offered me to save them from being investigated. But they were investigated, and I forced them to disgorge ten million in fines into the king's coffers."  
"No one could dispute any of this, Your Eminence," the king said, raising his hat. "You are the most honest man in my kingdom."  
The cardinal bowed, and continued, "But that's not what is said by my enemies in Your Majesty's Court – even by those closest to Your Majesty. Who is it who libels me across France, and slanders me in the eyes of all Europe? Those who should be the first to honour me as you do, Sire: His Royal Highness My Lord Gaston, Her Majesty Queen Anne, and Her Majesty the Queen Mother."  
The king sighed. The cardinal had touched the wound. Richelieu continued, "His Royal Highness Sir has always hated me. How have I responded to this hatred? The Chalais affair was nothing less than an attempt to murder me. Confessions from everyone involved, Sir included, made that clear. And what was my revenge? I made him marry Miss de Montpensier, the richest heiress in the kingdom, and persuaded Your Majesty to give him the honours and title of Duke of Orléans. My Lord Gaston has, as a result, an annual income of a million and a half *livres*."  
"In other words, Sir, he's even richer than I am."  
"The king doesn't need to be rich, he's the king; if he needs a million, he asks for a million, and it is found."  
"That's true," said the king. "The day before yesterday, you gave me four million, followed by another half million yesterday."  
"Must I remind Your Majesty also how much resentment Queen Anne of Austria holds against me? And what, in her eyes, is my crime? Respect must silence me on that score."  
"No, speak, Your Eminence. I shall, I must, I want to hear everything."  
"Sire, the great misfortune of princes, and the calamity of states, is the marriage of a king with a foreign princess. Queens who come from Austria, from Italy, or from Spain, at some point become enemies of the State. How many queens, to the benefit of their father or brothers, have stolen the sword of France from under the king's pillow? And what happens then? Despite such treason, the real culprit goes unprosecuted, and it is always lower heads that fall. After conspiring with England, Queen Anne, who hates me because she sees me as the champion of France, now conspires with Spain and Austria."  
"I know it – oh, I know it," said the king in a hushed voice. "But Queen Anne has no power over me."  
"That's true. But what about Marie, the queen mother, Sire? Queen Marie, the cruellest of all my enemies, because it was to her I was most devoted – and so from her I've suffered the most."  
"Forgive me, Your Eminence."  
"No, Sire, I cannot forgive you."  
"Even if I beg?"  
"Even if you command me. When you sought me out here, I told Your Majesty he shall have the entire truth."  
The king sighed, and said, voice trembling, "Do you think I don't know the entire truth?"  
"Not all of it. And this time, you shall hear it. Your mother, Sire, is the arch-nemesis of France. Your mother, Sire ... it's terrible to say this to a son but your mother..."  
"What about my mother?" said the king, glaring at the cardinal.  
This glare from the king that would have silenced a man less determined than the cardinal, instead seemed to loosen his tongue. "Your mother, Sire," he said, "was unfaithful to her husband. Before her marriage, your mother, during her time in Marseilles..."  
"Silence, Sir!" said the king. "The walls listen, they say, and sometimes they hear ... what they should not hear. Nobody needs to know, beyond you and me, why I hesitate to give an heir to the crown, when everyone presses me on it, most of all you. And what I say is so true, Sir," the king said, rising and grasping the cardinal's hand, "that if I thought my brother the true son of King Henry IV, in other words, the only blood that has the right to rule France, then as God and you hear me, Sir, I already would have abdicated in his favour and retired to a monastery, to pray for my mother and for France. Now, do you have anything else to tell me? If so, after all that, then tell me now."  
"Well, Sire, yes – I do have more to tell you," the cardinal said, surprised in spite of himself, "for I begin to understand that the instinctive respect I hold for Your Majesty has been justified, and my admiration is only deepened by this sharing of secrets. Oh, Sire! What worlds of sadness are revealed by your lifting of this veil! As God is my witness, if I didn't believe that the future of France depends on what else I need to tell you, I'd stop now and seal my lips forever. But, Sire ... have you ever thought about the death of King Henry IV?"  
"Alas! I think of it every day, Sir!"  
"But, in thinking of his death, have you tried to unravel the terrible mystery of the Fourteenth of May?"  
"Yes, and I have done so."  
"So, you know who the real assassins are, Sire?"  
"The assassination of Concini, le Marshall d'Ancre that I would approve again tomorrow if need be, proves that I know at least one of them – though I do not know the other."  
"But I, Sire, I – who didn't have the same reasons as Your Majesty to look away – I've seen to the bottom of this mystery, and I can name *all* the assassins."  
The king groaned.  
"You remember, Sire, that there was a religious woman, a holy creature who, knowing that the crime was afoot, swore it would not be completed. Do you know the reward for her loyalty?"  
"She was buried alive in a tomb at the Daughters of Repentance, the door walled up to keep her in, where she stayed for years on end, exposed to the scorching rays of the summer and the icy gales of the winter. Her name was Coëtman, and she died there ten or twelve days ago."  
"And knowing this, Sire, Your Majesty still suffered such an injustice to occur?"  
"The person of a king is sacred, Your Eminence," replied Louis XIII, who believed in the cult of absolute monarchy – that terrible cult that, under Louis XIV, would become idolatry. "Woe to those who learn a king's secrets."  
"Well, Sire, this is a secret known by someone other than you and me."  
The king was suddenly alert, and fixed a clear eye on the cardinal. "You may have heard," Richelieu continued, "that on the scaffold, Ravallac asked to be confessed."  
"Yes," said Louis XIII, turning pale.  
"You may even have heard that the clerk there listened while the condemned, already half dead, spoke the names of the culprits?"  
"Yes," said Louis XIII, "which were written down on a sheet kept out of the record."

To the cardinal’s eyes, he seemed even more pallid than before. “Then you may have heard that this sheet was kept and guarded very carefully by the clerk, Joly de Fleury?”

“I’ve heard all of this, Your Eminence. What else? What else?”

“Well, I tried to recover this sheet from the children of Sir Joly de Fleury.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“To give it to Your Majesty, in the event that you wanted it destroyed.”

“Well?”

“Well, Sire, this sheet is no longer in the possession of Sir de Fleury’s children. Two unidentified men, one a young man of sixteen, the other a man of twenty-six, came one day to try to persuade the clerk to give up the sheet. And they were successful.”

“And Your Eminence, who knows everything, doesn’t know the names of these two men?” the king asked.

“No, Sire,” the cardinal replied.

“Then I will tell you!” the king said, grabbing the cardinal by the arm. “The elder of the two men was Sir de Luynes, and the younger – was me.”

“You, Sire!” the cardinal cried, recoiling.

The king reached into his lapel and pulled out of an inside pocket a yellowed and crumpled paper, the process verbal Ravalliac had dictated on the scaffold, the sheet that named the culprits, and said, “Here it is.”

“Oh, Sire! Sire!” Richelieu said, realising what the pale king must have suffered during their talk. “Forgive me for what I’ve said to you. I truly thought you didn’t know.”

“Then how did you account for my sadness, my isolation, my grief? Is it usual for the Kings of France to dress as I do? Among other sovereigns, the death of a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a parent, or another king, means wearing the purple. But for all men, whether kings or commoners, the death of happiness means wearing black.”

“Sire,” said the cardinal, “there’s no need to keep this paper. Burn it.”

“No, Sir. I may be weak but fortunately I know myself. Despite everything, my mother is my mother, and sometimes she gets the better of me. But when I feel that her domination might push me to do something wrong, something unjust, I look at this paper, and it gives me strength. This paper, Your Eminence,” the king said in a voice gloomy but resolute, “I give to you to keep as a pact between us, for on the day I must finally break with my mother – exile her from Paris, hound her from France – I will do it with this paper in my hand. On that day I will ask you to return it, and you – you may ask me for whatever you want.”

The cardinal hesitated. “Take it,” said the king. “I want you to. Take it.”

The cardinal bowed and took the sheet of yellowed paper. “As Your Majesty wishes,” he said.

“And now, put me no more to the question, Your Eminence. I place France, and myself, in your hands.”

The cardinal fell to his knees, took the king’s hands, kissed them, and said, “Sire, in return for this moment, I hope Your Majesty will accept the entire efforts of the rest of my life.”

“So I intend, Sir,” said the king, with that supreme majesty he could sometimes assume. “And now, my dear Cardinal, let’s forget all that has happened, set aside the wretched intrigues of my mother, my brother, and the queen, and occupy ourselves with the glory of our arms and the greatness of France!”

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In Which the Cardinal Audits the Accounts of the King

The next day, at two in the afternoon, King Louis XIII, sitting in a great chair, his cane between his legs, his black hat with its black plumes resting on his cane, his brows somewhat less furrowed, his face less pale than formerly, watched the cardinal as Richelieu worked at his desk. Both were in the cardinal’s office in the Place Royale, the same place we saw the king, during his three-day reign, pass such troubling hours. The cardinal wrote, and the king waited. The cardinal looked up and said, “Sire, I’ve written to Spain, Mantua, Venice, and Rome, letters which Your Majesty has done me the honour to approve. Now I have just written, again at the approval of Your Majesty, to your cousin the King of Sweden. This response was more difficult than the others: His Majesty King Gustavus Adolphus isn’t yet allied to us, and he is a suspicious man, who makes decisions based on actions rather than words, reserving judgement until he’s had time to make up his mind.”

“Read your letter to me, your Eminence,” said Louis XIII. “I already know what was in the letter from my cousin Gustave.” The cardinal bowed and read:

Sire,

*The familiarity with which Your Majesty deigns to write to me is a great honour but assuming such familiarity in return would show a lack of respect, and be unbefitting of the humility appropriate to one in my position, even bearing the title Prince of the Church by which Your Majesty has been good enough to address me. Sire, I am not a great man! Sire, I am no genius! But I am, as you were good enough to note, an honest man. And it is this virtue that the king, my master, particularly appreciates, as he need only resort to himself when greatness or genius is required. I will speak candidly to Your Majesty, as requested but as nothing more than a simple minister of the King of France. Yes, Sire, I am sure of my king, more so than ever, as on this day he has confirmed my power over the direct opposition of Marie de Médicis, his mother, against Queen Anne, his wife, and against My Lord Gaston, his brother – he has given me proof that if sometimes his heart yields to filial piety, fraternal friendship, or conjugal affection that are the happiness and glory of common men and which God has placed in every honest and well-born heart, reasons of state outweigh those noble impulses. Kings must sometimes override their feelings when matters call for discipline and rigor in the name of good government. One of the great misfortunes of royalty, Sire, is that God has placed his representatives here on Earth so high that kings cannot really have friends, only favourites. But far from being influenced by his favourites, on the contrary, my master, who is called “the Jus, as I am the one who advised it” is entirely capable of bowing to the demands of criminal justice when a favourite is accused of meddling with state business – as he proved in the affair of Sir de Chalais. My master’s eyes are so vigilant, his grip so firm, that no matter how deep the conspiracy, no matter how powerful the conspirators, they cannot escape the justice of this king, whose heart and soul are devoted to France. If, one day, I do fall from power, it won’t be because I was undermined from below. So I say to you, Sire – as well as to my king, with whom I had the honour to share your letter, and from whom I have no secrets – yes, I am quite sure. If God gives me permission to stay in this world for another three years, and if the king gives me permission to remain as minister – and, in fact, Louis XIII gave Richelieu a nod – I can assure you in the king’s name and mine that we will be able to keep every one of our commitments to you, and I will deal with you as frankly as I do with my master. As to calling Your Majesty “my friend Gustave,” I know of only two men in antiquity – Alexander and Caesar – and three men of our modern monarchy – Charlemagne, Philippe-Auguste, and Henry IV – who would have had the stature for such flattering familiarity. I, who am so unworthy, can only call myself Your Majesty’s most humble and obedient servant.*

– Armand, Cardinal de Richelieu

*PS. If I please Your Majesty, my king has appointed the Baron de Chamassé to deliver this letter, and to be responsible for negotiating with Your Majesty the great matter of the foundation of the Protestant League. He does so with the full powers of the king and, if you absolutely insist, with mine as well.*

While the cardinal was reading this long letter that was in part an apology to the king for the way Gustavus Adolphus had rather freely shown his disregard for Louis XIII, the king, though occasionally gnawing at his moustache, nodded his general approval. But when the letter had been read, he stood for a moment in thought, and then asked the cardinal, “Your Eminence, in your capacity as a theologian, can you assure me that this alliance with a heretic does not imperil the salvation of my soul?”

“As I am the one who advised Your Majesty to do so,” said the cardinal, “if there is any sin in it, I take it upon myself.”

“That reassures me somewhat,” said Louis XIII, “but having taken this path since you became my minister, and assuming I’ll continue to follow your advice in the future, do you really think, my dear Cardinal, that one of us can be damned without the other?”

“The question is too difficult for me to answer. All I can say to Your Majesty is that I pray to God never to let me stray from Him, either in this world or the next.”

“Ah!” said the king, breathing more easily. “Is our work done, my dear Cardinal?”

“Not quite, Sire,” said Richelieu. “I must beg Your Majesty to grant me a few moments to make sure our commitments are maintained and our promises are kept.”

“Are you talking about the sums requested by my brother, my mother, and my wife?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Traitors and disloyal deceivers! You, who preach about saving money, are you going to advise me to reward infidelity, lies, and betrayal?”

“No, Sire but I will say to Your Majesty that a royal word is sacred, and once given, it must be upheld. Your Majesty promised one hundred and fifty thousand *livres* to his brother...”

“If he would be lieutenant general but since then he’s asked for more!”

“All the more reason to award him compensation.”

“He’s an impostor who pretended to fall in love with Princess Marie de Gonzague just to cause trouble!”

“Trouble we are out of, I hope, since he himself says he’s given up on that love.”

“While demanding his price to renounce it.”

“If he has his price, Sire, you have to pay the bill at the rate that was set.”

“One hundred and fifty thousand *livres*?”

“It’s expensive, I know but a king must keep his word.”

“In no time, he’ll take that one hundred and fifty thousand to Crete and bank it with King Minos, as he calls the Duke of Lorraine.”

“Then, Sire, that hundred and fifty thousand will have been well spent: for a hundred and fifty thousand *livres* will buy us the taking of Lorraine.”

“Do you think the Emperor Ferdinand will let us get away with that?”

“Well, don’t we have Gustavus Adolphus to oppose him?”

The king thought for a moment. “You are a canny chess player, Your Eminence,” he said. “My brother Sir shall have his hundred and fifty thousand. But as for my mother, she’ll never see her sixty thousand *livres*.”

“Sire, Her Majesty the Queen Mother has been in need of money for quite a while; she asked me for a hundred thousand *livres*, and at the time I was only able to give her fifty. But at that time we were strapped for cash, whereas now we are flush.”

“Cardinal! Do you forget all you said to me yesterday about my mother?”

“But didn’t I say she was still your mother, Sire?”

“Yes. Unfortunately for me, and for France, she is.”

“Sire, you committed to give Her Majesty the Queen Mother sixty thousand *livres*.”

“Maybe but I didn’t sign anything.”

“A royal promise is far more sacred than a written contract, Sire.”

“Then have it come from you instead of from me. Maybe then she’ll give you some respect and leave the both of us alone.”

“The queen mother will never leave us alone, Sire. She was born with the meddling spirit of the Médicis, and she’ll spend the rest of her life pursuing the two things she cannot have: her vanished youth and her lost power.”

“All right, I give in on the queen mother. But what about the queen, who wants me to pay Sir d’Éméry for a string of pearls – just one example of her continual demands!”

“That proves to us, Sire, that the queen recognises she has no power without the king. And since the king has the key to a box holding four million *livres*, we might as well remind her of it. So the queen owes someone twenty thousand? Then I’m sure Her Majesty will appreciate receiving fifty thousand! Send her fifty thousand as a sign of good faith, on condition that twenty thousand of it goes to Sir d’Éméry. The Crown of France is pure gold, Sire, and must shine on both the king and the queen.”

The king rose and held out his hand to the cardinal. “Your Eminence, you are not only a great minister and a good counsellor, you are a generous enemy. I authorise you, Your Eminence, to pay out the various sums we have discussed.”

“It is the king who promised, and the king who will deliver. The king will sign vouchers to present to the treasury, where they’ll be covered – but it seems to me His Majesty is forgetting another reward he promised.”

“Which one?”

“I thought I heard that, in an hour of generosity, he’d promised his fool Sir l’Angely the same amount he’d given his favourite, Sir Baradas: thirty thousand *livres*.”

The king flushed. “L’Angely turned it down,” he said.

“All the more reason, Sire, to show your generosity. Sir l’Angely turned it down because that was the crazy thing to do, and a fool has to act crazy to deserve a place with Your Majesty. But the king has two real friends he can depend on: his prime minister, and his fool. He shouldn’t appear ungrateful to the one while rewarding the other.”

“That’s so. You’re right, Your Eminence; the little clown has suffered so from my bad moods the last three months…”

“Three months, Sire, that can be recompensed at a rate of ten thousand a month. Show him that the King of France remembers his friends, as well as his favourites.”

“A favourite, who abandons me for Marion Delorme, a girl who … is…”

“Who is very useful, Sire, as she gave me the warning that I was about to be disgraced, and thus I was able to prepare a way to recoup my fortunes. Without her, Sire, I would have been caught unaware, and been unprepared to engage Your Majesty’s wisdom while absent. Put Sir Baradas in command of a company of troops, Sire, and give him the opportunity to prove to Your Majesty that the student can give faithful service to his teacher.”

The king thought for a moment. “Your Eminence,” he asked, “what do you think of this friend of his, Saint-Simon?”

“I think I should recommend him, Sire, as a person of goodwill and propriety who could fill the place left vacant by the ingratitude of Sir Baradas.”

“And besides,” the king added, “he really plays the horn quite beautifully. I’m glad you recommend him, Cardinal. I’ll see what I can do for him. By the way, what shall we tell the King’s Council?”

“Will Your Majesty be at the Louvre tomorrow at noon? By then, I’ll be prepared to explain my plan of campaign, so we can propose something more practical than crossing rivers upon Sir’s finger.”

The king stared at the cardinal, astounded that he should be so well informed even when away from Court. “My dear Cardinal,” he said with a laugh, “you must have actual demons in your service! Unless – as I’ve thought more than once – you’re the Devil himself.”

PART V

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The Avalanche

Just as the King’s Council, convened this time by Richelieu, came to order in Paris, at around eleven in the morning a small caravan that had left the French town of Oulx at dawn, and then passed through Exilles, now approached the outlying houses of the small town of Chaumont, just short of the Piedmont border. This caravan was composed of four people, two men and two women, mounted on mules. Both men wore Basque outfits but rode with their faces uncovered, and it was easy to see that they were young, the eldest about twenty-three, the youngest only eighteen. As for the two women, determining their ages was harder, as over their dresses they wore capes with hoods that completely hid their faces, something that might just as easily be attributed to the cold as to a desire to go unrecognised. Then as now, the Alps were crossed by magnificent roads from Simplon, from Mont-Cenis, and from Saint-Gothard but one could also reach Italy by way of trails so narrow, it was sometimes necessary for travellers to march single-file, leading their mules. These animals were perfectly comfortable with the dramatic terrain, both well trained and amenable. At the moment, the elder of the two cavaliers led the way on foot, holding the bridle of the mule ridden by the younger of the women. Seeing no one on the road but a kind of travelling merchant who preceded the caravan by five hundred paces, whipping along a little mule loaded with bales, she drew back her hood to reveal a head of soft blond hair and a face with a complexion so wonderfully fresh, it could belong to no one over the age of eighteen. The other woman followed, her face completely covered by her hood. Head bowed, whether in thought or by fatigue, she seemed completely oblivious of the way her mount picked its way along the trail, the snow-covered mountain on one side, sheer cliff on the other. But the mule seemed to know its business, choosing its way carefully, occasionally turning its head and eyeing the abyss, as if it understood quite clearly the dangers of a misstep. This danger was quite real; so, as a distraction, or to stave off the beckoning demon of vertigo, the fourth traveller, a young man with blond hair, a compact well-made figure, and the bright flashing eyes of youth, sat his mule side-saddle like a woman, his back to the abyss. A mandolin hung from his neck by a sky-blue ribbon, and as he rode he played it and sang, apparently to the fourth mule which, freed of its rider, followed contentedly along at the rear. And here is his song:

Venus has a thousand names  
And a hundred thousand nicknames  
Poor outraged lovers cry  
These iron-heart ladies  
Are creatures of Hades  
Who make them want to die  
Love for one is worry and tears  
For another it’s all pain and fears  
For a third it’s agony and defeat  
But me, when I think of  
The woman that I love  
She’s nothing to me but sweet!

As for the elder of the two young men, he neither played the viola nor sang – he was too busy for that. All his attention was concentrated on the young woman he was leading and the dangers that threatened her and her mount on the narrow and winding path. All the while, she gazed at him with that sweet and charming regard with which a woman looks at a man who not only loves her but is devoted to her, body and soul – and for whom devotion to the second outweighs even devotion to the first. After a moment, at one of the kinks in the path, the small caravan halted. There was a serious issue to be resolved. As we said, having passed Exilles two hours earlier, they were approaching the town of Chaumont, the last town in France that meant they were only half a league from the checkpoint that separated the French province of Dauphiné from the Italian province of Piedmont. Beyond that point, they would be in enemy territory, not only because Charles-Emmanuel, the Duke of Savoy and Piedmont, knew of the cardinal’s preparations for war but also because he’d been officially notified by the French government that if he didn’t allow their troops to march through his domain to raise the siege of Casale, it would be regarded as an act of war. So the serious issue was this: should they try to ride openly through Susa Pass, risking recognition and arrest by Charles-Emmanuel, or should they find a guide who could take them, by some other circuitous route that might avoid Susa, even Turin, and get them across into Lombardy? The young woman, with the charming confidence of a woman who loves a man who loves her in return, abandoned all these concerns to her lover; she looked at him with her lovely dark eyes and sweet smile and said, “You know better than I what to do – I leave it in your hands.”

The young man, anxious about the safety of the woman he loved, turned to question the woman whose face was hidden by her hood. “And you, Madam?” he asked. “What do you think?”

At these words the hood was raised, and one could see the face of a woman of forty-five or fifty, aged, emaciated, and ravaged by long suffering. The only part of her face that seemed alive was her eyes that shone with a piercing force as if trying to see beyond the world and into the unknown. “What’s that?” she asked. She hadn’t been listening, and had only looked up because they’d stopped. The young man raised his voice, for the noise of the cascading Doire tumbling through the canyon made normal speech impossible. He repeated his question. “As long as you’re asking,” she said, “what I think is we should stop at the next town because, since it’s on the border, we should be able to find out what you want to know. If there’s a back way across the mountains, someone in the village will know about it, and if we’re looking for a guide, that’s where we’ll find him. A few hours spent in discreet inquiry won’t make any difference; what’s important is that we, or rather you, aren’t recognised.”

“My dear Madam,” the young man replied, “you’re wisdom incarnate and we’ll do exactly as you say.”

“So?” asked the young woman.

“So now we go on. But what are you looking at?”

“Something amazing on the mountain. That is amazing, isn’t it?”

The young man looked to where she was pointing. “What is?” he asked.

“That there should be flowers blooming at this time of year!”

And indeed, just below the snow line, bright red flowers danced in the breeze. “Up here, dear Isabelle, there’re no seasons,” the young man said. “It’s always winter here but life can’t be quenched. Even in winter this flower grows in the snow that is why we call it the Alpine Rose.”

“It’s beautiful,” Isabelle said.

“Would you like one?” the young man said. And before the young woman could answer, he leaped up the slope, clambering over the rocks toward where the flowers grew.

“Count, Count!” cried the young woman. “In heaven’s name! Don’t be so foolish! I can’t bear even to look!”

But he who was honoured with the title of *count* and who we have no reason not to recognise as the Count of Moret, had already reached the ledge, picked the flower, and like a true *Montagnard* slid back down the slope – though he, a man who prepared for every contingency, had, like his companion, a rope coiled around his waist, in order to help with ascents and descents. He presented the Alpine Rose to the girl who, blushing with pleasure, raised it to her lips, then slipped it inside her bodice. At that moment, a sound like thunder rolled down from the peak of the mountain above. A cloud of snow billowed into the air, and a mass of white began racing like lightning down the slope, increasing in speed and force as it came. “Look out! Avalanche!” cried the younger of the two cavaliers, leaping from his mule. His companion wrapped Isabelle in his arms and leaned back against the overhanging rock face. The pale older woman drew back her hood so she could see what was happening. And suddenly, she screamed. The avalanche swept across the path about five hundred paces ahead of the small caravan, and though it was a minor one, the travellers felt the earth shake under their feet as the wind of death blew past. But the pale woman’s scream hadn’t been a cry of personal terror, as Galaor, the younger man, and the Count of Moret, worried about Isabelle, had both thought; it was because she’d seen the devastating tempest sweep the merchant and mule ahead of them down into the abyss. The Count of Moret and Galaor thought they’d escaped all danger, and weren’t sure why she’d screamed, so they turned to look. But they saw only the pale woman pointing and crying, over and over, “There! There! There!”

Then their eyes focused on the narrow path ahead. The peddler and his mule were gone, and the road was empty. Suddenly Moret understood everything. “Follow us slowly and carefully,” he told Isabelle, “and you, my dear Madam de Coëtman, follow Isabelle. Galaor and I will run ahead – maybe there’s something we can do to save the poor fellow.” And, leaping ahead with the agility of a mountain goat, the Count of Moret, followed by Galaor, rushed to the place indicated by Madam de Coëtman – whom Cardinal Richelieu, confident though he was that Moret would respect Isabelle’s chastity, had sent along as a chaperone as a concession to worldly propriety.

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Guillaume Coutet

Arriving at the spot indicated, the two young men gripped each other and peered down into the terrible abyss. They saw nothing at first, for they were looking too far out. Then they heard, from directly below them, words spoken as clearly as possible, given the profound terror of he who was speaking. “If you are Christian men, for the love of God, save me!”

Turning their eyes toward the voice, they saw, ten feet below them, on a precipice over a drop of more than a thousand feet, a man hanging from a tree, half uprooted and bending under his weight. His feet rested on a shifting rock but it was clear that it wouldn’t support him once the tree came loose that could happen at any moment. The Count of Moret grasped the situation at a glance. “Quick! Cut a staff eighteen inches long,” he cried, “thick enough to support a man’s weight.” Galaor, a mountaineer like Moret, understood what the count wanted. He drew a broad poniard from his sleeve and attacked a broken oak, and in a few moments hacked off a limb that could serve as a rope-ladder rung. Meanwhile, the count had unwrapped the rope from around his waist, to a length twice that of the distance to the man they hoped to rescue, and attached the rung to the loose end. Looping the rope around a protruding rock, he immediately began to let himself down toward the man suspended between life and death, meanwhile calling out encouragement. Moret passed the man the wooden rung on the other end of the rope, and he grasped it just as the tree’s roots pulled from the earth and it tumbled into the abyss. They weren’t safe yet: the rock supporting them was sharp, and was fraying the rope as they climbed. Fortunately, the two women arrived, bringing the mules with them. One mule was willing to approach near enough to the edge that they were able to pass the rope over its saddle. While Isabelle prayed, Madam de Coëtman, with indomitable determination, hauled the mule by the bridle until, with its help, Moret made it back over the edge. Then, drawing the rope over the saddle like a pulley, after a few seconds appeared the pale face of the peddler who’d so miraculously escaped death. A cry of joy greeted his appearance, to which Isabelle added, “Courage! Courage! You are saved!”

The man got to his feet, stumbled forward, dropped the rope, and draped his arms over the mule. The mule shied away, and the man, at the end of his strength, threw his arms up with a wordless cry and fainted into the arms of the Count of Moret. Moret opened a bottle of one of those invigorating liquors they distil in the Alps, held it to the man’s lips, and made him drink a few drops. It was apparent that the strength that had sustained him while he was in danger had abandoned him once he’d realised he was saved. The Count of Moret set him down, leaning him against the rock, while Isabelle held a bottle of smelling salts under his nose. The count untied the rung from the rope and threw it away with a man’s disdain for something useful whose use was over, and re-coiled the rope around his waist. Galaor, for his part, slapped his poniard back into its sheath with the recklessness of youth. In a few moments, after two or three convulsive twitches, the man opened his eyes. The expression

on his face showed no recollection of what had happened to him but gradually the memory returned. He realised he owed his life to those around him, and his first words were of thanksgiving and gratitude. The Count of Moret, whom the man took for a simple *Montagnard*, asked him about himself. “My name is Guillaume Coutet,” the man replied. “I have a wife who was almost a widow, and three children who were nearly orphaned. If there’s anything I can do for you, by my life or my death, you have only to ask.”

Then he got to his feet with the help of the count, and, subject to the retroactive terror that accompanies, or sometimes precedes, such an accident, he approached the precipice and gazed shuddering down at the broken tree roots below. Then he looked beyond at the shapeless chaos of snow, ice, boulders, and broken trees piled at the bottom of the valley, where the tumbling Doire backed up against this sudden unexpected obstacle to its course. He sighed, thinking of the mule and its lost load that was, in all probability, all the wealth he had. Then, recovering, he murmured, “Life is the greatest gift you give us, *my God*. I offer my thanks to you, and to those who helped me, for keeping me safe.”

He turned back toward the path but, whether from shock or the concussion of the fall, he was too weak to take another step. “I’ve delayed you long enough,” he said to the Count of Moret and Isabelle. “Since I can’t do anything for you in exchange for saving my life, I won’t hold you up any longer. Only, please tell the innkeeper of the Golden Juniper of the accident that befell his cousin, Guillaume Coutet, who remains on the road and could use some help.”

The Count of Moret whispered a few words to Isabelle, who nodded her approval. Then, addressing the wounded man, “My dear friend,” he said, “since God gave us the opportunity to save your life, we’re not about to abandon you. We’re no more than half an hour from the village; you can ride my mule, while I lead my lady by her bridle, as I was doing before the accident.”

Guillaume Coutet started to protest but Moret silenced him, saying, “I have need of you, my friend, and you may be able, within twenty-four hours, to repay the service I rendered you by doing me a greater one.”

“Really?” asked Guillaume Coutet.

“Faith of a gentleman!” replied the count, forgetting that he was betraying his cover with those words.

“In that case,” the peddler said, bowing, “I obey, as is my duty twice over; first, because you saved my life, and second, because you have the right by rank to command a poor farmer like me.”

Then, with the help of the count and Galaor, Guillaume Coutet mounted the mule. The count resumed his place leading the mule that carried Isabelle, who was happy that the man she loved had had a chance to prove his skill, courage, and generosity. After a quarter of an hour or so, the little caravan entered the village of Chaumont, and stopped at the door of the Golden Juniper. At the first words Guillaume Coutet said to the host of the Golden Juniper, not about the rank of the man who’d saved his life but rather the service he’d rendered him, Master Germain put the inn entirely at the count’s service. But the Count of Moret didn’t need the entire inn, just one large room with two beds for Isabelle and the Dame de Coëtman, and another room for him and Galaor. So he had the double satisfaction of getting what he wanted without disturbing anyone else. As to Guillaume Coutet, he was put up in his cousin’s own bedroom. A doctor was sent for, who examined him from head to toe, and declared that none of his two hundred and six bones were broken. He was told to bathe in water infused with aromatic herbs and a few handfuls of salt, and then rub his body with camphor. With this treatment, and a few glasses of mulled honey, the doctor was hopeful that within a day or two, the patient would be able to continue his journey. The Count of Moret, after taking care of the two lady travellers, made sure that the doctor’s instructions were followed exactly. Once the patient felt a bit better, the count sat down at his bedside. Guillaume Coutet repeated his protestations of gratitude and loyalty. Moret let him talk and, when he had finished, said, “It’s God to whom you owe your thanks, my friend, for it was He who led me to your aid. However, perhaps God had a dual purpose: to save you, and to provide me with your help.”

“If that were true,” said the patient, “I would be the happiest man alive.”

“I’ve been directed by Cardinal Richelieu – you see I’m keeping no secrets from you, and trust entirely in your discretion – I’ve been instructed by Cardinal Richelieu to escort to her father in Mantua the young lady you met, and to whom I am devoted.”

“May God guide and watch over you on your journey.”

“Amen – but we learned at Exilles that Susa Pass is blocked by barricades and heavily guarded fortifications. If we’re recognised there, we’ll be captured and held as hostages by the Duke of Savoy.”

“Then you’d better avoid Susa Pass.”

“Is there a way around?”

“Yes, if you trust me to lead you.”

“Are you from this area?”

“I’m from Gravière.”

“So you know the side roads?”

“In order to avoid the border tax, I’ve learned all the mountain paths.”

“Will you act as our guide?”

“It’s a rough road.”

“We’re not afraid of danger.”

“All right, then, I’ll do it.”

The Count of Moret nodded, indicating that the man’s word was enough. “However,” he said, “there’s more.”

“What else do you need?” asked Guillaume Coutet.

“I need information on the fortifications being built at Susa Pass.”

“That’s easy to get, since my brother is helping to build them.”

“And where does your brother live?”

“In Gravière, like me.”

“Can I seek out your brother, carrying a word from you?”

“Why not have he come here instead?”

“Could we do that?”

“It’s easy. Gravière is only half an hour away; my cousin is going there on his horse, and can bring my brother back with him.”

“How old is your brother?”

“Two or three years older than Your Excellency.”

“And how big is he?”

“About the same size as Your Excellency.”

“Are there a lot of people from Gravière working at Susa?”

“He’s the only one.”

“Do you think your brother might be willing to do me a favour?”

“Considering what you’ve done for me, he’d be willing to walk through fire for you.”

“Well, then, send for him. Needless to say, he’ll be well rewarded.”

“No need for that; Your Excellency has already rewarded us both.”

“Then I’ll go speak to our host about bringing him.”

“Please call him and let me speak to him alone, so he has no doubt but that I’m the one who’s asking him.”

“I’ll send him in.” The Count of Moret went out and, a quarter of an hour later, Master Germain mounted his horse and took the road to Gravière. One hour later, he returned to the Golden Juniper, bringing with him Guillaume’s brother, Marie Coutet.

## 121 Marie Coutet

Marie Coutet was a young man of twenty-six that as his brother had said made him three or four years older than the Count of Moret. He had the rugged good looks of the *Montagnard*: his honest face indicated a warm heart, and he was compact but strong, with broad shoulders and sturdy limbs. On the way back, he’d been brought up to date on the situation. He knew that his brother, swept away by an avalanche, had had the good fortune to catch hold of a tree, and had been rescued by a passing traveller. But why had his brother sent for him once he was out of danger?

That’s what he didn’t understand. But he didn’t hesitate for a moment that showed how devoted he was to his brother. As soon as he arrived, he went to the room where Guillaume Coutet was resting, and spent ten minutes with him, after which he asked Master Germain if he could speak to the gentleman. The Count of Moret was quick to respond to this invitation. “Your Excellency,” Guillaume said to him, “this is Marie, my brother. He knows I owe you my life, and, like me, he is at your disposal.”

The Count of Moret looked over the young mountaineer, and at first glance thought he saw in him both courage and honesty. “Your name,” he said, “is French.”

“Indeed, Your Excellency,” Marie Coutet replied, “both my brother and I are French in origin. My father and mother were from Phénioux; they moved to Gravière, where both of us were born.”

“So you still think of yourself as French?”

“In my heart as well as my name.”

“But you’re working on the fortifications at Susa.”

“They pay me twelve *sous* a day to shovel dirt, so all day I shovel dirt, without worrying about why or whose dirt it is.”

“But then, aren’t you working against your country?”

The young man shrugged. “Why doesn’t my country pay me to serve it?” he said.

“If I ask you to give me the details of the work you’re doing, will you share them with me?”

“Nobody asked me to keep it secret.”

“Do you know anything about the language of fortifications?”

“I’ve heard the engineers talk about redoubts, demi-lunes, and counterscarps but I have no idea what those words mean.”

“Could you draw me a diagram of the fortifications of Susa Pass, particularly those defending the heights of Montabon and Montmoron?”

“I don’t know how to read or write. I’ve never even held a pencil.”

“Are foreigners able to approach the works?”

“No. There’s a line of sentries a mile in front.”

“Could I go with you as a new worker? I was told they were looking for more men.”

“For how many days?”

“Just one.”

“If you don’t come back the next day, they’ll be suspicious.”

“What if you were sick for a day?”

“That might work.”

“Could I fill in for you?”

“I think so. My brother could write a note for the overseer, Jean Miroux. The next day, I’ll recover and return to work with no one the wiser.”

“Could you do that, Guillaume?”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“When do you start work?”

“Seven in the morning.”

“So there’s no time to lose. Get the note from your brother, return to Gravière, and at seven in the morning I’ll be there in your place.”



lifelong smuggler and poacher, he appeared to be in his element. With his elbows and shoulders he opened a path to the huge fireplace around which, smoking and drinking, a dozen men were gathered. Their mismatched outfits didn't seem to indicate any particular occupation but rather all occupations at once. Guillaume went up to the fireplace and spoke a few words into the ears of two men who were sitting there. They got up at once, without seeming bothered about it, and gave up their seats on a pair of hay bales. The Count of Moret and Galaor set their luggage on the bales, and set themselves on their luggage. Then they finally had a chance to take a good look at the company that surrounded them – a look that fully justified Miss de Lautrec's fears. Most of the men, like Guillaume, were apparently members of the honourable fraternity of smugglers but the others were a mixed lot: poachers on the lookout for any kind of game, highwaymen, condottieri, mercenaries from all over – Spaniards, Italians, Germans – it was a strange mixture. They spoke loudly in every language at once, and in terms so outlandish and lurid, even a skilled linguist would have had trouble sorting it out. These rougher types, instead of joining comfortably with the pack, seemed determined to keep their status as lone wolves, each trying to look more dangerous than the next. Only those few who were related to each other hung together. Spaniards predominated. Most had come from the siege of Casale, where the besieged were dying of starvation; they were deserters fleeing Italy in the guise of irregular soldiers who, once they reached the mountains, turned to one of those nocturnal pursuits for which, in every country, the mountains are the theatre. There these men flowed together, mingling to form a river that ran toward the edge of the abyss. Around their heads swirled the vapours of tobacco, mulled drinks, and alcoholic breath. A few smoking candles on the walls or tables added their fetid fumes to the atmosphere that they lit no better than the moon in a stormy sky. From time to time, voices rose in shrill disagreement, as shadowy figures raised menacing arms in the gloom; if the argument turned into a fight between, say, a Spaniard and a German, all those who spoke Spanish or German rallied to the one who spoke their language. If both parties were of equal strength, the *mélée* became general but if one side was weaker than the other, the original opponents were left to settle the quarrel on their own, with either a handshake or a knife. The two young cavaliers had just sat down and started to warm their hands when one of these quarrels that were always ready to break out anew, flared up in a corner of the room. German and Spanish insults were exchanged, denoting the nationalities of the opponents. Immediately, a dozen men charged through the smoke toward the conflict but as nine were Spaniards and only three Germans, the Germans quickly retreated to their benches, saying "It's nothing" – at which the Spaniards stood down, saying "Let them be."

Left on their own, the two disputants soon became combatants. Violent words turned to violent actions, and knife blades flashed in the candle light; curses bespoke wounds, their level of obscenity indicating the seriousness of the injuries. Finally a cry of pain rang out, stools and chairs were overturned as someone ran for the door, and a death rattle came from under the corner table. As soon as he saw the knives flashing, the Count of Moret had moved as if to intervene but an iron hand gripped his arm and held him down on his luggage. It was Guillaume who was doing him this favour. "By Christ," he said, "sit still!"

"But ... it's murder!" said the count.

"What business is that of yours?" Guillaume said quietly. "Let them be."

And, as we've seen, he did let them be. As the one who'd dealt the death wound escaped out the door, the one who'd received it slid down the wall until he fell beneath a table, where he gasped out his life. Once the fight was over and the killer gone, there was no objection to providing some relief to a dying man. As it was the German who was dying, two or three of his compatriots lifted him up from under the table and laid him on the top. The fatal wound was an upward stab, inflicted by one of those Catalan blades with a needle point that widens toward the hilt. It had gone in between the seventh and eighth ribs, right into the heart, and after the wounded man was set on the table, he gave a final spasm and quickly expired. In the absence of friends and relatives, his compatriots acted as his heirs and, nobody objecting, his effects were claimed by his three fellow Germans. After searching the body, they divided his money, his arms, and his clothes, as if this were the most routine matter in the world. That accomplished, the three Germans dragged the corpse outside, in its shirt and breeches, to a place where the road overlooked a thousand-foot cliff. There the body was slid over the edge, just like the body of a dead sailor cast overboard from a ship sailing the high seas. Except that in this case, a few seconds later they heard the thud of the body striking the rocks below. The dead man's father, mother, family, and friends were all unknown, and no one gave them a single thought. *What was his name? Where was he from? Who was he, really?*

It no longer mattered. He was one less atom in the infinite, and only the eye of God counted him among the countless atoms of humanity. His death left no more mark on Creation than the swallow who, at the approach of winter, departs for the south, leaving only a whisper in the air, or the ant that a passing traveller unknowingly crushes beneath his tread. However, the Count of Moret was appalled by the thought that Isabelle was separated from this terrible event by nothing more than a thin wall. He rose stiffly and made his way to the door of the kitchen where she was hiding, and found the hostess sitting on the threshold. "Never fear, my handsome young man," she said. "I'm on watch."

At that moment, as if Isabelle had sensed right through the wall that her lover had come looking for her, the door opened, and she graced him with that sweet, angelic smile that brought Paradise to wherever it shone. "Welcome, my dear," she said. "We're ready, and waiting on your signal."

"Then close the door, dear Isabelle. Don't open it except to my voice. I'll tell Guillaume and Galaor."

The door was closed. Turning around, the count found himself face to face with Guillaume. "The ladies are ready to go," he said. "We'd leave as soon as we can – this place makes my blood run cold."

"Good. But we'll make a gradual exit, and not go off all at once. You and the lad go first; in a couple of minutes, I'll follow with the luggage."

"Do you think there might be trouble?"

"There are all sorts here tonight – and you've seen the low value they place on a man's life."

"Why did you bring us in here, if you knew we'd find bandits like this?"

"I haven't passed this way for two months. Two months ago they weren't fighting in Italy yet. Where there's war, there are deserters, and deserters become dangerous bandits. If I'd known what awaited us, we would have kept going."

"All right. Send me Galaor. We'll prepare the mules and get ready to put this place behind us."

"I'm on my way." 5 minutes later, the 4 travellers, their guide left the smugglers' lodge as covertly, most of all as quietly as they could, and resumed their interrupted journey.

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Souls & Stars

Upon leaving the stable yard, Guillaume showed the count the long trail of blood that reddened the snow up to the edge of the precipice where the body had been thrown over. No words were necessary; the count looked around warily and instinctively placed his hand on his pistol. Isabelle, who had heard nothing inside, saw nothing outside. The count had asked her to stay quiet, and so she was. The moon cast its cold light on the snow-covered terrain and disappeared, from time to time, behind dark clouds that rolled across the sky like great waves. The road was smooth enough that Isabelle was able to leave the mule in charge of following the path, and turn her eyes up to the celestial infinity. In winter in the mountains, when the air is crisp and cold, and the viewer is above the mists of the lowlands, the stars shine down with a pure and sparkling light. In a dreamy and melancholic mood, Isabelle was soon lost in contemplation. Worried about her silence – because lovers worry about everything – the Count of Moret hopped down from his mule. He took her mule by the bridle with one hand, while offering her the other. "What are you thinking about, beloved?" he asked her.

"What'd I think about, my dear, when I gaze into the starry firmament but the infinite power of God and the tiny place we occupy in this universe that our pride leads us to believe was made just for us?"

"What would you think, my dear dreamer, if you knew the actual size of those worlds rolling through the heavens, compared to the reality of our own globe?"

"You think you know, do you?"

The count smiled. "At Padua," he said, "I studied astronomy under a great Italian master, a professor who took me into his confidence. He told me a secret he hasn't yet dared to reveal, fearing it would be dangerous for him to do so."

"Can a scientific secret be dangerous?"

"It can be, if it contradicts the holy books!"

"One must have faith first and foremost! In the heart of the religious, faith takes precedence over science."

"But remember, dear Isabelle, you're talking to a son of Henry IV, whose father converted to the church under the duress of politics. His last words about me before he died – alas, he died so quickly he'd spare me no more thought than this – his final words were 'Let him study, let him learn, and let him make up his own mind.'"

"You mean you're not a Catholic?" Isabelle asked with some anxiety.

"No, I am – don't worry about that," said the count. "But my tutor, who was an old Calvinist, taught me to consider every belief in the light of reason, and to reject religious dogma if it required suppressing the mind in favour of faith. So I study, and learn, and am reluctant to accept any teaching that requires blind belief. But that doesn't stop me from glorying in the greatness of God, in whose mercy I would seek shelter if disaster ever struck me."

"That's a relief," Isabelle said, smiling. "I was afraid I'd fallen for a pagan."

"You may have fallen for worse than that, Isabelle. A pagan might agree to be converted but a thinker seeks enlightenment. And enlightenment, as it approaches universal truth, moves farther from dogma. Had I lived in Spain in the time of Philip II, dear Isabelle, I'd probably have been burned as a heretic."

"*My God!* But what about the stars I was gazing at, and what the Italian sage told you?"

"He told me something you're going to deny, though I think it's the absolute truth."

"I would never deny anything you tell me, my love."

"Have you ever lived by the side of the sea?"

"I've been to Marseilles twice."

"And what did you think was the most beautiful time of day?"

"Sunset."

"Wouldn't you have sworn that it was the Sun who moved across the sky, and then rushed down beyond the edge of the sea?"

"I would, and I still swear it."

"I'm afraid you're wrong, Isabelle: it's not the Sun that moves, it's the Earth."

"Impossible!"

"I told you you'd deny it."

"But if the Earth was moving, I'd feel it."

"No, for everything moves with it, including the atmosphere around us."

"But even if we're the world that's moving, we would still see the Sun."

"You're right, Isabelle, and your quick wit is almost the equal of science. But the Earth not only moves, it rotates; at this moment, for example, the Sun illuminates the Earth on the side away from us."

"If that's the case, why aren't we upside-down with our feet in the air?"

"In a relative sense, we are! But the atmosphere I mentioned surrounds us and sustains us."

"I don't understand a word of this, Antoine, and would prefer to talk about something else."

"What shall we talk about?"

"The thing I was thinking about when you asked me what I was thinking about."

"And what was that?"

"I was wondering if all these worlds scattered across the sky had been created as homes for our souls after death."

"Dear Isabelle, I never would have believed you were so ambitious."

"Ambitious? Why?"

"Only two or three of those worlds are smaller than ours: Venus, Mercury, and the Moon – three in all. Others are eighty times, seven hundred times, even fourteen hundred times bigger than the Earth."

"If you mean the Sun, then certainly – it's the principal star of all the stars. From it we have everything that gives us existence: warmth, power, and the glory of the world around us. The Sun is not just in the beat of our hearts, it's the heartbeat of the Earth."

"Dear Isabelle, you just said more with your imagination and poetry than my Italian sage with all his knowledge."

"But," Isabelle demanded, "How can these points of light in the sky be bigger than the Earth?"

"Leaving out those we can barely see because they're so far from us, like Uranus and Saturn – do you see that golden star, there?"

"I see it."



"That's Jupiter; it is four hundred and fourteen thousand times larger than the Earth, and it has four moons that bathe it in eternal light."

"But how does it seem so small when the Sun seems so big?"

"Partly because the Sun is five times the size of Jupiter, and partly because we are only thirty-eight million leagues from the Sun but we are one hundred and seventy million leagues from Jupiter."

"But who told you all this, Antoine?"

"My Italian sage."

"What's his name?"

"Galileo."

"And you believe what he told you?"

"Firmly."

"Well, my dear Count, you frighten me with your vast distances. I don't think my soul could ever make such a journey!"

"Assuming we have souls, Isabelle."

"Can you doubt it?"

"I've not seen it demonstrated."

"We'll not talk about that; Italian sage or no, I much prefer to believe I have a soul!"

"If you believe in your soul, I'll try to believe in mine."

"Well, suppose you have one, and after death you were free to choose between a temporary stay here: or eternity on another world. Which would you choose?"

"But you, my dear Isabelle: where would you go?"

"I admit that I lean toward the Moon, for it's the star of unhappy lovers."

"That would be a good choice insofar as it's the closest, Isabelle, being a mere ninety-six thousand leagues away but it's the planet where your soul would fare the worst."

"Why?"

"Because it's uninhabitable, even for a soul!"

"Oh, how unlucky! Are you sure?"

"Judge for yourself. Currently, the best telescopes in the world are in Padua. When trained on your favourite planet, they see nothing but absolute sterility and solitude, at least on its visible hemisphere; no atmosphere, and thus no river, lake, or ocean; no vegetation; no life. It's true that the side we can't see may have everything that the near side lacks. But I doubt it, so I advise you not to send your soul there, because mine has to follow wherever yours goes."

"You seem to know all these worlds as if you'd lived there, my dear Count! In all these stars and constellations, these planets and these moons where'd I go, if your soul is determined to follow mine?"

"As to that," said the count, "I wouldn't hesitate for a moment: to Venus!"

"From a man who claims not to be a pagan, that's a bit compromising. So why is Venus the planet of your choice?"

"See there, dear Isabelle? That blue flame in the sky is Venus; it's the forerunner of the night, and the harbinger of the dawn, the most radiant planet in our system. It's only twenty-eight million leagues or so from the Sun, and receives twice as much heat and light as the Earth; it has an atmosphere much like ours, and though barely half the size of our planet, it has mountains reaching an altitude of a hundred and twenty thousand feet. Now Venus, unlike Mercury, is almost entirely enveloped in clouds, so it must be home to the streams and rivers that are missing from the Moon. Souls that walk along those banks would hear the water murmur with a lovely freshness."

"Very well: we go to Venus," said Isabelle.

This pact had just been concluded when they heard a sound rapidly approaching. The travellers instinctively stopped and turned to see where the sound came from. A man was running toward them at full speed but he didn't cry out, just waved his hat wildly. They could see him clearly, as the Moon was sailing through a gap in the clouds, like a boat on a deep blue sea. It was apparent that this man had something important to convey to the travellers. When he got close enough, he gasped out Guillaume's name. Guillaume got down from his mule and ran to meet the man, who was one of the two smugglers who had given up his place by the fire to the Count of Moret and Galaor. The two men met at about fifty paces away, exchanged a few words in an undertone, and then came toward the caravan. "Bad news, friend Jacquolino," said Guillaume, affecting an air of familiarity with the count that was meant to deceive his smuggler friend as to Moret's rank, a rank which the man seemed to guess nonetheless. "They're coming after us. We need to find a place to hide so we can let them go past."

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The Giacon Bridge

Here, in fact, is what happened in the smugglers' lodge after the Count of Moret, Galaor, and Guillaume Coutet left the common room. The front door reopened, and the face of the Spaniard who had fled after slaying the German reappeared there. The room was so quiet, it was as if nothing unusual had happened. "Hey!" he called. "You Spaniards!" All the Spaniards got up at the summons of their compatriot and went toward him. A local smuggler, the friend of Guillaume Coutet, suspecting the Spaniards were up to no good, went out the back door and circled around the lodge until he could get close to the conspirators. He heard the murderer tell his compatriots that, through the window of the kitchen, he'd seen two women, one of whom looked like an aristocrat. These ladies, he said, seemed to be part of Guillaume's caravan. And that was an opportunity too good to pass up. The murderer had little difficulty in persuading his comrades to seize the chance. There were ten Spaniards; they ought to be able to overwhelm three men without too much trouble, especially since one was a guide who probably wouldn't stick his neck out for people he didn't know. The gang went to gather their weapons. The smuggler, meanwhile, took to his heels and raced up the road, hoping to reach the caravan before the Spaniards could come upon them. And indeed, he arrived ahead of them but not by much. Guillaume and the smuggler talked it over quickly. They were both intimately familiar with the local terrain; but where there's no foliage, it's not easy to hide five travellers and their mules. The two smugglers grimaced and then both said, "The Giacon Bridge."

The Giacon Bridge was a high stone arch across a mountain canyon that carried the road over a tumbling tributary of the Po. Beyond, the road forked, one path climbing toward Venaux, the other bending back toward Susa, approaching it from behind. When they arrived at that point, the Spaniards would just have to guess which way their prey had gone, and if they picked the wrong direction, the travellers might escape – especially since the Spaniards had no idea the little caravan had been warned of the pursuit. They would probably just pick one fork or the other and continue on. Ten minutes' ride brought them to the Giacon Bridge. Guillaume took Isabelle's mule by its bridle, his comrade led the mule of Madam de Coëtman, and so they crossed the narrow span. Providence was on their side, for a sea of dark clouds that eclipsed the constellations which the count and Isabelle had admired, were also about to swallow the Moon and its light. In five more minutes, it would be dark as pitch. The smuggler let go of the bridle of the Lady Coëtman's mule, walked fifty paces away, dropped, and pressed his ear against the ground. The little caravan held still. After listening for a few seconds, the smuggler jumped up and ran back. "I heard them," he said, "but they're still six hundred yards behind us. In a minute, the Moon will disappear behind the clouds. There's not a moment to lose."

They resumed their ride. The clouds swept across the sky and the Moon disappeared; looking back, the travellers saw their pursuers arrive at the bridge just as darkness fell. Guillaume, who led the first mule, turned abruptly to the left, leading them onto a path cut into the rock that led down toward the tumbling torrent below. This path, such as it was, must have been cut so that, in the heat of summer, mules could be led down to cool water. It was a steep descent but they managed it without accident. At the bottom, the smuggler again pressed his ear against the stone. "They're coming," he said. "If one of our mules neighs and they spot us, leave it to me – I'll take that mule and lead them away."

Guillaume led the travellers under the arch of the stone bridge, where they bound kerchiefs around the mouths of the mules. Meanwhile his comrade went ahead to scout along the road to Venaux. Soon all the travellers could hear the Spanish bandits as they crossed the bridge. But as the travellers were doubly concealed by the darkness and the bridge, they were completely invisible, unless some unforeseen accident revealed their hiding place. After crossing the bridge, the Spaniards fell to arguing about whether they should take the fork that went on toward Venaux, or back toward Susa. The discussion became heated, and those among the fugitives who understood Spanish could clearly hear the whole debate. Suddenly, they heard a male voice rise in song from beyond the bridge. Guillaume placed a finger against the Count of Moret's lips – he had recognised the voice of his comrade. The song interrupted the debate at the fork in the road. Four of the Spaniards stepped forward to meet the singer. "Hey, you!" they called out in broken Italian. "Did you see any mounted travellers go by?"

"I saw two men and two women led by Guillaume Coutet, a merchant from Gravière," he said. "Is that who you mean?"

"Exactly!"

"Well, they're only about five hundred yards ahead along the road to Venaux," the smuggler said. This settled the argument, and the bandits rushed off down the road to Venaux. The travellers peered warily out from the shadows beneath the bridge. As for the smuggler, he took the road toward Susa, gesturing to the travellers to follow him. The sound of the bandits receded into the distance, and after five minutes' wait, the caravan, led by Guillaume, went back up the steep path to the bridge. Five hundred yards down the Susa road, they caught up with the smuggler, who, unwilling to return to the lodge after misleading the bandits, asked if he could join the travellers' party. Permission was instantly granted, and the Count of Moret promised him that, once they were over the border and into Piedmont, he would be well rewarded. They continued on their way, pressing the mules for speed that was easier as they approached Susa, where the road was better. As they got closer, the two guides advised caution but the path they were following was so little known and even less frequented that the Savoyards had set no sentries on it, though it approached the northern ramparts. The ramparts, when they reached them, were deserted, as the entire defence of the town of Susa was concentrated in the pass, a mile further ahead. Eventually, by following the rampart around to the east, they came down off the mountain and onto the road to the town of Malavet, where they spent the night. The next morning, they took counsel. They could descend into the plain and go down to Lake Maggiore by way of Rivarolo and Joui but that would be risking a danger of capture even worse than falling into the hands of Spanish bandits. It was true that the Count of Moret had been charged upon his departure from France to carry a letter from Queen Anne to Don Gonzales de Cordova, the Governor of Milan, and thus could pretend to be on a mission for the two queens to Rome or Venice. But that ruse would have galled him, as he was a true son of Henry IV and hated to lie. Besides, that would have shortened the journey that Antoine de Bourbon wished to prolong as much as possible. And since his advice carried the most weight, his will prevailed. So they decided to go the long way around, through Aosta, Domodossola, and Sonovre, and by bypassing the Lombard basin make their way to Verona, where they'd be safe. After a couple of days of rest in Verona, the party would separate, the women continuing on horseback to their destination, Mantua. At Ivrea, the smuggler who had joined their caravan went on his way, after being rewarded for his devotion with a money pouch that persuaded Guillaume Coutet all the more that he was guiding a nobleman who was travelling incognito. And to be fair we must say that it was to confirm this suspicion that he was determined to accompany the travellers to the end of their journey. As it happened, that confirmation wasn't hard to come by: if Guillaume Coutet had sworn to serve the count because the latter had saved Coutet's life, Antoine de Bourbon felt the strong sympathy and connection of the saviour for the saved. After 27 days of travel and a series of unimportant incidents we will spare the reader by omitting as they lacked the drama of previous events, the party arrived in Mantua by way of Tordi, Nogaro, and Castellarez.

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The Oath

No letter, word, or message had forewarned the Baron de Lautrec of the arrival of his daughter. As a result, though he wasn't always the most attentive of fathers, the first moments of their reunion were an outpouring of paternal and filial love. It was several moments before the baron could acknowledge his daughter's travelling companions, and read the letter sent to him by Cardinal Richelieu. From this letter, he learned the name of the young man charged with the care of his daughter, and from that just how much the cardinal cared for his Isabelle. Altogether he had more than enough reason to immediately notify Charles de Gonzague, the new Duke of Mantua, of the arrival of his daughter, and of the illustrious escort who'd brought her to his door. So he sent a servant to the Château de Té to tell the duke the news that was bound to pique his interest, since the Count of Moret, as the natural brother of Louis XIII, must be privy to the intentions of the cardinal and the king. When he heard that the count requested an audience, the Duke of Mantua responded by mounting a horse and coming himself, accompanied only by one of his most faithful servants. He found that the Count of Moret, despite being the son of Henry IV, refused to cover his head and take a seat before the duke did. As it happened, the duke already knew, from an envoy, the news from Paris as of January 4, 1629 – that is to say, several days after the departure of the Count of Moret and Isabelle. The cardinal, on the strength of the king's promise to him, had conveyed France's full support to the Duke of Mantua that had gone a long way to relieve him of his fears. And now here came not a mere courier but an emissary from Richelieu himself, to assure him that the cardinal – and the king – were on their way. History tells us that on Thursday, January 15, the king dined at Moulins and spent the night at Varenne. We don't know his exact whereabouts between January 15 and February 5 – but we do know that in that time the plague that had broken out in Italy, had crossed the Alps and reached Lyon. Would the king have enough courage in the face of bitter cold and this deadly scourge, to carry him through Lyon and up into the frigid mountains? For anyone who knew how changeable the king was, this was a real concern. But for those who knew the steadfast character of the cardinal, there was hope. The Count of Moret could only repeat to the Duke of Mantua what he'd been told by the cardinal: that the French intended to raise the siege of Casale and bring immediate relief to Mantua.

There was no time to lose. Charles, the Duke of Nevers, knew from a reliable source that Prince Gaston, in a moment of anger, had sent a message reaching out to Wallenstein in Germany. Thus Sir unwittingly drew toward France those new Huns under their new Attila. For the last three months, two generals of these barbarians, Aldringen and Gallas, past masters of destruction and pillage, had been sacking their way through Worms, Frankfurt, and Swabia. To the poor Duke of Mantua, it was as if they were already looming across the Alps, more terrible than the savage tribes of the Cimbri and Teutons, who had sledged down mountains and across frozen rivers on their shields. The Count of Moret knew he shouldn't stay long in Mantua. He had promised the cardinal he would return to take part in the campaign – but against this, the duke urged him to lend his name to the defence of Mantua until it could be relieved by the king's forces. The situation in Mantua was so grave, the Baron de Lautrec almost regretted that he'd summoned his daughter into it. The day after their arrival, her father summoned Isabelle for a private talk. He told Isabelle the commitments he'd made regarding her to the Viscount of Pontis – and in return, Isabelle told him quite openly of the vow made to her by the Count of Moret. Despite the excellence of the Sir de Pontis's birth and family, they were no match for that of Antoine de Bourbon, who outranked anyone of less than royal birth. The baron contented himself with bringing the Count of Moret into his office to ask him about his intentions. Moret replied with his usual frankness, confessing that the cardinal had already forced his hand, and endorsed his commitment – so long as first he discharged his duty to the cardinal. The Baron de Lautrec accepted this commitment, with the proviso that if the count was killed, or contracted to another, he would resume his authority to bestow his daughter's hand where he would. Barring that, he had no reason to resist the young count's suit for Isabelle. The evening after this double discussion, the young couple, walking along the banks of the river Virgil, related to each other the talks they'd had with the baron. Isabelle made her lover promise not to get killed, he promised never to take another for his wife, and both were satisfied. We must emphasise this promise "never to take another for his wife," because with every son of Henry IV other than Antoine de Bourbon, this would certainly have been a Jesuitical promise, adhered to in fact but not in spirit. There was certainly no ulterior motive in the promise not to get killed but this promise to take no other wife but Isabelle de Lautrec – did it extend to mistresses, or those moments when the Devil might otherwise tempt him? The most faithful of lovers have such moments, even those who aren't sons of a freethinker like Henry IV. Could the young Basque Jacquolino resist the sultry attractions of his beautiful cousin Marina, whose hot eyes shot him flaming glances that set his heart afire? What if another evening came like that after Marie de Gonzague's soirée, when La Fargis, her kiss still burning on his lips, was stepping into her chair – what if Satan tapped him on the shoulder and urged him to join her? Was he strong enough to send Satan back to Hell? We can't say that, for Antoine de Bourbon, the words he'd spoken to Isabelle de Lautrec outweighed the attractions of Madam de Fargis, that Venus Astarte who whispered burning words of forbidden love into the ears of her lovers. What we can say is that the Count of Moret felt the need of a witness other than the river the pagans called the Mincio, and other lights than those of Venus, Jupiter, Saturn, and Cassiopeia. And so he asked Isabelle to join him in a Christian church and, in the presence of God, reaffirm the solemnity of his oath. Isabelle, like her compatriot Juliet, promised everything her lover asked, repeating to him the words of the English poet:

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,  
The more I have, for both are infinite."

The next day at the same hour, that is to say, about nine in the evening, two shadows, one walking a few steps behind the other, slipped into St. Andrew's Church through a side door. By the light of the ever-burning lamps and votive candles offered in memory of the many miracles commemorated there, they made their way toward the altar of Our Lady of the Angels that was also known by the even more charming name of Our Lady of Love, since its first dedication in that name a half-century before had exposed the amorous susceptibility of a bishop. First came a young woman, who knelt before it. The young man who followed knelt beside her, on her right. Both, radiant with youth and beauty, were bathed in the flickering light of the lamp, she with her head down, eyes moist with tears of joy, he with his face raised, his eyes sparkling with happiness. Each said a silent prayer – though by *each*, we really mean *Isabelle de Lautrec*. For the words that overflowed her heart formed a prayer on her lips to the dear Mother of God. But men only know how to pray in misfortune; in happiness, their words are but a babble of desire amid sighs of passion. Then, their first surge of love expressed, their trembling hands sought each other's grasp. Isabelle gasped with a joy that was almost pain, and then, with no thought of where she was, cried, "Oh, my love – how much I do love you!"

The count looked up at the Madonna. "See!" he cried. "The Madonna smiles! And so do I, for how much do I love you, my dearest Isabelle." And their heads dropped to their chests, crushed beneath the weight of their happiness. The count pressed Isabelle's hand against his breast, then gently pulled his hand from hers and pressed her fingers against his lips. And then, pulling the ring from the smallest of his fingers, he placed it on the second finger of her hand, saying "Holy Mother of God, patron saint of love both human and heavenly, you whose celestial smile echoes our own, be witness that I hereby pledge to have no wife but Isabelle de Lautrec. If I break that oath, may you punish me as I deserve."

"Oh, no, Virgin Mother," Isabelle cried, "never punish him!" "Isabelle!" said the count, taking her fiercely in his arms, then gently releasing her before the holiness of the place.

"Madonna, holy and all-powerful," she said, "be witness in my turn to my oath. I swear here at your altar before whose divine feet I kiss that from today I belong body and soul to the one who just placed this ring on my finger, and even were he to die or worse, betray his oath, I will be no one else's wife unless it be that of your divine son." With this final word, Isabelle's lips were closed by a kiss. The sainted Madonna smiled down at the count's kiss and at Isabelle's gasp, as she remembered that she'd been called Our Lady of Love before she was called Our Lady of the Angels.

### 127 The Journal of Sir Bassompierre

As the Duke of Mantua learned from the envoy, the cardinal and the king had left Paris on the fourth of January and, on the fifteenth, they dined at Moulins and supped at Varenne that is not to be confused with that Varennes in the Meuse later made famous by the arrest of a king. For this commencement of the campaign, we have a reliable guide in the journal of Sir de Bassompierre. It is to him we turn for the historical part of our story. The king, after making his fateful pact with Richelieu, left His Eminence's office, and outside encountered Sir de Bassompierre, who had come to pay his respects to the cardinal. Seeing him, the king paused and turned to Richelieu, who was escorting him to the door of the street. "Look, your Eminence – here's someone we can trust to go with us, and who will serve me well."

The cardinal smiled and nodded. "That is the marshal's way." "Your Majesty will pardon me for asking but where are we going?"

"To Italy," said the king. "I go in person to raise the siege of Casale. So prepare to depart, Sir Marshall. We'll take Créqui as well – he knows that country, and hopefully will tell us all about it."

"Your servant, Sire," Bassompierre replied with a bow. "I'll follow you to the end of the world, and even to the Moon, should you choose to mount so high."

"We go neither so far nor so high, Marshal. We rendezvous in Grenoble. If anything delays you from joining us there, please inform the cardinal."

"Sire," said Bassompierre, "with God's help, nothing will go amiss – especially if Your Majesty will order that old scoundrel La Vieuville to pay me what I'm owed as Colonel-General of the Swiss Guard."

The king laughed. "If La Vieuville won't pay you," he said, "the cardinal will."

"Is that so?" Bassompierre seemed sceptical.

"Quite so, Marshal. In fact, if you'll give me your bill now, you can leave here with the money. We depart in three or four days and have no time to lose."

"Your Eminence," said Bassompierre, with that air of grand nobility unique to him, "I never carry cash with me when I go to play cards with the king. I'll leave the bill with you, if I may, and send a lackey around later to pick up the money."

The king departed. Bassompierre wrote out his bill for the cardinal, and sent for the money the next day. The same evening that the cardinal had told Louis XIII that a king must always be true to his word, he sent one hundred fifty thousand *livres* to the Duke of Orléans, sixty thousand to the queen mother, and fifty thousand to Queen Anne. Also, l'Angely received the thirty thousand *livres* the king had offered him, and Saint-Simon the appointment of King's Squire, with its fifteen thousand *livres* per year. As for Baradas, we know that he had been surprised to receive a bearer bond from the king for thirty thousand *livres*, and had collected it the same day. The cardinal had also settled his accounts. Charpentier, Rossignol, and Cavois all shared in his success – but the payment to Cavois, generous though it was, was small consolation to his wife. For her, the cardinal's resignation had brought about a welcome return to quiet nights without disturbance that was all she'd been praying for – with, as we've seen, the aid of the children. Unfortunately, Man, in creating a personal God who could respond to every person, had so overwhelmed the Deity with entreaties that sometimes even the holiest and most reasonable requests were overlooked. Poor Madam Cavois fell into this category and following His Eminence, Cavois once again left her a widow. Fortunately, he left her once again pregnant. The king had previously bestowed on Sir the title of lieutenant general; but from the moment the cardinal rejoined the king, it was apparent that it would be Richelieu who would manage the conduct of the war, and that the office of lieutenant general would be an empty formality. So, though Sir sent his train by way of Montargis and then followed it beyond Moulins, upon arrival at Chavagnes he changed his mind and announced to Bassompierre that, considering the insult he had been offered, he was withdrawing to his principality of Dombes where he would await the orders of the king. Bassompierre implored him to reconsider but to no end. No one was surprised by Sir's decision, most seeing in it cowardice rather than wounded pride. The king marched quickly to Lyon, where he found the plague was raging, and went on to stop in Grenoble. On Monday, February 19, he sent to the Marquis de Thoiras in Vienna to come join the army and oversee the passage of the artillery over the mountains. The Duke of Montmorency had, on his part, informed the king that he would come by Nîmes, Sisteron, and Gap, joining the king at Briançon. It was there that the real troubles began. The two queens, on the pretext that they feared for the health of the king but actually to subvert the influence of the cardinal, had left Paris with the aim of joining the king in Grenoble. But he had ordered them to stop in Lyon, and they dared not disobey. However, in Lyon they made all the trouble they could, diverting Créquy's attention from preparing for the passage of the mountains, and delaying Guise from joining the fleet. However, nothing discouraged the cardinal: so long as the king was his ally, the king was his strength. He hoped that the king, by taking the personal risk of crossing the Alpine passes in winter, would attract from the neighbouring provinces the help they needed – and it had been working before the two queens began to interfere. When they got to Briançon, it was clear that the two queens' meddling had been so successful that nothing that was supposed to be there had arrived: no food, no mules, almost no ammunition, and no more than a dozen cannon. Worse, there were only two million *livres* left of all the millions the cardinal had borrowed. All this while, opposing the king was the Duke of Savoy, the most wily and deceitful prince of his time. He held Susa Pass, the way across the Alps to Casale and Mantua. None of these obstacles stopped the cardinal for a moment. He convened their most skilful engineers and sought with them the means of doing everything men's effort could do. Charles VIII had been the first to carry cannon across the Alps but that had been in good weather; it was hard enough to cross these almost inaccessible mountains in the summer, let alone in the winter. They affixed cables to the artillery and attached them to pulleys and winches; some men cranked winches, others hauled cables by hand. The cannon balls were hoisted up in baskets; barrels containing ammunition, powder, and more balls were loaded onto mules, bought at a ruinous price. In six days, all this equipment was brought over Mont Genève and down to Oulx. The cardinal pushed on to Chaumont, where he hastily gathered what information he could and checked it against the intelligence sent on by the Count of Moret. It was there that, upon reckoning all the ammunition, he was told that there were only seven cartridges per man. "What of that," Richelieu replied, "so long as Susa is taken with the fifth?"

Meanwhile rumours of these preparations reached the ears of Charles-Emmanuel, the Duke of Savoy; but the king and the cardinal were already in Briançon when Savoy thought them still in Lyon. Consequently he sent his son, Victor-Amadeus, to call on King Louis XIII in Grenoble; but once in Grenoble, he learned that King Louis had already left and was at that hour crossing the mountains. Victor-Amadeus set out at once in pursuit of the king and the cardinal. He caught up with Louis XIII at Oulx and asked for an audience, just as the last pieces of artillery were descending from the pass. The king received him but refused to listen to him and sent him on to the cardinal. Victor-Amadeus left immediately for Chaumont. There the Prince of Savoy, raised by a master of the ruse, hoped to use on the cardinal the methods familiar to himself and his father – but this time he was outplayed, a serpent against a lion. The cardinal understood from the prince's first words that the Duke of Savoy had but one reason for sending his son, and that was to gain time. But where the king might have been taken in, the cardinal saw clearly the negotiator's intentions. Victor-Amadeus had come to ask for time so his father could find a way out of the promise he'd made to the Governor of Milan not to allow French troops to cross his domain. But even as he began to articulate his request, the cardinal brought him up short. "Your pardon, My Prince," he said, "but His Highness the Duke of Savoy asks for time to repudiate a promise he was in no position to give."

"How is that?" asked the prince.

"Because, in his recent negotiations with France, he agreed to allow my master the king passage through his domain, if needed to support his allies."

Victor-Amadeus was taken aback. "I must beg pardon of Your Eminence but I've seen this clause nowhere in the treaties between France and Savoy."

"And you're well aware why you haven't seen it, Prince. It was a verbal agreement, and out of respect for the duke, your father, we were satisfied with his word of honour and didn't require that clause in writing. According to him, the King of Spain would take offence if he granted such a privilege to France and wouldn't give him a moment's rest until he'd obtained a similar right."

"But," ventured Victor-Amadeus, "the duke my father does not refuse passage to the king your master."

"Then," said the Cardinal, smiling as he recalled the details of the letter received from the Count of Moret, "is it to honour the King of France that His Highness the Duke of Savoy has closed the pass of Susa with a demi-lune bastion large enough for three hundred troops, backed up by barricades with room for three hundred more, and on top of this the Fort of Montabon, built between two redoubts with outworks placed to create a crossfire? Is it to facilitate the passage of the king and the army of France that, in addition to blocking the valley, boulders so large that no engine could move them have been rolled down into the road? Is it to plant trees and flowers along our path that for the last six weeks, three hundred workers have plied pickaxe and spade at work that has attracted visits from both you and your august father?"

"No, Prince, let us not mince words: speak frankly, as rulers should. You delay in order to give the Spanish enough time to take Casale, whose garrison is heroically dying of hunger. *Well!* As it is in our interest, and is our duty, to rescue this garrison, we say to you that your father, His Highness the Duke, owes us this passage, and your father the duke will give it to us.

"We need two days for the rest of our materiel to arrive." The cardinal drew his watch. "It is now eleven in the morning. Eleven in the morning, the day after tomorrow, will be on Tuesday; at dawn on Wednesday, we attack. You may take it as written. Now, whether you go to open the pass, or to prepare to defend it, you have no time to spare for reflection, so I won't keep you. A frank and open peace, My Lord – or a good war."

"I fear it will be the good war, Your Eminence," said Victor-Amadeus, rising.

"From the Christian point of view, and as a minister of the Lord, I hate war; but from the political point of view and as a minister of France, I think that war, though never a good thing, is sometimes a necessary thing. France is within its rights and will have them respected. When two states come to blows, bad luck comes to he who champions deceit and perfidy. God sees us; God will judge." The cardinal saluted the prince, making it clear that further talk was futile. France would march on Casale, and no matter the obstacles, that was the path they'd chosen.

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An Old Friend

Victor-Amadeus had scarcely left when the cardinal approached a table and wrote the following letter:

Sire,

*If Your Majesty, as God gives me to hope, has fortunately completed transport of our materiel over the mountains, I humbly beg you will order the artillery, caissons, and all machines of war brought immediately to Chaumont. We pray the king will have the kindness to proceed here without delay, as the day of hostilities is to be Wednesday – subject to the will of Your Majesty, though it were best not changed without good reason. I eagerly await Your Majesty's response – or, better still, Your Majesty himself. I send a reliable man upon whom His Majesty can depend for anything, even as an escort should His Majesty choose to travel incognito by night. I have the honour to be, for Your Majesty, Your most humble subject and most devoted servant,*

*– Armand, Cardinal de Richelieu*

Once the letter was written and folded, the cardinal called, "Etienne!"

At once the door of the room opened, and on the threshold appeared our old acquaintance Étienne Latil, last seen entering the cardinal's study in Chaillot, pale, knees trembling, supporting himself against the wall, and feebly offering his devotion. But now with head high, moustache bristling, a spring in his step, hat in his right hand and the left on the pommel of his sword, he was once again that captain who might have stepped out of a sketch by Callot. It had been fully four months since, struck at the same time by the Marquis de Pisany and by Souscarrières, he had fallen unconscious to the floor of Master Soleil's inn. However, if a wound isn't fatal, it's not long before a man put together like Étienne Latil is back on his feet, more hale and hearty than ever. The imminent hostilities lent a gaiety to his face that did not escape the cardinal. "Étienne," he said to him, "mount your horse this instant – unless you'd prefer, for your own reasons, to travel by foot – but however you wish, this letter that is of the highest importance, must reach the king before ten this evening."

"Would Your Eminence tell me what time it is?"

The cardinal drew his watch. "It is nearly noon."

"And the king is in Oulx?"

"Yes."

"Unless I plunge down the Doire, the king will have his letter by eight."

"Try not to plunge down the Doire, as that would cause me grief; whereas if the king receives his letter, I'll be pleased."

"I shall hope to satisfy Your Eminence on both points."

The cardinal knew Latil for a man of his word, so judging that it was pointless to insist, he merely made a gesture of dismissal. Latil ran to the stable to choose a good horse, stopping at the smithy only long enough to have it shod with crampons; that business finished, he sprang on its back and launched himself down the road to Oulx. He found the track in better condition than he'd expected. With the aim of making it passable for the cannons and other equipment, the engineers had done everything feasible to improve it. By four o'clock Étienne was at Saint-Laurent, and by half past seven he was at Oulx. The king was at supper, served by Saint-Simon, who had succeeded Baradas in his favour. At the foot of the table was his fool and confidant, l'Angely. A message from the cardinal was announced, and immediately the king ordered that the messenger be brought before him. Latil was fully conversant with all forms of etiquette, having spent his time as a page of the Duke of Épermon, and thus was no man to let himself be intimidated by royal majesty. He entered boldly into the room, advanced toward the king, placed one knee on the ground, and presented him his hat with the cardinal's letter balanced atop it. Louis XIII watched this with a certain astonishment: Latil had followed the rules of etiquette of the old-time court. "*Yeah!*" he said, taking the note. "Where do you come by these fine manners, my master?"

"Is not this the fashion, Sire, in which one presented letters to your illustrious father, of glorious memory?"

"Indeed! But the mode is a trifle passé."

"The respect is the same, Sire, so it seemed to me the etiquette should be the same."

"You seem well versed in etiquette for a soldier."

"I started out as page to Sir Duke of Épermon, and in that time I more than once had the honour to present a letter to Henry IV in the manner I have now had the honour to repeat to his son."

"Page to the Duke of Épermon," repeated the king.

"And like him, Sire, I was on the running board of the carriage on May 14, 1610, in the Rue de la Ferronnerie, when Henry IV was slain; Your Majesty may have heard that it was a page who stopped the assassin by holding on to his cloak despite the knife-blows that slashed his hands."

"Yes ... This page, would he be you, by any chance?"

Latil, still on one knee before the king, drew off his deerskin gloves, revealing hands furrowed by scars. "Sire, see my hands," he said.

The king looked at the man with visible emotion, and said, "These hands are the hands of loyalty. Give me your hands, *mon brave*."

And taking Latil's hands in his own, he gripped them. "Now, rise," he said. Latil rose. "A great king, Sire, was King Henry IV," he said.

"Yes, and God give me the grace to resemble him."

"The opportunity is here, Sire," replied Latil, indicating the note he had brought.

"Let us see," said the king, opening the letter.

"Ah!" he said, after reading it. "Sir Cardinal says that he has engaged our honour, and that whether we disengage it or not, the matter will not wait ... Saint-Simon, inform Gentlemen Créqui and Bassompierre that I must speak with them this very moment."

The two marshals were lodged in a house adjacent to that of the king, and were alerted within minutes; of the two other commanders, Sir de Schomberg was at Exilles, Sir de Montmorency at Saint-Laurent. The king conveyed the contents of Richelieu's letter to the two marshals, and ordered them to get the artillery and munitions to Chaumont as quickly as possible, declaring that everything must be at Chaumont by the end of the next day. As for the marshals, he expected them by Tuesday evening so they could take part in a council of war, in which they would decide the mode of attack for the following day. At ten o'clock that evening, in a murky night swirling with snow, without moon or stars, the king departed on horseback for Chaumont accompanied only by Latil, Saint-Simon, and l'Angely. Having prepared his own horse for ice, Latil now took the same precautions with the king's horse. Then he set out on that route for the third time, leading on foot and probing the road. Never had the king displayed such a bold demeanour, nor been so satisfied with himself. If he didn't have the strength of character for actual grandeur, he at least had a sense of it. He wore his hat with the black plumes, and thought of the white plumes his father Henry IV had worn during his great victory at Ivry. If his son could change his black plume for a white plume, why couldn't Susa be his Ivry? Latil marched before the king's horse, sounding the road with an iron-shod staff, stopping from time to time to find better footing, taking the horse by the bridle and leading him over bad spots. At each guard post the king was recognised, and he gave the order to prepare the troops to march on Chaumont, enjoying in their obedience one of the sweetest prerogatives of power. Just short of Saint-Laurent, Latil had an intimation, from the sharpness of the north wind, of the approach of one of those sudden whirlwinds that are dubbed in the mountains a "snow-plough." He invited the king to dismount and take shelter between Saint-Simon, l'Angely, and himself but the king wanted to stay on his horse, saying that if events called for him to be a soldier, he would act like a soldier. He wrapped himself in his cloak and waited. The whirlwind didn't keep them waiting long; it came on with a whine. L'Angely and Saint-Simon pressed themselves in on either side of the king, who was wrapped in his cloak. Latil seized the horse's bit with both hands and turned his back to the hurricane. It arrived, terrible and howling. In an instant, the road was covered with snow two feet deep. The riders felt their horses tremble between their legs: in such cataclysms of nature, the animals share the fright of man. The silk ribbon which held on the king's hat parted, and the black felt with its black plumes disappeared into the darkness like a night-bird. Upon arrival at Saint-Laurent, the king asked to be led to Sir de Montmorency's quarters. It was one o'clock in the morning; Montmorency had thrown himself fully clothed onto his bed. At the first word of the king's presence, the duke sprang back up and stood in his doorway, awaiting the king's orders. Such promptness pleased Louis XIII, and though not overly fond of Sir de Montmorency, who had at one time been enamoured of the queen, he saluted him. The duke offered to accompany the king and provide him with an escort. But Louis XIII replied that he was on the ground of France; and so long as he was on the ground of France, he felt safe; the escort he had seemed sufficient, being entirely devoted. He merely asked Montmorency to make his way to Chaumont in time for the council of war to be held at nine o'clock the following evening. The only thing he agreed to accept was another hat. When placing it on his head, he realised that it had three white plumes and once again he recalled Ivry. "It's a good omen," he said.

Upon leaving Saint-Laurent, the snow was so deep that Latil invited the king to come down from his horse. The king dismounted. Latil led, taking the king's horse by the bridle; l'Angely came after, then Saint-Simon. Louis XIII thus had a path to follow levelled for him by three men and three horses. Saint-Simon, who was grateful to the cardinal for the favours he'd done him, praised to the king all the precautions Richelieu had taken and all the foresight he had shown. "Yes, yes," answered Louis XIII, "Sir Cardinal is a good servant; I doubt that my brother would have taken so many pains for me in his place."

Two hours later, the king arrived without incident at the door of the Golden Juniper in Chaumont, as proud of his lost hat as of a wound, as proud of his night march as of a victory. He remarked that no one need awaken the cardinal. "His Eminence is not asleep," replied Master Germain.

"And what is he doing at this hour?" asked the king.

"I work for the glory of Your Majesty," said the cardinal as he appeared, "and Sir de Pontis aids me with all his power in this glorious task." And the cardinal invited the king into his room where he found a large fire to warm it and an immense map of the country, drawn up by Sir de Pontis, unrolled on a table.

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The Cardinal finds the Guide he needs

One of the great strengths of the cardinal was not to believe King Louis XIII had virtues that he lacked but to make the king think he had them regardless. Lazy and languid, he made the king believe he was active; timid and distrustful, he made the king believe he was brave; cruel and bloodthirsty, he made him believe he was just. Richelieu said that, though the king's presence wasn't urgently required in Chaumont at that hour of the night, still he had exalted his glory and that of France by having made the trek, in such peril, on such roads and in the middle of such deep darkness, to answer the call of the nation. However, now the king must take to bed on the instant, as the day just beginning and the one to follow remained ahead of him. By daybreak, the orders had been given all along the route, so that the troops bivouacked in Saint-Laurent, in Exilles, and in Séhault were all under way toward Chaumont. These troops were under the command of the Count of Soissons, the Duke of Longueville, de la Trémoille, d'Halluin, and de La Valette, the Count of Harcourt and de Sault, and the Marquises de Canaples, de Mortemar, de Tavaune, de Valence, and de Thoiras. The four top commanders were the Duke of Montmorency and the three Marshals: Créqui, Bassompierre, and Schomberg. The genius of the cardinal had planned it all; he conceived, the king commanded. Since we've already told the story of the siege of La Rochelle, that glorious climax of the reign of Louis XIII, in our book *The Three Musketeers*, we are permitted to dwell here at some length on the famous forcing of the Pass of Susa, about which the official historians have made much ado. Upon leaving Richelieu, Victor-Amadeus, to cover his exit, as they say in the theatre, had announced he was heading to Rivoli where the duke, his father, awaited him, and that in twenty-four hours he would announce Charles-Emmanuel's decision; but when he arrived in Rivoli, the Duke of Savoy, whose only goal was to draw things out, had already departed for Turin. Thus around five in the evening, instead of Victor-Amadeus it was Savoy's Prime Minister, the Count of Verrue, who was announced at the cardinal's door. At this, the cardinal turned to the king. "Would Your Majesty," he asked, "prefer the honour of receiving him, or will you leave this burden to me?"

"If it was Prince Victor-Amadeus, I'd receive him; but since the Duke of Savoy sees fit to send me his prime minister, it's only right that my prime minister should answer him."

"Then does the king give me *carte blanche*?" asked the cardinal.

"Entirely."

"I'll leave the door open," continued Richelieu, "so Your Majesty will hear the entire exchange, and if anything I say displeases him, he'll be able to enter and contradict me."

Louis XIII gave a nod of assent. Richelieu, leaving the door ajar, went into the chamber where the Count of Verrue awaited. This Count of Verrue should not be confused with his famous grandson, husband of the celebrated Jeanne d'Albert de Luynes, mistress of Victor-Amadeus II and known as the *Lady of Pleasure* – this Count of Verrue, whom history barely mentions, was a man of forty years, acute, discerning, and of proven courage. Charged with a difficult mission, he brought an essential candour to the tortuous negotiations required of an emissary of Charles-Emmanuel. Seeing the grave figure of the cardinal, with that eye that saw to the bottom of hearts, faced with this genius who alone held in check the other sovereigns of Europe, he bowed deeply and respectfully. "My Lord," he said, "I come in place of Prince Victor-Amadeus who is needed at the side of the duke, his father, who has fallen seriously ill. When his son, after having left Your Eminence, arrived last night at Rivoli, he found that his father had been taken to Turin."

"Then, Sir Count," said Richelieu, "you come charged with the full powers of the Duke of Savoy?"

"I come to announce that I precede his arrival, my Lord; ill as he is, the Duke of Savoy wants to plead his case to His Majesty in person. He is being carried here in a sedan chair."

"And when do you think he will arrive, Count?"

"His Highness's state of weakness, and the slowness of his means of transport, means that, in my opinion, he can be here no sooner than the day after tomorrow."

"At about what hour?"

"I wouldn't dare to promise before noon."

"I am in despair, Sir Count: I told Prince Victor-Amadeus that on that day at daybreak we would attack the entrenchments of Susa – and at daybreak we *will* attack."

"I hope Your Eminence will not be so inflexible," said the Count of Verrue, "since you know that the Duke of Savoy does not intend to deny passage."

"Ah, well, then," said Richelieu, "if we're in agreement, there's no need for further talk."

"It is true," said Verrue with some embarrassment, "that His Highness has one condition ... or rather, one hope," added the count.

"Ah-ha!" said the cardinal, smiling. "And that is?"

"His Highness the Duke hopes that, due to the great sacrifice he is making, His Most Christian Majesty will cede from the Duchy of Mantua the same part of Montferrat that the King of Spain was allotting to Savoy if he prevailed – or if he does not want to grant it to the duke, that he will make a gift of it to Madam, your king's sister and our prince's wife. On this condition, the pass will be open tomorrow."

The cardinal looked for a moment at the count, who could not sustain his regard and lowered his eyes. Then, as if that was what he awaited, Richelieu said, "Sir count, all Europe has such a high opinion of my master the king's regard for justice, that I don't know how His Highness the Duke of Savoy could imagine that His Majesty would consent to such a proposition. Personally, I'm certain that he would never accept it. The King of Spain may well grant part of what does not belong to him in order to engage Savoy to support an unjust usurpation; but God prevent that the king my master, who crosses the mountains to come to the aid of the oppressed Duke of Mantua, would treat his ally so. If the Duke of Savoy forgets what a King of France is capable of, the day after tomorrow he will be reminded."

"But may I hope at least that these final proposals will be presented by Your Eminence to His Majesty?"

"Useless, Sir count," said a voice from behind the cardinal. "The king has heard, and is quite astonished that a man who must know better should make a proposal that would compromise France and stain its honour. If tomorrow the pass is not opened without condition, the next day, at daybreak, it will be attacked." Then, drawing himself up and placing a foot before him with that majesty which he could sometimes assume, King Louis XIII added, "I will be there in person, and you'll be able to recognise me by these white plumes, as my august father was recognised at Ivry. I hope that His Highness the Duke will adopt a similar sign to identify him in the heat of battle. Take him my words, Sir: they are the only response I can and must make."

And he dismissed the count with a gesture, who responded with a deep bow and withdrew. All that day and all that night, the army continued to assemble around Chaumont. By the following evening, the king commanded twenty-three thousand foot and four thousand horse. Around ten at night, the artillery and all its materiel were lined up beyond Chaumont, the mouths of the guns turned toward the enemy. The king ordered a check of the caissons and crates for a report on how much ammunition was available. At this time the bayonet had not yet been invented, so the cannon and the musket decided everything. Today, the rifle has come forward as the weapon of choice for the modern warrior, becoming, as predicted by the Marshall de Saxe, the handle of the bayonet. At midnight, the council was convened. It was composed of the king, the cardinal, the Duke of Montmorency, the three marshals: Bassompierre, Schomberg, and Créqui. Bassompierre who was senior, took the floor. He cast his eyes over the map and studied the positions of the enemy – which they knew perfectly, thanks to the information sent by the Count of Moret. "Unless someone has a better idea," he said, "here's my proposal, sire." And, saluting the king and cardinal to show that he was addressing them, he said, "I propose that the regiments of the French and Swiss Guards take the lead; the Regiment of Navarre and the Regiment d'Estissac, the left and right. The two wings will each be led by two hundred musketeers who will gain the summit of the two peaks of Montmoron and Montabon. Once at the top of the two mountains, nothing will be easier than for them to get the drop on the guards at the barricades. At the first shot heard from the heights, we move; while the musketeers' fire on the barricades from behind, we'll make a frontal assault with the two Guard regiments. Approach the map, Gentlemen, look at the position of the enemy, and if you've a better plan than mine, speak up." Marshall de Créqui and Marshall de Schomberg studied the map and supported Bassompierre's proposal. That left the Duke of Montmorency. Montmorency was better known for his dauntless courage and audacity on the field of battle than as a strategist and man of foresight; moreover, he spoke with a certain difficulty at first, with a stammer that he gradually lost as he went on. However, this time he found the courage to speak before the king. "Sire," he said, "I respect the opinion of Sir de Bassompierre, and of Gentlemen de Créqui and de Schomberg, and am well aware of their courage and experience; but while I don't doubt we can carry them, taking those barricades and the redoubts, especially the demi-lune that completely blocks the road, will be a difficult task indeed. Sir de Bassompierre has rightly said that we must take them; but is there no way to cut off these entrenchments? Can't we find, perhaps by a difficult mountain path, a way to turn the flank, to come down between the demi-lune and Susa and attack this position from behind? It would only be a question of finding a loyal guide and an intrepid officer, two things that don't seem impossible to me."

"You hear the proposal of Sir de Montmorency," said the king. "Do you agree?"

"Excellent!" replied the marshals. "But there's no time to lose in finding this guide and this officer."

At that moment Étienne Latil spoke a few quiet words in the cardinal's ear, and Richelieu's face brightened. "Gentlemen," he said, "I believe Providence sends us our loyal guide and intrepid officer in one and the same person."

And turning toward Latil who awaited his orders: "Captain Latil," he said, "bring in Sir Count of Moret." Latil bowed. Five minutes later, the Count of Moret entered, and despite his disguise as a humble mountaineer, everyone could see the resemblance to his august father – a resemblance that was the envy of King Louis XIII, illustrious son of Henry IV. He had just arrived from Mantua, sent by Providence as the Duke Richelieu had said.

### 130 Susa Pass

The Count of Moret, thanks to the route he'd taken to cross safely into Savoy, could be at once the loyal guide and the intrepid officer. Indeed, the question had scarcely been stated before, taking a pencil, he traced on Sir de Pontis's map the path that led from Chaumont to the smugglers' inn. He paused to recount how he'd been forced to change his route to escape the Spanish bandits, and how this change of route had brought him to the path whereby one could slip past the ramparts that girdled the mountains above Susa. He was authorised to take five hundred men with him, a larger troop being too awkward to manoeuvre on such a route. The cardinal wanted the young prince to take a few hours of rest but he refused, saying that if he was to arrive in time to create a diversion at the moment of the attack, he didn't have a minute to lose. He requested the cardinal to give him, as second in command, Étienne Latil whose devotion and courage were beyond question. They agreed to all his desires. At three in the morning, Moret's troop quietly departed; each man carried with him one day's rations. Of the five hundred men who were to march under his orders, the Count of Moret knew only the young captain; but once they were told they were to have the son of Henry IV as their leader, the soldiers crowded around him with cries of joy. They brought up torches so they could see his face, whose resemblance to that of the *Béarnaise* redoubled their enthusiasm. Immediately after the Count of Moret's five hundred men marched out, under cover of a night so dark it was impossible to see ten paces before oneself, the remainder of the army was put in motion. The weather was terrible, and the ground was covered with two feet of snow. Fifty men remained behind to guard the artillery park. The rest of the troops marched to within five hundred paces of the Rock of Gélasse, just short of Susa Pass. Six pieces of cannon and six pallets of balls were brought up to force the barricade. The troops chosen to attack were seven companies of Guards, six of Swiss, nineteen of Navarre, fourteen of Estissac, and fifteen of Sault, plus the king's mounted musketeers. Each unit was to throw out in front fifty storm troopers known as *the Lost Children*, supported by one hundred men, with those supported by five hundred more. Around six in the morning, the troops were marshalled into order. The king presided over these preparations, detailing some of his musketeers to join the *Lost Children*. Then he ordered the Sir Comminges, preceded by a trumpeter, to approach the border and ask the Duke of Savoy for passage for the army and the person of the king. Sir de Comminges advanced but a hundred paces from the barricade he was stopped by a challenge. The Count of Verrue appeared and called out, "What do you want, Sir?"

The herald responded, "We wish to pass, Sir."

"But," Verrue replied, "How do you wish to pass? As friends or as enemies?"

"As friends, if you open the pass to us; as enemies, if you close it. I am charged by the king my master to go to Susa and prepare lodgings for him, as he plans to sleep there tomorrow."

"Sir," answered the Count of Verrue, "the duke my master would hold it a great honour to host His Majesty but he comes with so many followers that before I can respond, I must ask His Highness for orders."

"Well," said Comminges, "do you intend, by any chance, to dispute our passage?"

The Count of Verrue came forth and stood before him. "What would you have, Sir?" the herald asked the count.

"I've the honour to say to you, sir," replied Verrue coldly, "that on this subject I must first know the intentions of His Highness, my master."

"Sir, I warn you," said Comminges, "that I must report your reply to the king."

"You may do as you please, Sir," responded Verrue. "You are master of yourself."

And with this, each saluted the other. Verrue returned to his side of the barricades, and Comminges returned to the king.

"*Well*, Sir?" Louis XIII asked Comminges.

The herald related his discussion with the Count of Verrue: Louis XIII listened without missing a word, and when Comminges had finished, the king said, "The Count of Verrue answered not only as a worthy servant but as a man of spirit who knows his duty."

At that moment the king was on the farthest frontier of France, between the *Lost Children* ready to charge, and the five hundred men who were to support them. Bassompierre approached, smiling and with hat in hand. "Sire," he said, "the dancers are ready, the violins are in tune, and the masks are at hand; when it pleases Your Majesty, we may commence the ballet."

The king looked at him, brow furrowed. "Sir Marshall, did you know I just received a report that we have only five hundred rounds in the artillery park?"

"Well, Sire," answered Bassompierre, "this is certainly the right time to consider that; if the masque isn't ready, the ballet shouldn't be danced. But let's do it. All will be well."

"Is that your answer to me?" said the king, fixing the marshal with a look.

"Sire, it would be beyond bold to guarantee something as doubtful as a victory; but my answer to you is that we will return with our honour, or I will fall or be taken."

"Make sure that if we are beaten, Sir de Bassompierre that I am taken with you."

"Bah, what can happen to me worse than to be called a coward, as Your Majesty did the Marquis d'Uxelles? But don't worry, Sire, I'll try not to deserve such an insult. Let's just do it."

"Sire," said the cardinal, who held his horse close to the king's, "with an attitude like the marshal's, my hopes are high." Then, addressing Bassompierre: "Go, Sir Marshall, go – and do your utmost." Bassompierre rode to where the other commanders awaited, and dismounted with Gentlemen de Créqui and de Montmorency for the frontal assault on the trenches. Only Sir de Schomberg remained mounted, due to the gout in his knee. They marched past the base of the Rock of Gélasse; for some reason the enemy had abandoned that position, strong though it was, perhaps afraid that those who defended it would be cut off and forced to surrender. But as soon as the troops passed the rock, they were exposed, and fire commenced from the mountain and the broad barricade. And at the first volley, Sir de Schomberg was hit in the lower back. Bassompierre followed the valley floor and approached the demi-lune that blocked Susa Pass from the front, Sir de Créqui close beside him. Sir de Montmorency, as if he were a common soldier, sprang up the mountain on the left toward the peak of Montmoron. Sir de Schomberg was tied to his horse that was led forward by its bridle due to the difficulty of the terrain; he made his way up the right-hand slope in the midst of the *Lost Children*. Following Bassompierre's plan, these units were to flank the barricades, shooting the defenders from above while the others attacked the front. The Valaisans and Piedmontese defended valiantly; Victor-Amadeus and his father commanded from the redoubt on the peak of Montabon. Montmorency,

reckless as always, quickly attacked and carried the first outwork on the left. As his armour had encumbered him while afoot, along the way he had dropped its pieces one by one, attacking the rampart in his simple buff jerkin and velvet trunk-hose. Bassompierre, for his part, remained on the valley floor, weathering the fire from the demi-lune. Behind came the king, with his white plumes, and Sir Cardinal in a gold-embroidered robe of russet velvet. Three times the centre charged the demi-lune, and three times they were repulsed from that curved barricade. Musket balls leaped and ricocheted down the valley from rock to rock, killing one of Sir de Créquy’s esquires within a few feet of the king’s horse. Bassompierre and Créquui then resolved to scale the slopes, each with five hundred men: Bassompierre the mountain on the left, to reinforce Sir de Montmorency, and Créquui the mountain on the right, to support Sir de Schomberg. Two thousand five hundred men remained on the valley floor to maintain pressure on the demi-lune. Bassompierre, overweight, fifty years old, and on the steepest slope, was climbing while leaning on his aide, when suddenly he lost his support: the aide beside him had taken a ball in the chest. He made it to the summit just as Sir de Montmorency was falling back from his third assault on the redoubt. They combined forces for a fourth. Montmorency was lightly wounded in the arm, while Bassompierre’s clothes were riddled with bullet-holes. But the redoubt on the left was carried, and the Savoyard defenders took refuge behind the demi-lune. The two commanders looked across toward the mountain redoubt on the right. The battle there was hotly contested. Presently they saw two riders leave at a full gallop, making for a path that had apparently been prepared for their retreat down to the demi-lune. It was the Duke of Savoy, Charles-Emmanuel, and his son, Victor-Amadeus. A flood of fugitives followed them. The redoubt on the right was taken. Only the demi-lune remained: the hardest nut to crack. Louis XIII sent couriers to congratulate the marshals and Montmorency on their success but telling them to retire and recover. Bassompierre replied on behalf of himself and Honourable Schomberg, Créquui, and Montmorency:

*Sire, we are grateful for your concern but at times like these the blood of a prince or a marshal of France is not worth more than that of the simplest soldier. We ask for ten minutes of rest for the men, after which the ball will start anew.*

And indeed after ten minutes of rest the trumpets sounded, the drums beat again and the two wings closed on the now-reinforced demi-lune in two tight columns.

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A Man is Never hanged until the Noose is Tightened

The approaches had fallen to the French – but the last entrenchment remained, teeming with soldiers, bristling with cannons, and anchored by the fort of Montabon, built atop an inaccessible rock; the fort had but one approach, a staircase that could be climbed only in single file. Left far behind were any guns that might bear on either the valley floor or the mountain summits. The soldiers had to assault the demi-lune supported by nothing but what the Italians of the time called their *French Fury*. From a low rise within range of the enemy’s guns, king and cardinal watched the troops marching forward behind the flower of the nobility, the leaders’ hats held high on the ends of their swords. The soldiers advanced head down, not asking if they were being led to butchery; their commanders led from the front, and that was all they needed to know. His Eminence was with the king on his horse, and the cardinal saw the sudden gaps the cannon ploughed through the ranks; the king clapped his hands, applauding the soldiers’ courage while at the same time his innate cruelty awoke like a tiger scenting blood. When he’d had the Marshall d’Ancre killed, though he was still too small to look out the window, he’d had some of his men lift him up so he could watch the bloody body carried past. The troops reached the barricade; some carried ladders, and the escalade began. Montmorency took a flag and was first upon the wall; Bassompierre, too old to follow, took a position halfway up the ramparts and exhorted the soldiers to do their utmost. Some ladders broke beneath the weight of so many attackers, so keen were they to be the first to set foot on the rampart; others held back to allow time for their companions to go over, drawing up other ladders to mount the assault. The besieged used whatever weapons they could. Some fired at the attackers at close range; others swung spades and picks, saw blood spout from their blows, and sometimes a man would throw his arms wide and fall backwards. Others hurled stones, or swung heavy poles that cleared two or three ladders at a time. Suddenly the French could see disarray among the defenders, while from beyond them came shouting and a fusillade. “Courage, *friends*,” cried Montmorency, mounting another assault, “it’s the Count of Moret to our rescue!”

And he sprang forward anew, ragged and bloody though he was, carrying along with him, by this supreme effort, all who could see and hear him. The duke was not mistaken: it was Moret who had created the diversion. The count had left at three in the morning, as we have seen, with Latil for captain and Galaor for aide-de-camp. They arrived at the bank of the torrent that had almost drowned Guillaume Coutet; but when the freeze had come, the water had dropped, and now one could cross by leaping from rock to rock. Arriving on the other side of the torrent, the Count of Moret and his men quickly crossed the field that separated them from the mountain. He found the rising path, and his men followed. The night was dark but the glimmer from the new-fallen snow lit the way. The count, familiar with the difficult terrain, had provided his troops with long ropes, one for each twenty-four men. As each twenty-four-man unit marched along the brink, if one man slipped he was supported by the other twenty-three. Twenty-four others marched behind them, acting as another stay or support. As they approached the smugglers’ inn, he ordered the troops to be silent. Though they didn’t know the reason, all remained quiet. The count gathered a dozen men about him, explained to them that the inn before them was their objective, and ordered them to instruct their comrades to quietly surround it. If but one man escaped this nest of villains and gave the alarm, their mission could be compromised. Galaor, who knew the place, took a score of men to surround the inn-yard; with twenty more Latil guarded the gate, while the Count of Moret led a similar number to the only window that let daylight into the house, and by which those inside might escape. The window glowed brightly, indicating that the hosts were in residence. The rest of the troop spread out along the road, in order to leave the bandits no route of escape. The gate of the yard was closed; Galaor, with the lithe agility of a monkey, vaulted over, dropped into the yard, and opened it. In a moment, the yard was full of soldiers, standing with muskets at the ready. Latil arranged his men in two rows opposite the door, ordering them to fire on anyone who attempted to flee. The count had slowly and quietly approached the window in order to see what was going on inside; but the heat of the room had fogged the glass, preventing a view of the interior. One of the window’s four panes had been broken in some brawl and replaced by a sheet of paper affixed to the frame. The Count of Moret got up on the windowsill, cut a slit in the paper with the point of his dagger, and could finally glimpse the strange scene passing within. The smuggler who had warned Guillaume Coutet when they’d passed through before that Spanish bandits were after them was bound and gagged on a table; the bandits whom he had betrayed, gathered *en tribunal*, had just pronounced judgement. As that judgement could not be appealed, the only question was whether he should be hanged or shot. Opinion was almost evenly divided. However, as is well known, the Spaniards are a thrifty people. One made the point that you couldn’t execute a man with fewer than eight or ten musket shots that would cost them eight or ten charges of lead and powder – while to hang a man, not only did you need only one rope but afterwards that rope, having been used in a hanging, multiplied its value by two, four, even ten times! This sage advice, so economical, carried the day. The bandits chose the rope by acclamation, and the poor devil of a smuggler realised that his fate was sealed. His only recourse was the prayer of the dying: *My God, I place my soul within your hands!*

Then amid the solemn silence that always precedes the terrible act of violent separation of body and soul, came the order: “Pull!”

But scarcely was this word pronounced when there came from the window the sound of tearing paper, and into the room stretched an arm pointing a pistol. The pistol fired, and the man holding the noose around the neck of the condemned man fell down dead. At the same moment, a vigorous kick broke the window latches, and in two more blows it was open, letting in the Count of Moret, who leaped into the room followed by his men. At the gunshot, like a signal, the front door and the yard door also burst open, so all exits were visibly barred by armed soldiers. Within moments, the condemned was untied, and he passed from anguish to the giddy joy of the man who had made the march to the tomb but leaps from the grave before the earth can cover him. “Let no one try to escape,” said the Count of Moret, with a gesture of supreme authority that was his royal heritage. “Anyone who tries to flee will be killed.”

Nobody moved. “Now,” he said, addressing the smuggler whose life he’d saved, “I’m the traveller you so generously warned, two months ago, of the danger I was in, a warning for which you were just now about to die. It’s only right that the roles be reversed, and this tragedy played out to its end. Point out to me the wretches who pursued us; their trial will be short.”

The smuggler didn’t wait to be asked twice; he indicated eight Spaniards – the ninth was dead. These eight bandits, seeing themselves condemned, and understanding there would be no mercy, exchanged glances – and then with the energy of despair, drew their daggers and fell on the soldiers who guarded the door to the road. But they had bitten off too much. As you may recall, Latil was in charge of guarding that door, and stood on the threshold with a gun in each hand. With two shots he killed two men. The other six fought briefly with the men of the Count of Moret and of Latil. For a few seconds there was the clash of steel, cries, oaths, two more gunshots, the thump of two bodies on the floor ... and it was over. Six were dead in their gore, and three others, still alive, were tied hand and foot and in the hands of the soldiers. “Someone get that rope that was to be used to hang this honest man,” said the Count of Moret, “then find two more to hang these villains.”

The muleteers, who were beginning to understand that they were not under suspicion, and that instead of seeing one man hang they were about to see three, a spectacle three times as entertaining, offered up the ropes on the instant. “Latil,” said the Count of Moret, “I charge you with hanging these three gentlemen. I know you’re efficient – don’t let them linger. As for the rest of this honourable company, leave ten soldiers to keep them under guard. Tomorrow, no sooner than midday, if the prisoners have caused no trouble, they may be set free.”

“And where will I rejoin you?” asked Latil.

“This brave man,” answered the Count of Moret, indicating the smuggler miraculously saved from the noose, “this brave man will lead you; but march double-time to catch up to us.” Then to the smuggler, “Guide him along the same road you recall from before, my good man; later, at Susa, there will be twenty *pistoles* for you. Latil, you have ten minutes.” Latil bowed. “Let’s be on our way, Gentlemen,” said the Count of Moret. “We lost half an hour here, though in a good cause.” Ten minutes later, Latil, guided by the smuggler, rejoined them; the task the count had left three quarters done was complete. Latil and his guide caught up to Moret at the Giacon Bridge. The smuggler, who hadn’t had time to thank him, threw himself at Moret’s feet and kissed his hands. “*It’s good, my friend*,” said the Count of Moret. “Now, we must be at Susa within the hour.” And the troops resumed their march.

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The White Plume

We know the path the Count of Moret had to follow: it was the same route he’d taken with Isabelle de Lautrec and the Dame de Coëtman. Strict silence was decreed, and no noise was heard but the sound of snow crunching under the soldiers’ feet. As they turned the shoulder of the mountain, the town of Susa came into view, limned by the first light of morning. The ramparts, this far up the mountain, were deserted. The road, if the narrow furrow they followed no more than two abreast could be called a road, passed about ten feet above the parapet. From there, one could slip down to the ramparts. The demi-lune that, after the flanks were carried and the redoubts had been taken, still held off the French army, was nearly three miles from the town of Susa; and as no one could imagine an attack from the mountainside, no one was on guard there. However, by the light of dawn the sentinels in the town saw the small troop filing down the side of the mountain and raised the alarm. The Count of Moret heard their cries, saw their reaction, and knew there was no time to lose. Like a true mountaineer, he leaped from rock to rock and was the first to drop onto the ramparts. Latil was right by his side. At the cries of the sentinels, Piedmontese and Valaisans tumbled out of a guardhouse at the gate and formed into a troop of a hundred men, preparing to buy time for further reinforcements. The Count of Moret gathered the first twenty men onto the rampart, and with this twenty he rushed the town gate. In the grey dawn, the soldiers of Charles-Emmanuel saw a long dark file of men circling down the mountain, enemies who seemed to fall from the sky in numbers they couldn’t tell, so they didn’t put up much of a fight; however, thinking it was critical that the duke and his son be informed, they dispatched a rider to Susa Pass to warn them of what was happening. The Count of Moret saw this man being detached and tried to go after him, cutting his way through the mêlée; the courier was in full gallop, and the count suspected where he was going but had no way to stop him. It was just one more reason to secure the Susa town gate, below the pass into which Louis XIII, after flanking the barricades, had made a partial entry. So he rushed the gate with what few men he had, and swarmed over the defenders. The fight was brief; surprised from the direction they least expected it, by a force of unknown size, and believing themselves betrayed, the Piedmontese and Valaisans, good soldiers though they were, cried, “Alarm!”

They ran for it, some through the town and others down the valley. The Count of Moret seized the gate, rallied his troops, and turned four guns to bear on the town. Then, leaving a hundred men to hold the gate and serve the guns, with the four hundred remaining he advanced to attack the fortifications at the pass from behind. Cannon thundered from above, smoke wreathing Montabon peak. The two armies were in a death grip. Moret doubled his men’s pace; however, while still a mile from the entrenchments, he saw a corps of troops being detached from the Savoyard army and sent toward him. The unit was about equal in number to that of the Count of Moret; at its head, mounted, was its commanding colonel. Latil approached the count. “I recognise the officer leading that troop,” he said. “He’s a gallant soldier named Colonel Belon.”

“And so?” said the count.

“I’d like My Lord’s permission to take him prisoner.”

“I’ll allow you to do that – *By the belly of the Grey Saint*, I could hardly ask for more! But how will you take him?”

“Nothing could be easier, My Lord; when you see the colonel fall beneath his horse, charge his men furiously; they’ll think he’s dead and will scatter. Swoop in and take the flag, while I take the colonel; though you might rather have the colonel and I the flag. The colonel will pay a fine ransom of three or four hundred *pistoles* – while the flag, for all its glory, is nothing but a flag.”

“To me the flag, then,” said the Count of Moret, “and to you the colonel.”

“Then let’s beat the drums and sound the trumpets!”

Moret raised his sword, the drums beat, and the trumpets sounded the charge. Latil took four men with him, each holding a musket, ready to pass a new weapon to him once he’d fired the first, the second, and even the third. As for the enemy, at the sound of the French drums and bugles, the Savoyard troop seemed to quicken its step. Colonel Belon said a few words, the troops replied with “Long live Charles-Emmanuel!”

And they came on at speed. Soon the two troops were no more than fifty paces from each other. The Savoyard unit stopped to fire a volley. “This is the moment,” said Latil. “Look out, My Lord! Take their fire, shoot back, and then charge the flag.”



Latil had hardly finished when a hailstorm of balls passed like a hurricane – but mainly above the heads of the French soldiers, who held their ground. “Aim low!” cried Latil. And as an example, aiming at the colonel’s horse, he fired just as the officer shook the reins to charge. The horse took the ball just below the shoulder; carried forward by its charge, it fell and rolled to within twenty paces of the French ranks. “To me the colonel, to you the flag, My Lord,” cried Latil and he leaped upon the colonel, sword held high. The French soldiers had fired and, following Latil’s advice, aimed low, so that nearly all their shots struck home. The count took advantage of the chaos to hurl himself into the midst of the Piedmontese. In a few bounds, Latil closed with Colonel Belon, who was pinned under his horse and stunned from his fall. Latil put his sword to his throat and said to him, “My prisoner, rescued or not?” The colonel slid a hand toward his holster. “One move, Colonel Belon,” said Latil, “and you’re dead.” “I surrender,” said the colonel, handing his sword to Latil. “My prisoner, rescued or not?” “Rescued or not.” “Then, Colonel, keep your sword – one does not disarm a brave officer like you. We’ll come to terms after the battle; if I’m killed, you are free.” With these words he helped the colonel out from under his horse, and having set him on his feet, he sprang into the midst of the Piedmontese ranks. It played out the way Latil had predicted. The soldiers of Charles-Emmanuel, seeing the fall of the colonel, and unsure whether he was dead or alive, had lost their nerve. The count had attacked so furiously that the ranks had opened before him, and he’d reached the flag, around which a knot of Savoyards, Valaisans, and Piedmontese put up a brave defence. Latil threw himself into the thickest part of the mêlée, shouting in a voice like thunder, “Moret! Moret to the rescue! Strike for the son of Henry IV!” This final onslaught broke the enemy troop. Cutting down the man who carried it, the Count of Moret seized the Savoyard flag in his left hand. He raised it high and shouted, “Victory for France! Long live King Louis XIII!”

This cry was repeated by every Frenchman still upright. What followed was a rout: the troops who had been sent to oppose the Count of Moret, diminished by a third, took to their heels. “We mustn’t lose a minute, My Lord,” said Latil to the count. “After them, shooting as we go; we don’t have to kill them but it’s important that our fire be heard in the entrenchments.” And indeed, their fire, heard in the demi-lune, spread chaos among the defenders. Attacked from the front by Montmorency, Bassompierre, and Créquì, and from behind by the Count of Moret and Latil, the Duke of Savoy and his son were afraid they’d be surrounded and captured; leaving the Count of Verrue to conduct a desperate defence, they went down to the stables, jumped into the saddle, and flew from the entrenchments. They found themselves in the middle of Colonel Belon’s soldiers, who were fleeing pell-mell with the French in pursuit, firing at will. These two riders trying to reach the mountainside attracted the attention of Latil, who, thinking they looked important, sprang forward to cut them off; but just as he was about to grab the duke’s horse by the bridle, he was dazed by a flash of light and a sharp pain in his left shoulder. A Spanish officer in the service of the Duke of Savoy, seeing his master about to be taken, had jumped in and, swinging his long sword, gashed the shoulder of our swashbuckler. Latil let out a cry, less of pain than of anger at seeing his prey escape. Sword in hand, he threw himself on the Spaniard. Though Latil’s sword was six inches shorter than that of his adversary, they’d barely met before Latil, a master of arms, knew himself master of his enemy. Twice wounded, the Spaniard fell within ten seconds, shouting “Save the duke!” At these words, Latil leaped over the wounded man and resumed his pursuit of the two riders but thanks to their hardy mountain horses they were already far enough down the road to be out of range. Latil returned, furious at having missed such glorious prey; but at least he still had the Spanish officer who, unable to defend himself, surrendered *rescued or not*. Meanwhile, the demi-lune was in turmoil. The Duke of Montmorency, first onto the ramparts, held his position, dispatching with blows of an axe all who tried to approach him, and opening a space for those who followed him. Piedmontese, Valaisans, and Savoyards fled like a torrent out the postern gates toward the road down to Susa. But there they ran into the Count of Moret, amid gunfire and cries of “Long live King Louis XIII!” Unaware of his true strength, they didn’t even try to fight, they just ran, flowing around each group of French like water around rocks. The Count of Moret entered the demi-lune on the opposite side from Montmorency. They met in the middle, recognised each other, and embraced. Then, arm in arm, they marched victorious to the breach, one waving the French flag he’d first placed on the demi-lune’s ramparts, the other the Savoyard flag he’d won. Saluting Louis XIII and lowering the two standards before him, together they cried “*Long live the king!*” It was the same cry before which, three years later, both of them would fall. The cardinal called out, “No one is to enter the redoubt before the king.” Just as these words were uttered, Latil slipped in through a postern. Sentinels were placed at all entrances, and Montmorency and Moret went themselves to open the Gélasse gate for the king and the cardinal. The two rode in, musketoen at the knee to signify that they entered as conquerors – and that the conquered, taken by storm, could expect only what was granted at the victors’ good pleasure. The king addressed the Duke of Montmorency first. “I know, Sir Duke,” he said, “that which is the object of your ambition. When the campaign ends, you shall be entitled to exchange your sword for one chased with golden *fleur de lys* that will elevate you above all the Marshals of France.” Montmorency bowed. The Sword of the Constable was his sole ambition in the world, and this was the king’s formal promise that he would have it. “Sire,” said the Count of Moret, presenting the king with the flag won from Colonel Belon’s regiment, “allow me the honour of placing at Your Majesty’s feet this standard I have taken.” “I accept it,” said Louis XIII; “and in exchange, I hope you’ll be pleased to wear this white plume in your hat, in memory of the brother who gave it to you and of our father who bore three of them at Ivry.” The Count of Moret wanted to kiss the king’s hand but Louis XIII took him in his arms and embraced him warmly. Then the king removed from his hat, the same one he’d received from the Duke of Montmorency, one of its three white plumes. He presented it, along with the diamond clip that held it on, to the Count of Moret. And that same day, around five in the evening, King Louis XIII made his entry into Susa after having received the keys to the town from its authorities on a silver platter.

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**What l’Angely Thought of the Compliments of the Duke of Savoy**

King Louis XIII was delirious with joy. It was the second time in less than a year that he’d made a triumphal entrance into a town conquered by force of arms, thereby deserving the title of *the Victorious*. All that the cardinal had promised had been achieved, from first to last, the last promise being that on March seventh the king would sleep in Susa – and there he slept. But the cardinal, who knew secrets hidden to others, and who saw further than the king, was less at ease than this master. He knew – as did Louis XIII, though the triumph of the day had made him forget – that the fighting had nearly exhausted the army’s ammunition. He knew something else that the king did not know: that the troops were short on food, and the bad weather and condition of the roads prevented the commissaries from bringing more. He knew, moreover, that Casale was hard pressed by the Spanish. If the Duke of Savoy continued to resist them for another week or so that wouldn’t be hard, considering their lack of munitions, then Casale – reduced to the last extremity despite the heroism of its commander, Gurrón, and despite the devotion of its people, who had joined the garrison in defending the city – might be forced to open its gates to the Spaniards. The latest intelligence from Casale reported that they’d eaten their horses and were down to the dogs and cats, the last resort of famine. Thus, that evening, while Louis XIII was celebrating with his marshals, generals, and senior officers, Richelieu approached the king and asked if afterward, unless fatigue prevented it, His Majesty might spare a few moments. The king, who seemed nearly as jubilant as the day he’d had the Marshall d’Ancre killed, replied, “Since every time Your Eminence desires to speak with me, it’s for the good of the state and the glory of the crown, I am and will always be willing to listen to you.” And indeed, when the soirée was over, the king, still glowing with praise, came to the cardinal. “And now, Your Eminence, it’s just us,” he said, sitting down and offering a chair to the cardinal. Once the king was seated, the cardinal obeyed and took a seat as well. “Speak. I’m listening,” said Louis XIII. “Sire,” said the cardinal, “I believe Your Majesty’s now had satisfaction for the insult he suffered and his desire for glory need not push him to continue a war that’d immediately end in a glorious peace.” “My dear Cardinal,” said the king, “I hardly recognise you: you call for war, despite all opposition; and now that the campaign’s barely begun, you propose peace.” “Does it matter, Sire, whether peace comes sooner or later, so long as it brings us what we’d hoped?” “But what will Europe say of us? To make such threats and demands and then give up after just one fight...” “Europe will say, Sire, and it will be the truth, that this one victory was so glorious and absolute that it decided the entire campaign.” “But still, to conclude the peace, we would have to present our demands.” “That is the grand prerogative of the victor.” “Do you think, your Eminence that we’re in position to make such demands?” “We’re certainly in a position to open the negotiations, Sire.” “How so?” “We can say it’s in consideration of the best interests of your sister, Princess Christine.” “True enough,” said the king, “she’s married to Victor-Amadeus. I always forget I have a family. It’s also true,” he added bitterly, “that it’s a family I prefer to forget. So you think...?” “I think, Sire, that though war is at times a cruel necessity, we belong to a church that abhors bloodshed, and it’s our duty to curtail it when we can. That’s within your power, Sire, after such a glorious day, for the God of Hosts is also the God of Mercy.” “How would you present this matter to the King of Marmots?” said the king, using the nickname concocted by Henry IV after his conquest of Bresse, Bugey, Valromey, and Gex. “That’s easily done, Sire. I’ll write in the name of Your Majesty to the Duke of Savoy that he can choose between peace or war: if he prefers war, we will continue to fight as we did today and as your august father did in the past; but if, instead, he chooses peace, we will negotiate with him on the same basis as before our victory. To be specific, he is to allow the passage of French troops, and to assist with the relief of Casale, providing us food and ammunition at a fair market price; and furthermore Savoy will allow us, in the future, passage for whatever troops and materiel might be necessary for the defence of Montferrat, in the event that Montferrat were attacked or we thought such an attack likely; and that to ensure these two contingencies, Sire, the Duke of Savoy cedes to us Fort Gélasse and the Pass of Susa, to be occupied by a Swiss garrison commanded by an officer of your appointment.” “But the Savoyard is going to want something in return for all that.” “If you wish, Sire, we can meet one of his demands. We can offer, on behalf of the Duke of Mantua, in compensation for the House of Savoy’s rights to Montferrat, to cede him the city of Trino, with its annual revenue of fifteen thousand crowns.” “We’d already offered him that, and he refused it.” “Sire, we were not then in possession of Susa.” “All thanks to you, and I’ll never forget it.” “What must not be forgotten, Sire, is the risks Your Majesty faced, the courage of your troops, and the virtues of their commanders.” “If I ever had the misfortune to forget it, Your Eminence would remind me.” “So my proposal is acceptable?” “Whom shall we send with it?” “Doesn’t it seem to Your Majesty that Marshal Bassompierre would be the best ambassador we could choose for this?” “Perfect.” “Then, Sire, he will leave tomorrow morning to present our treaty to the duke. As for the secret articles...” “There will be secret articles?” “Every treaty has secret articles. Those will be negotiated personally between me and the duke or his son.” “Then everything is on hold!” “Just for three days, Sire, until we arrange to receive a visit from the prince your brother, or your uncle the duke.” “That’s right,” said the king, “they are my family. But with one great virtue: they’re family I can publicly make war against. And now, good evening, Sir Cardinal. You must be tired and in need of a good night’s sleep.” Three days later, in fact, as predicted by the cardinal, Victor-Amadeus came to Susa to negotiate with Richelieu, who obtained from him all the conditions he’d proposed to the king. As for the secret articles, they were granted as well, along with the public terms: *The Duke of Savoy engages to provide Casale with four thousand bushels of corn and wheat and five hundred casks of honey. In return, once this obligation is met, it is agreed that the troops of France shall not advance beyond Bunolonga, the village between Susa and Turin, and His Majesty will allow the Prince of Piedmont time to persuade the Spanish to lift the siege of Casale. In addition, Charles-Emmanuel will be ceded the town of Trino by the Duke of Mantua, Alba, and Montcalvo.* Eight days after this treaty was concluded, Don Gonzales da Cordova personally raised the siege of Casale, thus preserving the honour of Spain. On 31 March and 1 April respectively, the treaty was ratified by the Duke of Savoy and King Louis XIII. However, the truth is that this treaty was regarded as no more binding than those made with the Duke of Lorraine. One day, when William III was telling Charles IV, duke de Lorraine, that he’d signed a treaty in good faith, the duke said with a laugh, “So you’d rely on a treaty, then?”



"But of course," His Majesty naïvely replied.

"Well," replied Duke Charles, "whenever you like, I can show you a whole chest full of treaties that I've signed, none of which have been honoured!"

And though Charles-Emmanuel had nearly as many treaties in his chest, he was happy to add one more, though he had no more intention of honouring it than any of the others. Nonetheless, he expressed the desire to embrace his nephew Louis XIII, so a meeting was arranged. First came the Prince of Piedmont and the Cardinal of Savoy, who greeted the king when the treaty was signed; Victor-Amadeus brought his wife, Princess Christine, the king's sister. Louis accorded his sister all proper honours and every sign of friendship, delighted to show that he loved best this sister who'd made open war upon him, unlike the Queen of England and the Queen of Spain, who were content to conspire against him secretly. Finally came the Duke of Savoy, who was received with open arms by his nephew Louis XIII, who had resolved to steal a march on him and surprise him before he was ready; but Charles-Emmanuel was warned in time and rushed down the stairs in a hurry, to meet the king on his doorstep. "My dear Uncle," said Louis XIII, embracing him, "I'd intended to surprise you in your chamber!"

"You forgot, my dear Nephew," said the duke, "that it's not easy to move secretly when one is King of France."

The king climbed the stairs alongside the duke. But to reach the duke's chambers, he had to pass a row of courtiers and senior officers standing on a trembling balcony that barely supported them.

"Make haste, Uncle," the king said. "I'm not sure how long this will hold us up."

"Alas, Sire!" the duke replied. "See how all the world trembles before the might of Your Majesty."

The king, radiant with this praise, turned to l'Angely. "Hey, fool: what do you think of my uncle's compliments?"

"Oh, I'm not the fool you should ask," said l'Angely.

"Who then?"

"Ask the two or three thousand fools who got killed to earn them!"

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A Chapter of History

L'Angely, in his response to the king, had summed up the situation admirably. After every war, no matter how long, even the Thirty Years War, a peace is signed, and, once signed, the kings who had made the war embrace each other, without a thought for the thousands of men sacrificed to the conflict, rotting on the battlefields, or the thousands of weeping widows, the thousands of mothers wringing their hands, or the thousands of children dressed in mourning. And given the past history of the "good faith" of Charles-Emmanuel, one could be sure that this new peace would be broken the first time the Duke of Savoy found it advantageous. A month or two passed in celebrations, during which the Duke of Savoy sent his emissaries to Vienna and Madrid. In Vienna, his envoy delivered the message that King Louis's victory at Susa was not so much a humiliation of Savoy as it was of Emperor Ferdinand, as the Duke of Savoy had disputed the King of France's passage in order to sustain the Empire's rights in Italy. The aid France sent to the people of Casale was a clear attack on the emperor's authority, insofar as the place had been besieged by the Spanish in order to compel the duke de Nevers, a Frenchman who'd claimed an Imperial fief, to bend the knee to His Imperial Majesty. In Madrid, Savoy's envoy was charged to convey to King Philip IV and the count-duke, his prime minister, that the affront to Spanish arms at Casale was intended to weaken His Catholic Majesty's authority in Italy, an insult as yet unpunished. The King of France, goaded by Richelieu, planned to drive the Spaniards from Milan, and the Court of Madrid should expect that once they were forced from Milan, then Naples would soon follow. Philip IV and Ferdinand also exchanged emissaries. Here's what they decided:

The Holy Roman Emperor would ask the Swiss Cantons to allow his troops free passage. If the Grisons refused, Imperial troops would attack by surprise, cross the Alps, and march immediately on Mantua. The King of Spain recalled Don Gonzales de Cordova and replaced him with the overall commander of the Spanish troops in Italy, the famous Ambrose Spinola, who was given orders to besiege and take Casale, while the Imperial troops besieged and took Mantua. The French campaign, successfully completed in a matter of days, had caused quite a stir: the affair redounded to King Louis's credit across Europe, and he was acclaimed as the only sovereign, besides Gustavus Adolphus, willing to leave his palace to defend his realm, sword in hand. Ferdinand II and Philip IV, in contrast, waged their cruel wars from a distance, kneeling safely at their altars. If the king and his army had been able to stay in Piedmont, all their gains would have been preserved – but the cardinal was committed to suppressing the Protestants before summer. The Protestants had taken advantage of the absence of the king and cardinal to rally their forces, and fifteen thousand had gathered in Languedoc under the command of the duke de Rohan. The king bade goodbye to *his good uncle* the Duke of Savoy, disregarding the intrigues the duke was brewing under his very nose in Piedmont. On April 22, he returned to France by way of Briançon, Gap, and Châtillon, and marched on Privas. He avoided Lyon, from which the two queens had fled to escape the plague. As for Sir, still wallowing in his grievances, he'd left not only Paris but France itself, accepting the hospitality of Duke Charles IV of Lorraine in his city of Nancy. By leaving France, he'd abandoned his claim to Princess Marie de Gonzague, transferring his attentions to Princess Marguerite of Lorraine, the duke's sister. Pursued by forty thousand troops led by three Marshals of France and by Montmorency, to whom Richelieu had promised to present the Sword of the Constable, Rohan, the leader of the Protestants, fell into the same mistake made in the previous century by the leaders of the rebellious Catholic League: in return for funds that were never paid, he signed a treaty with Spain, mortal enemy of both France and her Protestants. In the end, Privas, their greatest fortress, was taken. A third of its people were hanged, and the rest were stripped of all their property. On 24 June 1629 with a new Italian campaign pending as the pot there was starting to boil, a final truce was signed, a peace whose primary condition was the demolition of the fortifications of every Protestant city. Even before Privas, it was known that Emperor Ferdinand intended to send troops into Italy; it was said Wallenstein himself would lead fifty thousand men over the Alps of the Grisons. On June 5, Ferdinand published a decree stating that his troops marched into Italy not to make war but to preserve the peace, sustaining the legitimate authority of the emperor and defending the empire's foreign fiefs from claims that infringed on his rights. In the same statement, the emperor requested His Serenity the King of Spain, who possessed the chief stronghold of the Empire in Italy, to provide the Imperial troops with whatever food and ammunition they needed. Everything France had done in Italy had to be done over again. Louis was willing but couldn't be ready to undertake another foreign war in less than five or six months. Lacking money after Privas, Richelieu had been forced to discharge thirty regiments. The envoy Sir Sabran was sent to the Court of Vienna to discuss the emperor's ultimatum. Meanwhile, Sir de Créquy was dispatched to Turin to ask the Duke of Savoy to explain, frankly that side he was on in the event of war. The emperor replied:

*The King of France entered Italy with a powerful army, without any declaration of war on Spain or the Empire, and overcame, by arms or agreement, several localities under the jurisdiction of the Emperor. If the King of France will withdraw his troops from Italy, the Emperor will be satisfied to allow all issues to be settled by a court of law.*

The Duke of Savoy replied:

*The Imperial movement into the realm of the Grisons has nothing to do with the Treaty of Susa. But the King of Spain would like the French to leave Italy and give Susa back. If King Louis satisfies his brother-in-law Philip IV, the Duke of Savoy will persuade Emperor Ferdinand to withdraw his troops from the territory of the Grisons.*

Sir de Créquy sent this response to the king, who gave it to the cardinal and charged him with answering it. The cardinal replied:

*Tell the Duke of Savoy this isn't a matter of what the King of Spain or the Emperor wants, it's about whether His Highness intends to keep his word by joining his troops with those of France to maintain the Treaty of Susa.*

The king returned to Paris, so angry with his brother Sir that he was ready to confiscate all his domains. But the queen mother went to work and mended the division between the brothers: Sir, as usual, humbly begged the king's pardon, presenting his conditions for returning, and instead of losing domains due to his escapade was instead granted a new fief in the Duchy of Valois, increasing his income by a hundred thousand *livres* a year, as well as the governorships of Orléans, Blois, Vendome, Chartres, and the Château d'Amboise, the command of the Army of Champagne, and, in the absence of the king, the office of lieutenant general in charge of Paris and the surrounding region. In addition, the accord included this curious clause:

*Though reconciling with the king, Sir does not agree to overlook Cardinal Richelieu's many insults, affronts for which he will sooner or later be punished.*

The cardinal learned of this accord after it was too late to prevent it. He went to the king to see this agreement with his own eyes. Facing him, Louis bowed his head, aware of the weakness and deep ingratitude he had shown in giving in to his brother's demands. "If this is what Your Majesty grants to his enemies," said the cardinal, "what's he willing to do for the man who's proven himself his best friend?"

"Anything such a man asks if that man is you."

And indeed, the king awarded Richelieu the title of Vicar General in Italy and made him generalissimo of all his armies. Upon learning of these concessions to her foe, Marie de Médicis accosted her son and, referring to the cardinal's new commissions, demanded haughtily, "What about us, Sire? In light of this, what rights do you grant to us?"

"The right of monarchs to cure scrofula," said l'Angely, who was present at the dispute.

By dint of incredible effort and by leveraging his new prestige, the cardinal found the wherewithal to mount another campaign. But a new enemy barred the path to Piedmont, an abyss that could swallow half an army. This enemy was the plague – that same plague which had forced the two queens to return to Paris and the king to withdraw through Briançon. This plague arose in Milan – as depicted in Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed* – and passed from Milan to Lyon, where it wrought terrible havoc. It was said some soldiers had brought it over the Alps, where it broke out just outside Lyon in the village of Vaux. A *cordon sanitaire* was placed around the village but this plague, like all plagues, had human vice as its ally. The plague found an accomplice in greed: some of the infected paid to be smuggled out of Vaux and into the Church of Saint-Nizier that brought the contagion into the heart of Lyon. It was the end of September. One would have said, watching workers fall as if struck by lightning all across the populous quarters of Saint-Nizier, Saint-Jean, and Saint-Georges, that nature was mocking humanity. For the weather was magnificent: never had a more beautiful sun lit so clear a sky; never had the air seemed so sweet and pure; never had the Lyonnais seen such lush vegetation. There were no sudden changes of temperature, no extreme heat or thunderstorms, none of those atmospheric disruptions so often associated with outbreaks of communicable disease. Radiant and smiling, nature watched as corruption and death came knocking at the doors of house after house. Moreover, the spread of the scourge was inexplicable and oddly capricious. It spared one side of a street and ravaged the other. An island of homes would remain intact, while every house in the surrounding quarter was visited by the sinister guest. The plague passed over some of the most filthy and congested parts of the old city, only to break out in places like Bellecour and Terreaux, among the nicest, airiest, and most open neighbourhoods. Along the river quays, the entire lower part of the great city was devastated. No one knows why but for some reason, the plague stopped dead at Rue Neyret. There, outside a small old house, is a statue bearing the Latin inscription:

*Ejus praesidio non ultra pestis 1628.*

Beyond, in Croix-Rousse, there's not a single case of plague.

Then as if the plague hadn't done enough damage in its march, infection was followed by murder. As in Marseilles in 1720 as in Paris in 1832, the populace, ever suspicious and credulous, cried out that they'd been deliberately poisoned. But unlike in Paris where it was said criminals had poisoned the fountains or Marseilles where convicts were blamed for corrupting the harbour water. In Lyon it was meat vendors who were accused of spreading the plague. These street sellers were said to be the ones who'd passed the pestilence from house to house. A Jesuit, Père Grillot, claimed the meat vendors were selling tainted lard and tallow. "It's in mid-September," he said, "that we began to notice the spoiled meat. The sacristan in the Jesuit church found a sack of greasy meat behind a bench, and when he burned it, the smoke was so foul that he had to bury what wouldn't burn."

Sir Montfalcon's lovely history book provides us these details but unfortunately doesn't tell us if Père Grillot was able to give absolution to those his claims assassinated. The very next day, an unlucky man who'd gotten tallow on his clothes from a lit candle was stoned by a mob. Then in Guillotière, a doctor who'd concocted a potion for one of his patients was accused of poisoning him, and had to drink his own medicine to escape being killed. Any passing stranger might be accosted, pursued with the cry "Throw that poisoner into the Rhône!"

When the plague broke out in Marseilles, the city aldermen went to consult with Chirac, the municipal physician, who told them, "There's nothing to do but try to keep up your spirits." However, as they found in Lyon, staying cheerful wasn't so easy when the priests and monks advised giving up all hope, as the scourge was surely the instrument of God's wrath. So advised, the simple folk regarded the plague not as an epidemic that could be staved off but as a destroying angel with a flaming sword that no one could escape. The doctors who went on our expedition to Egypt learned a few facts about such plagues: they attack the weak, the feeble, and the afraid. Fear the plague, and you're as good as infected. And who wouldn't be afraid if they saw two Brothers of the Minimes chanting the General Atonement as they carried to Notre-Dame-de-Lorette a silver death lamp, on which were engraved the names of the city aldermen? Who wouldn't be afraid when monks on soapboxes in the squares and on street corners loudly preached the end of the world, while their priests granted final blessings to the dying city? When a monk or priest passed in the street, some knelt in their paths to ask absolution – but many fell before they could receive it. Penitents roamed the city in sackcloth and ashes, ropes around their waists and torches in their hands, and sick citizens, leaning against walls or lying in the street, without knowing whether these penitents were consecrated and had the right to absolve the dying, shouted their confessions to them, hoping to save their souls at the price of their dignity. In such times we see how the grip of terror can sunder the bonds of nature, of friendship, and of love. Kin flees from kin, the wife abandons her husband, and parents leave their children, the chaste surrender their modesty to any who will carry them away. One woman, laughing hysterically, told how she'd sewn into their funeral shrouds her four children, her father, her mother, and her husband. Another woman was widowed six times in six months, burying six husbands. Most citizens locked themselves in their houses or shuttered shops, jumping at every noise, eying passers-by and gazing, haggard, from their windows, behind which they appeared as pale as ghosts. Few people were in the streets; those who had to go someplace did so at a run, with hardly a word for anyone they met. Anyone from outside Lyon who had to come into the city did so on a horse at the gallop, wrapped up to the eyes in a cloak. Gloomiest and most frightening of all were the physicians who made their rounds wearing a strange costume they'd invented, a beak wrapped in oilcloth that covered the mouth and nose, containing a handkerchief soaked in vinegar. Such a getup would have

been laughable in ordinary times; but in this lethal atmosphere, it was terrifying. After eight days, the city was almost depopulated, though more by flight than by death. All those who could afford to leave had left; even the judges had vacated, and the courts were quite empty. Women gave birth by themselves, for the midwives had all fled, and the physicians were busy with the plague. The workshops were silent: no labourers sang their work songs, no vendors cried their wares in the streets. Everything was still, everywhere was the silence of death, broken only by the dismal sound of the bell of the dead-cart as it collected the corpses, and by the tolling of the great bell of Saint-Jean that rang every day at noon. These funeral sounds had a woeful effect on the nerves, especially those of women, who would sit gloomily counting their rosaries while uttering only an occasional moan. Some, when they heard the bell of the corpse-cart approaching, fell dead as if stricken by lightning. Others, leaving a church where the death bell tolled, fell ill on the way home and died soon thereafter. One frantic woman threw herself down a well; another young lady ran out of her house in a frenzy and hurled herself into the Rhône. There were three main measures the citizens could take, and they took them: sequester the wealthy sick in their homes; lock up the sick poor in hospitals; and collect the bodies of those who had died. Some adopted a fourth course, skipping the first three, intruding into houses on the pretext of treating the sick or carrying out the dead, and instead carrying out anything of value they could find, breaking open desks, cracking safes, and relieving the dying of their rings and jewellery. To sequester the sick, doors were walled up and food and medicines were passed in through the windows. New gallows were put up in every quarter, and looters caught in the act were taken to them and hanged without delay. The hospitals were overwhelmed, so the city established a quarantine house on the right bank of the Saone. It had room for only two hundred beds but had to accommodate four thousand patients: there were plague victims everywhere, in the rooms, in the corridors, in the cellars and the attics. Every victim who died and freed up a bed was replaced by two more. Doctors and nurses making their rounds could barely pick their way through the press. In between the stiffening corpses that almost immediately began to rot, the dying trembled and shook, throats burning, crying out for water. Here and there a body would rise in a spasm from its mattress or pile of straw and, sunken-faced and wild-eyed, paw at the air with its hands, then utter a deep groan and fall back, dead. Other victims, if they had the energy, recoiled from these visions, tripping over their neighbours and dragging off those sheets that would soon serve as their shrouds. And yet, the patients in the dreadful quarantine house were envied by those poor who were dying alone on street corners and in ditches. Most wretched of all were the beggars and vagrants who were pressed into service as corpse collectors. They were paid three *livres* a day, plus whatever they found in the pockets of the dead. They had iron rakes and pitchforks that they used to drag out the bodies and pile them onto carts. Any bodies found above the ground floor were thrown out through the windows. The corpses were buried to overflowing in mass graves that fermented and burst open, spewing out rotting human remains. One old man by the name of Reynard had watched his entire family die, leaving him on his own. When at last he felt himself succumbing to the sickness, he was terrified of dying alone, being thrown into a mass grave, and denied a proper Christian burial. So he took a spade and a pick and used the last of his strength to dig his own grave. When the work was complete, he made a cross of his spade and pick and placed it at the head of his grave. Then he lay down on the edge of the pit, counting on his last convulsion to roll him in, in hopes that some passing Samaritan might see his body there and cover it with earth. Most terrible of all, amid the agony of a dying people was the laughter and cheer of some of the corpse collectors, awful men who came to be known as “the crows.” It was as if the dead were their friends, and the plague was their kin. They welcomed the coming of the plague to their city, and their admission into homes from which all their lives they’d been spurned. Like the Marquis de Sade, like the executioner of Mary Stuart, they wallowed in forbidden pleasures – and when a dead woman was pretty, when a corpse was beautiful, they celebrated a monstrous marriage of life with death. Appearing in Lyon, as we said, in September, the plague peaked after about thirty days but continued to rage for another month. Toward the end of December, when bitter cold came south, it tapered off. The citizens celebrated its departure with dances and bonfires but then the warm weather came back, a heavy rain put out the fires, and the plague returned for another bout. The epidemic revived to full force in January and February, then declined in the spring, only to reappear in August before finally disappearing in December. In just over a year, the plague in Lyon killed six thousand people. Archbishop Charles Miron had been the first to die on 6 August 1628 and was succeeded by the Archbishop of Aix, Alphonse de Richelieu, brother to the cardinal. It was to this brother that the cardinal naturally addressed himself to ask if it would be possible to attempt another campaign against Piedmont, marching thirty thousand men through Lyon and the Lyonnais. The archbishop replied that the threat of disease had passed, there would be plenty of empty homes to house the troops – and even the Court should the Court choose to follow the army. When he received this response, the cardinal dispatched Sir de Pontis to Mantua that same day, to assure the duke that help was on its way. De Pontis was also ordered to place himself at the disposal of Duke Charles de Nevers to help plan the city’s defences.

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#### 1 Year Later

A year had passed since Richelieu, satisfied with the Treaty of Susa, or at least pretending to trust in it, had been forced to leave Piedmont to go fight the Huguenots in Languedoc. During that year, as he’d promised King Louis XIII, the cardinal had crushed the hopes of the Protestants, already badly battered by the fall of La Rochelle. He had reorganised the army, refilled the coffers of the State with new money, and signed his famous treaty with Gustavus Adolphus that supported the Catholics of France against the Protestants, and the Protestants of Germany against the Catholics. He had sent Marshal Bassompierre to the Swiss Council in Solothurn to complain about the passage of the Imperial Germans across the lands of the Grisons, and to see if he could bring back another five or six thousand Swiss mercenaries. Finally, since he couldn’t yet get to Mantua personally, the cardinal had sent the best help he could in the form of his finest engineer, Sir de Pontis, with military advice from Marshall d’Estrées, sent from Venice. With the plague in Lyon exhausted, the French army was put back on the march, though, as mentioned, a year after forcing Susa Pass and imposing terms on Charles-Emmanuel, the cardinal found himself back where he’d started: except that with Susa Pass cleared, and Fort Gélasse in French hands, Piedmont was open to him – he should be able to get to Casale to rescue the Marquis de Thoiras, under siege by Spinola, who’d succeeded Gonzales de Cordova as commander of the Spanish troops. This time, the cardinal felt sure enough of the king that he could afford to leave him behind, having taken pains to reveal to him the treachery of Sir, Marie de Médicis, and Anne of Austria. And the cardinal’s vanity played its part as well: newly empowered, he was able now to undertake a campaign on his word alone, and in the king’s absence to reap its glory for himself. Every man of genius has a weakness, and Richelieu was so great that he had three: he wanted to be recognised not just as a great politician – which no one disputed – but also as a great general – making him a rival to his own commanders, Créquy, Bassompierre, Montmorency, Schomberg, and the Duke of Guise – and as a great poet, a title only posterity could award. At the beginning of March 1630, the cardinal was back at Susa, exchanging ambassadors and envoys extraordinaire with that elusive chameleon called Charles-Emmanuel, that crowned snake who, for fifty years, had been slipping from the grasp of the Kings of France and Spain. The cardinal had already spent a month in negotiations that had led nowhere. But he was compelled to be patient for fear the Duke of Savoy might prevent him from resupplying Casale with food and ammunition, where they were running out. The Duke of Savoy wasn’t strong enough to resist the force of France without the support of Spain or Austria – but he had the support of Spain from Milan, and of Austria from Wallenstein’s troops that had passed the Grisons. In fact, he might be better able to dispute the passage of Montferrat than he’d been to defend the Pass of Susa. As the delays wore at his patience, the cardinal wrote to the Duke of Montmorency, in a tone more friendly than formal:

*Sir Duke, you know what we’d agreed between us: when the Italian campaign was over, you would be awarded the Sword of the Constable. But the Italian campaign, as you can see for yourself, won’t be concluded until the Duke of Nevers is confirmed as the ruler of Mantua. Last year’s campaign will be only a skirmish compared to this year’s war that must support Duke Charles in his claims. It’s time we quit dealing with intermediaries and envoys while there’s still a chance of success. Go to Turin under the guise of a pleasure trip and meet secretly with the Duke of Savoy. You are gallant, Sir, and the ladies of the Court of Savoy are beautiful, so I don’t think you can complain too much of this task. But let me speak frankly of the real mission that is delicate. You are related, through your wife, to Queen Marie de Médicis, and are known to be a member of Queen Anne’s circle – which will be a recommendation to the enemies of the king, though you are his friend as well. Try to arrange a direct meeting with the Duke of Savoy, or at least between his son and me, to find out his real position. Meanwhile, I, undistracted by beautiful ladies or lively music, will be sending scouts out in every direction. When you return, Duke, depending on what you find out, we’ll know in which direction to march. Just try to keep the truth of your mission under your hat.*

It was the kind of mission perfectly suited to the charming, elegant, and handsome Duke of Montmorency. He had, in fact, married the daughter of the Duke of Bracciano that same Vittorio Orsini who had been one of Marie de Médicis’s lovers before her marriage, and perhaps even after – if the rumours about Louis’s parentage were true, that made Montmorency the king’s brother-in-law. He was, indeed, devoted to Queen Anne, though it was Buckingham who had stolen her heart when he had come to Court as ambassador of Charles I. Buckingham had scattered the pearls from his doublet across the Court of the Louvre but had won a gem far more precious in the gardens at Amiens: a lady’s love. Yes, a man like the Duke of Montmorency would be welcomed at the Court of Savoy by all but the husbands of the beautiful Savoyard ladies. The duke therefore accepted this mission, half diplomacy and half gallantry, and departed for Turin, leaving the cardinal, as he’d said, to study the horizons to see which would be darkened by the oncoming storm. On the northern horizon, in Germany, Wallenstein daily grew more powerful, becoming almost unstoppable. The Emperor had made him the Duke of Friedland, ruling the vast, rich regions he’d conquered for Ferdinand in Bohemia, domains confiscated from so-called rebels. At Wallenstein’s own expense he’d raised an army of fifty thousand troops, repelled the Danes, beaten Mansfield and his allies at the bridge of Dessau, defeated Bethlen Gabor, reoccupied Brandenburg, and conquered Holstein, Schleswig, Pomerania, and Mecklenburg – in token of which the Emperor named Wallenstein the Duke of Mecklenburg as well as of Friedland. But there his series of conquests came to a halt, at least temporarily. Ferdinand was assailed with complaints against his blind general from all sides; seeking a way to remove him from Austria, Denmark, Hungary, and Germany, he sent him east and south. Recruits flocked to Wallenstein: he sent a force of them to Italy, and another to Poland, where a huge garrison of forty thousand men camped on the Baltic, devouring a country already exhausted. To feed his troops he had to conquer or perish, so he went back to war, marching on the rich Imperial cities of Worms, Frankfurt, Schwaben, and Strasbourg. His western vanguard occupied a fort in the Diocese of Metz, and Richelieu learned that their Sir, when he was in Lorraine, had made contact with Wallenstein to invite his barbarians into France – ostensibly to overthrow Richelieu, though the real target was Louis XIII. Wallenstein put two of his corps, those led by Gallas and Aldringen, under the command of Collalto, an Italian general, and dispatched them to Italy to besiege Mantua and support Charles-Emmanuel. On the eastern horizon, Richelieu looked toward Venice and Rome. Venice had promised to create a diversion by attacking Milan but Venice was no longer the power that once had made daring raids on Constantinople, Cyprus, and the Morea. But the Venetians fulfilled the rest of their promises, sending wheat, ammunition, reinforcements, and funds to Mantua, as well as cutting off food supplies to the besiegers. Deprived of food, drink, and fodder, unable to breach Mantua’s walls due to a lack of artillery, the Imperials were about to lift the siege when aid came from an unexpected quarter. The pope allowed them to resupply from the Papal States, provided they did so by buying bread, honey, and hay from one of his nephews (one of the few who hadn’t been granted an ecclesiastical office). So as always, it was the pope, and an Italian pope at that, who betrayed Italy. He was a Barberini, naturally, of the same family that had stripped and sold the bronze plaques from the Pantheon of Agrippa. Nearer to the cardinal, south of Savoy, was Spinola, the Genoese condottiere in the service of Spain. He’d marched into Montferrat when the Imperials had entered the Duchy of Mantua, more to block the relief of the city than to resume the siege of Casale. He had six thousand foot and three thousand horse, nine thousand troops with which to oppose the French if they tried to rescue Mantua. If Mantua fell, the twenty-five or thirty thousand Imperials who’d besieged it would be freed up to join Spinola in taking Casale and then driving the French from Italy. To the west, Richelieu’s horizons were darker still. At least Collalto and Spinola were visible enemies, openly opposed to him. That wasn’t the case in France: there, the cardinal’s enemies were like miners, digging underground in the dark to attack from hiding, while wearing a mask of friendship in the light. Louis, though aware that his life and reputation were linked to those of his minister, was worn out by these endless conspiracies – disgusted with everything, more melancholy than ever, he was prey to constant anxiety. His closest kin – mother, wife, and brother – all lived for a single hope: the fall of the cardinal. With every word and act devoted to that end, they made Louis’s court a sour and bitter place, even while their efforts reinforced the king’s conviction that he had no influence, no grandeur, and no royalty without the cardinal. The king began to comprehend that these attacks on the cardinal were really just a prelude to their real aim that was his own fall, by guile or by open attack. So Louis redoubled his defence of the cardinal, persuaded that to do so was to defend himself. The flight of the Duke of Orléans to Nancy, the secret letter decoded by Rossignol, and especially the treacherous negotiations between the Prince and Wallenstein, all convinced the king that a time was coming when Gaston, supported from outside by Austria, Spain, and Savoy, and from within by Queen Marie, Queen Anne, and malcontents of every stripe, would raise the banner of revolt. And, indeed, there was no shortage of malcontents. The Duke of Guise was angry that he hadn’t been given command of the army, and conspired with Madam de Conti and the Duchess d’Elbeuf to plot against Richelieu. The judges at the Châtelet in Paris, incensed by new fees imposed on officers of the judiciary, refused to render justice. The lawmakers of Parliament were so upset by an increase in their taxes that they secretly offered to support the Duke of Orléans if he promised to abolish the fees when he came to power. We’ve gone into enough detail about the cardinal’s police to make it clear that he was aware of all these malcontents, and had his eye on their intrigues. But despite these threats, he was convinced the king would nonetheless come to rejoin him, for two reasons: first, he knew the king’s incurable melancholy and ennui would send him back to the army, if only to once again hear the glorious sound of victory, and the praise that goes with it; and second, since the king had named Gaston both Lieutenant General of Paris and Commander of the Army of Champagne, Gaston potentially had enough power, with the support of his mother and the queen, to drive the king from Paris, and maybe even from France. Gaston might take advantage of the king’s absence to conspire against the cardinal and maybe even the king but once Louis XIII had joined him, Richelieu feared nothing. He knew Gaston well enough to know that, if faced by an army commanded by the cardinal and the king himself, Sir would abandon his allies and accomplices and beg forgiveness, as he’d done before. His review of the horizons of Europe complete, the cardinal turned from the dangers in the distance toward nearby Turin, to see how well Montmorency was following his instructions.

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#### Old Lovers Reunited

The Duke of Montmorency had invited his friend the Count of Moret to accompany him to Turin without revealing the true nature of his trip and Moret had accepted eagerly. The gravity of the historical events we recount sometimes distracts us from the joys or sorrows they bring to the hearts of our characters. We mentioned the besieging of Mantua without relating how this siege dismayed the heart of the son of Henry IV. Indeed, Isabelle, trapped in that city with her father, might suffer misery, famine, even death – all the risks associated with a siege by barbarians such as those who made up the Imperial hordes. So the Count of Moret had volunteered to go and help defend Mantua – especially once he’d heard that Richelieu had sent his rival, Sir de Pontis, to that city as an engineer. Moret

was eager not just to defend Isabelle against the besiegers but also to oppose whatever influence de Pontis might gain with Sir de Lautrec. But Richelieu didn't have so many loyal hearts and minds around him that he was willing to deprive himself of a man who, by rank alone, should stand near the king and cardinal – and who, by his courage and quick thinking, had already done great things, and might be called upon to do more. However, to reassure his young protégé, the cardinal informed him that he'd written to Sir de Lautrec, advising him to remember the promise the cardinal had made to the two young people, and to respect his daughter's commitment to the count. Not that we wish to portray our hero as any better than he was: the blood of Henry IV flowed in his veins, and that made him, if not unfaithful, at least a little inconstant. Though he stuck to his oath to Isabelle never to have any wife but her, it would be untrue to say that, after the last campaign, thoughts of another hadn't entered his head while approaching Paris with his brother and the cardinal. Thoughts of a dark-haired woman, wearing a red Basque cap, whose red mouth had given him kisses at the Inn of the Painted Beard so bold that his lips burned again at the thought of them. And more: he remembered the night when, leaving Princess Marie de Gonzague's soirée, he and that enticing woman who'd played the role of his cousin had exchanged promises to meet again – promises that circumstances had forestalled but which he intended to make good. But chance interfered once again: by the time the Count of Moret had arrived in Paris, Madam de Fargis – we assume our readers had guessed it was her – had already left the capital, doubtless in the service of one of even higher rank. So Jacquolino, to his great regret, was unable to renew his acquaintance with his beautiful cousin Marina. But the elegant court of the Duke of Savoy was a place he remembered fondly: he'd spent a month there two years before when on his way back from Italy, when he'd been given messages for Sir and the two queens. It was a court where opportunities for romance were not hard to find. And, indeed, there were few courts as addicted to gallantry and romance as that of the Duke of Savoy. Dissolute himself, Charles-Emmanuel possessed that charm and urbanity that gave others the permission to indulge themselves. If, after all we've said about him, we wanted to further round out his personality, we would add that he was stubborn, ambitious, and wasteful. But he hid his hypocrisy under such an accomplished air of grandeur that his overspending passed for generosity, his ambition as a desire for glory, and his stubbornness as firmness and consistency. Unfaithful in his alliances, greedy for others' wealth, wasteful of his own, ever poor but lacking in nothing, he continually outfoxed Austria, Spain, and France, taking from whoever offered the most, and giving in return the least he could get away with, particularly in matters of war. And he made war on his neighbours whenever it seemed to his advantage, because he was tormented by the need to increase his domains. Though forced eventually to sue for peace, in the subsequent treaty he always managed to insert a few ambiguous clauses that enabled him to violate it later. A master of delaying tactics, he was a modern Fabius of diplomacy. He had managed to marry himself to King Philip's daughter Catherine, and his son to King Henry IV's daughter Christine – though these two alliances provided only partial protection against the consequences of his habitual treachery. This time, at last, he faced his most formidable opponent, Cardinal Richelieu – and it would break him. The Duke of Savoy gave a warm welcome to his two visitors: Montmorency, preceded by his reputation for courage, charm, and generosity; and Moret, who was remembered for his gallantry on his last visit. Madam Christine was particularly gracious to the young prince who so resembled Henry IV, and treated him like a brother. Knowing Montmorency's romantic tendencies, Charles-Emmanuel had summoned to court all the most beautiful women of Turin and the surrounding area, in hopes of enticing the duke's interest from France to Savoy. But among all those beautiful faces, Antoine de Bourbon looked in vain for the one he'd hoped to see, that of the Countess Matilda of Espalomba. There's a story about this lovely countess which, as it occurred before the opening chapter of this book, and didn't bear on the subsequent story of our prince, we haven't shared with our readers. One day, Charles-Emmanuel had seen a new star appear at his court, an unknown moon, pale and shining, in orbit around a planet that shed no light of its own. Though he came from one of the leading families of the realm, Count Urbain of Espalomba had married a commoner – Matilda of Cisterna, the loveliest flower of the Aosta Valley, to paraphrase Shakespeare – and brought his bride to Court. Charles-Emmanuel, though sixty-seven, had preserved during his long reign those habits of gallantry that led him to treat his court like a private harem, where he had but to toss his ducal handkerchief to make his choice. Dazzled by the beauty of the Countess of Espalomba, he'd let her know that she had only to say the word to be the next Duchess of Savoy; but that word the lovely countess never said. For once, the duke's heart was ignited, not by vulgar ambition but by the burning flame of love. But the countess, just eighteen years old, had already set eyes on the Count of Moret, a young prince of twenty-two: April and May came together, and spring was declared with a kiss. The Count of Espalomba had his suspicions but only about the Duke of Savoy. With his eye fixed on Charles-Emmanuel, he could see nothing else, and so it was that in the shadow of the old husband's jealousy, the two young lovers found happiness. But the sovereign's eye was sharper than that of the husband – the duke suspected something, though he wasn't sure what. He mulled it over: Count Urbain was poor and avaricious, and had come to court seeking the duke's favour, so Savoy named the count Governor of Fort Pinerolo, with orders to take immediate command. There the countess was sent as well to be locked away in a safe place, like a rich gem in a coffer to which only the duke held the key. Forced to separate, the young lovers had wept and promised each other eternal fidelity; we've seen how well the Count of Moret kept his part of that oath. Meanwhile, Matilda had no choice but to while away the time on her own; the chances for romance in Pinerolo were few and unappealing, especially after one had loved a young and handsome king's son. Matilda had learned that the count had left Savoy right after her departure, and she was grateful that her lover hadn't wanted to stay in a court that lacked her presence. For the past eighteen months, she'd dreamed of their reunion. So she was overjoyed when she learned her husband had been asked to leave Pinerolo and spend a few days in the capital during the fêtes planned to welcome the two princes to the Court of Turin. At last the two lovers were reunited! Did each bring to this meeting an equal share of love? We dare not say – but each brought an equal share of youth, the thing that love resembles most. However, once again their bliss was to be short-lived. The princes had only a few days to spend in Turin – but the Italian campaign could last for months, even years, so there might yet be opportunities for further reunions. They were careful to meet in secret, after which, thanks to information from his beautiful lover, the Count of Moret was able to draw a detailed plan of Fort Pinerolo. Upon studying it, he was delighted to see that the bedchambers of the count and countess were at opposite ends of the château. So the lovers set up a method of secret communication. When the young bride had left the lovely Aosta Valley, she'd brought along her slightly older foster sister, Jacintha – a standard precaution when a young woman married an older husband, as sisters made natural allies in marriages of convenience. Jacintha had a brother named Selimo who was two or three years older, so they arranged that he would bring the count, under the assumed name of Gaetano, to meet her at Pinerolo. What could be more natural than that a brother should come with his friend to visit his sister, especially when that sister lived with ten or twelve people in a grand abode that could easily house fifty? Once under the same roof, the youths would be poor lovers indeed if they couldn't manage to see each other three or four times a day, and at least once every night. They worked all this out within the first day of seeing each other again. The young are said to be heedless of the future but this pair of lovers, on the contrary, took the future quite seriously. These arrangements were made right under Count Urbain's nose, whose suspicions were once again all directed at the Duke of Savoy. But the duke had either given up hope of winning the lady's love or, fickle as always, had decided that he preferred to torment Urbain by denying him his salary, on the pretext that money was so tight, he was going to have to beg his own subjects for contributions! For his part, the Duke of Montmorency was the happiest man on earth. Young, handsome, wealthy, and wearing, after the royal houses, the greatest name in France, the ladies simply flocked to him. Flattered by the master of one of the most sophisticated courts in Europe, his vanity was stroked at every turn. For example, once, when leading the court from the table to the ballroom, the Duke of Savoy had called out, "Since you arrived, Duke, our ladies speak of nothing but how handsome you are, abandoning their husbands to worry and sorrow." The eight days the two ambassadors spent at Turin or in Rivoli Castle passed in dinners, balls, cavalcades, and fêtes of every sort – and meanwhile the cardinal met with Victor-Amadeus in the castle or, as the cardinal preferred, in the village of Bunolonga. The cardinal liked Bunolonga better since it was only an hour's ride from Susa, and there the Prince of Piedmont came to him, rather than he to the Prince of Piedmont.

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The Cardinal takes the Field

The negotiations were intense. Each party had to deal with a formidable opponent. Charles-Emmanuel wanted peace for himself but all-out war between France and the House of Austria, in hopes he could remain neutral until the opportunity came to reap the greatest reward by throwing his support behind one crown or the other. But the cardinal had already chosen the day he would go to war with Austria – the day that Gustavus Adolphus marched into Germany. The cardinal turned the question from peace to war, asking Victor-Amadeus, "What price would the Duke of Savoy ask to declare for France, open his borders, and add ten thousand men to the army of the king?" Since all possibilities, and this one in particular, had been foreseen by Charles-Emmanuel, Victor-Amadeus was ready with his answer: "It would take the King of France to attack Milan and the Republic of Genoa, with which Charles-Emmanuel is at odds, and to refuse all proposals of peace from the House of Austria until Milan is conquered and Genoa destroyed." Here was a new proposal indeed, one that showed how the situation had evolved since the Treaty of Susa. The cardinal appeared surprised by this proposal but quickly replied, in terms preserved for us by historians of the time: "What's this, Prince? My king sends his army to ensure the freedom of Italy but the Duke of Savoy wants him to use it to destroy the Republic of Genoa, with whom His Majesty has no quarrel? France will willingly use its good offices and authority to negotiate with the Genoese to give satisfaction to the Duke of Savoy but declaring war on them is out of the question. Now, if the Spaniards put the king into the position of having to attack Milan, he'll probably do it, and pursue it with all rigor – and the Duke of Savoy can rest assured that once he prevailed, the king wouldn't keep any domains that didn't belong to him. The king, in the person of his minister, gives his word as to that." The proposal had been quite specific, and so was the reply. Victor-Amadeus, backed into a corner, asked for a few days to consult with his father. Three days later, in fact, he was back in Bunolonga. "My father," he said, "fears that my brother-in-law Louis will come to terms with the King of Spain before the aims of the war are achieved. Prudence prevents him from declaring for France unless the king commits not to lay down arms until Milan has fallen." Richelieu simply referred him back to the terms of the Treaty of Susa. Victor-Amadeus asked for more time to confer with his father, and returned again, saying "The Duke of Savoy is prepared to adhere to the terms of the treaty, provided the ten thousand infantry and one thousand horse he provides are used to help reduce the Republic of Genoa, that matter to be concluded before embarking on another." "And this is your final word?" asked the cardinal. "Yes, My Lord," replied Victor-Amadeus, rising from his seat. Richelieu rapped twice on a panel behind him, and Latil appeared. The cardinal called him over and whispered, "The prince's leaving. Go ahead and make sure he receives no royal honours in passing." Latil bowed and hurried out. The cardinal was satisfied: he knew an order given to Latil was as good as done. "Prince," the cardinal said to Victor-Amadeus, "I had for the Duke of Savoy, on the behalf of my master the king, all the regard a King of France can have for one who is not only a fellow sovereign but an uncle. Add to this all the esteem the king has for Your Highness, who as the husband of his sister is no less than a brother. But in my double role as His Majesty's minister and generalissimo, I would fail in my duty if I didn't see Savoy severely punished for refusing to live up to its word. It's an insult to the king, and the Army of France won't stand for it. It's seventeenth March." He drew out his watch. "Today, on seventeenth March as of six-forty-five in the afternoon, France and Savoy are at war. Take care! Because we mean business." And he bowed to the prince, who then left him. Two sentries stood watch outside Cardinal Richelieu's door, halberds on their shoulders. Victor-Amadeus passed between them without either appearing to notice him or pay him the least regard. Other soldiers, who were playing dice on the stairs, didn't even pause their game to get out of his way. "Ah," murmured Victor-Amadeus. "So they've been ordered to insult me!" If he had any doubts that such was the case, they were settled at the gate where the guards completely ignored him. Prince Victor-Amadeus had scarcely left before the cardinal had summoned the Count of Moret, the Duke of Montmorency, and the Marshals Créquy, la Force, and Schomberg. He explained the situation to them and asked for their advice. All were of the opinion that since the cardinal had committed them to war, they must go to war. Ordering them to prepare to mobilize the following day, the cardinal dismissed them, keeping only Montmorency behind. Once they were alone, he asked, "Prince, would you like to be constable tomorrow?" Montmorency's eyes flashed. "My Lord," he said, "the way Your Eminence phrases the question makes me wonder how that might be possible." "It's not only possible, it's easy. We've declared war on the Duke of Savoy, as he'll learn at Rivoli Castle within two hours. Take fifty well-mounted cavaliers, gain entrée to the castle, seize the duke and his son, and bring them here. Once we have them, we can do as we like with them. They'll soon see reason." "My Lord," said Montmorency, bowing, "just last week, in that same castle, I was the guest of the duke as your ambassador. It would be dishonourable to return there today as an enemy." The cardinal shrugged. "You're right," he said. "One doesn't propose such things to a Montmorency. This is a mission for a swashbuckler – and I have one at hand. But I'll remember your refusal, my dear Duke. The next time you wish a favour, remember that I'd asked one of you." Montmorency bowed and departed. "That was a mistake," the cardinal murmured thoughtfully as the door closed behind the prince. "Here is the price of relying so much on men of lower rank. Anyone else would have accepted the task but men of high blood are too haughty. But he has an honourable heart, and though he doesn't like me, I'd trust him and his honest dislike before others who boast of devotion." Then, knocking twice on the panel, "Étienne!" he called. "Étienne!" Latil appeared. "Do you know Rivoli Castle?" the cardinal asked. "The château a league outside Turin?" "Yes. Right now it houses the Duke of Savoy and his son." Latil smiled. "So it's time to strike," he said. "Meaning?" "To take the two of them." "You'd do that?"

“For God’s sake! Would I?”  
“How many men would you need?”  
“Fifty, well-armed and well-mounted.”  
“Pick your men and your horses. If you succeed, there’s fifty thousand *livres* in it for the men, and twenty-five thousand for you.”  
“The honour of the deed would be quite enough but if My Lord insists on adding to that, I won’t argue.”  
“Do you have anything else to say?”  
“Just one thing, My Lord.”  
“What’s that?”

“When undertaking a task like this one, one always hears ‘If you succeed,’ never ‘If you don’t succeed.’ But no matter how well such a mission is performed, how skilfully managed, one of those unexpected events could occur that thwart even the greatest of captains. Then the men, through no fault of their own, get nothing, and that’s discouraging. Promise us something even if we don’t succeed, no matter how little.”  
“You’re right, Étienne,” said the cardinal, “and that’s good advice. A thousand *livres* per man and twenty-five thousand for you if you succeed – and if you don’t, two crowns per man, and twenty-five for you.”  
“Then here’s how I see it, My Lord: it’s seven o’clock now, and it’ll take three hours to get to Rivoli, so we assail the castle at ten. The rest is up to luck, good or bad.”  
“Go, my dear Latil, and rest assured I believe that if you don’t succeed, it won’t be your fault.”  
“It’s in God’s hands, My Lord!”  
Latil took three strides toward the door, then turned around. “Has My Lord mentioned this mission to anyone else?”  
“Only one person.”  
“*By the Belly of the Grey Saint*, as King Henry IV used to say. That cuts our chances by fifty percent!”  
Richelieu frowned and said to himself, “If he turns this down, I must warn him that I’ll take it hard.” Then to Latil: “Well, go anyway – and if you fail, I’ll know that I’m the one to blame.” 10 minutes later, a troop of 50 cavalry led by Étienne Latil rode past the window of the cardinal who watched them go from behind the blinds.

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The Empty Lair

Though in the shadow of a powerful and determined enemy who might declare war on him at any moment, it wasn’t the Duke of Savoy’s style to show fear; so while his son Victor-Amadeus was at Bunolonga negotiating with Richelieu, at Rivoli Castle the duke was throwing a grand party. On the evening of March 15, the prettiest women in Turin and the most elegant gentlemen of Savoy and Piedmont were all gathered at Rivoli that was brilliantly lit, streams of light shining from the windows in all four directions. The Duke of Savoy, charming, witty, and spry, despite his sixty-seven years, laughed and revelled with the vigour of a young man, and was the first to flatter his daughter-in-law, in whose honour the party was given. But occasionally, an almost imperceptible frown briefly darkened his face. He was thinking the French were only eight or ten leagues away – the French, who had forced the impregnable Pass of Susa within a matter of hours. Even now his fate hung in the balance in the secret struggle between Cardinal Richelieu and Victor-Amadeus, his son. Charles-Emmanuel had made excuses for his son’s absence, saying he was expected back that evening – and meanwhile, he counted every passing moment. Indeed, at about nine o’clock, the prince appeared in splendid attire. A smile on his lips, he greeted Princess Christine first, then the ladies, then those Savoyard and Piedmontese great nobles whom he honoured with his friendship. Finally he approached Duke Charles-Emmanuel and, kissing his hand, spoke to him in a low voice as if inquiring about his health. His face was calm but what he said was, “France has declared war on us; hostilities begin tomorrow. We must take care.”  
The duke replied in the same tone, “Leave after the quadrille and give orders to concentrate the troops at Turin. As for me, I’ll dispatch the governors of Forts Viellane, Fenestrelle, and Pinerolo to their posts.”  
Then he waved his hand to the musicians, who had paused when the prince had entered, and gave the signal to resume the dance. Victor-Amadeus took the hand of his wife, Princess Christine, and without saying a word about the rupture between Savoy and France, led off the royal quadrille. Meanwhile, Charles-Emmanuel approached the governors of Piedmont’s three main forts and ordered them to leave at once for their citadels. The governors of Viellane and Fenestrelle had come without their wives, so they had but to saddle their horses and don their cloaks to follow the duke’s command. This wasn’t the case with Count Urbain of Espalomba; not only had he brought his wife but she was dancing the quadrille with Prince Victor-Amadeus. “My Lord,” he said, “your order won’t be easy to follow.”  
“And why is that, Sir?”  
“Because the countess and I came here from Turin dressed for the ball, in a hired carriage that doesn’t come from Pinerolo.”  
“The wardrobe of my son and daughter-in-law will provide you with everything you need, and you can take a coach from my stables.”  
“I’m not sure the countess could undertake such a journey without risk to her health.”  
“In that case, leave her here and go alone.”  
The count gave Charles-Emmanuel a strange look. “Yes,” he said, “I see how such an arrangement would be convenient for Your Highness.”  
“Any arrangement is convenient for me, Count, so long as you depart without wasting a minute.”  
“And the dishonour, My Lord?” the count demanded.  
“Where is the dishonour, my dear Count, in ordering a commander to his post?” replied the duke. “On the contrary, it’s a proof of confidence.”  
“That’s no explanation for this sudden departure.”  
“A sovereign doesn’t have to answer to his subjects,” Charles-Emmanuel said, “especially when these subjects are in his service and he has orders for them. Now I order you to go at once to Pinerolo, and if the town and citadel are attacked you are to defend it until no stone is left standing upon another. You and Madam may ask for whatever you need, and it will be provided for you at once.”  
“Should I take the countess out of the quadrille, or wait until it’s finished?”  
“You can wait until it’s finished.”  
“Very well, My Lord. When the quadrille is over, we’ll depart.”  
“Go quickly, Count, and put up a strong defence.”  
And the Duke of Savoy walked away, ignoring the oaths Count Urbain swore under his breath. When the quadrille was finished, the count related the order he’d been given to his astonished countess. They left the hall by one door, while Victor-Amadeus went out the other. The governors of Viellane and Fenestrelle, who’d had no part in the quadrille, were already gone. The duke whispered a few words to his daughter-in-law, who followed the count and countess. Outside the hall, she assigned one of her maids to assist the countess, then returned to the fête to organise the next quadrille in place of Prince Victor-Amadeus. Ten minutes later the prince was back in the ballroom, visibly paler than when he’d left. He went up to Duke Charles-Emmanuel, linked arms with him, and walked him to a window embrasure. There he gave the duke a note. “Read this, Father,” he said.  
“What is it?” asked the duke.  
“A note that was just handed to me by a dust-covered courier who arrived on a horse coated with sweat. I tried to give him a purse full of gold for his effort but he refused it, saying ‘I serve a master who doesn’t allow others to pay his servants.’ And with that, having given his horse no more time to catch his breath than it took to say those words, he galloped off.” As he said this, Duke Charles-Emmanuel was reading the note. It was short:  
*A guest who was hospitably received by His Highness the Duke of Savoy takes this opportunity to pay for such hospitality by warning him that he and Prince Victor-Amadeus must depart Castle Rivoli this very night. There’s not a moment to lose. To horse, and ride for Turin!*  
“No signature?” asked the duke.  
“None. But it’s obviously from the Duke of Montmorency or the Count of Moret.”  
“What livery was the courier wearing?”  
“No livery – but I thought I recognised him as one named Galaor who accompanied the duke.”  
“That must be it. Well?”  
“Your opinion, My Lord?”  
“My opinion, my dear Victor, is that we should follow this advice. Nothing bad will happen if we do but we might suffer a terrible turn if we don’t.”  
“Then let’s be on our way.”  
The duke strode to the centre of the ballroom, still smiling. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I’ve just received information that I must respond to immediately, with the aid of my son. But don’t concern yourselves – dance on, have fun, my palace is yours. Princess Christine, will you do the honours?”  
Though couched as an invitation, it was a command. The ladies and gentlemen parted into two lines and bowed as the two princes passed, smiling and waving. Once out of the ballroom, all pretence was abandoned. Father and son summoned their valets, who threw cloaks over their shoulders as they hurried down the stairs. They crossed the courtyard and went straight to the stables, saddled the two fastest coursers, slipped pistols into their holsters, mounted, and rode. They launched themselves at a gallop down the road to Turin, only a league away. Meanwhile, Latil and his fifty men were also at the gallop along the road from Susa to Turin. Where the road forks, and one branch, lined with poplars, heads toward Rivoli Castle, Latil, who rode in the lead, thought he saw a shadow approaching. On his side, the rider – for the shadow was that of a mounted cavalier – came to a halt, examining the band of riders with the same curiosity the riders were examining him. Latil was about to cry “Who goes there?” when he stopped himself, for fear that his French-accented Italian would betray him. He decided to ride forward alone, and urged his horse toward the rider who stood in the road like an equestrian statue. But as soon as the shadowy rider saw him coming, he drove in his spurs and left the Rivoli road, galloping cross-country toward the road to Susa. Latil rode to cut him off, shouting, “Halt!”  
But the shadow just rode all the faster. As they converged, Latil considered that the rider was now within pistol range but two ideas gave him pause: first, the rider might not be an enemy; and second, a pistol shot this close to Rivoli might raise the alarm. They reached the road but the unknown rider was three lengths ahead of Latil, and he was better mounted; Latil pursued but the rider not only maintained his lead, he increased it. After five minutes, Latil gave up the pursuit and returned to his detachment. The darkness of night swallowed the rider and even the sound of his horse, leaving nothing behind. Latil, shaking his head, resumed his position at the head of the troop. The event might mean nothing but to Latil it was deathly important. He said to himself, “I’d wager anything the duke’s been forewarned. Why would a cavalier riding from Rivoli be so desperate to hide his identity? Why would he ride to Susa, unless he’d come from Susa in the first place? By the sound of its breathing, his horse had clearly ridden a long way already.”  
His suspicions were further confirmed when, as they approached Rivoli, Latil saw not one but two shadowy riders on the road ahead, who like the first stopped when they saw the approaching troop. But the pause was only momentary before they launched themselves in the opposite direction from the first rider, that is, toward Turin. Latil didn’t even consider pursuing them, as they rode fresh, first-rate horses whose hooves barely seemed to touch the ground. There was nothing to do but continue on to the château, whose windows glowed on the near horizon. But Latil was convinced that he knew the explanation for his encounters with these riders. In ten minutes they were at the château gates. There was no sign of warning or alert. Latil rode around the compound, assigning six troopers to each door, and then, at the head of the final half-dozen, he rushed, sword in hand, up the stairs to the main doorway. At the sight of armed men in French uniforms rushing into the ballroom, the astonished musicians abruptly stopped. The dancers, frightened, turned this way and that but soldiers were coming in through every door. Latil, having ordered his men to hold the doors, advanced, hat in one hand and sword in the other, toward the centre of the room. But Princess Christine met him halfway. “Sir,” she said to him, “I presume you come to call upon my father-in-law, the Duke of Savoy, and my husband, the Prince of Piedmont. I regret to say they’re not here, having left for Turin no more than fifteen minutes ago, where I anticipate by now they’ve safely arrived. If you or your men are in need of refreshments, well, Rivoli Castle is famous for its hospitality, and I’d be happy to do the honours for an officer and soldiers of my brother Louis XIII.”  
“Madam,” Latil replied, summoning all his memories of the old royal court so as to reply properly to the wife of the Prince of Piedmont, daughter-in-law of the Duke of Savoy and sister of his king, “we visit solely to bring news of Their Highnesses. We met them no more than ten minutes ago, on their way, as you did the honour to inform me, to Turin – and the way they spurred their horses, they were eager to get there. As for the hospitality you do us the honour to offer us, we must decline as we are obliged to report our news to the cardinal.”

And then, bowing to Princess Christine with an elegance one might find surprising in a mercenary captain, he withdrew. “Come on,” he said, rejoining his men. “As I suspected, they’re forewarned and the lair’s empty!”

The Count of Moret offers to take a Mule & a Million to Fort Pinerolo

When he heard the results of Latil’s expedition, Richelieu was furious. Like Latil, he had no doubt but that the Duke of Savoy had been forewarned. But who could have alerted him? The cardinal had shared his plan with only one person, the Duke of Montmorency. Was he the one who’d warned Charles-Emmanuel? That seemed consistent with his exaggerated devotion to chivalry. But such chivalry on behalf of an enemy verged on treason to the crown. Richelieu didn’t reveal his suspicions about Montmorency, for he knew Latil was attached to the duke and to the Count of Moret but he asked a number of probing questions about this shadowy cavalier glimpsed in the dark. Latil described what he’d seen: a young man aged seventeen or eighteen, wearing a large plumed hat and wrapped in a dark blue or black cloak, whose horse was as black as the night with which it had merged. After Latil left, the cardinal sent to ask what orders the sentries had followed between eight and ten that night, and was told that no one could enter or leave the Susa garrison without the password that that evening was “Susa and Savoy.” Of course, the password was known to all the high officers: Marshals Schomberg, Créqui, and La Force, the Count of Moret, the Duke of Montmorency, and so forth. The cardinal called the sentries in and questioned them. From Latil’s description, one of them recognised a youth who had gone out, giving the correct password. He’d left by the gate toward France rather than the gate to Italy but that didn’t mean anything: once outside the gate and into the town, he could easily have changed direction. So they discovered at daybreak, when they found the tracks of a horse. The trail went out the France gate, around the town of Susa, and joined the road to Italy a mile beyond. The cardinal lost no time in delays. The day before, he’d declared war to Victor-Amadeus; so by ten o’clock, his investigations having been concluded, he gave the order to march, and the drums and trumpets sounded. The cardinal watched as the army passed, four corps commanded by Schomberg, La Force, Créqui, and the Duke of Montmorency. Among the officers standing near him was Latil. Montmorency was accompanied, as always, by a large entourage of gentlemen and pages. Among these pages was Galaor, wearing a wide plumed hat and mounted on a black horse. As the young man passed, Richelieu touched Latil on the shoulder. “Maybe,” said the latter, “but I couldn’t swear to it.”

Richelieu frowned, and his eyes flashed in the direction of the duke. Putting his horse into a gallop, he rode to the head of the column, preceded only by the vanguard known as the *Lost Children*. He was dressed in his usual wartime attire, a steel breastplate over a richly embroidered golden doublet. A feather floated from his broad felt hat. As they might meet the enemy at any moment, two pages went before him, one carrying his gauntlets and the other his helmet. At his side, two other pages led a rare and powerful war-horse. Cavois and Latil, the captain and lieutenant of his guards, followed close behind. After an hour’s ride, they reached a small river which the cardinal had had scouted out the previous day. Confident of his information, he was the first to ride into the water, and arrived without accident on the other side. A heavy rain began to fall as the army crossed the river but the cardinal, nothing daunted, continued his march. It would have been impossible to shelter an army in the few isolated houses that lined the road but the soldiers, disregarding the possible, began to complain and wish the cardinal to the Devil. These complaints were loud enough that the cardinal could scarcely miss them. “Well!” said the cardinal, turning to Latil. “Do you hear that, Étienne?”

“What, My Lord?”

“What those clowns are saying about me.”

“Well, My Lord,” said Latil, laughing, “it’s the custom of suffering soldiers to wish their commanders to the Devil – but the Devil has no hold on a Prince of the Church.”

“Perhaps, when I’m wearing my red robes – but not when I wear the uniform of His Majesty. Ride down the ranks, Latil and advice them to be more patient.”

Latil passed down the ranks, and then returned to his place by the cardinal. “Well?” asked the cardinal.

“Well, My Lord, they’ve decided on patience.”

“Because you told them I was unhappy with them?”

“Not exactly, My Lord.”

“What did you tell them then?”

“That Your Eminence was grateful for how they endured the hardships of the road, so much so that when they arrive at Rivoli, they’ll be issued a double ration of honey.”

The cardinal gnawed at his moustache for a moment. “You may have hit on the answer,” he said.

And indeed, the murmurs had subsided. Besides, the weather was clearing, and under a sunbeam in the distance, they could see the shining roofs of Rivoli Castle and the village that clustered around it. Marching without pause, they arrived at Rivoli in just three hours. “Would Your Eminence like me to direct the distribution of honey?” Latil asked.

“Since you promised these buffoons a double ration, we must give it to them – but it must be paid for in cash.”

“Indeed, they must have it, My Lord but ... cash?”

“Why, yes. Everything costs money.” The cardinal stopped, drew a tablet from his saddle, and wrote on the top sheet:

*The Treasurer will pay Sir Latil the sum of one thousand livres, charged to my account.*

Then he signed it. Latil took the note and went on ahead. When the army entered Rivoli three quarters of an hour later, the soldiers were struck dumb to see, in every tenth doorway, an open honey barrel surrounded by glasses. Their mute astonishment changed to loud satisfaction, the complaints about water were converted to cheers for the honey, and cries of “*Long live the cardinal!*” rang down the ranks. Amid this ovation, Latil rejoined the cardinal. “Well, My Lord?” he said.

“Well, Latil, I think you understand soldiers better than I do.”

*“For the love of God! Each to his own! I know soldiers because I’ve lived among soldiers. Your Eminence understands churchmen, having lived among men of the Church.”*

“Latil,” said the cardinal, placing his hand on the swashbuckler’s shoulder, “if there’s one thing I’m learning by living among soldiers, it’s that the more one lives among churchmen, the less one knows about anything.”

Having arrived at Rivoli Castle, the cardinal summoned his principal commanders. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I think this castle is large enough to provide quarters for all of you. Gentlemen Montmorency and Moret were guests here of the Duke of Savoy, and can show you around. In one hour, we’ll convene for a war council. Be prompt; we have important matters to discuss.”

The marshals and high officers, soaked to the bone and as eager to warm up as the soldiers, promised to be punctual and hurried away. One hour later, the seven high commanders were gathered before Cardinal Richelieu in the audience chamber that just the day before had belonged to the Duke of Savoy. These seven were the Duke of Montmorency, the Marshals Schomberg, Créqui, La Force, and Thoiras, Sir d’Auriac, and the Count of Moret. The cardinal stood, gestured for silence, rested both hands on the table, and said, “Gentlemen, we have an open gate into Piedmont. This gate, Susa Pass, was unlocked with the price of our blood. However, when dealing with a man as devious as Charles-Emmanuel, one gate isn’t enough – we need two. Here is my plan of campaign: before pushing further into Italy, I want to open another gate between Piedmont and Dauphiné so we can bring in further reinforcements, and in case we need a route for a withdrawal. For this purpose, I propose to seize Fort Pinerolo. “You know, gentlemen, how the feeble Henry III ran afoul of the Duke of Savoy in his youth. Charles, the Duke of Mantua, whose claim we cross the Alps to support – his father, the old Duke of Nevers, Governor of Pinerolo and general of the armies of France in Italy, used his powers of eloquence to persuade Henry III to agree to a terrible mistake. Nevers foresaw the day that his son might lay claim to the Duchy of Mantua, and would want to control the passes to France. So he persuaded Henry III to trade away the governorship of Pinerolo in hopes it would fall to Mantua – despite the fact that this was not in France’s best interest. So, Gentlemen, it falls to us to return Fort Pinerolo to the crown of France. Should we attempt this by force, or by deception? If we choose force, it will cost us both time and troops. So I prefer deception. Philip of Macedon said there’s no fort so impregnable it won’t open its gates to a mule loaded with gold. I have the mule, and I have the gold but I lack the man or the means to get it inside. Help me out: we need a way to turn a million in gold into the keys to this fortress.”

As usual, the question was opened up to the floor, everyone having the opportunity to answer in order of seniority. Each commander asked for twenty-four hours to think about it, until they reached the Count of Moret, who was youngest and therefore the last to speak. No one expected him to say anything, so he surprised everyone when he stood up, bowed to the cardinal, and said, “If Your Eminence will prepare the mule and million, I’ll undertake to get those keys. All I’ll need are three days.”

The Foster-Brother

The day after the council at Rivoli Castle, a young peasant named Gaetano, aged about twenty-four, dressed like a mountaineer from Aosta Valley and speaking with a Piedmontese accent, appeared at the gates of Fort Pinerolo at about eight in the evening. He said he was the brother of the Countess of Espalomba’s chambermaid, Signora Jacintha, and asked to see her. When informed of this by a soldier of the garrison, Signora Jacintha gave a little squeal of surprise that could easily have been mistaken for a cry of joy. Then, as if she had first to get her mistress’s permission in order to respond to a summons of family at the fortress gate, she ran into the countess’s bedroom. Five minutes later, she left by the door she’d gone in, while the countess darted out the opposite door and down the stairs to a charming little private garden that happened to be overlooked by the windows of Jacintha’s room. Once in the garden, the countess made her way to its most secluded corner, a bower shaded by lemon, orange, and pomegranate trees. Meanwhile, Jacintha ran down to the courtyard like a sister in a hurry to see her beloved brother, tenderly crying out “Gaetano! Dear Gaetano!”

The young man threw herself into her arms, just as Count Urbain of Espalomba returned from reviewing his sentries. He was in time to see the happy embrace of the young people, as they exclaimed that they hadn’t seen each other for nearly two years, ever since Jacintha had left her mother’s house to follow her mistress. Jacintha approached the count with a pretty curtsy and asked permission to host her brother. He had, it seemed, some urgent business in the area, though he hadn’t yet had time to explain it. The count asked to speak with Gaetano and, after a few words, satisfied with the lad’s demeanour, gave permission for him to stay in the fortress. Gaetano assured him that he wouldn’t be there long, forty-eight hours at the most. Then the count, deciding he’d spent enough time with these commoners, dismissed them and went inside to his chambers. Gaetano remarked that the count appeared to be in a sour mood, a fact that seemed to interest him more than one might expect from a farmer who had little to do with the affairs of the great nobles. Jacintha told him Urbain was angry with his sovereign, on two counts. First, for the arrogant way the Duke of Savoy had courted his wife in the very presence of her husband; and second, for the abrupt order to shut himself up in this citadel and defend it to the death against all comers. Count Urbain had said to his wife, in Jacintha’s presence that no noble of Spain, Austria, or France would stand for what he had to suffer in Piedmont – and neither should he. Gaetano seemed so pleased with this news that, when they turned a dark corner of the corridor, as if in a surge of affection for his sister, he took Jacintha in his arms and gave her a big kiss on each cheek. Jacintha’s chamber was off that very corridor; she opened her door, ushered her “brother” inside, and shut it behind him. Gaetano said happily, “Here I am at last! And now, dear Jacintha, where is your mistress?”

“What? I thought you’d come to see me!” the young woman laughed.

“For you ... and her,” said the Count of Moret, for it was indeed him. “But mostly for her. I’ve political matters to arrange with your mistress and as you’re the maid of a woman of affairs, you know business comes first.”

“And where would you like to arrange these important matters?”

“Here in your room, if it’s all right with you.”

“What! In front of me?”

“Well, no. We have full confidence in you, my dear Jacintha but some matters are too dangerous to share.”

“Then what am I to do?”

“You, Jacintha, will sit outside your mistress’s bed, where the curtains are drawn due to her sudden indisposition, keeping watch to make sure her husband doesn’t intrude and wake her.”

“Ah, Sir Count,” Jacintha said with a sigh, “I had no idea you were such a clever diplomat.”

“But I am, as you see. And for a diplomat, nothing is more precious than time, so tell me quickly – where is your mistress?”

Jacintha sighed even more deeply, opened the window, and said, “See for yourself.”

The count then remembered the private garden Matilda had told him about, where she so often dreamed of him. She had spoken of a bower of pomegranate, orange, and lemon trees, where it was shady even in daytime, and more so at night. Jacintha had scarcely opened the window before he’d leaped to the ledge and down into the garden. Then, as Jacintha wiped away a tear she’d been unable to keep back, she watched him disappear into the little wood whispering, loudly, “Matilda! Matilda!”

At the sound of her name, Matilda instantly recognised the voice that spoke it and darted toward it, crying “Antoine!”

As the lovers met, they threw themselves into each other’s arms, embracing against an orange tree that rained a flurry of blossoms on their heads. There they remained for a time, if not silent, at least not quite talking, just uttering the vague murmurs that, on the lips of lovers, say so much without saying a word. Finally both, as if awaking from a lovely land of dreams, said at the same time: “It’s you!” And in a single kiss, both answered, “Yes!”

Then, as reality returned, the countess cried, “My husband?”

“All taken care of as planned – he took me for Jacintha’s brother and has admitted me into the fortress.”



Then they sat down side by side and hand in hand. The time had come for explanations. Between lovers, explanations can take a long time. They started them in the garden but then took them into Jacintha’s room, while Jacintha, as arranged, spent the night in her mistress’s bedroom. Around eight the next morning, a gentle knock sounded on the door of Count Urbain’s bedchamber. He was already up and dressed, having been awakened at six o’clock by a message from Turin announcing that the French were at Rivoli and appeared to be in preparations to besiege Pinerolo. The count was anxious, and showed it in the abrupt way he barked “Enter!”

The door opened, and to his amazement it was the countess. “It’s you, Matilda!” he said, rising. “Have you heard the news? Is it to that that I owe the pleasure of this unexpected early visit?” “What news, Sir?”

“Only that we’re probably about to be besieged!”

“Yes, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“How and when did you learn this news?”

“Just last night, as I’ll explain. It kept me awake all night long.”

“As I can tell from your complexion, Madam – you look tired and pale.”

“I was waiting impatiently for morning so I could speak to you.”

“Couldn’t you have awakened me, Madam? The news was important enough.”

“But it stirred up such a tumult of doubts and worries, Sir that I wanted to talk with you about the situation before sharing what I’d heard.”

“I don’t understand, Madam, and I confess that I can’t think how a woman heard secret news about a matter of politics and war…”

“Oh, I know you think we’re not clever enough to think about such things.”

“And you think that’s wrong,” said the count, smiling.

“I do, because women are capable of good advice.”

“So, if I asked for your opinion on our situation, what advice would you give me?”

“First of all,” the countess said, “I’d remind you of how shabbily the Duke of Savoy has treated us.”

“No need of that, Madam – his disrespect was plain and clear, and I’ll never forget it.”

“I’d remind you of the festivities for the ambassadors at Turin, during which our sovereign made proposals to me that were an insult to both of us.”

“I remember them, Madam.”

“I would remind you of the brusque and uncivil way in which he ordered you to leave Rivoli and go to Pinerolo to be butchered by the French!”

“I haven’t forgotten it, and I’m waiting for the chance to prove it to him.”

“Well, that chance has come. You, Sir, are in one of those situations where a decisive man can be the arbiter of his own destiny and choose between two futures: servitude under a harsh and arrogant master, or freedom with dignity and an ample fortune.”

The count looked at his wife in astonishment. “I confess, Madam, I have no idea where you’re going with this.”

“I will speak clearly about the matter. Jacintha’s brother is in the service of the Count of Moret.”

Now the count was doubly astonished. “The natural son of King Henry IV?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And so, Madam?”

“So, the day before yesterday, Cardinal Richelieu declared before the Count of Moret that he’d give a million in gold to anyone who would bring him the keys to Pinerolo!”

The count’s eyes narrowed with greed. “A million,” he said. “I’d like to see that.”

“You can see it whenever you like, Sir!”

The count rubbed his hands together. “A million,” he whispered. “You’re right, Madam, this is a matter worthy of discussion! But how do you know this money is really … available?”

“That’s easily explained. The Count of Moret took charge of the affair and sent Gaetano ahead with orders to test the waters.”

“And that’s why Gaetano arrived to see his sister last night?”

“Exactly. His sister brought the proposal to me, so if it miscarried I’d be the only one who was compromised.”

“How could it miscarry?” the count asked.

“It seemed possible … you might refuse it.”

The count was thoughtful for a moment. “What guarantees am I offered?”

“Cash.”

“But, then, what guarantees would they ask of me?”

“A hostage.”

“A hostage? Who?”

“Me. It makes sense that you’d send your wife away from a fortress on the verge of a siege where you’re planning to defend to the death. You can say you’re sending me to my mother at Selimo but actually let me know where to meet you later in France – since I assume you’ll negotiate for a safe haven there.”

“And how will the million be paid?”

“In gold.”

“When?”

“As soon as, in exchange for the money Gaetano brings you, you sign an order of capitulation and hand me over as the hostage.”

“Send him. When Gaetano returns tonight with the gold, be ready to go with him.” That night at eight o’clock, the Count of Moret, still under the name of Gaetano, entered the gates of Fort Pinerolo with a mule loaded with gold, as he’d promised Cardinal Richelieu. And he left with the countess as he’d promised himself. The capitulation came two days later, after the cardinal had placed the fortress under siege. The garrison was allowed to leave with their lives and all their baggage.

## 141 The Eagle & the Fox

Two days later, Cardinal Richelieu occupied Fort Pinerolo just as Charles-Emmanuel was leading troops from Turin to lift the siege. When the latter was only three leagues from Turin, his scouts informed him that a body of eight hundred men under the Savoy banner was coming to meet him. He sent one of his officers forward on reconnaissance, and he reported back that, to his astonishment, the troops were the garrison of Pinerolo returning to Turin. The fortress had surrendered. This news was a terrible blow to Charles-Emmanuel. He paused, turned pale, put a hand to his forehead, and then called the commander of his cavalry. “Charge that rabble,” he said, pointing to the poor devils who’d had no choice but to leave their garrison, since the governor had surrendered it. “And if possible, leave no one standing.”

The order was executed to the letter: three-quarters of the wretches were put to the sword. The fall of Pinerolo, the cause of which was still unknown to the Duke of Savoy, forced him to reconsider his position. It was disastrous. All the tricks and intrigue of a reign of nearly forty-five years – a reign composed entirely of tricks and intrigue – had come to this: the army of a terrible enemy was in the heart of his domain. His only recourse now was to throw himself into the arms of the Spaniards and Austrians, begging for aid from Spinola – a Genoese, and thus an enemy – or Wallenstein – a Bohemian, and thus a barbarian. One must bend before the iron hand of necessity. The duke sent to Spinola, the Spanish commander-in-chief, and to Collalto, the German commander in Italy, asking them for aid against the French. But Spinola, that canny warrior, was camped in Milan, from which he’d been keeping an eye on Charles-Emmanuel; he hadn’t the least bit of sympathy for that intriguing and ambitious princeling, who had so many times, through his deceptions and reversals, caused Spinola to draw his sword and then put it back in its sheath. As for Collalto, he had but a single goal in Italy: equip and enrich his army and himself, and as a climax to the campaign, like a true condottiere, to take and pillage Mantua. Men of this stamp were understandably little moved by the pleas of the Duke of Savoy. Spinola declared that he couldn’t divide his army, as he needed all his troops for his operations in Montferrat. Collalto was another matter. As we said, he could call on as many men as he needed from Germany. Wallenstein, at the head of the horde, led over a hundred thousand men – or rather was led by them – frightening Ferdinand with their power, sometimes even frightening himself, so he was willing to hire them out to whoever could afford them. So the negotiations between Collalto and Charles-Emmanuel were simply a matter of money; a few words and a large coffer of cash yielded the Duke of Savoy ten thousand men. It was only Charles-Emmanuel’s fervent hatred of France that allowed him to strike this terrible bargain, for he was bringing into Piedmont an enemy more terrible than the one he wanted to drive out. The French soldiers marched under rigorous discipline, plundering nothing but money; the Germans, on the contrary, stole everything they could carry. The Duke of Savoy soon realised that his best chance was to make one last attempt to come to terms with Richelieu. Thus, two days after taking Pinerolo, as the cardinal worked in the same chambers where Count Urbain had received his countess on the morning after Gaetano’s arrival, he was informed of the visit of a young officer in the service of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, the pope’s nephew and his envoy to Charles-Emmanuel. The cardinal immediately guessed what this was about. Latil had announced the officer, and as the cardinal had great confidence in both the courage and the insight of his lieutenant of the guards, he said “Come here.”

“At your command, Your Eminence,” Latil replied, touching his hat.

“Do you know this envoy from My Lord Barberini?”

“He’s new to me, Your Eminence.”

“And his name?”

“Also unknown to me.”

“To you but maybe not to me.”

Latil shook his head. “There aren’t many names I don’t recognise.”

“What’s he called?”

“Mazarino Mazarini, my Lord.”

“Mazarini! You’re right, I don’t recognise that name, Étienne. I don’t like to play if I can’t see my neighbour’s cards. Is he young?”

“Twenty-six; twenty-eight at the most.”

“Handsome or ugly?”

“Good-looking.”

“Useful to both a woman and a prelate! What part of Italy is he from?”

“By his accent, I’d say the nobility of Naples.”

“Sophisticated and subtle, then. Is he well groomed?”

“Like a coquette.”

“So, to summarise: twenty-eight years old, handsome, well turned out, sent by Cardinal Barberini, the nephew of Urban VIII – he’s either a useful idiot, or a capable agent, and we’ll soon know which. In either event, thanks to you, he won’t surprise me. Have him enter.”

Five minutes later, the door opened again and Latil announced, “Captain Mazarino Mazarini!”

The cardinal glanced at the young officer. He was just as Latil had described him. For his part, as he bowed respectfully to the cardinal, the young officer, whom we’ll call Mazarin – for that was his name after he became a French citizen in 1639, and thus he is known to the history of the realm – made as complete a survey of His Eminence as a man with a quick and incisive mind can do at a glance. We have once already, depicting Sully and Richelieu, showed the past meeting the present. Depicting Richelieu and Mazarin, we show the present meeting the future. But this time, instead of titling our chapter *The Two Eagles*, we must call it *The Eagle and the Fox*. The fox came in with his astute and sidelong glance. The eagle fixed him with his sharp and penetrating gaze. “My Lord,” said Mazarin, pretending to be flustered, “forgive my emotion in finding myself before the leading political genius of the century – I, a mere captain of the papal forces, and so young.”

“Indeed, Sir,” said the cardinal, “you’re only twenty-six?”



"Thirty, My Lord."

The cardinal laughed. "Sir," he said, "when I went to Rome to be consecrated as a bishop, Pope Paul V asked me my age, and like you, I exaggerated – I said I was twenty-five though I was only twenty-three. He made me a bishop, and after the ceremony I threw myself at his feet and asked for absolution. I confessed that I'd lied and added two years to my age, and he gave it to me. Would you like absolution?"

"I will ask for that, My Lord," replied Mazarin with a smile, "on the day I'm made a bishop."

"Is that your ambition?"

"I hope, Your Eminence, to someday be a cardinal."

"That won't be hard, with the resources you have."

"And what would My Lord say these resources are?"

"First, the mission you've been given that I'm told is on behalf of Cardinal Antonio Barberini."

"That rope is a thin one, since I'm merely a protégé of a nephew of His Holiness, and not of His Holiness himself."

"When I see a protégé of any of the nephews of His Holiness, I see the influence of His Holiness."

"However, you know what His Holiness thinks of his nephews."

"I recall that, in a moment of candour, he said that his first nephew, Francesco Barberini, when he left the Collegio Romano, was good only for saying paternosters; his brother Antonio, who sent you to me, was strong only in the stench of his trousers that is why he'd given him a cardinal's robe; that Cardinal Antonio, when young, was nicknamed Demosthenes because he stammered and got drunk three times a day; and last of all Taddeo, who was named Generalissimo of the Holy See, was better with a knitting needle than a sword."

"Ah, my Lord! I'll press that question no further. But having said what the uncle thinks of his nephews, I imagine you can tell me what the nephews think of their uncle."

"That the favours they receive from Urban VIII are legitimate rewards for the pains they took to get him elected. On the first round of voting, the future pontiff had no supporters. But the nephews bought off the Roman populace, paying them to shout beneath the windows of Castel Sant'Angelo, "Barberini as pope, or death and fire!" At the next round, he got five votes that was significant: only thirteen were needed. Two cardinals led the faction that was opposed to Barberini at all costs. Within three days, both cardinals passed away, one struck, they say, by apoplexy, while the other succumbed to an aneurysm. They were replaced by two Barberini supporters that gave him seven votes. Two other opposing cardinals died soon thereafter. Then came word of an outbreak of plague; everyone was eager to get out, so the conclave was rushed to its conclusion. In the end, Barberini had fifteen votes, two more than the thirteen he needed."

"That wasn't too high a price, considering the great reforms proclaimed as soon as His Holiness Urban VIII assumed the papal throne."

"Yes, indeed," said Richelieu. "He forbade the Recollects to wear sandals and pointed hoods in the manner of the Capuchin Order; he defended the renaming of the Carmelites as the Reformed Carmelites; he demanded that the Spanish Premonstratensians revert to their old, sombre habits and give up their proud new ones. He beatified two Theatine fanatics, André Avellino and Gaetano Tiane; a Barefoot Carmelite, Felix Cantalice; an Illuminatus, the Florentine Carmelite Corsini; two female ecstatic, Magdalena de Pazzi and Elizabeth, Queen of Portugal; and finally the blessed Saint Roch and his dog."

"Ah, well," said Mazarin. "It's clear Your Eminence is up to date on His Holiness, his nephews, and the Court of Rome."

"But you, who seem like a sensible man," said Richelieu, "why are you in the pay of such nonentities?"

"We start where we can with what we have, My Lord," said Mazarin with a sly smile.

"That's so," said Richelieu. "And now we've talked enough about them; what about us? What do you hope to get from me?"

"Something you'll never agree to."

"Why?"

"Because it's absurd."

"Why undertake such a mission?"

"Because it brings me before the man I admire most in the world."

"What is it, then?"

Mazarin shrugged. "I am to inform Your Eminence that due to the capture of Fort Pinerolo, the Duke of Savoy has become gentle as a lamb and supple as a serpent. Through this envoy, he begs Your Eminence, who is known for his generosity, if, for the sake of the king's sister the Princess of Piedmont, you would return Fort Pinerolo, as this would greatly advance the cause of peace."

"My dear Captain," replied Richelieu, "it's as well that you started out as you did, or I'd have wondered why you were fool enough to take such a mission, or if you simply thought that I was a fool. In any case: no! Giving up Fort Pinerolo was one of Henry III's greatest shames, and regaining it will be one of the glories of the reign of Louis XIII."

"Are those the terms in which you would have me state your reply?"

"No, not exactly."

"Then how, My Lord?"

"Like this: His Majesty has not yet learned of our conquest of Pinerolo; I can do nothing until he informs me whether he wishes to keep it, or prefers to give it up as a courtesy to his sister. I'm told the king has left Paris bound for Italy, so we must wait until he arrives in Lyon or Grenoble. At that time, we can enter into serious negotiations and perhaps render a more positive response."

"Rest assured, My Lord, I shall deliver your response verbatim. Just allow me, if you please, to give them some hope."

"What will they do with that?"

"Nothing – but it may be useful to me."

"Do you plan to stay in Italy?"

"No but I want to accomplish as much as I can before I leave."

"You don't think Italy has sufficient scope for your ambitions?"

"Italy is a shambles, and has been for centuries, My Lord. The last hundred years, as you know better than I, have been a disaster, the final collapse of all that remained from the feudal era. The two pillars of the Middle Ages, the Church and the Empire, are in disarray; once the pope and the emperor were the twin hands of God but since Rudolph of Hapsburg, the emperors have been a series of despots, and since the rise of Luther, the pope is no more than the leader of a sect."

Mazarin appeared hesitant to continue. "Go on," said Richelieu. "I'm listening."

"You, listening to me, My Lord! Until today I doubted myself but if *you* listen to me, I'll doubt myself no more. There are still Italians but Italy is no more. Spain holds four of its capitals, Naples, Milan, Florence, and Palermo. France wants Savoy and Mantua. Venice is in decline, and Genoa gets by from day to day. A frown from Philip IV or Ferdinand II can shake even the pope, successor though he is to Gregory VII. Every man of leadership calls for freedom but their voices lack strength; the nobles have crushed the people, and have themselves been reduced to mere courtiers. The nobility is powerless, seeing plots and invisible enemies on all sides, so they surround themselves with standing armies, with mercenaries and thugs, terrified of poison, cowering inside chain mail. Worse, they've handed over the Council of Trent to the Inquisition. The courage to fight in the open, to take the war to the battlefield, is gone, and with it the heart of the people. Maintaining order is everything, and order is the death of life."

"If you leave Italy, where will you go?"

"Wherever there are revolutions, My Lord: maybe England but probably France."

"If you come to France, will you seek me out?"

"I would be happy and proud to do that, My Lord."

"Sir Mazarini, I hope we shall meet again."

"That is my one desire, My Lord."

And the artful Neapolitan bowed to the ground and backed out of the chamber. "I had heard," the cardinal murmured, "that the rats were leaving the sinking ship; I didn't expect to meet one who might weather the storm." And he added softly: "This young captain will go a long way, especially if he trades his uniform for a cassock."

Then, rising, the cardinal stepped out into the antechamber, where he paced back and forth so thoughtfully that he almost overlooked the arrival of a courier, who gave him a letter from France. "Ah!" said the cardinal, seeing that the courier was covered in dust. "This letter must be urgent."

"Quite urgent, My Lord." Richelieu took the letter and opened it; the letter was brief but, as we shall see, was of some importance:

*Fontainebleau, 17 March 1630*

*The king has left for Lyon but got no farther than Troyes before he returned to Fontainebleau. Beware: he's in love!*

*P.S.: If the courier has arrived before the 25th, give him fifty pistoles!*

The cardinal read the letter over several times. He recognised the handwriting as that of Saint-Simon who wasn't in the habit of conveying false information. But this news seemed so unlikely, he was doubtful. "No matter," he said to Latil. "Get me the Count of Moret; this is rather in his line."

"Has My Lord forgotten," Latil laughed, "that the Sir Moret is escorting his beautiful hostage to Briançon?"

"Seek him out wherever he is and tell him to come without delay. I'm sending him to Fontainebleau with the news that we've taken Pinerolo!" Latil bowed and went out.

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*Aurora*

As we said in our previous chapters, King Louis XIII, harassed by his mother; fearful of his brother after granting him too much power; aware that Queen Anne, despite her disavowals, continued to meet and conspire with the Spanish ambassador – the king, separated from the cardinal, his political touchstone, had fallen into a melancholy that nothing could allay. What was especially irksome was the understanding, affirmed by the moral sense God gave him, that Richelieu was more essential to the survival of the State than he himself was. And yet everyone around him, with the exception of l'Angely, his fool, and Saint-Simon, whom he'd made grand equerry, either openly opposed this essential man, or conspired secretly against him. In every society throughout history, there has always been a conservative or conventional party that opposes all new ideas as violations of tradition. This party prefers the known routine to an unknown future: that is to say, progress. The adherents of the status quo, favouring stagnation over movement, death versus life, saw in Richelieu a revolutionary whose efforts to reform society would just cause unrest. And Richelieu was not just the enemy of the conservatives but of the entire Catholic world. Without him, Europe would have been at peace: Savoy, Spain, Austria, and Rome, all seated at the same table, would take turns plucking the leaves of the artichoke of Italy. Austria would have Mantua and Venice, Savoy would get Montferrat and Genoa, Spain would have Milan, Naples, and Sicily, and Rome would rule Tuscany and the minor duchies – while France, uninvited to the feast, could keep to herself on the other side of the Alps. Who opposed this peace?

Richelieu alone. That's what the pope implied; that's what Philip IV and the Emperor proclaimed; that's what the choir of Queens Marie de Médicis, Anne of Austria, and Henriette of England all sang. Beside these great voices who cried "Anathema!" against the minister were ranged lesser voices such as that of the Duke de Guise who'd hoped to lead the armies and had withdrawn, disgruntled to his governance of Provence; that of Créquy, the Governor of Dauphiné who thought he had the right to inherit the Sword of the Constable from his stepfather.

Lesdiguières and Montmorency who at different times had been promised that sword, the latter now afraid it had slipped from his hands since he'd refused to abduct the Duke of Savoy for the cardinal; and all the Great Nobles, such as Soissons, Condé, Conti, and Elbeuf, who hated the cardinal's systematic dismantling of the rights and privileges of the dukes and princes. Despite all these voices, or rather because of them, Louis was determined to leave Paris and keep the promise he'd made to his minister to join him in Italy. It goes without saying that this resolution that would place the king under the influence of the cardinal, had been opposed with great outcry by the two queens, who declared that if the king went to Italy, they had no choice but to follow. For this they had the usual excuse, their fear for the king's health. Despite these objections, the king had sent the cardinal notice of his intent to depart, and in fact had left for Lyon on 21 February. His route would take him through Champagne and Burgundy; the two queens and the King's Council were to join him in Lyon. But events didn't unfold quite so smoothly. The day after the king had left Paris, his brother Gaston, who until then hadn't dared to stray from his city of Orléans, left his post and marched with a great to-do to the capital, entering the city at about nine in the evening. He went straight to the palace of the queen mother, where she was holding court. Marie de Médicis rose, astonished, and, feigning anger, dismissed her ladies and shut herself up in her study with Gaston. Queen Anne joined them a few moments later, entering by a secret door. There they renewed the pact, continually proposed by Queen Marie, that Sir would marry Queen Anne in the event of the king's death. This marriage

would have been for Marie de Médicis a sort of prolonged regency, and she would gladly forgive God for carrying off her eldest son if that was her compensation. Blinded by her interests, Queen Marie was the only one who'd entered the pact honestly, as she couldn't see beyond her immediate desires. The Duke of Orléans had conflicting commitments to the Duke of Lorraine, whose sister he was in love with. He was in no hurry to marry his brother's widow, who was seven years his senior and who'd had, moreover, that deplorable affair with Buckingham. Queen Anne, for her part, hated Sir, despised him even more than she hated him, and didn't trust a word he said. Nevertheless, everyone repeated their promises. No one outside really knew what happened in that chamber, and gossips, unaware of the presence of Queen Anne, spread the rumour the next day that the Duke of Orléans had come to Paris to tell his mother of his undying love for Princess Marie de Gonzague, and to take advantage of his brother's absence to marry her. This report seemed confirmed when, immediately after the duke's arrival, Marie de Médicis sent for the young princess and had she detained at the Louvre, where she was kept, to all intents, a prisoner. For his part, Gaston loudly declared that such was his dearest desire. All the malcontents began to gather around him, insinuating that if, in the king's absence, he would openly declare against Richelieu, he would find himself at the head of a large and powerful party, one that would support him not only against the cardinal but against Louis XIII, whose fall might well follow that of his minister. Many chose to believe that Gaston had accepted these proposals. The Cardinal de La Valette, son of the Duke of Épermon, and the Cardinal of Lyon, that brother of the Duke Richelieu who led so bravely during the plague, arrived together to call upon the Duke of Orléans; the latter paid a thousand compliments to Cardinal de La Valette but the Cardinal of Lyon was left waiting in the hall without a word. The day after Gaston's arrival in Paris, the queen mother wrote to Louis XIII to inform him of his brother's unexpected return – though it had probably been expected by her. Of course, nothing was said of the meeting and pact between her son and her stepdaughter but she went on at length about Gaston's love for Marie de Gonzague. Louis, who was already in Troyes when he received the letter from Marie de Médicis, announced that he would return to Paris; but at Fontainebleau he was met by a letter informing him that Gaston, hearing news of his return, had withdrawn to his estate at Limours. Three days later came the news that the king, instead of continuing his journey south, would spend Easter at Fontainebleau. What was behind the king's latest decision?

We shall tell you.

The night of the meeting in Luxembourg Palace between the queen mother, Gaston d'Orléans, and Queen Anne, Madam de Fargis returned home from Spain, where she'd gone to support her husband's political efforts that had appeared shaky. With the war between France and Piedmont seemingly over, her support was no longer needed in Madrid, and Madam de Fargis, to the great satisfaction of Anne of Austria, had been recalled to Paris. When the queen saw her, she uttered a cry of joy, and as the lady ambassador knelt to kiss her hand, Anne lifted her up and embraced her.

"I see," Madam de Fargis said with a smile, "that my long absence hasn't cost me Your Majesty's good graces."

"On the contrary, dear heart," said the queen, "your absence just made me appreciate your loyalty all the more – and I've never had as much need for it as tonight."

"My arrival is timely, then, and I hope to prove to my sovereign that, far or near, I'll take care of her. But what's happened to make the presence of your humble servant so necessary?"

The queen told her of the king's departure, of Gaston's arrival, and of the pact they'd just renewed. "So Your Majesty trusts her brother-in-law?" asked Madam de Fargis.

"Not for an instant; this pact is meant to quell my suspicions and keep me waiting off to the side."

"Has the king grown worse?"

"Morally, yes – but physically, no!"

"To the king, morality is all, as you know, Madam."

"What shall I do?" asked the queen. Then, in a lower voice: "You know, my dear, the astrologers' claim that the king can't last beyond the next rise of Cancer."

"My lady," said Madam de Fargis, "you recall that I proposed a certain plan to Your Majesty."

The queen blushed. "But you know I could never go through with it," she said.

"That's a shame, because it's the surest method, and I even got the approval of the King of Spain, Philip IV."

"Dear God!"

"Or would you rather trust the word of a man who has never once kept his word?"

The queen was silent for a moment. "But, my dear Fargis," she said, resting her head on her confidante's chest, "even supposing I had the permission of my confessor – oh, just thinking about it makes me ashamed! – surely the plan you proposed should be the last resort, after we've tried everything else?"

"Will you allow me, dear mistress," said Madam de Fargis, taking advantage of the queen's position to drape an arm around her neck and gaze into her face, her eyes sparkling like diamonds, "to relate to you a story of the court of King Henry II that says something about Queen Catherine de Médicis?"

"Speak, dear heart," said the queen, relaxing with a sigh upon the siren to whose voice she so unwisely listened.

"*Well!* Now the story goes that Queen Catherine de Médicis arrived in France at the age of fourteen, where she was married to the young King Henry II, and went, like Your Majesty, eleven years without children."

"I've been married for fourteen years!" said the queen.

"Well," Madam de Fargis smiled, "Your Majesty's marriage may have taken place in 1616 but it wasn't consummated until 1619."

"That's so," said the queen. "But what explains Queen Catherine's sterility? King Henry II didn't have the same ... aversions as King Louis XIII, as proven by his mistress, Diane de Poitiers."

"He had no aversion to women, true – only to his wife."

"Do you think, Fargis, that the king's aversion to me is ... personal?" the queen gasped.

"What, for Your Majesty? *By the belly of the Grey Saint*, as the king his father used to say! And as the sweet Count of Moret still does, to whom Your Majesty should pay more attention. Anyway, don't even think it!"

Then, casting an eye like Sappho on her queen, anxious and piqued by doubt, she said, "And where would he find such eyes as yours, such a mouth, such lovely hair?" She ran her hand along the queen's arched neck. "Where would he find ... such skin? No, Madam – no, my Queen, you are the loveliest of all, the beauty of beauties. But unfortunately for Queen Catherine, she had none of this.

On the contrary, born of a diseased father and mother, she had the cold, slimy skin of a snake."

"Is this true, dear heart?"

"It's true. So when the young king, used to the pale and silky skin of Madam de Brézé, felt at his side a living corpse, he cried that he hadn't been sent a flower from the Pitti Gardens but a worm from the Médicis tombs."

"Hush, Fargis! You give me a chill."

"So, my beautiful Queen, this revulsion King Henry II had for his wife, who was it helped him to overcome it? One who always had his interest at heart: that same Diane de Poitiers, she who, if the king died childless, would have fallen under the power of another Duke of Orléans, one not much better than yours."

"Where are you taking this?"

"To here: if the king fell in love with a woman who he knew was devoted to you, a woman with the same religious convictions as the king, why, he'd return from seeing her to Your Majesty and then..."

"Well?"

"Well, a child would make the Duke of Orléans beholden to us, rather than us to him."

"Ah but my dear Fargis," said the queen, shaking her head, "King Henry II was a *man*."

"As King Louis XIII may yet be..."

The queen replied with a sigh, "But where would you find a woman both pure and devoted?"

"I already have," Fargis said.

"One more beautiful than...?" The queen stopped, biting her lip. She'd almost said, "One more beautiful than me?"

Fargis understood. "More beautiful than you, my Queen? Impossible! But one with beauty of another kind. You are the rose at the peak of its bloom, Madam; she, she is a bud but with such a glow that her family and friends all call her the Aurora."

"And this marvel," said the queen, "is she at least of noble blood?"

"Of the highest class, Madam: she's the granddaughter of Madam la Flotte, the queen mother's chief maid of honour, and the daughter of Sir de Hautefort."

"And you say this young lady is devoted to me?"

"She would give her life for Your Majesty," and she added, smiling, "maybe more."

"Is she aware of the role we want her to play?"

"Yes."

"And she accepts with resignation?"

"With enthusiasm, Madam – in the interest of the Church! We have her confessor on our side, who compares her to Judith of Bethulia, and the king's doctor..."

"What does Bouvard have to do with it?"

"He will persuade the king your husband that he's sick due to chastity!"

"For a man who purges and bleeds him two hundred times a year, that'll be difficult!"

"He'll manage it."

"So it's all arranged?"

"It lacks nothing but your consent."

"But I'd at least like to see and speak to this amazing Aurora!"

"Nothing simpler, Madam – she's here!"

"And she – she'll do it?"

"Yes, Madam."

The queen gave Fargis a look with just a touch of suspicion. "You arranged all this since your arrival tonight?" she said. "Truly, you don't waste any time, dear heart."

"I arrived three days ago, Madam but I waited to see Your Majesty until everything was ready."

"And now everything is prepared?"

"Yes, Madam. But if Your Majesty prefers to adopt the first means I proposed, we can abandon this one."

"Not at all, not at all," the queen quickly said. "Perhaps you should bring in your young friend."

"Command your faithful servant, Madam."

"Bring her in!"

Madam de Fargis went to a side door and opened it. "Come in, Marie de Hautefort," she said. "Our beloved queen consents to receive your homage."

The young woman gave a cry of joy and rushed into the room. The queen, seeing her, gasped in admiration and astonishment. "Do you think her beautiful enough, Madam?" asked Lady Fargis.

"Maybe too beautiful," replied the queen.

143  
The Letter & the Lure

And indeed, Miss Marie de Hautefort was wonderfully beautiful. She was a blonde of the South, with rose-petal skin and shining hair, and, as Madam de Fargis had said, she was called, "Aurora." It was Vautier who had discovered her on a trip to Périgord, and then come up with the scheme, remembering a look he'd seen the king give Miss de Lautrec one day. He had the idea that this invalid king, bled white as a ghost, might be susceptible to the infection of love. He'd arranged everything in advance, making sure no parent, lover, or friend would object to the young woman's commitment to the cause but delayed, on the advice of Queen Marie, until the return of Madam de Fargis, who would coat the rim of the glass with honey before presenting the absinthe to the queen. We've already seen how eager the queen was to swallow it. But when she saw the beautiful girl at her feet, arms outstretched and crying "I would give my all, everything for you, my Queen!" – She saw this delicate bud, heard that sweet voice that couldn't lie, and gently raised her up. That very evening, all was decided. Miss de Hautefort would do everything she could to make the king love her, and, once she was loved, use all her influence to urge him to reconcile with the queen and to dismiss Cardinal Richelieu. They just had to set the stage for the enchanting scene that would captivate

Louis XIII. The queens announced that, as the king was at Fontainebleau, they would join him there for Easter. And in fact, they arrived on the eve of Palm Sunday. The next day, the king attended services in the château chapel, and everyone was summoned to hear mass with His Majesty. Just a few paces from the king, lit by a ray of sunlight through a stained-glass window that bathed her in a halo of gold and purple, was a young woman kneeling on the bare floor. He, the king, had his knees softly cradled on a gold-tasseled cushion. His chivalric instincts were awakened; he was ashamed to have a cushion under his knees when this beautiful girl had none. He had a page take it to her. Miss de Hautefort blushed, considering herself unworthy to place her knees on a cushion where the king had knelt. She stood up, bowed to His Majesty, and respectfully placed the cushion on a chair, all with the innocent and virginal air of one of the noblest daughters of the South. The king was moved by her grace. He'd been moved thus once before in his life, taken by surprise even more suddenly that helps to explain the impression Miss de Hautefort made on this enigmatic man. On a journey to the provinces, he had, in a small town, attended a ball. Toward the end of the performance, one of the dancers, a certain Gau the Courtesan, had stepped gracefully onto a chair and raised a wooden candlestick holding a simple tallow candle. The king, when chaffed about his distaste for women, always recounted this story, saying this young woman had performed this act with such delicacy that he fell in love with her on the spot and, upon leaving the city, had sent her thirty thousand *livres* for her virtue. Only he didn't say whether he sent her the thirty thousand *livres* because he wanted to defend her virtue, or possess it for himself. The king was taken no less suddenly by the lovely Marie de Hautefort than he'd been by the virtuous Gau the Courtesan. Upon returning to the château, he inquired as to who was the ravishing person he'd seen in the chapel, and learned she was the granddaughter of Madam de la Flotte, arrived that day in the household of Queen Marie de Médicis to be one of her maidens. And that very day, to the astonishment of everyone, and to the great satisfaction of those involved in the matter, he made a complete change in the royal routine. Instead of staying locked in his darkest room, as he'd done for a month in the Louvre, and for the last week at Fontainebleau, he went out and about, in his carriage or walking in the park, as if seeking someone. And in the evening he came to visit the queens – as he hadn't done since the departure of Miss de Lautrec – to spend the evening chatting with the lovely Marie, and to inquire where she'd be the following day. The next morning, he sent a letter by courier to Bois-Robert, summoning him to Fontainebleau with all haste. Bois-Robert was amazed by this mark of favour that was the sort of thing he expected from Richelieu but not from the king. His surprise was even greater when Louis led him to a window embrasure, pointed out Miss de Hautefort, who was walking on the terrace, and told him he wanted a verse written about that particular lovely lady. Astonished though he was, Bois-Robert didn't have to be asked twice. He praised Miss de Hautefort's beauty and, learning that she was called Aurora, said he could have sought high and low and found no better name for her dawn-like loveliness. It gave him, moreover, a subject for his verse. In his poem, Louis XIII, under his sometime title of Apollo – Apollo was the god of the lyre, and Louis XIII, as we know, liked to compose music – begged Dawn not to rise so early and vanish so quickly. Desiring her since the beginning of the world, he pursued her daily in his horse-drawn celestial chariot without ever quite reaching her, always seeing her disappear just as he reached out his hand to touch her. The king read this verse and approved it, except for one point. "This is fine, Le Bois," he said, "But remove the word *desiring*."

"Why is that, Majesty?" asked Bois-Robert.

"Because I don't ... desire."

There was no answer to that. *Desiring* was edited out. As for the king, he set music to Bois-Robert's words, and words and music were sung by his official musicians, Molinier and Justin who given the importance of the matter, wore their most splendid attire. The two queens, and especially Anne of Austria, applauded the poetry of Bois-Robert and the melody of the king. Louis XIII performed his Easter rites. His confessor Suffern who was in on the scheme, soothed His Majesty's conscience, citing the example of the Patriarchs, who were unfaithful to their wives without inviting the wrath of the Lord – but the king assured him that there was no such danger, as his love for Miss de Hautefort was pure and without sin. Not so Madam de Fargis and company, who definitely had sin in mind. For a mind like La Fargis's, sin was always the object. Once Easter was past, the cabal watched Louis XIII with some anxiety but he made no move to continue his journey south; instead, he ordered hunts and banquets – but at both banquets and hunts, though he devoted himself exclusively to Miss de Hautefort, his conduct toward her was still perfectly respectful. There was one gambit yet to try: to make the king jealous. There existed a certain Sir d'Ecquevilly Vassé, of the family of President Henequen. Though never finalized, there had been some talk of marriage between him and Miss de Hautefort. He arrived at Fontainebleau, having been invited by Madam de Fargis with an eye toward making him an object of jealousy. And indeed, Sir d'Ecquevilly seemed inclined to revive his old courtship, despite the unusual attentions the king was paying his intended. Louis XIII took pause and asked Miss de Hautefort about the matter, who confirmed that the families had discussed a marriage. And so finally Louis XIII became jealous – and jealous of a woman!

The two queens met with Madam de Fargis to figure out how to exploit this jealousy. And Madam de Fargis came up with a scheme. That evening, Gretchen the dwarf, who could approach without question, would speak to Miss de Hautefort and awkwardly slip her a perfumed letter, in such a way that the king couldn't help but notice. The king would want to know who'd sent such a letter. The rest was up to the queen and Miss de Hautefort. That evening, the usual circle gathered around Her Majesty Queen Anne. The king was sitting near Miss de Hautefort, cutting out paper dolls. Miss de Hautefort was carefully dressed, at the personal instruction of the queen. She wore a low-cut dress of white satin, and her dazzling arms and shoulders, whiter even than her dress, drew the lips like a magnet draws iron. The king, from time to time, passed his eyes over these arms and shoulders but no more than that. Fargis stared openly. "Ah, Sire," she whispered to the king, "if I were a man..." Louis XIII frowned. Anne of Austria adjusting the hem of her dress also seemed to be looking at this beautiful image in rose-coloured marble. At that moment, little Gretchen crawled out on all fours from between the king's legs. The king thought it was Grisette, his favourite dog and moved his feet to let her through. The dwarf shrieked as though the king had stepped on her hand. His Majesty stood. Gretchen took advantage of the movement to slip the letter as clumsily as instructed into Miss de Hautefort's hand. The king couldn't fail to see it. Taking part in this farce made the young woman blush that served the conspirators' purposes perfectly. The king saw the letter pass from the dwarf's hand to Marie's, and from Marie's hand into a pocket. "The dwarf gave you a letter?" he asked.

"Do you think so, Sire?"

"I know so."

There was a brief silence. "Who is it from?" asked the king.

"I don't know," said Miss de Hautefort.

"Then read it and you'll know."

"Later, Sire!"

"Why later?"

"There's no hurry."

"With me, there is."

"But it seems to me, Sire," said Miss de Hautefort, "I'm free to receive letters from whomever I like."

"Not so!"

"Why not?"

"Not when..."

"Not what?"

"Not when ... not when ... I love you!"

"What, you, love me?" said Miss de Hautefort, laughing.

"Yes!"

"But what will Her Majesty the queen say?"

"Her Majesty the queen says I can't love anyone; this will prove I can."

"Bravo, Sire!" said the queen. "In your place, I'd want to know who's written to this young lady, and what it says."

"But I'm desperate! The king mustn't know," said Miss de Hautefort.

She rose. "We'll see about that," said the king. And he rose as well.

Miss de Hautefort backed quickly away. The king made a move to grab her. The door to the queen's boudoir was behind her, and she ran for it. Louis XIII chased her through it, the queen right behind, calling "Watch your pockets, Hautefort!"

The king cornered her and raised his hands, clearly intending to search the girl. But she, knowing the king's prudery, pulled the letter from her pocket and thrust it into her bosom. "Take it from there, Sire," she said.

And with the shamelessness of innocence, she presented her chest to the king. The king hesitated, and dropped his arms. "Take it, Sire, take it!" cried the queen, laughing aloud, to the great embarrassment of her husband. To remove the young woman's last defence, she grabbed Miss de Hautefort's hands and pinned them behind her back. "Now, Sire – take it!"

Louis looked around, caught like a sugar cube in silver tongs ... and then chastely, without touching her skin, drew the letter from its warm sanctuary. The queen, who hadn't really expected this, released Miss de Hautefort's hands and murmured to herself, "I may have no choice but to adopt Fargis's proposal."

The letter was from Miss de Hautefort's mother. The king read it and, ashamed, returned it. Then all three went back into the salon, each with different emotions. Madam de Fargis was chatting with an officer who'd just arrived from the army, bringing, he said, important news for the king. "The Count of Moret!" murmured the queen, recognising the young man she'd seen only two or three times before, though it was always Madam de Fargis who'd spoken to him. In truth, he was quite handsome. Then she said, even lower: "He does look a bit like the Duke of Buckingham." Was she just noticing it now or did she suddenly wish for a reason to find a resemblance between Richelieu's messenger and the former ambassador of the King of England?

(Unfinished & Abandoned)

BOOK III  
THE DOVE  
1637  
144

5 May

Beautiful dove with your silver plumage, your black collar and pink feet, since your prison seems so cruel that you threaten to batter yourself to death on its bars, I give you your freedom. But, as you doubtless want to leave me to rejoin a person you love more, I must justify your week's absence. I need payment for the service I render you in setting you free from eternal captivity – for the heart is selfish, and does nothing without asking payment in return, often at double value. Go then, gentle messenger, go and, by your return, tender these regrets to the person who calls you despite the distance. This note that I attach to your leg, is the proof of your loyalty. So goodbye – the window opens, and heaven awaits ... farewell!

145

6 May

Thank you, whoever you are, for returning my sole companion. But that blessed act must be its own reward. If only the charming messenger who brought me your letter could have known how to thank you, or tell me where you live, for I'd hate you to think me cold and uncaring. But the same restlessness that took her to your home brought her back to mine. Yesterday Iris was full of the joy of her return to me. However, this morning – how changeable we are! – this morning, I wasn't enough for her. She beat with her wings and her beak, not at the bars of her cage, for she never had a cage but at the panes of my window. She is no longer mine alone – she belongs to both of us. Now, my opinion may not be shared by many but I think that by sharing we double what we have. From now on, our Iris is not single but double – and notice how prescient I was in naming her Iris, as if I knew she would become our messenger! Your Iris will bring you my letters, and my Iris will bring me yours – because I hope you will kindly reply to tell me how she came into your hands. It may surprise you that I'm so quick to be familiar with a stranger, an unknown – but I know you must be a good man or woman, since your returned me my dove. Furthermore, the tone of your letter bespeaks a person of distinction and heart; all such noble spirits are sisters, all such refined minds are brothers. So treat me as a brother – or a sister, if you will – because I need to find the brother or sister I never had. Iris, my dear friend, go back to where you came from, to that person I refer to as him or her – and add that I'd rather be thought of as her than as him. Go, Iris – and remember that I'm waiting for you.

146  
As the *Angelus* tolls

My sister,



God in that shimmering radiance. Tell me all this, then tell me more: what you see from your window, plains or mountains, peaks or valleys, streams or rivers, lake or ocean. Tell me all, and it will distract my thoughts from the troubles that plague my mind – and then perhaps my heart, distracted by my thoughts, will manage to forget, if only for a moment ... no, no, no, tell me nothing. I will never forget!

150

13 May

The one you loved is dead: that’s why you still have tears. The one I love betrayed me. That’s why I have none! Tell me about your love all you want but don’t ask me to speak of mine. For four years I’ve lived in a monastery – and yet I’m not a monk! Why, you may ask, is that? I’ll tell you. When my love that was my last link to life, failed me, I fell into such despair that I gave myself to God – not from virtue but from pain. I’ve waited for this despair to subside so the Lord wouldn’t have to receive me as the abyss receives the blind but as a generous host receives a weary pilgrim who, after toilsome travels, seeks a night’s rest at the end of a long day. I wanted to bring him a strong spirit, not a broken heart, a whole body and not a cadaver. But now, four years after seeking such solitude, though daily purifying myself with prayer, I’ve not yet dared to trade the habit of a novice for the robes of a monk. My former self still lives in me, and it would be sacrilege to offer so worldly a creature to our heavenly Creator. Now you know as much of my past and private life as I can tell you. As to my present life and situation, here is what I can say: I live, not really in a monastery but rather in a hermitage built halfway up a hill, in a room with whitewashed walls, lacking all ornament but the portrait of a king for whom I have a special reverence, and an ivory crucifix, a masterpiece of the sixteenth century that was given to me by my mother. My window is surrounded by a luxuriant jasmine whose branches are laden with flowers; they scent my room as they open with the rising sun, on the horizon which is probably toward where you are: for from there I see our dove approaching from afar, and when she leaves I see her start in the same direction and fly for a mile or so until, dwindling, she merges into the azure sky or grey clouds. Given the lay of the land, dawn has a particular charm for me. It’s a view I adore and will try to describe. My horizon is bounded to the south by the high Pyrenees, with their purple slopes and snowy peaks; to the east by a hilly ridge that rises toward the main range; while to the north there stretches as far as the eye can see a country of plains, dotted with olive orchards, lined with small streams among which, like a sovereign receiving the tribute of its subjects, one of the greatest rivers of France majestically winds. The plateau beneath me slopes down from south to north, from the mountains to the plains. It has three very different aspects: in the morning, noon, and evening. In the morning, the sun rises behind the ridge of hills to the east. Ten minutes before it appears, I see a ray of rosy light stream slowly up until it fans across the sky, darkening the hills to black silhouettes. Through this fan spike the spearheads of early sunlight, all the colours from brightest pink to fiery yellow. As the sun rises behind the hills, it begins to gild their contours with its rays, the highest hill all aglow until, like a moving fire, ever expanding, the day star itself appears, splendid, gleaming, streaming flames, as if from the crater of some inextinguishable divine volcano. As it rises into the heavens, the life of the earth below is reborn; the tops of the Pyrenees shimmer white and silver; their dark sides slowly lighten from black to purple, and from purple to light blue. As light floods down from over the ridge, day spreads across the plain. The streams glisten like silver strands, the river twists and undulates like a shining ribbon; the birds sing in the oleander bushes, among the pomegranates, in the clumps of myrtle, and an eagle, the king of the sky, soars through the ether, banking around a circuit of a league or more, disappearing and reappearing. At noon, the entire basin I just described becomes a fiery furnace. Lit from top to bottom, the mountains cannot conceal their naked flanks, stony limbs that extend into the granite bones of the earth. Broken sunlight rebounds from shiny rock surfaces, streams and rivers seem torrents of molten metal, the flowers fade, the leaves bow down, the birds grow silent; invisible cicadas sing from the branches of creaking pine trees, and the only living movement that animates this baking desert is a green lizard that sometimes climbs my window trellis, or a mottled snake that, coiled in a spiral, pants with its mouth half open, ignoring the midges that pass within range of its fangs. In the evening, life is reborn for a while, like the last flare of a lamp before it goes out. One after another, the cicadas fall silent, their buzzing succeeded by the plaintive but monotonous cries of the crickets. The lizards flee, the snakes disappear, and the bushes are agitated by the anxious fluttering of birds seeking lodging for the night. The sun goes down toward the horizon behind me, and as it descends, I see the Pyrenean snows change from soft pink to purple, while the shadows elongate across the plains, filling the spaces between them until, according to natural law, the whole world belongs to darkness. Then all noise ceases, the earthly glow is extinguished, the stars emerge silently from the sky – and in the middle of the night’s silence, a single melody unfolds into space: the song of the nightingale, star-lover, and dark-singer. You asked me what I could see from my window, and I’ve told you. Fix this triple vision in your mind, and allow your mind to distract your heart, for your salvation in this world is in nothing but this word: Forget!

151

Forget! You tell me to forget! Listen to what is happening to me. You must understand: when darkness comes, it brings with it something frightening, something incredible and unnatural. When I sleep, death is no longer death, and the dead return to life! He is next to me, with his long dark hair, his pale face, his manly features imbued with all the nobility of his heritage. He is there – I speak to him – I extend my hand, I cry out “Are you still alive? And do you still love me?” And he replies that yes, he still lives, and yes, he still loves me. This same vision, undeniable, unrelenting, almost palpable, is repeated every night, only to disappear with the first light of dawn. My God, what must I do to get this nightmare, this vision from the angel of darkness, to stop tormenting me? I’ve prayed at the sacred altar, wrapped holy rosaries around my neck and wrists, laid a crucifix on my chest and fallen asleep with my hands crossed on the feet of the divine martyr – but all was vain, futile, useless; the day brings me back to God but the darkness returns me to him. I’m like the queen described by the poet Homer whose work every day was undone every night. If there were no night, there would be no sleep and if no sleep, then no dreams – and then maybe I could forget. Can you get God to grant me that?

152

14 May

All that can be obtained from God through prayer, I’ll obtain for you; for you are sorely wounded, and the wound is grievous and deep. Let us pray.

153

15 May

I don’t know but somehow, through writing to you, I gain some peace and a certain relief. This is indeed a new turn to my life; I was alone in the world, without family, isolated from all, half in the grave, weeping and desperate – and now suddenly I’ve found a brother. Because it seems to me you’re like a brother ... a brother I never knew, one who left France before I was born but whom I’ve been waiting and searching for. And now, you come at last: revealed, though not present, revealed by voice alone. I cannot see you but I hear you. I cannot touch but I listen. You have no idea how the landscape so brilliantly conjured by your pen occupies my thoughts. Let no one deny to me the reality of shared vision, for shared vision exists. By the constant force of my will, your landscape is now reflected in my mind as in a mirror. I see everything, from the rosy morning rays rising behind the hills to the creeping grey shadows of evening; I hear everything, from the sound of the flower as it opens its petals to the morning dew, to the song of the nightingale trilling out into the solitude and silence of the night. And I see it all so clearly that, if I ever found myself within the circle of your vision, I could say, “There are the flaming hills, there the snow-capped mountains, there the silver streams, there the gleaming river, here the pomegranates, here the oleander, here the myrtle – all here!” So clearly do I see your hermitage rising above the walls of the garden, with its window veiled by jasmine and vines. Then I see you in your whitewashed cell, kneeling in front of our brother Christ, praying for yourself and, especially, for me. Tell me who is the king whose portrait hangs in your cell, this king for whom you have a special reverence, so I, too, can envision this king’s portrait, and my reverence can echo yours. But you, as well, I would like to see you ... oh, only in my thoughts, rest assured of that! You said that the *you* of the past no longer existed, and I should ask only about the person of the present and the future. Let the past fade, then – tell me how old you are now, and those traits that will help me imagine you clearly. Tell me how and when you came to this hermitage, and what accounts for your bidding farewell to the world. I would also like to know how far you are from me. Is it possible to calculate that distance? You seem so good, I have no fear of tiring you; you seem so learned, I’m not afraid to ask the impossible. I shall think about how you might answer; and when you do, I shall think about how you replied. Go, dear dove – fly, and come back soon!

154

3<sup>PM</sup>

There, you see: by occupying your mind, I was able, for a moment, to distract your heart. The soul is not like the body; if one who is soul-sick can forget why he suffers, he suffers no more. You want me to tell you about me, to see if you can find something to like in this man, physical or moral, alive or dead? Well, listen. I was born at Fontainebleau on 1 May 1607, so my age is thirty years and fourteen days. I’m sturdy of frame, brown-haired, blue-eyed, with a pale complexion and high forehead. I retired from the world on January 17, 1633, when I took a vow that, unless something occurred to change my destiny, I would devote myself to God for the next five years – which would be my last. I withdrew from the world in the aftermath of a great political disaster that swallowed up my dearest friends – and after a deep personal injury that broke my heart. The portrait of the king that hangs in my cell, for whom I have a special reverence, is of King Henry IV. Now, you wanted to know the distance between us. It’s now just short of three o’clock. I’ll date this letter at three o’clock exactly, the time I shall release our messenger. Pigeons fly at fifteen or sixteen miles per hour, as I learned when I was in a circumstance to employ them. Note the time you receive this letter, and calculate. Don’t reply for two or three days; take those days to imagine me, poor recluse, and then put your ideas, whether illusion or reality, on paper. Then send me a summary of your research, the distillation of your dreams. God be with you!

155

2 hours after receiving the letter

Listen! Hear me! It’s not in two or three days I must answer you but now! My God! What mad idea grips my mind, my heart, my soul! What if ... the one I love is not dead! What if *you* are the one I love, the one I call, the one I seek, the one who appears to me every night! You were born on May 1, 1607 – so was he! You’re strong – like him! You are brown-haired, blue-eyed, with a pale complexion and high forehead – like him! Then remember the words you told me in another letter that remain alive in my memory: you fell from the heights of human eminence, you trembled at the wind of the axe as it took the heads of those around you, and in your fall you lost a kingdom. I don’t know how all these things can apply to you but if they do – my God! My God! It must really be you. You have in your cell a portrait of a king whom you love and revere, a portrait of King Henry IV. And he, he, he was the *son* of King Henry IV! If you are not Antoine de Bourbon, Count of Moret, said to have been killed at the Battle of Castelnaudary, then *who’re you?* Answer me! In the name of heaven, answer me!

156

16 May

At daybreak, if you are not Isabelle de Lautrec, whom I believed unfaithful, then who are you? I am Antoine de Bourbon, Count of Moret, whom all think died at the Battle of Castelnaudary – but who lives, not by the mercy but by the vengeance of the Lord. Oh! If things are as I fear they are, then woe to us both! The dove must have gotten lost in the night, or perhaps she got tired and was forced to rest. She didn’t arrive until the first light of dawn.

157

7<sup>AM</sup>

Yes, yes, yes, O sufferer! Yes, I’m Isabelle de Lautrec! You believed me unfaithful? Me? How? Why? For what reason? To defend myself, I must know. Did you know the dove takes only two hours to go from you to me or me to you? Did you know there must be only thirty miles between us? Tell me, tell me, how have I deceived you? How have I betrayed you? Speak, speak! Fly, dove: you carry my life!

158

11 o’clock

The eyes, the heart, the soul – can all be deceived at once? Are you or are you not the Isabelle de Lautrec I saw enter Valence Cathedral on January 5, 1633? Are you not she who was dressed as a bride, and who walked behind Emmanuel, Viscount de Pontis, dressed as a groom? Or was it all an illusion of the Archfiend? No quibbles, no hesitation, no half-answers. Proof, or silence.

3pm

Proof? You shall have it! It's easy enough to provide. Everything you saw had the appearance of truth, yet everything you saw was false. But I have a long story to tell you, and alas! Our poor dove is exhausted and needs rest. Instead of the usual two hours, it took her nearly four hours to fly back to me. I'll write part of the story tonight. Dear Lord God, give me some peace – my hand trembles so, I can barely hold the pen. But first, my God, I must give thanks to you for letting him see ... there. I spent three hours on my knees, praying, pressing my burning forehead against the chilly flagstones, and now I'm calmer. To return to you. Let me tell you all, tell you everything, from the moment I left you in Valence, to that woeful moment when I pronounced my vows. The night you left, do you remember it as well as I do? It was August 14, 1632, when we parted; you said goodbye to me without telling me where you were going. I was full of foreboding; I couldn't let go of the edge of your cloak. It seemed to me it wasn't to be a parting for a few days, as you'd promised but a parting forever. Eleven o'clock was tolling from the church in the town; wearing a dark cloak, you mounted a white horse; you rode slowly at first, and three times you turned back to say goodbye. The third time, you made me go inside, because you said if I stayed in the doorway, you might never leave. Why didn't I stay? Why did you go? I went in but only to run up to my balcony. You looked back, and saw me waving a handkerchief wet with my tears. You lifted your hat, plumes fluttering, and I heard your farewell waft on the wind, diminished by distance to no more than a sigh. A great cloud drifted across the sky and obscured the Moon; I raised my hands as if to stop it before it could cut off the silver radiance by which I could still see you. Finally, like a dark aerial monster, it opened its mouth and swallowed the pale goddess, who disappeared within it. When I lowered my eyes to the horizon, I sought for you in vain. I could still hear the sound of hooves ringing on the road in the direction of Orange but I could see you no more. Suddenly a flash tore open the cloud, and by the lightning's gleam I glimpsed your white horse. But you, in your dark cloak, had already merged with the night. Your mount rode away quickly but seemingly without a rider. Twice more the lightning flashed to reveal your horse, fading like a ghost. Then even the sound of the hooves was lost. A fourth flash came with a roar of thunder but the horse was gone. All that night, the thunder growled, while the wind and rain beat against my windows. The next day, nature, distraught, dishevelled, and drained, seemed to grieve like my heart. I knew what was happening in the direction toward which you'd disappeared – that is to say, in Languedoc. It was said your friend the Duke de Montmorency, who was governor there, had joined the party of Sir and the exiled queen mother. Prince Gaston had crossed France to meet the Duke de Montmorency, raise the province in revolt and muster troops to march against the king and Sir de Richelieu. So you went, to join one of your brothers to fight against the other – and far more dangerous, to draw your sword and risk your head against terrible Cardinal Richelieu, who had already broken so many swords and taken so many heads! As you know, my father was in Paris with the king. So I followed you south with two of my ladies under the pretext of a visit to my aunt, who was Abbess of Saint-Pons – but really to get closer to the theatre of events in which you were to play a role. It took me eight days to travel from Valence to Saint-Pons. I arrived at the convent on August 23. The holy women there were unused to affairs of the world but the events occurring nearby were so grave, they were the subject of all conversations, and every inhabitant of the convent was discussing the news. And what had they heard?

They said the king's brother, My Lord Gaston d'Orléans, had met up with the Marshall-Duke de Montmorency, bringing two thousand men he'd raised in the Principality of Trier; and these, added to the four thousand already with Montmorency, brought their total troops to six thousand. With these six thousand soldiers, he held Lodève, Albi, Uzès, Lunel, and Saint-Pons where I was. Nîmes, Toulouse, Carcassonne, and Beziers, though populated by Protestants, had refused to join him. It was also said that two armies were on the march against the Duke de Montmorency. One of them, commanded by Marshal Schomberg, was coming by way of Pont-Saint-Esprit. The other, led by the king, as the cardinal had decided Louis XIII himself was needed in the theatre of war, was said to have arrived at Lyon. A letter that caught up to me from Valence not only confirmed this news but informed me that my father, the Baron de Lautrec, was with His Majesty. This letter came from my father, and also announced that he and his old friend the Count de Pontis had decided to strengthen the ties between our two houses by a marriage between me and the count's son, the Viscount de Pontis. As you'll remember, I'd already spoken to you of this proposed marriage, and you'd said to me, "Just give me three months. In three months, things will be different for everyone. Give me three more months, and I'll ask the Baron de Lautrec for your hand."

Imagine my torment at knowing you were allied with those my father called rebels, as fear and hatred grew between your house and that of my father, a loyal and faithful servant of the king. In his mind the king and the cardinal were one, and almost daily he announced, "He who is enemy to the cardinal, is enemy to the king."

On 23 August, a royal decree declared the Duke Montmorency attainted, forfeiting all honours and dignities, property and domains, and ordering him to appear before the Parliament of Toulouse for trial. The next day, the rumour spread of a similar declaration against you, son of a king though you were, and against Sir de Rieux. Imagine the feelings these rumours inflicted on my poor heart! On the 24th, an emissary of the cardinal passed through Saint-Pons, going, they said, to offer peace terms to Sir de Montmorency. I persuaded my aunt to offer him refreshments, and he accepted, stopping in her parlour. I spoke with him there, and what they said of his mission was true. It gave me hope. My hope increased when I heard that the Archbishop of Narbonne, a close friend of Sir de Montmorency, had passed through Carcassonne for the same purpose, to ask the marshal-duke to lay down his arms. The proposals he was carrying to the Governor of Languedoc were, they said, fair, reasonable, and conducive to his fortune and honour. The rumour soon followed that Montmorency had refused. As to you – because, you understand, you were the subject of much talk that was a cause of both consolation and dread for me – as to you, it was said that a letter had been written to you by the cardinal himself but you had replied that your word had long been promised to Sir, and that Sir alone could release you. And alas!

That selfish coward refused to let you go. On 29 August, word came that the armies of Marshal Schomberg and the Duke Montmorency were face to face. But the wily old marshal knew that Richelieu was a minister who could fall, and the king was a man who could die – and that Sir, against whom he was pitted, was heir to the throne, and would then become King of France. So he sent Sir Cavois to parley and open one last negotiation. We heard all the reports. My soul rose at each bit of hopeful news. I anxiously awaited Sir de Montmorency's final answer. You know his response. Whether from despair or conceit, fear or courage, he said, "First we'll fight; after the battle, we'll talk."

Thereafter, since all hope of accord was lost, and a victory by the Duke Montmorency was your only salvation, I forgot my duty as a daughter, I forgot my duty as a subject, and, prostrate at the altar, I prayed to God Almighty to look with favour on the hero of Vellano and the son of the victor of Ivry. From that moment, I lived only to wait upon news of the battle. Alas! On September 1, at five in the evening, came the terrible, fatal, heart-breaking news. The battle was lost. The marshal-duke was a prisoner, and you were either mortally wounded or ... dead! I didn't wait to hear any more. I went to fetch the gardener, whom I'd spoken to in advance. I told him to prepare two horses and meet me at nightfall at the garden gate. The night came, I met him, and we mounted and rode for the battlefield. We skirted the base of the mountains, crossed two or three streams, passed on the left the little village of Livinière, and reached Cannes at eight o'clock, where we stopped. My horse was lamed and limping; I determined to trade him for a fresh horse and discover what news I could. They said Montmorency and de Rieux were both dead. As to you, reports were conflicting: some said you were dead, others mortally wounded. If you were dying, I wanted to close your eyes; if dead, I wanted to wrap you in your shroud. We left Cannes at half past eight, crossing the fields and avoiding the roads; the gardener was from Saissac – he knew the country, and took us straight to Montolieu. The weather resembled that of the night we parted: dark clouds rolled across heaven, gusts roared through the trees, and a warm, suffocating wet wind spat large drops of rain, while thunder rumbled behind Castelnauary. We rode straight through Montolieu without stopping. Beyond that small town, we met the first outpost of Sir de Schomberg's troops. I repeated my questions. The battle had begun around eleven in the morning and lasted an hour or less; barely a hundred people had been killed. I asked if you were among the dead. They weren't sure but had heard a soldier of the vanguard say he'd seen you fall. We found him; he had indeed seen one of the leaders go down but wasn't sure it was you. I wanted to take him with me but he was on duty and couldn't come. But he told the gardener it was definitely the Count of Moret who'd led the charge, and if he'd been killed, it was by an officer of fusiliers named Bitéran. As I listened to these details, a chill came over me, my chest froze so I couldn't speak, and beads of sweat rolled down my face to mingle with my tears. We resumed our journey. We'd come twelve or thirteen leagues in five hours but as I'd changed horses in Cannes, I knew I could make it to Castelnauary. If the gardener fell behind, he promised to keep up by linking his reins with mine. Leaving Montolieu, we passed patrols in the woods. We recognised our location, and found our way to a ford over the Bernassonne. After crossing two more streams, we were well on our way again. Between Ferrals and Villespy, the gardener's horse fell and couldn't get up again but fortunately we were almost there: we could see the bivouacs of the royal army, and saw lights moving about the field where the battle had taken place. My companion told me the lights were probably those of soldiers out to bury the dead. I asked him to make one last effort to follow me; I dug my spurs into my horse, itself ready to fall, and rode past the first campfire. I was just passing the village of Saint-Papoul on my right when my horse reared. I bent down to see a shapeless mass: a dead soldier. I had found the first corpse. I jumped from my horse and left it to its own devices. We had arrived. The gardener ran toward the nearest group of torches. I sat on a grassy hillock and waited. The sky was still strewn with dark clouds, and thunder continued to rumble in the west, the occasional flash lighting the battlefield. The gardener returned, carrying a torch and followed by some soldiers. He had found them digging a large pit, and looked to check for bodies but none had yet been thrown in. Finally, I began to get some positive news. Sir de Montmorency, though wounded twelve times over, was not yet dead but he was definitely a prisoner; he had been captured and then carried to a farm a quarter of a mile from the battlefield, where he'd made his confession to Sir de Schomberg's chaplain. Then his wounds had been dressed by the surgeon of the light horse, and he'd been brought to Castelnauary on a litter. Sir de Rieux had been killed, and his body positively identified. As for you, you'd been seen falling from your horse but after that no one could say what had become of you. I asked where you'd been seen to fall, and was told it was at the ambushade. The soldiers wanted to know who I was. "Look at me," I said to them, "and guess." Sobs choked my voice, and tears streamed down my face.

"Poor woman," one of them said, "she loves him!"

I seized the man's hand – I could have kissed him. "Come with me," I said, "and help me find him, dead or alive."

"We'll help you," said two or three soldiers. "Follow us," one of them said.

The one I'd chosen to be our guide took the torch and lit the way. I came after. One of them offered to let me lean on him. "Thank you," I said, "but I'm strong enough."

In fact, I felt no fatigue, and it seemed to me I could go to the end of the world if I had to. We walked three hundred paces. Every ten steps there was a body, and I wanted to check to see if it was you but the soldiers drew me forward, saying, "It wasn't here, Madam."

Finally we came to a little ravine beneath some olive trees, where a path ran along a stream. "Here," the soldiers said.

I passed my hand over my forehead and staggered, feeling faint for a moment. Then we began the search, starting down from the crest. I took the torch from the guide and bent low to the earth. One after another, I checked every body. Two were face-down, one dressed as an officer, with dark hair like yours. I turned him on his back and parted his hair: it wasn't you. Suddenly I cried out – I'd spotted your hat! I stooped and picked it up. There were the plumes I'd put on it myself – there was no mistaking it. This was where you had fallen. But had you fallen dead, or only wounded? That was the question. The soldiers who'd come with me were speaking in low voices. I saw one of them gesture toward the stream. "What are you saying?" I asked.

"We were saying, Madam," replied the one who'd gestured, "that a wounded man, especially one who's shot, is always thirsty. If the Count of Moret was only wounded, perhaps he crawled to the stream at the bottom of the ravine to drink."

"Oh! It's a hope!" I cried. "Come!" I darted through the olive trees.

The slope was steep but I barely noticed. Ceres, torch in hand, seeking for lost Persephone, could have gone no quicker, goddess though she was. In an instant, I was beside the stream. In fact, two or three of the wounded had tried to reach it. One had died on the way; the second had gotten his hand into the stream but no more; the third had his head in the water, and had died while drinking. One of the three sighed; it was the man who had reached the edge of the stream and then passed out. The coolness of the night air, or some miracle, had brought him around. I knelt beside him, lit his face with the torch – and uttered a cry. It was Armand, your squire. At the sound, he opened his eyes and looked at me, confused. His eyes focused on my face. "Water," he croaked.

I fetched water in your hat and brought it to him. One of the soldiers stopped me. "Don't let him drink," he said in my ear. "Sometimes they die while drinking."

"Water!" the dying man repeated.

"Yes," I said, "I'll let you drink but first tell me what happened to the Count of Moret."

He looked more closely at my face, and recognised me. "Miss de Lautrec!" he murmured.

"Yes, Armand, it's me," I said. "I'm looking for your master. Where is he? Where is he?"

"Water!" he demanded, voice fading.

I remembered I had a vial of smelling salts in my pocket. I held it to his lips, and he seemed to revive a little.

"Where is he, in heaven's name?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Did you see him fall?"

"Yes."

"Dead or wounded?"

"Wounded."

"Where did this happen?"

"On the banks."

"Which side?"



"The side toward Fendeille."

"Among the king's troops, or Montmorency's?"

"Montmorency's men."

"And then?"

"That's all I can remember. I was wounded myself, my horse was killed, and I fell. Night came, and I crawled, because I was so thirsty. I nearly reached the stream but I fainted. Water! Water!"

"Let him drink now," the soldier said. "He's told us all he knows."

I cupped water from your hat. The soldiers raised the wounded man's head and I brought the water to his lips. He drank three or four sips greedily and then leaned back, sighed, and stiffened. He was dead. "You see, you had to make him talk before letting him drink," said the soldier.

He released poor Armand's head, and it fell heavily to the ground. I stood for a moment, wringing my hands anxiously. "What do we do now, Madam?" asked the gardener.

"Do you know which way is Fendeille?" I asked him.

"Yes."

"Then we go toward Fendeille." I turned to the soldiers and asked, "Who will come with me?"

"All of us!" they said.

"Then let's go."

We followed the path up out of the ravine, then over into a meadow, where we saw an officer at the head of a dozen soldiers. My companions spoke softly to each other. "What are you saying?" I asked.

"We say that officer might be able to give you some information."

"Which one?"

"That one."

They pointed at the captain leading the patrol. "Why do you think he could give me information?"

"Well, because he fought here."

"Let's go to him, then." And I walked quickly toward the officer.

One of my soldiers stopped me. "Pardon," he said, "but you see..."

"Why do you stop me?"

"Are you sure you want to know what he has to say?" the soldier asked.

"At all costs!"

"No matter what he tells you?"

"No matter what."

"Then I'll call him over." He stepped forward. "Captain Bitéran?"

The officer paused, peering toward him through the darkness. "Who calls?" he asked.

"We'd like to speak with you, *officer*."

"Who is that?"

"A lady."

"A lady! On the battlefield, at this hour?"

"Why not, Sir – if that lady comes to the battlefield seeking one she loves, to treat him if he's wounded, or bury him if he's dead?"

The officer approached; he was a man of about thirty. Seeing me, he removed his hat, to reveal a noble and distinguished face framed by blond hair. "Whom do you seek, Madam?" he asked me.

"Antoine de Bourbon, the Count of Moret," I replied.

The officer looked at me more closely. Then, paling slightly, voice altered, he repeated, "The Count of Moret? You seek the Count of Moret?"

"Yes, the Count of Moret. These good men tell me that you, better than anyone, should be able to tell me what happened to him."

He looked at my soldiers, grimaced and frowned. "*Mon Captain!*" one of them said. "It seems this lady is his fiancée, and she wants to know what's become of him."

"Sir, in heaven's name!" I cried. "You saw the Count of Moret, you know something about him. Tell me what you know."

"Madam, here's what I know: I was sent with my company of fusiliers to hide in ambush there in the ravine. We fired a volley, then pulled back to draw the enemy in. The Count of Moret, who never refused a fight and was quick to show his courage, charged recklessly at us, and fired his pistol at ... well, Madam, I won't lie ... at me. His bullet cut the feather from my hat. I shot back but more accurately, I'm sorry to say."

I uttered a cry of terror. "It was you?" I said, drawing back.

"Madam," the captain said, "it was a fair fight. I thought I was dealing with just another officer of the marshal-duke's army. If I'd known that he who charged me was a prince, and moreover the son of Henry IV, I'd certainly have forfeited my own life before taking his. But it was only when I heard him shout 'To me! For the Bourbons!' that I realised what a catastrophe I'd caused."

"Oh, yes!" I cried. "A terrible catastrophe! But, tell me, was he killed?"

"I don't know, Madam – just then, their musketeers opened fire. My fusiliers replied in good order. We withdrew, and I saw them standing over the body of the count, bloody and hatless."

"Oh! His hat, it's here!"

I crushed it passionately to my lips. "Madam," the captain said, with genuine pain, "give me your orders. After causing such a calamity, how can I ... I'll not say alone but at least help you in your search? Tell me, and I'll do everything in my power to help."

"Thank you, Sir," I said, trying to get hold of myself, "but the only thing you can do is tell me in which direction the count was carried away."

"Toward Fendeille, Madam," he replied; "but for safety's sake, follow the path that starts a hundred paces to your right. After a mile, you'll come to a house where they should know something."

"Very well," I said, and then, to the gardener, "You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Let's go."

"I could offer the lady my horse," the officer said timidly.

"Thank you, Sir," I replied. "I asked you for all I needed, and you gave me all I asked."

I passed a handful of crowns to my three soldiers. Two went off but the third insisted on escorting me to the house of which we'd been told. However, I couldn't resist the desire to take one last look at the ground consecrated by your blood; I turned, and saw the captain standing where I'd left him, staring at me like a man stunned by misfortune. On the way to the house, we found corpses all along the path but I was used to them by then and walked with a firm step through bloodstained grass that rose to my knees. We reached the house that was overflowing with wounded from both sides, some lying outside on ground strewn with straw. I came into this asylum of pain to question the dying with my voice, and the dead with my eyes. At my questions, one dying man raised himself on his elbow.

"The Count of Moret?" he said. "I saw him go past in the carriage of Sir."

"Dead or wounded?" I asked.

"Wounded," said the dying man, "but he was like me, more dead than alive."

"My God!" I cried. "Where were they taking him?"

"I don't know – but I did hear them mention a name as the carriage turned at the crossroad."

"Whose?"

"That of Madam de Ventadour."

"Yes, that makes sense – Madam de Ventadour is nearby, at the Abbey of Prouille. That's it! Thank you, my friend."

And, leaving a few crowns beside him, I went out and told the gardener, "He's at the Abbey of Prouille."

Prouille Abbey was about two miles from there. The gardener's horse was exhausted, and I'd left mine in the meadow of the battlefield. It was impossible to find a carriage, or even a farmer's cart, and to search for one would have wasted valuable time. I felt no fatigue, so we set out on foot. We'd gone barely a mile when the threatened storm finally broke and it began to rain. But all I could think of was you – I didn't feel the rain, I couldn't hear the storm, I marched through torrents of water on a path intermittently lit as bright as day. We came to a large oak; the gardener begged me to shelter there a while and wait until the storm had passed but I shook my head and continued on my way without answering. A minute later, lightning struck the oak and shattered it to splinters. I paused long enough to point out what had happened. "Yes, Madam," the gardener said, "you're protected from the sky, so, for as long as God gives you strength, let's go on."

We went on for another hour or so, until the lightning showed us the abbey where we were bound. I doubled our pace; and soon after, we arrived. In the abbey, all were asleep, or pretending to sleep. I made enough noise to awaken them from the deepest slumber: gatekeeper, sisters, and the abbess herself. After a thousand precautions, they finally opened up. They'd clearly heard me knocking but seemed to fear the assault of some rapacious horde. I hastened to identify myself, and immediately asked for news of you. The sister gatekeeper knew who I meant but claimed not to have seen you, or even to know you'd been wounded. I asked to speak to Madam de Ventadour, and they took me to her. I found her in full habit – having heard the noise I'd made, she'd arisen and dressed. I thought she looked pale, and seemed to tremble. She dismissed this as signs of the fear she'd felt when she heard me knocking, afraid it was rogue soldiers at the gate. I reassured her, and told her I'd come from Saint-Pons, how I'd gone to the battlefield, and found the place where you'd fallen. I showed her your hat, still clenched in my hand; I told her what I'd learned from the dying soldier, and begged her, in the name of heaven, to tell me what she knew about you. She replied that he must have been mistaken, or that the coach, after turning on the path to the abbey, must have gone another way, either right or left, and taken another route. In any event, she hadn't seen you, and had no news of you. I dropped my pleading hands and slumped onto a nearby settee – my strength had left me, along with my hope. The abbess summoned her women, who stripped me of my soaking clothes, still stuck to me from the drenching rain. I'd lost my shoes somewhere in the muddy road, and had walked at least a mile in bare feet. They brought a bath and placed me into it, where I lapsed into a stupor, almost unconscious. As I slowly came around, I heard them talking about someone having seen a carriage take the road to Mazères. I questioned them: the information came from a peasant who had brought the convent their evening milk. The abbess offered me her own carriage and horses, if I wanted to continue my search. I accepted. They brought me my clothes, for, seeing the first light of day streaming in, I didn't want to lose a moment before taking up the trail. It was quite possible they'd taken you to Mazères, as Mazères was a château that had stood on the side of Montmorency. Madam de Ventadour lent me her personal driver, and we departed. At Villeneuve-le-Comtat, at Payra, at Sainte-Camette, we sought information but not only had nobody seen anything but in those villages they didn't even know the Battle of Castelnaudary had taken place.

We continued on the road to Mazères. There, somebody would have to know something: the gates would be guarded by sentries loyal to Sir de Montmorency, who would have no reason to conceal the presence of the Count of Moret. We arrived at the gates: they hadn't seen a carriage, didn't know the Count of Moret was wounded, and their first news of the Battle of Castelnaudary came from us. We soon had proof that this was the truth, as an officer galloped up at full speed, announcing that Sir de Montmorency was a prisoner, Sir de Rieux was dead, all was lost, and it was every man for himself. After that, everyone was too busy to answer more questions. I had completely lost track of you! We began to search at random, casting around the theatre of events in a great circle, as hunters do when tracking game. We visited Belpech, Cahuzac, Fanjeaux, Alzonne, Conques, and Peyriac; in none of these places was there any hint of your passage. Somewhere between Fendeille and the abbey, your carriage had disappeared like a mirage. At Peyriac, I found the steward of our house in Valence. My father had sent word that he would spend two or three months at our château there. They implored me to come home, and that put an end to my search. After three weeks of looking, I'd lost all hope of finding you. I went to the château. My father arrived the next day. He found me despondent. After a word from the steward, everyone in the château was very considerate, and no one mentioned my journey. My father came and sat by my bedside. He was a very serious, even severe man, as you know. I'd told him of my love for you, and your promise to be my husband. The honour of such an alliance was so great that he'd given up his favourite project, that of my marriage to the Viscount de Pontis, the son of his oldest friend. But with your death, that project once again was his foremost desire. Besides, Louis XIII had had words with him about his daughter's love for a rebel. As you were his brother, the king was particularly angry with you. Your property and domains were all confiscated, and if you hadn't been presumed dead, you would have been tried and treated just as Montmorency had been, king's son though you were. So it was a blessing that you were dead, and had died on the battlefield. That captain I'd seen and interrogated, that killer whom I'd cursed and whose pale face haunted me in my dreams, that murderer had saved you from the scaffold. I listened, sadly and sombrely, to my father. His mind was made up: the Count de Pontis, who had fought in the army of Marshal Schomberg, was in the royal favour. It was my father and him against me and the cardinal. On my side, I did what I could. I asked my father for three months: if, after that

time, I'd had no news of you, or your death was confirmed, I would go to the church with the Viscount de Pontis. On October 30, Sir de Montmorency was executed. Then I almost blessed your murderer, for I knew that if you'd had to suffer like the poor duke, it would have killed me. There was no doubt about your fate – everyone said you'd been killed. I was a widow who'd never been married! Three months passed. On the last day of the third month, my father came to the château with the Viscount de Pontis. I knew how punctual my father was, and didn't want to keep him waiting. When he arrived, he found me already in my bridal gown. The clock struck eleven. The priest awaited us at the church. I rose and rested my arm on my father's. The Count de Pontis walked behind with his son. They were followed by five or six mutual friends, a few dozen relatives, and the servants. We made our way toward the church. My father didn't speak, only looked at me. He seemed surprised to find me so quiet. Like a martyr marching to her death, my face lit up as I approached the place of execution. As we entered the church, I was pale but smiling, like a castaway fighting a storm who sees the safety of port. The priest was waiting at the altar; we approached, and all went down on their knees. I'd been afraid that when I arrived at this point, my strength would fail me. But I was still strong, and I thanked the Lord for it with all my heart. The priest asked the Viscount de Pontis if he took me for his wife. "Yes," he replied. He gave me the same question, asking if I took Sir de Pontis as my husband. "My husband in this world and the next," I replied, "is my divine saviour Jesus, and I shall never have another." I made this response in a tone so calm and firm that no one in the church missed a word. Sir de Pontis looked at me with a frightened air, as if I'd gone mad. My father took a step forward. But I, I passed through the gate that separated me from the altar, raised my arms to heaven, and cried in a loud voice, "From this moment, I belong to God, and only God has a right to claim me!" "Isabelle!" my father shouted. "Would you defy my authority?" "There is an authority higher and holier than yours, my father," I replied respectfully. "It's the authority of the one who sustained my faith while on the road to misfortune. Father, I am no longer of this earthly world – pray for me. As I will pray for all of you." My father moved to pass the gate and snatch me from the altar but the priest held his arms out to block him. "Woe!" said he. "Woe to he who would impede this call to vocation, or try to prevent it! This girl has given herself to God, and I receive her in his name. The house of God is a holy sanctuary where no one, not even her father, has a right to take her against her will." My father might not have been stopped by this warning but the Count de Pontis dragged him away. The viscount and the rest of the entourage followed the old man out, and the door closed behind them. The priest asked me where I wished to retire. I had myself driven to the Ursuline convent. My father went to Paris at once, to appeal to the cardinal. But all he got from the cardinal was an order that I was not to take my vows for the term of a year. That year passed. After a year and a day, I took the veil. That was four years ago. For four years, not a day has passed without my praying for you, kissing the feathers of the hat I'd picked up on the battlefield at Castelnauary, the only relic of you I had. Now, you know everything. And now, in your turn, tell me all, in detail; tell me by what miracle you live; tell me where you are; tell me how I can see you. And tell it all quickly, before I go mad!

– 17 May, 4AM

160

6AM

Immediately after your letter, for a moment, God turned his eyes away from us – and in that moment, the angel of evil passed over us and touched our heads. Listen in your turn. You know what pledges I'd made to my brother Gaston. I'd hoped that, by making good on one, I'd account for them all. The king's prime minister seemed to think only of the king, not of the rest of us. Such tyranny was intolerable to the Sons of France; every time the cardinal employed the king's name, and used his seal, without consulting him, was a mark against his minister. Daily he gave orders in the house of Henry IV without regard for his sons, including the one who was on the throne. And meanwhile, as he gathered a fortune of two hundred million, barely a third of France's people could get decent bread; another third lived on coarse oat bread, while the final third, like filthy farmyard animals, sustained themselves on acorns and mash. Across the realm he'd been granted control of numerous royal fortresses and domains. He had Brouage, Oléron, Ré, La Rochelle, Saumur, Angers, Brest, Amboise, Le Havre, Pont-de-l'Arche, and Pointoise, at the very gates of Paris. He was master of the province and citadel of Verdun. In addition to the garrisons of all these towns, forts, and citadels, he was Admiral of the Navy. He had his own personal company of guards. He held in his hands all the keys to France. The rest of France, gathered against him, wasn't enough to raise an army to oppose his own. The prisons had become graves to bury the true servants of the king, and the crime of *lèse-majesté* no longer applied to those who rebelled against the king or the State but to anyone who lacked the zeal and blind obedience to follow the will and purposes of his prime minister. I had to say all this, first and foremost, because it's my excuse for leaving you and taking the side of one who, later, would deny us all, alive or dead. It was the trial and execution of the old Marshall de Marillac that decided everything for me. I had been in correspondence with my brother Gaston and with Queen Marie de Médicis, who had always been perfectly friendly to me. I determined to join my fortune to theirs. Do you remember how melancholy I was at that time? Do you remember my emotion, my voice breaking into sobs when I told you that my future was less certain than that of the new leaves on the tree under which we sat? Do you remember how I asked you for three more months before making you my wife, while saying that my happiest day would be the day I became your husband? In fact, from that moment, I was privy to all the affairs of my brother Gaston and acted as intermediary between him and poor Montmorency. You ask me not to leave out any details. And I won't forget or omit anything, if only to justify myself to you – and to me. We had to have the Spanish and Neapolitans on our side. And in fact, when Montmorency declared for us, the Neapolitans did indeed appear off the coast of Narbonne but they didn't dare to land. As for the Spaniards, they mustered at Urgel on their side of the border but never crossed to ours. You saw the insurrection rise all around you. You heard the cries of revolt in Bagnols, in Lunel, in Beaucaire, and in Alais. One morning I received – with a heavy heart, because I knew it betokened our separation – one morning there came the manifesto in which my brother Gaston declared himself Lieutenant General of France. Shortly thereafter, as you learned in a letter from the king to your father, ordering him to Paris, Gaston returned to France with eighteen hundred horse, who burned the outlying suburb of Saint-Nicolas and the houses of the members of parliament who'd tried and condemned Marillac. A day later, in my turn, I too received a letter. My brother wrote to me from Albi and summoned me to keep my oath to him. That was the day I took leave of you, 14 August 1632 – a fatal date, burned as deeply into my heart as yours. Oh, all your details of my departure are true! Your depiction of that night is perfect, except I could see you for longer than you could see me. You were on the balcony of your room, lit from behind, while I plunged into deepening darkness. But eventually the road reached a turn, beyond which I'd see you no more. At that point, I halted my horse, wondering if it wouldn't be better to forget all my oaths and commitments, sacrificing honour to love to return to you. But your window closed, your light went out, and I thought it a warning from God to continue on my path. So I dug my spurs into my horse, wrapped my head in my cloak, and rushed forward into the darkness drowning the horizon while urging myself, "Forward! Forward!" Two days later, I was in Albi, where I nearly caught up to my brother, who'd left five hundred Polish horse as my command and marched on to Beziers. On August 29, I received orders from the marshal-duke to join him. I went with my five hundred, and reached him on the night of August 30. On the 31st, we met to consider our position. We believed Sir de Schomberg was marching on Castelnauary, and marched there in our turn. But Schomberg got there first and occupied a house only ten minutes from the field, where he formed up a corps of Guards. It was then September 1, at eight in the morning. The marshal-duke was apprised of the situation; he took five hundred men to scout Schomberg's army in force; and when he reached the house, he charged it. Those within soon abandoned their posts. Sir de Montmorency left a hundred and fifty men to guard the house, and returned to us quite pleased with this initial success. He found us gathered in the largest house in town: my brother Gaston, Sir de Rieux, Sir de Chaudebonne, and me. Approaching my brother, Montmorency announced, "Sir, today you will triumph over all your enemies, today the son will be reunited with his mother. But," he added, gesturing with his bloody sword, "only if by tonight your sword is like mine, that is to say, red to the hilt." My brother doesn't care for swords, especially when they're bloody, and he turned away. "Eh, Marshal!" he said, "Do you never tire of boasting? Always you promise me great victories but these hopes are never fulfilled." "In any case," said the marshal, "assuming you're still with me and I, as you say, have given you hope, today that's more than anyone's done for your brother the king – for there's not just hope at stake here, there's life itself." "Why, Marshal!" Gaston said with a shrug. "Do you really suppose the life of the heir apparent is in play? No matter what happens, I'm sure to make my peace, as I did the last three times." The marshal smiled sourly and, turning from the prince, approached the rest of us. "Well, now we come to the bout," he said, "and our man already has a nosebleed. He says he, at least, will get away clean. But I think if he does, neither I, nor you, Sir de Moret, nor you, Sir de Rieux, will be part of his escort." We said we certainly would not. "Very well," the marshal-duke continued, "then come with me – because we swore that when this day came, we'd meet it sword in hand." Just then, the report came that Schomberg's army had left the woods and was marching toward us. "Come, gentlemen," the marshal-duke said, "The time has come – every man to his post." We had to pass over a river on a small bridge where they might have disputed our crossing but no one did. On the contrary, Sir de Schomberg's plan was to draw us forward into an ambush on that sunken road where you found my poor squire. The bridge crossed, I took my position on the left wing that was under my command. It was, as you know, my first battle. I was eager to show that, though of the same blood as Sir, my blood ran hotter than his. Ahead, I saw a troop of fusiliers detached as forward skirmishers: I charged them. I particularly noted the officer you met on the night after the battle. He was a brave gentleman, as calm under fire as if he were on parade. I spurred straight at him and discharged my pistol which, as you said, trimmed the feather from his hat. He returned fire. I felt a blow to my left side; I put my hand to it without knowing what I'd find, and drew it away covered with blood. I didn't feel much pain at the time but something like a red cloud passed before my eyes, and the earth spun beneath me. My horse shied, a movement I didn't have enough strength to control. I felt myself slipping from the saddle. I cried, "To me! For the Bourbons!" And I saw a vision of you. As my eyes closed, I seemed to hear a volley of musketry, and a curtain of flame unrolled before me. Doubtless my Poles bore me away, because from that moment until I recovered my senses, a mile or two from there, I was unaware of what happened to me. I was in terrible pain when I came to. I opened my eyes, to see a curious crowd peering in from around the carriage. I tried to figure out where they were taking me. I remembered the sister of my friend Sir de Ventadour was the abbess of a nearby convent. With an effort, I put my head out the door, and gave orders to take me to Madam de Ventadour. You see, your dedicated pursuit put you on the right trail, and it isn't your fault you didn't catch up with me. The pain that had awakened me then plunged me back into unconsciousness. I don't know quite how I was brought before Madam de Ventadour but when I awoke I found myself lying on an excellent bed. However, I was in some sort of underground vault. The doctor of the convent was near at hand but someone beside me, seeing my eyes open, whispered to me, "Don't say who you are." You'd been my final memory, and you were my first thought. I looked for you but you weren't there. I saw only unknown faces, and a man with rolled-up sleeves and bloody hands. It was the doctor who'd tended to me. I closed my eyes. Later that night you came to the abbey but, due to their fear of the cardinal, they told you they hadn't seen me. So you didn't know I was there, and I didn't know you'd come. We came so close but missed each other. I have little sense of what happened during the two weeks after I was wounded. It was less a recovery than a pause at the door of the tomb. Finally, my youth and strength of will prevailed; I felt life return to my feverish and languid limbs, and from that moment, the doctor declared I had turned the corner. But I was forbidden to leave my bed, or be taken outdoors. I was still at risk of my life for another four to six weeks. It was during this time that they tried and executed the marshal-duke. That execution only reinforced the terror of the poor sisters who were tending me. They had no doubt that even a prince of the blood would be treated like Sir de Montmorency. For hadn't Montmorency allied with the traitorous Marie de Médicis? Outside, everyone decided I must be dead, and as it was in everyone's interest to believe it, the news of my death soon spread. After two months, I could get up. Though I'd remained hidden in the vaults beneath the convent until then, now my recovery required fresh air. It was November but Languedoc's mild winter didn't prevent night-time walks. I was allowed to take the night air in the convent garden. Along with thought and feeling – though not yet strength, because I was so feeble, I couldn't go up or down stairs – my love for you, numbed till then by the nearness of death, returned with full force. I spoke only of you, longed only for you. As soon as I could hold a pen, I asked to be able to write to you. They gave me what I asked for, and a messenger took my letter away – but as a message would reveal that I still lived, and as Madam de Ventadour was terrified that such news would result in their persecution, imprisonment, perhaps even death, the messenger just stayed in the area for two weeks, then returned to say that your father had taken you to Paris, and he'd delivered my letter to those of your women who seemed most devoted to you. That reassured me. I was certain my appeal to your love would bring a prompt reply. A month passed; every day that went by was another blow to my confidence, a wound to my hope. It was three months since the Battle of Castelnauary. I ached to know the current news. Wounded at the outset of the fight, I knew nothing of the result. They hesitated to tell me the news until I threatened to go find out for myself. Finally they told me everything: the loss of the battle, Gaston's flight and reconciliation – his fourth, as he'd said – the trial and death of Montmorency, the confiscation of my property, the loss of my rank and my dignity. I took this news better than they expected. Certainly the death of the poor marshal was a heavy blow. But after the execution of Sir de Marillac, we'd foreseen that death was a possibility for both Sir de Montmorency and myself, and had discussed it more than once. As for the loss of my rank, my dignity, and my fortune, I met that with a contemptuous smile. Men had taken from me everything that could be given by men – but they'd left me with what God had given me: your love. From that moment, your love for me was the one hope I had left in life. It was the only star shining in the sky of the future that had become as dark as that of the past had been radiant. The messenger hadn't found you – so I resolved to be my own messenger. Your response had never come, so I decided to seek an answer for myself. But leaving the convent wasn't going to be easy. They kept a close watch on me, afraid I might be seen and recognised. I therefore told them I proposed to leave, not just the convent but France itself. For the abbess, this was the best proposal I could possibly make. It was agreed that I would disguise myself as a angler and travel among others as far as Narbonne, where I would leave them. At Narbonne Abbey, I would dress in ecclesiastical garb and continue in the abbess's carriage. I'd never been to that area, and besides, everyone thought I was dead, so it was unlikely that I'd be recognised. The good abbess put her coffers at my disposal. I thanked her but when wounded I'd had on me two hundred crowns or so that was still in my purse, plus diamond rings and brooches worth ten thousand crowns at least. And you were rich, so what use had I for money? I left the abbey in early January, full of gratitude for the hospitality they'd given me. Alas! I had no idea how dearly that hospitality had cost me. It was twenty-eight leagues to Narbonne, and I was still so weak that I could walk for only short distances – though perhaps I exaggerated my weakness a bit, so they'd underestimate me. The first night, we lodged in Villepinte; the second, in Barbaira; the third, in Narbonne. The next day, they made arrangements to sail me to Marseilles. I was to be a sick prelate with ailing lungs ordered to take the air at Hyères or Nice. I rested for a day at Narbonne and departed the next. With a good wind behind me, forty-eight hours later I was in Marseilles.

There, I paid my boatmen, said farewell to the two servants of the abbess who'd come with me, and was once again perfectly free. In the market I hired a coach to take me to Avignon, and from Avignon up the Rhône to Valence. My cavalier airs might betray me, so I made myself an officer's uniform of the Cardinal's Guard. Wearing that uniform, I was sure I wouldn't be bothered. I left Marseilles and reached Avignon in three days. In Avignon, the wind was blowing up from the sea, ensuring good navigation, so I entrusted myself to the Rhône. When the wind died, we roped the boat to horses and were drawn along by a cable. Early one day, I saw your château in the distance. It was there that you would be waiting for me – or, if what I'd been told was true and your father had taken you to Paris, it was there that I'd find news of you. I wanted to be put ashore, the boat got on so slowly but unfortunately I was still too weak. Oh, if only I'd arrived just one hour sooner! If only I'd seen you first! But it was not to be – we were doomed ... I could only stand in the prow and await our arrival. Even so, half a league short of Valence, I disembarked. I could walk only slowly but that was faster than the boat. Moreover, the hope of seeing you revived my strength. From far off I saw your balcony, the one from which you'd waved goodbye as I turned the corner of the road – but the balcony was empty and the blinds were shut. There was something about the château that I'd yearned to see for so long, something bleak and empty that chilled me. Suddenly, I saw the main gate open. A procession marched out, turned toward the city, and disappeared. I was still a quarter-league away but without knowing why, I felt my heart sink and my strength fail me. I leaned against a tree beside the road, sweat beading my forehead; I wiped it away and resumed my trek. I came upon a servant. "My friend," I asked, hesitating, "does Miss Isabelle de Lautrec still live in that château?"

"That's right, *officer*," he said. "Miss Isabelle de Lautrec. But half an hour from now, she'll be called something else."

"Something else! What will she be called?"

"Madam la Viscountess of Pontis."

"Why the Viscountess of Pontis?"

"Because in half an hour she'll be the wife of my master, the Viscount de Pontis."

I felt myself go pale and mopped my face with my handkerchief. "So," I said, "the procession I saw leaving the château...?"

"Was that of the betrothed?"

"And at this moment...?"

"At this moment, they're in the church."

"No! It's impossible!"

"Impossible!" said the servant. "Well, if you want to see it with your own eyes, Officer, there's still time. Take this shortcut, and you'll be at the church soon enough."

I couldn't believe the man's story – I wanted him to be wrong, I wanted to see with my own eyes that there was no such terrible reality. For some reason he must be telling me a lie, a bald-faced lie. I knew Valence, having lived there for three months. I quickly crossed the bridge, entered the town, and followed the streets that would take me most directly to the church. Besides, I was guided by the jubilant sound of the bells. The cathedral square was crowded with people. Despite the pealing bells, despite the crowd of celebrants, I still couldn't believe – I told myself the man had misled me that someone else was walking to the altar. But though I passed through a teeming crowd, I didn't dare to ask anyone. If I hadn't been dressed as one of the Cardinal's Guard, I certainly couldn't have pushed through to the front ranks but the crowd parted at the sight of my uniform. And then ... oh, it takes all my strength to recount these terrible details – until yesterday I didn't know for sure it was you who was writing to me, I hadn't yet reopened this lethal wound ... You suffered through my death but oh, I suffered through your betrayal. Your betrayal ... forgive me, Isabelle, forgive me, I know now it was only the appearance but oh! For me, unhappy wretch, it was reality. When I saw you, a cloud rose before my eyes like the one when I was shot from my horse by that officer. It was the same feeling but more painful – because while the bullet struck my side, this pierced my heart. I saw you appear: you were pale but almost smiling. You walked with a firm stride across the square, seemingly in a hurry to get to the church. I passed a hand over my eyes, stumbled, panting, muttering in a low voice that surprised those around me, "My God, this can't be true ... my eyes, ears, all my senses must be deceiving me ...! But she's alone, alone – she couldn't wrong me, she couldn't wrong me so."

You passed no more than ten feet from me but I was struck dumb, hoping you wouldn't enter the church that you would turn away, you would cry out that this was a violation of your love – and then I, I would rush forward, and though it cost my life I'd cry, "Yes, I love her! Yes, she loves me! Yes, I am the Count of Moret, dead to everyone but her, Isabelle de Lautrec, my bride in this world and the next! Let me be with my fiancée!" And I would have carried you away in the face of all of them, despite everything, because I felt I had the strength of a giant. But Isabelle! O Isabelle! You didn't speak, you didn't stop, and you went on into the church. A long cry, a heart-breaking wail rose from the depths of my breast as you disappeared through the doors ... and then, before anyone could ask me why I moaned so, I turned, darted through the crowd, and disappeared. I returned to the riverbank, I found my boat, I threw myself amid the boatmen, burying my hands in my hair and crying "Isabelle! Isabelle!" They left me a while in my despair. Then they asked me where I wanted to go. I pointed downriver. They loosed the boat, and the Rhône carried us away. What more can I say? I must have survived the next four years, since today you find me, still alive and still in love. But before today, I didn't exist. I've been waiting to take my vows until the end of the term I'd imposed on myself. That term, you have brought to an end – thank you! Since I know you didn't betray me, since I know you still love me, entering my vocation will be easier for me, and now I can go calmly to God. Pray for your brother ... as your brother prays for you.

– 3PM

161

5:30PM

What's this you tell me? I don't quite understand. You have found me; you're sure I didn't betray you; you know I love you; and this, you say, ends the term of waiting to take your vows, makes your vocation easier, and makes you calm enough to consecrate yourself to God! Good Lord! Would you continue with your strange project of renouncing the world? Just listen to me: God is not unjust. When I dedicated myself to him, it was in the belief that you were dead. But you live! God won't require me to keep a vow made in despair, if the cause of my despair doesn't exist. I'm free, despite my vows. Yes, yes, it's as you say: we nearly touched each other at the abbey but had no way of knowing we were so close to each other. Oh but I'm wrong, I belie my own heart, for an inner voice cried to me, "Stand firm, argue, insist – he is here."

Yes, I understand, the poor abbess was terrified, afraid of what the hospitality she gave you would cost. Oh, why couldn't I have found you! I'd been proud of the mission God have given me to save the son of Henry IV. I wanted the pride and glory to be able to say, "When the whole world abandoned him, I alone endured, I alone rescued him." Fool that I am! Saying that would have betrayed you, and you'd have been lost like the marshal-duke. Better, then, for her to hide you from me so you should live – better that I should suffer, should despair, should die. But why despair now? Why should I die? You've yet to take your vows, and I regard mine as invalid. Let's leave, let's go to Italy, to Spain, to the end of the world. I'm still rich – and besides, why do we need money? We love each other! Come! Let's go! Oh, answer me. Yes, tell me where you are, tell me how to find you. Consider this: you doubted me – me, your Isabelle! You thought me deceitful, and you owe me expiation.

I wait, I wait.

162

5AM

Your letter stirs the most secret depths of my heart. Ah, for what was to have been ours! You offer me the happiness I sought, expected, desired all my life – and I cannot accept that happiness. Isabelle! Isabelle!

You are a lady, as I am a gentleman. Neither of us would betray a promise made to men, let alone an oath made to God. Don't try to deceive yourself: the vows you made are real, and God doesn't admit of equivocation. For us there is only one future, the one to which misfortune has led us. You showed me the sacred path, and you were the first to take it. I follow you – and we shall arrive together, since we have the same goal. I will pray for you, as you pray for me. We pray as one, not for ourselves but for the eternal life and eternal love that we shall receive from the Lord, in place of worldly love and mortal life. And don't believe that, because I tell you this, I love you less than you love me. No, I can't love you less, I know – I love you with the heart of a man much stronger since he fell from his heights to the depths, and who, having touched death with his hand, returns pale from the tomb bearing revelations of another life beyond. Believe me, Isabelle, the more I love you, the more certain I am on this point. Don't risk your eternal salvation on such sophistry. The life of this world is to eternity as a second is to a century. We live for a second on the earth but we live forever with God. And then, moreover, listen to this, my bride in this world and the next: though it was God who willed despair into your heart when it was deceived, that power to bind has the power to unbind. Urban VIII is pope, and your family has powerful allies in Italy. Use them to get a nullification of your vows. On that day, Isabelle, you truly can tell me, "I'm free!"

And then, then ... oh, I dare not think of what blessed happiness, what bliss without remorse we would find!

163

2PM

Yes, you are right; there must be no shadow on our happiness. In our hearts shall be neither fear nor remorse, and our dark and stormy sky shall be followed by a firmament glittering with stars. Yes, I spoke to one who has listened to me; yes, she assures me she'll find mercy for me; yes! I ask you for three months to go free myself, and if in three months our dove hasn't borne you the ecclesiastical order that liberates me, then our only hope is in heaven. Then you may give yourself to God as I did, bound by an unbreakable oath. Oh, I couldn't bear to know that you were free, when I am forever chained! Tomorrow, I'll be on my way.

164

4:30PM

Go, and may God be with you!

1638

1 June

It's just a month since I received your last letter; a month I've spent watching for the coming of our dove; a month with no words about you, except those from my heart. How the time passes! Now, minutes become hours; hours become days; days become years. Can I live like this for two more months? Yes, because I will hold out hope until the very last day. I write this letter without knowing if you'll ever receive it – but I write for that day that shall separate us or bring us together. For you know, Isabelle, I think about you with every beat of my heart.

165

22 June

Fly, beloved dove, fly to my dear returned one, tell him it was his prayers that protected me – tell him I'm free, and tell him we are happy! Free! Free! Free! Let me tell you, my beloved ... I don't know where to start, I'm so mad with joy! As you may know, the same day I wrote my last letter to you, the good news came, officially confirmed, that the queen was pregnant. To celebrate the occasion, there were to be great festivals throughout France, and pardons granted by the king and cardinal. I resolved to go and throw myself at the feet of the cardinal, who has, in ecclesiastical matters, all the powers of Rome. That's why I asked you for only three months. The same day I wrote you, I departed, with the permission of our mother superior. My neighbour in the next cell agreed to take care of our dove. I was so sure of myself, I left her without fear. I departed – but despite my best efforts, I couldn't get to Paris in less than seventeen days. The cardinal was at his country estate in Rueil. I left immediately for there. At first he was ill and couldn't receive me. I took lodgings in the town and waited, after leaving my name with Father Joseph. On the third day, Father Joseph himself came to tell me that His Eminence was ready to receive me. I rose at this news but fell back in my chair, pale as death. My heart quivered, and my legs were too weak to hold me. They say Father Joseph isn't tender of heart – and yet, when he saw me collapse at the mere idea of an audience with the cardinal, he did his best to encourage me, telling me that if I had something to ask of His Eminence, the time was right, as the cardinal was better than he'd been for quite some time. Oh, my entire life, and yours, depended on what was to happen between that man and me!

I followed Father Joseph, blind to my surroundings, my eyes fixed only on him and matching my pace to his, as if his movements directed mine. We passed through the town and entered the estate. We went up an avenue of tall trees. I saw everything at once, all blurred together, so the details escaped me. Finally, I saw before us an arbour of honeysuckle and clematis, and under it a man half lying on a couch. He was dressed in a white robe and wearing a red cap, the biretta of a cardinal. I pointed toward the man and Father Joseph understood. "Yes," he said, "that's him."

Just then I was passing a large tree; I paused and leaned against it, for I felt that if I took another step without support, I'd fall. The cardinal saw my hesitation, the stagger that betrayed my weakness; he rose. "Approach without fear," he said.

An indescribable tone softened his usually gruff voice, and it was that change in his voice that suddenly filled me with hope. I regained my strength and, almost running, I threw myself at his feet. He waved Father Joseph away, who obeyed, retreating out of earshot but still within view. I bowed and extended my hands before me. “What do you want of me, my daughter?” asked the cardinal-duke.

“My Lord, My Lord, a blessing upon which depends not just my life but my salvation.”

“Your name?”

“Isabelle de Lautrec.”

“Ah! Your father was a loyal servant of the king – a rare thing in this time of rebellion. We had the misfortune to lose him.”

“Yes, My Lord. Is it permitted to invoke his memory in your presence?”

“Were he alive, I would grant him whatever he asked, except for those things that are in the purview of the Lord, for whom I am but a simple vicar. Speak: what do you wish?”

“My Lord, I have taken vows.”

“So I recall, because, at your father’s request, I opposed these vows with all my power, and instead of granting your wish to take them, asked you to delay for a full year. So you took these vows despite the year’s delay?”

“Alas, My Lord, I did!”

I admired the prodigious memory of this great man of affairs who recalled so unimportant an event as a poor child he’d never seen taking the veil. “Ah, and now you repent them.”

I preferred to blame my repentance on inconstancy rather than desire. “My Lord,” I said, “I was just eighteen years old, and the death of a man I loved had driven me mad.”

He smiled. “I see. And now that you are twenty-four, you’ve become more reasonable.”

I waited, hands clasped. “So now,” he said, “you would break those vows, as with time the woman has overcome the holy sister. The memories of the world have pursued you in your seclusion, and though you swore your body to God, your soul, I perceive, remains on earth. O human weakness!”

“My Lord! My Lord!” I cried. “I’m lost unless you have mercy on me!”

“It was, however, freely and voluntarily that you took your vows.”

“Yes, freely and voluntarily. I repeat, My Lord – I was mad.”

“And what excuse can you give God for this failure to keep your oath?”

My excuse – an excuse already well known to God, who had preserved your life, my beloved – that I couldn’t tell him, or all would be lost. I remained silent but for a tiny moan. “So, you’ve no excuse,” said the duke.

I wrung my hands in agony. “Well, then, I must find one for you,” he said, “however mundane.”

“Oh, help me, My Lord, aid me, and I’ll bless you till the last breath of my life!”

“Hmm! As minister to King Louis XIII, I don’t wish a name as loyal and good as yours to perish. Your house is one of the true glories of France, and the true glories of France are dear to me.”

Then, gazing at me, he asked, “You love someone?”

I bowed my head into the dust. “Yes, that’s it,” the duke continued. “I guessed as much: you love someone. And the one you love is free?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“He knows of your request, and expects it?”

“He is waiting.”

“Very well. You shall be free, and this man shall join his name, whatever it is, to that of Lautrec, so that the name of the victor of Ravenna and Brescia shall not perish.”

“Oh, My Lord!” I cried, kissing his feet.

He lifted me, breathless with joy, and beckoned to Father Joseph, who approached. “Escort Miss Isabelle de Lautrec back where you found her,” the cardinal said, “and in an hour you can bring her the order that releases her from her vows.”

“My Lord, My Lord, how can I thank you?”

“That’s easy enough: when you’re asked your opinion of me, say that I know both how to punish and how to reward. Living, I punished the traitor Montmorency; dead, I reward the loyal Lautrec. Go, my daughter, go.”

I kissed his hands ten times over, and then followed Father Joseph. An hour later, he brought me the order that nullified my vows. I left at once, without losing a minute, the precious order next to my heart that was even more devoted to God since God had released me from my words. My return trip took only thirteen days, and here I am, writing to you, beloved – not telling all I have to say, because that would take a book, and it would be a week before you knew that I’m free, I love you, and we shall be happy! I hasten to finish because I don’t want to delay this wonderful news a single minute. I’m keeping the horses harnessed – at the return of the dove, I’m ready to go. Just tell me where you are, and wait there for me. Go, my dove: I’ve never had such need for your wings. And then return! Do you hear, my beloved: tell me nothing but where I need to go to find you. I don’t want to delay our reunion by even so long as it takes to write – I love you!

10 minutes later

Oh, woe! Woe is upon us! That man is fatal to us, beloved – perhaps even more so the second time than the first. Listen, listen, although you can’t hear me. Listen, although you may never know what I must tell you. Listen! I attached my letter as usual to the leg of our dove, this letter in which I told you everything, this letter that bore our whole future happiness. I had released little Iris, and followed her with my eyes as she sprang into the sky – when suddenly, from the other side of the cloister walls, I heard a gunshot, and saw our dove stop in its flight, flutter, and fall. I gave so agonised a shriek, I feared my soul would leave my body. Frantic, I immediately rushed from the convent. It was so obvious that I was in distress that no one tried to stop me. I’d seen in which direction the dove had fallen, and ran that way. Fifty paces beyond the walls of the cloister, I saw an officer dressed for the hunt. It was he who had shot the dove; he held it in his hands, gazing with astonishment and some regret at the letter attached to its leg. I approached him with outstretched hands, unable to say anything but “Woe! Woe! Woe!” Four steps away I stopped, faint, struck to the heart as if by lightning – this hunter, this officer, who had just shot our dove, was the same I’d seen that night on the Castelnauudary battlefield. It was that same Bitéran who shot you from your horse! We recognised each other. Oh, I tell you, his pallor was almost equal to mine; he saw me dressed as a nun, and realised who it was beneath the sister’s habit. “Ah, Madam,” he whispered, “I am truly desolate!”

And he handed me our poor dove, who struggled in his hand and fell to the ground. I picked it up – fortunately, it had only a broken wing. But she holds the secret of your location, my beloved. And this secret she keeps to herself. How can I find you if she can’t fly to you? Fly to tell you where to find me, that I’m free, that we should be happy! Oh, beyond doubt, that poor little creature has a soul. If you’d only seen, my beloved, how she looked at me as I carried her into the convent. Meanwhile, motionless and speechless, the assassin’s eyes followed me, as they’d followed me when I’d walked away through the bloodstained meadow grass of that battlefield. I don’t know if this man will ever be able to make good all the evil he’s done but if there’s no redress for this, I’ll curse him until my final hour! I laid the dove in a basket, and placed the basket in my lap. Fortunately, the wound hadn’t injured her body, just the end of her wing. I detached the blood-spattered letter from her leg. My God! My God! If not for this sudden accident, by now it would almost have reached you. Where are you? Where are you? Who will tell me where to find you? Ah, I’d sent for the convent’s doctor, and here he comes ...

4 hours later

The doctor is a fine man, a good man; he understands that existence is mysterious and strange, and sometimes the life of a dove is as precious as the life of a king. He understood when he saw my despair, and when he saw the blood-spattered letter. The injury, he said, was minor, and the dove would survive – once he took off her wing. I snatched her back, and then fell to my knees, saying “If you take her wing, you take my life. She must fly! She must fly!”

“To save the wing is much harder,” he said, “and I can’t answer for its success – but I’ll do everything I can. If all goes well, in only two or three weeks, she’ll fly once more.”

“So it will take up to three weeks – but she’ll fly! She’ll fly!”

You understand, my love: all my hope is in this. He bound her wings against her body. She seems to understand, poor thing – she can’t move but she looks at me. I put grain and water within reach of her beak but she will only take food from my hand. What to do while I wait? How can I tell you what happened? What messenger can I send to find you? How should I know, like a castaway lost at sea, in which direction to send my distress signal? Why wasn’t it one of *my* arms that was broken, instead of her wing?

23 June

Yes, you were right, my beloved: if I hadn’t gotten a release from my vows, there would always have been a shadow of remorse on our happiness – or, rather, we’d have had no happiness at all, for it would not have been sanctioned by God! When I told you “I’m free, let’s go off together, we’ll be happy,” I wanted that to be so but deep in my soul was a voice of regret that, no matter how strong my love, could not be silenced. Today I’m very sad, because I don’t know how to find you or see you but my conscience is clear; and when I say, when I repeat, “I love you, my husband,” I no longer feel the hollow in my heart I’d felt when I said, “Don’t worry, my beloved, we’ll be happy.” I have cared for our poor dove as I would have watched over an ailing sister. She suffers, and sometimes I can see the pain in her eyes. Then I bathe her wing in ice water, and it seems to do her good. She strokes me with her pink beak, as if to thank me. Poor dove! She has no idea how much selfishness there is in the care I give her. But you, you! My God! What must you be thinking?

1 July

Two months have passed, and still no news. My eyes are worn out from scanning the horizon, vainly seeking our beloved dove. Each black dot I see in the sky, I think, “This is it...” and then after a moment, I realise my mistake, and my chest that had heaved with hope, deflates with a sigh. No matter: I still wait, I still hope. You live; you love me; why am I so desperate for happiness? But ... the time passes. It’s now two months since you left. If I calculate correctly, it’s eight or ten days since you should have returned. O my God! My God! Would you deny me, and turn this heart to bronze? Even though she said she still loves me? Lord my God, do not abandon us!

2 July

Oh! If you knew, poor beloved of my heart, everything I’ve written to you in the last fortnight! In there, you’d see a whole world of thoughts, desires, hopes, regrets, and memories! If we’re ever reunited – God willing, and as I ardently pray every day, and more so at night! – if we’re ever reunited, you’ll read all of it, and then, only then, I swear to you, will you understand how much you were loved! If we never meet again ... oh, all the tortures of hell are wrapped up in that fear ... well, it is I who will reread these letters, it is I who will daily add another note more desperate than that of the day before, it is I who, until I die, will still write “I love you!”

Each day I think I’ve exhausted all the anguish and joy in my heart – and then I feel that ahead there are still depths of joy or pain I’ve not yet glimpsed! Tomorrow! Why does my hand shake so when writing that word? It’s because tomorrow will be the day that decides my life; tomorrow, I’ll see if our dove can fly. It’s already three days since she left the basket; she moves about the room, she stretches her wings, she flits from the door to the window. She seems to understand, poor thing, how important it is for us that she finds the strength to fly. Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! I will write a short note for her to carry, so as not to load her with unnecessary weight. Just a few words but enough to tell you everything. Tomorrow, my beloved! I’ll spend the night in prayer. I won’t even try to sleep, it would be useless. What are you doing to us, God? Do you doubt how much I love, and how much I suffer?

6 July

It’s dawn, beloved, and as I told you, I haven’t slept for a moment. I spent the night in prayer; I hope God has heard me, and that today you’ll know where I am, that I’m free and waiting for you. The dove is even more anxious than I; it beats against the window with its beak and its wings. We’ll open that window, little one! God grant that your wing is strong enough for the trip you’re about to take. I interrupt this long letter to write the short note she will carry to you – or perhaps, alas, only try to carry to you!

4<sup>am</sup>

Oh my dove happens to reach you, my beloved, read this post and leave without losing a second – as I would do myself, if only I knew where to find you. I’m free, I love you, and I await you at the convent of Montolieu, between Foix and Tarascon, on the banks of the Ariège. You’ll see why I don’t write more, why this note is so short, and the paper so thin. You’ll know all this and a thousand

things more, all our misfortunes, our fears, our hopes, if our beloved messenger reaches you – for if that happens, you'll set out at once, won't you? I await you, my beloved, as the blind await the light, as the dying hope for life, and as the dead await resurrection. Go, beloved dove, go!

5AM

We are accursed! Oh, my beloved, what have we come to? There's nothing left for me but to die in tears and despair. She cannot fly; after a hundred paces her wing faltered, and she landed in the topmost branches of a poplar she was trying to fly over – but she flew right into it and, branch by branch, fell to the ground. I ran to her, arms outstretched, heart breaking – I ran with a moan that became a cry of pain. I picked her up, and she rested a moment, and again tried to fly – and again she fell! And I fell beside her in despair, rolling on the ground, tearing at the grass with my hands and my teeth. My God! My God! What will become of me? I was too proud, too happy, too certain of bliss, I had it all in my grasp, and then fate struck me down and my dearest treasure is gone. O my Lord! Send me an inspiration, a light, a hope! Lord, Lord, help me! Pity me, O Lord! I'm going mad ... wait. Wait. Divine goodness, you hear me! You answer me! Listen, listen, beloved, hope has revived in my heart, hope that comes to me from on high. Listen! From my window, I've often watched the flight of our dove, from when she departs to a distance of, if I'm not mistaken, two or three leagues. She passes over the sources of the broad stream that flows into the Ariège at Foix. She flies over the small wood of Amourtièr, then above the Salat between Saint-Girons and Oust. Well, here's what I'll do: I'll don a pilgrim's cloak, and then begin looking for you, starting at the small village of Rieupregan. I always lose sight of the dove near that village; once I've passed it, I'll find which way to go from her. She can fly about a hundred paces at a time. So, I'll let her fly a hundred paces, rest for a while, and then fly another hundred. She'll be my guide, and I'll follow her like the Hebrews followed the column of flame by night and the column of smoke by day – because I, too, am in search of the Promised Land, and I'll find it, or die of pain or exhaustion along the way. Alas, I know the road will be long! Poor dove, forgive me for how I'll make you suffer, a martyr to our love! The dear thing won't be able to go more than one or two leagues a day – but no matter, my beloved, for if it takes the rest of my life to find you ... oh! Then I'll seek you for the rest of my life. So I'm leaving – today immediately. I've told our mother superior everything – everything, except your name. She's a worthy woman, a holy woman, who's suffered along with my pain and cried along with my tears. She offered to send someone to accompany me but I refused. I don't want anyone; what I must do I understand, instinctively, involves only heaven and myself. But I promised to write to her if I found you. If I don't write, she'll know I've died, or gone mad, or hidden myself away in the corner of some wood or along a back road on the bank of a lonely river. I go, carrying with me all these letters I've written that you haven't received, that perhaps you'll never receive. Oh, if one day I can drop them all at your feet and tell you, "Read! Read, my beloved!" You will see, on that day, how I've suffered – but on that day, how happy I'll be! I go now; it's three o'clock in the afternoon, and I hope to make it to Rieupregan before the end of the day.

7 July

At night, before leaving, I passed through the chapel, in order to bring God, as it were, along with me. I prostrated myself before the altar, pressed my forehead on the carved stone where the sculptor had carved a cross, and I prayed. Oh, it's true: there is a comfort in prayer. Prayer is the green knoll where one sits and rests after a tiring journey. Prayer is the cool stream where one finds refreshment in the middle of the desert. I left the chapel full of strength and hope, feeling like God had attached angel's wings to my shoulders. It has always been prayer that lifted me from the earth and carried me to the Lord. This is only a test, Lord, is it not? You haven't cursed me, have you, my Lord? That's not what I'll find, will I, Lord, at the end of this road I've only just begun? Wait for me, beloved, wait for me, because I swear, one day soon I'll get there.

I've paused for a moment to lean on the sill of a window that looks out toward the village of Boussenac. That village is along my road, and I'll reach it tomorrow, unless our dove takes me a different way. A dog is sadly howling, probably lost in the small wood I see to my right, a dark blot on the landscape. I said to myself: "If the dog stops howling, it will be a good omen, a sign that I'll find him."

And the dog fell silent. One is superstitious when suffering, don't you think, my heart's beloved? Are you suffering, too? Dear God, what a beautiful night! I imagine you're at your window as I am at this one, looking toward me as I look toward you, thinking about me and God, as I think about God and you. Did you see that lovely shooting star that carved a fiery furrow across the sky? How many miles did it cover in just a second? Oh, if only I had the power to reach you in a second, even if, as I arrived, I sparked and burned out! I would embrace such a bright second of happiness, even if what followed was eternal night. Tomorrow, my beloved – tomorrow, I hope, I will be nearer to you than ever.

## 9 July

I've stopped at a small village named Soulan. Dear God, what a storm! What had the Earth done for the Lord to menace it in such a terrible voice? The water fell in torrents and swelled the Salat, making it impossible to ford. I'd have to go back to Saint-Girons to find a bridge, and that would cost me two days. I've been told that tomorrow, once the river ebbs to its usual level, I should be able to resume my journey. Oh! A day lost! A day during which you await me! A day in which, perhaps, you'll lose hope in me!

12 July

Evening in the village of Alos, a farmer agreed to be my guide, and I crossed the river on his mule. In the river there was a moment, only a third of the way across, when all was almost lost – the beast stumbled in its footing, and I looked up to heaven, crossed my hands on my chest, and said, “If I die, my God, you know I died for him.” But you see, all must be well, since I didn’t die.

15 July

My marathon continues, guided as ever by our dove. On the 13th, we went from Alos to Castillon; that was a big day for our poor girl. I should have been sorrier for her – we must have gone three leagues. The next day, the 14th, I was repaid for my cruelty of the day before, as we made barely a league. Now it's the 15th, and I've reached Saint-Larry, just across a small unnamed stream that flows into the Salat. At least I'm sure I'm on the right road. The dove doesn't hesitate for a moment, doesn't deviate for a second. She goes straight ahead without pause. Only, time is passing, while still you wait. Time is flying toward the day you take your vow. Oh, that vow, be in no haste to take it, beloved! Believe in me, believe in your Isabelle. If you doubt me for a moment, it could cost us everything.

18 July

For three days I've wandered almost at random, through woods and along streams. Alas, the air lacks the obstacles of the land, and the dove often goes where I can't! I confess, O my beloved that for once my courage and strength have failed me, and I've collapsed at the foot of a tree, desperate and dying. It's already eleven days since I left, and I've covered only fifteen to eighteen leagues of what she flew in only an hour when she was our messenger of love, flying fast as an arrow above the miserable beings who call themselves kings of creation but haven't the abilities of a bird, and must take eleven days to travel what a dove can do in an hour. Tell me, how can it be that a wretched magnetic needle knows where north is, while I, a thinking being, made in the image of God, don't know where you are? How it is a ship can sail from one point in the world, go to the far side of the Earth and find a particular island in the ocean, while I can't seem to find you, though you were close enough to speak to or reach out and touch? Oh, I know well, dear God, that if I want to find him, it's not to him but to you that I must reach out. My God, support me! My God, go with me! My God, guide me!

## 29 July

return to my senses; to daylight; to life. I nearly died, my beloved – and few would disbelieve that then, at last, I'd know where you are, for the dead know everything; few would disbelieve that the ghost of your Isabelle could enter your cell at night, in the hour when the spirits walk. And that's why I wish to live. If you saw my shadow, you'd have known I was dead – whereas if you see neither my shadow nor my body, you may think I've only forgotten or betrayed you. Don't say, alas, that you no longer believe in me! For I haven't forgotten or betrayed you – I love you! I love you! I nearly died – that's all. Do you remember the dying soldier I saw that night, who'd dragged himself to the stream, leaking his last drops of blood, gasping his last breath, yearning for water, and then dying at his first swallow? Well, that was almost me. After a long trek through a forest that I was told was called the Mauleon, I arrived breathless at a spring. This spring came right out of the rock, and was icy cold. I drank, thinking it would restore my strength and I could continue my journey. I continued but walked for only a hundred steps and then stopped, shivering. A chill overcame me, and I fainted beside the small path I was following. I don't know what happened after I passed out. All I know is that yesterday, when I came to, the light was very dim. I looked around and found myself in a fairly clean room, on a bed, watched from its foot by an unknown woman. Beside me on the bed perched our dove, stroking my cheek with her poor wounded wing. This woman had found me while returning with two men from the Mauleon market. They saw I was still breathing, took pity on me, and brought me where I am now. Where I am is a small village near Nestier, or so I've been told. The room I'm in must be at some altitude, because from my bed, out the windows I can see only sky. The sky! The sky is the only road to he who awaits me. Yesterday I asked the date, and was told it was July 28. Alas! I've spent more than twenty days in my wandering. Where am I – near to you, or far? I asked for paper, ink, and a pen but after tracing just a few letters, my head was swimming and I couldn't continue. Tonight I'm better, and can write almost without tiring – I've had to stop only three or four times so far while writing this letter. I thanked the woman who was watching over me. I no longer need constant care, I'm better, I feel strong. Tonight I'll try to get up, and tomorrow resume my journey. It would kill me to just lie here while you're waiting for me – as you'd expect, wouldn't you, my heart's beloved, who waits for me? The dove is also well rested. I hope it will be capable of longer flights, and therefore guide me to you more quickly. I'd planned to spend all night in writing to you but I'd overestimated my strength. I must stop. I must say goodnight to you – my ears are ringing, the room spins around me, and my pen seems to trace letters of fire. Ah...!

9<sub>AM</sub>

I slept for two hours or so, a horrible, restless sleep more like delirium. Fortunately, upon opening my eyes, I saw the day was almost born. O my beloved, what a beautiful thing daybreak would be, if we were near each other, and watched together as the stars disappeared – all those stars whose names you know, and that merge and disappear into the ether ahead of the sun, who chases them and appears in his turn! I just opened my window to gaze out upon a huge expanse. Alas! The more land I see, the more lost I feel. My God! The love story of Theseus and Ariadne, was it truly just a fable? My prayer, deep, ardent, and eternal, is that you'll send me some blessed angel who will bring me a thread that leads me to him. Oh! I listen; I watch; I wait. But there is nothing, dear God, nothing! Only the sun, that is to say, your image that, still tinted pink, colours the atmosphere above and the mountain behind which it rises. If only my heart were calm, this spectacle would be beautiful. The hills emerge, their blue outlines silhouetted against the golden rays, showing their lovely and graceful forms. The ridge of mountains that girds the southern horizon is vast and beautiful, with snowy peaks that shimmer and sparkle like the flames of a divine star. A great river appears crossing the plain, broad and majestic, like ... oh, my God! My God, I can't be mistaken! The angel I begged for, pleaded for – he came, invisible but real! Those hills behind which the sun rises, the double crest he tops, these snowy mountains that seem like silver pillars supporting the vault of heaven, that great river flowing from north to south taking in tributaries as a sovereign receives his subjects ... it's the hills, the mountains, the river he described to me, that he sees from his window. My horizon is his! My God – did I lose my way, only to find at last my road to him? Did you close my eyes, just to show me the light I'd see when they opened? My God! Your mercy is infinite! You are great, you are holy, you are good, and it is only on my knees that I should address you. Kneel, therefore, faithless heart who doubted the goodness of the Lord! On your knees! On your knees!

## 30 July

4AM

I have thanked God, and I depart. My strength came back to me with my faith. I was weak only because I was desperate. But first, a final look. Oh, it's your picture to the life, my beloved! Painter, I have seen your vision! Poet, it is as you described so well! There are the peaks of the Pyrenees, changing from white to shining silver; their dark sides gradually lightening from black to purple, from purple to blue, as a flood of light flows down from the high peaks; there the daylight spreads across the plain, there are the streams that glisten like silver strands, there the river that twists and undulates like a ribbon of satin; here are the birds singing in the oleander bushes, the pomegranates and clumps of myrtle; and there flies the eagle, king of the sky, circling in the ether. Oh, my beloved! We are joined in vision, and I see what you see. Only, from where do you see it? Wait, wait, your letter is here. Oh, your letters, they don't leave my side for a moment; when I die, they'll be next to my heart, and those who lay me in the grave will be charged under pain of sacrilege to bury them with me. From where do you see it?

Dear God, it's as if I just read it. Fortunately, I know them by heart – if I lose them, I could rewrite them without missing a word, I've read them so often. "My window is surrounded by a luxuriant jasmine whose branches are laden with flowers; they scent my room as they open with the rising sun."

That's it! That's it! The sun has just risen to my left, so you are to my right. "The plateau beneath me slopes down from south to north, from the mountains to the plains."

That's it, exactly. Yes, that's the very horizon. Thank you, Lord, for making the day so clear!

Yonder are the highlands where I'll find your hermitage. Oh, why are they still so far away, and why is the human eye so feeble? I see hundreds of white specks scattered among the green trees – which of all these white specks is your hermitage? Oh, darling dove – beloved dove – dove, daughter of heaven – it's up to you to tell me that. I go, my beloved, I go; each minute of delay is a minute stolen from our happiness; to delay is to tempt Providence. For wasn't it only by the delay of a minute that you lost me? Come, dove! Yes, tomorrow, perhaps even tonight, we'll see him again!

31 July

The night has interrupted my search, beloved – but hope, I hope! I questioned everyone I met, and was finally shown, on a distant ridge, a Camaldolese monastery, and near it a small house that looks to me like the one you described. I saw it shining through the rising mists of evening; perhaps it's yours, perhaps you looked out over your horizon without knowing that it hid, invisible to your eyes, a poor, anxious creature who lives only for you, and will die without you. I was told that that small house is inhabited by a recluse, a sage and man of God but one still young and handsome. That man is you, my beloved, is it not? It's you. And if so, during the day sometimes you must visit the village of Camons where I am now. You once visited a poor carpenter who broke his leg falling from a roof; you took care of him, and healed him. When the whole family kneeled before you as you were leaving, you said, "if you are consoled, pray for the consoler." Oh, that's you – I recognise your sorrowful way of speaking. You wait for me, not knowing what's become of me, and you suffer. You suffer, because you doubt. Oh, man must always doubt; if you didn't doubt, I'd think you were dead. To think that if I'd arrived here only two hours earlier, I might perhaps have met you! I say perhaps, for if I was sure it had been you, it would break me – I'd hire a guide, I'd even have them carry me.

But what if I was wrong? Our dove’s instinct is the best guide of all; she hasn’t deviated for a moment. If by some fate I just missed you, I can still rely on her. What are you doing at this moment, wherever you are, my beloved? Unless you are thinking of God, I hope you’re thinking of me. It’s eleven o’clock. Tomorrow! Tomorrow! This great hope, too strong not to have come from heaven, says I’ll see you – tomorrow.

11 o’clock

I don’t know if you’re returning to me, heart’s beloved but hurry, hurry – midnight approaches, and the stroke of midnight will end the last day of my life as part of the world. Tomorrow is the day on which I’m to take my vows. I waited religiously for the full three months but I cannot forever postpone my promise to God. God speaks to me, since you are silent; God calls me, since you leave me alone. Oh, it’s not without deep sorrow that I renounce this hope. If only you had come, if but for a moment. I have dwelled, body and soul, in the past, that is to say, in happiness; it will cost me more to set aside that happiness than it would cost me to set aside life. The life of the cloister, no matter what people say, is neither death of the body nor death of the soul. I have often examined corpses, cast my eyes over their pale and livid faces, and it’s only the material flesh that has broken down. No dream stirs in those sleeping brains, no pain, physical or moral, afflicts those flaccid fibres. I have often examined, on the other hand, these living corpses called monks. Their faces are as pale or paler than those of the dead but their visages are not those of the deceased: tears flow forever from their hearts, a deep and inexhaustible source that reddens their eyes, sinking them in their sockets, and ploughs bitter furrows down their cheeks. By this we recognise God’s suffering elect, whom I hope, at least, derive some comfort from his love. The nervous energy that drives the living animates them only with sadness. It’s neither the composure of life nor the quiet of the grave; it’s the agony, the fever of slow consumption, the withering from this world to the next, from life to death, from the cradle to the grave. Well, Isabelle, I can fool myself no longer, and postpone the abyss by plumbing its depths; I, too, will embark on this agony, in hopes it will quickly carry me to death! Goodbye. I shall spend the night in prayer. The monastery bells will sound at two o’clock to say that a soul, though not a body, is leaving the earth for heaven. At nine in the morning, those who will be my brothers in God will come for me.

1 August

5<sup>AM</sup>

I just saw my life’s last rising of the sun. He has never been brighter, more splendid, and more magnificent. What matter to him the pains of this poor little world he illuminates? What matter the tears I shed that drown this paper? I’ve watched his dawn break for but ten short minutes, and already he drinks the dew that trembles at the tip of a blade of grass, or glistens like a diamond in the pedalled chalice of a flower. I shall never see his dawn again. The cell assigned to me looks into a high-walled courtyard; through an archway, I can just glimpse the corner of the cemetery. I’ll try to have them put my grave in that corner – I want it to be as close as possible, so the journey will be short. Now, pray!

9<sup>AM</sup>

The chanting approaches; they’re coming for me. I don’t want those men coming in here. I don’t want them to see your letters, or what I’ve been writing. I don’t want them to see my tears. I’ll wait on the threshold. My soul remains with you: they bear away only my corpse. Goodbye! The cry that rose from all of creation at the death of the Son of God was not deeper, more agonizing, or more lamentable than that which I utter at the death of our love. Goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye!

10 o’clock

Your empty chamber! Your letter, wet with tears! Your final goodbye! I arrived half an hour too late. If only your vows have not yet been spoken! My God! My God! Give me strength. Oh, dove, my dove, if only I had your wings, broken though they are!

(This fragment of a letter was found in the archives of the Ursuline Convent at Montolieu but the first part is missing.)

...At daybreak I left the village of Camons, where I told you, dear Mother Superior, everything had led me to believe he sometimes spent the day. I had questioned the entire family of the poor injured carpenter, and I would have known him from their descriptions, even if my heart hadn’t already told me it was him. Moreover, the words he’d spoken upon leaving them – “If you are consoled, pray for the consoler” – those could have come only from a suffering soul preparing to give himself to God. My strength was restored by the hope of seeing him again. I set out on foot, for if I took a horse or a carriage, I’d have to make a wide detour to reach that white speck beside the vast, dark Camaldolese monastery that, though almost three leagues off as the crow flies, sent me the sound of its bells on the wings of the wind. Upon leaving the village, I let fly the dove. The poor dear made one of its longest flights, nearly two hundred paces toward the house my eyes devoured. There was no doubt – I was headed toward the goal she’d shown me with the last of her strength. Unfortunately, there was no marked path; I had to follow the slope of the mountain, sometimes split by ravines, sometimes crossed by streams, sometimes cloaked with small woods which I dared not enter, for fear of losing myself. I walked three hours without pause but due to these detours, I covered only two leagues. The house was often out of sight, and without my darling dove, I’d have been lost. I cast her in the air and followed wherever her flight led me. Finally, it seemed to me my route became a bit easier. I heard the bells of a small village sounding eight o’clock; I don’t know why but the tone of the bells seemed so sad, I felt my heart clench. It seemed that every hour as it passed me on wings of bronze, pealed out, “Hurry! Hurry!”

So I hurried, and soon I could distinguish the details of the house. As I approached, I recognised it from the description he’d given me: the window through which he watched the sun rise, and the jasmine that shaded the window and seemed to me like a green palisade. For a moment I thought I could see him in that window, and whether illusion or reality, I spread my arms and shouted. Alas! He was still over a mile away, and neither saw nor heard me. The bells of the monastery were ringing. I remembered the continual peals of the bells the night before I took the veil, and a terrible suspicion crept into my mind and heart that these bells tolled for the same reason. But I shook my head and told myself, “No, no, no!”

As I approached, I saw a long procession of monks make their way to the little white house and then, moments later, return toward the monastery. Who did they seek in that house? Someone alive – or dead? Soon I’d know, for I was barely a hundred steps from the house, when suddenly a deep mountain stream barred my way. It was a steep cascade, muddy and full of rocks, so deep I didn’t dare try to cross it. I climbed toward its source, despite my fatigue but it felt like I’d never reach that house before my fleeting strength abandoned me. After a quarter hour’s walk, I found a tree that had fallen across the chasm. At any other time, I wouldn’t have dared to venture upon so flimsy a bridge. But I leaped onto it, my feet sure, my eye fixed on the far side, and then I was across. There I found, instead of obstacles, a sort of paved path, so I went ever faster as I approached. I reached my desired goal; the door was open; I crossed the threshold; a stairway opened to my right, and I rushed up it without calling out. I hadn’t dared breathe since passing the doorway – I was convinced I’d find an empty room. The chamber was empty, the window open, and a letter was on the table, all wet with tears. This letter, O my mother! It was less than half an hour old, and it was his final farewell. I had arrived half an hour too late: he was at the church, taking his vows. I felt the house shiver beneath my feet; everything seemed to spin around me. I began a shriek that would end as my last breath, when suddenly the thought came that maybe his sacrifice wasn’t yet made, his vows were not yet pronounced. I rushed out of the house, instinctively taking my dove that had perched on a branch of the blessed jasmine. The monastery was no more than a hundred paces away but I felt my strength would fail me before I reached the church. My brain was empty of thought, my lungs gasped for air. I heard the priests singing the *Magnificat*. I heard the organ playing the *Veni Creator*. My God! I had only seconds, no more. And woe betide me! As luck would have it, I’d gone around the wrong side of the apse – the door was on the other side. The window to the nave was open – but how could I hope my voice would be heard above the organ and the chanting of the monks? I tried to shout but all my chest could produce was a dull rattle. It was a moment in which it seemed all was lost, all was in vain. My mind was confusion, my thoughts were a blur – and then, in the midst of this chaos came a light, and a fire lit my heart. I cast my dove through the window, and fell in a swoon. Heaven be praised! When I came to, I was in his arms. He already wore the robe of a monk and had the tonsure of a priest – but he was mine! Mine! Mine! Then, and forever. The oath was upon his lips when the dove, like the Holy Spirit descending on a sunbeam, had interrupted it. Beloved dove, your image will be carved on our tomb, asleep in our intertwined hands! I promised I would write to you if I found him, Mother Superior. God, in his infinite mercy, has allowed me to find him – and so I write.

Your respectful and ever grateful daughter,

Isabelle de Lautrec, the Countess of Moret

Palermo

10 September 1638

BOOK IV  
20 YEARS AFTER  
171

The Ghost of Richelieu

In a chamber of the Palais Cardinal, or Royal Palace as it was now known, near a vermeil-gilded table stacked with books and papers sat a man with his head resting on his hands. Behind him was a vast fireplace, glowing with heat, with flaming embers crackling over large gilded andirons. The glow from the fireplace lit the dreamer’s magnificent robes from behind, as the flickering light from a grand candelabra illuminated the front. To see this crimson robe edged with intricate lace, this pale forehead bent in meditation in the solitude of his study, to hear the silence of its antechambers and the measured tread of the guards outside on the landing, one might have thought the shadow of Cardinal Richelieu (Mazarin) still haunted this room. Alas! It was no more than the shadow of that great man. France badly weakened, the authority of the king disregarded, the Great Nobles once more strong and defiant, foreign enemies menacing the borders – all testified that Richelieu was no more. But more than anything, the proof that this red-robed form was not that of the former cardinal was his isolation that seemed, as we’ve said, more like that of a ghost than a living man. It was the halls devoid of courtiers; the courtyard bristling with guards; the air of disdain and derision blowing in through the windows from the streets, the breath of a whole city united against this minister; and finally, from near and far, the rattling of gunfire, not, fortunately, aimed with intent to injure, so much as to show the guards – the Swiss, the musketeers, and the soldiers stationed around the Royal Palace – that the people, too, had arms. But Mazarin now stood alone and knew his weakness. “*Foreigner!*” he muttered. “*Italian!*” These are the words they use as curses. With these same words they assassinated and dismembered Concini – and if I let them, they’d do the same to me, tear me limb from limb, though I’ve never done anything worse than just squeeze them a little. Fools! Unable to see that their enemy isn’t this Italian who speaks poor French but rather those lords who feed them fine words in a pure Parisian accent. Yes, yes,” continued the minister, pale lips smiling a subtle and incongruous smile. “Yes, you tell yourselves that the fortunes of favourites are precarious – but you should know I’m no ordinary favourite! Though the Earl of Essex wore a splendid diamond-crusted ring given him by his royal mistress, and I wear only a simple ring engraved with a number and a date, *my* ring has been consecrated by a vow in the Royal Palace chapel. They won’t break me to their will! Let them join their eternal call of ‘Down with Mazarin!’ to cries of ‘Long live Sir de Beaufort!’ or ‘Long live Sir Prince!’ or even ‘Long live the Parliament!’ Well – Sir de Beaufort\* is locked up in Vincennes, the Prince de Condé\* may join him any day, and as for parliament...”

Here the cardinal’s smile twisted into an expression of hatred more virulent than seemed possible on such a mild face. “Well, as to parliament ... parliament, too, will get what’s coming to it. We have the royal strongholds of Orléans and Montargis. We have time. In time, all those who today shout, ‘Down with Mazarin!’ will in their turn shout, ‘Down with the princes.’ Richelieu, whom they hated while he lived but can’t stop talking about now that he’s dead – he had worse days than this, when he feared he’d be dismissed, or seemed actually forced out. But Queen Anne\* will never dismiss *me* – and if the people force me out, she will go with me. Then we’ll see how the rebels like having neither a king nor a queen! Oh, if only I wasn’t a foreigner! If only I were French, and a nobleman!”

He fell back into his reverie. Indeed, the situation was dire, and the day that had just ended had made it more complicated still. Mazarin, always driven by sordid avarice, was crushing the people with taxes. In the words of Advocate General Talon, the people had been left with nothing but their souls, and still had those only because they couldn’t be sold at auction. The people had been advised to be patient, as great victories were in the offing but since glory couldn’t feed empty mouths, the people used their mouths for muttering their discontent. But that wasn’t all, because when it’s only the people who complain, the Royal Court, insulated by the bourgeoisie and the gentry, doesn’t hear it. However, Mazarin had been so reckless as to offend the magistrates! He had created offices for twelve newly made Judges of Requests and sold them, and as the existing judges had paid high prices for their positions, and the addition of twelve new colleagues could only dilute their value, the magistrates had united against him. They’d sworn on the Gospels to oppose these appointments and to resist all encroachments from the Court, promising each other that any member who lost his office by this rebellion would be reimbursed by the others. Now, here’s how the conflict played out:

On 7 January 1648, 700 or 800 mutinous Parisian merchants had gathered to protest a new tax on business owners, sending 10 delegates to talk to Prince Gaston, the Duke of Orléans\* who had always been popular with them. The duke, receiving them, had been told they were determined not to pay this new tax, and were even willing to take up arms against anyone the king might send to collect it. The Duke of Orléans listened politely to them that gave them hope; he promised to speak to the queen about it and dismissed them with the usual response of princes: “We’ll see.”

For their part, on the ninth the Judges of Requests came before the cardinal, and their designated representative spoke so firmly and fearlessly the cardinal had been astonished. He gave them the same response the Duke of Orléans had given the merchants: “We’ll see.”



So, in order to see, the King's Council had assembled and sent for d'Émery, the superintendent of finances. This d'Émery was widely despised by the people, first of all because he was the superintendent of finances, and all superintendents of finances should be despised, and second because, it's fair to say, he deserved it. He was the son of a banker of Lyon named Particelli who had, after filing for bankruptcy, changed his name to d'Émery. Cardinal Richelieu, who recognised his merits as a financier, had presented him to King Louis XIII\* under this new name, recommending d'Émery for the position of superintendent of finances, and the king had agreed. "Excellent!" he'd said. "I'm glad to hear about this Sir d'Émery, as we need an honest man for the post. I'd thought you were going to sponsor that swindler Particelli for the job and was afraid you'd persuade me to agree."

"Sire!" replied the cardinal. "Don't worry, that Particelli you mentioned has been hanged."

"All the better!" said the king. "It's not for nothing that I'm known as Louis the Just."

And he'd signed the appointment of Sir d'Émery. It was this same Superintendent d'Émery who'd been sent for by Prime Minister Mazarin. He rushed in pale and frightened, saying his son had been nearly assassinated that day on the Place du Palais; a crowd had confronted him, complaining of the extravagance of his wife, who'd decorated their home with hangings of red velvet trimmed with gold fringe. She was the daughter of Nicolas Le Camus, who'd come to Paris with just twenty *livres* but had by 1617 become royal secretary. His salary had been only forty thousand livres but somehow his children had received an inheritance of nine million. D'Émery's son had barely avoided violent suffocation at the hands of the mob that had threatened to squeeze all the stolen gold out of him. So, the council decided to take no action that day, as the superintendent was in no condition to think straight. The following day, First President of Parliament Mathieu Mole, whose courage in these affairs, according to Cardinal de Retz, was equal to that of the Duke Beaufort or of Sir Prince de Condé – the two men who were considered the bravest in France – the next day, we say, the first president was attacked in his turn. The people threatened to take him to task for the ills they were suffering but the first president, always unflappable and self-possessed, replied with his usual calm that if the malcontents didn't bend to the king's will, he would erect enough gallows in the squares to hang the lot of them. To which they replied that they asked nothing better than some new gibbets, as they would serve to hang those judges who bought favour from Court at the cost of the misery of the people. There was more: on the eleventh, when the queen went to mass at Notre Dame, as she did every Saturday, she was met by over two hundred women crying out and demanding justice. They had no worse intention than that, wishing only to kneel before her to try to move her to pity but the guards kept them back, and the queen, haughty and proud, passed without paying any attention to their cries. That afternoon, the King's Council met again; it resolved to maintain the royal authority, and summoned parliament to convene on the following day, the twelfth. That day, on the evening of which our story begins, started when King Louis XIV, then ten years old and just recovered from smallpox, had gone to Notre Dame to give thanks for his deliverance. This gave him a pretext for calling out his troops – guards, Swiss, and musketeers – and posting them around the Royal Palace, on the Pont Neuf, and on his route along the quays. After hearing mass the king had made a surprise call on parliament, where he held an impromptu *lit de justice*, confirming all his previous tax edicts as well as issuing five or six new ones, each one, according to Cardinal de Retz, more ruinous than the last. The new measures were loudly opposed by President Blancmesnil and Councillor Broussel. Furthermore, the first president, who as we saw had supported the king only the day before, indignantly protested this high-handed method of bringing the king in person to impose the royal will on parliament. These edicts decreed, the king returned to the Royal Palace. Crowds of people lined his way but though they knew he came from parliament, they didn't know whether he'd gone to demand justice for the people or to oppress them further, so no cheers greeted his passing, and there were no felicitations on his return to health. Every face was anxious or gloomy, and some were even threatening. Though the king had passed, the troops remained in position; it was feared there would be riots once word of the decrees at parliament got around – and indeed, at the merest rumour that, instead of rolling taxes back, the king had increased them, crowds began to gather. Soon a great clamour filled the streets, with shouts of "Down with Mazarin!" as well as "Long live Broussel" and "Long live Blancmesnil."

The people knew that Broussel and Blancmesnil had spoken out on their behalf, and though their eloquence had been to no avail, it had won them the citizens' goodwill. Attempts were made to dispel these crowds and silence their shouts but as often happens, that served only to increase the throngs and redouble their cries. The Royal Guards and the Swiss were first ordered to stand firm, and then sent to patrol Rue Saint-Denis and Rue Saint-Martin, where the crowds seemed thickest and most animated. At this point the merchants' provost appeared at the gates of the Royal Palace, and was immediately admitted. He came to say that if the troops weren't ordered to stand down, all of Paris would be under arms within two hours. While the options were being debated, Lieutenant of the Guards Comminges\* came in from the street, his clothes torn and his face bloodied. Seeing him, the queen cried out in surprise and asked what had happened. As the provost had predicted, the sight of the guards had inflamed the crowds. They had swarmed the belfries and rung the tocsin. Comminges had stood firm and arrested a man who appeared to be one of the leading agitators, and then, in order to make an example of him, ordered the man hanged from the Croix du Trahoir. The soldiers had moved to carry out this order but were attacked with stones and halberds by rioters from Les Halles. The rebel had taken advantage of the chaos to escape, reaching the Rue des Lombards, where he'd disappeared into a house. Despite an aggressive search, they couldn't catch the culprit. Comminges had posted sentries in the street and then, with the rest of his detachment, returned to the Royal Palace to report these events to the queen. They were followed all the way back by threats and curses, several of his men were wounded by pikes and halberds, and he himself had been cracked over the eyebrow by a stone. Comminges's report only confirmed the advice of the merchant's provost. The authorities were unprepared to withstand a serious revolt; the cardinal had the rumour spread among the people that the troops stationed along the quays and the Pont Neuf were there only for the ceremony and were being withdrawn. Indeed, by four in the afternoon they were all concentrated around the Royal Palace, with a detachment at the Barrière des Sergents, another at the Quinze-Vingts, and a third at the Butte Saint-Roch. They filled the courtyards with Swiss Guards and musketeers, and they waited. This is where things stood when we introduced our readers to Cardinal Mazarin's study that had once belonged to Cardinal Richelieu. We saw in what state of mind he heard the crowd noises and gunshots that echoed into his windows. Suddenly he looked up with a determined expression, like a man who has made up his mind. He stared at a huge clock that was on the verge of striking ten, reached for a silvered whistle placed on the table within reach of his hand, and trilled on it twice. A hidden door in a tapestry opened soundlessly, and a man dressed in black emerged and moved silently to stand behind the cardinal's chair. "Bernouin," said the cardinal without turning, for having whistled twice he knew it was his valet, "that King's Musketeers are guarding the palace?"

"The Black Musketeers, My Lord."

"Which company?"

"Tréville's."

"Is there an officer of that company in the antechamber?"

"Lieutenant d'Artagnan."\*

"He's a good one, I believe?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Get me a musketeer's uniform and help me into it."

The valet went out as quietly as he'd entered, and returned a few moments later, carrying the requested outfit. Silent and thoughtful, the cardinal began removing the ceremonial robes he'd worn to attend the session of parliament and then donned the military uniform that he wore with a certain ease thanks to his time in the Italian campaigns. Once he was fully dressed, he said, "Get me Sir d'Artagnan."

And the valet, silent and mute as ever, went out through the antechamber door like a shadow. Left alone, the cardinal regarded himself in the mirror with some satisfaction. He looked young for his forty-six years, and though a bit short, he still cut an elegant figure. His complexion was fair and smooth, his eyes expressive, his nose large but well-shaped, his brow broad and majestic. His chestnut hair curled slightly, and his beard that was darker, took a curling iron well. He straightened his baldric, then looked complacently at his hands that were handsome and of which he took great care. He removed the buckskin riding gauntlets from his belt and replaced them with simple gloves of silk. At that moment the door opened. "Sir d'Artagnan," announced the valet.

An officer entered. He was a man of thirty-nine or forty years, compact but lean and well made, with a sharp and clever eye, his goatee still black though his hair was touched with grey, as often happens when a man has lived too well or not well enough, especially if he's of dark complexion. D'Artagnan stepped into the study, recalling that he'd come into it once before in Cardinal Richelieu's time, then stopped when he saw no one within but one of his company's musketeers. At a glance he recognised the cardinal under the uniform. He remained standing in a respectful but dignified pose, as befits a gentleman who has spent much of his life among the *Grands*. The cardinal fixed him with a gaze more cunning than penetrating, looked him over carefully, and said after a few moments of silence, "You're Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Himself, my Lord," said the officer.

The cardinal considered for a moment that intelligent face and mobile expression restrained by years and experience; but d'Artagnan withstood the examination like a man who has been subjected to a far more piercing gaze. "Sir," said the cardinal, "come with me – or rather I'll go with you."

"I'm at your orders, My Lord," d'Artagnan replied.

"I'd like to personally inspect the guard posts around the Royal Palace. Do you think there's any danger?"

"Danger, My Lord?" asked d'Artagnan, astonished. "From where?"

"They say the people are in open revolt."

"The uniform of the King's Musketeers still commands respect, My Lord – and even if that weren't the case, I think with four of my men we could chase off a hundred of these clowns."

"Didn't you see what happened to Comminges?"

"Sir de Comminges is an officer of the guards, not the musketeers," d'Artagnan replied.

"In other words," said the cardinal, smiling, "the musketeers are better soldiers than the guards."

"Everyone prefers his own uniform, My Lord."

"Except me, Sir," the cardinal said, still smiling. "As you see, I prefer yours to my own."

"*Plague*, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "now that's modesty. As for me, I confess that, if I had one of Your Eminence's grand outfits, I wouldn't need any other."

"Perhaps but to wear one of those out tonight might not be safe. Bernouin, my hat."

The valet returned, carrying a musketeer's broad-brimmed hat. The cardinal put it on, cocked it like a cavalier, and turned to d'Artagnan. "You have horses saddled in the stables, don't you?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Very well! Let's go."

"With how many men, My Lord?"

"You said that with four men you could chase off a hundred of these rabble; we might meet two hundred, so bring eight."

"As My Lord wishes."

"I'll follow you. No, wait." The cardinal paused. "We'll go this way. Bernouin, a light." The valet brought a candle; the cardinal took a small golden key from his desk and unlocked the door of a secret staircase. A few moments later they found themselves down in the side courtyard of the Royal Palace.

## 172 A Night Patrol

Ten minutes later, the little troop went out through the Rue des Bons-Enfants, behind the theatre built by Cardinal Richelieu for the play *Mirame*, and in which Cardinal Mazarin, a patron more of music than of literature, had sponsored the production of one of the first operas performed in France. The great city showed every evidence of turmoil: large crowds roamed the streets, and despite what d'Artagnan had said, stopped to watch the soldiers pass with a menacing air of mockery that showed the citizens had temporarily traded their usual deference for insulting belligerence. From time to time a commotion was heard from the markets of Les Halles. Gunfire rattled toward Rue Saint-Denis, and occasionally, for no apparent reason, church bells were rung. D'Artagnan steered his course with the nonchalance of a man unimpressed by such nonsense. When a crowd blocked the middle of the street he rode his horse straight for them without a word of warning and, whether rebels or not, they seemed to see what manner of man they were dealing with and parted to let the patrol pass. The cardinal envied his composure that he attributed to familiarity with danger, and he regarded the officer with the esteem the cautious accord to cool courage. As they approached the detachment posted at the Barrière des Sergents, the sentry cried, "Who goes there?" D'Artagnan replied and having asked the cardinal for the passwords, advanced at the order.

The countersign was *Louis and Rocroi*. The passwords acknowledged, d'Artagnan asked if Sir de Comminges wasn't commander of the post. The sentry indicated an officer on foot talking to another on a horse. D'Artagnan recognised him and returned to the cardinal, saying, "There is Sir de Comminges."

The cardinal urged his horse toward them while d'Artagnan held back discreetly. However, from the way the two officers removed their hats, he knew they'd recognised His Eminence. "Bravo, Guitaut,"\* said the cardinal to the mounted officer, "I see that despite your sixty-four years you're as alert and devoted as always. What were you telling this young man?"

"My Lord," replied Guitaut, "I was saying we live in unusual times, and that today looked a lot like things must have during the days of the Catholic League I heard so much about as a youth. Do you know there's even talk of the mob throwing up barricades across Rue Saint-Denis and Rue Saint-Martin?"

"And what did your nephew Comminges have to say to that, *my dear* Guitaut?"

"My Lord," Comminges replied, "I said that you can't make a League without the essential element of a Duke Guise. Besides, they won't repeat what they did before."

"No, this time they'll make a Fronde, as they call it," said Guitaut.

"What's that you said? A Fronde?" asked Mazarin.

"My Lord, that's the name they've given their party."

"Where does it come from?"

"Apparently several days ago Councillor Bachaumont said at the Palais that all these rowdies in the alleys were like schoolboys slinging stones – *Fronding* – ruffians who scatter when they see a constable, only to gather again once he's passed. The rebels picked up on the word *frond*, quick as a Brussels beggar, and started calling themselves *Frondeurs*. Since yesterday, everything is the Fronde: Fronde hats, Fronde gloves, Fronde fans, even Fronde bread, and ... well, just listen to that." A window had opened, and a man stuck out his head and began to sing:

*The Fronde wind blows  
So, let her in  
I think it goes  
Against Mazarin  
If the Fronde wind blows  
We'll let her in!*

"Insolent wretch!" Guitaut growled.

"My Lord," said Comminges, whose injury had put him in a bloodthirsty mood, "shall I have that fellow shot to teach him a lesson about what to sing?"

And he reached toward the holster on his uncle's horse. "By no means!" cried Mazarin. "*Diavolo!* You'll spoil everything, my friend, and just when things are going so well! I know your Frenchmen as well as if I'd made them myself. If they sing the song, they'll pay the piper. During the days of the League that Guitaut was speaking of, they only sang the mass, and things ended badly for them. Come, Guitaut, let's see if they keep guard at the Quinze-Vingts as well as they do at the Barrière des Sergents."

And, with a salute to Comminges, he rejoined d'Artagnan, who assumed the lead of the little troop, followed immediately by Guitaut and the cardinal, with the rest as rear guard. "That figures," Comminges muttered, watching them ride away. "I forgot that he's satisfied so long as everyone pays."

Along Rue Saint-Honoré the people were gathered in small groups discussing the new edicts. They pitied the young king, used as a tool to plunder the people unknowingly, and blamed Mazarin for everything. They talked of appealing to the Duke of Orléans and Sir Prince, and applauded Blancmesnil and Broussel. D'Artagnan passed through these groups as inflexibly as if he and his horse were iron. Mazarin and Guitaut talked softly together, while the musketeers, who had finally recognised the cardinal, rode in silence. They reached Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre and the post at the Quinze-Vingts. Guitaut beckoned to a junior officer, who advanced to report. "Well?" Guitaut asked.

"Ah! All is well on this side, *my Captain* but I think something is going on over there."

And he pointed toward a beautiful hôtel, or mansion, on the spot where the Vaudeville Theatre now stands. "That's not just any mansion," said Guitaut. "That's the Hôtel de Rambouillet."

"I don't know about any Rambouillet," said the officer. "All I know is I saw some pretty shady characters go in there."

"Bah!" said Guitaut, laughing. "Those are just poets."

"Bah yourself, Guitaut," said Mazarin. "I'll thank you not to speak of those gentlemen with such irreverence! Didn't you know I was a poet myself in my youth? I wrote verses in the style of Sir de Benserade."

"You, My Lord?"

"Yes, me. Shall I recite some of it?"

"Not on my account, My Lord! I don't know Italian."

"Yes but you know French, don't you, my brave Guitaut?" replied Mazarin, laying his hand in a friendly way on the officer's shoulder. "And whatever order you're given in that language, you'll follow?"

"Of course, My Lord, as I always have – provided it comes from the queen."

"Ah, yes!" said Mazarin, biting his lips. "You're absolutely devoted to her."

"Well, I *have* been captain of her guards for more than twenty years."

"Onward, Sir D'Artagnan," the cardinal said. "All is well here."

D'Artagnan resumed the lead of the column without saying a word, displaying the unquestioning obedience that is the hallmark of an old soldier. Passing through Rue de Richelieu and Rue Villedo, they arrived at Butte Saint-Roch, the third post. It was the most isolated, for it was just inside the walls, and the city was sparsely populated in this neighbourhood. "Who is in command here?" asked the cardinal.

"Villequier," replied Guitaut.

"The devil!" said Mazarin. "You speak with him – you know I'm at odds with him since I charged you with the arrest of the Duke Beaufort. He complained that he, as captain of the Royal Guard, should have had that honour."

"I know it, and I've told him a hundred times he was wrong. The king couldn't have given him that order, as he was barely four years old at the time."

"Yes, Guitaut but I could have ordered him on the king's behalf, and I chose you instead."

Guitaut didn't reply, just urged his horse forward, and after being recognised by the sentry, called for Sir de Villequier.

He came out. "Ah! It's you, Guitaut. What the devil are you doing here?" he said, in his usual ill-humoured tone.

"Just checking the situation in this direction."

"Why bother? There were shouts earlier of 'Long live the king!' and 'Down with Mazarin!' – But there's nothing new in that. We're used to it by now."

"And do you join in?" Guitaut replied, laughing.

"My faith, sometimes I'd like to! I think they're right, Guitaut. I'd give five years of my pay that they don't pay me, if it would only make the king five years older."

"Really? And what would happen if the king were five years older?"

"He'd be at the age of majority and could give his orders himself. I'd much rather obey the grandson of King Henry IV than the son of Pietro Mazarini. Death of the devil! I'd kill for the king. But if I got killed on account of Mazarin, like your nephew nearly was today, there's nothing in heaven worthwhile enough to console me for it."

"All right, all right, Sir de Villequier," said Mazarin, coming up. "Rest assured, I'll report your devotion to the king." Then, turning to the escort: "Let's go, Gentlemen – all is well here."

"So, Mazarin was there all along!" said Villequier. "So much the better, Guitaut – I've wanted to tell him that for a long time. You gave me the opportunity, and though I don't imagine you did it as a favour, I thank you."

And turning on his heel, he returned to the guardhouse, whistling that tune of the Frondeurs. Mazarin was thoughtful on their return. What he'd heard in succession from Comminges, Guitaut, and Villequier just confirmed his suspicion that, if it came to a crisis, he'd have nobody on his side but the queen. And yet the queen had so often abandoned her friends, it seemed to the minister that, despite his precautions, her support couldn't be counted upon. During the whole of their nocturnal ride, that is, for an hour or so, the cardinal, while studying in turn Comminges, Guitaut, and Villequier, was keeping his eye on another man. This man, self-assured despite the angry populace, responding neither to Mazarin's wry remarks nor to the catcalls of the crowd – this man seemed to him above and beyond, a person well adapted to the events taking place, and even more suited for events yet to come. The name of d'Artagnan wasn't completely unknown to Mazarin, although he hadn't come to France until around 1635 – that is, seven or eight years after the events we related in *The Three Musketeers*. It seemed to the cardinal that he associated that name with a person said to be a model of courage, skill, and dedication. He was so taken by this idea that he immediately wanted to learn all he could about d'Artagnan – but he couldn't exactly ask d'Artagnan about himself. From the few words he'd heard the lieutenant of musketeers say, he'd recognised the accent of Gascony, the Italians and Gascons are too much alike, and know each other too well to ever trust what any of them would say of themselves. As they arrived at the walls that enclosed the Royal Palace gardens, the cardinal knocked at a small door right about where the Café de Foy stands now, and after thanking d'Artagnan and asking him to wait in the courtyard, he gestured to Guitaut to follow him. Both dismounted, handed the bridles of their horses to the lackey who'd opened the little door, and disappeared into the garden. "My dear Guitaut," said the cardinal, leaning on the arm of the old captain of the guards, "you told me just now that you've been in the queen's service for twenty years?"

"Yes, that's the truth," Guitaut replied.

"Now, *my dear* Guitaut," the cardinal continued, "I know that in addition to your courage that is proven, and your loyalty that is beyond question, that you have an excellent memory."

"You've noticed that, my Lord?" said the guard captain. "The devil! Too bad for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Beyond all doubt, the most important quality of a courtier is to know how to forget."

"But you're no courtier, Guitaut, you're a brave soldier, a veteran captain from the time of King Henry IV, one of the few who are still among us."

"Plague, My Lord! Did you ask me to come with you so you could cast my horoscope?"

"No," said Mazarin, laughing, "I brought you here to ask whether you noticed our lieutenant of musketeers."

"Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Yes."

"No need for me to notice him, My Lord – I've known him for a long time."

"What kind of man is he, then?"

"What kind?" said Guitaut, surprised. "Why, he's a Gascon!"

"Yes, I know that; what I want to know is if he's a man one could trust."

"Sir de Tréville holds him in high esteem – and Tréville, as you know, is a good friend of the queen."

"I need to know if this is a man who's proven his worth."

"If you're asking if he's a brave soldier, then yes. At the Siege of La Rochelle, at Susa Pass, at Perpignan, it's said he did more than his duty."

"But you know, Guitaut, we poor ministers often need men who are more than just brave. We need people who are quick and capable. Wasn't this d'Artagnan, according to rumour, involved in some intrigue in Cardinal Richelieu's time that he managed to conclude quite cleverly?"

"As to that affair, My Lord," said Guitaut, who saw what the cardinal was getting at, "I have to tell Your Eminence that I don't know any more than what everyone knows. I never meddle in intrigues, and if I'm sometimes told things in confidence, since those secrets aren't mine to share, I'm sure My Lord won't mind if I keep them to myself."

"Upon my word," Mazarin said, shaking his head, "I've heard some ministers are actually lucky enough to get told what they need to know."

"My Lord," Guitaut replied, "those ministers don't weigh all men in the same balance. They ask men of war what they need to know about war, and intriguers about intrigue. Ask your questions of some intriguer of that period, and you'll find out what you want to know – for the right price, of course."

"Pay, by God!" said Mazarin, with the grimace he always made at the subject of payment. "Then we'll pay ... if we must."

"Does My Lord seriously wish to know the name of a man who was involved in all the conspiracies of that time?"

"*Per Bacco!*" Mazarin swore, as he was growing impatient. "It takes an hour to get something through that iron head of yours."

"There's one man who can tell you everything you want to know – if he'll talk."

"That's *my* problem."

"Ah, My Lord! It's not always easy to get someone to tell you what they don't wish to say."

"Bah! With patience, I find, one gets results. And this man is...?"

“The Count de Rochefort.”  
“The Count de Rochefort!”  
“Unfortunately, he disappeared four or five years ago, and I don’t know what became of him.”  
“Ah but I do, Guitaut,” said Mazarin.  
“Then why is Your Eminence complaining that he doesn’t know anything?”

“So,” Mazarin said, “you think that Rochefort...”  
“He was Richelieu’s demon twin, My Lord – but I warn you, this will cost you dearly. The old cardinal paid his creatures well.”  
“Yes, Guitaut,” said Mazarin, “Richelieu was a great man but he did have that tragic flaw. Thank you, Guitaut – I’ll try to take advantage of your advice this very evening.”

As they had arrived at the courtyard of the Royal Palace, the cardinal dismissed Guitaut with a salute; then, seeing an officer walking up and down the yard, he approached him. It was d’Artagnan, who was awaiting the return of the cardinal, as ordered. “Come, Sir d’Artagnan,” said Mazarin in his friendliest tone. “I’ve an order to give you.” D’Artagnan bowed, followed the cardinal up the secret staircase, and a moment later found himself in the office from which they’d departed. The cardinal sat down at his desk and wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper. D’Artagnan stood, impassive, waiting with neither impatience nor curiosity. He seemed like a military automaton, clockwork soldier. The cardinal folded the letter and sealed it with his ring. “Sir d’Artagnan,” he said, “you’ll carry this dispatch to the Bastille and return with the person who’s named in it. Take a carriage and escort, and guard the prisoner carefully.”  
D’Artagnan took the letter, touched his hand to his hat, turned on his heel like a drill sergeant, and a moment later could be heard ordering in his curt monotone: “An escort of four men, a carriage, and my horse.” Five minutes later came the sound of carriage wheels and the ringing of horseshoes on the pavement of the courtyard.

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2 Old Enemies

D’Artagnan arrived at the Bastille just as the clocks were striking half past eight. He was announced to the governor who, when he heard the visitor came with an order from the cardinal, came out to meet him on the steps. At that time the governor of the Bastille was Sir du Tremblay, brother of the famous Capuchin monk known as Father Joseph, that terrible servant of Richelieu who had been called His Grey Eminence. When Marshal Bassompierre was in the Bastille, where he stayed for twelve years all told, and heard his fellow prisoners say, when dreaming of liberty, “I’ll be released at such-and-such a time,” or “I’ll soon be free of this place,” Bassompierre would say, “As for me, Gentlemen, I’ll leave when Sir du Tremblay leaves” – by which he meant that when the old cardinal died, du Tremblay would lose his post as governor, and Bassompierre would be freed to resume his place at Court.

But his prediction failed to come true, because to Bassompierre’s surprise, when the cardinal died things just went on as before: Sir du Tremblay didn’t leave, and neither did Bassompierre. Du Tremblay was therefore still governor of the Bastille when d’Artagnan presented himself with the minister’s order. He was received with great courtesy, and as the governor was about to dine, he invited d’Artagnan to join him. “I would accept with pleasure,” said d’Artagnan, “but unless I’m mistaken, the envelope of this letter is marked *Urgent*.”

“Quite so,” said Sir du Tremblay. “Ho there, Major! Send down Number two-hundred-and-fifty-six.” Upon entering the Bastille, one ceased to be a man and became nothing more than a number. D’Artagnan shuddered at the sound of the keys. Still in the saddle, he looked around at the ironbound doors and barred windows; he had no desire to dismount inside these thick walls that he’d always seen from the other side of the moat, and which he’d learned to fear twenty years before. A bell rang. “I must go,” said Sir du Tremblay. “They’re calling for me to sign the release of the prisoner. I hope to see you again, Sir d’Artagnan.”

“Devil take me if I share *that* hope,” d’Artagnan murmured from behind a gracious smile. “Only five minutes in here, and I’m sick of it already. Let’s go – I’d rather die penniless in a shack than be a rich governor of the Bastille, even if it paid ten thousand a year.” He’d scarcely finished this monologue when the prisoner appeared. Seeing him, d’Artagnan started with surprise, a movement he quickly suppressed. The prisoner entered the carriage without appearing to recognise d’Artagnan. “Gentlemen,” d’Artagnan said to his four musketeers, “I was ordered to keep an eye on the prisoner and since the carriage doors have no locks, I’m going to ride with him. Sir de Lillebonne, be so kind as to lead my horse by the bridle.”

“Of course, Lieutenant.”  
D’Artagnan dismounted, handed his horse’s bridle to the musketeer, and entered the carriage. He sat next to the prisoner, then ordered, in a voice that showed no emotion, “To the Royal Palace, at the trot.”

The carriage moved, and as it passed under the gatehouse, d’Artagnan took advantage of the shadow it cast to grip the prisoner in an embrace. “Rochefort!” he cried. “It’s really you!”  
“D’Artagnan!” cried Rochefort, astonished.  
“Ah, my poor friend!” d’Artagnan said. “I haven’t seen you for four or five years, and feared you were dead.”  
“*My faith*,” said Rochefort, “there’s not much difference between being dead and being buried – and they buried me deep.”  
“And for what crime were you in the Bastille?”  
“Do you want to know the truth?”

“Yes.”  
“Well, then – I have no idea.”  
“Are you serious, Rochefort?”  
“I’m serious, faith of a gentleman! At any rate, it can’t be for the crime they accused me of.”  
“What was that?”  
“Petty theft.”  
“You, a petty thief? Are you kidding me?”  
“I wish I was. You want the whole story?”  
“I’ll say I do.”

“Well, here’s what happened. One evening, after roistering at Reynard’s in the Tuileries with the Duke d’Harcourt, Fontrailles, de Rieux, and some others, d’Harcourt proposed we go cloak-snatching on the Pont Neuf. As you know, that sort of prank had been made quite fashionable by the Duke of Orléans.”

“What, at your age? Were you crazy, Rochefort?”  
“No, just drunk. But it didn’t sound like fun, so I told the Knight of Rieux we should just watch rather than take part – and to get the best view, we should climb onto King Henri’s bronze horse. No sooner said than done! We used the royal spurs as stirrups and sat on the king’s crupper. Perched there, we could see everything. Already four or five cloaks had been snatched with great flair, from victims who hadn’t dared say a word in protest, until one fool, less patient than the others, called out, “Guards! Guards!” that got the attention of a patrol of archers. D’Harcourt, Fontrailles, the others ran for it, and de Rieux wanted to do the same but I remember telling him they’d never see us where we were. But he wouldn’t listen to me. He put his foot on the spur to climb down, the spur broke off, and he fell, broke his leg, and instead of keeping quiet about it, began to howl like a hanged man. I tried to jump down in my turn but too late: I jumped right into the arms of the archers. They took me to the Châtelet, where I slept soundly enough, as I was sure I’d be out the next day. But the next day passed, then another, and then a whole week, so I wrote to the cardinal. That same day they came for me and took me to the Bastille, where I spent the next five years. Do you think that was for committing the sacrilege of riding pillion behind Henry IV?”

“No, you’re right, my dear Rochefort, it can’t be for that. But you’re probably about to learn what it was for.”  
“Ah, yes, I forgot to ask – where are you taking me?”  
“To the cardinal.”

“What does he want?”  
“I don’t know, since I didn’t even know it was you I was going to get.”  
“Impossible. A favourite like you?”  
“Me, a favourite?” d’Artagnan cried. “My dear Count! I was a cadet from Gascony when I met you at Meung twenty-two years ago, and I’m still not much more than that!” He finished with a deep sigh.  
“But you’re leading a command, aren’t you?”

“Because I happened to be the one in the antechamber when the cardinal called. But I’m still just a lieutenant of musketeers, as I’ve been for the last twenty years.”  
“Well, at least nothing bad has happened to you.”  
“What could happen to me? To quote some Latin verse I’ve mostly forgotten, or rather never knew, ‘Lightning doesn’t strike the valley’ – and I’m a valley, my dear Rochefort, the deepest around.”

“And Mazarin is still Mazarin?”  
“More than ever! They say he’s secretly married to the queen.”  
“Married!”

“If he’s not her husband, he’s certainly her lover.”  
“So, she resisted Buckingham but gave in to Mazarin!”

“Women!” said d’Artagnan, philosophically.  
“Not just a woman but a queen!”

“*My God*, queens are just women twice over.”  
“And Sir de Beaufort, is he still in prison?”

“Indeed. Why?”  
“It’s just that he thinks well of me and might get me out of this.”  
“You’re probably closer to being free than he is, and will have to get *him* out of it.”

“Then, the war...”  
“Oh, we’ll have a war.”  
“With the Spanish?”  
“No, with Paris.”

“What do you mean?”  
“Don’t you hear that gunfire?”  
“Yes. What is it?”

“That’s the citizens getting warmed up before the game!”  
“And you think these civilians mean business?”  
“That’s right, if they can find a good leader to pull them together.”  
“What a rotten time to get out of prison.”  
“Good God, cheer up! If Mazarin sent for you, it’s because he needs you, and if he needs you – well, my compliments! He hasn’t needed me in years, and you see where I am.”  
“Then speak up about it! That’s my advice.”  
“Listen, Rochefort – let’s make a deal.”  
“What’s that?”  
“We’ve been good friends to each other.”  
“For the love of God! I’ve got three sword wounds to prove it.”  
“Well, if you get back in favour, don’t forget about me.”  
“On the honour of a Rochefort – but you must do the same for me.”

"Deal! Here's my hand. So, the first chance you get to put in a word for me..."

"I'll speak up. And you?"

"I'll do the same."

"And what about your old friends? Are they included?"

"Which friends?"

"Athos,\* Porthos,\* and Aramis\* – have you forgotten?"

"Just about."

"What's become of them?"

"I don't know."

"Really?"

"Good Lord, yes! We parted, as you know; I sometimes hear indirect news, so I know they're still alive but that's all. But where in the world they might be, devil take me if I know. Upon my honour, the only friend I have is you, Rochefort."

"And your illustrious ... what did you call that lad who made sergeant in the Piedmont Regiment?"

"Planchet?"

"Yes, that's it. And the illustrious Planchet, what happened to him?"

"He married the owner of a confectioner's shop in the Rue des Lombards ... he always did have a sweet tooth. So, he's a merchant of Paris, and probably leading the riots. It's funny but he'll probably make alderman before I make captain."

"Come, my dear d'Artagnan, buck up! It's when you're at the bottom of the wheel that it turns you back to the top. Your fate may change this very evening."

"Amen to that!" said d'Artagnan, halting the carriage.

"What are you doing?" asked Rochefort.

"We're nearly there, so I'm getting out. It shouldn't look like we know each other."

"Quite right. *Goodbye!*"

"*Au revoir*; remember your promise."

And d'Artagnan mounted his horse and took over lead of the escort. Five minutes later they entered the courtyard of the Royal Palace. D'Artagnan led the prisoner up the grand stair, across the antechamber, and along a corridor. At the door of Mazarin's study, he was about to have himself announced when Rochefort laid his hand on his shoulder. "D'Artagnan," said Rochefort with a smile, "do you want to know what I was thinking as we rode along that route, passing those angry mobs that watched you and your four men with flaming eyes?"

"What?" said d'Artagnan.

"Just that all I had to do was shout for help and they'd have torn you to pieces, you and your escort – and I'd have been free."

"Why didn't you do it, then?" said d'Artagnan.

"Come now!" Rochefort replied. "What of our sworn friendship? Now, if it had been someone other than you who was taking me, I don't say..."

D'Artagnan saluted him – and said to himself, "Has Rochefort become a better man than I?"

And he had himself announced to the minister. "Bring in Sir Rochefort," came Mazarin's impatient voice, as soon as he heard the names, "but ask Sir d'Artagnan to wait – I've not yet finished with him."

At these words d'Artagnan withdrew happily. As he'd said, it was a long time since anyone had needed him, and this directive from Mazarin seemed a good omen. As for Rochefort, the summons had no effect on him other than to put him on his guard. He entered the study and found Mazarin seated at his desk in his usual attire, that of a prelate of the Church – similar to the robes of an abbot of the period but with stockings and mantle of purple. As the doors closed, Rochefort glanced at Mazarin from the side of his eye, and saw the minister sizing him up from the side of his own. The minister was the same as always: curled, primped, perfumed, and thanks to this grooming, looking less than his age. As for Rochefort, that was something else; five years in prison had aged Richelieu's worthy aide, turning his black hair white and changing his healthy complexion to a wan pallor. Seeing him, Mazarin shook his head slightly with a look that said, "Here's a man without much use left in him."

After a silence that stretched out for what seemed to Rochefort an age, Mazarin took a letter from a pile of papers, showed it to him, and said, "I see here a letter in which you request your freedom, Sir Rochefort. Are you in prison, then?"

Rochefort trembled at this question. "But," he said, "It seems to me Your Eminence ought to know that better than anyone."

"Me? Not at all! There's still a crowd of prisoners in the Bastille who've been there since Sir de Richelieu's time, and I don't know all their names."

"Oh but me, My Lord, that's another thing entirely! You knew my name, since it was by Your Eminence's order that I was taken from the Châtelet to the Bastille."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Yes – I think I do remember it. Didn't you, at the time, refuse a mission to Brussels on the queen's behalf?"

"Ah," said Rochefort, "so that's the real reason? I've been wondering for five years. Fool that I am, not to have seen it!"

"I don't say that's the cause of your arrest, I'm just asking a question, that's all. So, listen: did you not refuse to go to Brussels on the queen's service, after you'd gone there on the service of the old cardinal?"

"It's precisely because I'd gone there in service to the cardinal that I couldn't go back in service to the queen. I'd left Brussels in terrible danger. I'd gone during the Chalais conspiracy to intercept the correspondence between Chalais and the archduke, and when I was recognised, I was nearly torn to pieces. How was I supposed to go back after that? Instead of serving the queen, I'd have been lost to her."

"Well, here we see, my dear Sir Rochefort, how even the best of intentions can be misconstrued. When you declined to go, the queen saw it as insubordination. Her Majesty still bore a grudge about some of your services to the late cardinal!"

Rochefort smiled sourly. "Now that he's dead, the fact that I served Cardinal Richelieu against the queen is exactly why I would serve you, My Lord, against all the world."

"Unlike Cardinal Richelieu, Sir Rochefort," said Mazarin, "I am far from all-powerful. I'm just a minister who, as servant to the queen, needs no servants of his own. But Her Majesty is very sensitive; having heard of your refusal, she took it as a declaration of war, and since you were a capable man and therefore dangerous, Sir Rochefort, she ordered me to ... attend to you. Which is how you found yourself in the Bastille."

"Well, My Lord," said Rochefort, "it seems to me that if I was in the Bastille by mistake..."

"Yes, yes," Mazarin replied, "I'm sure this can all be worked out. You're a man who understands how tangled affairs can become, and how to untangle them – by whatever means."

"That was what Cardinal Richelieu thought, and I'll admire that great man all the more if you tell me you share his opinion."

"It's true," said Mazarin, "Sir de Richelieu was a great politician, a much greater man than I, who am simple and straightforward. That's what holds me back, that frankness so entirely French."

Rochefort had to bite his lips to suppress a smile. "So, I'll come to the point. I need good friends and faithful servants – when I say *I need*, of course I mean the *queen* needs. I do nothing except at the orders of the queen, is that clear? I'm not like Cardinal Richelieu, who followed his own whims. No, I'll never be a great man like him; but at least I can be a good man, Sir Rochefort, and I hope to prove it to you."

Rochefort remembered well that silky voice that sometimes slipped into sibilants like the hiss of a viper. "I'm quite prepared to believe that, My Lord," he said, "though for my part, I've seen little proof till now of that good nature Your Eminence speaks of. Remember, My Lord," he continued quickly, seeing the minister's expression, "remember that I spent the last five years in the Bastille, and nothing darkens a man's vision like seeing things through prison bars."

"Ah but Sir Rochefort, I already told you it wasn't my idea to put you in prison. The queen ... well, the anger of a woman, and moreover a princess, what would you have? But it goes as quickly as it comes and is soon forgotten."

"I understand, My Lord, how five years at the Royal Palace, amid gallants and gaiety, might make one forget – but I, who passed them in the Bastille..."

"My God, Sir, do you think life at the Royal Palace is all parties and fun? Not at all! We have here, too, our trials and troubles. But let's say no more about it. I'll lay my cards on the table, Sir Rochefort. Now tell me, are you with us?"

"Please understand, My Lord, I ask nothing better – but I have no idea of the state of affairs. At the Bastille, one talks politics only with soldiers and jailers, and you have no idea how little such people know about what's really going on. I've always been a partisan of Sir de Bassompierre myself – is he still one of the Seventeen Lords?"

"He is dead, Sir, and it's a great loss. He was a man devoted to the queen, and men so loyal are rare these days."

"*For God's sake!* Quite so," said Rochefort, "especially once you've sent them to the Bastille."

"Very well, then," said Mazarin, "how would you measure devotion?"

"By action," said Rochefort.

"Indeed – by action," said the minister thoughtfully. "But where does one find men of action?"

Rochefort shook his head. "There's no shortage of them, My Lord – if you know how to look for them."

"I don't know how to look for them? What are you saying, Sir Rochefort? Kindly instruct me. You were close to My Lord le Cardinal and must have learned a lot. Ah! What a great man he was!"

"My Lord won't take offence if I lecture a bit?"

"Me? Never! As you know, I listen to everyone. I want to be loved, not feared."

"Well, My Lord, on the wall of my prison cell, scratched in with a nail, is a proverb."

"And what is this proverb?" asked Mazarin.

"Just this, My Lord: *Like master...*"

"... *Like manservant*. I know it."

"No: *like retainer*. It's a minor change made by those devoted followers I was speaking of."

"*Well*. So, what does this proverb mean?"

"It means Sir de Richelieu knew how to attract loyal retainers by the dozen."

"He, the target of every assassin! He, who spent his life warding off attack after attack!"

"But he did ward them off, despite their number. Because though he had many enemies, he had just as many friends."

"But that's all I ask!"

"I've known people," continued Rochefort, thinking it was time to put in a word for d'Artagnan, "people so capable they were even able to foil the cardinal, with all his guards and his spies – people without rank, without money, and without support who nonetheless saved a crowned head her crown, and made the cardinal cry mercy."

"But these people you speak of," said Mazarin, smiling to himself at manoeuvring Rochefort into bringing up the very subject he wished to discuss, "these people weren't devoted to the cardinal, since they fought against him."

"No, though they would have been better off if they had been. But they had the bad luck to be devoted to this same queen for whom you were just now trying to find servants."

"But how is it you know all this?"

"I know this because, at the time, these people were my enemies; because they were pitted against me, and though I did them all the harm I could, they got the better of me; because one of them, my particular nemesis, gave me three sword wounds, the last one seven years ago ... and that settled our old account."

"Ah!" said Mazarin, with good-natured longing. "If only I knew such men."

"Well, My Lord, you've had one of them standing outside your door for the last six years, and you haven't seen fit to do anything with him."

"But who?"

“Sir d’Artagnan.”

“That Gascon?” cried Mazarin in a perfect imitation of surprise.

“That Gascon saved a queen, and in skill, courage, and wit made Sir de Richelieu look like a schoolboy in comparison.”

“Really?”

“It’s exactly as I have the honour to tell Your Eminence.”

“Tell me the whole story, my dear Sir Rochefort.”

“That’s rather difficult, My Lord,” said the count, smiling.

“He’ll tell me himself, then.”

“I doubt it, My Lord.”

“And why is that?”

“Because the secret is not his to tell – because, as I’ve said, it’s the secret of a great queen.”

“And he alone accomplished such a feat?”

“No, My Lord, he had three friends, three brave men who backed him up, just the sort of loyal companions you said you were looking for.”

“And these four men worked together, you say?”

“As if they weren’t four men but one; as if four hearts beat in one chest. What they’ve done together, those four!”

“My dear Sir Rochefort, you pique my curiosity, truly you do. Are you sure you can’t share their story?”

“No but I can tell you a tale – a true fairy tale, as it were, My Lord.”

“Then tell me, Sir Rochefort! I do so love a good story.”

“You’re sure that’s what you want, My Lord?” said Rochefort, trying to understand the cardinal’s motive in all this.

“Yes.”

“Well then, listen! Once upon a time there was a queen ... not just any queen but the queen of one of the greatest kingdoms of the world, a queen whom a great minister wished to harm because once he’d loved her too well. No point in trying to guess who I mean, My Lord, as all this took place long before you came into the queen’s kingdom. Now there came to Court a brave ambassador, so rich and so elegant, that all the women lost their hearts to him. Even the queen was taken with him, and doubtless because of how diplomatically he conducted himself, she had the imprudence to present him with some royal ornaments so remarkable and unique that they were irreplaceable. Now as these ornaments had been given to her by the king, the minister persuaded His Majesty that she should wear them at an upcoming ball. Needless to say, My Lord, the minister was well aware that these ornaments had left with the ambassador and were now far across the sea. Alas, the great queen was lost – doomed to fall from her high estate to below the lowest of her subjects!”

“Really!” said Mazarin.

“Yes, My Lord! But four men resolved to save her. Now these four men were not princes, nor dukes, nor peers, nor even men of wealth – they were just four soldiers with bold spirits, strong arms, and quick swords. So, they went to recover the necklace. But the minister knew of their departure and had placed men along their road to prevent them from reaching their goal. Waylaid by numerous assailants, three of them were brought low but one fought through to the port, killed or wounded those who tried to stop him, crossed the sea, and returned the ornaments to the great queen. She wore them proudly to the ball on the appointed day, and the minister was nearly ruined as a result. And what do you say to that deed, My Lord?”

“It was magnificent!” said Mazarin in wonder.

“Well, I could tell ten more such tales.”

Mazarin didn’t reply. He was thinking.

Five or six minutes passed.

“Have you anything more to ask of me, My Lord?” said Rochefort.

“So that’s it. And d’Artagnan was one of these four men, you say?”

“It was he who took the lead.”

“And the others, who were they?”

“My Lord, allow me to let d’Artagnan name them to you. They were his friends, not mine, and only he would have any influence over them. I never even knew them under their true names.”

“I see you still don’t trust me, Sir Rochefort. Well, I will continue to be frank: I need him – and you – and all of them!”

“Then start with me, My Lord, since you sent for me, and here I am. I’m sure it will come as no surprise that after five years in prison, I’m curious to know what plans you have for me.”

“You, my dear Sir Rochefort, will be in charge of security; you will go to Vincennes, where Sir de Beaufort is imprisoned, and keep him under careful guard. Well! What do you think?”

“I’m afraid the position you offer me is impossible,” said Rochefort, shaking his head ruefully.

“Impossible? How can it be impossible?”

“Because Sir de Beaufort is one of my friends, or rather, I’m one of his. Have you forgotten, My Lord, that he’s the one who sponsored me to the queen?”

“Since then, Sir de Beaufort has become an enemy of the State.”

“Yes, My Lord that may be. But since I’m neither king, nor queen, nor minister, he’s no enemy to me, and I can’t accept what you offer me.”

“So, this is what you call devotion? Good luck with that. Such devotion won’t get you very far, Sir Rochefort.”

“But My Lord,” Rochefort replied, “to come out of the Bastille only to go to Vincennes, for me that’s just changing one prison for another.”

“Just be honest: you’re really on Sir de Beaufort’s side, aren’t you?”

“My Lord, I was locked up so long I’m not allied to any party, except the party of fresh air. Assign me anywhere else, send me on a mission, and give me anything to do so long as it’s active!”

“My dear Sir Rochefort,” said Mazarin archly, “your zeal is admirable, and though I’m sure you have the heart for it, in you the fire of youth has gone out. Trust me, what you need now is rest and plenty of it. Hey, there, outside!”

“You’re not sure what to do with me, then, My Lord?”

“On the contrary, I’ve decided.” Bernouin entered. “Call a bailiff for me,” Mazarin said to him in a low voice, “and stay nearby.”

An officer was summoned. Mazarin wrote a brief note and handed it to him, then nodded. “Goodbye, Sir Rochefort,” he said.

Rochefort said, “I see, My Lord, that you’re sending me back to the Bastille.”

“Clever man.”

“I’ll go, My Lord but I say again, it’s a mistake not to make use of me.”

“You, the friend of my enemies!”

“What would you have? I didn’t make them your enemies. I could still be on your side.”

“Do you think you’re the only one for that post, Sir Rochefort? Believe me, I’ll find others just as good.”

“Then it is my turn to wish you luck, My Lord.”

“All right, off with you. And by the way, bother to write me no more letters, Sir Rochefort, as I’m afraid they’ll just go astray.”

“Well, I got played for a fool that time,” Rochefort muttered on his way out. “But if d’Artagnan isn’t satisfied with that little tribute I gave him, he’s a hard man to please. Wait a minute, where the devil are they taking me?” In fact, they took Rochefort out by the secret staircase, instead of passing through the antechamber where d’Artagnan was waiting. In the side courtyard he found the carriage and four-man escort waiting for him but his friend was nowhere to be seen. “Oh ho!” Rochefort said to himself. “That changes everything. If the mob still crowds the streets, then by God, we’ll show Mazarin we’re still good for something more than just guarding a prisoner.” And he leapt into the carriage as lightly as if he were no older than twenty-five.

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Anne of Austria at Age 46

Left alone with Bernouin, Mazarin paused a moment, thinking. He’d learned a lot but he needed to know more. As Brienne has informed us, Mazarin was a card cheat that he called just taking advantage of his opportunities. He resolved not to commence the game with d’Artagnan until he knew all of his opponent’s cards. “Would My Lord like anything?” Bernouin asked.

“I would,” Mazarin replied. “Light the way; I’m going to see the queen.”

Bernouin took a candlestick and led the way. There was a secret passage that connected Mazarin’s suite with the queen’s apartments; the cardinal could use that corridor to visit Anne of Austria at all hours. Arriving in the bedchamber at the end of the passage, Bernouin met Madam Beauvais; he and she were the confidants of this pair of aging lovers. Madam Beauvais went ahead to announce the cardinal to Anne of Austria, who was in her oratory with the young Louis XIV. Anne of Austria, seated in a grand armchair, elbow leaning on a table and head resting on her hand, watched the royal child as he lay on the carpet, leafing through a big book of battles. Anne of Austria was a queen who knew how to waste her time without losing her dignity; she sometimes spent hours idling in her bedchamber or oratory, neither reading nor praying. As for the king’s choice of reading matter, it was an edition of Quinte Curce’s *History of Alexander* profusely illustrated with engravings. Madam Beauvais appeared at the door of the oratory and announced Cardinal Mazarin. The child got up on one knee, frowning, and asked his mother, “Why does he just come right in without asking for an audience?”

Anne coloured slightly. “In times like these,” she replied, “it’s important for a prime minister to be able to report what’s happening to the queen at any time of day, without exciting the curiosity or commentary of the whole Court.”

“But it seems to me Sir de Richelieu didn’t barge in like that,” replied the child, unappeased.

“How would you know how Sir de Richelieu behaved? You were too young to remember.”

“I don’t remember it – I asked about it, and they told me.”

“Who told you that?” asked Anne of Austria, with poorly disguised irritation.

“I know better than to tell on those who answer my questions,” replied the child. “If I tell, they’ll stop answering and I won’t learn anything.”

At that moment Mazarin entered. The king stood, picked up his book, put it on a table, and stood next to it that compelled Mazarin to remain standing as well. Mazarin took in the scene with a thoughtful eye, giving the queen an inquiring look. He bowed respectfully to Her Majesty and deeply to the king, who replied with a rather cavalier salute – but at a reproachful look from his mother Louis XIV swallowed the hatred he’d felt toward the cardinal since infancy and greeted the minister with a forced smile. Anne of Austria tried to guess the reason for this unexpected visit from Mazarin’s expression, as the cardinal usually didn’t come in to her until everyone else had retired. The minister nodded slightly toward the door and the queen said, “Madam Beauvais, it’s time for the king to go to bed. Call La Porte.”

The queen had already told young Louis two or three times that it was time to retire, and the child had fondly insisted on staying with her – but this time he made no reply, just pursed his lips and turned pale. La Porte appeared at the door, and the child went straight to him without embracing his mother. “Louis,” Anne said, “aren’t you going to kiss me goodnight?”

“I thought you were mad at me, Madam, since you send me away.”

“I’m not sending you away but you’re just recovering from the smallpox, and I don’t want you to get overly tired.”

“You weren’t worried about that today when you sent me to parliament to issue those nasty edicts the people are complaining about.”

“Sire,” said La Porte, trying to distract him, “who would Your Majesty like to carry your candlestick tonight?”

“Anybody, La Porte,” the child answered, then added, raising his voice, “so long as it’s not Mancini.”

Mancini was one of Mazarin’s nephews whom the cardinal had made a child-of-honour to the king, and whom Louis XIV treated with a measure of the disdain he felt for his minister. And the king marched out without kissing his mother or bowing to the cardinal. “Excellent!” said Mazarin. “I’m delighted to see His Majesty being brought up to abhor deceit.”

“Why do you say that?” asked the queen, almost timidly.

"It seems to me the king's exit makes that quite clear. His Majesty doesn't even try to hide how little affection he has for me – which doesn't prevent me, however, from being entirely devoted to his service, and to that of Your Majesty."

"I beg your pardon on his behalf, Cardinal," said the queen. "The child is too young to understand all the obligations and duties you have." The cardinal smiled. "But you must have some important reason for coming," the queen continued. "What is it?"

Mazarin sat or rather lay back on a large chaise and said with a melancholy air, "It's just that in all probability, we'll soon be forced to part unless your devotion's such that you'd go with me back to Italy."

"And why is that?"

"Because," Mazarin said, "as they sang in the opera *Thisbe*, 'The whole world conspires to come between us.'"

"You're jesting, Sir!" said the queen, trying to recover some of her former dignity.

"Alas, no, Madam!" said Mazarin. "It's no laughing matter. On the contrary, I'm trying my best not to weep. And when I say, 'The whole world conspires to come between us,' I have to say you're part of that world, a part of what's driving us apart."

"Cardinal!"

"No? Didn't I see you the other day smiling very agreeably at Sir, the Duke of Orléans – or rather at what he said?"

"And what was it he said?"

"Madam, he told you, 'It's your Mazarin who's the stumbling block here – once he goes, all will be well.'"

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"What? Why ask me? You're the queen, it seems to me."

"Some monarch, disrespected by every scribbler in the Royal Palace, and every petty lord in the realm!"

"Nonetheless, you still have the power to banish from your presence anyone who displeases you."

"You mean to say, anyone who displeases *you*!" replied the queen.

"Me!"

"Yes! Who sent away Madam de Chevreuse,\* after she'd been persecuted for twelve years under the old regime?"

"She was an intriguer who wanted to continue her conspiracies under Sir de Richelieu and turn them against me!"

"Who sent away Madam de Hautefort, that friend so loyal and good that she refused the king's good graces in order to stay in mine?"

"Bah: a prude who told you every night, as she helped you undress, that it was risking your soul to love a priest – as if being a cardinal makes one a priest!"

"Who arrested Sir de Beaufort?"

"A ruffian who boasted of nothing less than planning to have me assassinated!"

"You see, Cardinal," replied the queen, "That your enemies are made into mine."

"That's not enough, Madam – your friends must also be my friends."

"My friends, Sir?" The queen shook her head. "Alas! I no longer have any."

"How can you have so few friends in prosperity, when you had so many in adversity?"

"Because in prosperity, Sir, I've forgotten my old friends. Because I acted like Queen Marie de Médicis who, upon returning from her first exile, turned her back on those who'd suffered it with her, so that when she was banished a second time, she died friendless in Cologne, abandoned by all the world, even her son."

"Then it's past time to try to repair the damage," said Mazarin. "Think back and recollect your oldest friends."

"What do you mean, Sir?"

"Just what I said: recollect."

"Looking around now, I seem to have little influence with anyone. Sir, the Duke of Orléans, follows his current favourite around, as always – yesterday it was Choisy, today La Rivière, tomorrow someone else. Sir Prince, Condé, is led around by Coadjutor de Retz who himself follows Madam de Guéménée."

"Ah, Madam, I didn't say to consider your friends of today but to recollect your friends of old."

"My friends of old?" said the queen.

"Yes, your oldest friends, those who aided you against Sir de Richelieu, and even vanquished him."

"What is he getting at?" the queen said to herself, looking anxiously at the cardinal.

"Yes," he continued, "under the right circumstances, that powerful will and determination that characterises Your Majesty was able, with the help of friends, to repel your opponent's attacks."

"Me?" said the queen. "I just suffered through those times, that's all."

"Yes," said Mazarin, "as women suffer – by avenging themselves. To the point. Do you know Sir Rochefort?"

"Sir Rochefort was never one of my friends," said the queen, "quite the opposite. He was one of my bitterest enemies, an agent loyal to the old cardinal. I thought you knew that."

"I know it so well," said Mazarin, "that for you I had him put in the Bastille."

"Is ... is he out?" asked the queen.

"No, never fear – he's still inside. I mention him only to bring up another. Do you know Sir d'Artagnan?" continued Mazarin with a shrewd look at the queen.

For Anne of Austria, it was a blow to the heart. "Has the Gascon been indiscreet?" she muttered, then said aloud, "D'Artagnan! Wait a moment ... yes, that name is familiar. D'Artagnan, a musketeer who loved one of my women. Poor little thing, she was poisoned because of me."

"That's all?" said Mazarin.

The queen looked at the cardinal in surprise. "Sir," she said, "are you subjecting me to an interrogation?"

"Even if I was," Mazarin said, with his soft voice and eternal smile, "you'd still give only such answers as suit you."

"Be direct with your questions, Sir, and then I'll be direct with my answers," said the queen, beginning to lose her patience.

"Well, Madam!" said Mazarin with a bow. "I want only to make your friends mine, so I can share with them what little talent and energy Providence has given me. The situation is serious and calls for active measures."

"What, again?" said the queen. "I thought we'd settled things when we dealt with Sir de Beaufort."

"Yes! We diverted a torrent that threatened to drown us but now we're menaced from deeper pools. There's a proverb in France about still waters, I believe."

"Go on," said the queen.

"Well!" continued Mazarin. "Every day I suffer insults from your princes and titled minions, all of them marionettes blind to the fact that I'm pulling the strings, nor do they see that beneath my calm exterior, I'm suppressing the hollow laugh of the injured man who'll one day prove their superior. True, we arrested Sir Beaufort but he may have been the least dangerous. There's still Sir Prince..."

"The victor of Rocroi! Even he is on your mind?"

"Yes, Madam, and frequently – but *patienza*, as we Italians say. Then, after the Prince de Condé, there is Sir, the Duke of Orléans."

"What are you saying? Gaston, the First Prince of the Blood, the king's own uncle!"

"Not the First Prince of the Blood, not the king's uncle but the cowardly conspirator who, under the previous reign, driven by caprice and resentment, eaten up by envy and idle ambition, jealous of all those who were admired for loyalty and courage, disgusted with his own worthlessness, made himself the crier of every slander, the centre of every cabal – he who encouraged good men who had the folly to take him at his royal word to conspire on his behalf, then disowned them as they mounted the scaffold! Not the First Prince of the Blood, I say, not the king's uncle but the assassin of Chalais, of Montmorency, and of Cinq-Mars, who is now trying to play the same game again, and imagines that this time he'll win because he has a new opponent, a man who doesn't threaten but instead ... smiles. But he is mistaken. He has lost by losing Sir de Richelieu, as I have no interest in keeping near to the queen this agent of discord whom the late cardinal used for twenty years to make the king's blood boil."

Anne blushed and hid her face in her hands. "I will not have Your Majesty humiliated," said Mazarin, regaining his calm tone, though beneath it was an unusual firmness. "I want people to respect the queen, and to respect her minister, since in the eyes of the world I am no more than that. Your Majesty knows that, despite what they say, I'm not just some Italian dancing monkey. The rest of the world must know me as Your Majesty knows me."

"Well, then, what should I do?" said Anne of Austria, submissive before this domineering voice.

"You must search your memory for the names of those loyal and devoted men who crossed the sea despite Sir de Richelieu, spilling their blood along the road, to bring back to Your Majesty certain jewels you'd given to the Duke of Buckingham."

Anne rose, angry and majestic, as if stiffened by a steel spring, and regarded the cardinal with that hauteur and dignity that had made her so admired in the days of her youth. "You insult me, Sir!"

"I want you, at long last," continued Mazarin, finishing the speech interrupted by the queen, "I want you to do today for your husband what you once did for your lover."

"That old slander once again!" cried the queen. "I thought it was finally dead and buried, something you've spared me until now ... but you bring it up at last. Fine! We'll settle this between us, and it will be over and done, do you hear me?"

"But, Madam," said Mazarin, taken aback by this show of strength, "I'm not asking you to tell me everything."

"But I want to tell you everything," said Anne of Austria. "So, listen. I want to tell you, Sir, that there were indeed at that time four faithful hearts, four loyal spirits, four devoted swords who saved more than my life – for they saved my honour."

"Ah! You admit it," said Mazarin.

"Is it only the guilty whose honour may be at stake, Sir, and can't a person, especially a woman, be dishonoured by appearances? Yes, appearances were against me, and my honour was at risk – and yet, I swear, I wasn't guilty. I swear by..."

The queen looked around for something holy she could swear on, pushed aside a tapestry to reveal a cabinet, and drew from it a small, rosewood box chased with silver. Laying it on her altar, she said, "I swear upon these sacred relics that though I loved the Duke of Buckingham, the Duke of Buckingham was not my lover!"

"And what are these relics upon which you take this oath, Madam?" Mazarin said, smiling. "For I warn you, in my capacity as a Catholic prelate I know when a relic is a relic."

The queen detached a small golden key from a necklace and handed it to the cardinal. "Open it, Sir, and see for yourself."

Mazarin, astonished, took the key and opened the coffer, in which he found a rusted knife and two letters, one of them stained with blood. "What's this?" he asked.

"What's this, Sir?" said Anne of Austria with a queenly gesture, taking the coffer in her arms, still beautiful despite the years, and holding it open. "I'll tell you. These two letters are the only letters I ever wrote to him. And this knife is the one with which Felton killed him. Read these letters, Sir, and see if I speak the truth."

But despite being given permission, Mazarin hesitated to read the letters, and instead took up the knife that Buckingham, dying, had torn from his wound and sent by La Porte to the queen. The blade was all corroded for the blood had become rust and after a moment's examination, during which the queen turned as white as the altar cloth she was leaning on, he replaced it in the coffer with an involuntary shudder. "It is well, Madam," he said, "and I accept your oath."

"No!" frowned the queen. "Read! I insist upon it. I want this settled between us so we never return to it. Do you think," she added, with a ghastly smile, "that I'm going to open this coffer for you at every accusation?"

Mazarin, daunted by this outburst, obeyed almost mechanically, and read the two letters. One was that by which the queen had asked Buckingham for the return of her diamond studs, the one d'Artagnan had brought him in the nick of time. The other was the one La Porte had borne to the duke in which the queen had warned him of his assassination, and had come too late. "It's ... well, Madam," said Mazarin. "I've nothing more to say about it."

"If, Sir," said the queen, closing the coffer and resting her hand upon it, "I have anything still to answer for, it's that I've always been ungrateful to those men who saved me, and did everything they could to save ... him. I gave nothing to that brave d'Artagnan, of whom you spoke just now, other than my hand to kiss, and this diamond."



The queen extended her beautiful hand toward the cardinal and showed him a marvellous stone that sparkled on her finger. “He sold it, it seems,” she said, “in a moment of want; he sold it to save me a second time, because he needed to send a messenger to the duke to warn him of the assassination.”

“So d’Artagnan knew of that?”

“He knew everything. How? I never learned. He sold this ring to Sir des Essarts on whose finger I saw it and from whom I bought it back. But this diamond belongs to him, sir, so return it to him for me – and since you’re lucky enough to have such a man near at hand, try to make use of him.”

“Thank you, Madam!” said Mazarin. “I’ll follow your advice.”

“And now,” said the queen, brittle with emotion, “do you have anything else to ask of me?”

“Not a thing, Madam,” said the cardinal, in his most soothing voice, “except to beg you to forgive my unworthy suspicions. It’s just that I love you so dearly, is it any wonder I’m jealous even of the past?” An indescribable smile passed over the queen’s lips. “Well, then, Sir,” she said, “If you have nothing else to ask of me, you may go. You must understand that you’ve upset me, and I need some time to myself.”

Mazarin bowed. “Then I retire, Madam,” he said. “Will you allow me to return?”

“Yes but tomorrow. That should give me enough time.”

The cardinal took the hand of the queen and kissed it gallantly, and then withdrew. He’d scarcely left before the queen went into her son’s apartments, where she asked La Porte if the king had gone to bed. La Porte just pointed toward the sleeping child. Anne of Austria went up the bed’s steps, put her lips to her son’s furrowed brow and gently kissed it. Then she retired as quietly as she’d come, only saying to the valet, “Try, my dear La Porte, to help the king appreciate Sir Cardinal, whom he and I owe so much.”

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Gascon & Italian

Meanwhile the cardinal had returned to his study, where Bernouin waited at the door. Mazarin asked him if anything had happened, and if there was any news from outside; the valet shook his head, and the cardinal motioned him away. Left alone, he went through the door to the corridor, then the one to the antechamber, where he found d’Artagnan on a bench, exhausted and asleep. “Sir d’Artagnan!” he said softly. D’Artagnan didn’t flinch. “Sir d’Artagnan!” he said louder.

D’Artagnan continued sleeping. The cardinal approached him and touched a finger to his shoulder. This time d’Artagnan started, awoke, and instantly stood like a soldier under arms. “I’m here,” he said. “Who calls?”

“Me,” said Mazarin with his broadest smile.

“I beg Your Eminence’s pardon,” said d’Artagnan. “I was so tired…”

“Ask for no pardon, Sir,” said Mazarin, “When you tire yourself in my service.”

D’Artagnan had to admire the minister’s gracious manner. “Oh ho,” he said to himself. “What’s that proverb about good things coming while one sleeps?”

“Come with me, Sir!” Mazarin said, returning to his study.

“Well, well,” murmured d’Artagnan. “It looks like Rochefort kept his word. Only where the devil has he gotten to?”

And he looked into every corner of the study without finding Rochefort. “Sir d’Artagnan,” said Mazarin, sitting comfortably in an armchair, “you’ve always seemed to me a brave and gallant man.” *Perhaps* so, thought d’Artagnan but *he took his time in telling me*. That didn’t stop him from bowing to the ground to acknowledge the compliment. “Well,” continued Mazarin, “now is the time to profit from your talents and worth!”

The officer’s eyes flashed with a joy he immediately covered, for he didn’t know where Mazarin was leading him. “Command me, My Lord,” he said. “I’m at Your Eminence’s orders.”

“Sir d’Artagnan,” Mazarin continued, “in the previous reign you distinguished yourself in several exploits.”

“It’s kind of Your Eminence to remember that. In fact, I think I fought with some success.”

“I’m not speaking of your exploits in war,” said Mazarin, “because, though commendable enough, there were others who did more.”

D’Artagnan was astonished. “Well?” said Mazarin. “Have you nothing to say?”

“I’m waiting,” d’Artagnan said, “for My Lord to tell me what exploits he’s referring to.”

“I speak of a certain adventure … you know which one I mean.”

“Alas, My Lord, I don’t,” d’Artagnan replied, perplexed.

“I see you’re discreet. Fine. I speak of the adventure of the queen’s diamond studs, and that journey you made with your three friends.”

*Hello*, thought the Gascon, *is this some kind of trap? Better play dumb*.

And he adopted an expression so bewildered it would have been the envy of Mondori or Bellerose, the greatest comedians of the time. “Very good!” said Mazarin, laughing. “Bravo! I knew you were the man I needed. So, how far are you willing to go for me?”

“As far as Your Eminence needs me to,” said d’Artagnan.

“You’ll act for me as you formerly did for a queen?”

*Clearly*, d’Artagnan thought, *he wants me to speak of it first. Devil take his cunning but he’s no Richelieu*. “For a queen, My Lord? I don’t understand you.”

“You don’t understand that I need you – you and your three friends?”

“What friends do you mean, My Lord?”

“Your three friends of former days.”

“In former days, My Lord,” replied d’Artagnan, “I didn’t have three friends, I had fifty. When you’re twenty, you call everyone your friend.”

“Come now, Sir Lieutenant,” said Mazarin, “discretion is a fine thing – but you might regret being overly discreet.”

“My Lord, Pythagoras made his students listen quietly for five years to teach them to be silent.”

“And you’ve been silent for twenty years, Sir that is fifteen years too long, even for a Pythagorean philosopher. Now speak, for the queen herself releases you from your oath.”

“The queen!” said d’Artagnan.

This time his astonishment was unfeigned. “Yes, the queen! And the proof that I speak on her behalf’s that she told me to show you this diamond that you’ll recognise and she bought from Sir des Essarts.”

And Mazarin extended his hand toward the officer, who sighed as he recognised the ring the queen had given him on the night of the ball at the Hôtel de Ville. “So, you see that I speak to you in her name. Answer me without any more comedy – for as I’ve said, and I repeat it, your fortune is at stake.”

*“My faith, My Lord! My fortune is long overdue – Your Eminence has long forgotten it!”*

“It’s but the work of a week to repair it. Now, here *you are* – but where are your friends?”

“I don’t know, My Lord.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. All three have left the service, and it’s been long since we separated.”

“But you can find them again?”

“No matter where they are. That’s my affair.”

“Good! And you require…?”

“Money, My Lord, is what this kind of business needs. I remember too many times when we were thwarted for lack of money. Without that diamond that I had to sell, we would have failed entirely.”

“The devil! Money, and in no small amount, I’ll wager,” said Mazarin. “You ask a great deal, Sir Lieutenant. Don’t you know the king’s coffers are empty?”

“Then do as I did, My Lord, and sell the crown jewels. Believe me, it does no good to be stingy; one can’t do great things with meagre means.”

“Well!” said Mazarin. “I suppose we can accommodate you.”

*Richelieu*, thought d’Artagnan, *would already have given me five hundred pistoles in advance*.

“So, you’re with me, then?” said Mazarin.

“Yes, if my friends are.”

“But if they refuse, I can still count on you?”

“I’ve never been any good by myself,” said d’Artagnan, shaking his head.

“Then see that you find them.”

“What will I say to persuade them to serve Your Eminence?”

“You know better than I do. Persuade them according to their characters.”

“What can I promise on your behalf?”

“If they serve me as they served the queen, the rewards will be lavish.”

“And what are we to do?”

“Everything, since it seems you know how to do everything.”

“My Lord, when one has confidence in people and wants them to return your trust, one is more forthcoming with information than Your Eminence is.”

“When the time for action arrives,” said Mazarin, “I assure you I’ll tell you everything.”

“But until then?”

“Await events – and go find your friends.”

“My Lord, they might not be in Paris, in fact they probably aren’t that means I’ll have to travel. I’m only a poor lieutenant of musketeers, and travel is expensive.”

“I don’t intend for you to travel with an entourage,” said Mazarin. “My missions are covert and mustn’t draw attention.”

“Still, My Lord, I can’t travel on my pay that is already three months behind. And I can’t travel on my savings, because after twenty-two years’ service the only thing I’ve saved is debt.”

Mazarin thought for a moment, as if struggling with himself. Then, going to a cabinet closed with a triple lock, he drew out a purse, weighed it two or three times in his hand, and then gave it d’Artagnan.

“Use this,” he said with a sigh, “to fund your travels.”

*Well!* D’Artagnan thought. *If these are Spanish double-pistoles, or even gold crowns, we may be able to do business together*.

He saluted the cardinal and stuffed the purse into his belt pouch. “So, then,” said the cardinal, “you’re off.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Write to me daily to report the progress of your negotiations.”

“I shall not fail, My Lord.”

“Very good. By the way, what are the names of your friends?”

“The names of my friends?” said d’Artagnan, with a touch of anxiety.

“Yes – while you search on your side, I’ll investigate on mine, and maybe I’ll learn something.”

“The Count of La Fère, formerly known as Athos; Sir du Vallon, known as Porthos; and the Knight d’Herblay, now the Abbot d’Herblay, known as Aramis.”

The cardinal smiled. “Younger sons,” he said, “who joined the King’s Musketeers under assumed names to avoid compromising their families. The usual thing: empty purses but long rapiers.”

“If God wills these rapiers to join Your Eminence’s service,” d’Artagnan said, “I dare to hope My Lord’s purse will become lighter and theirs heavier – because with these three men, and me, Your Eminence shall move all of France, and even Europe, if he so desires.”

"These Gascons," Mazarin laughed, "almost match the Italians for bravado."  
"In words," said d'Artagnan with a matching smile, "and we're even better with deeds."  
And he left, after receiving an indefinite leave order signed by Mazarin himself.  
Once outside in the courtyard, he went to a lantern to take a quick look into the purse. "Silver crowns!" he said with contempt. "I suspected as much. Ah, Mazarin, Mazarin! You still don't trust me. Too bad – that will bring you misfortune."  
Meanwhile the cardinal was rubbing his hands. "A hundred *pistoles*!" he murmured. "For a hundred pistoles I bought a secret for which Sir de Richelieu would have paid twenty thousand crowns. And I got this diamond into the bargain," he said, looking lovingly at the ring he'd kept, instead of giving it to d'Artagnan. "Why, this diamond must be worth ten thousand livres." And the cardinal retired to his chambers, delighted with an evening in which he'd made such a handsome profit. He placed the ring in a silk-lined jewel box filled with gems of every kind, for the cardinal had a taste for precious stones. Then he called Bernouin to undress him, without another thought for the distant shouts coming in through the windows, or the gunshots resounding across Paris, though it was eleven at night. Meanwhile d'Artagnan was making his way toward the Rue Tiquetonne, where he lived at the Hôtel de La Chevrete ... but let's say a few words about d'Artagnan's home and tell how he came to live there.

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D'Artagnan at Age 40

Alas! In the time since we last saw him in *The Three Musketeers*, when d'Artagnan lived in the Rue des Fossoyeurs, many years had passed and much had gone with them. D'Artagnan hadn't missed his opportunities, the opportunities had missed d'Artagnan. When his friends had surrounded him, d'Artagnan's youth and inventiveness had flourished; he had one of those open and ingenious natures that easily assimilate the qualities of others. Athos gave of his grandeur, Porthos his enthusiasm, and Aramis his elegance. If d'Artagnan had continued to abide with these three men, he would have become a truly superior man. But Athos had left him first, to retire to the small estate he'd inherited near Blois; Porthos had gone second, to marry the prosecutor's widow; finally, Aramis, the third, to take his vows and become an abbot. From that moment, d'Artagnan, who seemed to have counted on a future that included his three friends, found himself alone and unsteady, lacking the drive to pursue a career in which he couldn't quite excel without the spiritual essence contributed by each of his friends. Thus, though he continued as a lieutenant of musketeers, d'Artagnan found himself feeling isolated. He was not of sufficiently high rank, like Athos, for the *Grands* to open their houses to him; he wasn't vain enough, like Porthos, to feel entitled to mix with high society; and he wasn't well-bred enough, like Aramis, to get by on sheer elegance and sophistication, drawing on depths from within. For a while the memory of the charming Madam Bonacieux gave the young lieutenant a certain poetic melancholy; but like all things of this world, even this memory gradually faded. Life in a garrison is fatal to delicate sensibilities. Of the two opposing sides that composed d'Artagnan's nature, the material side had gradually won out – and slowly, without even noticing it, d'Artagnan, always in garrison or in camp, had become what we call in our time a career soldier. It's not that d'Artagnan lost his native cleverness but rather that he'd turned his innate finesse toward solving small problems rather than great ones, focusing on the soldier's mundane concerns of finding comfortable quarters, good food, and an accommodating hostess. And d'Artagnan had found all three of these things six years before in Rue Tiquetonne, at the sign of La Chevrete. In the early days of his stay there, the mistress of the boarding house, a fresh and pretty Flemish woman of twenty-five or twenty-six, had been quite taken with him but their amorous intentions had been blocked by an inconvenient husband. After d'Artagnan had pantomimed running him through with his sword a few times, one fine morning this husband had disappeared forever, after selling the best bottles in the honey cellar and carrying off what money and jewellery he could. Everyone assumed he was dead – especially his wife who, fancying herself in the condition of a widow, boldly asserted his death. Eventually, after three years of a liaison that d'Artagnan had carefully maintained, finding his lodging and his mistress more agreeable every year, as the two went so well together, the mistress decided it was once more time to be a wife, and proposed that d'Artagnan should marry her. "How so?" d'Artagnan replied. "That'd be bigamy, my dear! Don't even think of it!"

"But I'm quite sure my husband's dead."  
"He was a thoroughly inconsiderate fellow and would certainly return just to see us hanged."  
"Well, if he comes back, you'll kill him – you're so brave and masterful!"  
"Plague! That's just one more route to the hangman, my love."  
"So, you reject my proposal?"  
"Completely! That's not going to happen."

The pretty hostess was devastated. *If she'd had her way, Sir D'Artagnan would have been not just her husband but deity – he was so very handsome and had such a proud moustache!*  
During the fourth year came the campaign in Franche-Count. D'Artagnan was given his orders and prepared to leave. There was agony, rivers of tears, and solemn promises to remain faithful – though all from the hostess, of course. D'Artagnan was too much the *grand lord* to make promises, other than to promise to do what he could to add glory to his name. There was no doubting d'Artagnan's courage: he conducted himself admirably, and, charging at the head of his company, he took a ball in the chest that laid him out at full length on the battlefield. Everyone saw him fall from his horse, and no one saw him get up, so everyone assumed he was dead – especially those who hoped to assume his position. From the generals of the divisions who hope for the death of the commander in chief, down to the private soldiers who dream of the deaths of their corporals, everyone wants someone deceased. But d'Artagnan wasn't the sort of man to be killed so easily as that. After lying unconscious on the battlefield through the heat of the day, the cool night air brought him around. He made his way to a village, knocked on the door of the finest house, and was received as wounded Frenchmen are always and everywhere: he was taken in, treated, cured, pampered even, and restored to better health than ever. One morning he set off down the road to France, once in France took the way to Paris, and once in Paris to the Rue Tiquetonne. But d'Artagnan found his room occupied by another man's wardrobe, complete except for a sword. "He must have returned," he said to himself. "Well, too bad, and all the better!"

D'Artagnan, of course, was thinking of the missing husband. He asked the new servants where their mistress had gone and was told to the promenade. "Alone?" asked d'Artagnan.  
"With sir."

"Sir has come back, then?"  
"He must have," the servant naïvely replied.  
"If I had any money," d'Artagnan said to himself, "I'd leave – but since I don't, I'll just have to stay, take my hostess's advice, and put this conjugal ghost to rest."  
He'd just completed this monologue, monologues being suited to all dramatic occasions, when the servant who was waiting by the door, called out, "Look! Here comes madam now, returning with sir."  
D'Artagnan glanced up the street and saw, at the corner of the Rue Montmartre, the hostess returning on the arm of an enormous Swiss Guard, who swaggered with such airs that d'Artagnan was pleasantly reminded of his old friend Porthos. "So that's sir?" said d'Artagnan. "He's grown a bit, I think."  
And he sat down in the parlour where he couldn't be missed. The hostess entered first, and gasped when she saw d'Artagnan. By this, d'Artagnan knew he'd been recognised; he leapt up, ran to her, and kissed her tenderly. The Swiss looked on, stupefied, while the hostess turned pale. "It's you, Sir! Wh-what do you want from me?" she asked, dismayed and flustered.

D'Artagnan, unabashed, said, "Sir here is your cousin? Or is he your brother?"  
And without waiting for a reply, he embraced the huge Helvetian, who stiffened uncomfortably. "Who is this man?" the Swiss asked.  
The hostess just choked, unable to speak. "And who is this Swiss?" asked d'Artagnan.  
"He's going to marry me," said the hostess, between gasps.  
"Your husband's finally died, then?"

"Vhat you zay?" said the Swiss.  
"I'll zay plenty," replied d'Artagnan. "I zay you may not marry madam without my permission and I..."  
"Und you...?"  
"And I ... don't give it," said the musketeer.

At this, the Swiss turned red as a beet. He wore a gold-trimmed uniform, while d'Artagnan was wrapped in dull grey cloak; he was six feet tall, d'Artagnan was five and a half; he thought he was at home, and d'Artagnan was an intruder. "Vill you get out of here?" the Swiss demanded, stamping his foot like a man growing seriously angry.  
"Me? Unlikely!" said d'Artagnan.

"But he'll just throw you out," said the houseboy who couldn't understand how any normal man could stand up to the huge Swiss.  
"You," said d'Artagnan, beginning to lose his temper and taking the houseboy by the ear, "get out of the way and don't move unless I say so. As for you, illustrious descendant of William Tell, get your clothes out of my room and take them elsewhere – they annoy me."  
The Swiss began to laugh loudly. "I, leave? Vhy would I do zat?"  
"Ah, so you do understand French," said d'Artagnan. "Come take a little walk with me, and I'll explain why."

The hostess, who knew d'Artagnan for a swordsman, began to cry and tear her hair. D'Artagnan turned and said, more gently, "You should send him away, Madam."  
"Pah!" said the Swiss, who had needed a moment's thought to understand d'Artagnan's intentions. "Pah! Who are you, crazy one, to ask me to take a walk with you?"  
"I am a Lieutenant of the King's Musketeers," said d'Artagnan, "and therefore your superior in every way. However, this isn't a question of rank, just the right to quarters – and you know the custom. You want them? Then let's take a walk. The one who returns gets the room." And d'Artagnan led the Swiss away, despite the lamentations of the hostess. Deep down, she felt her heart yearn toward her old love – but since he'd insulted her by refusing her hand, she wouldn't be sorry if the proud musketeer was taught a lesson. The two adversaries marched straight to the moat outside the Montmartre wall. It was dark by the time they arrived; d'Artagnan politely requested that the Swiss yield him the room and be on his way; the Swiss shook his head in refusal and drew his sword. "Then you'll sleep here instead," said d'Artagnan. "This is a wretched bed but you chose it, and it's not my fault." And with these words he drew steel and crossed swords with his adversary. His opponent had a strong wrist but d'Artagnan far outmatched him in agility. The Swiss soldier's rapier never even found the musketeer's blade, and he took two wounds before he realised he'd been touched. He felt a chill, a sudden weakness, and was surprised to find he was sitting down, dizzy and bleeding. "*There!*" said d'Artagnan. "What did I tell you? That's the price of being stubborn. But you're strong, and you'll be good as new in a fortnight. Stay here, and I'll send the houseboy along with your clothes. Farewell ... Oh, you'll need a place to stay: try the Chat Qui Pelote, on Rue Montorgueil. You'll be well fed there, if I know the hostess. Goodbye!" And with that he strutted all the way home. The houseboy was standing exactly where he'd left him; d'Artagnan sent him to take his clothes to the Swiss, who was still sitting there, dumbfounded by his opponent's coolness. After that, the houseboy, the hostess, and the entire household regarded d'Artagnan as if Hercules had returned after completing his twelve labours. But once he was alone with the hostess, he said, "Now, fair Madeleine, you see the difference between a mere soldier and a gentleman. As for you, you've behaved like a tavern wench. More's the pity, because as a result you've lost my esteem and my lodging. I chased off the Swiss to teach you a lesson but I'm not about to stay under such a low roof as this. Hey, houseboy! Carry my things to the Muid d'Amour in the Rue des Bourdonnais. Goodbye, Madam." D'Artagnan said these words in a manner both moving and majestic. The hostess threw herself at his feet and begged his forgiveness, clinging to him tenderly. The roast was turning on the spit, the stove was glowing, and beautiful Madeleine wept adoringly. Hunger, warmth, and love all spoke together; he forgave her, and having forgiven, he remained.

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D'Artagnan is confounded but receives Aid from an Unexpected Quarter

From the Royal Palace, d'Artagnan made his way thoughtfully toward home, somewhat reassured by the purse given him by Cardinal Mazarin but thinking of the beautiful diamond he'd seen sparkling for a moment on the prime minister's finger. "If that diamond ever fell into my hands again," he said, "I'd instantly turn it into cash. I'd buy a few properties around my father's small château that is a lovely house but has very few outbuildings, and a garden plot no larger than the Cemetery of the Innocents. Then it's probable some rich heiress, attracted by my nobility and good looks, would come and marry me. We'd have three boys: I'd make the first a *grand lord* like Athos, the second a handsome soldier like Porthos, and the third a refined abbot like Aramis. *My faith!* It would be infinitely better than the life I lead now – but unfortunately Sir de Mazarin is a gutless rat who wouldn't give me that diamond."  
What would d'Artagnan have said if he'd known the queen had entrusted the diamond to Mazarin to give it to him?  
As he turned into Rue Tiquetonne, he found it in a tumult with a large crowd outside his boarding house. "Oh ho!" he said. "Is there a fire at the Hôtel de La Chevrete or has the husband of the beautiful Madeleine actually returned at last?"  
As d'Artagnan approached he saw it was neither, as the crowd was in front of the house next door rather than the boarding house. Some of those gathered bore torches, and by their light d'Artagnan could see armed men in uniforms. He asked what was happening, and was told that a mob of twenty men, led by a bourgeois, had attacked a carriage escorted by some of the cardinal's musketeers but when reinforcements had arrived the citizens had fled. Their leader had gone to ground in the house next to the hôtel, and the troops were searching the building. In his younger days d'Artagnan would have run to join the men in uniform and aid them against the citizens but his hot head had grown cooler over time. Besides, he had the cardinal's purse in his pocket, and didn't want to carry that

into a riot. Formerly d'Artagnan had always wanted to know everything but now he knew more than enough already. He went into the boarding house without asking any more questions. Inside he found the beautiful Madeleine, who wasn't expecting to see him, as d'Artagnan had told her he'd be on duty that night at the Louvre. So, she used his unexpected return to propose a small celebration, hoping to engage him because she was worried about what was going on in the street, and had no burly Swiss Guard to protect her. She tried to draw him out as to what was going on outside, and with his own affairs but d'Artagnan was in no mood for chat; he told her to send supper up to his room, along with a bottle of old Burgundy. Pretty Madeleine had been trained to obey at a gesture, like an officer's valet. And this time around d'Artagnan had deigned to speak with her as well, so she obeyed twice as quickly. D'Artagnan took his key and his candle and went upstairs. He was satisfied with a simple room on the fourth floor, leaving the better rooms for Madeleine to rent out. The respect we have for the truth compels us to admit his room was next to the gutter and just below the roof. Here was the tent of this latter-day Achilles. D'Artagnan would camp out alone in his room when he wished to punish fair Madeleine by his absence. Once inside, his first act was to open an old desk with new locks and put away the purse full of coins, without even bothering to take the time to count them. A few moments later his supper arrived, along with the bottle of honey, and he dismissed the houseboy and sat down. Not to think, as one might assume, not yet: for d'Artagnan was a man who believed in doing each thing in its turn. He was hungry, so first he ate his supper, and when he was done he turned in. Nor was he one of those people who do their best thinking when abed; when d'Artagnan was in bed, he slept. In the morning, refreshed, was when his mind was clear and he had his best ideas. It had been a while since he'd had to think much about anything but nonetheless he saved his thinking for the morning. At daybreak he awoke, jumped out of bed like a soldier at reveille, and paced around his room, thinking. "In '43," he said, "six months or so before the death of the late cardinal, I had a letter from Athos. Where was I? Let's see ... ah, yes, I was at the Siege of Besancon, I remember. I was in the trenches. What was it he said? He was living on a small estate – yes, that's it, a small estate. But where? I'd read only that far when a gust of wind carried the letter off. When I was younger I would have gone after it, even if it meant running out of cover into a crossfire. My youth would have cost me a pretty price! So, I let the wind blow my letter away to the Spanish, who were too rude to return it to me. That was my last contact with Athos. On, then: Porthos. I last had a letter from him inviting me to his estate for a grand hunt in September of 1646. Unfortunately, I was in Béarn at the time due to my father's death, and though the letter followed me there, I was gone again by the time it arrived. They sent it after me to Montmédy but once again it missed me. It finally caught up to me in April but by then it was April 1647, and as the invitation had been for the previous September, I was out of luck. Now, where is this letter? It must be with my title deeds."

D'Artagnan went into a corner and opened an old trunk stuffed with parchments pertaining to the D'Artagnan estate, most of which had been out of the family for 200 years. He searched through it and finally he gave a cry of joy as he recognised the great looping handwriting of Porthos, followed by some spidery lines traced by the wrinkled fingers of his worthy wife. He remembered what it said, so d'Artagnan skipped through the body of the letter to get to the address: Château du Vallon. Porthos had included no other information. In his pride he thought everyone knew the location of the château that bore his name. "Devil take him!" said d'Artagnan. "Still the same vainglorious lummox! However, it's nonetheless a good idea to find him first, as he can't be short of money, having inherited eight hundred thousand livres from Sir Coquenard. But the other two are bound to fail me. By now Athos will have pickled his brain from drinking, and Aramis will be worn thin from his devotions."

D'Artagnan took one more glance at the letter and noticed it contained this sentence as a postscript: *I write by this same courier to our worthy friend Aramis at his abbey.* "At his abbey! Yes but which abbey? There are two hundred in Paris and three thousand in France. And for all I know when he became an abbot he changed his name for the third time. If only I was learned in theology and remembered the subject of that thesis he discussed so earnestly at Crèvecœur with the curate of Mont Didier and the superior of Jesuits! Then I might figure out which order he'd entered and which saint he'd taken as his patron. Maybe I should ask the cardinal for a safe-conduct that would enable me to inquire at all the abbeys – maybe even the convents? That's an idea ... but it would be admitting right at the outset that I need help, and the cardinal would be finished with me. The great are only grateful when one does the impossible for them. 'If it was possible,' they say, 'I'd have done it myself.' And rightly so. But wait a minute – I recall I had a letter from my old friend, in which he asked a favour of me. Yes, I remember it! But where's this letter now?" D'Artagnan thought for a moment, then went into his dressing room and opened the wardrobe where he kept his old clothes. He was looking for the doublet he wore in early 1648, and as d'Artagnan was an orderly man, he found it hanging right where it belonged. He reached into its pocket and drew out a paper: it was the letter from Aramis.

*Sir d'Artagnan,*  
*As you know, I've quarrelled with a certain gentleman, and he's given me a rendezvous for this evening in the Place Royale. As I'm a member of the Church and it would reflect poorly if it were known I took part in a duel, I can ask only the most loyal and discreet friend to help me, so I'd like you to stand as my second. Come in through the Rue Neuve Sainte-Catherine entrance and look for your opponent under the second lamppost on the right. I will be with mine under the third.*

*Entirely yours,*  
**ARAMIS**

This one lacked even a postscript. D'Artagnan remembered the affair: he'd gone to the rendezvous and met his opponent, a man he didn't know, and had given him a pretty thrust through the arm. Then he turned toward Aramis, who was already approaching, having finished with his man. "All done," said Aramis. "I think I've killed the insolent dog. Thank you, *dear friend*, and if you need me in the future, I'm entirely at your service."

And Aramis  
/ had shaken his hand and disappeared under the arcades. So, he had no more idea where Aramis was than Athos or Porthos. The embarrassment of it was just turning to irritation when he heard the sound of a window breaking in his bedchamber. He immediately thought of the money bag locked in his desk and ran to his room. He was right: as he came in the door, he could see a man entering through the window. "Ah ha! Wretch!" snarled d'Artagnan, taking the man for a thief and grabbing his sword.

"Sir!" the man cried. "In heaven's name, leave your sword in its scabbard and hear me out! I'm not a thief, far from it! I'm an honest citizen, a local merchant, and I'm called ... but wait! Aren't you Sir d'Artagnan?"

"And you – you're Planchet!" cried the lieutenant.  
"At your service, Sir," said Planchet, smiling in delight and relief, "if I still can be."  
"Maybe," said d'Artagnan, "but what the devil are you doing running over the roofs at seven in the morning in January?"  
"Sir," said Planchet, "if you must know – but maybe you don't have to know."  
"You think not?" said d'Artagnan. "Well, first put a towel over that broken window, and draw the curtains."  
Planchet leapt to obey, and when he was done, d'Artagnan said, "Well?"  
"First of all, Sir," said Planchet warily, "how do things stand between you and Sir Rochefort?"  
"Very well indeed. Didn't you know Rochefort's now one of my best friends?"  
"Ah! All the better."  
"But what does Rochefort have to do with the way you got into my room?"  
"Ah, well, you see, Sir ... I must inform you that Sir Rochefort is..."  
"For the love of God!" d'Artagnan said. "I know, he's in the Bastille."  
"That is to say, he was," Planchet replied.

"What do you mean, he was?" d'Artagnan gasped. "Has he had the good luck to escape?"  
"Ah, Sir!" gasped Planchet in his turn. "If you call that good luck, then all is well. You should know that yesterday guards were sent to take him back to the Bastille."  
"Yes, by God! I should know that, since I was the one who'd fetched him out."  
"But it wasn't you who took him back, fortunately for him. Because if I'd seen you were part of the escort, believe me, Sir, I have too much respect for you to—" "Out with it, you animal! What happened?"  
"Well! When the carriage carrying Sir Rochefort got to the Rue de la Ferronnerie, it was blocked by a crowd of citizens, who started muttering at the sight of the guards. The prisoner thought the time was right and started shouting for help. I happened to be in the crowd and recognised the voice of Sir Rochefort; after all, he was the one who got me appointed sergeant in the Piedmont Regiment. I shouted out that the prisoner was a friend of the Duke Beaufort, and then there was a riot. The crowd surrounded the horses and pulled down the escort. Meanwhile I got to the door and opened it, and Sir Rochefort jumped out and disappeared into the crowd. Unfortunately, just then a patrol came by, reinforced the guards, and charged us. I beat a retreat toward Rue Tiquetonne but they were right behind me, so I ducked into the house next door to this one. They surrounded and then searched it but in vain, as on the fifth floor I'd found a sympathetic person who hid me under a couple of mattresses. I stayed in my hiding place all night but when day broke I thought they might resume their search, so I scrambled out across the gutters looking for some unguarded way into another house. That's my story, Sir, upon my honour, and it'll be terrible if you disapprove of it."  
"No, *my faith*," said d'Artagnan. "On the contrary, I'm very glad to hear Rochefort got away. But you realise, don't you, that if you fall into the hands of the king's men, you'll be hanged without delay?"  
"By God, I know it!" said Planchet. "That's what I'm afraid of, and why I'm so glad I found you – because if you agree to help me escape, no one could do it better."  
"True," said d'Artagnan, "and I ask nothing better, though I risk being stripped of my rank if anyone found out I'd given asylum to a rebel."  
"Ah, Sir! You know I'd risk my life for you."

"You might even mention that you've already done so, Planchet, and more than once. I forget only those things I ought to forget – and that's something I'd rather remember. Sit down, then, and have a bite to eat, as I can see how you're making eyes at the remains of last night's supper."  
"Thanks, Sir. Your neighbour's pantry wasn't very well stocked, and I haven't eaten since I had a slice of bread and jam at noon yesterday. I don't mind sweet things in their place but that was rather a light meal to serve as both dinner and supper."  
"Poor lad!" said d'Artagnan. "Well, put yourself around that."

"Ah, Sir, you've saved my life twice," said Planchet.  
And he sat down at the table, as happy with scraps as in the old days in the Rue des Fossoyeurs. D'Artagnan began to pace up and down, trying to figure out what sort of advantage he could wring out of the unexpected appearance of Planchet. Meanwhile, Planchet worked to make up for lost time. Finally, he gave that sigh of satisfaction that shows when a hungry man is ready to take a break. "Tell me," said d'Artagnan, who thought it was time to see what he could learn, "do you know where Athos is?"

"No, Sir," Planchet replied.  
"The devil! What about Porthos?"  
"Him neither."  
"Two devils! And Aramis?"  
"Nor him."  
"Three devils! Curse it all!"  
"But," said Planchet slyly, "I know where Bazin is."  
"What! You know how to find Bazin?"  
"Yes, Sir."  
"And where is he?"  
"At Notre Dame."  
"And what is he doing at Notre Dame?"  
"He's a beadle."  
"Bazin is a beadle at Notre Dame? Are you sure?"  
"Absolutely: I saw him and spoke with him."  
"He must know how to find his master."  
"Without a doubt."  
D'Artagnan thought for a moment, then took up his cloak and sword and prepared to go out. "Sir," said Planchet with a lamentable air, "you're not going to abandon me, are you? You're my only hope!"  
"Oh, they won't look for you here," said d'Artagnan.  
"Yes but if you leave," said the prudent Planchet, "the folk of this house, who didn't see me come in with you, will think I'm a thief."  
"Good point," said d'Artagnan. "Let's see – can you speak like a provincial?"

"I can do better than that, Sir," said Planchet, "I even know another language: I can speak Flemish."

"Where the devil did you learn that?"

"In Artois, where we fought for two years. Listen: *Goeden morgen, mynheer! Ith ben begeeray te weeten the gesond bects omstand.*"

"What does that mean?"

"Good morning, Sir! Be as kind as to tell me how you're feeling."

"You call that a language?" said d'Artagnan. "Never mind, that'll do perfectly."

D'Artagnan went to the door, called for the houseboy, and told him to ask the fair Madeleine to come up. "What are you doing, Sir?" Planchet said. "You're going to reveal our secret to a woman?"

"Don't worry, this one won't tip our hand." At that moment the hostess entered. She came in smiling expectantly, thinking to find only d'Artagnan but upon seeing Planchet, she stopped short, astonished.

"My dear hostess," said d'Artagnan, "may I present your brother, who's just arrived from Flanders, here to spend a few days in my service."

"My brother!" said the hostess, even more astonished.

"Say hello to your sister, Master Peter."

"*Vilkom, Zuster!*" said Planchet.

"*Goeden day, Broer!*" replied the bewildered hostess.

"Here's the situation," said d'Artagnan. "Sir is your brother, just come from Amsterdam, whom maybe you don't know but I do. Get him dressed properly while I'm out, and when I return in, say, an hour, present him to me. Since I can refuse you nothing, I'll take him into my service on your recommendation, although he doesn't speak a word of French. Got that?"

"I've got enough of it to see what you're after, and that's all I need," Madeleine said.

"You're a precious gem, dear hostess and I leave it to you." Whereupon with a wink to Planchet, d'Artagnan went out to go to Notre Dame.

The Differing Effects of a Half-Pistole When Bestowed upon a Beadle & a Choirboy

D'Artagnan crossed the Pont Neuf, congratulating himself on having found Planchet, because though it might seem as if he was doing the good fellow a favour, it was really Planchet who was helping him. At the moment, nothing could be more useful than to have a brave and intelligent lackey. It's true that Planchet probably couldn't stay in his service for long but after hiding in his home that had saved his life, or nearly so, when he returned to his home in Rue des Lombards, Planchet would still be in d'Artagnan's debt. D'Artagnan wasn't sorry to have friends among the bourgeoisie when they were preparing to make war on the Court. He would have an agent in the enemy's camp, and for a man as shrewd as d'Artagnan the smallest advantage could lead to great results. So, it was in this frame of mind, pleased with his chance and how he'd seized it, that d'Artagnan arrived at Notre Dame. He mounted the steps, entered the church, and addressing a sacristan who was sweeping the vestibule, asked him if he knew Sir Bazin. "Sir Bazin the beadle?" said the sacristan.

"Himself."

"He's assisting at mass over there, in the Chapel of the Virgin."

D'Artagnan sighed with relief, for despite what Planchet had told him, he'd secretly feared he'd never find Bazin. But now he had hold of one end of the string, and just needed to follow it to the other. He knelt in the front of the chapel so as not to lose sight of his man. Fortunately, it was Low Mass, and ending soon. D'Artagnan, who'd forgotten all his prayers, and had neglected to take up a prayer book, used the time to take a good look at Bazin. It must be said, Bazin wore his vestments with majesty and beatitude. He had arrived at what was, as we know, the height of his ambitions, and the silver-chased verge he held up was as honourable to him as the commander's baton that Condé threw – or didn't throw – into the enemy's lines at the Battle of Fribourg. His physique had undergone a change perfectly suited to his vestments, in that he was as round as the halo of a saint. Every angle had disappeared from his face: he still had a nose but his cheeks had expanded to absorb the rest of his features, smoothing his chin into his throat. This swelling had nearly shut his eyes. His forehead, down to the wrinkles just above his eyes, was covered by his hair that was cropped in ecclesiastical bangs. But Bazin's forehead, even when visible, had never been more than an inch and a half high. The officiating priest finished the mass as d'Artagnan completed his survey: he pronounced the sacramental words and withdrew, giving his benediction – which everyone received kneeling, to d'Artagnan's astonishment. But then he recognised the celebrant as the *coadjutor* himself, the famous Jean-François de Gondy who was currying favour with the devout among the populace, sensing the political moment. It was to feed this popularity that from time to time he led the morning masses that were usually attended by just a few commoners. D'Artagnan knelt like the others, received his blessing, and made the sign of the cross – but as Bazin passed humbly by, walking last with his eyes raised to heaven, d'Artagnan tugged at the hem of his robe. Bazin looked down and jumped as if he'd seen a snake. "Sir d'Artagnan!" he cried. "*Vade retro, Satanas!*"

D'Artagnan laughed. "So, my dear Bazin, is that how you receive an old friend?"

"Sir," Bazin replied, "A Christian's true friends are those who help him to salvation, not those who tempt him away."

"I don't understand you, Bazin," d'Artagnan said. "I fail to see how I can be any bar to your salvation."

"You forget, Sir," replied Bazin, "how you almost destroyed that of my master – that thanks to you he was nearly damned forever by staying a musketeer, when his vocation so clearly drew him to the Church."

"My dear Bazin," d'Artagnan said, "you can see, by where you've met me, that I'm a changed man. Age brings reverence – and as I'm sure your master is well on his way to salvation, just tell me where he is so I can get his advice on how to achieve my own."

"Say rather to drag him back with you into the world. Fortunately," Bazin added, "I don't know where he is, and since we're in a holy place, I wouldn't dare tell a lie."

"What?" cried d'Artagnan, crushed by disappointment. "You don't know where Aramis is?"

"First of all," said Bazin, "Aramis was his name of perdition. In *Aramis* one finds *Simara*, the name of a demon – but fortunately for him, he's left that name behind him forever."

"Right," said d'Artagnan, determined to show patience, "it's not Aramis I'm looking for, it's the Abbot d'Herblay. Come, my dear Bazin, tell me how to find him."

"Didn't you hear me say, Sir d'Artagnan, that I don't know?"

"Oh, I heard you say it; it's just impossible for me to believe it."

"It's the truth, Sir, the good Lord's honest truth."

D'Artagnan could see he wasn't going to get anything out of Bazin. He was obviously lying but was firm and persistent about sticking to it. "Very well, Bazin!" d'Artagnan said. "Since you don't know where your master is, we'll say no more about it. But let's part friends; here's a half-pistole to drink to my health."

"I do not drink, Sir," said Bazin, majestically pushing away the officer's hand. "Such things are for the laity."

"Incorruptible too!" murmured d'Artagnan. "Really, I'm off my game."

And since d'Artagnan, distracted by his thoughts, had let go of Bazin's hem, the beadle took advantage of his release to retreat to the sacristy, not thinking himself safe until he'd closed the door behind him. D'Artagnan stayed where he was, thinking, his eyes fixed on the door that had put a barrier between him and Bazin, when he felt a fingertip touch him lightly on the shoulder. He turned and was about to exclaim in surprise, when the one whose finger had touched him brought that finger to his lips to enjoin silence. So, he lowered his voice and said, "You, here, my dear Rochefort!"

"Quiet!" said Rochefort. "Did you know I was free?"

"I heard it first-hand."

"From who?"

"From Planchet."

"Planchet? How do you mean?"

"He was the one who freed you."

"So that was Planchet! I thought he looked familiar. Which just goes to show that no good deed is ever wasted."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I came to thank God for my joyous deliverance," said Rochefort.

"I know that can't be all. What else?"

"And then to ask for orders from the coadjutor, to see if there's some way we can outrage Mazarin."

"You're a bad egg, and you're going to end up back in the Bastille."

"Oh, don't be too sure about that! I'm enjoying this fresh air entirely too much. In fact," said Rochefort, taking a deep breath, "I'm of a mind to take a walk in the country, a tour of the provinces."

"Really!" said d'Artagnan. "I've had the same thought."

"Ah. And without prying, can one ask where you're going?"

"To look for my friends."

"Which friends?"

"The ones you asked me about yesterday."

"What, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis?"

"Yes."

"On your honour?"

"What's so surprising about that?"

"Oh, nothing. It's funny, that's all. And on whose behalf are you looking for them?"

"You can't have any doubts about that."

"True enough."

"Unfortunately, I have no idea where they are."

"And no way to find out? Just wait a week, and I'll tell you myself."

"A week is too long. I must find them within three days."

"Three days! That isn't long," said Rochefort, "and France is large."

"Never mind, you know the word *must*. We can do a lot once *must* is invoked."

"And how will you start your search?"

"I'm on it."

"Good luck, then!"

"And you, *bon voyage!*"

"Maybe we'll meet each other on the road."

"Not likely."

"Who knows? Chance is capricious."

"Goodbye."

"*Au revoir*. And by the way, if Mazarin happens to mention me, tell him I said he'll soon see if, as he says, I'm too old for action."

Then Rochefort went off with one of those diabolical smiles that, once upon a time, had made d'Artagnan shudder. But d'Artagnan watched him go without anxiety, smiling on his part with a touch of that melancholy peculiar to him. "Go, old demon," he said to himself. "Do as you will, it doesn't matter to me – for there's no second Constance in the world!"

Turning, d'Artagnan saw that Bazin, having removed his ecclesiastical garb, was talking with the sacristan d'Artagnan had spoken with upon entering the church. Bazin was waving his short little arms around in lively gestures, probably, thought d'Artagnan, warning the lad against him in future. He took advantage of the two churchmen's preoccupation to slip out of the cathedral and take up a post on the corner of the Rue des Canettes from which he could watch the door unnoticed. Five minutes later d'Artagnan saw Bazin appear on the steps. He looked all around to make sure he wasn't

observed but didn't see our officer, hidden around the corner of a house fifty paces away. Reassured, he set off along Rue Notre Dame. D'Artagnan darted from his hiding place and caught up just in time to see him turn down Rue de la Juiverie and then, on Rue de la Calandre, enter a boarding house of honest appearance. Our officer had no doubt it was the home of the worthy beadle. D'Artagnan was careful to keep his distance; if the house didn't have a concierge, there'd be no one to speak to, and if it did, she'd already have been warned. Instead he went into a small tavern on the corner of Rue Saint-Éloi and Rue de la Calandre, where he ordered a hippocras. That drink would take a good half hour to prepare, giving d'Artagnan plenty of time to watch Bazin's house without arousing suspicion. In the tavern, he noticed a young lad, aged twelve or so, whom he thought he recognised from having seen him twenty minutes earlier dressed as a chorister. He spoke with him, and as the apprentice sub-deacon had nothing to hide, d'Artagnan learned that he served from six to nine in the morning as a choir boy, and then from nine till midnight as a tavern boy. As he was talking to the lad, a horse, saddled and bridled, was led up to Bazin's front door, and a moment later, Bazin came down. "Look!" said the lad. "There goes our beadle, on his way again."

"And where is he off to?" asked d'Artagnan.

"*Dame* – blessed if I know!"

"There's a half-pistole in it," d'Artagnan said, "if you can find out."

"For me?" said the lad, eyes sparkling. "Oh, I'll find out where he's going. It won't be hard. You're not kidding?"

"No, faith of an officer. Look – here's the half-*pistole*."

And he displayed the corrupting coin but kept hold of it. "I'll ask him."

"That's the best way *not* to get the answer," said d'Artagnan. "Wait till he's gone, then ask around, see what people know. Until then, your half-*pistole* waits here."

And he put it back in his pocket. "I get it," said the lad, with that smirk unique to the gamins of Paris. "We'll wait, then."

They didn't have to wait long. Five minutes later, Bazin set off at a trot, slapping the withers of his horse with an umbrella. Bazin had always had the habit of using an umbrella as a riding crop. He'd scarcely turned the corner of the Rue de la Juiverie before the tavern boy was off like a bloodhound on his trail. D'Artagnan sat back down at his table, certain that within ten minutes he'd know just what he wanted to know. Indeed, the boy returned in even less time than that. "Well?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Well," the young lad said, "I found out a thing or two."

"So, where's he going?"

"I still get the half-pistole?"

"Oh, yes – but talk to me first."

"Let me see it again. I want to make sure it's the real thing."

"Here it is."

"Master host!" the boy said. "Sir here wants some change."

The innkeeper took the half-pistole and gave the boy its change – which he put into his own pocket. D'Artagnan watched this little game, chuckling, then said, "So where did he go?"

"He went to Noisy."

"How do you know that?"

"Ah, *for the love of God*, it didn't take long to figure that out. I recognised the horse as belonging to the butcher, who occasionally hires it out to Sir Bazin. I didn't think the butcher would hire out his horse without asking where Sir Bazin would be going with it – not that he'd be likely to go far."

"And he told you Sir Bazin..."

"Was going to Noisy. It's the usual thing, he goes there two or three times a week."

"And do you know Noisy?"

"I should, my nurse was from there."

"Is there a monastery in Noisy?"

"A famous one, a Jesuit monastery."

"Well, that's it, then," said d'Artagnan.

"So, you're satisfied?"

"Entirely. What do they call you?"

"Friquet."

D'Artagnan took out his notebook and wrote down the lad's name and the tavern's address. "So, Sir Officer," the tavern boy said, "Might there be a way to earn more half-pistoles?"

"Could be," said d'Artagnan. And since he'd learned what he wanted to know, he paid for the hippocras that he hadn't drunk yet, and marched on back to Rue Tiquetonne.

**In Which d'Artagnan finds himself on the Crupper of Planchet Seeking Aramis**

Returning home, d'Artagnan found a man standing by the fireplace; it was Planchet but a Planchet so different, thanks to the old clothes left behind by the vanished husband, that he hardly recognised him. Madeleine had just presented him to all the houseboys. Planchet then addressed d'Artagnan in some lovely Flemish, the officer replied in some made-up gabble, and the bargain was concluded: Madeleine's brother had entered d'Artagnan's service. D'Artagnan's course was clear: he didn't want to arrive in Noisy during the day for fear of being recognised but it was only three or four leagues from Paris, on the road to Meaux, so he had some time ahead of him. He spent the first part of it in taking a substantial lunch that can be a liability for head work but a useful precaution when one has work for the body. Then he changed his outfit, as he thought the uniform of a lieutenant of musketeers might inspire distrust. Finally, he got out the best and longest of his swords, one he'd relied upon back in the old days. About two o'clock he had a couple of horses saddled, and then, followed by Planchet, he rode toward the La Villette gate. The house next door to the Hôtel de La Chevrete was still undergoing an intensive search. A league and a half outside Paris, d'Artagnan, seeing that in his impatience he'd still left too soon, stopped at an inn to breathe the horses. The bar was full of suspicious characters who gave them ugly looks and seemed to be organising some sort of nocturnal expedition. A man wrapped in a cloak appeared at the door but seeing a stranger within, he just gestured to two of the drinkers, who got up and went out to talk with him. As for d'Artagnan, he approached the lady of the house, breezily praised her honey, some horrible swill from Montreuil, and plied her with questions about Noisy. He learned there were two buildings of note in the village, one belonging to the Archbishop of Paris, now in use by his niece, the Duchess de Longueville, the other a monastery managed by the worthy fathers of the Jesuits, and there was no way to mistake one for the other. At four o'clock, d'Artagnan resumed his journey, marching on foot because he didn't want to arrive before nightfall. But walking while leading a horse, on a grey winter's day, across a featureless landscape, one has nothing better to do, as La Fontaine says of the hare in his hole, than to think. And so d'Artagnan thought. Planchet did too; but as we'll see, their thoughts were not the same. A word from the inn's hostess had steered d'Artagnan's thoughts in a particular direction, and that word was the name of Madam de Longueville. Indeed, Madam de Longueville was a lot to think about, as she was among the greatest ladies of the kingdom, and one of the reigning beauties of the Court. Wedded young in a loveless marriage to the old Duke Longueville, she'd had an affair with Coligny, who'd been killed on her account by the Duke Guise in a duel on the Place Royale. Following that had been a spate of rumours that she was entirely too close to her brother, the Prince de Condé, talk that had scandalized the more timorous souls at Court but their friendship had warped into a deep and abiding hatred. Now, it was said, she was involved in a political liaison with the Prince de Marcillac, son of the old Duke La Rochefoucauld, whom she was seducing into becoming an enemy of the Duke Condé, her brother. D'Artagnan thought about all of this. He thought of how, at the Louvre, he'd often seen the radiant and dazzling Madam de Longueville passing before him. He thought about Aramis, who with no more virtues than d'Artagnan, had formerly been the lover of Madam de Chevreuse, who'd been to the previous reign what Madam de Longueville was to this one. And he asked himself why there were people in the world who could get what they wanted, could satisfy political ambition or desire, while there were others who, by random chance, or some flaw in their natures, never got more than halfway to their hopes. He was just facing up to the idea that, despite all his wits, finesse, and skill, he was probably one of these latter people, when Planchet caught up to him and said, "I'll bet, Sir, that you're thinking what I'm thinking."

"I doubt that, Planchet," said d'Artagnan, smiling. "But what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking, Sir, about those ugly customers we saw drinking at the inn where we stopped."

"Planchet the ever prudent!"

"It's my instinct, Sir."

"Well, then! What do your instincts tell you in this situation?"

"Sir, my instincts told me those thugs were gathered at that inn for some sort of bad business. I was just thinking about that while I was back in a dark corner of the stable, and a man wrapped in a cloak came in, followed by two other men."

"Oh ho!" d'Artagnan said, as Planchet's story matched what he'd seen himself. "And then?"

"One of the men said, 'He's sure to be at Noisy, or be coming tonight, because I recognised his servant.' 'Are you sure?' said the man in the cloak. 'Yes, my Prince.'"

"*My Prince?*" d'Artagnan interrupted.

"Yes, 'my Prince.' But listen further: 'If he's really there, what should we do?' asked the other man. 'What should you do?' said the prince. 'Yes. He's a swordsman and won't be easily taken.' 'But you'll take him, just the same – and make sure you take him alive. Do you have rope to bind him and a gag for his mouth?' 'We have all that.' 'Pay close attention, because he'll probably be disguised as a cavalier.' 'Oh, yes, My Lord, never fear.' 'Besides, I'll be there to make certain.' 'And you assure us that the law ...' 'I'll answer for everything,' the prince said. 'All right, we'll do our best.' And with that, they left the stable."

"Well," said d'Artagnan, "what's that matter to us? That nasty sort of affair happens every day."

"How do you know we're not the targets of it?"

"Us, the targets? Why?"

"*Dame!* Think of what they said: 'I recognised his servant,' which could apply to me."

"Do you think?"

"And the other one said, 'He's sure to be at Noisy, or be coming tonight.' That could apply to you."

"And so?"

"So, the prince said, 'Pay close attention, because he'll probably be disguised as a cavalier' – which is pretty clear, since you're dressed as a cavalier rather than an officer of musketeers. What do you think of that?"

"Alas, my dear Planchet!" sighed d'Artagnan. "It's been some time since princes wanted to have me murdered. But those days are gone! Rest assured, these people aren't after us."

"Sir is certain?"

"Quite certain."

"All right, then – I won't mention it again." Planchet resumed his place in d'Artagnan's wake, with that sublime confidence he'd always had in his master, and which fifteen years of separation had done nothing to diminish.

They rode on for another league before Planchet approached d'Artagnan again. "Sir," he said.

"Well?"

"Look, Sir, over that way," said Planchet. "I think I can see shadows passing by in the twilight. Listen, isn't that the sound of horses' hooves?"

"Not a chance," said d'Artagnan, "the ground is soaked from the rain. But now that you mention it, I *do* seem to see something." And he stopped to look and listen. "If their horses hear ours, they'll neigh."

And just as he said it, the neighing of a horse came to their ears. "Those are our men, riding cross-country," he said. "But it's no business of ours; let's continue."

And they went on their way. Half an hour later, around eight-thirty or nine o'clock, they reached the first houses of Noisy. As was usual in the country, everyone was already in bed, and not a light could be seen in the village. D'Artagnan and Planchet continued on their course. Now to their right and left the sharp silhouettes of roofs stood out against the dark grey sky. Occasionally an awakened dog barked from behind a door, or a startled cat darted from the middle of the street to hide in a woodpile, out of which its frightened eyes glinted like carbuncles. These were the only living creatures that

seemed to inhabit the village. In the middle of the town, overlooking the main square, rose a dark mass between two streets, in front of which ancient lime trees spread their bony boughs. D'Artagnan carefully examined this building that showed a light in only one window. "This," he said to Planchet, "must be the château of the archbishop, current home of *the beautiful* Madam Longueville. But where is the monastery?"

"The monastery is at the far end of the village," Planchet said. "I know it."

"Well," d'Artagnan said, "trot over there, Planchet, while I tighten my horse's girth, and tell me if there are any lighted windows at the Jesuits' place."

Planchet obeyed, heading off into the darkness while d'Artagnan dismounted to adjust his horse's tack. After five minutes, Planchet returned. "Sir, there's only one lighted window on the side that faces the fields."

"Hmm!" said d'Artagnan. "If I were a Frondeur, I'd knock here at the palace if I were looking for a night's lodging. If I were a monk, I'd knock over there to find myself a good dinner. But since we're us, I think we might be stuck between the château and the monastery and have to sleep on the hard ground, dying of thirst and hunger."

"Yes," said Planchet, "like Buridan's ass. But instead, let's pick one or the other."

"Hush!" d'Artagnan said. "The only window with a light in it just went out."

"Do you hear something, Sir?" said Planchet.

In fact, there was a sudden noise like the sound of an approaching hurricane and then two troops of riders, a dozen men apiece came racing up the two streets that bordered the château, surrounding d'Artagnan and Planchet. "*Yeah!*" said d'Artagnan, drawing his sword and stepping behind his horse, as Planchet did the same. "Were you right all the time? Is it really us they're after?"

"Here he is! We got him!" cried the equestrians closing in around d'Artagnan, waving their swords.

"Don't let him escape," a voice called loudly.

"Don't worry, My Lord!"

D'Artagnan thought it was high time for him to join the discussion. "*Whoa*, Gentlemen!" he said in his Gascon accent. "What are you doing? What do you want?"

"You'll find out!" cried the equestrians.

"Wait, stop!" shouted the one addressed as my Lord. "Stop, or it's your heads! That's not his voice."

"*Oh that*, Gentlemen!" said d'Artagnan. "Has madness come to Noisy? Anyone who ventures too close had better watch out – my sword is long and will take you apart."

The leader approached. "What are you doing here?" he said in a haughty voice accustomed to command.

"What about yourself?" said d'Artagnan.

"Mind your manners, or things won't go well. My name is my secret but I still insist on the respect due to my rank."

"I'm sure if I was leading an ambush, I'd want to keep my name a secret, too," said d'Artagnan, "but I'm just travelling with my servant, so I've nothing to hide."

"Enough, enough! Who are you, then?"

"I'll tell you my name so you'll know how to find me, whether Sir or My Lord, gentleman or prince," said our Gascon, who didn't wish to appear to give in to a threat. "Have you heard of Sir d'Artagnan?" "Lieutenant of the King's Musketeers?" said the voice.

"That's the one."

"Of course."

"Well!" the Gascon continued. "Have you heard he has a firm wrist and a sharp blade?"

"Are you Sir d'Artagnan?"

"That's me."

"So, are you here to defend ... him?"

"Him? Who?"

"The one we seek."

"I thought I was in Noisy," d'Artagnan said, "not the Land of Mysteries."

"Answer me!" said the same haughty voice. "Whom do you await beneath these windows? Did you come to Noisy to defend him?"

"I'm not waiting for anyone," said d'Artagnan, losing his patience. "I'm not here to defend anyone but myself – but that, I'm warning you, I'm more than ready to do."

"All right," said the voice. "Be on your way, then."

"Be on *my* way!" said d'Artagnan, who wasn't about to leave. "I don't think so. I'm tired, and so is my horse. Unless you've got supper and a bed for us, we're going nowhere."

"Varlet!"

"Sir!" said d'Artagnan. "Watch your language, if you please. Insult me again, and whether you're a marquis or a duke, a prince or a king, I'll spill your guts. Do you hear me?"

"Here now," said the leader. "That's a Gascon talking, and no doubt about it. He's not who we're after; we've missed it for tonight, so let's go. Master d'Artagnan," he said, raising his voice, "we'll meet again."

"That'll be bad luck for you," scoffed the Gascon, "because it will be daylight and you'll be alone."

"Fine, fine!" said the voice. "Let's go, Gentlemen!"

And the troop, muttering and growling, disappeared into the darkness toward Paris. D'Artagnan and Planchet stayed on the defensive for a moment but as the noise died away, they sheathed their swords. "You see, fool?" said d'Artagnan quietly to Planchet. "It wasn't us they wanted."

"But who, then?" asked Planchet.

*"My faith!* I don't know, and I don't care. I just want to get to that Jesuit monastery. Mount up, and let's go knock on their door. What the devil! They won't eat us."

And d'Artagnan remounted. Planchet did the same but then an unexpected weight fell on his horse's withers. "Whoa, Sir!" Planchet cried. "There's a man on my crupper!"

D'Artagnan turned and saw two forms on Planchet's horse. "The Devil *is* after us!" he cried, drawing his sword and preparing to impale the newcomer. "No, my dear d'Artagnan," said the latter. "It isn't the Devil – it's me, Aramis. To the gallop, Planchet, and when you reach the end of the village, bear left." So Planchet galloped, carrying Aramis behind him, followed by d'Artagnan who began to think he was trapped in a fantastic and ridiculous dream.

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At the end of the village Planchet bore left as Aramis ordered and then stopped beneath the monastery's single lighted window. Aramis jumped down and clapped three times. At once the window opened and a rope ladder rolled down. "My dear d'Artagnan," said Aramis, "if you'd care to climb up, I'd be delighted to receive you."

"*Oh that*," said d'Artagnan. "So, this is how you get home?"

"Well, yes, after nine o'clock," said Aramis. "For the love of God, the monastery rules are quite strict."

"Pardon me, old friend," said d'Artagnan, "but did you swear for the love of God?"

"Did I?" said Aramis, laughing. "It's possible. You can't imagine the bad habits one learns in these cursed monasteries. It's the wicked ways of these churchmen among whom I'm forced to live! Aren't you going to climb up?"

"Go ahead. I'm right behind you."

"All right but in the words of the old cardinal to the late king, 'Only to show you the way, Sire.'"

And Aramis went briskly up the ladder, arriving at the window in a moment. D'Artagnan followed but less quickly. Clearly this means of entrance was not as familiar to him as to his friend. "I do beg your pardon," said Aramis, noting his careful climb. "This is good enough for me but if I'd had the honour of knowing of your visit, I'd have brought out the gardener's ladder."

"Sir," said Planchet, as d'Artagnan neared the top, "that's fine for Sir Aramis, and even for you, and I might manage it as well – but our two horses can't climb a ladder."

"Take them under that shed, *my friend*," said Aramis, pointing Planchet toward a sort of shack that stood on the edge of the fields. "You'll find straw and oats for them there."

"But what about me?"

"Come back under the window, clap three times, and we'll send down some food. Rest easy. *Morbleu*, it's not as if we'd let you die of hunger!"

Then Aramis pulled up the ladder and shut the window. D'Artagnan was looking around the room. Never had he seen a chamber so warlike, and yet so elegant. There were trophy stands in each corner displaying swords of all sorts, and four large paintings representing, armed and armoured for battle, Cardinal Richelieu, Cardinal Lorraine, Cardinal La Valette, and the Archbishop of Bordeaux. Nor did the rest of the furnishings bespeak the abode of an abbot: the hangings were damask, the carpets from Alençon, and the bed especially seemed like that of a fine lady, with lace trim and counterpane. It was hardly the home of a man who'd sworn to gain heaven by abstinence and mortification. "You're looking over my den," said Aramis. "Ah, *my dear*, my apologies but what would you have? They gave me a cell fit for a monk. What is it you're looking for?"

"I'm looking for whoever unrolled the ladder. I don't see anybody but ladders don't unroll themselves."

"No, it was Bazin."

"Ah ha!" said d'Artagnan.

"But Sir Bazin," continued Aramis, "is well trained. When he saw I wasn't returning alone, he discreetly retired. Have a seat, *my dear*, and let's talk."

Aramis pushed a chair toward d'Artagnan, who dropped gratefully into it. "You'll dine with me, I hope?" asked Aramis.

"Yes, of course," said d'Artagnan, "and with pleasure. I must admit, the ride has given me the devil of an appetite."

"Alas, my poor friend," said Aramis, "we can offer only meagre fare, as we didn't expect you."

"Are you threatening me, as you did at Crèvecœur, with an omelette and *tetragons*, as I think you called the spinach?"

"Oh, no," said Aramis, "by the grace of God and Bazin, I hope we can find something better than that in the pantry of our worthy Jesuit fathers. Bazin, *my friend!* Come here."

The door opened and Bazin appeared but when he saw d'Artagnan he gave a gasp that sounded much like a cry of despair. "My dear Bazin," said d'Artagnan, "I was delighted to see you tell a lie with such aplomb, especially in church."

"Sir," Bazin said, "I've learned from our worthy Jesuit fathers that it's permissible to state a falsehood when one's intentions are good."

"Fine, fine, Bazin but d'Artagnan is dying of hunger," Aramis said. "Give us the best dinner you can find, and above all, the best honey."

Bazin bowed obediently, gave a great sigh, and left. D'Artagnan turned his eyes from the bedchamber to its owner, from the fine furnishings to their owner's fine apparel, and said, "Now that we're alone, my dear Aramis, tell me: where the devil did you drop from when you landed behind Planchet?"

"Eh, *God*," said Aramis, "from heaven, of course!"

"From heaven?" said d'Artagnan, shaking his head. "You don't look like someone who came from there any more than you look like someone who's on his way there."

"*My dear*," said Aramis, with an air of self-satisfaction d'Artagnan had never seen when he was a musketeer, "if I didn't come from Heaven, I came at least from Paradise that is close enough."

"At last the great debate is settled," said d'Artagnan. "Up till now the sages had never been able to agree on the location of Paradise. Some said it was on Mount Ararat; others said somewhere between the Tigris and the Euphrates; but it seems it wasn't nearly so remote. Paradise is in Noisy-le-Sec, on the site of the château of the Archbishop of Paris, and one enters not by the door but by the window. From it one descends not the marble steps of a peristyle but the boughs of a lime tree and the angel who guards it with a flaming sword isn't called Gabriel but the far more earthly Prince Marcillac."

Aramis laughed. "You were always such a jolly companion, *my dear*," he said, "and your witty Gascon humour hasn't left you. Yes, there's something in what you say – so long as you don't think that means Madam de Longueville and I are lovers."

"Plague take me if I do!" said d'Artagnan. "After having been in love so long with Madam de Chevreuse, you'd hardly take up with her mortal enemy."

"Yes, quite so," said Aramis, with a casual air. "Alas, my poor duchess, I loved her well. To be fair, she did well by us but what would you have? She was exiled from France. He was a hard man to dice against, that damned cardinal!" He glared at the portrait of the former minister. "He'd ordered her confined to the Château de Loches – though I swear he'd rather have had her head, as he did with Chalais, Montmorency, and Cinq-Mars. She escaped that place, fled disguised as a man, along with her maid, that poor Kitty. I even heard a story that, in some village or other, she asked a curate for



hospitality, and he, taking her for a cavalier, offered to share the only bed he had with her. She had an amazing way of wearing men's garb and carrying it off, that dear Marie – I know only one other woman who wears it so well. They even wrote a verse about it: *Laboissière, please do tell ... do you know it?*"

"I don't. Sing it, old friend." Aramis began again, in his most cavalier tone:

*Laboissière, please do tell  
Don't I seem like a man?  
My faith, you ride well  
Better even than we can  
Among the shining halberds  
Head held up, she rides out  
Past a regiment of guards  
Just like a cadet, no doubt.*

"Bravo!" said d'Artagnan. "You always did sing beautifully, my dear Aramis. I see that preaching the mass hasn't spoiled your voice."

"*My dear,*" said Aramis, "when I was a musketeer, I stood guard as little as possible – and now that I'm an abbot, I say as few masses as I can. But back to my poor duchess."

"Which one? The Duchess de Chevreuse, or the Duchess de Longueville?"

"*My dear,* I already told you there's nothing between me and the Duchess de Longueville – a little flirtation, perhaps but no more. No, I was speaking of the Duchess de Chevreuse. Have you seen her since her return from Brussels, after the death of the old king?"

"Indeed I did, and she was still very beautiful."

"Yes," said Aramis. "I saw her then as well. I gave her excellent advice, to which she paid absolutely no attention. I did my best to persuade her that Mazarin was now the queen's lover but she refused to believe it, saying she knew Anne of Austria, and the queen was too proud to fall for such a fop. She joined the Duke Beaufort's cabal, and then the fop arrested Beaufort and exiled Madam de Chevreuse all over again."

"But you know she's since gotten permission to return," said d'Artagnan.

"Yes, she's back, and is bound to do something else foolish."

"But maybe this time she'll follow your advice."

"Oh, this time I haven't seen her," said Aramis. "She is much changed."

"Not like you, Aramis, for you never change. You still have your handsome black hair, that elegant figure, and those beautiful hands, like a lady's, really – hands well suited to a prelate."

"Yes," said Aramis, "I do what I can to take care of myself. But it's hard, *my dear*, as I'm getting old – I'm nearly thirty-seven."

"Listen, '*my dear,*'" said d'Artagnan with a smile, "since we're back together, let's agree on one thing: what age we shall be for the future."

"What do you mean?" said Aramis.

"I mean that I used to be younger than you by two or three years," d'Artagnan replied, "but unless I miscalculate, I'm now forty years old."

"Really!" said Aramis. "Then I must be the one who's miscalculated, *my dear*, because you've always been an admirable mathematician. So, by your reckoning, I must be ... forty-three! Double devils! Don't tell them at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, it would ruin me."

"Don't worry," said d'Artagnan, "I never go there."

"But damn me," cried Aramis, "where is that animal Bazin? Hey, Bazin, you clown! We're dying of hunger and thirst here."

Bazin entered at just that moment, both hands raised to heaven, each holding a bottle. "Finally!" said Aramis. "What took you so long?"

"I'm here, Sir," said Bazin. "It took me a while to climb all those stairs..."

"This is what comes of being a beadle," Aramis interrupted, "and wasting valuable time reading your breviary. I warn you that if you spend so much time polishing the relics in the chapel that you forget to polish my sword, I'll make a bonfire of all your breviaries and pictures of saints and roast you over it."

Bazin, shocked, made the sign of the cross with the bottle he held in his right hand. As for d'Artagnan, he was so surprised by the manner and tone of the Abbot d'Herblay compared to that of Aramis the Musketeer, he just stared. Bazin quickly covered the table with a damask tablecloth, and then brought out such an array of sweetmeats, tasty morsels, and perfumed dainties that d'Artagnan was astonished. "So, this is what you have when you're not expecting anyone?"

"Oh," said Aramis, "we can always scare up a snack. But I'd heard you were looking for me."

"From who?"

"From Master Bazin, of course, who took you for the Devil, *my dear*, and rushed to warn me of the peril to my soul if I risked the society of an officer of musketeers."

"Oh, Sir!" moaned Bazin, wringing his hands.

"Enough hypocrisy! You know I don't like it. You'd be better off opening the window and lowering down a loaf, a chicken, and a bottle to your friend Planchet, who's been clapping his hands down below for nearly an hour."

Planchet, having fed and watered the horses, was in fact waiting under the window, where he'd repeated the specified signal two or three times. Bazin obeyed, tying the three designated items to a rope and lowering them to Planchet, who, quite satisfied, immediately retired to the shed. "And now, let us eat," said Aramis.

The two friends sat down at the table, and Aramis began to slice up chicken, partridges, and ham with skill and dash. "Plague," said d'Artagnan, "you eat well here!"

"Yes, tolerably well. I have an exemption from Rome for fast-days that the coadjutor got me on account of my health, and I have Lafollone's former chef as cook. Remember Lafollone? He was that crony of the old cardinal who was a famous gourmand, and always prayed after dinner, 'My God, grant me the grace to properly digest that which I've eaten so well.'"

"That didn't keep him from dying of indigestion," d'Artagnan laughed.

"What would you have?" Aramis shrugged. "No one can escape his destiny!"

D'Artagnan said, "I hope you won't mind the indelicate question I'm about to ask."

"Ask away – you know that between us, nothing is too delicate."

"So, are you rich, now?"

"Oh, *my God*, no! I make about twelve thousand livres a year, plus a small annuity of a thousand crowns granted me by the Prince de Condé."

"And how do you earn these twelve thousand livres?" said d'Artagnan. "From your poetry?"

"No, I gave up poetry, except for the occasional epigram, love sonnet, or drinking song. No, *my dear*, I write sermons."

"You make money from sermons?"

"Ah but they're excellent sermons, you see! Or so they tell me."

"And do you preach them?"

"No, I sell them."

"To whom?"

"To those of my fellow churchmen who wish to be known as great orators!"

"Really? And you haven't been tempted to find such glory for yourself?"

"I tried it, *my dear* but it's just not my forte. If I'm in the pulpit, and a pretty woman happens to look at me, I look back; and if she smiles, I smile too. And there goes the sermon! Instead of warning about the torments of hell, I speak of the joys of paradise. That exact thing happened to me one day in the Church of Saint-Louis in the Marais. A cavalier laughed and mocked me, and I interrupted my sermon to call him a fool. Some of the congregation went outside to gather rocks to stone me but I spoke so persuasively to the rest that when the others returned, they ended up stoning the cavalier instead of me. Of course, he showed up at my house the next day with a challenge, thinking I was an abbot like other abbots."

"And what came of this challenge?" said d'Artagnan, holding his sides from laughing.

"What came of it was a rendezvous the following night in the Place Royale. For the love of God! I think you know something about that."

"Would that by any chance be the 'insolent dog' I helped you as second against?" d'Artagnan asked.

"Exactly. You saw how that turned out."

"Was he killed?"

"I don't know. But in any case, I gave him absolution *in articulo mortis*. It is sufficient to kill the body with slaying the soul."

Bazin made a gesture of despair that indicated that while he might approve the theory, he deplored the tone of its expression. "Bazin, *my friend*, you overlook the fact that I can see you in the mirror, and that I forbade all such signs of approval or disapproval. So, you will do us the favour of serving us some Spanish honey, and then retire. Besides, my friend d'Artagnan has a secret he wishes to share with me. Isn't that so, d'Artagnan?" D'Artagnan nodded, and Bazin withdrew, after placing some Spanish honey on the table. The two friends, left alone, remained silent in each other's presence. Each of them, when he thought he wasn't observed, risked a glance at the other. Aramis pretended to savour his honey, while d'Artagnan considered how to begin. It was Aramis who was first to break the silence.

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None of the 2

"What are you thinking about, d'Artagnan," asked Aramis, "and why does that thought make you smile?"

"I was thinking that when you were a musketeer you were always acting the abbot, and now that you're an abbot, you behave like a musketeer."

"It's true," said Aramis, laughing. "Man is a strange animal, compounded of contrasts – as you know, *my dear* d'Artagnan. Since becoming an abbot, I dream of nothing but battles."

"That's clear from your furnishings and decor. I've never seen so many different styles of rapiers. Do you still fence well?"

"As well as I used to – maybe even better. I do nothing else all day."

"And with whom do you spar?"

"Oh, we have an excellent master of arms."

"What, here?"

"Yes, here, in this very monastery, *my dear*. A Jesuit monastery has everything."

"Then you would have killed Sir de Marcillac if he'd come after you alone, instead of with a troop of twenty?"

"Certainly," said Aramis, "and even with his troop of twenty, if I could have drawn steel before I was recognised."

"God help me," muttered d'Artagnan. "I think he's become more of a Gascon than I am." Then, aloud: "Well, then, Aramis, you were wondering why I was looking for you?"

"No, I didn't ask," said Aramis slyly, "but I expect you'll tell me anyway."

"Well, I've come to offer you a way to slay Sir de Marcillac, if that would please you, prince though he is."

"Well, well, well," said Aramis. "That's an idea, that is."

"And I invite you to take advantage of it. Let's see! With your abbacy worth a thousand crowns, and the twelve thousand livres you make selling sermons – are you rich? Be honest."

"Rich? I'm as poor as Job. Turn this place upside down if you like but you won't find more than a hundred pistoles in it."

"Plague, a hundred pistoles?" d'Artagnan said to himself. "And he calls that being poor as Job? If I had that, I'd feel rich as Croesus." Then, aloud: "Are you ambitious?"

"As ambitious as Caesar."

"Well, then! I offer you the chance to be rich, powerful, and able to do whatever you like."

The shadow of a cloud passed over Aramis's brow as quick as that over the corn in August – but quick as it was, d'Artagnan saw it. "Go on," said Aramis.

“After one more question. Are you involved in politics?”

A light flashed in Aramis’s eyes, quick as the shadow that had passed over his brow – but d’Artagnan saw that too. “No,” said Aramis.

“Then you should be open to every side, since you have no master but God,” said the Gascon, laughing.

“Possibly.”

“Aramis, do you sometimes dream of those days of our youth, laughing, drinking, and fighting?”

“Yes, of course, and often missed them. It was a happy time, *delectable tempus!*”

“Well, my friend, those happy times can come again. I’ve been given a mission to find my old companions, and I wanted to start with you, who was the heart and soul of our little band.”

Aramis’s bow was almost too courteous. “Me, go back into politics?” he sighed, and leaned loosely back in his chair. “But dear d’Artagnan, you see how comfortable and easy my life is now. In the past, we both suffered from the ingratitude of the great!”

“True enough,” said d’Artagnan, “but perhaps the great repent of their ingratitude.”

“If so,” said Aramis, “that’d be a change indeed. However, for every sin, a penance. But you’re right about one thing: if one’s of a mind to meddle in affairs of state, now would be the time to do it.”

“And how would you know – you, who have nothing to do with politics?”

“*My God!* How could I not? I live in a world devoted to it. When we talk of poetry or love, who is there but Sir Sarasin, the poetical friend of Sir de Conti? Or Sir Voiture who’s allied with the coadjutor? Or Sir de Bois-Robert, who, since he’s no longer with Cardinal Richelieu, is with no one or everyone? You see, there’s no escaping politics.”

“No doubt about that,” said d’Artagnan.

“And don’t take what I say as the chatter of some little abbot who just repeats what he’s heard,” said Aramis. “I’m well aware that Cardinal Mazarin is worried about recent turns of events. It seems his decrees aren’t regarded with the same respect as those of our old nemesis, the late cardinal, whose portrait you see here. Because despite all we said and did to thwart him, you must agree, *my dear*, that he was a great man.”

“No argument from me on that, friend Aramis. It was he who made me an officer.”

“My instincts at first were entirely in favour of Cardinal Mazarin. Such a minister is rarely popular but his brilliance was such that he seemed likely to triumph over his enemies, if only by fear that, in my opinion, is often better than love.”

D’Artagnan nodded to indicate his approval of this rather dubious maxim. “That,” Aramis continued, “was my first instinct – but since I know so little about such matters, I really couldn’t trust my own opinion, so I humbly inquired further to ascertain the true situation. And well, *my dear friend*...”

“Well, what?” d’Artagnan asked.

“Well!” said Aramis. “Though it mortifies my pride, I had to admit I’d been wrong.”

“Really?”

“Yes! I inquired further, as I said, and was told by people of all ranks, people who ought to know, that Mazarin was far from the brilliant man I’d taken him for.”

“Bah!” said d’Artagnan.

“No. He is a man from nowhere, of no family, a mere servant of Cardinal Bentivoglio who got ahead by scheming. He’s an upstart, a parvenu, who for France will never be more than a mere figurehead. Oh, he’ll make himself a pile of gold, empty the king’s treasury, pay to himself all the salaries Cardinal Richelieu shared out to everyone else – but he’ll never put the law into the hands of the strongest, the noblest, or the most honourable. He appears, in manners and heart, to be less a gentleman than a sort of buffoon, a Pulcinello or Pantaloon. But you’re the one who knows him, not me.”

“Well,” said d’Artagnan, “I admit there’s some truth to what you say.”

“Why, you fill me with pride, *my dear*. To think that I, someone with just a touch of insight, could discern things as clearly as you, who are a man of the Court.”

“But what you say applies to him personally, and not to his faction and its resources.”

“That’s true. He has the queen on his side.”

“And that’s something, I should think.”

“But it’s not like having ... the king.”

“Who’s still a child!”

“A child who will be an adult in four years.”

“But this is the present.”

“Yes, it’s not yet the future. But even in the present, Mazarin’s neither the Parliament nor the people on his side – that is, the money – nor does he have the nobility and the princes – that’s, the swords.”

D’Artagnan scratched at his ear. He had to admit to himself that Aramis’s summary was both thorough and undeniable. “You see, my poor friend, that I still have my wits about me, as I used to. But maybe it’s wrong for me to be so open and candid about the matter, since you seem to lean toward Mazarin.”

“What, me?” cried d’Artagnan. “Not at all!”

“You were speaking of a mission.”

“Did I say a mission? Sometimes I pick the wrong word. No, I think as you do: all is confusion. Well, then – let’s throw the feather into the wind, follow where the wind takes it, and resume our life of adventures. We were four brave cavaliers, four hearts bound as one. Let’s rejoice! It’s not our hearts that have divided us, just time and fortune. This time, time is with us – and it’s time to win something greater than a diamond.”

“You’re right, d’Artagnan – as always,” said Aramis, “and the proof is that I’ve had the same idea. But you know me, ever anxious, imagining trouble. I was thinking that, the way things are today, we’d need allies. And then one came to me, speaking about our prowess in former days, and very persuasively too. I’ll tell you frankly: I’m talking about the coadjutor.”

“Sir de Gondy, the cardinal’s enemy!” cried d’Artagnan.

“No – the king’s friend,” said Aramis. “The king’s friend, do you hear? And I desire to serve the king – which is, after all, the duty of a gentleman.”

“But ... but the king is with Mazarin!”

“By fate but not by his will; not by the urgings of his heart. The poor child is caught in the snare of his own enemies.”

“*Oh that!* But, my dear Aramis, what you propose leads to nothing less than civil war.”

“*War* indeed ... for the king.”

“But the king will be at the head of Mazarin’s army.”

“But his heart will be with the army commanded by Sir de Beaufort.”

“Sir de Beaufort? He’s locked up in Vincennes.”

“Did I say Sir de Beaufort?” said Aramis. “It could be anyone. Say Sir de Beaufort; say Sir Prince de Condé.”

“But Sir Prince is committed to the army of the cardinal.”

“Ah, er, yes!” said Aramis. “Of course! Though there have been certain ... discussions. However, if not Sir Prince, say Sir de Gondy...”

“But Sir de Gondy wants to be a cardinal – he’s asked for his red hat.”

“And cardinals can’t be generals?” said Aramis. “Look around you. Here are four cardinals who commanded armies just as well as Gentlemen de Guébriant and de Gassion.”

“Oh but really, a humpbacked general?”

“When he’s clad in armour, no one will notice his hump. Didn’t Alexander have a limp, and wasn’t Hannibal half blind?”

“And you see advantages to allying with this party?” asked d’Artagnan.

“I see the protection of powerful princes.”

“Who are proscribed by the government.”

“Balanced out by the Parliament and the rioters.”

“But for this to work out ... the king would have to be separated from his mother.”

“Hmm. That’d happen.”

“Not likely!” said d’Artagnan, returning to his first conviction. “Think, Aramis, I appeal to you – you know Anne of Austria as well as I. Would she ever forget that her son is her safety and her anchor, that her life and fortunes are entirely bound up with his? If she broke with Mazarin she would have to follow her son and go over to the side of the princes – but you know there are ... reasons ... why she’ll never abandon Mazarin.”

“You’re probably right,” Aramis sighed, “but I just can’t join him.”

“With him, all right,” said d’Artagnan, “but what about with me?”

“With nobody, I’m afraid. I’m a priest – what do I have to do with politics? I just read my breviary. I keep to my small circle of chatty abbots and witty women, and the more noise there is in public affairs, the less notice will be taken of my private life. I’m doing wonderfully well on my own, *dear friend*, and the less I meddle, the better off I’ll be.”

“Well, all right, then,” said d’Artagnan. “I can’t argue with your philosophy. I don’t know what devil stung me and made me ambitious. After all, my position keeps me fed, and with the retirement of poor old Sir de Tréville, I may yet be made captain that comes with a very pretty marshal’s baton for a cadet from Gascony. If I’m in need of adventures, I can always accept Porthos’s invitation and go hunt on his lands. Where are Porthos’s lands, by the way?”

“You don’t know? Well, I do. He has ten leagues of woods, hills, and dales – he’s the Lord of Peaks and Plains and contends for his feudal rights with the Bishop of Noyon.”

“Well,” d’Artagnan said to himself, “at last we’ve got something I needed to know: Porthos is in Picardy.” Then aloud: “And has he resumed his old name of du Vallon?”

“Yes, and he’s added to it *de Bracieux* that used to be a barony, by my faith!”

“So Porthos is finally a baron!”

“I don’t doubt it. His ‘Baroness Porthos’ is particularly impressive!”

And the two friends laughed. “So,” continued d’Artagnan, “you’ll have nothing to do with Mazarin?”

“Nor you with the princes?”

“I’m afraid not. All right then, we’ll keep to ourselves and remain friends, neither Cardinalists nor Frondeurs.”

“Yes,” said Aramis. “Just musketeers.”

“Even with the priest’s collar?” said d’Artagnan.

“Especially with the priest’s collar,” said Aramis. “That’s what makes it so charming!”

“Very well, then – goodbye,” said d’Artagnan.

“I won’t keep you, *my dear*,” said Aramis, “because I know where you’d have to sleep, and I can’t see you spending the night in the shed with Planchet.”

“Eh, I’m barely three leagues from Paris, the horses are rested, and in just over an hour I’ll be home.” And d’Artagnan poured out two last glasses of honey. “To our old days!” he said.

“Yes,” said Aramis. “Sadly, those days are behind us. *Tempus fugit irreparable*...”

“Bah!” said d’Artagnan. “They may yet return. If you want me, I’m in the Rue Tiquetonne, Hôtel de La Chevrete.”

“And I’m in the Monastery of the Jesuits: by the door from six in the morning until eight at night, and by the window from eight at night until six in the morning.”

“Goodbye, my friend.”

“Oh, I’m not leaving you yet! Let me see you out.”

And he took up his sword and cloak. “He wants to make sure I’m out of the way,” said d’Artagnan to himself.

Aramis whistled for Bazin but Bazin was sleeping in the antechamber over the remains of his supper, and Aramis had to shake him by the ear to wake him. Bazin stretched out his arms, rubbed his eyes, and curled back up again. “Come, come, Master Sleeper,” said Aramis, “rouse yourself.”

"But Sir," said Bazin, yawning enough to break his jaw, "the ladder is still at the window."

"Get the gardener's ladder. Didn't you see the trouble d'Artagnan had getting up? He'll need help getting down."

D'Artagnan was about to assure Aramis that he could get down on his own, when he had an idea that silenced him. Bazin sighed heavily and went to fetch the ladder. A few moments later, a good, solid wooden ladder was placed against the windowsill. "That's more like it," said d'Artagnan. "Why, even a woman could go up and down a ladder like that."

That brought a sharp look from Aramis, who seemed to wonder what he meant but d'Artagnan gave him his most naïve smile. And then he put his foot on the top rung of the ladder and climbed down. A moment later he was on the ground. Bazin was still at the window. "One moment," said Aramis. "I'll join you." Both down, the two walked toward the shed. At their approach Planchet came out, holding the horses by their bridles. "Excellent!" said Aramis. "Here's a servant who's active and alert – not like that lazy Bazin, who's good for nothing since he became a beadle. Follow us, Planchet, until we reach the outskirts of the village."

And the two friends rode through the village, talking of this and that, until, at the last house: "On your way then, *dear friend*," said Aramis. "Follow your fate: Dame Fortune smiles on you, and don't let her escape, for she's a lady, and must be treated accordingly. As for me, I remain here, in humility and leisure. Goodbye!"

"So, you're sure," said d'Artagnan, "that what I had to offer you is of no interest?"

"On the contrary, it would appeal to me strongly if I were anybody but who I am," said Aramis. "I'm a bundle of contradictions: what I hate one day, I love another, and vice versa. Unlike you, I can't settle on anything like a fixed plan."

"You are such a liar," d'Artagnan said to himself. "Of all of us, you're the one who knows best how to set a goal and stalk it by secret steps."

"Farewell, *my dear*," Aramis continued. "Thank you for your good intentions toward me, and most of all for those happy memories that your visit has reawakened."

They embraced. Planchet was already mounted; d'Artagnan climbed into his own saddle, then shook Aramis's hand one last time. The riders spurred their horses and rode off toward Paris. Aramis remained standing in the middle of the street until he'd lost sight of them at the curve of the road. But about two hundred paces beyond it, d'Artagnan stopped short, jumped down, and threw his bridle to Planchet. He took his pistols from their saddle holsters and thrust them through his belt. "What's wrong, Sir?" said Planchet, taken aback.

"What's wrong," said d'Artagnan, "is that no matter how sly he is, I won't be his dupe. Just don't move – wait right here by the side of the road until I come back."

With these words, d'Artagnan jumped the ditch by the side of the road and set off across the fields to circle around the village. He had noticed that the acreage between the house occupied by Madam de Longueville and the Jesuit monastery was mainly empty space enclosed by a thick hedge. An hour before he might have had a hard time finding this hedge but since then the moon had risen, and though it was sometimes obscured by clouds, it still shone brightly enough for him to find his way. D'Artagnan found the hedge and hunkered down behind it. As he'd passed the large château described earlier, he'd noticed that the same single window was once again lit. He smiled, convinced that Aramis had not yet returned home, and that when he did, it would not be alone. Indeed, after a moment he heard footsteps approaching, and voices speaking low. At the corner of the hedgerow, the footsteps stopped. D'Artagnan dropped to one knee and did his best to merge with the hedge. At that moment two figures came into view – two men, to d'Artagnan's astonishment. But his astonishment faded when one spoke in a soft and harmonious voice; for one of the two men was a woman garbed as a cavalier. "Don't worry, dear René," said the soft voice. "That'll not happen again. While waiting, I discovered a passage from the cellar that goes out under the street. You just have to raise a paving stone to find your way in."

"Oh!" said a second voice that d'Artagnan recognised as that of Aramis. "I swear to you, Princess, that if our reputations didn't depend on these subterfuges, I'd rather risk my life..."

"Yes, yes, I know you're as brave and adventurous as any man in the world – but you don't belong just to me, you belong to our whole faction. So be careful."

"I shall always obey, Madam," said Aramis, "when commanded by a voice as sweet as yours."

He kissed her hand tenderly. "*Ah!*" cried the sweet-voiced cavalier.

"What?" asked Aramis.

"Can't you see? The wind has blown off my hat!"

Aramis leapt after the fugitive felt. D'Artagnan took advantage of the confusion to find himself a less dense spot in the hedge from whence he could get a better look at the impostor cavalier. Just at that moment the moon, as inquisitive, perhaps, as our officer, came out from behind a cloud, and in the sudden clarity d'Artagnan recognised the blue eyes, golden hair, and noble features of the Duchess de Longueville. As the two went on their way toward the Jesuit monastery, d'Artagnan returned, laughing, to where he'd left Planchet. "Good!" said d'Artagnan, brushing off his knees. "Now, Aramis, I see you clearly: you're a Frondeur, and you're the lover of Madam de Longueville."

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### Sir Porthos du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds

Thanks to what he'd learned from Aramis, d'Artagnan, who already knew that Porthos's family name was *du Vallon*, of an uncertain domain, had learned that he was also called *de Bracieux*, and that from Bracieux he was suing the neighbouring Bishop of Noyon. So, it was near Noyon that he needed to seek this estate, in other words, somewhere between the Île-de-France and Picardy. His route was quickly decided upon: he would go to Dammartin, where the road forks, one branch toward Soissons, and the other to Compiègne. At the fork he would ask about Bracieux, and the answer would determine whether he went left or right. Planchet, still worried about repercussions from his escapade in Paris, declared he would follow d'Artagnan to the end of the world, whether he went right or left. D'Artagnan thought maybe Planchet should notify his wife of his intentions, or at least tell her he still lived but Planchet wisely replied that his wife wouldn't die of anxiety from not knowing his whereabouts, while he, wary of her sharp tongue, might die of anxiety if she did know them. This made enough sense to d'Artagnan that he insisted no further, so at about eight the next evening, as the fog began to thicken in the streets, he left the Hôtel de La Chevette and, followed by Planchet, went out of the capital by Port Saint-Denis. By midnight the two travellers were in Dammartin. It was too late to make inquiries: the host of the Cygne de la Croix inn had already gone to bed. D'Artagnan put off his questions till the following day. The next morning, he sent for the host but he was one of those sly Normans who never answer yes or no, unwilling to commit themselves by giving a straight answer. Eventually d'Artagnan divined from the host's equivocations that the road to the right was the one to follow, and he resumed his journey based on this doubtful information. By nine in the morning he'd reached Nanteuil, where he stopped for lunch. This time the host was a frank and honest Picard who, recognising Planchet as a compatriot, made no fuss about providing the information desired. The domain of Bracieux was just a few leagues from Villers-Cotterêts. D'Artagnan knew that town from three or four visits with the Court, because at that time Villers-Cotterêts was a royal château. So, he made his way there and went to the Golden Dolphin, the inn where he usually stayed. There he learned what he wanted to know. The Bracieux estate was indeed about four leagues from the town but he wouldn't find Porthos there. Porthos had been in a legal brawl with the Bishop of Noyon about the domain of Pierrefonds that bordered his, and Porthos, tiring of a lawsuit that he didn't understand anyway, had settled it by simply buying the estate, thereby adding Pierrefonds to his list of noble titles. He now answered to the resounding name of du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds and had taken up residence in his newest home. Porthos was apparently collecting titles and wouldn't stop until he was Marquis de Carabas. D'Artagnan had to wait to continue until the following day, as the horses had just ridden ten leagues and were tired. He could have rented others, perhaps but there was a great forest to pass through, and Planchet, it will be remembered, didn't like riding through woods at night. Another thing Planchet didn't like was starting out in the morning with an empty stomach, so upon waking, d'Artagnan found his breakfast already prepared. He couldn't exactly complain about this delay, so he sat down to table, and Planchet, resuming his former humble position, felt no more shame eating d'Artagnan's scraps than Madam de Motteville and Madam de Fargis did eating the leftovers of Anne of Austria. So d'Artagnan didn't take the road until after eight o'clock. There was no mistaking it: he had only to follow the road from Villers-Cotterêt toward Compiègne, and once through the woods, take the first right. It was a beautiful spring morning, the birds singing in the tall trees, and broad sunbeams angling through the clearings like curtains of golden gauze. Elsewhere, the light scarcely penetrated the thick canopy of leaves, and the trunks of the old oaks grew so close together that the leaping squirrels dwelled in eternal shade. Dawn had released from the foliage the natural perfume of herbs, flowers, and leaves that delighted the heart. D'Artagnan, sick of the stench of Paris, thought to himself that when one bore three names all stitched together, and owned such woods, it must be like living in Paradise. He shook his head and said, "If I were Porthos, and d'Artagnan came to me with a proposal such as the one I bear, I know what I'd tell d'Artagnan."

As for Planchet, he wasn't thinking; he was digesting. As they emerged from the woods d'Artagnan saw the side road he'd been told of, and down the road the towers of an immense feudal castle. "Hmm," he murmured. "I think I recall that this castle belonged to an ancient branch of the Orléans family. Can Porthos have purchased it from the Duke Longueville?"

"*My faith*, Sir," said Planchet, "here's a domain indeed. If all this belongs to Sir Porthos, my compliments to him."

"Plague take it," said d'Artagnan, "don't call him Porthos, or even du Vallon; address him as de Bracieux or de Pierrefonds, or you'll spoil my mission." As they approached the castle that had first caught his eye, d'Artagnan realised that it couldn't be his friend's estate: the towers, though as solid as if built yesterday, were abandoned and emptied, as open to the sky as if some giant had split them with an axe. Farther along, at the end of the road, d'Artagnan found himself gazing down into a beautiful valley, at the bottom of which slept a lovely lake. Houses were scattered along its shores, humble dwellings roofed with tile or thatch, all deferring as to a sovereign lord to an omate château, built early in the reign of Henry IV and surmounted by stately weathervanes. This time, d'Artagnan had no doubt but that he was gazing upon the home of Porthos. The road led straight to this handsome château that was to the feudal castle what a fop of the Duke d'Enghien's circle was to an armoured knight of the reign of Charles VII. D'Artagnan put his horse into a trot and hastened down the road, followed by Planchet grimly matching his master's gait. After a few minutes' ride, d'Artagnan found himself at the end of a carriageway lined with poplars that led to an iron gate with gilded points and crossbars. Halfway down this avenue was a sort of lord dressed in green, his clothes as gilded as the gate, and mounted on a sturdy hack. He was attended by a pair of liveried footmen and was receiving the respectful homage of a dozen or so peasants. "Ah ha!" said d'Artagnan to himself. "Can that be the Lord du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds? If so, *my God*, he's shrunken since he gave up the name of Porthos!"

"That can't be him," said Planchet who'd asked himself the same question. "Sir Porthos was well over six feet tall, and that man's no more than five and a half."

"Maybe," said d'Artagnan, "but look at the way they to bow to him."

And with these words, d'Artagnan spurred his horse toward the hack and its respected rider. As d'Artagnan approached, he began to realise who it was. "God, Sir!" said Planchet, who was coming to the same conclusion. "Is that who I think it is?"

At this exclamation, the mounted man turned with slow dignity and a lofty air, and the two travellers could see, displayed in all their splendour, the round eyes, ruddy complexion, and smug smile of Mousqueton. Indeed, it was Mousqueton – Mousqueton, grown gloriously portly – Mousqueton who, recognising d'Artagnan, unlike that hypocrite Bazin, slipped off his steed and humbly approached the officer, hat in hand, so that the homage of the assembled crowd was transferred to this new sun that eclipsed the old. "Sir d'Artagnan, Sir d'Artagnan," repeated Mousqueton, his enormous cheeks quivering with joy, "Sir d'Artagnan! Oh, what joy this will be to my Lord and master du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds!"

"My good Mousqueton! Is your master here then?"

"You are within his domains."

"In which you are so splendid, so blooming, so enlarged!" continued d'Artagnan, listing the changes good fortune had wrought upon he who once had been always so hungry.

"Yes, Sir," said Mousqueton, "I'm doing pretty well, thank God!"

"But have you nothing to say to your friend Planchet?"

"My friend Planchet! Oh, Planchet, are you here, too?" cried Mousqueton, with open arms and tears in his eyes.

"In person," replied Planchet. "But I was wondering if you'd become too proud to notice me."

"Too proud to notice an old friend! Never, Planchet. If you wondered that, you don't know your Mousqueton."

"Then well met!" said Planchet, jumping down from his horse and throwing his arms around Mousqueton. "You're not like that wretch Bazin, who scarcely seemed to know me, and left me cooling my heels for two hours in a shed."

And Planchet and Mousqueton embraced with such emotion, the onlookers assumed Planchet must be some lord in disguise, so well was he received by their hero Mousqueton. "And now, Sir," said Mousqueton, when he'd pried himself away from Planchet, who'd tried to embrace him tightly enough to touch hands behind his back but failed, "now let me take my leave of you, for I don't want my master to hear of your arrival from anyone but me. He would never forgive me for not warning him you were coming."

"So, your master, my old friend, hasn't forgotten me?" said d'Artagnan, careful not to call him by either his former name of Porthos or his cascade of new names.

"Forget! Him?" cried Mousqueton. "Hardly a day passes that we don't expect to hear that you've been made a marshal or promoted to replace Sir Gassion or Sir Bassompierre." D'Artagnan allowed his lips to curve into one of those rare melancholy smiles that still rose from the depths of his heart despite the disappointment of years. "And you, hayseeds," said Mousqueton to the locals, "stay near Sir Count d'Artagnan and escort him in honour, while I prepare my Lord for his arrival."

Planchet, still nimble, leapt back on his horse, while Mousqueton, with the aid of two fawning peasants, remounted his own, then cantered off up the tree-lined avenue at a rate that said more about the strength of his mount's back than of its legs. "Now that's more like it," said d'Artagnan. "No mystery, no cloaked figures, no politics here: just honest laughter and cries of joy. Everyone seems well-fed and happy, and even nature itself seems to celebrate, as if the trees, instead of growing leaves and flowers, had sprouted red and green ribbons."

"As for me," said Planchet, "I fancy I smell a delicious roast, and imagine the cooking staff lining up to bow as we pass. Ah, Sir – what a chef Sir Pierrefonds must have, considering how he loved to eat when he was just Sir Porthos!"

"Stop that," said d'Artagnan, "you're frightening me. If the reality is as rich as the appearance, I'm done for. A man in Paradise will scarcely leave it, and I'll fail with him as I failed with Aramis."

D'Artagnan finds Porthos & learns that Money cannot buy Happiness

D'Artagnan rode through the gate and found himself in front of the château. When he saw, on the porch, the silhouette of a giant, he immediately dismounted and hurried forward. Say what you will about d'Artagnan, his heart beat with joy at the sight of this tall and martial figure, the profile of a brave and good friend. He ran to Porthos and rushed into his arms. All the servants, ranged in a circle at a respectful distance, looked on with humble curiosity. Mousqueton, in the front rank, dabbed at his eyes – the poor man hadn't stopped weeping for joy since he'd first recognised d'Artagnan and Planchet. Porthos took his friend by the arm. "Ah, what joy to see you again, dear d'Artagnan!" he cried in a voice that had turned from baritone to bass. "So you haven't forgotten me then?"

"Forget you! Ah, my dear du Vallon, does one forget the finest days of his youth, his devoted friends and the perils they faced together? Seeing you brings every moment of our old friendship rushing back to me."

"Yes, yes," said Porthos, trying to give his moustache the rakish twist it had lost in his seclusion, "yes, we did a thing or two back in those days, when we gave the poor old cardinal such a hard time." And he gave a great sigh – which d'Artagnan noted. "In any case," continued Porthos, in a troubled tone, "welcome, dear friend. You'll help me regain my old high spirits. Tomorrow we'll hunt the hare across my fields that are excellent, or chase the deer in my woods that are also excellent. I have four hounds I believe are the quickest in the province, and a full pack nearly as good, the equal of any for twenty miles around."

And Porthos sighed a second time. "Oh ho!" d'Artagnan muttered. "Is my brave gentleman less happy than he seems?" Then, aloud: "But first, present me to Madam du Vallon, because I remember that handsome letter of invitation you sent me, at the bottom of which she kindly added a few lines."

At this, a third sigh from Porthos. "I lost Madam du Vallon two years ago," he said, "and I'm still wounded by it. That's why I left my Château du Vallon near Corbeil to come and live on my estate of Bracieux, a change that led me to buy this domain of Pierrefonds. Poor Madam du Vallon," continued Porthos, with a grimace of regret, "she's a woman of many moods but she eventually got used to me and my little ways."

"So, you're wealthy and unencumbered," said d'Artagnan.

"True, alas!" sighed Porthos. "I'm a widower with an income of forty thousand livres. Let's have breakfast, shall we?"

"The sooner the better," said d'Artagnan. "The morning air gave me an appetite."

"Yes," said Porthos, "I have excellent air."

They went into the château that was gilded from top to bottom: the cornices were gilt, the mouldings were gilt, even the wooden chairs shone with gold paint.

A table stood waiting, attended by servants. "You see?" said Porthos. "This is how I do things."

"Plague," said d'Artagnan, "my compliments to you. The king does no better."

"Yes," said Porthos, "I heard Sir de Mazarin doesn't feed him properly. Try this cutlet, d'Artagnan – it's mutton from my own sheep."

"I congratulate you," said d'Artagnan. "You've very tender sheep."

"Yes, they're fed in my meadows that are excellent."

"I'll have a bit more."

"No, instead try some of this rabbit from a hare killed yesterday in my warrens."

"*Dame!* What is that rare flavour?" said d'Artagnan. "Do you feed them on wild thyme?"

"And tell me what you think of this honey," said Porthos. "Isn't it excellent?"

"It's quite charming."

"It's from my own vineyards."

"Really!"

"Yes, from that south-facing slope on that excellent hill. It gives me twenty hogsheads."

"That's a truly fine vintage, that is!"

And Porthos sighed for the fifth time – d'Artagnan had been counting them. "*Oh that!*" he said. "Something's eating you, old friend. Are you suffering? Is it your health?"

"My health is quite excellent, better than ever. I could kill an ox with a single punch."

"Family troubles, perhaps..."

"Family! No, fortunately, I'm the only one of my clan left in this world."

"Then why these great sighs?"

"My friend," said Porthos, "no one is aware of this but I'll tell it to you: I'm not happy."

"You, not happy, Porthos! You, who have a château, with meadows, hills, and woods, and an income of forty thousand livres – you aren't happy?"

"My friend, I have all this, it's true – but in the middle of it, I'm all alone."

"Oh, I see – you're surrounded by bumpkins and rabble who are beneath you."

Porthos paled slightly and emptied a great glass of the vintage from his vineyard. "No," he said, "on the contrary, I'm surrounded by gentry who trace their lines back to Pharamond, Charlemagne, or at worst Hugues Capet. At first, since I was the newcomer, I made advances to them but as you know, my dear Madam du Vallon..." Porthos stopped, at a loss. "Madam du Vallon," he continued, "had a dubious background – her first husband, as I'm sure you remember, d'Artagnan, was a mere attorney. They said she was ... nauseating. Nauseating! At such a word, I might slay thirty thousand. As it happens, I killed only two, and though that silenced the rest, it didn't make me their friend. So, I'm an outcast; I live alone, I'm bored, and it eats at me."

D'Artagnan smiled – here was the chink in the armour, and he readied his blow. "But," he said, "now your wife is no longer a liability, and you're on your own."

"Yes but you know, not being of the ancient nobility like the Coucy, who were content to be lords, or the Rohans, who disdained to be dukes, all these people hereabout, these viscounts and counts, they all have precedence over me – at church, at ceremonies, everywhere – and I have nothing to say about it. Ah, if only I were..."

"A baron?" said d'Artagnan, finishing his friend's sentence. "Is that it?"

"Ah!" cried Porthos, his face lighting up. "If only I were a baron!"

*He's hooked*, thought d'Artagnan. *Now to land him*. Then, aloud: "Well, old friend, that title is exactly what I've come here today to bring you."

Porthos jumped up in a bound that shook the room. Two or three bottles trembled, fell from the table and broke. Planchet started to clean up, as Mousqueton ran in. "My Lord needs something?" he asked.

Porthos just waved him toward the broken bottles. "I'm glad this brave fellow is still with you," said d'Artagnan.

"He is my steward," said Porthos. Then raising his voice: "He's just an old rascal who's made good, as you can see but," and he lowered his voice again, "he wouldn't leave me for the world."

*And he calls you my Lord*, d'Artagnan thought, smiling to himself.

"You can go now, Mouston," said Porthos.

"You call him Mouston? You've abbreviated his name?"

"Yes," said Porthos, "his old name savoured of the enlisted man a league off. But we were talking business, I think, when he came in."

"Quite so," said d'Artagnan, "and we can't be too careful. Your people might suspect something, and there could be spies even here in the country. You realise, Porthos that these are serious matters."

"Plague!" said Porthos. "All right, let's take a walk in my park to aid our digestion."

"Gladly."

And as both had breakfasted well, they took a stroll into the gardens, down beautiful lanes of chestnuts and lime trees, thirty acres at least, among shrubbery and brushy thickets, where fat rabbits chased each other through the grass and between the bushes. "My faith," said d'Artagnan, "your park is like everything else of yours. If there are as many fish in your ponds as there are rabbits in your warrens, you must be a happy man, Porthos – assuming you still have a taste for hunting and fishing."

"I leave the fishing to Mousqueton, as that's a pursuit for commoners. I do still hunt sometimes – that is to say, when I'm bored, I'll take Gredinet, my favourite dog, bring my gun, sit on one of my marble benches, and take shots at the rabbits."

"That sounds like fun!" said d'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Porthos, "What fun!"

And he sighed again but d'Artagnan had quit counting. "And good old Gredinet," Porthos added, "fetches the rabbits himself and carries them right to the cook in the kitchen."

"A fine animal indeed!" said d'Artagnan.

"But enough about Gredinet – you can have him if you want him, for I tire of hunting," said Porthos. "Let's get back to that business you mentioned."

"Certainly," said d'Artagnan, "but I warn you, old friend, it's the kind of business that means changing your life."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean getting back into hamess, picking up your sword, and resuming your adventures, maybe taking some knocks along the way, like in the old days."

"The devil you say!" said Porthos.

"Oh, I know it would be a shock. You've been spoiled by the good life, old friend, and may not have the iron wrist and the dashing moves that once put fear into the Cardinal's Guards."

"Bah! My wrist is still solid," said Porthos, extending a hand like a shoulder of mutton.

"All the better."

"So, we're called to war?"

"We are, by God!"

"And against who?"

"Do you follow politics, old friend?"

"Me? Not in the least."

"Do you favour Mazarin or the princes?"

"I don't favour anybody."

"Which is to say you favour yourself. So much the better, Porthos, given the business that's ahead of us. Well, to be frank, I must say that I've come from the cardinal."

That title resonated with Porthos, as if it were still 1640 and they were speaking of the old cardinal. "Oh, ho!" he said. "So, His Eminence wants me?"

"His Eminence desires you to join his service."

"And who told him about me?"

"Rochefort. Remember him?"

"For the love of God, yes! He's the one who gave us so much trouble back when we were riding the roads, the one you stuck a sword into three times over. He had it coming too."

"But did you know he's now one of our friends?" said d'Artagnan.

"He is? I didn't know that. And he's forgiven us?"

"Say, rather, that I've forgiven him," said d'Artagnan.

Porthos couldn't quite comprehend this but it will be remembered that comprehension wasn't his strong suit. "So you say," he continued, "the Count Rochefort spoke of me to the cardinal?"

"Him, and the queen."  
"The queen?"  
"To inspire confidence, she even handed him that famous diamond you remember, the one I sold to Sir Des Essarts but which, somehow, returned to her possession."  
"But it seems to me she would have done better to give it to you," said Porthos. "That's just common sense."  
"I'm with you," said d'Artagnan, "but you know how it is! Kings and queens have their caprices. In the end, since they're the ones with the power and honour, the ones who distribute titles and wealth, we devote ourselves to them."  
"Yes, that's who we devote ourselves to!" said Porthos. "So right now, you're devoted to...?"  
"The king, the queen, and the cardinal – and I've answered to them for your loyalty."  
"And you said you've obtained certain conditions for me?"  
"Magnificent conditions, old friend, magnificent! You already have money, right? An income of forty thousand livres, you said?"  
Porthos bridled. "Yes but one can never have too much money. Madam du Vallon left my affairs in a tangle it would take a genius to sort out, and, well, I'm no genius. I barely get by from day to day."  
*He's afraid I'm here to borrow money from him*, thought d'Artagnan. "Ah, old friend," he said aloud, "so much the better if you're hard up!"  
"How so?" said Porthos.  
"Because His Eminence is prepared to reward you with whatever you wish: land, money, and titles."  
"Ah!" said Porthos, opening his eyes wide at that final word.  
"Under the old cardinal," continued d'Artagnan, "we never found a way to make our fortunes, though the opportunity was there. Not that that matters much to you, who have forty thousand livres, and seem like the happiest man on earth." Porthos sighed. "However," d'Artagnan continued, "despite your forty thousand livres, or even because of them, it seems to me a little noble's coronet would look well on your carriage door. Eh?"  
"It would," said Porthos.  
"Then, old friend, reach for it – it's at the end of your sword! To each our own: your goal's a title, and mine is money. I need enough to rebuild the estate of D'Artagnan – which my ancestors, impoverished by the Crusades, let fall into ruin – and buy some thirty acres around it. That will do it for me; with that I'll retire."  
"And I," said Porthos, "I want to be ... a baron."  
"And so you shall."  
"Have you thought to propose this to our other friends?" asked Porthos.  
"In fact, I've seen Aramis."  
"And what does he want? To be a bishop?"  
"Aramis, well," said d'Artagnan, who didn't want to disappoint Porthos, "Aramis, if you can imagine it, has become a monk and a Jesuit. He lives like a bear in a cave, renouncing the world and thinking only of salvation. I couldn't persuade him out of it."  
"Too bad," said Porthos. "He had brains, that one. And Athos?"  
"I haven't seen him yet but I'll look him up after I leave you. Do you know where I can find him?"  
"Near Blois, on a small estate he inherited, I'm not sure from who."  
"What's it called?"  
"Bragelonne. It's hard to understand – here's Athos, who was as noble as an emperor, yet all he inherits are mere counties. And what's he going to do with all these counties? The Count of La Fère and the Count de Bragelonne? Eh?"  
"It's a shame he has no children," said d'Artagnan.  
"Hmmm!" said Porthos. "I heard he'd adopted a young man who looks quite a bit like him."  
"Athos, our Athos, who was as virtuous as Scipio? Have you seen this lad?"  
"No."  
"Well, perhaps I'll bring back news of him. But I fear the worst, for Athos's fondness for honey has probably ruined him."  
"Yes," said Porthos, "it's true, he did drink a lot."  
"And then, he was the eldest of us," said d'Artagnan.  
"By just a few years," said Porthos. "It was his dark moods that made him seem old."  
"Yes, that's so. Well, if Athos joins us, so much the better. If he doesn't, it'll be just us! We're as good as a dozen other men."  
"Yes," said Porthos, smiling at the memory their former exploits, "but the four of us would have been as good as thirty-six! Especially if the business will be as dangerous as you say."  
"Dangerous for recruits, maybe but not for us."  
"How long will it take?"  
"*Dame!* Perhaps three or four years."  
"Will there be much fighting?"  
"I hope so."  
"The more the better!" cried Porthos. "You have no idea, my friend, how creaky my old bones have become since I've been down here! Sometimes, on Sundays, coming home from mass, I ride through my neighbours' fields just to see if I can scare up a quarrel but nothing doing. They've either learned to respect me or, more likely, learned to fear me. So they let me tramp down their clover with my dogs, nobody says *boo*, and I come home more bored than ever. At least, you say, they're getting up to some mischief in Paris?"  
"Oh, it's charming, old friend – no more edicts against duelling, no Cardinal's Guards, no pesky Jussacs or other bloodhounds meddling with us, by God! In the streets, in the taverns, everywhere, you just ask, 'Are you a Frondeur?' Then you draw your sword, and nothing more is said about it. Why, Sir de Guise killed Sir de Coligny right there in the Place Royale, and nothing came of it."  
"That does sound good," said Porthos.  
"And before long," continued d'Artagnan, "it'll be pitched battles, cannon fire, you name it!"  
"I've decided then."  
"You're committed?"  
"Count me in. I'll cut and thrust for this Mazarin. But you swear..."  
"What?"  
"That I'll be made a baron."  
"For the love of God!" said d'Artagnan. "It's as good as done. You'll have your barony. I'll answer for that." And on that promise, Porthos who never doubted his friend's word, walked back with him to his château.

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If Porthos was Unhappy with his Situation, Mousqueton was not

While returning to the château, as Porthos enjoyed his golden dreams of a barony, d'Artagnan reflected on the flaws in human nature, ever dissatisfied with what it had, always yearning for what it had not. In Porthos's place, d'Artagnan would have been the happiest man on earth but Porthos was miserable because he was missing – what, exactly? Five little letters to place before all his names, and a coronet to paint on the doors of his carriage. "Will I spend my whole life," d'Artagnan said to himself, "looking left, right, and centre without ever seeing the face of a person who's completely happy?" In the midst of these philosophical musings Providence saw fit to contradict him. Just after Porthos left him to go give orders to the cook, d'Artagnan saw Mousqueton approaching. The brave fellow's expression but for the slightest shadow, like a passing summer cloud, seemed to be that of man who'd found perfect happiness. "Now here's what I was looking for," said d'Artagnan. "It's a shame the poor boy doesn't know why I'm here."  
Mousqueton hovered at a slight distance. D'Artagnan sat on a marble bench and beckoned him to approach. "Sir," said Mousqueton, taking advantage of the privilege, "I have a favour to ask you."  
"Speak, my friend," said d'Artagnan.  
"I'm afraid that if I do, you'll think prosperity has spoiled me."  
"I certainly think it's made you happy."  
"As happy as can be – but you could make me even happier."  
"Just ask. If I can do it, I will."  
"Oh, Sir, if only you would."  
"So?"  
"Sir, the favour I have to ask is that you call me not Mousqueton but Mouston. Since I've had the honour to be my Lord's steward, I've been known by the latter name that is more dignified and commands respect from my subordinates. You know, Sir, how important it is for the servants to respect one."  
D'Artagnan smiled; while Porthos added to his names, Mousqueton shortened his. "Well, Sir?" said Mousqueton, trembling.  
"Well, then: Mouston it is," said d'Artagnan. "And don't worry, I won't forget. In fact, if it makes you happy, I'll stop calling you *boy* as well."  
"Oh!" cried Mousqueton, flushing with joy. "If you'll do me this honour, Sir, I'll be grateful all my life ... if it's not asking too much?"  
"*Alas!*" said d'Artagnan to himself. "It's little enough to do for him, considering the unexpected trouble I'm about to bring this poor devil who's received me so well."  
"Will Sir be staying with us long?" asked Mousqueton whose face, restored to its former serenity, bloomed like a peony.  
"I'm leaving tomorrow, my friend," said d'Artagnan.  
"Ah, Sir!" said Mousqueton. "So, you only came to visit us in order to leave us with more regrets?"  
"I'm afraid so," d'Artagnan said but so low that Mousqueton who was retiring behind a bower, didn't hear it. D'Artagnan's heart might have been like old leather but at this it was touched with remorse. He didn't regret enticing Porthos onto a road that put his life and fortune at risk, because Porthos would willingly put everything on the line for the title of baron – but as for Mousqueton, who desired nothing more than to be addressed as Mouston, wasn't it cruel to snatch him away from his delicious life of abundance?  
That idea was still gnawing at him when Porthos reappeared. "To dinner!" said Porthos.  
"To dinner? Already?" said d'Artagnan. "What time is it?"  
"Eh? Why, it's already past one o'clock."  
"Porthos, your home is a paradise in which time is forgotten. I'll come but I'm not hungry yet."  
"Come, then – if you can't eat, you can always drink. That's one of the maxims of poor Athos that I remember when I'm bored."  
D'Artagnan, whose brash Gascon nature needed little in the way of drink, didn't seem as committed to Athos's axiom as his friend but nonetheless did what he could to keep up with his host. However, while watching Porthos eating and drinking with such gusto, the thought of Mousqueton returned to his mind – all the more because Mousqueton, though he didn't wait at their table that would have been beneath his new position, nonetheless appeared frequently at the door, and marked his gratitude to d'Artagnan by sending in honey of a superior age and vintage. So, when they reached dessert, and at a sign from d'Artagnan, Porthos had dismissed his servants and they were alone, d'Artagnan said, "Porthos, who will accompany you on our campaign?"  
"Why, Mouston, of course," replied Porthos.  
That was a blow to d'Artagnan; already he imagined the benevolent smile of the steward twisted into a painful grimace. "Oh?" he said. "Mouston's no longer in the first blush of youth, you know. Plus, he's grown very ... substantial. Perhaps he's lost the habit of active service."  
"I'm aware of it," said Porthos. "But I'm used to him. And besides, he'd never leave me – he's too attached for that."

*How blind's self-love!* D'Artagnan thought.

"Besides, don't you still have your old lackey in your service?" asked Porthos. "That good, that honest, that intelligent ... what do you call him?"

"Planchet. Yes, he's back with me but he's no longer a lackey."

"What is he then?"

"Well, with that sixteen hundred livres he earned at the siege of La Rochelle by carrying our letter to Lord de Winter – you remember that – he opened a small confectioner's shop in the Rue des Lombards."

"Oh, so he's a confectioner in the Rue des Lombards! ...Then why is he with you?"

"He got involved in some escapades and is afraid of being found out."

And the musketeer related to his friend how he had once again found Planchet. "Well!" said Porthos. "If you'd told me that one day Planchet would save old Rochefort and you'd hide him as a result..."

"You never would have believed it. But what would you have? Things happen, and men change."

"That's true about everything," said Porthos, "except for honey that never changes except for the better. Taste some of this – it's a Spanish vintage called sherry that I learned about from our friend Athos."

Just then, the steward came in to consult his master on the matter of the next day's menu, and the planning for a hunt. "Tell me, Mouston," said Porthos, "are my weapons in good order?"

D'Artagnan began drumming his fingers on the table to hide his embarrassment. "Your ... weapons, My Lord?" asked Mousqueton. "What weapons?"

"Eh, for the love of God! My equipment!"

"Which equipment?"

"My wartime equipment."

"Of course, My Lord. At least, I think so."

"Well, make sure of it, and do whatever's necessary. Which is my fastest horse in a sprint?"

"Vulcan."

"And for stamina?"

"Bayard."

"Which horse do you prefer?"

"I like Rustaud, My Lord – she's a good animal, and we get along well."

"She's strong, isn't she?"

"A Normand crossed with a Mecklenburg who can go all day and all night."

"That's settled, then. Get those three animals ready, tend to my arms, and see to your own – you'll need a brace of pistols and a hunting knife."

"Are we travelling then, My Lord?" asked Mousqueton anxiously.

D'Artagnan, who'd been drumming his fingers at random, began to beat out a quick march. "Better than that, Mouston!" replied Porthos.

"We're going on an expedition, Sir?" said the steward whose cheeks of rose paled into lilies.

"We're rejoining the service, Mouston!" replied Porthos, trying once more to give his moustache its old military curl.

These words were scarcely spoken before Mousqueton was stricken with a tremor that set his fat cheeks atremble. He looked at d'Artagnan with such an indescribable air of tender reproach the officer could hardly bear it. He reeled, and said, in a choked voice, "Rejoining the service? The service of the king?"

"More or less. We're going on campaign and can expect all kinds of adventures."

This last word struck Mousqueton like a thunderbolt. It was the terrible days of the past that made the days of the present so sweet. "Oh, *my God!* What's this I hear?" said Mousqueton with a look of desperate appeal aimed at d'Artagnan.

"What would you have, Mouston?" said d'Artagnan. "A man's destiny..."

Despite the care d'Artagnan had taken to use the right name, for Mousqueton it was a blow to the heart, and he was so dismayed he fled from the room, forgetting to close the door. "Ah, good Mousqueton, your joy is at an end," said Porthos in the same tone that Don Quixote used when asking Sancho Panza to saddle his pony for one last campaign.

Left thus alone, the two friends talked about the future and built castles in the air. The fine honey Mousqueton had served them went to their heads, showing d'Artagnan a rosy prospect of doubloons and pistoles, and Porthos a ducal title and the *cordon bleu* of the Order of Saint-Esprit. When the servants came in to show them to bed, they were both asleep with their heads on the table. Morning came, and Mousqueton was somewhat consoled to hear from d'Artagnan that their campaign would likely be on the battlefield of Paris, well within reach of the Château du Vallon that was near Corbeil; of Bracieux that was near Melun; and of Pierrefonds that was between Compiègne and Villers-Cotterêts. "But it seems to me," Mousqueton said shyly, "in the old days..."

"Oh, nowadays we don't make war the old-fashioned way," said d'Artagnan. "Today it's all a political affair. Ask Planchet."

Mousqueton went to pump his old friend for information, who confirmed what d'Artagnan had told him – though he added that, in this war, those taken prisoner risked being hanged. "Plague take it," said Mousqueton. "I think I preferred the Siege of La Rochelle."

As to Porthos visit his woods, hills, ponds, admire his pack of greyhounds, the faithful Gredinet, and all else he possessed after helping his guest hunt down a buck, and after three more sumptuous meals, he asked for final instructions from d'Artagnan, who had to be on his way. "Let's see," said the musketeer, "I need four days to get from here to Blois, a day or so there, then three or four more to get back to Paris. You should gather your equipment and leave here a week from today; meet me in Rue Tiquetonne, at the Hôtel de la Chevrete, or wait there for me until I return."

"Excellent!" said Porthos.

"I'm off on my errand to see Athos," said d'Artagnan, "hopeless though it may be. I imagine he's pretty far gone by this time but we must be loyal to our friends."

"It might distract me from my boredom if I went with you," said Porthos.

"It might," said d'Artagnan, "and you'd be welcome but then you wouldn't have time to make your preparations."

"That's true," said Porthos. "Go, then, and good luck to you. As for me, I'm eager to get to it."

"Marvelous!" said d'Artagnan.

Porthos escorted him to the farthest limit of the domain of Pierrefonds, where they said goodbye. "Well," d'Artagnan said, as he took the road to Villers-Cotterêts, "at least I won't be alone. Porthos is as mighty as ever. If Athos joins us, well then! The three of us will laugh at Friar Aramis and his little dalliances." At Villers-Cotterêts he wrote to the cardinal:

*My Lord, I already have one recruit to offer to Your Eminence, and this one is worth twenty other men. I'm off to Blois to see the Count of La Fère, at his estate of Bragelonne near that city.*

And with that, he took the road to Blois, chatting along the way with Planchet, who was a fine companion for a long journey.

## 185 The Angelic Youth

They had a long way to go but d'Artagnan wasn't concerned: his horses were rested and well fed from their stay in the lavish stables of the Lord de Bracieux. He therefore set out with confidence on his four or five days' journey, accompanied by the faithful Planchet. As we said, to ease the tedium of the journey, the two men rode side by side, talking away the miles. D'Artagnan had gradually lost the air of a master, and Planchet had long left that of a servant. He was a shrewd fellow, and since reinventing himself as a bourgeois, he'd missed the freedom of the highway as well as the conversation and company of gentlemen. He knew he had a measure of both courage and wit, and rubbing elbows all day with dull common folk didn't satisfy him. Thus, with the man he still called master, he soon rose to the role of confidant. D'Artagnan hadn't opened his heart to anyone for years, and the two found that they got along very well indeed. For Planchet was no vulgar clod: he was a man of good judgement who, without looking for trouble, wasn't afraid of hard knocks, as d'Artagnan had had the opportunity to see for himself. He'd been a soldier, and a career under arms brings out the best in a man. Moreover, though d'Artagnan had helped Planchet, Planchet was more than a little useful to d'Artagnan. So they were on a friendly and nearly equal footing by the time they arrived in the region of Blois. Along the way, d'Artagnan, shaking his head, repeatedly went back to the idea that obsessed him: "I know this errand to recruit Athos is useless but I owe it to my old friend to try, for he once had the stuff in him to be the most generous and noble of men."

"Yes, Sir Athos was a true, proud gentleman!" said Planchet.

"Wasn't he, though?" replied d'Artagnan.

"Strewing coins as the sky rained hail," continued Planchet, "and handling his sword with a royal air. Do you remember, Sir, that duel with the English at the Luxembourg paddock? Ah, how noble and magnificent Sir Athos was that day, when he told his opponent, 'You demanded I reveal my name to you, Sir – which is too bad for you, for now I must kill you!' I was nearby and I heard him. Those were his words, verbatim. And just as he said, Sir, he touched his opponent only once, and he fell dead without as much as a gasp. Yes, Sir, I repeat – there was a true gentleman."

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, "that's true as the gospel but all those qualities were overshadowed by a single fault."

"Oh, I remember how well he liked to drink," said Planchet, "or rather, that he just drank. But he didn't drink like others do. His eyes revealed nothing as he brought the glass to his lips. Truly, never was silence so eloquent. To me, it seemed he was saying to himself, 'Come, liquor, and wash away my sorrows.' And how he could crack the stem of a glass or knock the neck off a bottle! No one could do it like he could."

"Well, that's the sad reality we're facing today," continued d'Artagnan. "That noble gentleman with the proud gaze, that handsome cavalier so brilliant under arms that one was amazed he bore a simple sword rather than a marshal's baton – ah! He'll have decayed into a bent old man with watering eyes and a red nose. We'll find him lying in the yard, watching us approach with dull eyes, maybe not even recognising us. As God is my witness, Planchet, I'd turn tail rather than face such a sorry spectacle if I weren't bound to pay my respects to the shade of the glorious Count of La Fère that was, whom we all loved so well."

Planchet hung his head and didn't say a word; it was plain to see he shared his master's fears. "And then," resumed d'Artagnan, "to see him in infirmity, for Athos is old now, and in misery, because he's probably neglected what little property he had, and his wretched lackey Grimaud, more mute and drunken even than his master ... ah, Planchet, it rends my heart."

"I can almost see them before me, staggering and stammering," said Planchet in a piteous tone.

"I must confess, my greatest fear," said d'Artagnan, "is that Athos will accept my proposition in a moment of drunken belligerence. That would be bad luck for me and Porthos, and a real embarrassment – but the first time he goes on a drunken binge, we'll just leave him behind. When he comes around later, he'll understand."

"In any event, Sir," said Planchet, "we'll soon know the truth, because I think those high walls ahead, dyed red in the sunset, are the walls of Blois."

"Probably," replied d'Artagnan, "and those crenellations and sharply turned turrets I see off to the left resemble what I've heard about Chambord."

"Shall we go into the town?"

"Yes, to get information."

"Sir, as a confectioner, let me advise you that we must try some of those tasty little Blaisois *pôts de crème* I've heard so much about but have never been able to find in Paris."

"Then try them we shall, never fear!" said d'Artagnan.

Just then a heavy oxcart, laden with lumber from the nearby woods for the docks on the Loire, turned out of a rutted path onto the travellers' road. A drover walked alongside, waving a long pole with a nail in its end with which he spurred his slow team. "Hey, there, friend!" cried Planchet to the drover.

"What can I do for you, Gentlemen?" said the peasant, in that pure accent of the lands of the Loire that would shame the proudest scholars of the Place de la Sorbonne or the Rue de l'Université.

"We're looking for the house of Sir Count of La Fère," said d'Artagnan. "Do you know anyone of that name among the local gentry?"

Upon hearing this name, the peasant removed his hat and replied, "Gentlemen, this timber I'm carting is from his woods; I fell it in his grove and carry it to his château."

D'Artagnan asked no further questions of this man, reluctant to hear another confirm the fears he'd shared with Planchet. "His *château*," he said to himself, "his *château*. Ah, I get it! Athos may be failing but he's still proud, so like Porthos, he's forcing his peasants to title him *My Lord*, and to call this shack the *château*. Athos always had a heavy hand with the servants, especially when he was drunk."

The oxen were slow; d'Artagnan and Planchet, following the cart from behind, began to get impatient. "Does this path go anywhere else?" d'Artagnan asked the drover. "Can we follow it without taking a wrong turn?"



"*My God*, yes, Sir! Don't tire yourself by following beasts as slow as mine. Go ahead half a league and you'll see a château on the right – you can't see it from here because of that row of poplars. But that's not Bragelonne, that's La Vallière. Go three musket-shots beyond and you'll see a large white house with slate roofs, built on a knoll and shaded by some big sycamores. That's the château of Sir Count of La Fère."

"And is this half-a-league very long?" asked d'Artagnan as in our beautiful country of France, there are leagues and there are leagues.

"Ten minutes' ride and no longer, Sir, with a horse like yours."

D'Artagnan thanked the drover and spurred ahead but then, still troubled by what he expected to find of the man he'd once so loved, who had contributed so much to his manhood by his advice and aristocratic example, he gradually dropped to a walk and rode onward slowly, head sunk on his chest. Planchet was also giving some thought to their encounter with the peasant. Never, not in Normandy, nor in Franche-Count, nor in Artois, nor in his own Picardy, had he ever encountered villagers with such self-possession, easy manners, and refined speech. He was tempted to take the drover for some gentleman in disguise, perhaps a rebel who for political reasons had disguised himself. Soon they turned a corner and beheld the Château de La Vallière, just as the drover had told the travellers. A quarter mile beyond that they found the white house framed in sycamores, massive old trees that spring had frosted with a flurry of flowers. At this sight, the usually unemotional d'Artagnan felt a strange lurch in the bottom of his heart, so strong are the currents that flow from the memories of youth. Planchet, not subject to the same feelings, was surprised to see his master so agitated, and glanced back and forth from d'Artagnan to the house. The musketeer rode a few steps forward and then stopped before a gate, wrought in iron in the elegance that marked the restrained taste of the time. Beyond the gate were some neatly kept vegetable gardens, and a spacious courtyard where servants in various liveries stood holding several fine riding mounts, as well as two country horses hitched to a carriage. "There must be some mistake, or that peasant misled us," said d'Artagnan. "This can't be where Athos lives. *My God!* Has he died, and his property been inherited by what's-his-name? Dismount, Planchet, and go inquire; I confess I don't have the courage to do it myself."

Planchet got down. "You can add," said d'Artagnan, "that a passing gentleman wishes to have the honour of paying his respects to the Count of La Fère – and if you're happy with their answer, you can say it's me."

Planchet, leading his horse by the bridle, approached the gate and rang the bell. Immediately a servant, white-haired but erect despite his age, came forward to receive Planchet. "Is this the home of the Count of La Fère?" asked Planchet.

"Yes, Sir, that it is," said the servant, who wore no livery.

"A nobleman retired from the service, right?"

"That's right."

"And who had a lackey named Grimaud?" asked Planchet who didn't think one could have too much information with his usual caution.

"Sir Grimaud is away from the château at the moment," said the servant, suspiciously giving Planchet the once-over, as he wasn't used to such interrogation.

"Then," Planchet cried happily, "that's the same Count of La Fère we're looking for. Please admit me so I can announce my master, one of his old friends who has come to pay his respects to Sir Count."

"Why didn't you say so before?" said the servant, unlocking the gate. "But your master, where is he?"

"He's coming; he's right behind me."

The servant swung open the gate and led in Planchet, who beckoned to d'Artagnan. The musketeer, heart pounding harder than ever, rode into the courtyard. As Planchet stepped onto the porch, he heard a voice from within the parlour that said, "Well, where is this gentleman, and why haven't you brought him in?"

This voice, when it reached d'Artagnan, awoke in his heart a thousand feelings, a thousand memories he'd forgotten. He jumped from his horse and ran to catch up with Planchet, who, smiling, advanced toward the master of the house.

"But I know this fellow," said Athos, appearing in the doorway.

"Yes, indeed, Sir Count, you know me, and I know you as well. It's Planchet, Sir, Planchet, you know..." But he choked up and could say no more.

"What! Planchet!" cried Athos. "Is Sir d'Artagnan with you?"

"I'm here, my friend!" said d'Artagnan, nearly overcome. "Athos – I'm here."

At these words a visible emotion flushed the handsome visage and calm features of Athos. He took two quick steps toward d'Artagnan, looked in his face with eyes filled with feeling, and then hugged him tenderly. D'Artagnan, all his fears banished, embraced him in his turn with tears in his eyes. Athos then took him by the hand, pressed it between his own, and led him into the salon, where several people were gathered. Everyone stood. "I have the honour to present," said Athos, "the Knight d'Artagnan, Lieutenant of the King's Musketeers, a very devoted friend, and one of the bravest and most congenial gentlemen I've ever known."

D'Artagnan, according to custom, received the compliments of those present, gave them his best in return, and then joined their circle. As the conversation was resumed, he began to examine Athos. Strange thing! Athos had scarcely aged at all. His wondrous eyes, freed from redness and no longer buried in dark circles, seemed larger and more liquid than ever; his face, a trifle elongated, had gained in majesty what it had lost in feverish intensity; his hands, long, fine, and strong, were set like gemstones in lace cuffs, like hands by Titian or Van Dyck. He was less heavy than formerly, though his shoulders told of uncommon strength; his long black hair, just sprinkled with grey, fell elegantly to his shoulders in a natural wave. His voice was as strong and precise as it had been at twenty-five, and his beautiful teeth, white and sound, gave an inexpressible charm to his smile. Meanwhile the count's guests, who had perceived by the faltering of the conversation that the two friends were eager to be left alone, began, with the courtly manners of a former time, to find excuses for their departure – taking one's leave being a matter to handle with grace and care, important to those graceful and careful enough to handle it properly. But then there came a great clamour of dogs barking in the courtyard and several people said at the same time, "Ah, Raoul's returned."

Athos, at the name of Raoul, glanced at d'Artagnan, as if to see if it inspired curiosity or attention in him. But d'Artagnan was still recovering from his astonishment and noticed nothing. So, it was without expectation that he turned to see a handsome young man of fifteen enter the room, dressed simply but in perfect taste, gracefully doffing a hat adorned with long red plumes. But something about this newcomer struck him unexpectedly hard, and his mind awoke to a sudden flood of new ideas that, taking shape, began to provide an explanation for the changes in Athos that until then had seemed so inexplicable. For there was a strong resemblance between the young man and the noble count, a resemblance that might explain the mystery of his regeneration. Suddenly alert, d'Artagnan watched and listened. "So, you've returned, Raoul?" said the count.

"Yes, Sir," replied the young man respectfully, "and the task you assigned me is completed."

"But what's wrong, Raoul?" said Athos, suddenly all solicitude. "You're pale – you're agitated."

"It's just that, Sir," the young man replied, "an accident has happened to our little neighbour."

"To Miss de La Vallière?"\* Athos said quickly.

"What happened?" asked several voices.

"She was walking with Dame Marceline in the grove where the loggers were trimming their trees, and I was riding by and saw her and stopped. She saw me as well, from the top of a pile of logs, and jumped down to run to me, and – well – her foot came down wrong, and she fell and couldn't get up again. It looked to me like she sprained her ankle."

"God save her!" said Athos. "And her mother, Madam de Saint-Rémy, has she been told?"

"No, Sir, Madam de Saint-Rémy is in Blois with the Duchess d'Orléans. I'm afraid the first aid measures seemed rather clumsy, and ran to you to ask your advice."

"Send immediately to Blois, Raoul – or rather, mount up and go yourself." Raoul bowed. "But where is Louise now?" asked the count.

"I brought her here, Sir, and left her with Charlot's wife, who's bathing her ankle in ice water."

With this explanation, the guests needed no further excuses, and got up to take their leave of Athos – all but the old Duke Barbé who was an ancient friend of the house of La Vallière, and went to see Louise, who was crying but, upon seeing Raoul, immediately wiped her lovely eyes and smiled. The duke offered to take little Louise to Blois in his carriage. "You're wise, Sir," said Athos, "that's the fastest way to get her to her mother. As for you, Raoul, I fear you've acted foolishly, and this is all your fault."

"Oh, no! No, Sir, I swear!" cried the girl, while the young man grew pale at the thought that he might be responsible for the accident.

"Oh, Sir, I assure you..." Raoul said brokenly.

"You're going to Blois nonetheless," the count continued, more kindly. "Make your excuses, and mine, to Madam de Saint-Rémy, and then return." The colour returned to the young man's cheeks. After a glance at the count for approval, he lifted in his strong arms the little girl, who smiled and laid her head on his shoulder, and gently bore her to the carriage. Then, jumping onto his horse with the ease and elegance of a born horseman, after saluting Athos and d'Artagnan, he trotted quickly off next to the door of the carriage, looking constantly in through the window.

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### The Château of Bragelonne

Throughout this scene, d'Artagnan looked on with a bewildered expression, mouth almost gaping. Almost nothing here had accorded with his expectations, and he was mute with astonishment. Athos took his arm and led him into the garden. "While they're preparing our dinner," he said, smiling, "I imagine you won't mind if I shed some light on all these perplexing mysteries?"

"True, Sir Count," said d'Artagnan who was gradually falling back under the influence of Athos's commanding superiority.

Athos regarded him with a sweet smile. "Then first of all, my dear d'Artagnan," he said, "we'll have no more of this 'Sir Count.' If I called you Knight, it was only to introduce you to my guests, so they would know your quality. But for you, d'Artagnan, I hope I shall always be Athos, your old friend and companion. Or do you prefer the ceremonial because you love me less than formerly?"

"May God forbid!" said the Gascon with one of those bursts of youthful loyalty found so rarely in those who've matured.

"Then it's back to our old habits – and for starters, let's be honest with each other. Any surprises here?"

"Plenty."

"But what astonishes you most," smiled Athos, "is me – confess it."

"I do confess it."

"I'm still youthful, aren't I? I still seem much the same, despite my forty-nine years?"

"On the contrary," said d'Artagnan, ready to be completely honest. "You're not much like your old self at all."

"Ah! I understand," said Athos, colouring slightly. "Everything comes to an end, d'Artagnan, including folly."

"And your fortunes have improved, it seems to me. You're admirably housed – this is your estate, I take it."

"Yes, a very modest domain – you remember, I told you I'd had a small inheritance when I left the service."

"You have a park, horses, servants..."

Athos smiled. "A park of about twenty acres," he said, "twenty acres that are mostly vegetable gardens and pasture. I have exactly two horses, not counting my valet's old nag. My servants consist mostly of four farm dogs, two greyhounds, and a retriever. Yet I don't keep this grand pack for myself."

He smiled. "Yes, I understand," said d'Artagnan. "It's for the young man – for Raoul."

And d'Artagnan looked at Athos with a sudden smile. "You have guessed it, my friend!" said Athos.

"And this young man is your adopted son – your relative, perhaps? Ah but you've changed, Athos!"

"This young man's, d'Artagnan," Athos replied calmly, "an orphan abandoned by his mother with a poor country curate. I've fed and raised him."

"Then he must be quite attached to you?"

"I believe he ... loves me like a father."

"But is grateful more than anything?"

"Oh, the gratitude is entirely reciprocated," said Athos. "I owe him quite as much as he owes me – even more, in fact, though I wouldn't tell him that."

"What do you mean?" asked the musketeer, astonished.

"I mean that, God be thanked, he is responsible for the changes you see in me. I was wasting away like a poor lonely tree on eroding ground; it took a deep affection to get me to take root in life once more. A mistress? I was too old. Friends? I no longer had you. Well! This child helped me find what I'd lost. If I didn't have the heart to live for myself, I found it in living for him. Lessons are fine for teaching a child, d'Artagnan but a good example is better. I had to become his example. What vices I had, I corrected; what virtues I lacked, I pretended to have. I may be mistaken but I think Raoul will become as complete a gentleman as one can in our degraded times."

D'Artagnan looked at Athos with increasing admiration. They walked along a cool, shady avenue, through which filtered the slanting rays of the setting sun. One of these golden beams caught Athos in profile, and his face seemed as radiant as the calm evening light that played upon it. Unbidden, the idea of Milady came into d'Artagnan's mind. "And so, you're happy?" he asked his friend. The watchful eye of Athos seemed to penetrate d'Artagnan's heart and read his very thoughts. "As happy as a creature of God is permitted to be on this earth. But finish your thought, d'Artagnan, for I sense there is more."

"Athos, you're awful – no one can hide anything from you," d'Artagnan said. "And, yes ... I wanted to ask if you're ever haunted by a feeling of horror, a feeling something like..."

"Like remorse?" Athos finished. "Yes – and no. Not remorse, because that woman, I believe, deserved the punishment she suffered. No remorse, because if we'd let her live, she would have undoubtedly continued on her path of destruction. But that doesn't mean, friend, that I'm convinced we had the right to do what we did. Perhaps all bloodshed requires expiation. She made hers; perhaps it is up to us to accomplish our own."

"I have sometimes had the same thought, Athos."

"That woman – she had a son, did she not?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever heard anything about him?"

"Never."

"He must be around twenty-three now," Athos mused. "I often think of that young man, d'Artagnan."

"How strange! I'd forgotten all about him."

Athos smiled sadly. "And Lord de Winter, have you had any news of him?"

"I'd heard he was greatly in favour with King Charles I."

"He's followed the royal fortune that goes ill these days. See, d'Artagnan?" continued Athos. "It all comes back to what I was just speaking of. That king's spilled Strafford's blood and bloodshed calls for more. And the queen?"

"Which queen?"

"Madam Henriette of England, the daughter of Henry IV."

"She's lodged in the Louvre, as you know."

"Where she's given almost nothing, isn't she? During last winter's storms, her daughter was ill, it was said, and forced to shiver in bed for lack of firewood. Can you imagine that?" Athos huffed. "The daughter of Henry IV freezing for lack of a few sticks of wood! If only she'd asked one of us for hospitality when first she came, instead of Mazarin. She'd have wanted for nothing."

"Do you know her, then, Athos?"

"No but my mother saw her as an infant. Have I ever mentioned that my mother was maid of honour to Marie de Médicis?"

"No. You never spoke of such things, Athos."

"Ah, *my God* – well, you see," said Athos, "the right opportunity never presented itself."

"Porthos never waited for the right opportunity," said d'Artagnan with a smile.

"Each to his nature, d'Artagnan. Porthos has excellent qualities, despite a touch of vanity. Have you seen him?"

"I left him five days ago," said d'Artagnan.

He then recounted, with all the verve of his Gascon sense of humour, the magnificence of Porthos in his Château de Pierrefonds – and while lampooning his friend, he worked in two or three jests at the expense of Sir Mouston. "I sometimes wonder," replied Athos, smiling with a gaiety that recalled their good old days, "How it was that we four random souls formed a friendship so loyal it still binds us after twenty years of separation. Friendship grows deep roots in honest hearts, d'Artagnan. It's only the wicked who deny the bonds of friendship, because they can't understand it. And Aramis?"

"I saw him, too," said d'Artagnan, "but he seemed ... cold."

"So, you've seen Aramis as well," said Athos, giving d'Artagnan a penetrating look. "But this is practically a pilgrimage, friend – you're visiting the Stations of Friendship, as the poets would say."

"I guess so," said d'Artagnan, embarrassed.

"Aramis, you know, is naturally cold," continued Athos, "and is always caught up in the intrigues of the ladies."

"I believe he's involved in a very complicated one at the moment," said d'Artagnan.

Athos made no reply. *He's not even curious about it*, thought d'Artagnan.

Athos suddenly changed the subject. "There, you see?" he said, pointing out to d'Artagnan that they were almost back at the château. "An hour's walk, and you've seen my entire domain."

"Everything is charming, and shows the touch of a real gentleman," replied d'Artagnan.

Just then came the sound of a horse's hooves. "That will be Raoul returning," said Athos. "We'll hear the news about that poor little girl."

Indeed, the young man appeared at the gate and rode into the courtyard, covered with dust. He leapt from his horse and handed the reins to a groom, then came and bowed to the count and d'Artagnan.

"Lad," Athos said, resting his hand on d'Artagnan's shoulder, "this is the Knight d'Artagnan, of whom you've often heard me speak, Raoul."

"Sir," said the young man, bowing to him even more deeply, "Sir Count mentions your name whenever he wants an example of a generous and intrepid gentleman."

This little compliment didn't fail to move d'Artagnan, who felt his heart gently stirred. He held out a hand to Raoul, saying, "My young friend, every virtue attributed to me really derives from the count, as he was my education in all things. It's not his fault if I took so little advantage of his lessons but it looks to me like you won't miss a thing. I like your look, Raoul, and your words have touched me."

Athos was thoroughly delighted; he regarded d'Artagnan with real affection, and gave Raoul one of those rare, heartfelt smiles that children are so proud to receive, when they get them. "Now," said d'Artagnan to himself, who'd missed nothing of this exchange, "now I'm certain of it."

"Well!" said Athos. "I hope that accident will have no ill results."

"We don't know anything yet, Sir – the doctor can't tell due to the swelling. But he's afraid there might be a damaged nerve."

"And you didn't think you ought to remain longer with Madam de Saint-Rémy?"

"I was afraid I wouldn't be back in time for your supper, Sir," said Raoul, "and you might be kept waiting."

At that moment a little boy, half peasant, half servant, appeared to announce that supper was served. Athos led his guest into a simple dining room but with doors that opened on one side out into the garden, and on the other into a greenhouse blooming with flowers. D'Artagnan glanced at the table setting; the dishes were splendid, and he knew they must be family heirlooms. On the sideboard was a superb silver ewer, so fine that d'Artagnan stopped to look at it. "Ah but this is divinely made!" he said.

"Yes," replied Athos. "It's a masterpiece by a great Florentine artist named Benvenuto Cellini."

"And what battle is represented on it?"

"The Battle of Marignano. It shows the moment when one of my ancestors gave his sword to King François I, who had just broken his. That was the occasion for which Enguerrand de La Fère, my grandfather, was made a Knight of Saint Michael. Fifteen years later, the king – who hadn't forgotten that he'd fought for three more hours with the unbreakable sword of his friend Enguerrand – made him a gift of this ewer, and another sword that you might have seen in my home, a nice example of the jeweller's art. That was a time of giants," said Athos. "We are dwarfs, these days, beside those men. Let's sit down, d'Artagnan, and dine. As to that," said Athos to the small servant who'd just served the soup, "please call for Charlot."

The child went out, and a moment later, the servant who had met the two travellers at the gate came in. "My dear Charlot," said Athos, "so long as he's here, I commend to your care Sir d'Artagnan's servant, the good Planchet. He is fond of good honey, and you have the key to the cellars. Moreover, as he's slept often on the hard ground, he'll appreciate a good bed. See to it, please."

Charlot bowed and left. "Charlot is a good man," said the count, "who's served me for eighteen years."

"You think of everything," said d'Artagnan, "and I thank you on Planchet's behalf, friend Athos."

The young man blinked at this name, and looked carefully at the count to make sure it was he whom d'Artagnan addressed with it. "A strange-sounding name, isn't it, Raoul?" said Athos, smiling. "It was my *nom de guerre* while Sir d'Artagnan, two brave friends, and I were fighting at the Siege of La Rochelle under the late cardinal and under Sir de Bassompierre, who has also passed on. Sir here still calls me that in the name of friendship, and every time I hear it, it gladdens my heart."

"It was a famous name indeed," said d'Artagnan, "and one day received triumphal honours."

"What do you mean, Sir?" asked Raoul with youthful curiosity.

"I have no idea what he's talking about," said Athos.

"Have you forgotten the Saint-Gervais bastion, Athos and the napkin that three bullet holes made a battle flag? My memory's better than yours – I recall every detail and I'll tell you about it, young man."

And he told Raoul the story of the battle of the bastion, just as Athos had told him the tale of his grandfather. Listening to this story, the young man thought he heard unfolding one of the exploits recounted by Tasso or Ariosto, a tale of the glorious age of chivalry. "But what d'Artagnan hasn't told you, Raoul," said Athos in his turn, "is that he was one of the finest swordsmen of his time: arm of iron, wrist of steel, with eyes of flame that missed nothing his opponent might try. He was but eighteen years old – three years older than you, Raoul – when I first saw him in action, and that against proven fighters."

"And Sir d'Artagnan was victorious?" asked the young man, whose shining eyes begged for more details.

"I might have killed one," said d'Artagnan, to Athos's inquiring look. "As to the other, I either disarmed or wounded him, I can't remember which."

"You wounded him. Oh, you were a tough customer."

"Eh, I haven't lost it," said d'Artagnan, with his smug Gascon laugh. "The other day, in fact..."

But a look from Athos silenced him. "You know, Raoul," said Athos, "you may think yourself a fine swordsman but such vanity can lead to a cruel disappointment. I want you to understand how dangerous a man is when he unites coolness and agility, and I can never offer you a more striking example than this. Tomorrow, if you ask Sir d'Artagnan very politely for a fencing lesson, and if he's not too tired, he might oblige you."

"Plague, Athos, you're a fine teacher yourself, especially regarding the qualities you attribute to me. Just today, Planchet mentioned that famous duel in the stable yard of the Luxembourg, versus Lord de Winter and his companions. Ah, young man," continued d'Artagnan, "somewhere around here must be the sword that I often called the finest blade in the realm."

"Bah! I've lost my touch while raising this child," said Athos.

"There're hands that never lose their touch," said d'Artagnan, "and just convey that touch to others." The young man would have liked to draw out this conversation all evening long but Athos told him their guest had travelled far and needed rest. D'Artagnan protested but Athos insisted that Raoul show him to his room. Athos followed, to make sure the stories of their younger days didn't continue, and brought the pleasant evening to a close with a friendly hand shake and a wish that the musketeer should have a good night.

D'Artagnan went to bed, not so much to sleep as to be alone, and think about what he'd seen and heard that evening. As he was good-natured and had had from first acquaintance with Athos an immediate liking that had ripened into sincere friendship, he was delighted to find him a strong man of acute intelligence rather than the drunken brute he'd expected to see, sleeping off some binge on a dunghill. He accepted without resentment Athos's superior qualities where they exceeded his own, instead of feeling the jealousy and pique that would have tainted a less generous nature, and in short felt a sincere and loyal joy that gave him hope for the outcome of his plans and proposals. However, it seemed to him that Athos had been less than frank and forthcoming with him on several points. Who was this young man who so resembled him, whom he claimed to have adopted? What was behind his return to the life of the world, and the exaggerated sobriety d'Artagnan had noticed at supper? And though it might seem insignificant, the absence of his servant Grimaud, whom Athos previously couldn't do without, had been left unexplained despite several opportunities, a lapse that worried d'Artagnan. It seemed he didn't have his friend's full confidence, or that Athos was bound by some secret obligation, and might even have been warned in advance about his visit. He couldn't help thinking of Rochefort, and what he'd told him at Notre Dame. Could Rochefort have warned Athos that d'Artagnan was coming? D'Artagnan had no time to waste on puzzling this all out. He resolved to find the answers to these questions on the following day. However, he also thought that it's best to ride cautiously over unknown terrain, and he probably should take several days in scouting out this new Athos to account for his changed ways and habits. If he could gain the confidence of the naïve young Raoul, perhaps by fencing or going hunting with him, he might be able to find out what

he needed to know to connect the new Athos with the Athos of times past. It ought to be easy, if the trusting frankness of his teacher was reflected in the heart and mind of the student. But d'Artagnan was wary of overplaying his hand with the young man by making an awkward interrogation, as he knew that one false move would be enough to uncover his manoeuvres to the eyes of Athos. Further, it must be said that d'Artagnan, though ready to employ finesse against sly Aramis, or take advantage of Porthos's vanity, was unwilling to try deceit on the noble and forthright Athos. It seemed to him that, while he might be able to outfox Aramis and Porthos in matters of diplomacy, he had no such chance with Athos. "Ah, why isn't silent old Grimaud here?" d'Artagnan mused. "His silence would have told me a lot, for never was anyone so eloquent in his silence as Grimaud!" Meanwhile, the daytime activity of the estate gradually wound down: he heard doors and shutters being closed, movement ceased, and the sound of dogs barking to each other across the fields slowed and then stopped. Finally, around midnight a nightingale that had been singing in a nearby grove trailed off and fell asleep. The only noise remaining in the château was a monotonous pacing from the room below his own that he supposed must be the bedchamber of Athos. *He's walking and thinking*, d'Artagnan thought *but about what? It's impossible to know. All one can guess is that it must be important to him.* Eventually even this sound ceased, and he assumed Athos had gone to bed. In the silence, fatigue crept up on d'Artagnan; he closed his eyes in his turn, and almost immediately fell asleep. D'Artagnan never needed much sleep. Dawn had scarcely gilded his curtains before he jumped out of bed and opened the windows. Through them he thought he saw someone prowling furtively and quietly across the stable yard. D'Artagnan had a habit of paying attention to everything that might be useful, so he silently watched the prowler until he recognised the garnet coat and dark hair of Raoul. The young man, for it was indeed Raoul, opened the stable door and brought out the bay horse he'd ridden the day before, and saddled and bridled it with as much speed and skill as an expert groom. Then he led the beast down the path to the garden, opened a small side gate that let out onto a trail, drew the horse outside, closed the gate behind, and mounted and rode off. Over the top of the wall d'Artagnan saw him fly by like an arrow, bending down under the overhanging branches of the maples and flowering acacias. D'Artagnan had noted the day before that that was the road to Blois. "Ah ha!" said the Gascon. "Here's a young gallant who doesn't share Athos's disdain for the fair sex. He's not going hunting, as he took neither arms nor dogs; he's not been sent with a message, because he's sneaking away. Is it me he's hiding from, or his father? ... Because I'm sure the count must be his father. *For God's sake!* I'll learn the answer, because I'll bring it up with Athos himself." The sun rose, and all the sounds d'Artagnan had heard grow silent the night before began successively to return, one after another: the birds in the branches, the dogs in the barn, the sheep in the field, even the boats on the Loire seemed to come alive, rocking at their moorings or bearing away with the current. To avoid disturbing anyone, d'Artagnan remained quietly at his window until he heard all the château's doors and shutters being thrown open. Then he combed back his hair, gave his moustache a final twist, brushed the edge of his hat against the sleeve of his coat, and went downstairs. He was on the last step of the bottom flight when he saw Athos outside in the garden, bent over the ground like a man looking for a lost coin. "*Hello*," said d'Artagnan.

"Hello, friend. Did you have a good night?"

"Very good, just like the supper that sent me there, and your reception before that. But what are you looking at with such care? Have you become a tulip fancier?"

"Don't mock, my friend. Living in the country, our tastes change, and we come to love all the beautiful things that God's gaze draws forth from the earth, and which we disdain in the cities. I was just looking at these irises planted by the pond that are bent and broken. I have the clumsiest gardeners in the world – they bring the horses out to water them, and walk them across the flowerbed."

D'Artagnan smiled. "Really? Is that what you think?" And he led his friend along the path, where other plants were similarly crushed. "Looks like there are more this way, Athos."

"But yes! Also freshly broken?"

"Just as fresh." said d'Artagnan.

"Who went this way this morning?" Athos wondered anxiously. "Has a horse escaped the stable?"

"Unlikely," said d'Artagnan, "since the hoof-prints are equal and regular."

"Where's Raoul?" cried Athos. "Why haven't I seen him?"

"Easy, now!" said d'Artagnan, putting a finger to his smiling lips.

"What's he done?" asked Athos. D'Artagnan related what he'd seen, while carefully watching his host's expression. "Ah! I guess it all now," said Athos, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "The poor boy has gone to Blois."

"To do what?"

"Eh, *my God!* To ask after the little girl, La Vallière. You recall, the child who sprained her ankle yesterday."

"You think so?" said d'Artagnan, incredulous.

"I not only think so, I'm sure of it," said Athos. "Haven't you noticed that Raoul is in love?"

"With whom? That seven-year-old child?"

"Friend, at Raoul's age, the heart is so full, it must overflow upon something, whether dream or reality. Well, his love for her is half of one and half the other."

"You're kidding me. That little girl?"

"Didn't you see her? She's the prettiest little thing in all the world: silver-blond hair, blue eyes adoring and mischievous at the same time."

"But what do you think of this feeling?"

"I don't oppose it, though I smile and gently make fun of Raoul. But a young heart's needs are so urgent, their feelings of yearning and melancholy so sweet and so sad, it often seems very much like true love. I remember when I was Raoul's age I fell in love with a Greek statue that good King Henry IV had given my father, and thought I'd go mad with grief when I was told that the story of Pygmalion was only a fable."

"A folly of idleness. You don't keep Raoul busy enough, so he fills the time in his own way."

"True enough. I've thought of moving away."

"Good idea."

"No doubt – but it would break his heart, and he'd suffer as much as if it were true love. For three or four years, since he himself was a child, he's admired and then adored this little doll, and if we stay here, it will ripen into true love. These youngsters share their dreams all day long and make plans as if they were lovers who were twenty years old. For a while, this made La Vallière's parents smile but now I think they're beginning to frown."

"Childishness! Raoul just needs something to distract him. Get him away from here soon, or, Morbleu, you'll never make a man of him!"

"I think," said Athos, "I'll send him to Paris."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. He thought this was his cue to begin his attack. "If you want," he said, "I think we'd make a career for this young man."

"Ah!" said Athos in his turn.

"I want to consult you on a certain matter I've been thinking about."

"Say on."

"Do you think it might be time to rejoin the service?"

"But haven't you been in the service all along, d'Artagnan?"

"No but listen: I mean active service. Aren't you tempted sometimes to return to our old life? I believe there are serious rewards to be gained and you could relive the exploits of our youth along with me and Porthos."

"So, you're making me an actual proposition!" said Athos.

"Honest and true."

"To take the field again?"

"Yes."

"Who for and who against?" asked Athos, fixing his clear and benevolent gaze on the Gascon.

"The devil! You come right to the point."

"And I hit what I aim at. Listen carefully, d'Artagnan. There is only one person, or rather one cause that a man like me can serve: that of the king."

"But of course," said the musketeer.

"Yes – but hear this," Athos said seriously. "If by the king's cause you mean that of Sir de Mazarin, we cease to understand each other."

"I didn't exactly say that," replied the Gascon, embarrassed.

"Come, d'Artagnan," said Athos, "no games. These little evasions tell me everything. Nobody likes to admit it when they're recruiting for Mazarin – they act sad and uncomfortable and won't look one in the eye."

"Oh, Athos!" said d'Artagnan.

"Oh, you know I don't mean you, who are a gem of courage and honesty," said Athos. "I'm talking about the cronies of this petty Italian intriguer who tries to wear a crown he stole off a pillow, this knave who calls his party the king's party, while daring to imprison royal princes – though he doesn't dare to execute them, as did our cardinal, the great cardinal. This skinflint, who weighs his golden crowns and pays only with the clipped coins, keeping the whole ones for himself. This buffoon whom we hear mistreats the queen, and prepares for civil war just to protect his stolen sources of income. Is this the master you propose I should serve? No, thank you!"

"You're fierier than you used to be, by God!" said d'Artagnan. "The years have warmed your blood instead of cooling it. So, you think this is the master I want you to serve?" And he thought: *Devil take me if I'll spill our secrets to someone so set against us.*

"If not that, friend," said Athos, "and then what do you propose?"

"*My God!* A simple alliance! You while away the time on your estate and seem happy in your golden daydream. Porthos has maybe fifty or sixty thousand livres of income, while Aramis has fifteen Duchesses who vie for the attention of the prelate, as they once did for the musketeer, and lives like a spoiled child. But me – what am I in this world? I've worn my breastplate and buff coat for twenty years, clinging to my paltry rank, without advance, retreat, or risk. In short, I'm dead. Well! When I think the time has come to resurrect myself, you all tell me, 'Don't serve that man! He's a knave! A buffoon! A petty tyrant! An *Italian!*' And I agree with you but so what? Find me a better master or show me where I can make a real living." Athos reflected for a few seconds and understood d'Artagnan's position – he'd pressed too far too fast, and now tried to draw back to hide his hand. But he saw clearly that the musketeer's initial proposals were in earnest and would have been developed further if he'd lent them a sympathetic ear. "Very well, then," he said to himself, "d'Artagnan is for Mazarin." From that moment, he conducted himself with extreme caution. On his side, d'Artagnan played a closer game as well. "But it seems to me you have a definite plan," Athos continued.

"Certainly. I wanted to take counsel of all three of you in order to find a common approach, since if we act on our own we'll always be incomplete."

"True enough. You spoke of Porthos – has he decided to seek for his fortune? It seems to me he has fortune enough."

"No doubt about it but man is so constituted that whatever he has, he wants something more."

"And what does Porthos want?"

"To be a baron."

"Oh, right, I'd forgotten," said Athos, laughing.

*You'd forgotten?* D'Artagnan thought. *And when had you learned it? Are you in contact with Aramis? Ah, if I knew that, it'd explain everything.* The conversation ended there, for just then Raoul came in. Athos had intended to scold him but the young man looked so stricken he didn't have the heart, and just asked him what had happened. "Has your little neighbour grown worse?" d'Artagnan said.

"Ah, Sir!" said Raoul, almost choking with grief. "The fall was serious, and though there may be no deformity, the doctor fears she'll limp for the rest of her life."

"Oh! How terrible!" said Athos.

D'Artagnan had had a joke on the tip of his tongue but seeing how hard Athos took this news, he swallowed it. "Ah, Sir, I'm so wretched!" replied Raoul. "This terrible event is all my fault."

"Yours, Raoul? How?" asked Athos.

"But yes! Wasn't she coming to me when she jumped off the top of that woodpile?"

"There's only one recourse, Raoul: you'll have to marry her in expiation," said d'Artagnan.

"Oh, Sir, you're joking about genuine pain," said Raoul. "It isn't right."

And Raoul, who wanted to be alone with his tears, returned to his room, where he remained until dinnertime. The mutual admiration of the two friends wasn't injured in the least by the morning's skirmish, and they dined with good appetite, glancing from time to time at poor Raoul who, with moist eyes and a heavy heart, ate hardly anything. As they were finishing their meal, two letters arrived that Athos read with close attention, starting several times despite himself. D'Artagnan, who watched him reading these letters from across the table, and whose eyesight was keen, swore to himself that he recognised on one the compact handwriting of Aramis, and on the other the long, looping hand of a woman. "Come," said d'Artagnan to Raoul, seeing that Athos wished to be alone to think about these letters or respond to them, "let's go spar a bit in the armoury. It will distract you."

The young man looked at Athos, who replied with a nod of assent. They went to the *room* on the ground floor, where they found foils, masks, gloves, plastrons, and all the other accessories of fencing. Fifteen minutes later Athos came in. "Well?" he said.

"He has your moves down already, Athos," said d'Artagnan. "If he only had your cool, I'd have nothing but praise for him..."

As for the young man, he was a trifle ashamed. He'd managed to touch d'Artagnan no more than a couple of times, on the arm and thigh, while the musketeer had buttoned him twenty times full on the body. At that moment, Charlot came in bearing an urgent letter for d'Artagnan that had just come by messenger. Now it was Athos's turn to watch from the corner of his eye as d'Artagnan read. The musketeer read the letter with no visible sign of emotion, other than a curt nod when he reached the end. "See here, my friend," he said, "this is the service for you, and no wonder you've had enough of it. Sir de Tréville has fallen ill, and the company can't do without me, so my leave is at its end."

"You're returning to Paris?" asked Athos sharply.

"Yes, by God!" said d'Artagnan. "Why don't you come yourself?"

Athos coloured slightly and replied, "If I come to town, it will please me to look you up."

"*Whoa*, Planchet!" cried d'Artagnan from the door. "We leave in ten minutes; make sure the horses get oats." Then, turning to Athos: "My visit here just doesn't feel complete. It seems a shame to leave without once greeting good old Grimaud."

"Grimaud?" said Athos. "I'm surprised it took you this long to ask me about him. I lent him to a friend of mine."

"Someone who will understand his signs and gestures?" said d'Artagnan.

"I hope so," said Athos.

The two friends embraced warmly. D'Artagnan pressed Raoul's hand, and made Athos promise to visit him if he came to Paris and write to him if he didn't. He mounted his horse; Planchet, ever correct, was already in the saddle. D'Artagnan smiled at Raoul. "Why don't you ride along with me? I'm going right past Blois."

Raoul glanced at Athos, who restrained him with a subtle gesture. "Sorry, Sir," the young man replied, "I'll stay here with Sir Count."

"In that case, farewell to both of you, my good friends," said d'Artagnan, pressing their hands one last time, "and God guard you! ... As we used to say when we took our leave in the time of the late cardinal."

Athos waved his hand, Raoul bowed, and d'Artagnan and Planchet rode off. The count followed them with his eyes, his hand resting on the shoulder of the young man, whose height almost equalled his own. But as soon as they were out of sight, he turned to Raoul and said, "We leave this evening for Paris."

"What! Why?" said the young man, turning pale.

"You may go and tender my farewell, and yours, to Madam de Saint-Rémy. I'll expect you back by seven." The young man bowed, his expression a mixture of grief and gratitude, and went off to go saddle his horse. As for d'Artagnan, as soon as they were out of sight, he drew the letter from his pocket and reread it:

*Return with all speed to Paris.*

– J.M.

"This letter is rather curt," murmured d'Artagnan, "and if it didn't have a postscript, I might pretend I'd never received it – but fortunately it does have a postscript." And he reread the postscript that made up for the letter's brevity:

*P.S.: Call on the royal treasurer in Blois, tell him your name and show him this letter, and he will issue you two hundred pistoles.*

"That changes things," d'Artagnan said. "When the cardinal writes like that, then I like his style. Come, Planchet, we'll pay a visit to the royal treasurer, and then spur on."

"To Paris, Sir?"

"To Paris." And they put their horses into a trot.

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Sir Beaufort

Here are the events that had necessitated d'Artagnan's sudden return to Paris. One evening when Mazarin, as usual, was on his way to the queen's suite after everyone else had retired, and was passing near the guardroom, one door of which opened onto his antechamber, he heard loud voices. Wishing to know what the soldiers were talking about, he approached in his usual stealthy manner, pushed the door open slightly, and peeked in. The guards were having a heated discussion. "Well, I assure you," said one of them, "if Coysel predicted something, it's as good as already happened. I've heard it said that he's not just an astrologer but an actual magician."

"If he's one of your friends, then watch what you're saying, plague take it! You'll do him an injury."

"What do you mean?"

"You're liable to get him arrested."

"Bah! Nobody burns witches anymore."

"No? It seems to me it hasn't been that long since the late cardinal burned Urbain Grandier. I ought to know – I was on duty at the stake and saw him roasted."

"Oh, Grandier wasn't a sorcerer, he was a scholar that is another thing entirely. He didn't predict the future, he studied the lessons of the past – which can be much worse, if you learn the wrong things."

Mazarin nodded in agreement – but he wanted to know what prediction they were talking about, so he continued to eavesdrop. "I don't say Coysel isn't a wizard," the second guard replied, "but I do say that if you announce your prediction in advance, that's a sure way to see it thwarted."

"Why?"

"Listen, if we're fencing, and I tell you, 'I'm going to give you a straight thrust, then a thrust *en second*,' then naturally you'll parry. Well, if Coysel said loud enough for the cardinal to hear, 'Before a certain date, a certain prisoner will escape,' it's obvious the cardinal will then take precautions to make sure the prisoner does *not* escape."

"Eh? *My God*," said a third guard, who'd appeared to be asleep on a bench but who'd actually not missed a word of the conversation, "*my God*, do you think a man can escape his destiny? If it's written in the stars that the Duke Beaufort will escape, then Beaufort will escape, and all the cardinal's precautions won't stop him."

Mazarin started. He was Italian – in other words, superstitious. He went in, and the guards, seeing him, halted their conversation. "What did you say, gentlemen?" he said in a silky voice. "You said Monsieur de Beaufort had escaped, I think?"

"Oh, no, my Lord!" said the second soldier, surprised. "He's still under guard. It's just said that he *will* escape."

"Who said that?"

"Come, repeat your story, Saint-Laurent," said the soldier, turning toward the tale-teller.

"My Lord," said the first guard, "I merely told these gentlemen what I've heard of the prediction of a man named Coysel who claims that, no matter how well he's guarded, Monsieur de Beaufort will escape by Pentecost."

"And this Coysel, is he a dreamer, a fool?" asked the cardinal, still smiling.

"Not at all," said the guard, sticking to his story. "He's predicted many things that have come to pass, such as that the queen would give birth to a son, that Coligny would be killed in his duel with the Duke de Guise, and that the coadjutor will be made a cardinal. Well, Coligny was killed, and the queen not only had a son but two years later she had another."

"Yes," said Mazarin, "but the coadjutor is not yet a cardinal."

"No, my Lord," said the guard, "but he will be."

Mazarin made a face that said, *He doesn't have that cardinal's hat yet*. Then he added, "So you think, *my friend* that Sir Beaufort will escape?"

"No doubt about it, My Lord," said the soldier. "If Your Eminence offered to give me Monsieur de Chavigny's\* job as warden of the Château de Vincennes, I wouldn't take it. Now, the day after Pentecost, that would be another story."

There is nothing more convincing than conviction; it's persuasive even to sceptics, and far from being a sceptic, Mazarin, as we've said, was superstitious. He turned and went thoughtfully on his way.

"The tightwad!" said the guard on the bench. "He pretended not to believe in your magician, Saint-Laurent, so he wouldn't have to tip you for the warning. But as soon as he's back in his study he'll be profiting from your prediction."

In fact, instead of continuing on to the queen's chambers, Mazarin did return to his study, where, summoning Bernouin, he gave orders that on the morrow, at dawn, he should send for the officer in charge of Monsieur de Beaufort, and that Mazarin should be awakened as soon as the officer arrived. Without knowing it, the guard had touched the cardinal in a sore spot. For five years Beaufort had been in prison but not a day passed that the cardinal didn't think that he might escape. One couldn't expect to keep the grandson of Henry IV in prison all his life, especially when that grandson of Henry IV was scarcely thirty years old. But if he did escape, what hatred, forged in captivity, would he bear for his captor, the man who had taken the rich, brave, and splendid Beaufort – loved by women, feared by men – and stolen the best years of his life by clapping him in prison?

Already, Mazarin had doubled the watch around Beaufort – but he was like the miser in the fable who could sleep only with his treasure in sight. Often, he awoke in the night with a start, dreaming of Beaufort's escape. Then he would send to inquire after him, and each time was pained to hear that the prisoner still gamed, drank, and sang cheerfully – but while gaming, drinking, and singing, he would pause now and then to vow that Mazarin would pay dearly for all the pleasures he was forced to take in Vincennes instead of in freedom. Such thoughts haunted the minister during his sleep that night, and when Bernouin entered his room to wake him at seven the next morning, his first words were, "Eh? What is it? Has Monsieur de Beaufort escaped from Vincennes?"

"I think not, My Lord," said Bernouin, whose professional calm never left him, "but in any case, we'll soon know all the latest, because the officer you sent for, La Ramée,\* has arrived from Vincennes and is awaiting Your Eminence's orders."

"Bring him in," said Mazarin, arranging his pillows so as to receive him sitting in bed.

The officer entered. He was a large, portly man, good-looking, with an air of ease that worried Mazarin. "This buffoon seems less than clever," he murmured.

La Ramée stood silently in the doorway. "Come in, Monsieur!" said Mazarin.

The officer obeyed. "Do you know what they're saying here?" continued the cardinal.

"No, your Eminence."

"Well! They're saying that Monsieur de Beaufort is going to escape from Vincennes – in fact, it's as good as done."

The officer gaped in surprise. He squinted and wrinkled his nose, as if trying to scent the joke in what His Eminence was telling him, then opened his eyes wide and burst out laughing, the flesh all over his large figure shaking with hilarity. Mazarin was secretly delighted by this disrespectful display but maintained his grave expression. When La Ramée had had a good laugh and was wiping his eyes, the officer thought it was time to explain his inappropriate mirth. "Escape, My Lord!" he said. "Escape! Is Your Eminence not aware of Monsieur de Beaufort's situation?"

"I know he's in the dungeon at Vincennes."

"Yes, my Lord, in a room with walls seven feet thick, and iron crossbars on the windows as thick as my arm."

"Sir," said Mazarin, "with patience one can bore through walls, and a watch spring can saw through a bar."

"But my Lord should know that he has eight guards at all times, four in the antechamber and four in his room, and these guards never leave him."

"But he leaves his room to go out and play tennis!"

"Well, yes, my Lord, for the prisoners must exercise. However, if Your Eminence commands, exercise will be forbidden."

"No need of that," said Mazarin, who didn't want to be too hard on the prisoner for fear of how vindictive he'd be if he ever did escape. "But I must ask with whom he plays tennis."

"Sir, he plays with the officer of the guards, or with me, or with the other prisoners."

"But doesn't that sometimes take him near the walls?"

"Has Your Eminence seen our walls? There's a sixty-foot drop from the parapet, and I doubt whether Monsieur de Beaufort is so weary of life that he's willing to risk breaking his neck by jumping down."

"Hmm!" said the cardinal, who began to be reassured. "So, you think, then, my dear Sir La Ramée...?"

"I think that unless Monsieur de Beaufort finds a way to change into a bird, I can answer for him."

"Beware of overconfidence!" Mazarin replied. "Monsieur de Beaufort told the guards who escorted him to Vincennes that he'd often thought he might be imprisoned and had devised forty methods of escaping from it."

"My Lord, if even one of those forty methods had been any good, he'd have been gone a long time ago."

"Come now," muttered Mazarin, "he's not as stupid as I thought."

"Besides, my Lord forgets that Sir de Chavigny is the governor of Vincennes," continued La Ramée, "and Monsieur de Chavigny is no friend to the Duke Beaufort."

"Yes but Monsieur de Chavigny is away."

"He may be away but I'm still there."

"And when you're away as well?"

"Oh, when I'm away, I have an assistant who hopes to become a royal officer, and who, I assure you, is a most vigilant guard. He's been with me for three weeks now, and my only complaint is that he's too hard on the prisoner."

"And who is this Cerberus?" asked the cardinal.

"A certain Monsieur Grimaud, my Lord."

"And what did he do before he came to Vincennes?"

"The one who recommended him said he was a country man who'd gotten into some kind of terrible trouble and hoped to find safety inside a royal uniform."

"And who recommended him?"

"The Duke Grammont's steward."

"So, you think he's reliable?"

"As reliable as I am, my Lord."

"Is he a chatterer, this fellow?"

"Lord, no! At first, I thought he must be a mute, as he spoke and answered only with signs but it seems that's just how his former master trained him."

"Well, then, my dear Monsieur La Ramée, tell him that if he makes a good and faithful guard, we'll overlook his problems in the provinces – we'll put a proper uniform on him, and put a few pistoles in its pockets so he can drink to the health of the king."

Mazarin was big on promises – quite the opposite of Monsieur Grimaud, who spoke little but did much, as La Ramée had boasted. The cardinal peppered La Ramée with a shower of further questions about the prisoner, how he was fed, lodged, and furnished but the latter's answers were so satisfactory that by the time he was dismissed, the cardinal was almost reassured. By then it was nine in the morning, so the cardinal got up, perfumed and dressed himself, and went to the queen to tell her what had kept him. The queen, who feared Sir Beaufort no less than the cardinal, and was nearly as superstitious as he was, made him repeat word for word all La Ramée's promises and the praise he'd heaped on his assistant. When he was finished, she said, "If only we had such a Grimaud shadowing every prince!"

"Patience," said Mazarin, with his Italian smile, "that may come in time. Meanwhile..."

"Meanwhile? What?"

"I'll take certain precautions." And with that, he went off to write the order commanding d'Artagnan's return.

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How the Duke of Beaufort amused himself in the Dungeon of Vincennes

That prisoner so feared by the cardinal, whose potential escape preoccupied the entire Court, had no idea how often they thought about him at the Royal Palace. He recognised the futility of trying to escape, so he kept himself busy by devising new ways to outrage or insult Mazarin. He had even tried writing satirical verses but had soon given up, as heaven hadn't granted him the gift of poetry – in fact he had a great deal of difficulty expressing himself in simple prose. As Baron de Blot, the great satirist of the age, had said about Beaufort:

*In a fight he shines, he thunders!  
A cannon on the loose!  
But when he thinks, he blunders  
And we take him for a goose  
Even Gaston, when he talks  
Can manage how to speak  
Beaufort's tongue just balks  
Much as Gaston's arm is weak!*

So this prisoner confined himself to insults and curses. The Duke Beaufort was the grandson of Henry IV and his mistress Gabrielle d'Estrées – as strong, as brave, as proud, and above all, as Gascon as his grandfather, though far less literate. For a while, after the death of King Louis XIII, he'd been the queen's confidant, the leading favourite at Court – until he'd had to give way to Mazarin and found himself reduced to second place. He'd had the bad judgement to be angry at this demotion, and even worse to complain loudly about it, so the queen – and by the queen, we mean Mazarin – had had him arrested and taken to Vincennes by that same Guitaut we met at the beginning of our story, and whom we'll meet again later. Thereafter the queen and Mazarin were freed from his person and his pretensions, and he troubled them no more, popular prince though he was. For five years he'd lived in a small chamber in the dungeon of the royal castle of Vincennes. This period of incarceration that might have taught wisdom to someone other than Beaufort, had passed over his head without making any impression on him. It might have occurred to someone else that if he hadn't offended the cardinal, insulted the other princes, and made no effort to create a following, except, as the Cardinal de Retz said, for a few sad and sorry dreamers, he might have been at liberty for the last five years, or at least had some defenders. But such thoughts never even occurred to the duke, whose long imprisonment had only served to make him more petulant, and every report about him that reached His Eminence just reaffirmed the cardinal's decision to imprison him. After failing at poetry, Beaufort decided to try painting. He made sketches of the cardinal with charcoal but as his artistic talent was mediocre and the likenesses didn't much resemble their subject, to make it clear who they were supposed to represent, he titled them all, "*Ritratto dell'Illustrissimo Facchino Mazarini*." [The Portrait of the Illustrious Porter Mazarin]

Chavigny, warned about this, visited the duke and begged him to take up another hobby, or at least to leave his portraits untitled. But Sir de Beaufort, like many prisoners, took great pleasure in juvenile acts of defiance, and the next day, the walls of Beaufort's room were covered in portraits with prominent titles. Chavigny was informed about these additional portraits that were all done in profile, as Beaufort wasn't good at full faces. One day, while Sir de Beaufort was playing tennis, Chavigny had the portraits sponged off and the walls whitewashed. Beaufort thanked Chavigny for giving him so much clean drawing space and made each wall a new gallery dedicated to some aspect of the life of Cardinal Mazarin. The first gallery represented the Illustrious Scoundrel Mazarin being soundly thrashed by Cardinal Bentivoglio, in whose service he'd begun his career. In the second, the Illustrious Scoundrel was playing the part of the wounded Ignatius Loyola in the tragedy of that name. The third showed the Scoundrel stealing the portfolio of prime minister from Chavigny, who'd thought he was going to have it. In the fourth, the Scoundrel was refusing to give clean sheets to La Porte, the valet of young Louis XIV, saying that clean sheets once per season was often enough for a King of France. These compositions, large and rather complicated, were beyond the prisoner's ability to depict in detail, so he contented himself with simply drawing their frames and lettering out their long titles. But these frames and titles were enough to provoke Sir de Chavigny, who sent word to Beaufort that if he didn't give up these artistic projects, he would be denied their means of execution. Beaufort replied that since he'd been denied the opportunity to have a career in arms, and couldn't be a Bayard or a Trivulce, then he would be a Michelangelo or a Raphael. One day while Beaufort was taking a promenade in the prison yard, his fireplace was swept clean of coal and cinders, so that when he returned there was nothing he could use as a charcoal pencil. Beaufort swore, ranting and raving that they were trying to kill him with cold and damp, the way they'd killed Puylaurens, Marshal Ornano, and the younger Vendome – but Chavigny replied that Beaufort had only to give his word to make no more drawings, and he could have all the firewood he wanted. Sir de Beaufort refused to give his word and went without heat for the rest of the winter. Furthermore, on another day while the prisoner was out upon returning he found the room once again whitewashed and without a trace of his frescos. Sir de Beaufort then bought from one of his guards a dog named Pistachio. As there was no rule against a prisoner having a dog, Chavigny didn't oppose the creature's change of master. Beaufort then spent many quiet hours with this dog, and though it was suspected he was training Pistachio, no one knew what he was training it to do. One day, when Pistachio's training was considered complete, Beaufort invited Chavigny and all the officers of Vincennes to a grand performance in his chamber. The guests arrived to find the room lit with every candle Beaufort could get. The performance then began. The prisoner, with a piece of plaster pried from the wall, had drawn a long white line representing a rope on the floor down the middle of the room. Pistachio, at his master's command, placed himself on the line, stood up on his hind legs, and holding a stick used to beat clothes between his forepaws, began to follow the line, with all the balancing contortions of a tight-rope walker. After three times walking the length of the line back and forth, he gave the stick to Sir de Beaufort, then walked the line again without the stick for balance. The intelligent animal was lauded with applause. The performance had three acts; the first completed, it moved on to the second: telling time. The audience was asked what time it was. Sir de Chavigny showed his watch to Pistachio; the time was half past six. Pistachio raised and lowered his paw six times; on the seventh, he left it in the air. It was as clear as could be and was better than a sundial – for as everyone knows, a sundial tells time only when the sun shines. Next, the dog was asked to show who the finest jailer in all the prisons of France was. Pistachio went three times around in a circle, then laid down in the most respectful way at the feet of Chavigny. The governor pretended to enjoy the joke, laughing just enough to show his teeth. When he'd finished laughing, he gnawed his lip and began to frown. Finally, Beaufort put this difficult question to Pistachio: Who was the world's greatest thief? Pistachio went all around the room but didn't stop at anyone, then went to the door, where he scratched at the panel and whined. "See, Gentlemen," said the prince, "this clever animal, not finding what I asked for, wants to look elsewhere. But don't worry, you'll get his answer. Pistachio, my friend, come here." The dog obeyed. "Is the world's greatest thief Le Camus, the king's secretary, who came to Paris with only twenty livres, and now has ten million?"

The dog shook his head *no*. "Is it Superintendent d'Émery," continued the prince, "who gave his son Sir Thoré, upon his marriage, three hundred thousand livres and a mansion near the Tuileries compared to which the Louvre is a shack?"

The dog shook his head *no*.

"Not him, eh?" said the prince. "Now listen carefully: is it, by any chance, the Illustrious Scoundrel Mazarini of Piscina then?"

The dog nodded wildly, raising and lowering his head nine or ten times. "You see, Gentlemen," said Beaufort to the officers, who this time didn't dare to laugh, "The Illustrious Scoundrel Mazarini is the world's greatest thief – at least, according to Pistachio."

And then it was time for the third and final act. "Gentlemen," said the Duke Beaufort into the sudden silence, "you all remember how the Duke Guise had all the dogs of Paris trained to jump for Miss de Pons when he declared her the fairest of the fair! Well, Gentlemen, that was nothing, because the animals didn't know the dissidence" – he meant *difference* but Sir de Beaufort often chose the wrong word – "between those they were to jump for, and those they weren't. Now Pistachio will show you how superior he is to his canine colleagues. Sir de Chavigny, be so kind as to lend me your cane."

Chavigny handed his walking stick to Beaufort, who held it horizontally one foot above the floor. "Pistachio, my friend," Beaufort said, "oblige me by jumping for Madam de Montbazon."

Everyone laughed, because it was well known that Madam de Montbazon had been Beaufort's mistress at the time of his arrest. Pistachio didn't hesitate and jumped happily over the cane. "But," said Chavigny, "it seems to me Pistachio does no more than the other dogs did when they jumped for Miss de Pons."

"Wait for it," said the prince. He raised the cane by six inches. "Now, Pistachio, jump for the queen."

The dog jumped respectfully over the cane. The duke raised the cane six more inches. "Now, Pistachio, jump for the king."

The dog was game, and despite the height of the cane, leapt lightly over it. "And now, pay attention," said the duke, lowering the cane nearly to the floor. "Pistachio, my friend, jump for the Illustrious Scoundrel Mazarini of Piscina."

The dog turned his back on the cane. "What's this, then?" said Sir de Beaufort, going around the animal from its back to its front. He presented the cane again. "Jump, Sir Pistachio." But Pistachio again turned around and put his back to the cane. Sir de Beaufort once more stepped in front of the dog and repeated his command – but this time Pistachio lost his patience, seized the cane with his teeth, snatched it from the prince, and chewed it to splinters. Beaufort pried the cane's pieces from the dog's jaws, and then solemnly presented them to Chavigny with his sincerest regrets. He was sorry but

the performance was over – however, if they would return in three months for another session, Pistachio would regale them with a new set of tricks. Three days later, Pistachio was found poisoned. They searched for the poisoner but as may be imagined, the culprit was never identified. Sir de Beaufort buried the dog, over which he placed this epitaph:

Here lies Pistachio, One of the Smartest Dogs Who Ever Lived

This broke none of the prison rules, so Sir de Chavigny had nothing to complain about. But then the duke spread the word that in poisoning his dog, they were just testing concoctions to try on him – and one day, after dinner, he went to bed crying out that he had cramps, and Mazarin had had him poisoned. When news of this latest trick reached the cardinal, he was alarmed. The dungeon of Vincennes was notoriously unhealthy: Madam de Rambouillet had quipped that the chamber wherein Puylaurens, Marshal Omano, and Grand Prior Vendome had died was worth its weight in arsenic, and the phrase had become a watchword. Mazarin ordered that the prisoner be served no food or honey that hadn’t been tested. That’s when La Ramée had been appointed to serve near the duke as his taster. However, Chavigny wasn’t satisfied with the death of the innocent Pistachio, and hadn’t yet pardoned the duke’s impertinence. Sir de Chavigny was a creature of the late cardinal – some even said he was his son – and knew a few of the old tyrant’s tricks. He deliberately began to provoke Sir de Beaufort: he removed what he had left of iron knives and silver forks, replacing them with silver knives and wooden forks; when Beaufort complained, Chavigny replied that as the cardinal had recently told Madam de Vendome that her son was in prison for life, he was afraid this terrible news might result in a suicide attempt. Two weeks later, Beaufort found two rows of saplings newly planted along the path to the tennis court; when he asked about them, he was told they were intended to provide shade for him far into the future. Finally, one morning the gardener came to say that they were planting asparagus shoots for him that everyone knows take years to mature – five back in those days, though in our time advances in gardening have gotten it down to four. These provocations drove Beaufort into a fury. The duke thought it was time to start employing his forty methods of escape, starting with the simplest, and an attempt to corrupt La Ramée. But as La Ramée had invested fifteen hundred crowns in purchasing his office, he stuck to his duty, and instead of succumbing to the attempted bribe, went and reported it to Chavigny. The governor immediately put eight men in the prince’s rooms, doubled the guard, and tripled the sentries. From that moment, the prince went everywhere like one of those theatrical kings who’s always followed by a chorus, four men before and four men behind, not counting the door-wardens who trailed the rest. At first Beaufort laughed off this increased security, saying, “It amuses and diversifies me” (he meant *diverts*). “Besides,” he added, “when I tire of these additional honours bestowed on me, I still have thirty-nine other methods.” But living in a crowd began to wear upon him. He got through the first six months of it on sheer bluster but eventually, seeing eight other men sit down whenever he sat, rise when he got up, and stop wherever he stopped, his mood darkened, and he began to count the days. This new persecution provoked a resurgence of his hate for Mazarin. The prince began to swear from morning till night, vowing he’d make mince pie of Mazarin’s ears. This was alarming; the cardinal, who heard everything that happened in Vincennes, pulled his biretta down over his ears. One day Beaufort assembled all his guards and, despite his notorious speech issues, regaled them with this oratory that had obviously been prepared in advance: “Gentlemen, if you continue to tolerate the grandson of good King Henry IV being subjected to gross insults and ignobility” – he meant *ignominies* – “then *by the belly of the Grey Saint*, as my grandfather used to swear! I was nearly the ruler of Paris – did you know that? Once I was charged with guarding the king and Sir for an entire day, and the queen flattered me and said I was the most honest man in the kingdom. Gentlemen, I say to you now: take me outside! With you as my bodyguard, I’ll go to the Louvre, twist Mazarin’s neck for him, and appoint you all officers with fine pensions. *By the belly of the Grey Saint!* Forward, march!” But, as moving as that was, the eloquence of the grandson of Henry IV failed to touch their stony hearts, and no one budged. Seeing this, Beaufort told them they were all blackguards that made bitter enemies of the lot of them.

Sometimes when Sir de Chavigny came to see him that he did two or three times a week, the duke took advantage of the visit to threaten him. “What will you do, Sir,” he’d say, “when one day an army of Parisians appears, all armoured and bristling with muskets, come to liberate me?”

“My Lord,” answered Chavigny, bowing low, “as I have twenty artillery pieces on my ramparts, and thirty thousand rounds in my magazines, I’d do my best to cannonade them.”

“Yes but after you’d fired off your thirty thousand rounds, they would take the dungeon, and once the dungeon was taken I’d be forced to let them hang you – for which I’d be very sorry, I’m sure.” And in his turn the prince bowed profoundly and politely to Chavigny. “But I, My Lord,” continued Chavigny, “when the first of the rabble burst in through my posterns, or clambered over my wall, would be forced, to my very great regret, to personally kill you with my own hands, as you have been placed in my particular care, not to be given up dead or alive.”

And once again he saluted His Highness. “Yes,” continued the duke, “but since those brave citizens won’t have come here without first taking the time to hang Sir Guilio Mazarini, you would do well to keep your hands off of me, for fear of the Parisians tying you to four horses and quartering you in your own courtyard – which is even less pleasant than hanging, as those things go.”

These exchanges of pleasantries could go on for ten, fifteen, or even twenty minutes but they always ended the same way, with Chavigny turning toward the door and shouting, “*Whoa!* La Ramée!”

La Ramée would come in. “La Ramée,” Chavigny would say, “I commend Sir de Beaufort to your care. Treat him with the respect due to his name and rank, and don’t let him out of your sight for a moment.” Then he would retire, saluting Beaufort with such ironical politeness that it threw the duke into a blue fury. La Ramée had therefore become the prince’s virtual twin, his eternal guardian and second shadow – but it must be said that La Ramée, that bon vivant, free liver, jolly drinking companion, fine tennis player, and all-around good fellow, had only one real fault as far as Beaufort was concerned, that of being incorruptible. Instead of being tiresome, he’d become for the prince a genuine diversion. Unfortunately, La Ramée couldn’t say the same about the prince, and though he valued the honour of being locked up with such an important prisoner, the pleasure of living cheek-by-jowl with the grandson of Henry IV didn’t compensate for almost never seeing his family. He might have had the good fortune to be an officer of the king but he was also a devoted father and husband. La Ramée adored his wife and children, and though he could see them occasionally from the top of the wall, when to give him some familial consolation they would take a walk along the other side of the moat, it was far too little for him. La Ramée felt that his jovial good humour that he regarded as the basis of his good health – though in truth it was probably the reverse – was at risk of being lost to so rigorous a routine. This belief only grew stronger when, the relationship between Beaufort and Chavigny having soured to hatred, Chavigny stopped visiting the prince. La Ramée then felt the burden of his responsibility weighing on him – so when, as mentioned earlier, he was in search of some relief, he found it in the recommendation of Marshal Grammont’s steward that he take on an underling. He immediately brought up the idea with Sir de Chavigny, who said he had no objection provided the new subordinate suited him. We’ll spare our readers a detailed portrait of Grimaud, since if they remember him from the preceding works in this series, they’ll recall his estimable character that was unchanged except for being twenty years older. The years had made him only more taciturn and stoic – though, considering the role he was to enact, Athos had given him full permission to speak. But by then Grimaud had hardly said a word for a dozen years or more, and so prolonged a habit becomes second nature.

## 190 Grimaud assumes his Post

Grimaud brought all these fine qualities with him to his interview at the dungeon of Vincennes. Sir de Chavigny prided himself on having an infallible eye for character that if true would have been an argument for him really being the son of Cardinal Richelieu, as the persistent story had it. So, he carefully examined the applicant, noting with approval his narrowed eyebrows, thin lips, hooked nose, and sharp cheekbones, all of which recommended him. He addressed Grimaud with twelve words; Grimaud replied with four. “Here’s an able lad, or I’m no judge of men,” Chavigny said to himself. “Go report to Sir La Ramée, and if you satisfy him, you satisfy me.”

Grimaud turned on his heel and went to subject himself to the more rigorous inspection of La Ramée, who was all the more meticulous because he knew Sir de Chavigny was relying on him, so he needed to be able to rely on Grimaud. Grimaud had just the qualities one would look for in a subordinate officer, so, after a thousand questions that received monosyllabic answers, La Ramée, fascinated by the man’s austere economy of words, rubbed his hands in satisfaction and signed Grimaud on. “Orders?” asked Grimaud.

“They are these: never leave our sole prisoner alone, confiscate all sharp implements, and don’t let him signal to outsiders or speak at length with his guards.”

“That’s all?” asked Grimaud.

“That will do for the moment,” replied La Ramée. “New circumstances, if any, will bring new orders.”

“Good,” replied Grimaud.

And he went in to join the Duke Beaufort. The duke was trying to comb out his hair and beard that he’d been growing out wild and untamed, to dismay Mazarin with reports of his general deterioration – but a few days earlier he thought he’d recognised, from the walls of the keep, the carriage of the lovely Madam de Montbazon, whose memory was so dear to him, and the thought of her carried more weight than thoughts of Mazarin. In hopes of seeing her again he’d decided to groom himself and had asked for a leaden comb that had been granted him. Beaufort had asked for a leaden comb because, like all blonds, his beard was a bit red, and he darkened it by passing a lead comb through it. Grimaud came in, saw the comb the prince had just set down on a table, bowed politely, and took it. The duke looked at this strange intruder with astonishment as the newcomer put the comb into his pocket. “What the hell?” cried the duke, “What are you doing, you clown?”

For an answer, Grimaud just bowed a second time. “Are you a mute?” the duke shouted. Grimaud shook his head. “What are you, then? Answer, I command you!”

“Guard,” replied Grimaud.

“A guard!” cried the duke. “Great. The only thing my situation lacked was this sinister lout. Whoa! La Ramée! Anyone!”

At this call, La Ramée came running – but unfortunately for the prince, La Ramée, counting on Grimaud to take his place, had been already halfway across the courtyard, and had to climb, wheezing, back up to the cell. “What is it, my Prince?” he asked.

“Who is this bandit who comes in, takes my comb, and puts it in his pocket?” Beaufort demanded.

“This is one of your guards, My Lord. He has many fine qualities that I’m sure you’ll come to appreciate as much as Sir de Chavigny and I do.”

“But why did he take my comb?”

“In fact,” said La Ramée, “why *did* you take My Lord’s comb?”

Grimaud took the comb from his pocket, pressed its teeth into his finger, showed the marks it made, and said a single word: “Sharp.”

“That’s ... true,” said La Ramée.

“What does this animal say?” demanded the duke.

“By royal order, My Lord may have no sharp implements.”

“*Ah cà?*” said the duke. “Are you crazy, La Ramée? But you gave me this comb yourself.”

“And I was wrong to do so, My Lord, because it was in contravention of my orders.”

The duke glared furiously at Grimaud who gave the comb to La Ramée. “I think I’m going to hate this clown,” the prince murmured. Indeed, there are no neutral feelings in prison: everything, people or practices, are loved or hated, sometimes with reason but more often by instinct. Now, for the simple reason that Grimaud at first blush had pleased Chavigny and La Ramée, his virtues in the eyes of the governor and the officer had become vices to Beaufort, and hated by him. On his side, Grimaud didn’t want to drive the prisoner into a fury on the very first day – for his purposes he needed, not an outburst of temper but a good, reliable, ongoing hatred. So, he withdrew when the four guards came in with the prince’s dinner. Meanwhile, the prince was eagerly contriving a new joke: he’d asked for crawfish for lunch the following day and had spent this day building a cute little gallows in the middle of his room upon which to hang them. The red colour of the boiled crawfish would leave no doubt about the target of this allusion; he would thus have the pleasure of hanging the cardinal in effigy, while imagining he was hanging him in reality – and nobody could reasonably complain about the hanging of a crawfish. The day was spent in happy preparation for the execution. One returns to childhood when imprisoned, and Beaufort had become more juvenile than ever. On his usual walk, he collected two or three small branches destined to play a role in his comedy, and after much searching, found a piece of broken glass, a discovery that pleased him no end. When he returned to his room, he began unravelling the threads of his handkerchief. None of these details escaped the sharp eyes of Officer Grimaud. The next morning the little gallows was complete, and set up in the middle of the room, where Sir de Beaufort finished trimming its wooden legs with his shard of glass. La Ramée watched with the curiosity of a father who’s always on the lookout for a new toy for his children, while the four guards slumped idly nearby with the bored air that, then as now, is the principal hallmark of the professional soldier. Grimaud came in just as the prince put down his shard of glass, interrupting his work of miniature carpentry to tie his handkerchief-threads into a noose. He gave Grimaud a dirty look that showed he hadn’t forgiven him for the day before but he was so preoccupied with his current project he paid him no further attention. But when he’d finished tying a sailor’s knot in one end of his string and a noose in the other, and examined the dish of crawfish in order to choose the most majestic, he turned back to pick up his piece of glass – and the shard of glass was gone. “Who took my piece of glass?” huffed the prince. Grimaud made a sign to show that he had. “What? You again! And why did you take it?”

“Yes,” asked La Ramée, “why did you take His Highness’s piece of glass?”

Grimaud, who was holding the fragment of glass, passed his fingertip across its edge, and said, “Sharp.”

“He’s quite right, My Lord,” said La Ramée. “The devil! This lad’s as sharp as that glass.”

“Sir Grimaud,” said the prince, “I warn you, for your own good, keep well out of reach of my hands.”

Grimaud bowed and withdrew to the far side of the room. “Tut-tut, My Lord, I’ll do it,” said La Ramée. “I’ll finish trimming your little gallows with my knife.”

“You?” said the duke, laughing.

“Yes, me. Don’t you want it to be finished properly?”



"I do!" said the duke. "Go to it, my dear La Ramée. In fact, it will be even funnier if you do it."

La Ramée, though not quite sure what the duke meant by that remark, went to work with his knife, trimming the gallows' legs to a nicety. "There," said the duke. "Now, scoop out a little hole in the sand of the floor under it, while I fetch the victim."

La Ramée knelt and dug a shallow depression. Meanwhile, the prince fitted the noose around his crawfish. Then, with a laugh, he set it swinging. La Ramée also laughed heartily, without quite knowing why, and the guards joined in with the chorus. Only Grimaud failed to laugh. He approached La Ramée, pointed to the crimson crawfish twisting on its thread, and said, "Cardinal!"

"Hanged by His Highness the Duke Beaufort," declared the prince, laughing louder than ever, "with the aid and assistance of Master Jacques-Chrysostom La Ramée, Officer Royal!"

La Ramée cried out in terror, rushed to the gallows, smashed it to bits, and threw the pieces out the window. In a frenzy, he was about to do the same to the crawfish, when Grimaud snatched it from him. "Good food," he said, and put it in his pocket. This so delighted the duke that he almost forgave Grimaud for the part he'd played in the scene. But over the course of the day, as he reflected on his new guard's behaviour and the problems it had caused him, his hatred returned. The story of the cardinal-crawfish hanging spread rapidly, to La Ramée's dismay – it was the talk of everyone within the dungeon, and even outside it. Chavigny, who in his heart hated the cardinal, shared the story with two or three of his closest friends, and they told it everywhere in town. Thus, Sir de Beaufort got two or three happy days out of the affair. Meanwhile, the duke had noticed that one of his guards had an amiable demeanour, compared to which the dour Grimaud only displeased him all the more. One morning he took the man aside and was having a pleasant private conversation with him when Grimaud came in. He saw what was going on, and then, respectfully approaching the guard and the prince, he took the guard by the arm. "What do you want now?" the duke asked sharply.

Grimaud walked the guard four paces away and showed him the door. "Let's go," he said.

The guard obeyed. "Agh!" cried the duke. "You're insufferable! You'll pay for this."

Grimaud bowed politely. "I'll crack your bones, Sir Spy!" cried the exasperated prince.

Grimaud backed away, still bowing. "I'll strangle you with my own hands!" continued the duke.

Grimaud retreated further, bowing again. "And I'll do it," said the prince, "no later than now!" – thinking that if it was worth doing, it might as well be done quickly.

So, he reached out for Grimaud, who merely pushed the guard outside and shut the door behind him. He turned back around just as the prince's hands closed around his neck like two iron tongs. But instead of crying out or defending himself, he simply smiled, brought his index finger slowly to his lips, and said a single word: "Hush!"

It was so strange to see Grimaud gesture, smile, and speak, that His Highness stopped short, astonished. Grimaud took advantage of the moment to reach into his vest and draw out a small envelope that wafted a charming perfume that it retained despite its long residence in Grimaud's pocket, and which he presented to the duke without a word. The duke, more and more astonished, let go of Grimaud, took the note, and seemed to recognise the handwriting. "From Madam de Montbazon?" he gasped. Grimaud nodded. The duke quickly tore open the envelope, gaping in amazement, and read the following:

*My dear Duke,*  
*You can rely entirely on the brave fellow who brings you this, as he's the servant of a gentleman who's on our side, as proven by twenty years of loyalty. This fellow agreed to enter the service of your warden and be locked up with you in Vincennes to help you get ready for your escape that we're preparing now. Your time of deliverance approaches! Have patience and fortitude, and remember that, no matter how much time has passed, your friends and allies still stand by you.*  
*Ever yours, your affectionate,*  
*MARIE DE MONTBAZON*  
*P.S.: I sign my full name, because it would be the height of vanity to think that, after five years, you'd still recognise my initials.*

The duke stood stunned for a moment. What he'd sought for in vain for five years – an aide and ally – had fallen suddenly from heaven when he least expected it. He looked at Grimaud in astonishment, and then returned to his letter and read it again. "Oh! My dear Marie," he murmured, when he'd finished. "So that was her I saw passing in her carriage! And somehow, she still thinks of me after five years of separation! Morbleu! Who'd have thought to find in her the consistency of Astraea?" Then, turning to Grimaud: "And you, my good fellow – so you've agreed to help us?"

Grimaud nodded. "And that's why you're here?"

Grimaud nodded again. "And to think I wanted to strangle you!" the duke cried. Grimaud smiled reassuringly. "But wait," said the duke. And he reached into his pocket. "No one shall say that such devotion to the grandson of Henry IV shall go unrewarded."

The Duke Beaufort searched his pockets with the best of intentions – but one of the precautions taken at Vincennes was to leave the prisoners no money. Grimaud, however, seeing the duke's disappointment, took from his own pocket a purse full of gold and presented it to him. "This is what you're looking for," he said.

The duke opened the purse and went to pour its contents into Grimaud's hands but Grimaud shook his head. "Thank you, My Lord," he said, drawing back, "but I've been paid."

The duke was surprised yet again. He held out his hand; Grimaud leaned forward and kissed it respectfully. The courtly manners of Athos had rubbed off on Grimaud.

"And now," asked the duke, "what do we do next?"

"It's eleven in the morning," Grimaud replied. "My Lord will please arrange a game of tennis with La Ramée for two o'clock. During the game knock two or three balls over the parapet and off the walls."

"Well, what then?"

"Then, My Lord will approach the wall and call down to a man working in the dry-moat to return them."

"Understood," said the duke.

Grimaud's face showed relief and satisfaction; he spoke so infrequently that so much conversation was difficult for him. He began to take his leave. "*Oh that!*" said the duke. "Is there nothing I can give you?"

"My Lord can make me a promise."

"Whatever you ask."

"It's that, when we escape, allow me to always lead the way – first of all because if My Lord is caught, the worst that can happen is a return to prison, whereas if I'm caught, the best that can happen is I'll be hanged."

"That's only fair," said the duke. "I'll do just as you say – faith of a gentleman."

"Now," said Grimaud, "I have one more thing to ask of My Lord: that he shall continue to detest me as before."

"I'll try," said the duke.

There was a knock on the door.

The duke thrust the letter into his pocket and threw himself onto his bed. Everyone knew that was his retreat when lost in the depths of boredom. Grimaud went to open the door; it was La Ramée returning from having visited the cardinal, in the scene previously described. La Ramée looked around inquiringly but seeing only the expected antipathy between the prisoner and his guardian, he smiled in satisfaction. Then, turning to Grimaud, he said, "Good, *my friend* – well done. I just put in a good word for you where it counts, and I hope that soon you'll be getting some good news."

Grimaud bowed in a grateful manner, and withdrew, as he usually did when his superior came in. "Well, My Lord!" La Ramée said with a jolly laugh. "Are you still sulking around that poor fellow?"

"Ah, it's you, La Ramée," said the duke. "My faith, it's about time you arrived. I'd thrown myself on the bed and turned my nose to the wall so as not to yield to the temptation to strangle that wretch Grimaud."

"I hardly think it was because he said something to offend Your Highness," chuckled La Ramée, trying to make a joke out of his subordinate's habitual silence.

"For the love of God, I should think not! He's like some mute Eastern monk. But I'm glad you're back, La Ramée, for I'm eager to see you."

"My Lord is too good," said La Ramée, flattered by the compliment.

"You see," continued the duke, "I'm feeling especially stiff and clumsy today, and thought you should have a chance to take advantage of it."

"Then perhaps a game of tennis?" said La Ramée, taking the hint.

"If you would be so good."

"I am My Lord's humble servant."

"My dear La Ramée," said the duke, "you're a most congenial fellow, and I'd almost stay here in Vincennes just for the pleasure of your company."

"My Lord," said La Ramée, "I think that wish would be fulfilled, if it were up to the cardinal."

"What do you mean? Have you seen him recently?"

"He sent for me this morning."

"Really! Did you talk about me?"

"What do you think I would talk to him about? You know, My Lord, you're his worst nightmare."

The duke smiled bitterly. "Ah, if only you'd accept my offers, La Ramée!"

"My Lord, we can talk all you like but in the end I must disappoint you."

"La Ramée, I've told you, and I repeat it, that I can make your fortune."

"With what? The moment you escape from prison, all your property will be confiscated."

"The moment I escape from prison, I'll be the master of Paris."

"Hush, please! You know I can't listen to that kind of talk. That's a fine thing to say to an officer of the king! I can see I'm going to need another Grimaud."

"All right, then, we'll drop it. So, you had a talk with the cardinal! You know what, La Ramée? The next time he invites you for a visit, let me dress up in your clothes and go in your place. I'll strangle him, and then give up and meekly return to prison – faith of a gentleman!"

"My Lord, I can see that I must call for Grimaud."

"No, I'm done. So, what did he talk about, that liar?"

"I'll pretend I heard 'friar' and ignore that, My Lord," La Ramée said slyly. "What did he tell me? He told me to keep an eye on you."

"Keep an eye on me? Why?" asked the duke, anxiously.

"Because an astrologer has predicted that you'll escape."

"Really? An astrologer spoke of me?"

Superstitious, the duke shuddered in spite of himself. "*My God*, yes! But these wretched magicians only say such things to disturb people, you know – word of honour."

"And what did you say about this to His Illustrious Eminence?"

"That if the astrologer in question was selling almanacs of his predictions, I wouldn't advise him to buy one."

"Why?"

"Because the only way you could escape would be to change into a finch or a wren and fly away."

"Isn't that the unfortunate truth. Let's go play a game of tennis, La Ramée."

"My Lord, I beg Your Highness's pardon but I must ask for a half an hour's delay."

"Why's that?"

"Because, though his birth isn't nearly as good as Your Highness's, My Lord Mazarin is so proud that he didn't invite me to stay to lunch."

"Well, then! Would you like to join me for lunch?"

"Not this time, My Lord! I must tell you there's a baker named Père Marteau whose shop is just across from the castle..."

"So?"

"So last week he sold his bakery to a chef from Paris, one to whom the doctors, it seems, recommended he take country air."

"Well? What does that matter to me?"

"Listen, My Lord – this new baker had in front of his shop such delights as would make your mouth water."

“Oh, you glutton.”

“Eh? *My God*, My Lord,” replied La Ramée, “one isn’t a glutton just because one likes to eat well. It’s the nature of Man to seek perfection in all things, including pies. Now, this beggar of a baker, when he saw me browsing his stall, came out all covered in flour and said, ‘Sir La Ramée, you must help me find customers among the prisoners. I bought this establishment from my predecessor because he assured me that he supplied the château but upon my honour, in the week since I’ve been here Sir de Chavigny hasn’t purchased so much as a tartelette.’

‘Well,’ I told him, ‘probably Sir de Chavigny is afraid your pastry isn’t any good.’

‘My pastry, no good? Well, then, Sir La Ramée, you shall be the judge of that, and this very minute.’

‘I can’t,’ I said to him, ‘I have to get back to the dungeon.’

‘Well, go on about your business,’ he said, ‘as you seem to be in a hurry but come back in half an hour.’

‘In half an hour?’

‘Yes. Have you had lunch?’

*‘My faith*, no.’

‘Well, there’ll be a pie here waiting for you, along with a bottle of old Burgundy ...’ So, you see, My Lord, inasmuch as I’m starving, I would like with Your Highness’s permission...”

La Ramée bowed. “Go on, then, you animal,” said the duke, “but take note that I, too, give you only half an hour.”

“Can I promise your business to Père Marteau’s successor, My Lord?”

“Yes, so long as he doesn’t put mushrooms in his meat pies. For you know,” added the prince, “the mushrooms of Vincennes forest are fatal to my family.” La Ramée nodded, though he didn’t understand the prince’s allusion, and went out. Within five minutes the duty officer came in, on the pretext of paying his respects to the prince and keeping him company but actually in accordance with the orders of the cardinal, who, as we’ve seen, had commanded that the prisoner be kept under close watch. But during the five minutes he’d had alone, the duke had reread the letter from Madam de Montbazon that assured him his friends had not forgotten him and were planning his escape. How? That he didn’t know yet but he promised himself he’d find out from Grimaud, despite his habitual silence. He admired him all the more now that he understood his conduct and realised that all the little persecutions he’d inflicted on the duke were to persuade the other guards of his hostility. This ruse had given the duke a high opinion of Grimaud’s intellect, and he decided to trust in him completely.

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**What Was Hidden in the Pies of the Successor of Father Marteau**

Half an hour later La Ramée returned, glowing with the good cheer of a man who’s both eaten well and drunk well. He had found the pie delicious and the honey excellent. The weather was perfect for a tennis party. The Vincennes tennis court was a “long palm” green, that is, open rather than enclosed, so it would be easy for the duke to do what Grimaud had proposed and send a few balls over the edge and down into the dry-moat. However, as two o’clock – the designated time – had yet to strike, the duke wasn’t too awkward at first. But he arranged to lose the first few games that allowed him to get angry and behave as we do when that happens, making mistake after mistake. Then, once two o’clock struck, the prince’s balls began to go over the side and into the moat – to the delight of La Ramée, who scored fifteen points with each fault. Soon enough balls had gone over that they had too few to continue. La Ramée proposed to send someone down to the moat to collect them but the duke nonchalantly observed that that would be a waste of time, and approached the rampsarts that were, as the officer had noted, over fifty feet high. Looking down, he saw a man working in the little gardens kept by the peasants on the far side of the moat. “Hey there, friend!” cried the duke.

The man looked up, and the duke suppressed a gasp of surprise. This peasant, this supposed gardener, was Rochefort, whom the prince thought was still in the Bastille. “Hey, up there,” the man called. “What can I do for you?”

“Be so kind as to throw back our tennis balls,” said the duke. The gardener nodded, scrambled down into the moat, and began to toss back the lost balls that were picked up by La Ramée and the guards. One fell right at the feet of the duke, and as it was obviously intended for him, he put that one in his pocket. And then, giving the gardener a grateful wave, he returned to his game. But the duke continued to have a bad day, and his balls went every which way, instead of confining themselves to the court; a few even went back into the moat but as the gardener had gone, those weren’t returned. The duke declared himself ashamed of his clumsiness and declined to continue. La Ramée was delighted at having won such a victory over a prince of the blood. The prince returned to his cell and went to bed that is what he did nearly every day since they’d taken away his books. La Ramée gathered up the prince’s discarded clothes under the pretext that they were dusty and could use a good brushing but actually to make sure the prince wouldn’t go anywhere. He was a cautious man, that La Ramée. Fortunately, the prince had had time to hide the tennis ball under his pillow. As soon as the door was closed, the duke tore open the ball’s outer covering, using his teeth since they’d taken away every sharp implement, except for silver knives that bent rather than cut. Under the skin of the ball was a letter that read as follows:

*My Lord, your friends watch over you, and the time of your liberation draws near. Order a pie for the day after tomorrow from the new pastry chef who has purchased the bake shop, and who is none other than Noirmont, your steward. Be careful to open the pie only when you are alone. I think you’ll be pleased with what it contains. The ever-devoted servant of Your Highness, in the Bastille or out, Count ROCHEFORT*

*P.S.: Your Highness can rely on Grimaud for everything – he’s intelligent and utterly dedicated.*

Beaufort, who’d been allowed to have a fire again since he’d given up painting, burned the letter – as he did, though more regretfully, with the letter from Madam Montabazon. He was going to do the same to the ball when it occurred to him that it might be useful for sending Rochefort a reply. He was alert that was just as well, because all this activity drew the attention of La Ramée, who came into the cell. “My Lord needs something?” he asked.

“I felt a chill,” replied the duke, “and lit a fire so I could warm up. The dungeons of Vincennes, you know, are renowned for their frigidity. We could keep ice in here, and even harvest saltpetre. As Madam de Rambouillet said, the cells where Puylaurens, Ornano, and my uncle the Grand Prior of Vendome died are worth their weight in arsenic.”

And the duke lay down again, covertly stuffing the ball under his pillow. La Ramée smiled sadly. He was a good man at heart, had become fond of his illustrious prisoner, and would have been sorry if anything unfortunate happened to him. And the terrible fates of the duke’s three predecessors were incontestable. “My Lord,” he said, “please don’t indulge in such thoughts. Ideas like those are far more fatal than saltpetre.”

“You, at least, are a charming fellow,” said the duke. “If I could eat pies and drink Burgundy, like you do, at the shop of Père Marteau’s successor, I’d be happier.”

“In fact, My Lord,” said La Ramée, “he stocks a proud honey, and his pastries should be famous.”

“It certainly wouldn’t be hard for his cellar and kitchen to be better than those of Sir de Chavigny,” said the duke.

“Well, My Lord,” said La Ramée, falling into the trap, “what prevents you from trying them? Besides, I promised you a sample.”

“You’re right,” said the duke. “If I have to stay here forever, as Mazarin was kind enough to let me hear he intends, I’ll need a distraction for my old age, and might as well become a gourmand.”

“My Lord,” said La Ramée, “take my advice, and don’t wait for old age to begin.”

“Good,” Beaufort said to himself. “Every man, to tempt his heart and soul from heavenly grace, must be susceptible to one of the seven deadly sins – if not two. It seems that La Ramée’s temptation is gluttony. We’ll take advantage of that.” Then, aloud: “Well, my dear La Ramée, shall we make a party of it then, the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes, My Lord – that’s the day of Pentecost.”

“Then will you read me a lesson on that day?”

“In what?”

“In gourmandising!”

“Willingly, My Lord.”

“But let’s make it a private lesson. We’ll send the guards to eat in Chavigny’s mess hall while we dine here, at your direction.”

“Hmmm!” said La Ramée. It was an attractive prospect – but La Ramée, who was as canny as the cardinal had surmised, was an old hand at spotting prisoners’ tricks. Beaufort had said he had forty ways to escape from prison – might not this tempting dinner be concealing one of them?

So, he thought about it for a moment but considered that as he would be ordering the food, honey, no powder would taint the food, and no drug could be mixed in the honey. As to getting him drunk, the duke ought to know better than that. And then an idea occurred to him that settled the matter. The duke had followed La Ramée’s internal monologue by the worried expression on his guardian’s face – but then that expression cleared. “Well,” asked the duke, “shall we do it?”

“Yes, My Lord – on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“That Grimaud shall serve at our table.”

Nothing could suit the prince better but he had enough self-control to frown and grimace. “To the devil with your Grimaud!” he cried. “He’ll spoil all our fun.”

“I’ll order him to stand behind Your Highness and not say a word, so that, with a little imagination, it will seem like he’s leagues away.”

“I see very clearly how it is,” said the duke. “You don’t trust me.”

“My Lord, the day after tomorrow is Pentecost.”

“Well, what’s that to me? Do you think the Holy Spirit is going to descend like a tongue of fire to blast open the doors of my prison?”

“No, My Lord – but I remember what that damned magician predicted.”

“What did he predict?”

“That Your Highness would be free from Vincennes by the day of Pentecost.”

“And you believe what such charlatans say? Folly!”

“Me, I care no more than this,” said La Ramée, snapping his fingers. “It’s My Lord Mazarin who cares – he’s an Italian, and superstitious.”

The duke shrugged. “Well,” he said, pretending to a resigned good humour, “I can accept your Grimaud, for the sake of the thing but nobody other than him. I put you in charge of everything: you order the entire dinner but it must include one of those divine meat pies you mentioned. You can tell Père Marteau’s successor that if he does well, he can depend on me as a customer for the rest of my stay in prison, and even after I’m released.”

“You still think you’re going to get out?” said La Ramée.

“*Dame*, yes!” replied the prince. “If only at the death of Mazarin, who’s fifteen years older than I. Though it’s true,” he added with a smile, “that in Vincennes we age faster than those outside.”

“My Lord,” said La Ramée, “consider your dinner ordered.”

“And do you think I’ll be an apt pupil?”

“If you’re willing to learn, My Lord,” replied La Ramée.

“And if you have enough time to teach me,” muttered the duke.

“What was that, My Lord?” asked La Ramée.

“My Lord says don’t spare the cardinal’s purse, since he seems determined to continue to board and lodge me.”

On his way out, La Ramée paused at the door. “Who should My Lord like me to send in?”

“Anyone you like, except that Grimaud.”

“The Officer of the Guard, then?”

“With his chessboard.”

“Done.”

And La Ramée went out. The Officer of the Guard came in, and five minutes later Beaufort seemed deeply engrossed in the sublime combinations that lead to checkmate. What a singular thing is the mind, and what profound alterations a sign, a word, or a hope can cause in it! The duke had been five years in prison but a look back made those five years, however slowly they’d passed, seem shorter than the forty-eight hours that now separated him from the time set for his escape. It was the details that worried him. How would this escape be effected? What would be hidden in the mysterious pie? Which friends were waiting for him? How could he still have allies after five years in prison?

It seemed he was a very privileged prince indeed. To his astonishment, it seemed that his former friends – and most extraordinarily, his mistress – still remembered him. It’s true she might not have been scrupulously faithful to him the entire time but she hadn’t forgotten him, and that was a lot. This was more than enough for the duke to think about, and even distracted him on the tennis court, and as La Ramée had schooled him before, the next time he schooled him again. But at least these defeats kept him busy, and soon enough it was evening, with only three hours to go until bed. Then the night would come, and with it sleep. Or so the duke thought. But sleep is a capricious deity that stays away just when it’s most devoutly desired. The duke was awake well into the middle of the night, tossing and turning on his mattress like Saint Lawrence on his martyr’s grille. Finally, he fell asleep. And then, before the arrival of day, he had fantastic dreams: he grew wings, and naturally wanted to fly, and at first his wings fully supported him. But when he reached a certain height, this support suddenly failed, his wings were broken, and he plummeted toward a bottomless abyss. He awoke in a sweat, trembling as if he really had tumbled from the sky. Then he fell asleep again to wander into a maze of dreams, each wilder than the last, and though his eyes were closed, his mind was turned toward a single goal: escape, always escape. He found an underground passage that would take him out of Vincennes, and followed it, Grimaud marching before him lantern in hand ... but gradually the passage narrowed, and though the duke persevered, it finally became so narrow he could go no farther, no matter how he tried to squeeze through. The walls seemed to close in and press on him, yet he could still see in the distance Grimaud with his lantern, who continued to walk forward, and though he tried to call for help, he was gripped so tightly he couldn’t utter a single word. Then, from behind him, he could hear the footsteps of his pursuers, growing ever closer, and he knew that if they caught him, he would never escape. The enveloping walls seemed in league with his enemies, holding him when he needed to flee. He heard the voice of La Ramée, and then saw him, laughing, stretching out a hand to shake his shoulder, awakening him in the low, vaulted room where Marshal Ornano, and Puylaurens, and his uncle Vendome had all perished. There, in the floor, were their three graves, with a fourth yawning open, awaiting his own corpse. That woke him, and thereafter the duke tried as hard to stay awake as he had to fall asleep, so that when La Ramée entered in the morning, he found him so pale and tired that he asked if he were sick. “Indeed,” said one of the guards who had stayed in the prince’s room but had been unable to sleep due to a toothache, “My Lord had a restless night, and in his dreams called out for help two or three times.”

“What’s wrong, My Lord?” asked La Ramée.

“What’s wrong, fool,” said the duke, “is that all your silly talk about escape turned my brain, so that I dreamed about escaping, only in doing so I fell and broke my neck.”

La Ramée laughed. “You see, My Lord,” he said, “this is a warning from heaven, and I hope My Lord will never be so reckless as to act out his dream.”

“You’re right, my dear La Ramée,” said the duke, wiping the sweat from his brow. “From now on, I’ll dream of nothing but food and drink.”

“Hush!” said La Ramée.

He then sent the guards away, one by one, on various pretexts, until they were alone. “Well?” asked the duke.

“Well!” said La Ramée. “Your dinner’s been ordered.”

“Ah!” said the prince. “And what will it consist of, Sir Major-domo?”

“My Lord promised to trust me on that.”

“Will there be a pie?”

“As tall as a tower!”

“Baked by Père Marteau’s successor?”

“It’s all arranged.”

“And you told him it was for me?”

“I told him.”

“What did he say?”

“That he would do his best to please Your Highness.”

“The time is coming!” said the duke, rubbing his hands.

“Plague, My Lord!” said La Ramée. “You are tending toward gluttony! In five years, I haven’t seen you look as cheerful as you do now.”

The duke saw he’d been careless – but suddenly, as if he’d been listening at the door and realised it was time for a diversion, Grimaud came in and gestured to La Ramée that he had something to tell him. La Ramée approached Grimaud, who spoke to him in a low voice. This gave the duke time to get hold of himself. “I have forbidden this man,” he said, “to come in here without my permission.”

“My Lord,” said La Ramée, “you must forgive him, as I’m the one who summoned him.”

“And why did you do that, since you know it displeases me?”

“My Lord should remember what we agreed about who will serve us this famous dinner,” said La Ramée. “Did my Lord forget about the dinner?”

“No but I’d forgotten about Sir Grimaud.”

“My Lord knows that we can’t have the dinner without him.”

“Very well, do as you please.”

“Come here, boy,” said La Ramée, “and listen to what I have to tell you.” Grimaud approached, wearing his most sullen expression. La Ramée continued, “My Lord does me the honour of dining in private with him tomorrow.”

Grimaud made a gesture to indicate he didn’t see what that had to do with him. “It does, in fact, have to do with you,” said La Ramée, “as you will have the honour of serving us – and no matter how hungry and thirsty we may be, afterward there’s bound to be something left in the dishes and bottles for you.”

Grimaud bowed gratefully. “And now, My Lord,” said La Ramée, “I must beg Your Highness’s pardon but it seems Sir de Chavigny is going away for a few days, and before leaving he has some orders to give me.”

The duke tried to catch Grimaud’s eye but Grimaud might as well have been blind. “Then go,” the duke said to La Ramée, “but come back as soon as you can.”

“My Lord wants to get revenge for yesterday’s game of tennis?”

Grimaud gave a near-imperceptible nod. “Yes,” said the duke, “and beware, my dear La Ramée, for one day is not like another, and I’ve decided to play to win.”

La Ramée went out; Grimaud watched him without so much as moving a muscle; then, when he saw the door was closed, he quickly drew a pencil and sheet of paper from his pocket. “Write, My Lord,” he said.

“And what should I write?”

Grimaud pointed a finger and dictated: “‘Everything is ready for tomorrow night. Be on watch from seven o’clock till nine and have two horses ready; we’ll come down from over the first window of the gallery.’”

“And what else?”

“What else, My Lord?” said Grimaud, surprised. “After that, sign it.”

“And that’s it?”

“What more needs to be said, My Lord?” said Grimaud who was concise to the point of austerity.

The duke signed it. “Now,” said Grimaud, “does My Lord still have the ball?”

“What ball?”

“The one that contained the letter.”

“Ah, yes – I thought it might come in handy. Here it is.”

And the duke took the ball from under his pillow and gave it to Grimaud. Grimaud smiled as pleasantly as he could. “Well?” asked the duke.

“Well, My Lord,” said Grimaud, “I’ll sew this letter up into the ball, and then, when playing tennis, you’ll send the ball over into the dry-moat.”

“But mightn’t it be lost?”

“Rest assured, My Lord, someone will be there to pick it up.”

“A gardener?” asked the duke. Grimaud nodded. “The same one as before?” Grimaud nodded again. “The Count Rochefort then?” Grimaud nodded a third time. “But see here,” said the duke, “give me at least some details on how we’re going to escape.”

“I’m not allowed to say,” Grimaud replied, “before the time comes.”

“Who will be waiting for me on the other side of the moat?”

“I don’t know, My Lord.”

“But at least tell me what’s going to be in this famous pie, or I’m going to go mad.”

“My Lord,” said Grimaud, “it will contain two poniards, a rope ladder, and a choke-pear.”

“Well ... now I understand.”

“My Lord will see that they’ve thought of everything.”

“We will take the poniards and the rope,” said the duke.

“And we’ll feed the choke-pear to La Ramée,” said Grimaud.

“My dear Grimaud,” said the duke, “you don’t speak often but to be fair, when you do, you speak words of gold.”

Around the same time these escape plans were being hatched between the Duke Beaufort and Grimaud, two men on horseback, followed by a pair of lackeys, entered Paris by the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Marcel. These two men were the Count of La Fère and the Viscount of Bragelonne. It was the first time the young man had come to Paris. The capital was an old friend to Athos but he wasn’t showing it off to best advantage by bringing Raoul in by that route. Indeed, the ugliest village in the Touraine was better looking than Paris when entered from the direction of Blois. So, it must be said, to the shame of the great city, that it made a poor first impression on the young man. Athos was nonchalant and serene, as always. Arriving in the Saint-Médard district, the count, who served as his companion’s guide through the great maze, took the Rue des Postes to l’Estrapade, the Fossés Saint-Michel, and finally Vaugirard. At the corner of the Rue Férou, they turned down that short street. In the middle of the block, Athos looked up, smiling, and pointed out a common row house to the young man. “There, Raoul,” he said, “is a house where I passed seven of the sweetest – and cruellest – years of my life.”

The young man smiled back and gave the house a respectful salute. The admiration he had for his guardian showed itself in everything he did. As for Athos, Raoul was not only the centre of his life but other than his memories of his old regiment, the single object of his affection, so deep and profound was the count’s love for him. The travellers stopped in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier at the sign of the Green Fox. Athos was an old customer of this inn, having gone there a hundred times with his friends but twenty years had made many changes in the establishment, starting with the hosts. The travellers turned their horses over to the stable boys, and as they were animals of a noble race, they ordered the steeds be treated with the greatest of care: fed with the finest straw and oats, after which their chests and legs were to be rubbed down with warm honey. After all, they’d ridden twenty leagues that day. Having first attended to their mounts, as all true equestrians must, they then asked for two rooms for themselves. “Wash up and dress to look your best, Raoul,” said Athos. “I’m going to present you to someone.”

“Today, Sir?” asked the young man.

“In half an hour.”

The young man bowed. More tired than Athos, who seemed a man of iron, he might have preferred a dip in that River Seine of which he’d heard so much, though he was certain it couldn’t compare to his Loire, followed by a fall into bed – but the Count of La Fère had spoken, so his only thought was to obey. “Be thorough, Raoul,” added Athos. “I would like you to look handsome.”

“I hope, Sir,” said the young man with a smile, “that you’re not introducing me to a prospective bride. You know my commitments to Louise.”

Athos smiled back. “No, don’t worry,” he said, “though I am presenting you to a lady.”

“A lady?” asked Raoul.

“Yes, and I hope you’ll like her.”

The young man looked uneasily at the count but seeing Athos’s smile he was reassured. “And how old is she?” asked the Viscount of Bragelonne.

“My dear Raoul, learn once and for all that that is a question you never ask,” said Athos. “If you can tell a lady’s age from her face, there’s no point in asking, and if you can’t, to ask is indiscreet.”

“Is she beautiful?”

“Sixteen years ago, she was considered not only the prettiest but the most graceful woman in France.”

This response completely reassured the viscount. Athos couldn’t have any intentions for him toward a woman considered the prettiest and most graceful in France in the year before he was born. He retired to his room, and with the vanity that comes with youth, applied himself to Athos’s instructions to look as well as he could. With what nature had given him, this was no hard thing. When he returned, Athos received him with that fatherly smile he used to bestow on d’Artagnan but which was now reserved for Raoul with an even deeper tenderness. Athos inspected his feet, hands, and hair, those three signs of class. His black hair was parted and long, as was worn at the time, and fell in curls framing his tanned face. Grey suede gloves that matched his hat covered his fine and elegant hands, while his boots that matched both hat and gloves, were tapered and as petite as those of a child of ten. “Well,” he murmured, “if she’s not proud of him, she’s a hard woman to please.”

It was three in the afternoon, a suitable time to pay a visit. The two travellers followed the Rue de Grenelle to the Rue des Rosiers, turned onto Rue Saint-Dominique, and stopped at a majestic mansion facing the Jacobins, its gate surmounted by the arms of de Luynes. “This is it,” said Athos. He entered the hôtel with the assurance that persuaded the Swiss Guard that he had the right to do so. He climbed the main staircase and addressing a footman in full livery, asked if the Duchess de Chevreuse was receiving and if so, would she receive the Count of La Fère?

The servant returned a moment later and said that, though the Duchess de Chevreuse did not have the honour of knowing the Count of La Fère, she invited him to please come in. Athos followed the footman, who led him through a long series of apartments to a parlour, where he stopped before a closed door. Athos gestured to the Viscount of Bragelonne to wait where he was. The footman opened the door and announced the Count of La Fère. Madam de Chevreuse, so often mentioned in *The Three Musketeers* without actually having been brought on stage, was still a very beautiful woman. Indeed, though she was at this time forty-four or forty-five, she seemed still in the prime of her thirties, with lovely blond hair, and large, bright, intelligent eyes that had so often been opened in intrigue and closed in love. She retained her nymph-like figure, and from behind still seemed to be the young woman of 1623 who had jumped the moat of the Tuileries with Anne of Austria, a folly that had deprived the crown of an heir. In most ways, she was still the same wild creature who’d thrown herself into love affairs with such passion and originality that it became a hallmark of her descendants. She was in a little boudoir with a window overlooking a garden. This room, decorated in the mode made fashionable by Madam de Rambouillet in her famous hôtel, was hung in blue damask with pink flowers and golden trim. It was daring for a lady of the duchess’s age to receive visitors in such a boudoir, especially in her current posture, stretched out on a chaise longue with her head against the tapestry. She was holding a book half-open, her arm resting on a cushion. At the footman’s announcement, she rose on one arm and cocked her head curiously. Athos appeared. He was dressed in dark purple velvet with similar trim, embellished with silver aiguillettes. His simple cloak bore no gold trim, and a single violet feather adorned his black felt hat. He wore tall boots of black leather, and at his belt hung that sword with a magnificent hilt so often admired by Porthos when Athos lived in Rue Férou but which he’d never consented to lend to him. Splendid white lace erupted from the collar of his shirt and bedecked the tops of his boots. There was in this man, though completely unknown to Madam de Chevreuse, such an air of high nobility, that she half rose and graciously beckoned him to take a seat beside her. Athos bowed and obeyed. The footman was about to withdraw but Athos made a gesture that restrained him. “Madam,” he said to the duchess, “I had the audacity to present myself at your hôtel without having been introduced to you – successfully, since you deigned to receive me. I now ask the favour of a half hour’s interview.”

“Granted, Sir,” said the duchess with her most gracious smile.

“But that’s not all, Madam. It’s presumptuous, I know but I further request that our interview be a private one, as I keenly desire not to be interrupted.”

“I am at home to no one,” the duchess told the footman. “You may go.” The footman went out. There was a moment of silence, during which these two embodiments of the nobility sized each other up, without embarrassment on either side. The duchess was the first to break the silence. “Well, Sir,” she said with a smile, “can’t you see I await you with impatience?”

“While I, Madam,” replied Athos, “regard you with admiration.”

“Sir,” said the duchess, “you must excuse me but I long to learn with whom I’m speaking. You have the undeniable air of a courtier, yet I’ve never seen you at Court. Have you been in the Bastille, and just been released?”

“No, Madam,” Athos replied with a smile, “though I may be on my way there.”

“Ah! In that case, introduce yourself quickly, and then go away,” the duchess said playfully, in a charming tone. “I am already quite compromised enough without you making it worse.”

“Who am I, Madam? They announced my name: the Count of La Fère, a name unknown to you. I once bore another that you might have heard, though you’ve certainly forgotten it by now.”

“Tell me, Sir.”

“In former times,” said the Count of La Fère, “I was known as Athos.”

The duchess’s eyes widened in astonishment. It was obvious that name still meant something to her, though it wasn’t clear what. “Athos?” she said. “Wait, wait …!”

She pressed both hands to her forehead as if to marshal in her memories a colourful crowd of people and events. “Shall I give you a hint, Madam?” smiled Athos.

“But yes,” said the duchess, head in a whirl, “please do.”

“This Athos was affiliated with three young King’s Musketeers who went by the names of d’Artagnan, Porthos, and…”

Athos paused. “And Aramis,” gasped the duchess.

“And Aramis, that’s it,” said Athos. “So, you haven’t quite forgotten his name?”

“No,” she said, “no, my poor Aramis! Such a lovely gentleman – elegant, discreet, a writer of pretty verses. I think he turned out badly,” she added.

“Very badly: he became an abbot.”

“Ah! What a shame!” said the duchess, flipping her fan carelessly, “My thanks, sir, truly.”

“For what, Madam?”

“For reviving that memory, a pleasant recollection of my youth.”

“Will you permit me, then,” said Athos, “to revive another one?”

“Is it connected with the former?”

“Yes … and no.”

“Well, *my faith*,” said Madam de Chevreuse, “for a man like you I’d risk anything.”

Athos bowed. “Aramis,” he continued, “was connected with a young seamstress of Tours.”

“A young seamstress of Tours?”

“Yes, a sort of cousin of his, called Marie Michon.”

“Ah, I recall her,” said the duchess. “During the Siege of La Rochelle, she was the one who wrote to try to foil that plot against poor Buckingham.”

“Exactly,” said Athos. “Will you allow me to speak of her?”

Madam de Chevreuse gave Athos a long look. “Yes,” she said, “so long as you don’t speak ill of her.”

“That would make me an ingrate,” said Athos, “and I regard ingratitude not as a fault or a crime but as a sin that is far worse.”

“You, ungrateful to Marie Michon, Sir?” said the duchess, trying to read Athos’s eyes. “But how could that be? You never knew her personally.”

“Eh, Madam! Who knows?” said Athos. “There’s a proverb that says it’s only mountains that never meet, and proverbs are often based in truth.”

“Then go on, Sir, go on!” the duchess said brightly. “You can’t imagine how diverting this all is.”

“Since you encourage me,” said Athos, “I will continue. This cousin of Aramis, this Marie Michon, despite her modest rank, had knowledge of the highest degree, and called the grandest ladies of the Court her friends. Even the queen, proud though she is, in her dual capacity of Austrian and Spaniard – even she called her sister.”

“Alas,” said Madam de Chevreuse, with a tiny sigh and a twitch of her eyebrows, “things are much changed since that time.”

“But at that time the queen was in the right,” continued Athos, “for this seamstress was devoted to her, so much so that she served as an intermediary with the queen’s brother, the King of Spain.”

“An act that nowadays,” said the duchess, “is considered treason.”

“And so,” continued Athos, “the cardinal – the true cardinal – resolved one morning to arrest poor Marie Michon and confine her in the Château de Loches. Fortunately, such an act could not be prepared entirely in secrecy, and in any event, Marie Michon was ready: if she was ever menaced with real danger, the queen was to send her a prayer-book bound in green velvet.”

“Quite so, Sir! You are well informed.”

“One morning that green-bound book was brought to her by the Prince de Marillac. There was no time to lose. Fortunately, Marie Michon and a servant of hers, named Kitty, looked extremely well when dressed in men’s clothes. The prince brought Marie Michon a cavalier’s ensemble, and a lackey’s outfit for Kitty, as well as two excellent horses. Quickly, the two fugitives left Tours, headed for Spain – travelling by back roads to avoid the highways, starting at every sound, and begging for hospitality wherever they couldn’t find an inn.”

“In truth, that’s just how it happened!” cried the duchess, clapping her hands together. “But it’s very curious…”

She paused. “I need not follow the fugitives to the end of their journey,” said Athos. “No, Madam, for my tale I need take them only as far as a town in Limousine between Tulle and Angouleme, a little village called Roche-l’Abeille.”

Madam de Chevreuse gasped in surprise and looked at Athos with an expression of such astonishment that it made the old musketeer smile. “Hear me, Madam,” he continued, “for what I have yet to say is even stranger than what has gone before.”

“Sir,” said the duchess, “I think you must be a sorcerer. I’ll listen but in truth … never mind. Go on.”

“The ride that day had been long and tiring; it was October eleventh, getting cold, the village had neither inn nor château, and the peasants’ houses looked poor and dirty. Marie Michon had the tastes of the highborn, she was accustomed to fine linen and clean lodging, so she decided to ask for hospitality from the village priest.”

Athos paused. “Oh, continue!” said the duchess. “I warn you that now I expect to hear everything.”

“The travellers knocked at the door; it was late; the priest, already in bed, called out for them to enter. They found the door unlocked and opened it – they don’t lock their doors out in the villages. A lamp was burning in the priest’s house. Marie Michon, the most charming cavalier in the world, opened the door, put in her head, and requested hospitality for the night. ‘Willingly, my young cavalier,’ said the priest. ‘You can have half the bedchamber and whatever’s left of my supper.’ The two travellers consulted for a moment; the priest heard them laugh, and then the master – or rather the mistress – replied, ‘Thank you, Sir Curate, we accept.’

‘Then come in,’ he said, ‘eat up, and make as little noise as you can, because I also travelled all day and won’t be sorry to get a good night’s sleep.’”

Madam de Chevreuse went from surprise to astonishment and on to stupefaction, gaping at Athos, who wore an expression impossible to describe; she seemed to want to say something but held her tongue, for fear of missing a single word. Finally, she said, “And … after?”

“After?” said Athos. “Ah! That’s the hardest part to tell.”

“Tell it! Tell it! I’m the kind of person you can say anything to. Besides, it’s not about me, it’s about this Miss Michon.”

“Ah! Just so,” said Athos. “Well! Marie Michon had supper with her servant, and afterward, in accordance with the permission she’d been granted, she went into her host’s bedroom, while Kitty made herself comfortable on a chair in the room where they’d eaten.”

“Really, Sir,” said Madam de Chevreuse, “unless you’re the Devil himself, I don’t know how you can know all these details.”

“She was a charming woman, Marie Michon,” said Athos, “one of those wild creatures that recognises no limits, a being born to damn those of us who do. It occurred to her that, since her host was a priest, it would be amusing to give him a happy memory to cherish in his old age – and on her part, she would have the droll recollection of having tempted a curate to perdition.”

“Count,” said the duchess, “on my word of honour, you give me chills.”

“Alas for the chastity of the poor curate, he was no St. Ambrose,” said Athos, “and as I said, Marie Michon was an adorable creature.”

“Sir,” cried the duchess, seizing Athos’s hands, “tell me immediately how you come to know all these details, or I will call for a monk from the Augustinian convent and have you exorcised!”

Athos laughed. “It’s easily explained, Madam. A cavalier, himself charged with an important mission, had stopped at the rectory just an hour earlier to beg hospitality of the priest, who had just been called away to attend to a dying congregant, leaving his house and village overnight. The man of God, who trusted his guest, as he was clearly a gentleman, had left him his house, dinner, and bed. So, it was this guest of the curate whom Marie Michon had asked for hospitality.”

“And this cavalier, this guest, this gentleman who came before was…?”

"Myself, the Count of La Fère," said Athos, rising and bowing respectfully to the duchess. The duchess was stunned for a moment, and then burst into laughter. "Oh, my faith!" she said. "That's hilarious! For once, little Marie Michon got more than she expected. Sit down, dear Count, and finish your story."

"Now I become the villain of the piece, Madam. As I told you, I was travelling on an important mission; early the next morning I silently left the bedroom, leaving my charming companion asleep. In the front room her servant rested her head in an armchair, still slumbering like her mistress. I was struck by her pretty face; I approached and recognised her as that little Kitty whom our friend Aramis had found a place for. Then I realised the charming cavalier must be..."

"Marie Michon!" the duchess quickly interrupted.

"...Marie Michon," said Athos. "So, I left the house and went to the barn, where I found my horse saddled and my lackey ready, and we rode away."

"And you never returned to this village?" asked Madam de Chevreuse pointedly.

"I did, Madam – a year later."

"Well?"

"Well! I stopped to visit that good curate. I found him very concerned about something that greatly mystified him. A week before he'd been left a small cradle bearing a charming little boy three months old, along with a purse of gold and a note that said only: *11 October 1633*."

"That was the date of this strange adventure," said Madam de Chevreuse.

"Yes but that told the curate nothing, other than reminding him he'd spent that night with a dying congregant, for Marie Michon had left the rectory before he returned."

"You should know, Sir, that when Marie Michon returned to France in 1643, she sought news of this child that, as a fugitive, she hadn't been able to keep – but which, finally having returned to Paris, she wanted to raise as her own."

"And what did the curate say?" asked Athos.

"That a nobleman he didn't know had volunteered to raise the child, had guaranteed his future, and taken him when he went."

"And that was true."

"Ah, I understand now! You were that nobleman – you are his father!"

"Hush! Not so loud, Madam – he's waiting outside."

"He's here!" cried Madam de Chevreuse, jumping up eagerly. "He's here, my son – I mean the son of Marie Michon – here! I must see him this instant!"

"Take care, Madam," Athos interrupted. "He knows the identity of neither his father nor his mother."

"You kept the secret, and then you brought him to me, thinking how happy I'd be. Oh! Thank you, Sir! Thank you!" cried the duchess, seizing his hand and carrying it to her lips. "Thank you! You have a noble heart."

"I brought him to you," said Athos, gently withdrawing his hand, "so that you in your turn can do something for him, Madam. So far, I've watched over his education, and I think I've made a proper gentleman of him – but the time has come when I'm forced to take up arms again and resume the dangerous career of partisan. Tomorrow I join an adventurous exploit in which I may be killed – and then he will no longer be able to depend on me to see that he finds his proper place in the world."

"Rest easy as to that!" said the duchess. "Unfortunately, I don't have much political leverage at the moment but what I have is at his disposal. As to his title and fortune..."

"I have provided for that, Madam, never fear; I've given him the domain of Bragelonne as inheritance that grants him the title of viscount and an income of ten thousand livres."

"Upon my soul, Sir," said the duchess, "you are a true gentleman! But I'm eager to see our young viscount. Where is he?"

"Outside, in the parlour; I'll bring him in, if you wish."

Athos started toward the door but Madam de Chevreuse stopped him. "Is he handsome?" she asked.

Athos smiled. "He resembles his mother," he said. Then he opened the door and beckoned to the young man, who appeared in the doorway. Madam de Chevreuse couldn't contain her cry of joy at the sight of such a charming young cavalier, who exceeded all the expectations even her pride had conceived. "Come in, Viscount," said Athos. "Madam Duchess de Chevreuse permits you to kiss her hand."

The young man approached with uncovered head and a shy smile, dropped to one knee, and kissed the hand of the duchess. "Sir Count," he said, turning to Athos, "were you hoping not to unnerve me by telling me madam was a duchess? Surely this is the queen!"

"No, Viscount," said Madam de Chevreuse, taking his hand in turn and making him sit beside her, and then looking at him with eyes sparkling with joy. "No, unfortunately, I'm not the queen – for if I were, I'd be able to give you what you deserve right away. But never mind, such as I am, I'll do what I can. Now," she added, scarcely able to keep from embracing him, "what career do you hope to pursue?"

Athos, still standing, regarded them both with an expression of unspeakable happiness. "Well, Madam," said the young man, in a voice both sweet and resonant, "it seems to me the only career for a gentleman is that of arms. Sir Count raised me, I believe, with the intention that I'd be a soldier, and allowed me to hope that in Paris he would introduce me to someone who could give me a recommendation, perhaps even to the Prince de Condé."

"Yes, I understand, and it would become a young soldier like you to serve under a general like him but I don't stand very well with the prince, thanks to the way my stepmother, Madam de Montbazon, has quarrelled with his sister Madam de Longueville ... but maybe the Prince de Marillac – yes! See here, Count, that's it! The Prince de Marillac is an old friend of mine; he will recommend our young soldier to Madam de Longueville, who will give him a letter for her brother Condé. He loves her too tenderly not to grant everything she asks for."

"Excellent! That would be marvellous," said the count. "Only dare I request it be done with dispatch? I have reasons for wishing the viscount gone from Paris by tomorrow night."

"Do you wish it known this is done at your behest, Count?"

"It might be best for the time being if his name were not connected with mine."

"Oh, Sir!" cried the young man.

"You know, Bragelonne," said the count, "that I never do anything without a reason."

"Yes, Sir," replied the young man. "I know how wise you are, and I'll obey you as I always do."

"Well, then, Count, allow me," said the duchess. "I'll send for the Prince de Marillac, who fortunately is in Paris right now, and I won't give up until the matter is accomplished."

"Very good, Madam Duchess – a thousand thanks. I myself have several errands to run today, and upon my return at about, say, six o'clock, I'll expect to meet the viscount at our lodgings."

"What are your plans for the evening?"

"We go to visit the Abbot Scarron,\* for whom I have a letter, and where I expect to meet a friend of mine."

"Very well," said the duchess. "This will take only a moment, so don't leave my parlour until I return."

Athos bowed to Madam de Chevreuse and prepared to leave the room. "Really, Sir Count?" laughed the duchess. "Are we so formal in leaving our old friends?"

"Ah!" murmured Athos, kissing her hand. "If I'd only known sooner that Marie Michon was such a charming creature ...!" And he withdrew with a sigh.

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The Abbot Scarron

There was, in the Rue des Tournelles, an address known to all the coachmen and sedan-chair porters of Paris – and yet that address was the home of neither a nobleman nor a banker. No one went there to dine, to play cards, or to dance. Nonetheless, it was a magnet for all the high society of Paris. This was the house of little Abbot Scarron. There, at the house of this witty abbot, everyone went to laugh and to talk. There, everyone heard the latest news, and that news was instantly recounted, dissected, analysed, and turned into epigrams or satirical verse. Everyone wanted to spend an evening's hour with little Scarron, to hear what was being said, and what he had to say about it. Everyone longed to get in a word or two of their own – and if those words were clever, they were welcome. This little Abbot Scarron – who was an abbot because he possessed an abbacy, not because he'd actually taken orders – had once been one of the most fashionable clerics of Le Mans, where he'd resided. One day during Carnival, he'd wanted to bless his city with a jest they'd always remember, so he'd had his valet coat him in honey, and then, having torn open his feather bed, he'd rolled in it, becoming hilariously grotesque. He then went from door to door, visiting all his friends in this bizarre attire; the citizens were first amazed, and then offended; people insulted him, children threw stones, and he was forced to flee to escape the attacks. As soon as he fled, everyone pursued; reviled, harried, and hunted on all sides, Scarron had had no recourse but to jump into the river to escape. He swam like a fish but the water was icy cold, and when he finally pulled himself out of it, his limbs were crippled for life. Every known means had been tried to restore the use of his limbs but he suffered so much pain from the treatments he'd dismissed his doctors, saying he preferred the malady. He relocated to Paris, where his reputation for wit was already established. There he had made an elaborate wheelchair of his own invention – and one day, in that chair, he visited Queen Anne of Austria, and the regent, charmed by his wit and wisdom, asked if she could grant him a title.

"Yes, your Majesty," Scarron had replied, "in that regard I have a singular ambition."

"And what is that?" asked Anne of Austria.

"To be known as your patient," replied the Abbot.

And thereafter Scarron had been appointed "The Queen's Patient," with an annual income of fifteen hundred livres.

From that moment Scarron, with no fears for the future, had led a joyous life on his carefully spent salary. One day, however, an emissary from Cardinal Mazarin had called to tell him that it was a mistake for him to receive the coadjutor, Sir de Gondy, at his salon. "And why is that?" Scarron had asked. "Isn't he a man of good birth?"

"Indeed, for the love of God!"

"Congenial?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Spiritual?"

"He might, unfortunately, show a bit too much spirit."

"Even so," said Scarron, "why do you want me to stop receiving such a man?"

"Because he has improper ideas."

"Really? And who says so?"

"The cardinal."

"What?" said Scarron. "I should continue to receive Sir Gilles Despréaux, who doesn't like me but I should stop receiving Sir Coadjuteur because someone else doesn't like him? Impossible!"

The conversation ended there, and Scarron, a contrarian at heart, had invited Sir de Gondy to visit as often as he liked. On the morning of the day at which we've arrived that was the first day of the new trimester, Scarron had sent his servant with his invoice to collect his salary for the quarter according to his custom – but his servant had been told, "The State's no more money for Sir Abbot Scarron."

When the servant brought this reply to Scarron, he was being visited by the Duke Longueville who offered to give him twice the salary that Mazarin had denied him but Scarron was too clever to accept it. Instead he made sure that, by four o'clock that afternoon, the entire city knew of the cardinal's refusal. As it was Thursday, the day the abbot received everyone, crowds of well-wishers came from across the city, all reviling the name of the cardinal. In the Rue Saint-Honoré Athos encountered two gentlemen he didn't know, on horseback and followed by lackeys just as he was, and headed in the same direction. One of them took his hat in his hand and said, "Can you believe, Sir, this cowardly Mazarin has cut off poor Scarron's pension?"

"That is absurd," said Athos, bowing to both cavaliers.

"We see you are an honest man, Sir," replied the gentleman who had spoken to Athos, "while this Mazarin is a living plague."

"Alas, Sir," replied Athos, "take care whom you say that to."

And they bowed and separated. "This event is well-timed for our visit this evening," Athos said to the viscount. "We will pay our compliments to this poor fellow."

"But who is this Sir Scarron who puts all Paris in an uproar?" asked Raoul. "Is he some disgraced minister?"

"My God, no, Viscount," replied Athos, "he's just a petty gentleman of wit and spirit who's made an enemy of the cardinal by writing some verses about him."

"Do gentlemen write verses?" Raoul asked naïvely. "I thought that was beneath them."

"It is, my dear Viscount," Athos replied, laughing, "when they write bad ones – but when they're good, it enhances them. Look at Sir Rotrou. However," continued Athos, in the tone of one who gives good advice, "on the whole I think it's better not to do it."

"But then," asked Raoul, "is this Sir Scarron a poet?"

"He is, Viscount, so beware what you say in his house – or better yet, confine yourself to nods, or just listen."

"Yes, Sir," Raoul replied.

"You'll see me talking quite a bit with a gentleman who's a friend of mine, the Abbot d'Herblay, about whom you've heard me speak."

"I remember, Sir."

"Approach us sometimes as if to speak to us but say nothing – and likewise, do not listen. This ruse will keep intruders from bothering us."

"Very well, Sir, I'll obey you to the letter."

Athos made two stops in Paris, then at seven turned them toward the Rue des Tournelles. The street was crowded with porters, horses, and footmen. Athos made his way through the press to the house that was his goal and entered, followed by the young man. Upon gaining the interior, the first person he noticed was Aramis, loitering near a unique wheelchair, wide and covered with a tapestry canopy, under which, fidgeting and wrapped in an embroidered blanket, was a small figure: a person young and cheerful, yet pale and weak but whose active eyes were lively, clever, and gracious. This was the Abbot Scarron, ever laughing, joking, complimenting, wincing with pain, and massaging his limbs with a little rod. Around this sort of rolling pavilion clustered a crowd of gentlemen and ladies. The room was well and simply furnished; fine curtains of silk embroidered with flowers, their bright colours now somewhat faded, framed the windows; the wall hangings were modest but tasteful. Two polite and well-dressed footmen served the distinguished guests. Seeing Athos, Aramis approached him, took him by the arm, and presented him to Scarron, who received him with both pleasure and respect, and gave a very pretty compliment to the viscount. Raoul was speechless, unready for this level of discourse, so he bowed with what grace he could muster. Athos received the compliments of several nobles to whom Aramis presented him, and then, the flurry of his entrance passed, the general conversation resumed. After four or five minutes that Raoul used to recover his self-possession and begin to size up the assembled company, the main door opened and a servant announced Miss Paulet. Athos tapped the viscount's shoulder. "Take note of this lady, Raoul," he said, "she's a historical figure – it was to visit her that King Henry IV was going when he was assassinated."

Raoul started; it seemed that every moment, these days, brought him face-to-face with history. Here was a lady, still young and beautiful, who had known Henry IV and had spoken to him. Everyone hastened to greet the newcomer, for she was never out of fashion. She was a tall and graceful figure, crowned by a head of glorious golden hair, such as Raphael loved to paint and Titian gave to all his Magdalene. This tawny hair, or perhaps the ascendancy she'd won over other women, was why she was known as the Lioness. Our *beautiful ladies* of today who aspire to this title should know that it comes to them, not from England, as they might think but from their august compatriot Miss Paulet. Amid the murmur that her arrival evoked on all sides, Miss Paulet went right up to Scarron. "Well then, my dear Abbot," she said in her serene voice, "Are you now in poverty? We heard all about it this afternoon, at Madam de Rambouillet's, from Sir de Grasse."

"Yes but we enrich the State thereby," said Scarron. "We must, after all, make sacrifices for our country."

"Sir Cardinal will spend that fifteen hundred *livres* on more pomades and perfumes," said Sir Ménage, a Frondeur whom Athos recognised as the gentlemen he'd met in Rue Saint-Honoré.

"But what will the Muse say?" replied Aramis in his voice of honey. "That Muse, who requires a golden mediocrity? After all, *Si Virgilio puer aut tolerabile desit Hospitum, caderent omnes crinibus Hydri*."

"Well said!" said Scarron, extending his hand to Miss Paulet. "But if I no longer have my Hydra, at least I have my Lioness."

Every word Scarron said that night seemed exquisite. Such is the privilege of persecution. Sir Ménage couldn't contain his praise. Miss Paulet went to assume her accustomed place – but before taking her seat, she stood in her grandeur and surveyed all those assembled, her eyes finally resting on Raoul. Athos smiled. "You've been noticed by Miss Paulet, Viscount; go and greet her. Presume to be nothing more than what you are, a French provincial – and don't dare to speak to her of Henry IV." Blushing, the viscount approached the Lioness, and joined the other nobles who clustered around her throne. The gathering now divided into two distinct groups: those who surrounded Sir Ménage, and those paying court to Miss Paulet. Scarron rolled from one to the other, manoeuvring his wheelchair in the press with as much skill as an experienced pilot steering a boat in a crowded harbour. "When shall we talk?" said Athos to Aramis.

"Shortly," came the reply. "The crowd isn't thick enough yet; we'd be noticed."

At that moment the door opened and the footman announced the coadjutor. At this title, everyone turned, for it belonged to one who was already on his way to becoming famous. Athos turned with the others. He knew the Abbot de Gondy only by name. He saw a small, dark man come in, awkward and short-sighted, clumsy in everything except drawing his sword or pistol; though he stumbled against a table and nearly knocked it over, there was nonetheless something fierce and proud in his expression. Miss Paulet offered him her hand, and Scarron rolled up to greet him from his chair. "Well!" said the coadjutor, upon seeing Scarron. "I hear you're in disgrace, Sir Abbot?"

It was the greeting of the hour and had already been said a hundred times that evening, so Scarron had to find a hundredth witty rejoinder but he replied without effort, "Cardinal Mazarin has been kind enough to think of me."

"Brilliant!" cried Ménage.

"But how will you continue to be able to receive us?" continued the coadjutor. "If your income dwindles to naught, I'll have to appoint you a canon of Notre Dame."

"Oh, no!" said Scarron. "I'd bring you into disgrace as well."

"Do you have any resources we're unaware of?"

"I'll just borrow from the queen."

"But Her Majesty has no income of her own," said Aramis. "Doesn't she live on the conjugal funds?"

The coadjutor turned with a smile and acknowledged Aramis with a friendly gesture. "Pardon me, my dear Abbot d'Herblay," he said, "but I see you're behind the times, and I must give you something to bring you up to date."

"What's that?" said Aramis.

"A hatband."

Everyone turned toward the coadjutor, who drew from his pocket a silk ribbon tied in a distinctive shape. "Ah!" said Scarron. "It's tied into a sling – a *fronde*!"

"Exactly," said the coadjutor. "Everything now must be done *à la fronde*. Miss Paulet, I have for you a fan à la fronde. I'll give you the name of my glover, d'Herblay – he makes gloves à la fronde. And for you, Scarron, my baker, who bakes excellent loaves à la fronde."

Aramis took the ribbon and tied it around his hat. Just then the door opened, and the footman announced, "Madam Duchess de Chevreuse!"

At this name, everyone rose. Scarron turned his chair toward the door. Raoul blushed. Athos gestured to Aramis, who withdrew into a window embrasure. Amidst the respectful compliments that greeted her entrance, the duchess seemed to be looking for something – or someone. Finally, her gaze lighted on Raoul, and her eyes sparkled. She saw Athos and looked thoughtful; and she saw Aramis by the window and started slightly behind her fan. "What's the latest?" she asked, as if to conceal the thoughts crossing her mind. "How is poor Voiture? Do you know, Scarron?"

"What? Is Voiture ill?" asked Ménage. "What ails him?"

"He played cards overlong without reminding his servant to bring him a change of shirts," said the coadjutor, "caught a terrible cold, and is dying."

"Where is he?"

"*My God!* At my place, where else? Think of it – he'd made a solemn vow to give up gambling but after three days he couldn't stand it anymore. He came to the archbishop's house to ask me to relieve him of his oath but I was out on business visiting our good Councillor Broussel. However, in my rooms Voiture found the Marquis de Luynes at a card table, shuffling and looking for an opponent. The marquis called him over but Voiture said he couldn't play until he'd been relieved of his sacred vow. Luynes engaged in my name to take the sin upon himself, so Voiture sat down at the table, played until he lost four hundred crowns, then took a chill and lay down, to rise no more."

"Is he in danger, our dear Voiture?" asked Aramis, half hidden by the window curtain.

"Alas! The great man," said Sir Ménage. "Perhaps this time we will lose him, *deseret orbem*."

"You pity him?" said Miss Paulet wryly. "On his deathbed he's surrounded by sultanas, like a Grand Turk! Madam de Saintot comes running with soothing soups, La Renaudot warms his sheets, and Madam de Rambouillet sends herbal tisanes."

"You wouldn't miss him, my dear Parthénie?" said Scarron, laughing.

"How unjust you are! Of course, I would. I'd happily say masses for the repose of his soul."

"It's not for nothing you're called the Lioness," said Madam de Chevreuse. "Your bite is as sharp as ever."

"But ... you speak ill of a poetic giant, Madam," said Raoul, hesitantly.

"He, a giant? Clearly, Viscount, as you said, you *have* just arrived from the provinces, and have never seen him. A giant? Why, he's scarcely five feet tall."

"*Brava!* Hear, hear!" said a tall man, dark and gaunt, with a bristling moustache and a long rapier at his side. "Brava, lovely Paulet! It's past time someone put that little Voiture in his place. I think I know more than a little about poetry, and I've always found his detestable."

"Who is that swashbuckler, Sir?" Raoul asked Athos.

"Sir de Scudéry."

"The author of *Clelia* and *The Grand Cyrus*?"

"Co-author, an honour he shares with his sister, Miss de Scudéry that imposing woman over there next to Sir Scarron."

Raoul turned and saw two figures who had just entered: an older lady, prim, stiff, and arid, who held herself near like a duenna or chaperone, next to a lovely young woman, frail and sad of demeanour, with luxurious black hair and thoughtful, violet eyes. Raoul vowed to himself not to leave the salon before he'd had a chance to speak to the beautiful young lady with violet eyes, who, to his mind, though she had no resemblance to her, recalled to him poor little Louise whom he'd left suffering at Château de La Vallière, and whom his encounters with high society had made him forget for a moment. Meanwhile, Aramis had approached the coadjutor, who without ceasing to smile had whispered a few words in his ear. Aramis, despite himself, started slightly in surprise. "Laugh with me," said Sir de Gondy. "We're being watched."

And he moved away toward Madam de Chevreuse, who had a lively circle gathered around her. Aramis pretended to laugh to throw off any curious listeners, then seeing that Athos had gone into the embrasure he'd left a minute before, tossed a few words left and right before moving to join him. There at the window they finally had their conversation, a quiet one but accented with many gestures. Raoul approached them, as Athos had requested. "Sir Abbot has been repeating one of Sir Voiture's rondeaus that I'd never heard," Athos said loudly. "It's quite charming."

Raoul stood near them awhile, pretending to listen, then went to join the group around the duchess that included Miss Paulet on one side and Miss de Scudéry on the other. "Well, as to me," the coadjutor was saying, "I don't share Sir de Scudéry's opinion. I think Sir Voiture is indeed a poet but solely of poetical ideas, without a touch of politics to them."

Meanwhile: "And so?" asked Athos.

"It's tomorrow," Aramis said quickly.

"At what time?"

"Six o'clock."

"And where?"

"At Saint-Mandé."

"Who told you this?"

"The Count Rochefort." A guest drew near. "Political ideas?" said Aramis aloud. "Our poor Voiture hasn't a one – on this I agree with Sir Coadjuteur. He's purely a poet."

"Oh, certainly – a prodigious poet," said Ménage. "And yet posterity, while admiring him, will surely reproach him for having too little regard for the laws of poetry. He simply murders the rules."

"Murders them, that's the word for it," said Sir de Scudéry.

"But admit that his letters are literary masterworks," said Madam de Chevreuse.

"Oh, in that regard," said Miss de Scudéry, "his fame is assured."

"True enough," replied Miss Paulet, "so long as he's being humourous; but as a serious epistolary writer he's pitiful, his words blunt, unadorned, and put quite badly – as you must agree."

"So long as *you* agree that at humour, he's inimitable."



"Inimitable? Certainly," said Sir de Scudéry, twisting his moustache, "for who would imitate comedy that's forced and jokes that are overfamiliar? For example, his 'Letter from a Carp to a Sturgeon.'" "And you know," said Ménage, "he gets all his best ideas eavesdropping at the Hôtel Rambouillet. Look at his *Zélide* and *Alcidalis*."

"As for me," said Aramis, approaching the circle and bowing respectfully to Madam de Chevreuse, "as for me, I find him too careless in his regard for those of high rank. He's frequently disrespectful of Madam la Princess, the Marshall d'Albret, Sir de Schomberg, and the queen herself."

"What, even the queen?" demanded Sir de Scudéry, advancing his right leg and assuming a belligerent pose. "Morbieu! That I hadn't heard. And how has he disrespected Her Majesty?"

"You haven't heard his piece, 'I Thought'?"

"No," said Madam de Chevreuse.

"No," said Miss de Scudéry.

"No," said Miss Paulet.

"Ah! In fact, I think the queen has shared it with only a few – but I have it from a reliable source."

"And you know it?"

"I *could* bring it to mind, I think."

"Let's have it! Let's have it!" said every voice.

"Here's how it came about," said Aramis. "Sir Voiture was in the queen's carriage, riding with her through the forest of Fontainebleau; he put on a look of deep thought that never fails to incite the queen to ask him what he's thinking about. And so, 'Of what are you thinking, Sir Voiture?' her Majesty asked. Voiture smiled, pretended to ponder for about five seconds so he would appear to be improvising, and replied:

“I thought – that Destiny,  
After so much unearned misfortune,  
Had finally crowned you  
With glory, splendour, and fortune  
“But before, when you suffered,  
I think you were happier ...  
I'll not say more beloved  
Though that's what the rhyme calls for.”

Sir Ménage and Mesdemoiselles de Scudéry and Paulet shrugged, unimpressed. "Wait for it, wait for it," said Aramis. "There are two strophes."

"Oh, say rather two couplets," said Miss de Scudéry, "as this is at best a song."

“I thought – that poor Love,  
Who always lent you his arms,  
Is banished from your Court,  
Without looks, bow, or charms –  
“And for me, what's the use  
Of thinking about you,  
If you only abuse  
Those who've served you so well?”

"Well, as to that last trait," said Madam de Chevreuse, "it might murder the laws of poetry but it's certainly the truth – as Madam de Hautefort and Madam de Sennecey would surely attest, not to mention Sir de Beaufort."

"Go on, go on," said Scarron, "that no longer concerns me, since as of this morning I'm no longer 'her patient.'"

"And the final couplet?" said Miss de Scudéry. "Let's have the final couplet."

"Here it is," said Aramis. "This one goes to the trouble of naming names, so no one has to guess:

“I thought – we who are poets,  
Ideas tumbling in torment,  
What, given your mood,  
You would do in this moment,  
“If you saw enter, in this place  
The Duke of Buckingham,  
Who would you sooner disgrace,  
The duke or Père Vincent?”

At this final verse, there was a general cry of outrage at Voiture's impertinence. "Speaking for myself," said the girl with violet eyes, quietly, "I'm afraid I find these verses quite charming."

Raoul thought so as well; blushing, he approached Scarron and said, "Sir Scarron, do me the honour, if you please, to tell me who is this young lady whose opinion stands against that of this entire illustrious assembly."

"Oh ho, my young Viscount!" said Scarron. "I gather you wish to propose an alliance both offensive and defensive?"

Raoul blushed again. "I admit," he said, "I thought the verses very pretty."

"And so they are," said Scarron, "but hush! Between poets, we don't say such things."

"But I don't have the honour to be a poet," said Raoul, "so I ask you..."

"That's right – you wanted to know who the young lady is, no? She's the girl known as the *Beautiful Indian*."

"Excuse me, Sir," said Raoul, colouring, "but that doesn't tell me anything. Alas! I'm such a provincial."

"Which just means you're not infected yet with the wild nonsense we spew here from every mouth. All the better, young man, all the better! Don't try to understand it all, it's a waste of time – but when you grasp a bit more of it, we'll speak again."

"But forgive me, Sir," said Raoul, "and do please tell me who this person you call the Beautiful Indian is?"

"Oh, of course, she's one of the nicest people you could hope to meet: Miss Françoise d'Aubigné."

"D'Aubigné? Is she of the family of the famous 'Agrippa,' the friend of King Henry IV?"

"She's his granddaughter. She came here from Martinique that is why she's called the Beautiful Indian."

Raoul's eyes widened, and met the violet gaze of the young lady, who smiled. Everyone was still talking about Voiture. "Sir," Miss d'Aubigné said to Scarron, inserting herself into his conversation with the young viscount, "don't you admire these friends of poor Voiture? Listen to how they prick him even as they praise him. One denies him the possession of common sense, the next all talent for poetry, then any originality, or sense of humour, or independence, or ... why, good God! What has he left but celebrity?"

Scarron laughed, and Raoul joined in. The Beautiful Indian, astonished by the effect she'd achieved, looked down and resumed her air of innocence. Raoul said to himself, "This is a person of refined spirit."

Athos, still in the window embrasure, surveyed the entire scene with a disdainful smile on his lips. "Call over the Count of La Fère," Madam de Chevreuse said to the coadjutor. "I need to speak with him."

"Whereas I," said the coadjutor, "need it to be thought that I *don't* speak with him. I like and admire him, as I know at least something of his former adventures – but I shouldn't seem to know him until after tomorrow morning."

"Why after tomorrow morning?" asked Madam de Chevreuse.

"You'll know that tomorrow night!" said the coadjutor, laughing.

"Faith, my dear Gondy," said the duchess, "you always talk like it's the Apocalypse. Sir d'Herblay," she added, turning toward Aramis, "will you be my servant this evening?"

"Tonight, tomorrow, and forever, Duchess," said Aramis. "Command me."

"Well, then, fetch me the Count of La Fère. I want to talk to him."

Aramis went and brought back Athos. "Sir Count," said the duchess, giving Athos a letter, "here is that which I promised you. Our protégé will be well received."

"Madam," said Athos, "he is happy to be in your debt."

"You have nothing to envy him in that regard, for without you, I would never have known him," replied the wayward lady with an impish smile that recalled Marie Michon to both Aramis and Athos.

And with that, she rose and called for her carriage. Miss Paulet had already gone, and Miss de Scudéry was leaving. "Viscount," said Athos to Raoul, "follow Madam Duchess, and beg the favour of escorting her out – and as you do, be sure to thank her."

Meanwhile, the Beautiful Indian approached Scarron to take her leave of him. "What? Leaving already?" he said.

"But one of the last to go, as you see. If you hear news of Sir Voiture, and if it's good, please do me the favour of letting me know tomorrow."

"Oh but you know," said Scarron, "he may die."

"Do you mean it?" said the girl with violet eyes.

"Certainly, now that his panegyric is complete."

And they parted, laughing, the girl turning to give the poor paralytic a fond look, while the poor paralytic followed her out with a look of love. Gradually the groups broke up. Scarron pretended not to notice that some of his guests had had mysterious discussions, letters had arrived for others, and his party seemed to have an undercurrent that had nothing to do with literature despite all the noise devoted thereto. But what did that matter to Scarron?

He was already out of favour – as he'd said, as of that morning he was no longer *the Queen's Patient*. As to Raoul, he had indeed escorted the duchess to her carriage, where she gave him her hand to kiss – and then, in one of those wild caprices that made her so adorable, and so dangerous, she suddenly took him by his ears and kissed him on the forehead, intoning, "Viscount, by this kiss, and by my wishes, may you find happiness!"

Then she pushed him away and ordered the coachman to take her to the Hôtel de Luynes. The duchess favoured the young man with a final wave, the carriage rolled away, and Raoul went back inside, dazed.

Athos understood what had happened and smiled. "Come, Viscount," he said, "it's time we retired. You leave tomorrow for the army of Sir Prince, so sleep well on your last night in the city."

"I'm going to be a soldier?" said the young man. "Oh, Sir! I thank you with all my heart!"

"Goodbye, Count," said the Abbot d'Herblay. "I must return to my monastery."

"Goodbye, Abbot," said the coadjutor. "I preach tomorrow, and still have twenty texts to consult this evening."

"Goodbye, Gentlemen," said the count. "I'm so tired, I'm sure I'll spend the next twenty-four hours asleep."

The three men bowed, after exchanging a final look. Scarron watched them from the corner of his eye as they went out the doors of his salon. "And not a one of them will do what he said," he whispered with his simian smile. "But there they go, the brave gentlemen! And who knows? Perhaps they'll find a way to restore my pension ...! At least they can move their limbs, and that's more than enough. As for me, I have only language – but I'll try to show the world yet that that's something. *Whoa!* Champenois! It's striking eleven already; come and roll me to my bed ... Ah but in truth, that Demoiselle d'Aubigné is quite charming ....!" And with that, the poor paralytic disappeared into his bedroom, the door closed behind him, and the lights went out one by one in the salon on the Rue des Tournelles.

Day had barely broken when Athos arose and dressed; it was easy to see, from the pale traces insomnia had left on his face that he'd gone most of the night without sleep. No matter how firm and decisive he usually was, this morning there was something slow and irresolute about him. As a way of gaining time, he occupied himself with preparations for Raoul's departure. First, he inspected a sword that he drew from its oiled leather sheath and checked the grip to make sure it was well wrapped and the blade's tang was fixed firmly in the hilt. Then he threw into the bottom of the young man's luggage a small bag full of *louis d'or*, called Olivain, the lackey who'd come with him from Blois, placed the portmanteau before him, and made sure that it held everything a young man needs on campaign. Finally, after expending nearly an hour on these preparations, he opened the door to the viscount's room and quietly entered. The sun, already high, shone in through the wide-framed windows, because Raoul, returning late the night before, had neglected to close the curtains. He was still asleep, head resting gracefully on his arm, his long black hair half-covering his charming face, bedewed in the warmth with pearls of moisture that rolled down the dreaming youth's cheeks. Athos approached and, bent in an attitude of tender melancholy, watched for a time the sleeping young man with his smiling mouth and half-closed eyes, whose dreams should be sweet and his slumbers light, given the silent guardian angel who watched over him with care and affection. Gradually, in the presence of youth so rich and so pure, Athos was drawn into a reverie of his own youth, of half-formed memories that were more phantasms than thoughts. Between that past and this present stretched an abyss. But imagination is an angel's flight that darts back over the dark seas where our illusions were shipwrecked, past the rocks that shattered our happiness. He recalled how the first part of his own life had been destroyed by a woman; and thought with dread what an influence love can have over even the finest and strongest. Recalling all that he'd suffered, he foresaw all that Raoul might yet suffer, and the deep and tender compassion in his heart distilled itself into a single tear that dropped upon the young man. At that moment Raoul awoke from his cloudless dreams, showing none of the sadness or grief that afflicts some of those of sensitive spirit. His eyes rose to meet those of Athos, and he felt some of what was passing in the heart of this man who awaited his awakening, much as a lover awaits the awakening of his mistress, with a gaze expressing an infinite love. "You've been here, Sir?" he said with respect.

"Yes, Raoul, right here," said the count.  
"And you didn't wake me?"

"I wanted to let you enjoy your last moments of sound sleep, *my friend*; you must be still weary from yesterday that extended so far into the night."

"Ah, Sir, you're so good to me!" said Raoul.

Athos smiled. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine, Sir – fully recovered and refreshed."

"You're still growing," continued Athos, with a fatherly interest charming in such a mature man, "and at your age fatigue is doubly felt."

"Oh, please, Sir," said Raoul, shy at receiving so much attention. "Just give me a moment and I'll get dressed."

Athos called Olivain to assist, and in only ten minutes, with the military punctuality that Athos had passed on to his pupil, the young man was ready. "Now," the youth said to the servant, "let's prepare my luggage."

"Your luggage's already prepared," said Athos. "It's packed under my supervision and should lack for nothing. If the lackeys have followed my orders, your bags should already be placed on the horses."

"Everything has been done as Sir Count desired," said Olivain, "and the horses are ready."

"And I slept on," cried Raoul, "while you, Sir, attended to all these details! Oh, truly, you overwhelm me with kindness."

"So, you love me just a little? I hope so, at least," Athos replied in an almost tender tone.

"Oh, Sir!" cried Raoul, struggling to keep control of his emotions. "As God is my witness, I love and revere you."

"Make sure you don't forget anything," said Athos, pretending to look around to conceal his feelings.

"Of course, Sir," said Raoul.

The lackey approached Athos hesitantly, and whispered, "The viscount lacks a sword, as Sir Count had me take away the one he wore last night."

"It's all right," said Athos. "That's my business."

Raoul didn't seem to notice this exchange. He went toward the front door, glancing at the count every few seconds to see if the moment of parting had come but Athos seemed unmoved. Arriving on the steps, Raoul saw three horses. "Oh, Sir!" he cried, radiant. "You're going with me?"

"I'll ride with you part of the way," said Athos.

Joy shone in Raoul's eyes, and he sprang lightly onto his horse. Athos mounted more slowly, after whispering a few words to the lackey, who, instead of following immediately, went back into the house. Raoul, delighted to be in the count's company, noticed, or pretended to notice, nothing. The two gentlemen rode across the Pont Neuf, and then went along the quays, around what was then called Pepin's Pond, then past the walls of the Grand Châtelet. The lackey caught up to them as they turned onto Rue Saint-Denis. They rode in companionable silence. Raoul felt that the time of separation was approaching; the night before the count had given certain orders respecting the events of the day. He looked at the youth with undisguised tenderness, and from time to time let slip an affectionate remark, or some thoughtful and caring advice. After passing through the Saint-Denis gate, and climbing the heights past the monastery of the Récollets, Athos looked at the viscount's mount. "Take care, Raoul," he said. "Look! Your horse is already tired and foaming, while mine seems like it's just out of the stable. I've told you this often, as it's a common failure of equestrians: the way you tug on her mouth will harden her jaws, and if you do that too much, she won't respond as quickly as you might need her to. A rider's safety depends on his mount's prompt obedience. Remember, in a week you'll be riding, not around a track but on a battlefield."

Then quickly, to take the sting out of the observation, Athos continued, "Look there, Raoul – what a fine meadow for hunting partridge."

The young man appreciated the lesson, and even more the delicate way in which it was given. "I also noticed the other day," said Athos, "that when aiming a pistol, you extend your arm too far. The extra tension can interfere with your aim, so that out of a dozen shots you might miss three times."

"Whereas out of twelve shots you, Sir, would hit twelve times," replied Raoul, smiling.

"Because I bend my arm and rest my elbow on my other hand. Do you understand what I'm saying, Raoul?"

"Yes, Sir; I tried it myself after the last time you advised me, and it was a complete success."

"And then," said Athos, "when fencing, you charge your adversary too often. It's because you're young, I'm well aware – but the angle of the body when charging takes your sword out of line, and a level-headed opponent will stop you at the first step with a simple disengage, or even a stop-thrust."

"Yes, Sir, as you've done to me often enough – but not everyone has your courage and *sangfroid*."

"Now there's a cool breeze!" said Athos. "A reminder that winter is on its way. By the way, I must say, if you're going to shoot – and you will, as you're being sent to a young general who likes the smell of gunpowder – keep in mind that in an engagement, especially against other cavaliers, remember not to be the one who fires first. The first to fire rarely hits his man, and then he's disarmed himself in the face of an armed adversary. As your opponent fires, make your horse rear up – that manoeuvre has saved my life two or three times."

"If I can remember to do that, I will."

"What?" said Athos, "Are those poachers being placed under arrest over there? It seems so ... Another important thing, Raoul: if you're wounded during a charge, and fall from your horse, if you have the strength for it, try to get out of your regiment's line of advance – for if they fall back, you could get trampled. In any case, if you are injured, write me right away, or get someone to write for you. We veterans know how to deal with wounds," added Athos, smiling.

"Thank you, Sir," the young man answered with some emotion.

"Ah! And here we are at Saint-Denis," murmured Athos.

They had just arrived at the town gate, where two sentries stood on guard. One said to the other, "Here's another young gentleman on his way to join the army."

Athos turned toward them; everything that concerned Raoul, even indirectly, was important to him. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"By his martial air, Sir," said the sentry. "And he's the right age. This is the second one today."

"A young man like me has already passed this morning?" asked Raoul.

"Yes, *my faith*, with a haughty look and some fancy equipment – clearly the son of a family of rank."

"That sounds to me like he could be a companion for the road," said Raoul, as they continued on their way. "It's a shame that I missed him."

"You may yet join up with him, Raoul, after I have a talk with you here. What I have to say won't take long, and then perhaps you can catch up to your young gentleman."

"As you wish, Sir."

As they spoke they made their way through streets crowded for the coming festival of Pentecost and stopped in front of the old basilica within which first mass was being said. "Let's dismount here, Raoul," said Athos. "Olivain, give me that sword, and stay here to hold the horses."

Athos took the sword the lackey held out to him, and the two gentlemen went into the church. Athos offered some holy water to Raoul. In the hearts of some fathers is a tenderness like that for a lover. The young man touched Athos's hand, genuflected, and crossed himself. Athos spoke a word to one of the guards, who bowed and marched away toward the crypts. "Come, Raoul," said Athos, "let's follow this man."

The guard opened the Iron Gate to the royal tombs and stood on the top step while Athos and Raoul descended into the crypts. In a sepulchre at the bottom of the stairs burned a silver lamp and below this lamp rested a catafalque supported by an oaken stand, covered by a large cloak of purple velvet adorned with golden lilies. The sadness that seemed to pervade this majestic church had prepared the young man for this scene, and he descended, step by solemn step, to the sepulchre, where he uncovered his head and stood before the mortal remains of the last king who would be buried with his ancestors only when his successor came to take his place, and who until then remained here, seemingly to say to human pride, so easily exalted when upon a throne: "Dust of the earth, I await you!"

They stood a moment in silence. Then Athos raised his hand and pointing at the coffin, he said, "This is the catafalque of a man who was weak and lacked grandeur, and yet whose reign was full of important events. This king was guided by the ever-watchful mind of another man, who enlightened his liege the way this lamp illuminates his coffin. That man was the real king, Raoul; the other was a phantom into which he poured his soul. And yet, so powerful is the majesty of monarchy, that wise man doesn't have the honour to be buried at the feet of he for whose glory he expended his life. Remember, Raoul, that though that wise man served a little king, he by his devotion made his monarchy great. For there are two things within the palace of the Louvre: a king, who dies – and royalty that does not. That reign is passed, Raoul; that minister, so dreaded, so feared, so hated by his master, has gone to his grave, drawing after himself the king who didn't dare to survive alone, lest he should destroy his own great work – for a king only builds when he has God, or the spirit of God, near to him. Back then everyone regarded the death of the cardinal as a deliverance – just as I myself, as blind as my contemporaries, sometimes opposed the designs of that great man who held France in his hands, and who, clenching or opening them, choked it or gave it air as he willed. If I wasn't crushed, me and my friends, by his terrible wrath, then I was probably spared so I could tell you this today: Raoul, do not confuse the king with the monarchy. The king is only a man but the monarchy is the divine rule of God; if you are ever in doubt about which to serve, abandon the material incarnation in favour of the invisible principle – for the invisible principle is everything. Only God could make this principle tangible by incarnating it in a man. Raoul, I feel I can see your future, as if through a cloud. It's better than ours was, I think. Unlike us, who had a minister without a real king, you will have a king without a minister. You can serve, love, and respect such a king. If this king becomes a tyrant – for omnipotence is dizzying and can drive one to tyranny – then serve, love, and respect the monarchy, the infallible spirit of God upon earth, the celestial spark that makes this dust here so great and so holy that we, gentlemen of high rank as we are, are as nothing before this body at the foot of the staircase, just as this body itself is nothing before the throne of the Lord."

"As I love God, Sir," said Raoul, "I will respect the monarchy. I will serve the king, and I will try, even unto death, to live for the king, the monarchy, and God. Have I understood you correctly?"

Athos smiled. "You have a noble nature," he said. "Take, now, your sword."

Raoul went down on one knee.

"This sword was borne by my father, a gentleman loyal to the crown. I bore it in my turn, and did honour to him sometimes when the hilt was in my hand and the scabbard hung at my side. If your hand is not yet strong enough to wield it, Raoul, so much the better, as you will have more time to learn what to do when the time comes to draw it."

"Sir," said Raoul, receiving the sword from the hands of the count, "I owe everything to you – but this sword is the most precious gift you have given me. I shall bear it, I swear, as a grateful man."

And he put his lips to the hilt and kissed it respectfully.

"It is well," said Athos. "Rise, Viscount, and embrace me."

Raoul rose and fell with emotion into the arms of Athos. "Goodbye," murmured the count, his heart melting. "Goodbye, and think sometimes of me."

"Oh, forever and always!" cried the young man. "I swear to you, Sir, that at my end, your name will be the last name I speak, and my final thought will be the memory of you."

To hide his feelings, Athos climbed quickly back up the stairs, gave a gold coin to the tomb guardian, bowed before the altar, and went back out the entrance of the church, where he found Olivain waiting with the horses. "Olivain," he said, pointing to Raoul's baldric, "Tighten that belt's buckle, as the sword is hanging a bit low on it. Good. Now, you will accompany Sir Viscount until Grimaud joins you, at which time you'll leave the viscount. Do you hear, Raoul? Grimaud is a wise old servant full of courage and prudence; Grimaud will do well for you."

"Yes, Sir," said Raoul.

"Now to horse! I want to see how you ride."

Raoul obeyed. "Goodbye, Raoul!" said the count. "And fare you well, my dear child."

"Goodbye, Sir," said Raoul, "and farewell, my beloved protector!" Athos waved his hand, because he dared not speak, and Raoul rode away, his head uncovered in respect. Athos stood, motionless, watching him go until he disappeared around the corner of the street. Then the count tossed his horse's bridle to a peasant, slowly went back up the stairs, entered the church, knelt down in the darkest corner, and prayed.

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1 of the Duke Beaufort's 40 Methods of Escape

The same time passed for the prisoner as for those working on his escape – but for the prisoner, it passed far more slowly. Unlike those men who eagerly commit to a dangerous enterprise and grow cooler and calmer as the time for action approaches, the Duke Beaufort, whose fiery courage was proverbial but who had been chained up for five years, now seemed to want to hurry the very hours themselves toward the designated time to break out. There was nothing for him now but the escape, other than those projects he planned for afterward – projects, it must be admitted, that in comparison had grown vague and uncertain, though the desire for revenge still choked his heart. Beaufort's escape would be a terrible blow to Sir de Chavigny, whom he hated due to the petty persecutions he'd suffered at his hands, and an even worse disaster for Mazarin, whom he loathed for the unforgivable insult of his imprisonment. (We note that Sir de Beaufort maintained a due proportion in his hatred of the governor and the minister, placing the master over his subordinate.) Seething in his prison, Beaufort, who knew so well the court of the Royal Palace, and the relationship between queen and cardinal, imagined to himself the dramatic reaction to the news, the cries that would echo from the minister's office to Anne of Austria's chambers: *Beaufort has escaped!* Repeating this to himself, Beaufort smiled softly, as though already out and breathing the open air of fields and forests, with a powerful horse galloping beneath him as he shouted aloud, "I'm free!"

But when he came out of his reverie he was still between four walls, no more than ten paces from where La Ramée sat twiddling his thumbs while outside in the antechamber the guards drank and laughed. The only thing that made this odious tableau bearable, so strange is the human mind, was the sullen face of Grimaud, whose features he had so hated at first but which now embodied all his hopes. To him, Grimaud was as handsome as Antinous. Needless to say, this was all a fancy of the prisoner's feverish imagination. Grimaud was the same as he'd always been. That was how he maintained the confidence of his superior, La Ramée, who now relied on him more than he did on himself, since, as we've said, La Ramée felt at heart a certain sympathy for Sir Beaufort. Also, the good La Ramée was looking forward to his private supper party with the prisoner. La Ramée had only one fault: he was a gourmand who loved a good pastry and adored an excellent honey. And the successor to Père Marteau had promised him a pie of pheasant instead of chicken, and Chambertin instead of the usual Macon vintage. All this, plus the company of this excellent prince of whom he'd grown fond, who played such clever tricks on Chavigny and made such droll jests about Mazarin, all this made Pentecost for La Ramée the most anticipated festival of the year. So, La Ramée awaited the hour of six o'clock with nearly as much impatience as the duke. In the morning he had occupied himself by double-checking the details, and, trusting only himself, had made a personal visit to Père Marteau's successor. His expectations were surpassed: he was shown a true colossus of a pie, its upper crust adorned with the Beaufort coat of arms – and though it was as yet empty, nearby were a prime pheasant and two partridges, neatly larded and perforated like pincushions. Then La Ramée's mouth had begun to water, and he returned to the duke's cell rubbing his hands together. To crown it all, as we said, Chavigny, trusting in La Ramée, had taken a little trip, leaving that morning after appointing La Ramée Deputy Governor of Vincennes Château. As for Grimaud, he just seemed more sullen than ever. In the morning, Beaufort had challenged La Ramée to a game of tennis, and at a sign from Grimaud recognised that he needed to pay close attention to everything that followed. Grimaud, leading the way, traced the path they were to follow that evening. The tennis court was in what was called the small courtyard of the château. It was usually deserted, only guarded by sentries when Beaufort was playing there, though given the height of the drop over the outside walls this seemed unnecessary. There were three doors to open before reaching the small courtyard. Each opened with a different key. Once they were in the small courtyard, Grimaud marched stiffly over to sit in a crenellation, his legs dangling outside the wall. It was clear that this was where he intended to tie the rope ladder. All of this pantomime, though quite clear to the Duke Beaufort, was of course unintelligible to La Ramée. The contest began. This time, Beaufort was on his game, and it seemed as if he could put the ball wherever he wanted. La Ramée was completely routed. Four of Beaufort's guards assisted in collecting the balls. When the game was over, Beaufort, after lightly mocking La Ramée for his clumsiness, offered the guards two *Louis d'or* to go and drink his health with their other comrades. The guards asked permission of La Ramée, and he granted it but only for the evening. Till then La Ramée had important details to take care of, and he wanted to make sure the prisoner didn't disappear while he ran his errands. Sir de Beaufort could hardly have arranged matters better if he'd done it himself. Finally, the clock struck six, and though seven was the hour set for dinner, the food was prepared and served. There on a sideboard stood the colossal pie bearing the arms of the duke, seemingly cooked to perfection, if one could judge by the golden colour of its flaky crust. The rest of the dinner matched its quality in every way. Everyone was impatient: the guards to go and drink, La Ramée to sit down and dine, and Sir de Beaufort to escape. Only Grimaud was unmoved; Athos had trained him well for this. There were moments when, looking at him, the Duke Beaufort wondered if he were not in a dream, if this marble figure was actually in his service, and would animate when the time came. La Ramée sent away the guards, commending them to drink the prince's health; then, when they were gone, he closed the doors, put the keys in his pocket, and beckoned the prince to the table with a look that said: *Whenever My Lord desires*.

The prince looked at Grimaud, and Grimaud looked at the clock: it was barely a quarter after six, and the escape was fixed for seven, so there were still three-quarters of an hour to pass. The prince, to gain fifteen minutes, pretended to be engrossed in reading, and asked to finish his chapter. La Ramée approached and looked over his shoulder to see what book so engaged the prince that he would delay sitting down to table when dinner was ready. It was *Caesar's Commentaries* that he himself, contrary to Chavigny's orders, had provided to the duke three days earlier. La Ramée promised himself not to contravene the dungeon's regulations again. Meanwhile, he uncorked the bottles, and surreptitiously sniffed the pie. At half past six, the duke rose and solemnly declared, "No doubt about it, Caesar was the greatest man of antiquity."

"You think so, My Lord?" said La Ramée.

"Yes."

"Well! As for me," said La Ramée, "I prefer Hannibal."

"Why's that, La Ramée?" asked the duke.

"Because he left behind no *Commentaries*," said La Ramée with his big smile.

The duke took the hint and sat down, gesturing for La Ramée to take the place opposite him. The officer didn't wait to be asked twice. Nothing is so expressive as the figure of a true gourmand sitting down to a fine dinner. As he received his bowl of soup from the hands of Grimaud, La Ramée's face beamed with an expression of perfect bliss. The duke looked at him with a smile. "*By the belly of the Grey Saint*, La Ramée!" he cried. "If you told me that somewhere in France, at this moment, there was a happier man, I wouldn't believe it!"

"And you would be right, My Lord," said La Ramée. "As for me, I confess that when I'm hungry, I know of no more pleasant sight than that of a well-laid table. And if on top of that he who presides over the table is the grandson of Henri the Great, then you'll understand, My Lord that the honour one receives doubles the pleasure one takes."

The prince bowed in acknowledgment, while a nearly imperceptible smile touched the face of Grimaud where he stood behind La Ramée. "My dear La Ramée," said the duke, "truly, you know how to turn a compliment."

"No, no, My Lord," said La Ramée, sincere and earnest, "no, truly, I say just what I think – there's no flattery in it."

"So, you really do like me?" asked the prince.

"So much so," said La Ramée, "that I'll be inconsolable on the day Your Highness leaves Vincennes."

"Saying that is a strange way of showing your affliction."

(The prince meant *affection*.) "Ah but My Lord, what would you do on the outside?" said La Ramée. "Some exploit that would embroil you with the Court and get you locked up in the Bastille instead of Vincennes. Chavigny is not very friendly, I admit," continued La Ramée, sipping a glass of Madeira, "but Sir de Tremblay is much worse."

"True enough!" said the duke, amused at the turn the conversation was taking and glancing at the clock whose hands moved painfully slowly.

"What do you expect from the brother of a Capuchin who studied in the school of Cardinal Richelieu? Ah, My Lord, believe me, it's a good thing that the queen, who's always favoured you, or so I'm told, had the good idea of sending you here instead, where you can promenade, play tennis in the fresh air, and eat well."

"Truly," said the duke, "to hear you, La Ramée, I'd have to be some sort of an ingrate to want to leave here."

"In fact, My Lord, to leave *would* be the height of ingratitude," said La Ramée. "But surely Your Highness isn't speaking seriously."

"Alas, I must confess," said the duke, "perhaps it's sheer folly but I still dream of escape."

"By one of your famous forty methods, My Lord?"

"But yes!" replied the duke.

"My Lord," said La Ramée, "so long as we're baring our souls, tell me of one of these forty methods Your Highness has concocted."

"With pleasure," said the duke. "Grimaud, bring me the pie."

"I'm listening," said La Ramée, leaning back in his chair, holding up his glass, and squinting at it through one eye in order to see the sun through its ruby liquid.

The duke glanced at the clock. In ten more minutes, it would strike seven. Grimaud brought the pie and placed it before the prince, who lifted his slim silver knife to slice it open but La Ramée, who feared the flimsy blade would mar the beautiful pastry, handed the duke his own knife that had a sturdy blade of iron. "Thanks, La Ramée," said the duke, taking the utensil.

"Well, my Lord," said the officer, "what is this famous method?"

"Should I tell you," replied the duke, "of the one I think the best of all, the one I've decided would actually work?"

"Yes, that one," said La Ramée.

"Very well!" said the duke, holding the pie plate with one hand while carving a circle in the pastry with the knife he held in the other. "First of all, I would have to have as a guardian a brave fellow like you, Sir La Ramée."

"Good!" said La Ramée. "As you see, you have him. What next, my Lord?"

"I would give him my regards." La Ramée bowed. "I said to myself," continued the prince, "that once I had watching me a good fellow like La Ramée, I would have a friend of mine, whom he doesn't know is my friend, advise him to hire as a subordinate a man who is secretly devoted to me, and will help prepare for my escape."

"Go on!" said La Ramée. "That's not bad."

"It isn't, is it?" said the prince. "For example, the servant of some brave gentleman who is opposed to Mazarin – as all true gentlemen must be."

"Hush, My Lord!" said La Ramée. "Don't bring politics into this."

"Once I have this servant near me," continued the duke, "assuming he's skilful enough to get and keep my guardian's confidence – then with his aid, I'll be able to get news from outside."

"Ah, yes!" said La Ramée. "But how would you get this news from outside?"

"Oh, nothing could be easier," said the Duke Beaufort. "For example, I could get it by playing tennis."

"By playing tennis?" asked La Ramée, beginning to pay closer attention to the duke's story.

"Yes, like this: I send a ball into the dry-moat, where a man collects it. The ball contains a letter; from the ramparts I request the man return it but in place of my ball he throws me a different one – one that, also, contains a letter. So, we've exchanged ideas, and no one's the wiser."

"The devil you say!" La Ramée replied, scratching his ear. "I'm glad you warned me of this – I'll keep a close eye on your ball collector." The duke smiled. "But," said La Ramée, "that's really no more than a means of correspondence."

"That's not nothing, it seems to me."

"It's not enough, though."

"Ah but how about this: suppose I tell my friends, 'Do you think that, at a given hour on a given day, you could be on the other side of the moat with two spare horses?'"

"What use is that?" said La Ramée, with some anxiety. "Unless those horses have wings to fly to the top of the wall to pick you up."

"Eh, *my God*," the prince casually said, "the horses don't need to fly to the top of the wall so long as I have a way to get down."

“Such as what?”

“Such as a rope ladder.”

“Yes but,” La Ramée said, trying to laugh, “A rope ladder can’t come up in a tennis ball.”

“No, it has to enter inside something else.”

“Inside something else! Such as...?”

“Oh, perhaps ... in a pie.”

“In a pie?” cried La Ramée.

“Sure. Suppose, for a moment, that my faithful butler, Noirmont, spent enough money to purchase the bakery of Père Marteau...”

“Well, what then?” asked La Ramée, trembling.

“What then? My La Ramée, a confirmed gourmand, sees his lovely pies that look so much better than their predecessors, and offers to get me a sample. I accept, provided that La Ramée shares this sample with me. For comfort and privacy, La Ramée dismisses the guards, keeping only Grimaud to serve us. Grimaud, naturally, is the servant recommended by my friend, secretly devoted to me and ready to assist in everything. The time of my escape is fixed for seven o’clock. And, well! As you can see, it’s very nearly seven...”

“And when it’s seven...?” continued La Ramée, sweat beading his forehead.

“When it’s seven,” replied the duke, suiting his actions to his words, “I cut the crust off the top of this giant pie. Within it I find two poniards, a rope ladder, and a choke-pear. I place the point of one poniard to La Ramée’s chest and I say, ‘*My friend*, I’m very sorry but if you make a move or cry out, you’re a dead man!’”

As we said, the duke’s words reflected his actions. The duke ended standing beside La Ramée, pressing the point of a poniard into his chest with such resolve that his threat couldn’t be doubted. Meanwhile Grimaud, still silent, drew out of the pie the second poniard, the rope ladder, and the choke-pear. La Ramée’s eyes followed the appearance of each of these objects with increasing terror.

“Oh, My Lord!” he cried, with such an expression of stupefaction that at any other time the prince would have laughed. “You wouldn’t have the heart to kill me!”

“No – unless you try to thwart my escape.”

“But, My Lord, if I let you escape, I’m a ruined man.”

“I’ll make sure you’re repaid the full value of your position.”

“Are you really determined to leave the dungeon?”

“For the love of God!”

“And nothing I can say will make you change your mind?”

“This evening, I shall be free.”

“And if I defend myself? If I cry out?”

“Faith of a gentleman: I’ll kill you.”

At that moment the clock struck seven.

“Seven o’clock,” said Grimaud who until then hadn’t said a word.

“Seven o’clock,” said the duke. “You see, I mustn’t be late.”

La Ramée, driven by conscience, made a small movement. The duke frowned, and the officer felt the point of the dagger penetrate his clothes and prick his flesh. “Enough, My Lord!” he said. “Enough. I’ll hold still.”

“We must hurry,” said the duke.

“My Lord, one final favour.”

“What? Speak quickly.”

“Tie me up, My Lord.”

“Tie you up? Why?”

“So no one will think I was your accomplice.”

“Tie his hands!” said Grimaud. “Not in front but behind.”

“But with what?” said the duke.

“With your belt, My Lord,” said La Ramée.

The duke unbuckled his belt and gave it to Grimaud, who bound La Ramée’s hands tightly behind him. “Now his feet,” said Grimaud.

La Ramée stretched out his legs; Grimaud tore a strip from the tablecloth and tied him with it. “Now my sword,” said La Ramée. “Tie its hilt onto the sheath.” The duke took a lacing from his breeches and bound the sword to its owner’s satisfaction. “Now,” said poor La Ramée, “the choke-pear – I insist upon it. Otherwise they’ll put me on trial because I didn’t scream for help. And my Lord – *tightly*.”

Grimaud prepared to fulfil the officer’s request but the man signalled that he had something more to say. “Speak,” said the duke.

“Please, my Lord,” said La Ramée, “don’t forget, if I get in trouble because of you, that I have a wife and four children.”

“Don’t worry ... tightly, Grimaud.” In a moment La Ramée was gagged and laid on the ground, and then two or three chairs were overturned to indicate there’d been a struggle. Grimaud collected all the officer’s keys from his pockets; the first opened the door of the cell they were in, then locked it behind them after they left. They went quickly along the gallery that led to the small courtyard. The three doors along the way were speedily unlocked and opened by Grimaud in an impressive display of dexterity. Finally, they arrived at the tennis court; it was completely deserted, unlit and unguarded. The duke ran to the wall and saw, across the moat, three cavaliers holding two spare horses. The duke, excited to see them, exchanged waves with them. Meanwhile, Grimaud attached the rope ladder – or rather, what passed for one, a ball of silk cord with a rung at each end. One rung was lodged in the embrasure, the other the climber was to place behind his legs as he unwound the cord in descending. “Go,” said the duke.

“Me first, my Lord?” asked Grimaud.

“Quite so,” said the duke. “If they catch me, I go back into prison; if they catch you, you hang.”

“Fair enough,” said Grimaud.

And immediately, setting himself astride the lower rung, he began his perilous descent. The duke watched him with eyes wide in helpless terror, as three-quarters of the way down the wall, the cord suddenly broke, and Grimaud fell heavily into the dry-moat. Though the duke cried out, Grimaud didn’t even groan – but he had to be badly injured, as he remained lying where he’d fallen. At once one of the waiting men dropped down into the moat and untangled Grimaud from the cord, after which the other two helped him up and out. “Come down, My Lord,” called the first man. “The drop at the end is only fifteen feet, and the grass here is soft.”

The duke was already on his way. His task was more difficult without the lower rung for support – he had to descend fully fifty feet solely by the strength of his arms and wrists. But the duke, as we’ve said, was nimble, athletic, and cool in the face of danger; in less than five minutes, he was at the end of the cord that as the waiting gentleman had told him was only fifteen feet from the ground. He took a breath, closed his eyes, and dropped, landing harmlessly on his feet. Immediately he turned and began to climb out of the moat, at the top of which he met the Count of Rochefort. The other two gentlemen were unknown to him. Grimaud, knocked out, was tied to his horse. “Gentlemen,” said the prince, “I’ll thank you later but right now there’s not a moment to lose. Let’s ride! And if you love me, ride hard!”

And he sprang onto his horse and put it into a gallop, drawing the fresh air deep into his chest, and shouting, with a joy impossible to describe, “Free! *Free! FREE!*”

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A Timely Arrival & a Hasty Departure

At Blois, d’Artagnan collected the sum that Mazarin, to speed his return, had authorised to cover his immediate needs. It took an ordinary rider four days to travel from Blois to Paris. D’Artagnan arrived at the Saint-Denis gate at about four in the afternoon of the third day. Once he would have done it in two. We’ve already seen that Athos, who set out three hours after him, had arrived twenty-four hours ahead of him. But Planchet had lost the habit of these wild, forced rides, and d’Artagnan chided him for his softness. “What do you mean, Sir? We did forty leagues in three days! I think that’s pretty good for a confectioner.”

“Have you really become just a grocer, Planchet – and now that we’re reunited, are you seriously thinking of returning to vegetate in your grocery?”

“Humph,” said Planchet. “You’re the only one still pursuing such an overactive life. Look at Sir Athos, now – does he spend his time seeking out strenuous adventures? No, he lives like a gentleman farmer, a true country lord. The tranquil life, Sir, is the only life.”

“Hypocrite!” said d’Artagnan. “We’re almost back to Paris, where there’s a rope and a scaffold waiting for you and your ‘tranquil life!’”

Indeed, as they were speaking the travellers rode up to the barrier at the gate. As they were entering a neighbourhood where he thought he might be recognised, Planchet pulled down the brim of his hat. D’Artagnan twisted his moustache and remembered that Porthos should be awaiting him in Rue Tiquetonne. He’d been considering how to tempt him away from his green domain of Bracieux and the heroic kitchens of Pierrefonds. Turning the corner of the Rue Montmartre, he saw, in one of the windows of the Hôtel de la Chevette, Porthos dressed in a sky-blue doublet edged with silver embroidery, and yawning so as to nearly dislocate his jaw, while passers-by gazed with respectful admiration upon such a gentleman, so handsome, so wealthy, and so bored with his own wealth and grandeur. D’Artagnan and Planchet had scarcely turned the corner when Porthos spotted them. “Hey, d’Artagnan!” he called. “God be praised! It’s you at last.”

“And good afternoon to you, too, old comrade!” d’Artagnan replied.

A small crowd of idle onlookers gathered around the riders as the house grooms took their horses by the bridle but at a frown from d’Artagnan and a gesture from Planchet the busybodies dispersed, since they weren’t quite sure why they’d gathered in the first place. Meanwhile Porthos had come down to the doorstep. “Ah, my dear friend,” he said, “I see my horses have been hard put to it.”

“So true!” said d’Artagnan. “My heart breaks for these noble creatures.”

“I feel the same – they need a proper stable,” said Porthos. “If it wasn’t for the hostess here, who looks fine and knows a joke when she hears it,” he said, smugly preening, “I’d have sought lodging elsewhere.”

The fair Madeleine, who’d appeared behind him, stopped when she heard this and turned pale as death, for she thought it would be the scene with the Swiss Guard all over again – but to her amazement d’Artagnan didn’t frown, and instead of getting angry, he said to Porthos with a laugh, “Yes, dear friend, I understand that the air of the Rue Tiquetonne can’t compare to that of the valley of Pierrefonds but don’t worry – I’ve got better prospects ahead.”

“Really? When?”

“Very soon, I hope.”

“Ah! All the better!”

Porthos’s exclamation was followed by a deep groan that came from beyond the angle of the door. D’Artagnan, dismounting, saw the silhouette of the bulging belly of Mousqueton, whose sad mouth was the source of the complaint. “So, you, too, my poor Sir Mouston, have moved into this boarding house?” d’Artagnan asked in a tone equal parts compassion and mockery.

“Yes – and he finds the cooking terrible,” said Porthos.

“Well, then, why not do it himself, as he did at Chantilly?” said d’Artagnan.

“Ah, Sir, I don’t have here, as we did there, the ponds of Sir Prince, filled with lovely fish, or the forests of His Highness, where one could take such fine partridges. As for the cellar here, I’ve inspected it in detail, and it’s deeply disappointing.”

“Truly, Sir Mouston,” said d’Artagnan, “I would pity you, if I didn’t have more pressing business to attend to.”

Then, taking Porthos aside: “My dear du Vallon,” he said, “your outfit is splendid that is appropriate, as I’m about to present you to the cardinal.”

“Bah! Are you really?” said Porthos, his eyes widening.

“Yes, my friend.”

“An official presentation?”

"Does that worry you?"

"No but I admit I'm anxious."

"Oh, don't worry! It's not like you have to deal with the old cardinal – this one won't overwhelm you with his majesty."

"All the same, d'Artagnan – it's the Court, you know!"

"Oh, *my friend*, there's no real Court these days."

"But – the queen!"

"And as I was about to add, there is no queen. Anyway, we certainly won't see her."

"You say, then, that we're going from here to the Royal Palace?"

"Right away. Only, so we won't be late, I'm going to have to borrow one of your horses."

"As you like. There are four of them in your stables, all at your disposal."

"Oh, one will be good enough for the moment."

"Should we bring our servants?"

"Yes, it wouldn't hurt to bring Mousqueton with us. As for Planchet, he has reasons for not appearing at Court."

"Like what?"

"He did some deeds that put him at odds with His Eminence."

"Mouston," said Porthos, "saddle Vulcan and Bayard."

"And for myself, Sir, shall I take Rustaud?"

"No, we're going on a ceremonial visit, so take a more stylish horse, like Phoebus or Superb."

"Ah!" breathed Mousqueton with relief. "So, we're just paying a visit?"

"*My God*, yes, Mouston, no more than that. Only – just in case – put your pistols in your saddle holsters. I have mine, already loaded."

Mouston sighed; he knew all about the kind of ceremonial visits one made while armed to the teeth. "In fact, d'Artagnan," said Porthos, complacently surveying his old lackey, "you're right, Mouston will do nicely – he looks quite magnificent."

D'Artagnan smiled. "And you," said Porthos, "aren't you going to change into a fresh outfit?"

"No, I'm fine as I am."

"But you're filthy with sweat and dust, and your boots are quite muddy!"

"All of which testifies to how eagerly I obey the cardinal's orders."

Mousqueton came back with three horses, fully equipped. D'Artagnan remounted as if he'd just had a week's rest. "Oh, Planchet!" he said. "I'll need the long rapier..."

"As for me," said Porthos, displaying a small dress sword with a golden hilt, "I have my court sword."

"Take your rapier, old friend."

"Why's that?"

"I'm not sure – just trust me and take it."

"My rapier, Mouston," commanded Porthos.

"But that's combat equipment, Sir!" replied Mouston. "Are we going on campaign? If so, tell me now, so I can take appropriate precautions."

"You know how it is, Mouston," said d'Artagnan. "With us, it's always appropriate to take precautions. Or has your memory grown so dim, you've forgotten that we don't usually spend our evenings at balls and serenades?"

"You're right – I should have known better," said Mousqueton, quickly arming himself from head to foot. "...Alas!"

They rode off at a trot and arrived at the Royal Palace at a quarter past seven. The streets were crowded, as it was the day of Pentecost, and as they rode by the citizens looked with surprise at these two cavaliers, one so shiny and fresh he might have come right out of a box, and the other so dusty he seemed to have come from a battlefield. Mousqueton also attracted the attention of the onlookers, who said, as the novel *Don Quixote* was then in vogue, that he looked like Sancho who, having lost one master, had found two others. Arriving in the palace antechamber, d'Artagnan found himself in familiar territory, as the musketeers of his own company were on guard duty. He called over the audience-controller and showed him the cardinal's letter that ordered him to return without losing a second. The audience-controller bowed and went in to announce him to His Eminence. D'Artagnan turned toward Porthos, who seemed agitated and was ever so slightly trembling. He smiled, leaned up toward Porthos's ear, and said, "Take courage, my brave friend! We no longer brave the eye of an eagle, we're just dealing with a vulture. Stand as straight as you did at the Saint-Gervais bastion, and don't bow too deeply to this Italian; it will give him the wrong impression of your worth."

"Well, all right," said Porthos.

The audience-controller returned. "Enter, Gentlemen," he said. "His Eminence awaits you."

In fact, Mazarin was seated in his study, poring over a list of names of those receiving pensions and benefits to see who he might safely strike off. He watched d'Artagnan and Porthos enter from the corner of his eye, and though that eye had sparkled with satisfaction at the audience-controller's announcement, he now pretended not to notice them. "Ah, is that you, Sir Lieutenant?" he said, looking up. "You've shown great diligence, and your arrival is welcome."

"Thank you, My Lord. I've come at Your Eminence's orders, and brought with me one of my old friends, Sir du Vallon, who once disguised his nobility under the name of Porthos."

Porthos bowed to the cardinal. "A magnificent cavalier indeed," said Mazarin.

Porthos shook his head slightly, and gave his giant shoulders a modest shrug. "He's the mightiest sword in the realm, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "though many who know it'll not inform you of it – or can't."

Porthos saluted d'Artagnan. Mazarin loved handsomely turned-out soldiers almost as much as Frederick of Prussia would in a later era. He took a moment to admire Porthos's sinewy hands, broad shoulders, and steady eye. It seemed to him that he had before him the means of salvation of his ministry and the kingdom, carved from muscle and bone. He remembered that there had once been four such impressive musketeers. "And your other two friends?" he asked.

Porthos opened his mouth, thinking it was time to get a word in but d'Artagnan quelled him with a twitch of his eye. "Our other friends are engaged at present but will join us later."

Mazarin coughed lightly. "And Sir here, freer than they, has volunteered to rejoin the service?"

"Yes, My Lord, and out of sheer devotion, for Sir de Bracieux is quite wealthy."

"Wealthy?" said Mazarin, repeating the single word that always got his attention.

"An annual income of fifty thousand livres," said Porthos, speaking for the first time.

"Out of sheer devotion," continued Mazarin, with his cunning smile. "Sheer devotion, eh?"

"Perhaps My Lord no longer believes in such a thing?" d'Artagnan asked.

"Do you, Sir Gascon?" said Mazarin, resting his elbows on his desk and his chin on his hands.

"Me?" said d'Artagnan. "I think 'Devotion' makes a fine baptismal name, so long as it's followed by something more earthly. Everyone starts out more or less devoted but devotion eventually needs a reward."

"So, your friend – for example. What would he like to have as a reward for his devotion?"

"Well, my Lord! My friend has three magnificent estates: Vallon at Corbeil, Bracieux near Soissons, and Pierrefonds in the Valois. And what he would like is to have one of these estates elevated to a barony."

"Is that all?" said Mazarin, eyes sparkling at the happy idea that he could reward Porthos's devotion without opening his purse. "Is that all? Well, the thing can be arranged."

"Me, a baron!" cried Porthos, taking a step forward.

"I told you so," said d'Artagnan, stopping him with a movement of his hand, "and My Lord confirms it."

"And you, Sir d'Artagnan – what do you want?"

"My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "in September it will be twenty years since Cardinal Richelieu made me a lieutenant."

"Indeed – and you'd like Cardinal Mazarin to make you a captain."

D'Artagnan bowed. "Well, that's not an impossibility! We'll see, Gentlemen, we'll see. Now, Sir du Vallon," said Mazarin, "which do you prefer: to serve in the city, or go out on campaign?"

Porthos opened his mouth to answer. "My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "like me, Sir du Vallon prefers extraordinary services, that is to say, those missions that others consider insane or impossible."

This little Gasconade did not displease Mazarin, and it started him thinking. "Maybe but I must confess I summoned you here for a more sedentary task. I'm anxious about ... here, now! What's that noise?"

A great clamour came from the antechamber, the office door opened suddenly, and a man covered in dust rushed in, shouting, "Sir Cardinal? Where's His Eminence?"

Mazarin recoiled, thinking it was an assassin, and took shelter behind his chair. D'Artagnan and Porthos moved to put themselves between the cardinal and the newcomer. "Eh, Sir!" said Mazarin.

"What are you doing, bursting in here and shouting like some crier in the markets?"

"My Lord," said the officer so reproached, "I must tell you what I have to report quickly and in confidence. I'm Poins, Officer of the Guards at the dungeon of Vincennes."

The officer was so pale and distraught that Mazarin, convinced he brought news of importance, waved d'Artagnan and Porthos aside to make way for the messenger. The two cavaliers withdrew into a corner of the office. "Speak, Sir, and quickly," said Mazarin. "What is it then?"

"Just this, My Lord," said the messenger. "Sir de Beaufort has escaped from the Château de Vincennes."

Mazarin uttered a cry and turned even paler than the messenger. He fell back into his chair in a near-faint. "Escaped!" he gasped. "Beaufort – escaped?"

"From the parapet, My Lord, I saw him riding away."

"And you didn't shoot him?"

"He was out of range."

"But Chavigny, what was he doing?"

"He was away."

"And La Ramée?"

"He was found tied and gagged in the prisoner's cell, near a fallen poniard."

"But what about his assistant?"

"He was the duke's accomplice and escaped with him."

Mazarin groaned. "My Lord," said d'Artagnan, taking a step toward the cardinal.

"What?" said Mazarin.

"It seems to me Your Eminence is losing precious time."

"What do you mean?"

"If Your Eminence will order the prisoner pursued, he might still be caught. France is large, and it's sixty leagues to the closest border."

"And who would go after him?" cried Mazarin.

"For the love of God! Me!"

"You would arrest him?"

"Why not?"

"You would take the Duke Beaufort from amidst his armed allies?"

"If My Lord ordered it, I'd arrest the Devil himself. I'd grab him by the horns and haul him in."

"Me, too," said Porthos.

"You too?" said Mazarin, astonished. "But the duke won't give up without a fierce fight."

"Well!" said d'Artagnan, his eyes afire. "A fight! It's been a while since we had a good fight, isn't it, Porthos?"

"To battle!" said Porthos.

"And you think you can catch him?"

"Yes, if we're better mounted than he is."

"Then take whatever troops you want with you and go."

"At your orders, My Lord."

"At my orders," said Mazarin, taking a sheet of paper and writing a few lines.

"Add, My Lord that we may confiscate any horses we need along the way."

"Yes, yes," said Mazarin. "On the king's service! Take whatever you need and go!"

"Very good, My Lord."

"Sir du Vallon," said Mazarin, "you'll find your barony just beyond the Duke Beaufort – all you have to do is catch him. As for you, Sir d'Artagnan, I make no promises but if you bring him back, dead or alive, you may ask for what you will."

"To horse, Porthos!" said d'Artagnan, taking his friend by the arm.

"I'm with you," replied Porthos, with his serene composure.

And they ran down the grand staircase, gathering up guards as they passed, shouting, "To horse! To horse!"

Ten men were quickly assembled. D'Artagnan and Porthos mounted up, the former on Vulcan and the latter on Bayard while Mousqueton straddled Phoebus. "Follow me!" shouted d'Artagnan.

"Let's ride," said Porthos.

And they dug their spurs into the flanks of their noble steeds and galloped up Rue Saint-Honoré like a raging storm. "Well, now, Sir Baron!" called d'Artagnan. "I promised you some exercise, didn't I?"

"You did, Sir Captain!" replied Porthos. They glanced behind: Mousqueton, sweating even more than his horse, was right behind them, followed at a gallop by the ten troopers. The citizens gazed in amazement from their doorsteps as their excited dogs barked and nipped at the cavaliers' heels. At the corner of the Saint-Jean cemetery, d'Artagnan's horse knocked down a pedestrian but their business was too pressing to stop. The galloping troop continued on its way as if the horses had wings. But alas! Every action, however small, has its consequences, and we'll see how this one nearly led to the fall of the monarchy.

### 197 The Highway of the King

Headed toward Vincennes, they galloped through the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and soon found themselves outside the city, riding through a wood and then into a village. The horses seemed to stretch out more with every step, their red nostrils roaring like blazing furnaces. D'Artagnan, working the spurs, led Porthos by no more than two feet. Mousqueton followed by two lengths. The troopers trailed in a scattering behind, depending on the virtues of their horses. Coming over a crest d'Artagnan saw a group of people clustered along the moat where the Château de Vincennes faces Saint-Maur. He realised that must be from whence the prisoner had fled, and that was where he'd find more information. He reached the group within five minutes, followed successively by his troopers. The folk who made up the group were completely engrossed. They stared at the cord that still hung from the parapet and ended, broken, twenty feet from the ground. They estimated the height of the drop and shared theories of the escape. Nervous sentries passed along the top of the wall, peering down anxiously. A squad of soldiers, commanded by a sergeant, arrived to drive the idlers away from where the duke had taken to horseback. D'Artagnan went straight up to the sergeant. "*My Officer*," said the sergeant, "you can't linger here."

"Your orders don't apply to me," said d'Artagnan. "Has anyone gone after the fugitives?"

"Yes, Officer but unfortunately the escapees were well mounted."

"How many were there?"

"Four healthy, and one injured, whom they took with them."

"Four!" said d'Artagnan, looking at Porthos. "Did you hear that, Baron? Only four!"

A happy smile lit Porthos's face. "And how much of a lead do they have?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Two hours and a quarter, Officer."

"Two hours and a quarter, that's nothing. We're well mounted, aren't we, Porthos?"

Porthos sighed at the thought of what was ahead for his poor horses.

"Very well," said d'Artagnan. "Now that direction did they go?"

"As to that, Officer, I'm not supposed to say."

D'Artagnan drew a paper from his pocket. "The king's orders," he said.

"Speak to the governor then."

"And where is the governor?"

"He's away."

Anger coloured d'Artagnan's face; his brow furrowed, his temples flushed. "You wretch!" he said to the sergeant. "Do you think you can toy with me? Just wait."

He unfolded the paper and held it up in front of the sergeant with one hand, while with the other he drew a pistol and cocked it. "The king's orders, I said. Look at this and answer me, or I'll blow out your brains! Which way did they go?"

The sergeant saw that d'Artagnan was serious. "The road to Vendome!" he said.

"By what gate did they leave?"

"The Saint-Maur gate."

"If you're lying to me, dog, you hang tomorrow," said d'Artagnan.

"And if you catch up to them, you'll never return to hang me," muttered the sergeant. D'Artagnan shrugged, beckoned to his troop, and spurred on. "*This way*, gentlemen!" he cried, pointing toward the gate that gave onto Saint-Maur. But now that the duke had escaped, the gatekeeper thought it prudent to lock the gate. He had to be persuaded in the same way as the sergeant that cost them ten more minutes. That final obstacle passed, the troop resumed its ride with the same haste. But the horses couldn't maintain that pace, and after an hour's gallop, three balked and halted; one fell. D'Artagnan didn't pause, or even turn his head. In his calm voice, Porthos reported the loss to him. "As long as the two of us get there," said d'Artagnan. "Against four, we're plenty."

"True," said Porthos. And he put the spurs to his horse. After two hours, the horses had gone twelve leagues without a pause; their legs began to tremble, the foam blown from their muzzles speckled their riders' doublets, and their sweat soaked the riders' breeches. "Let's rest a few minutes to let these poor creatures breathe," said Porthos.

"No – we ride them to death, if we must," d'Artagnan said. "Look! Fresh tracks. They're no more than a quarter of an hour ahead of us."

And in fact, by the last rays of the setting sun, they could see the road was freshly furrowed by horses' hooves. They rode on – but two leagues later Mousqueton's horse staggered and fell. "Oh, great!" said Porthos. "There's Phoebus burned out."

"The cardinal will pay you ten thousand pistoles."

"Right you are!" said Porthos. "I'm over it."

"Resume the pursuit, at the gallop!"

"We'll if we can." But in fact, d'Artagnan's horse refused to take another step; his breathing shuddered to a halt, and a final touch of the spur, instead of reviving him, made him fall. "The devil!" said Porthos. "That's the end of Vulcan."

"*Mordieu!*" cried d'Artagnan, pulling out his hair by the handful. "Have I hit a wall? Porthos – give me your horse. But wait, what the devil are you doing?"

"For the love of God! I'm falling," said Porthos, "or rather, it's Bayard who falls."

D'Artagnan assisting, Porthos tried to spur the horse back up but suddenly blood gushed from its nostrils. "Three down!" said Porthos. "It's all over."

At that moment a neighing was heard. "Hush!" said d'Artagnan.

"What is it?"

"I heard a horse."

"It's just our companions rejoining us."

"No," said d'Artagnan, "it's ahead of us."

"Oh? Well that's something else entirely," said Porthos.

And he listened in his turn, focusing on the direction d'Artagnan had indicated. "Sir," said Mousqueton, who, having abandoned his horse on the highway, had just walked up to rejoin his maser, "Sir, Phoebus couldn't handle another..."

"Hush there!" said Porthos.

And just then a second neigh was borne to them on the night breeze. "They're about five hundred paces ahead of us," said d'Artagnan.

"True, Sir," said Mousqueton, "and five hundred paces ahead of us there happens to be a small hunting lodge."

"Mousqueton, your pistols," said d'Artagnan.

"They're ready, Sir."

"Porthos, do you have yours?"

"I have them."

"Well," d'Artagnan said, drawing his own, "do you get it, Porthos?"

"Not so much."

"We're riding in the king's service."

"So?"

"So, in the king's service, we require those horses."

"Right," said Porthos.

"No more talk then. Let's do it!" All three advanced through the dark, silent as ghosts. At a bend in the road, they saw a light shining through the trees. "There's the house," said d'Artagnan quietly. "I'll go first – follow my lead, Porthos." They glided from tree to tree and moved to within twenty paces of the house unnoticed. From that distance, thanks to a lantern hanging from a shed, they could see four horses of the finest quality. A groom was tending to them; nearby were saddles and bridles. D'Artagnan made a sign to his companions to stay a few steps behind him, and then moved quickly forward. "I'm buying these horses," he said to the groom. The man turned around, surprised but made no reply. "Didn't you hear what I said, dolt?" snapped d'Artagnan.

"I heard it," said the groom.

"Why didn't you answer me?"

"Because these horses aren't for sale."

"Nonetheless, I'm buying them," said d'Artagnan.



And he reached out for the closest horse. His two companions came up and did the same. “But gentlemen!” cried the groom. “They just travelled six leagues and have been unsaddled barely half an hour.”

“Then they’re already warmed up,” said d’Artagnan. “Half an hour’s rest is plenty.” The groom called for help. A steward came out just as d’Artagnan and his companions were getting the saddles on the horses. The steward began to object loudly. “My dear fellow,” said d’Artagnan, “say one more word and I’ll blow your brains out.” And he showed him the barrel of a pistol that he immediately tucked back under his arm so he could continue his work.

“But, Sir,” said the steward, “don’t you realise these horses belong to Sir Montbazon?”

“All the better,” said d’Artagnan. “That explains their quality.”

“Sir,” said the steward, backing away toward the door of the house, “I warn you, I’ll call for my people.”

“And I’ll call for mine,” said d’Artagnan. “I’m a lieutenant of the King’s Musketeers with ten troopers coming up behind me. Can’t you hear them? Then we’ll see.” No one heard anything but the steward went quietly back inside. “Are you ready, Porthos?” said d’Artagnan.

“I’ve finished.”

“And you, Mouston?”

“Me too.”

“Then into the saddle, and ride.”

The three sprang onto their horses, just as the steward reappeared. “There they are!” he shouted. “Quick! The pistols and carbines!”

“Off we go, before there’s musketry!” said d’Artagnan.

And they spurred off like the wind. “Help!” bellowed the steward as the groom appeared from another building with some armed men.

“Careful! They’ll kill your horses!” cried d’Artagnan, laughing.

“Fire!” replied the steward.

Sudden lightning lit the road, followed by a detonation, then the sound of bullets whistling past the riders. “They shoot like peasants,” said Porthos. “Marksmanship isn’t what it was in Sir Richelieu’s time. Do you remember the road to Crèvecoeur, Mousqueton?”

“Ah, Sir, my right buttock sure remembers it!”

“Are you certain we’re on the right track, d’Artagnan?” asked Porthos.

“For the love of God! Didn’t you hear what he said?”

“What?”

“That these horses belong to Sir Montbazon.”

“What of it?”

“What of it? Sir Montbazon is the husband of Madam de Montbazon...”

“He must be, no?”

“And Madam de Montbazon is the mistress of Sir Beaufort.”

“Ah, I get it,” said Porthos. “She provided the relays.”

“Exactly.”

“And now we’re chasing the duke on the horses he just left behind.”

“My dear Porthos, you really do possess a rare intelligence,” said d’Artagnan, half serious and half jesting.

“Bah!” said Porthos. “You must take me as I am.”

They ran the horses for an hour, until they were white with foam and blood streamed from their flanks. “Hey! What’s that I see ahead?” said d’Artagnan.

“You’re lucky you can see anything on a night like this,” said Porthos.

“Sparks!”

“Yes!” said Mousqueton. “I saw them too.”

“Ah ha!” said Porthos. “Have we caught up to them?”

“Here we go – a dead horse,” said d’Artagnan, reining in his own horse as it shied. “It seems they’re also reaching the end of their breath.”

“I think I hear a troop of riders ahead,” said Porthos, bending forward over his horse’s mane.

“A troop? Impossible.”

“No, there are a lot of them.”

“All right, if you say so.”

“Here’s another horse!” said Porthos.

“Dead?”

“No, dying.”

“Saddled or unsaddled?”

“Saddled.”

“That’s them, then.”

“Courage! We have them.”

“But if they’re so many,” said Mousqueton, “we don’t have them, they have us.”

“Bah!” said d’Artagnan. “They’ll think they’re outnumbered, since they’re caught up – they’ll be afraid and scatter.”

“Right,” said Porthos.

“Ah! Look there,” cried d’Artagnan.

“Yes, more sparks – this time I saw them, too,” said Porthos.

*“Forward!”* d’Artagnan shouted. “Five minutes from now we’ll be laughing.” And they hurtled ahead. The horses, furious from pain and fatigue, flew up the dark highway, and ahead they began to see a dark mass moving against the horizon.

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Encounter

They continued the chase for ten more minutes. Suddenly, two black blots detached themselves from the dark mass ahead, approached, grew, and assumed the silhouettes of two riders. “Uh-oh,” said d’Artagnan. “They’re coming to us.”

“Too bad for them,” said Porthos.

“Who’s that?” cried a hoarse voice.

The three riders dashed ahead without pause or reply, though from the approaching phantoms they heard the sound of swords being drawn and of pistols being cocked. “Reins in your teeth!” said d’Artagnan.

Porthos understood, and then he and d’Artagnan each drew a pistol left-handed and cocked it. “Who’s that?” the voice cried a second time. “Not one more step or you’re dead!”

“Bah!” replied Porthos, nearly choking on dust and chewing the reins as his horse was chewing his bit. “We’ve heard that before.”

At these words the two shadows reined up, barred the way, and starlight glinted from the barrels as they aimed their pistols. “Back off!” cried d’Artagnan. “Or it’s you who’ll be dead.”

Two pistol shots replied to this threat, and the shooters followed their shots so closely that they were upon their opponents a moment later. A third pistol cracked, fired at close range by d’Artagnan, and an enemy fell. As for Porthos, he struck his opponent with his sword so hard that, though the blade was turned, he sent the man tumbling ten paces from his horse. “Finish him, Mousqueton!” said Porthos. And he spurred forward to catch up to his friend, who had already resumed the pursuit. “Well?” said Porthos.

“Head shot,” shrugged d’Artagnan. “And you?”

“Just knocked him out of the saddle – but wait...”

They heard the crack of a carbine: it was Mousqueton, following his master’s orders as he passed. “Two down!” said d’Artagnan. “First trick to us.”

“Yes,” said Porthos, “but here come some more players.”

In fact, two more equestrians appeared to have detached from the main group and were hastening back to bar the road once more. This time d’Artagnan didn’t even wait for them to address him. “Make way!” he cried first. “Make way!”

“What are you after?” said a voice.

“The duke!” shouted Porthos and d’Artagnan with one voice.

The response was a burst of laughter but it ended in a whimper, as d’Artagnan ran the man through with his sword. At the same time two pistols boomed as Porthos and his adversary fired at each other. D’Artagnan turned and saw Porthos right behind him. “Bravo, Porthos!” he said to him. “Do you think you killed him?”

“I think I killed his horse,” said Porthos.

“Well, what would you have? You can’t hit the bull’s-eye every time – so long as you’re on the target, we can’t complain ... hey! For God’s sake! What’s wrong with my horse?”

“Your horse is done in,” said Porthos, reining in his own.

Indeed, d’Artagnan’s horse stumbled, fell to its knees, then groaned and lay down. It had been struck in the chest by his first opponent’s bullet. D’Artagnan’s curses were sharp enough to crack the sky.

“Does Sir need a horse?” said Mousqueton.

“By God! I’ll say,” cried d’Artagnan.

“Take this one,” said Mousqueton.

“How the devil do you have two horses?” said d’Artagnan, jumping on the second one.

“Their masters were dead, and I thought they might come in handy, so I took them.”

Meanwhile Porthos was reloading his pistols.

“Heads up!” said d’Artagnan. “Here come two more.”

“They keep coming like there’s no tomorrow,” said Porthos.

Indeed, two more riders were rapidly approaching. “Watch out, Sir!” said Mousqueton. “The one you unhorsed has gotten up.”

“Why didn’t you treat him like the first one?”

“I was busy rounding up the horses.”

A shot rang out and Mousqueton screamed in pain. “Ah, no, Sir! Not the other one! It’s like the road to Amiens all over again!”

Porthos turned and leapt like a lion on the dismounted rider, who tried to draw his sword but before it was out of its scabbard Porthos had cracked his head with such a blow from his pommel that he dropped like an ox under the butcher’s axe. Mousqueton, groaning, slid down from his horse, as his wound wouldn’t let him stay in the saddle. Watching the approaching riders, d’Artagnan had paused to reload his pistol, and discovered that his new horse had a carbine in a long saddle holster. “I’m back!” said Porthos. “Do we wait for them or charge?”

“We charge,” said d’Artagnan.

“We charge!” said Porthos.

They dug their spurs into their horses. The oncoming riders were no more than twenty paces from them. “In the king’s name!” cried d’Artagnan. “Let’s pass.”

“There’s no king here,” replied a dark, resonant voice that seemed to come from a cloud as the rider came wreathed in a mist of dust.

“And I say the king is everywhere,” said d’Artagnan.

“We’ll see,” said the same voice. Two shots rang out simultaneously, one from d’Artagnan, the other from Porthos’s adversary. D’Artagnan’s ball shot off his enemy’s hat, while the bullet from Porthos’s opponent tore out the throat of his horse that collapsed with a groan. “For the last time, where do you think you’re going?” said the same dark voice.

“To the Devil!” d’Artagnan replied.

“Fine! I’ll send you to him.” D’Artagnan saw him bring up the barrel of a musket; there was no time to reach for his holsters but he remembered some advice Athos had once given him and made his horse rear. The musket ball struck his mount in the belly. D’Artagnan felt his horse going down, and with marvellous agility he leapt off, landing safely. “What’s this?” said the same vibrant and mocking voice. “We’re not here to slaughter horses but men! Draw your sword, Sir! Draw your sword!”

And the man leapt down from his horse. “Let it be swords, then,” said d’Artagnan, “because the sword’s my business.”

In two bounds d’Artagnan was within reach of his opponent and felt his steel on his enemy’s. D’Artagnan, cool as ever, engaged him in *fierce*, his favourite guard. Meanwhile Porthos knelt, a pistol in each hand, behind his dying horse that writhed in convulsions of agony. But the *mêlée* was on between d’Artagnan and his opponent. D’Artagnan launched his usual fierce attack – but this time he met a strength and skill that gave him pause. He attacked twice in *fourth*, then stepped back but his adversary didn’t advance into the trap; d’Artagnan resumed his attack in *fierce*. Each lunged and parried twice but flying sparks were the only result. Finally, d’Artagnan thought he saw the opportunity to unleash his favourite feint; he lunged with finesse, drew his opponent’s point out of line, then remised like lightning, sure that he had him. The remise was parried. “*God be with you!*” he swore in his Gascon accent.

At this exclamation, his opponent sprang back and cocked his head, as if trying to see through the gloom. Meanwhile d’Artagnan, fearing a feint, fell into a defensive guard. “Take care,” said Porthos to his opponent. “I still have two loaded pistols.”

“Then I give you leave to shoot first,” his adversary replied.

Porthos fired, the flash lighting up the battlefield. At this sudden light, both fencers cried out. “Athos!” said d’Artagnan.

“D’Artagnan!” said Athos. Athos raised his sword’s point; d’Artagnan lowered his. “Aramis!” called Athos. “Don’t shoot.”

“Oh ho, is that you, Aramis?” said Porthos.

And he tossed away his second pistol. Aramis holstered his own pistol and sheathed his sword. “My son!” said Athos, extending his hand to d’Artagnan.

It was what he used to call d’Artagnan in the old days. “Athos,” said d’Artagnan, wringing his hands, “so you’re defending the duke? And here I’m, having sworn to take him dead or alive. Agh! I’m dishonoured.”

“Kill me then,” said Athos, lowering his guard, “if your honour requires my death.”

“Oh! Devil take me!” cried d’Artagnan. “There’s only one man in the world who could stop me and fate put him in my path. Gah! What am I going to tell the cardinal?”

“You will tell him, Sir,” said a voice that rang out over the battlefield, “that he sent against me the only two men who could beat four other cavaliers, fight the Count of La Fère and the Knight d’Herblay to a standstill, and then yield to fifty more.”

“The prince!” said Athos and Aramis, stepping aside to make way for the Duke Beaufort while d’Artagnan and Porthos took a step back.

“Fifty more!” muttered Porthos and d’Artagnan.

“Look around you, Gentlemen, if you doubt me,” said the duke. D’Artagnan and Porthos did look around and saw that they were surrounded by equestrians. “By the sound of the encounter,” said the duke, “I thought you must be twenty men. Fed up with fleeing, and ready for a little sword work, I turned back with my entire troop, to find you were only two.”

“Yes, My Lord,” said Athos, “but you were not in error, for these two are worth twenty.”

“Come, Gentlemen – surrender your swords,” said the duke.

“Our swords!” said d’Artagnan, raising his head and regaining his self-possession. “Our swords! Never!”

“Never!” said Porthos.

The riders began to close in. “One moment, My Lord,” said Athos. “A few words.”

He approached the prince, who leaned toward him and listened as he whispered. “Whatever you say, Count,” said the prince. “I’m too much in your debt to refuse your first request. Fall back, Gentlemen,” he said to his escort. “Gentlemen d’Artagnan and du Vallon, you’re free to go.”

The order was followed immediately, and d’Artagnan and Porthos found themselves at the centre of a widening circle. “Dismount now, d’Herblay,” said Athos, “and come with me.”

Aramis got down and approached Porthos, as Athos came up to d’Artagnan. The Four were thus reunited. “Friends,” said Athos, “are you still sorry you didn’t shed our blood?”

“No,” said d’Artagnan. “My only regret is to see us pitted against each other, when before we’d always been together. Alas! We’ll never succeed at anything again.”

“Never, *my God*. It’s over,” said Porthos.

“Well, then! Why don’t you join us?” said Aramis.

“Silence, d’Herblay,” said Athos. “Don’t make such a proposal to gentlemen such as these. If they’ve joined Mazarin’s faction, their honour is engaged, just as ours is to the side of the princes.”

“But meanwhile, we’re enemies,” said Porthos. “*Blue blood!* Who’d have thought it?”

D’Artagnan said nothing, just sighed. Athos looked at them, then took up their hands in his. “Gentlemen,” he said, “the matter is serious, and my heart suffers as if you’d pierced it through. Yes, it’s the sad truth that we are on opposite sides – but we haven’t declared war on each other. Perhaps we can come to an understanding. I believe a private conference is called for.”

“As for me, I agree,” said Aramis.

“Then I agree, as well,” d’Artagnan said proudly.

Porthos nodded in assent. “Let’s set a place of rendezvous,” continued Athos, “somewhere convenient to all, where we can state our positions and decide how we shall conduct ourselves vis-à-vis each other.”

“Fine!” said the other three.

“So, we’re agreed?”

“Entirely!”

“Well, then! Where shall it be?”

“How about the Place Royale?” asked d’Artagnan.

“In Paris?”

“Yes.”

Athos looked at Aramis, who nodded. “The Place Royale then!” said Athos.

“And when?”

“Tomorrow night, if that suits you.”

“You’ll be there?”

“Yes.”

“What time?”

“Would ten o’clock at night be convenient?”

“Perfectly so.”

“Then,” said Athos, “whether we settle on peace or war, friends, our personal honour, at least, will be satisfied.”

“Maybe so,” murmured d’Artagnan, “but our honour as soldiers is lost to us.”

“D’Artagnan,” said Athos gravely, “what wounds me more deeply is that circumstances have caused us to cross swords with each other. Yes,” he continued, shaking his head sorrowfully, “yes, as you said, evil times are upon us. Come, Aramis.”

“While we, Porthos,” said d’Artagnan, “must go back and confess our shame to the cardinal.”

“But be sure you mention,” shouted a voice that d’Artagnan recognised as the voice of Rochefort, “that I’m not yet too old to be a man of action!”

“Is there anything I can do for you, Gentlemen?” asked the prince.

“Bear witness that we did all we could, my Lord.”

“Rest easy, I’ll see to that. Goodbye, Gentlemen – I hope to meet you again sometime, perhaps in Paris, and then you may have your revenge.”

With these words, the duke waved to them in salute, put his horse into a gallop, and rode off, followed by his escort, who disappeared into the night, the sound of their hoof beats dwindling until it was lost. D’Artagnan and Porthos found themselves alone on the king’s highway, except for a man holding the bridles of two spare horses. They thought it was Mousqueton and approached him. “But who’s this?” cried d’Artagnan. “Is that you, Grimaud?”

“Grimaud!” said Porthos.

Grimaud just nodded to tell the two friends that they weren’t mistaken. “And whose horses are these?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Where do they come from?” asked Porthos.

“Sir Count of La Fère.”

“Athos, Athos,” murmured d’Artagnan. “The consummate gentleman! You really do think of everything.”

“And just in time!” said Porthos. “I was afraid we were going to have to walk.”

He climbed into the saddle. D’Artagnan did the same. “Well, now! So where are you off to, Grimaud? Are you leaving your master?”

“Yes,” said Grimaud. “I go to join the Viscount of Bragelonne with the army in Flanders.”

For a while they rode together in silence down the road back to Paris, until they suddenly heard groans that seemed to rise out of a ditch. “What’s that?” asked d’Artagnan.

“That,” said Porthos, “is Mousqueton.”

“Oh, yes, Sir, it’s me,” said a sad voice from a shadow by the side of the road.

Porthos rushed to his steward, to whom he was really quite attached. “Were you badly wounded, my dear Mouston?” he said.

“Mouston!” said Grimaud, eyes wide.

“No, Sir, I don’t think so – but I’m injured in an embarrassing way.”

“So, you can’t ride a horse?”

“No, Sir – and what am I to do?”

“Can you walk?”

“I’ll try, at least as far as the first house we come to.”

“What are we going to do?” said d’Artagnan. “We have to get back to Paris.”

“I’ll take care of Mousqueton,” said Grimaud.

“Thanks, that’s good of you, Grimaud!” said Porthos.

Grimaud dismounted and went to lend a hand to his old friend, who greeted him tearfully, though Grimaud wasn’t sure whether the tears were due to their reunion or his injury. As for d’Artagnan and Porthos, they rode silently back to Paris. Three hours later they were passed by a dusty courier, a messenger sent by the duke with a letter for the cardinal in which, as the prince had promised, he bore witness to the deeds of Porthos and d’Artagnan. Mazarin had already passed a miserable night before this letter arrived, in which the prince announced that he was free and ready to undertake a war to the death. The cardinal read it two or three times, then folded it, put it into his pocket, and said, “Though d’Artagnan has failed, what consoles me at least is that on his way he trampled Broussel.

That Gascon is a valuable man and serves me even in his clumsiness.” The cardinal was referring to the man whom d’Artagnan had knocked over in Paris at the corner of Saint-Jean who was none other than the worthy Councillor Broussel.

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Pierre Broussel, the Good Councillor

But unfortunately for Cardinal Mazarin, and despite his malicious hopes, the worthy Councillor Broussel had not been exterminated. It was true, he had been quietly crossing Rue Saint-Honoré when d’Artagnan’s speeding steed had struck him in the shoulder and knocked him into the mud. As we said, at the time d’Artagnan hadn’t paid any attention to the event, not realising its significance. Besides, d’Artagnan shared the deep disdain that the nobility of that period, and especially the nobility of the sword, felt for the bourgeoisie. He paid no mind to the small man dressed in black, though he was the cause of the man’s misfortune. No one even heard him cry out until after the storm of armed cavaliers had thundered past; only then was the injury noticed. Passers-by ran up to the moaning man and asked him his name, title, and address; and when told that his name was Broussel, he was a councillor of parliament, and he lived in Rue Saint-Landry, an angry cry went up from the gathering crowd, a cry so terrible and threatening that the wounded man feared another hurricane was about to pass over him. “Broussel!” they cried. “Broussel, our dear father! He who defended our rights against Mazarin! Broussel, the friend of the people – trampled, nearly killed by those Cardinalist scoundrels! To arms! To arms!”

Within moments the crowd became an immense mob. They commandeered a passing carriage to convey the little councillor home but an outraged citizen said that, in the wounded man’s state, the movement of the coach would make him worse. The zealot proposed that the crowd carry him by hand, a proposal that was enthusiastically and unanimously accepted. No sooner said than done: the people lifted him, with gentle menace, and bore him away, the crowd like a grumbling giant in a fable lumbering along while cradling a dwarf in its arms. Broussel must have had some idea how attached the Parisians had become to him – after all, he hadn’t spent three years sowing the seeds of opposition to the cardinal without hoping to someday reap rewards in popularity. So, this demonstration made him pleased and proud but though it showed the extent of his power, the triumph was shadowed by anxiety. Already suffering from wounds and bruises, he feared at every corner to see the crowd confronted by a troop of guards or musketeers, who might charge his mob – and who then would be triumphant?

He couldn’t help recalling that whirlwind of cavaliers, that iron-hooved hurricane that had thrown him down so pitilessly. And so, he kept repeating, in a voice growing ever fainter, “Hurry, my children, make haste, for truly I am suffering.” But at each of these complaints, the cries and curses of those who bore him redoubled. They finally brought him, though not without further bumps and bruises, to Broussel’s own house. Those who had surged on ahead already filled the street, and his neighbours thronged their windows and doorways. At the window of his own house, above a narrow door, could be seen an old servant woman who cried out in dismay, beside another woman, also elderly, who wept copiously. These two, clearly upset, kept asking the crowd what had happened but received only confused and contradictory responses. But when the councillor, carried between eight men, was brought pale and apparently dying to the steps of his house, his lady, Goodwife Broussel, and her maid disappeared from the window to reappear at the door. There the maid, raising her arms to the sky, rushed down the stairs to her master, crying out, “Oh, *my God! My God!* If Friquet is here, send him for a surgeon!”

And Friquet, of course, was there. What gamin of Paris wouldn’t be?

Friquet had naturally taken advantage of the Pentecost holiday to ask his innkeeper for the day off, a request that couldn’t be refused, as it had been a condition of his employment that he needn’t work during the year’s four chief holidays. So Friquet was already at the head of the mob. It had occurred to him that probably he ought to fetch a surgeon but he found it more amusing to shout his head off, crying, “They’ve killed Sir Broussel! Broussel, the father of the people! *Vive Sir Broussel!*” This was much more fun than scouring the streets for a doctor just so he could say, “Come, Sir Surgeon, good Councillor Broussel needs you.”

Unfortunately for Friquet, who’d assumed a leading role in the procession, he had the imprudence to jump on the sill of the house’s ground floor window to exhort the crowd to greater outrage – and there his mother saw him and sent him to find a doctor. Then she took the councillor in her arms and tried to carry him inside but at the bottom of the stairs Broussel stood up and said he felt strong enough to make it on his own. He also asked Gervaise that was the name of his maid, to try to dismiss the crowd but Gervaise wasn’t listening. “Oh, my poor master!” she cried. “My dear master!”

“Yes, yes, Gervaise,” said Broussel, trying to calm her. “It’s nothing, really.”

“Nothing, when you are crushed, annihilated, destroyed!”

“No, no, really, it’s nothing,” said Broussel, “or almost nothing, anyway.”

“Nothing, and you covered in mud! Nothing, and you with blood in your hair! Ah, my God, my God, my poor master!”

“Hush, now!” said Broussel. “Hush!”

“But the blood, my God, the blood!” cried Gervaise. “A doctor! A doctor!”

“A doctor!” the crowd howled. “A surgeon! Councillor Broussel is dying! Mazarin has killed him!”

“Oh my God!” cried Broussel. “This is awful! This mob is going to burn down the house!”

“Then go up to the window to show them you’re all right, master!”

“A plague on that!” said Broussel. “That’s what kings do. Tell them I’m getting better, Gervaise – tell them I’m going to go, not to the window but to bed, and to please go away!”

“But why should they go away? They’re here to honour you!”

“Oh, can’t you see?” said Broussel, desperate. “They’ll honour me by getting me hanged! Now come on! My wife’s fainting dead away.”

“Broussel! Broussel!” cried the crowd. “*Vive Broussel!* A surgeon for Broussel!”

They made such a clamour that what Broussel feared came to pass: a platoon of guards appeared and began to clear the crowd from the street with their musket butts. At the first cry of “The guard! The guard!”

Broussel, trembling for fear they’d take him for the instigator of the riot, sought refuge by hiding under his bed. At the guards’ assault, the crowd crying for Broussel was forced to fall back, and old Gervaise was finally able to shut the front door. But the door was scarcely shut, with Gervaise on her way up to find her master, when it began to resound with knocking. Madam Broussel, ahead of Gervaise, found her husband by his shoes sticking out from under their bed, where he was shaking like a leaf. “Go see who’s knocking, Gervaise,” called Broussel, “and don’t open the door unless you have to.”

Gervaise took a look. “It’s Sir Blancmesnil, the president of parliament,” she said.

“Oh, no problem, then,” said Broussel. “Open up.”

“Well!” said the president, coming in. “What have they done to you, my dear Broussel? I hear you’re nearly assassinated!”

“In fact, it seems likely they were trying to kill me,” said Broussel so firmly it almost seemed stoic.

“My poor friend! Yes, though they started with you, they have to destroy all of us, and since they can’t defeat us *en masse*, they’ll try to take us one by one.”

“If I survive,” said Broussel, “I shall crush them, all of them, under the weight of my words!”

“You’ll recover,” said Blancmesnil, “and I don’t doubt you’ll make them pay dearly for this attack.”

Meanwhile Madam Broussel was crying, and Gervaise was in despair. “What’s this?” cried a handsome and burly young man as he rushed into the room. “My father, wounded?”

“He’s a victim of tyranny,” said Blancmesnil, “and yet a true Spartan.”

“Oh!” cried the young man, turning toward the door. “They’ll pay, whoever dared to touch you!”

“Jacques,” said the councillor, getting up, “for now, just go get a doctor.”

“I hear more cries from the people,” said the old woman. “Friquet has probably found one – no, wait, it’s a carriage.”

Blancmesnil looked out the window. “It’s the coadjutor!” he said.

“The coadjutor!” repeated Broussel. “My God! I must go down to meet him!”

And the councillor, forgetting his wounds, started to rush downstairs to meet Sir Gondy but Blancmesnil stopped him. “Well, my dear Broussel,” said the coadjutor, coming in, “what’s this we hear?

Tales of ambushes and assassinations! My doctor’s house was on the way, so I brought him with me. Ah, Hello, Sir Blancmesnil!”

“Oh, Sir,” said Broussel, “what thanks I owe you! It’s true, I was cruelly knocked down and trampled by the King’s Musketeers.”

“Say, rather, the musketeers of Cardinal Mazarin,” said the coadjutor. “But we’ll make him pay for this, never fear. Won’t we, Sir Blancmesnil?”

Blancmesnil was still bowing when the door was thrust open by the hands of a porter. He was followed by a footman in full livery, who loudly announced, “Sir Duke Longueville!”

“What?” cried Broussel, “The duke, here? What an honour for me! Ah, My Lord!”

“I come to decry the terrible fate suffered by our brave defender,” said the duke. “Are you wounded, my dear Councillor?”

“If I were, your visit would heal me, My Lord.”

“But you suffer, though?”

“A great deal,” said Broussel.

“I brought along my personal doctor,” said the duke. “May he come in?”

“How’s that?” said Broussel.

The duke motioned to his footman, who ushered in a man in black. “We both had the same idea, My Lord,” the coadjutor said.

The two doctors looked each other over. “Ah, is that you, Sir Coadjuteur?” said the duke. “The friends of the people all share the same goal.”

“I was alarmed by the clamour and came running – but I think the most important thing is for our doctors tend to our brave councillor.”

“What, in front of everyone?” said Broussel, intimidated.

“Why not? You’re a victim of tyranny, and in the name of justice, we must bear witness to your injuries.”

“Dear God, is that more shouting?” cried Madam Broussel.

“No, it’s applause,” said Blancmesnil, dashing to the window.

“What?” cried Broussel, pale as death. “What is it now?”

“It’s the livery of the Prince de Conti!”\* cried Blancmesnil. “The Prince de Conti himself!”

The coadjutor and the Duke Longueville shared a look and tried not to laugh. The doctors had started to unbutton Broussel’s clothes but the councillor stopped them. At that moment the Prince de Conti came in. “Ah, Gentlemen!” the prince said, seeing the duke and the coadjutor. “You have anticipated me! But don’t blame me for being late, my dear Sir Broussel. When I heard about your accident, I thought you might need a doctor, so I went to get mine. How are you, and what’s the story of this assassination everyone’s talking about?”

Broussel tried to talk but words failed him; he was crushed by the weight of the honour done to him. “Come in, then, Doctor, and take a look,” said the Prince de Conti to a man in black who entered after him.

“Gentlemen,” said one of the first two doctors, “This isn’t an examination, it’s a consultation.”

“If you like,” said the prince. “Just reassure us about the condition of our dear councillor.”

The three doctors approached the bed, into which Broussel had retreated and pulled up the covers but despite his best efforts he was stripped and examined. They found no wounds but a bruise on the arm, and another on the thigh. The three doctors shared a significant look – never had three of the most learned physicians of the faculty of Paris been convened over such a trifle. “Well?” said the coadjutor.

“Well?” said the duke.

“Well?” said the prince.

“We hope that sir will never suffer an actual accident,” said one of the doctors. “We’ll be in the next room until you need us.”

“Broussel! How is Broussel?” shouted the people. “What’s the news about Broussel?”

The coadjutor stepped to the window. At the sight of him, the people fell silent.

“My friends,” he said, “have no fear. Sir Broussel is out of danger. However, his wounds are serious, and rest is required.”

Shouts of “Long live Broussel! Long live the coadjutor!” echoed down the street.

Sir Longueville was jealous and went to show himself at the window next. “Long live Sir Longueville!” someone obligingly cried.

"My friends," said the duke, waving, "go home in peace, and don't give our enemies the pleasure of suppressing a riot."

"Well said, Sir Duct!" said Broussel from his bed. "Now that was good, plain speaking."

"Friends and gentlemen of Paris!" said the Prince de Conti, taking his turn at the window to get his share of applause. "Sir Broussel has heard you! But he is in need of rest, and the clamour disturbs him."

"Long live the Prince de Conti!" shouted the crowd as the prince saluted them.

The three lords then took leave of the councillor, and the crowd that had gathered on Broussel's behalf became their escort. They all moved off toward the docks, still calling Broussel's name. The old maid, stupefied, regarded her master with admiration. The councillor had grown at least a foot in her eyes. "That's what it's like when a man serves his country with good conscience," said Broussel with satisfaction.

After an hour of deliberation, the doctors came out and bathed his bruises with salt and water. Meanwhile, the procession of carriages of the important and self-important kept coming. All day long the luminaries of the Fronde came to call on Broussel. "What a great triumph, Father!" said the young son who didn't quite grasp the real motive all these churchmen, lords, and princes had for visiting his injured parent.

"Alas, my dear Jacques!" said Broussel. "I fear this will be an expensive triumph and unless I'm wrong, even now Sir Mazarin is figuring out how to make us pay for it." Friquet finally returned at midnight, never having found a doctor.

4 Old Friends Prepare for a Council

"Well!" said Porthos, sitting in the courtyard of the Hôtel de La Chevette, as d'Artagnan returned from the Royal Palace with a grim expression. "So, he took it badly, my brave friend?"

"*My faith*, yes! Really, what an ugly beast that man can be. What are you eating there, Porthos?"

"As you see, I'm soaking a biscuit in a glass of Spanish honey. Give it a try."

"I will. Gimblou! A glass!"

The lad who enjoyed this euphonious name brought the requested glass, and d'Artagnan sat down next to his friend. "How did it go?"

"*Dame*! Well, of course, there are two ways to report a failure. I walked in, he looked at me sideways, I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'My Lord, we were outnumbered.' 'Yes,' he said, 'so I've heard – however, give me the details.' But you know, Porthos, I couldn't give him the details without naming our friends that would be a disaster."

"For the love of God!"

"My Lord,' I said, 'they were fifty, and we were two.' 'Indeed,' he said, 'but nonetheless I hear there was an exchange of pistol shots.' 'In fact, both sides burned some powder,' I said. 'And your swords saw the light of day?' 'Say, rather, the starlight, My Lord,' I replied."

"*Oh that!*" continued the cardinal. 'And I thought you're a Gascon.'

'I'm always a Gascon – when I succeed, my Lord.' That answer pleased him and he laughed. 'That will teach me, to give my guards better horses,' he said, 'for if they'd been able to keep up with you, and had done as well as you and your friend, you would have kept your promise to bring the duke back dead or alive.'"

"Well, that's not so bad," said Porthos.

"Eh, well, not so bad, maybe but not so well," said d'Artagnan. "My, how these biscuits soak up the honey! They're like sponges! Gimblou, another bottle."

The bottle came with a speed that showed what esteem d'Artagnan was held in the establishment. He continued, "I began to retire but he called me back. 'You had three horses killed from under you?' he asked me. 'Yes, My Lord,' I said. 'How much were they worth?'"

"A fine question, it speaks well of him," said Porthos.

"A thousand pistoles,' I said."

"A thousand pistoles!" said Porthos. "That's rather high! If he knows horseflesh, he'd have to haggle."

"I could tell he wanted to, the weasel, because he winced and gave me a look. But then he nodded, reached into a drawer, and pulled out some bearer bonds drawn on the Bank of Lyon."

"For a thousand pistoles?"

"Exactly, and not a *sou* more, the miser."

"And you have them?"

"Here they are."

"My faith! That seems quite proper," said Porthos.

"Proper! Is 'proper' good enough when lives were at risk, and when I've done him a huge favour?"

"A huge favour? What was that?"

"By our Lady! It seems I ran over a troublesome councillor of parliament."

"Really! Would that be the little man in black at the corner of the Saint-Jean cemetery?"

"That's the one. A troublemaker. Unfortunately, I merely knocked him down, and he'll recover to bedevil us again."

"And to think that I swerved to avoid him when I could have squashed him flat," said Porthos. "Now there's a lesson for next time."

"I should have had a bonus for that!"

"Well, to be fair, he wasn't totally crushed."

"Bah! Richelieu would have said, 'Here's five hundred crowns for running down that councillor!' But enough about that. What were your horses really worth, Porthos?"

"Ah, my friend, if poor Mousqueton were here, he could tell you, to the livre, *denier*, and *sou*."

"Whatever! So long as I was close."

"Well, Vulcan and Bayard cost me around two hundred pistoles apiece, while Phoebus was nearly a hundred and fifty, as I recall."

"So, we're four hundred and fifty pistoles to the good," said d'Artagnan, pleased.

"Yes," said Porthos, "but there's still the saddles and tack."

"For the love of God, that's true. How much was the tack?"

"Say, a hundred pistoles for all three..."

"All right, a hundred pistoles," said d'Artagnan. "That still leaves three hundred fifty more." Porthos nodded in agreement. "Let's give fifty pistoles to our hostess for our expenses, and divide the remaining three hundred," said d'Artagnan.

"Split it up," said Porthos.

"A paltry pay-out," murmured d'Artagnan, putting the bills in two piles.

"As usual!" said Porthos. "Did he say anything else?"

"What about?"

"Oh, well ... about me?"

"Ah, right!" said d'Artagnan, afraid of discouraging his friend by telling him the cardinal hadn't mentioned him. "Right! Uh, he said..."

"He said?" replied Porthos.

"Wait, I want to remember his exact words: he said, 'As to your friend, tell him he can sleep soundly.'"

"Good," said Porthos. "That tells me clear as day that he still intends to make me a baron."

At that moment nine o'clock sounded from the nearby church. D'Artagnan started. "Oh!" said Porthos. "There's nine striking now, and at ten, you remember, we've that rendezvous at the Place Royale."

"Bah! Don't mention it, Porthos!" snapped d'Artagnan, with an impatient gesture. "Don't remind me – that's what I've been sulking about since yesterday. I won't go."

"Not go? But why?" asked Porthos.

"Because it's too painful to meet with the two men who foiled our mission."

"Foiled? It was a draw," replied Porthos. "Neither side had the advantage – I still had a loaded pistol and you two were facing each other, sword in hand."

"Yes," said d'Artagnan. "But if there's a hidden scheme behind this rendezvous..."

"Oh, d'Artagnan, you don't believe that," Porthos said.

It was true – d'Artagnan didn't believe Athos was capable of anything underhanded but he was looking for an excuse not to go to the rendezvous. "We must go, or they'll think we're afraid," stated the superb Lord de Bracieux. "Really, *dear friend*, we faced fifty enemies on the king's highway – I think we can face two good friends in the Place Royale."

"Yes, yes, I know," said d'Artagnan, "but they took the side of the princes without warning us, and Athos and Aramis have toyed with me in an alarming manner. Last night we found out the truth; what's the point of going tonight to learn the same thing over again?"

"Do you really distrust them?" said Porthos.

"As to Aramis, ever since he became an abbot: yes. You can't imagine how changed he is. He sees us as obstacles on the road to his bishopric and could shove us aside without being any too sorry about it."

"Oh, well, Aramis, sure," said Porthos. "That wouldn't surprise me."

"Or Sir Beaufort might lay a trap to take us."

"Bah! He had us and let us go. But we'll be on our guard; we can arm ourselves and take Planchet with his carbine."

"Ha! Planchet's a Frondeur," said d'Artagnan.

"Damn all civil wars!" said Porthos. "We can't count on our friends, or even our lackeys. Ah, if only poor Mousqueton was here! There's one who will never abandon me."

"Yes, so long as you're still rich! But you know, old friend, it's not the civil wars that separate us, it's the fact that we're all twenty years older. The happy loyalty of youth has given way to the voice of self-interest, the spur of ambition, and the conceit of pride." He sighed. "Yes, you're right, we have to go, Porthos – but let's go well armed. If we don't go, it's true, they'll say we're afraid. Whoa! Planchet!"

Planchet appeared. "Saddle the horses and bring your carbine."

"But, Sir, who are we going up against?"

"We're not going up against anyone," said d'Artagnan. "It's just a simple precaution in case we're attacked."

"Do you know, Sir, that today they tried to assassinate good Councillor Broussel, the father of the people?"

"Is that so?" said d'Artagnan.

"Yes but the attempt was rebuffed, for he was borne home in the people's arms. Since yesterday his house is never empty. He was visited by Coadjutor de Gondy, by Sir Longueville, and by the Prince de Conti. Madam de Chevreuse and Madam de Vendome have signed his visitors' book, and whenever he gives the word..."

"Well? What happens when he 'gives the word'?" Planchet began to sing:

*The Fronde wind blows  
So, let her in  
I think it goes  
Against Mazarin  
If the Fronde wind blows  
We'll let her in!*

"Now I understand," d'Artagnan said quietly to Porthos, "why Mazarin would have preferred it if I'd annihilated that councillor."

"So, you see, Sir," said Planchet, "that if it was for some mission like the one that injured Sir Broussel that you wanted me to bring my carbine..."

"No, nothing like that, don't worry. But where did you hear all these details?"

"Oh, from a good source, Sir – from Friquet."

"From Friquet?" said d'Artagnan. "I know that name."

"He's the son of Sir Broussel's maid, and one who, in a riot, I wouldn't mind having at my side."

"Isn't he also a choirboy at Notre Dame?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Yes, that's right – he's a protégé of Bazin."

"Of course," said d'Artagnan. "And he's pot boy at a tavern in Rue de la Calandre?"

"That's him. What business could you have with a street urchin?"

"He's already given me good information," said d'Artagnan, "and may give me better yet."

"What, to someone who nearly crushed his master?" said Porthos, in what was for him a low voice.

"And who will tell him that?"

"Good point."

At that very moment, Athos and Aramis were entering Paris through the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. They had rested on the road and were hurrying so as not to miss the rendezvous. Bazin was their only follower, since Grimaud, as may be recalled, had stayed behind to care for Mousqueton, and was then supposed to leave to rejoin the young Viscount of Bragelonne with the army in Flanders. "Now," said Athos, "we need to find an inn where we can change into our city clothes, store our pistols and rapiers, and disarm our lackey."

"Disarm? By no means, my dear Count – in this, you must allow me not only to disagree with you but to try to persuade you to my opinion."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because we're going to a rendezvous of war."

"What do you mean, Aramis?"

"I mean that the meeting in the Place Royale is nothing but the sequel to the encounter on the king's highway."

"What? But our friends..."

"Have become our most dangerous enemies, Athos. Believe me, they can't be trusted – especially by you."

"Oh but my dear d'Herblay ...!"

"How do you know d'Artagnan hasn't blamed his defeat on us, and warned the cardinal? How do you know the cardinal won't take advantage of this rendezvous to arrest us?"

"Oh, really, Aramis! Do you think d'Artagnan and Porthos would lend their hands to such treachery?"

"You're right, *my dear* Athos – between friends. But between enemies, it's a legitimate ruse." Athos crossed his arms and bowed his handsome head on his chest. "What do you expect, Athos?" said Aramis. "Men are like that, and they can't stay twenty years old forever. We've wounded d'Artagnan in the pride that spurs him on – you know it's true. He was defeated. Didn't you hear his despair on the highway? As for Porthos, his barony probably depended on the outcome of this affair. Well, he ran into us along the way, and won't be a baron anytime soon – unless his barony depends on what happens at tonight's meeting. We must take proper precautions, Athos."

"But what if they show up unarmed? How that will shame us, Aramis!"

"Oh, rest easy, *my dear*, that's not going to happen. Besides, we have an excuse: we had to travel, and we're outlawed rebels!"

"Us, to need an excuse! An excuse with d'Artagnan! An excuse with Porthos! Oh, Aramis, Aramis," said Athos, shaking his head sadly, "upon my soul, you make me the most wretched of men. You are disenchanting a heart that was not yet dead to friendship. I'd almost prefer you just wrench it from my chest. You do as you please, Aramis. As to me, I'll go unarmed."

"You'll do no such thing, because I won't let you. It's not just one man, not even Athos, not even the Count of La Fère you betray by such weakness – it's an entire faction to which you belong, and that relies on you."

"Have it your way, then," replied Athos sadly.

And so, it was settled. They had scarcely reached Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule, at the gates of the deserted square, when they saw three equestrians under the Place Royale's outer arcade at the entrance of Rue Sainte-Catherine. In front were d'Artagnan and Porthos wrapped in cloaks bulged out by their swords. Behind them came Planchet, carbine at his knee. Seeing d'Artagnan and Porthos, Athos and Aramis dismounted. D'Artagnan and Porthos did the same. D'Artagnan saw that Bazin, instead of holding the others' three horses, had tied them to rings on the arcades. He ordered Planchet to do the same. Then they advanced, two against two, followed by their lackeys, and met with polite bows. "Where shall we have our discussion, Gentlemen?" asked Athos who saw that several people had stopped to look at them as if expecting one of those famous duels still remembered by the people of Paris, and especially those living on the Place Royale.

"The gates are shut," said Aramis, "but if you gentlemen don't mind waiting a moment here under these trees, I'll get the keys to go in through the Hôtel de Rohan that should suit us perfectly."

D'Artagnan peered into the shadows of the Place, while Porthos considered the mansion's gates, and what might be behind them. "If you prefer somewhere else, Gentlemen," said Athos in his refined and persuasive voice, "just name it."

"This place, if Sir d'Herblay can get the key, will do just fine, I think."

Aramis went off, after warning Athos to stay out of range of d'Artagnan and Porthos but Athos only smiled disdainfully and moved closer to his old friends, who remained where they were. Meanwhile Aramis was knocking at the Hôtel de Rohan, and talking with a footman who said, "You swear it's no duel, Sir?"

"Upon this," said Aramis, offering him a *Louis d'or*.

"So, you won't swear, good Gentleman?" said the footman, shaking his head.

"Oh, who can be sure of anything?" said Aramis. "I tell you only that, at the moment, these gentlemen are our friends."

"He's right," intoned Athos, d'Artagnan, and Porthos.

D'Artagnan had overheard the entire conversation. "You see?" he whispered to Porthos.

"See what?"

"He wouldn't swear."

"Swear about what?"

"That man wanted Aramis to swear that we hadn't come to the Place Royale to fight."

"And Aramis wouldn't swear?"

"No."

"Then be on your guard."

Athos observed this whispered exchange. Aramis opened the gate and stepped back so d'Artagnan and Porthos could enter. The hilt of d'Artagnan's sword caught on the gate and pulled back his cloak, exposing his brace of pistols that gleamed in the moonlight. "You see?" said Aramis, touching Athos's shoulder with one hand and pointing with the other at the arsenal in d'Artagnan's belt. "Alas, yes!" said Athos, with a deep sigh. He went in third. Aramis entered last and closed the gate behind him. The two lackeys remained outside but they were suspicious of each other, and kept their distance.

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The Place Royale

They walked silently toward the centre of the square but as they did the moon emerged from the clouds; this made them feel exposed, so they went under the lime trees, where the shade concealed them. Benches were placed here and there, and the four stopped before one of them. Athos gestured, and d'Artagnan and Porthos sat. Athos and Aramis remained standing. After a silent moment, during which they all began to feel embarrassed, Athos decided to begin the discussion. "Gentlemen," he said, "our presence at this rendezvous is proof of the power of our old friendship. No one is missing, so no one needs reproach himself."

"Listen, Count," said d'Artagnan, "instead of paying compliments we may or may not deserve, let's be open and forthright."

"I ask nothing better," said Athos. "I will be candid, so you may speak with all honesty. Do you have any issue to take with myself or the Abbot d'Herblay?"

"Yes," said d'Artagnan. "When I had the honour to speak with you at the Château de Bragelonne, I made proposals to you that you couldn't fail to understand – but instead of answering me as a friend, you treated me like a child. This friendship you boast about wasn't broken yesterday by our clash of swords but by your dissembling at your château."

"D'Artagnan!" said Athos in a tone of gentle reproach.

"You asked me to be frank," said d'Artagnan, "so there it is. Whenever you want to know what I think, I tell you. And I have the same complaint to make of you, Sir Abbot d'Herblay, as you abused me in the same fashion."

"Really, Sir, this is beyond strange," said Aramis. "You say you came to me to make proposals but did you? No, you sounded me out, that's all. And what did I tell you? That Mazarin was a buffoon, and that I wouldn't serve him. But that's all. Did I say I wouldn't serve someone else? On the contrary, I gave you to understand, it seems to me, that I favoured the party of the princes. We even joked, if I'm not mistaken, that the cardinal might very well send you to arrest me. Were you a man of his party? No doubt about it. Then why couldn't we be men of a different party? If you could have your secrets, then we could have ours – and if we kept quiet, all the better. It just proves we know how to keep a secret."

"I don't blame you for it, Sir," said d'Artagnan. "It's only because the Count of La Fère speaks of friendship that I consider your conduct."

"And what do you find?" asked Aramis haughtily.

The blood immediately went to d'Artagnan's head, and he stood and barked, "I find it worthy of a student of the Jesuits."

Seeing d'Artagnan stand, Porthos got up as well. All four now stood in threatening postures. Leaning toward d'Artagnan, Aramis dropped his hand toward his sword. Athos stopped him. "D'Artagnan," he said, "you come here tonight still furious about yesterday's encounter. I thought you had enough heart that a friendship of twenty years' standing would overcome a quarter-hour's injury to your pride. Come, tell me truly – do you have something to blame me for? If I'm at fault, d'Artagnan, I'll own that fault and confess it."

The soothing and sonorous voice of Athos had its old effect on d'Artagnan, calming him where the voice of Aramis that became sharp and shrill when angry, provoked him. He said to Athos, "I think, Count, that you had a confidence to share with me at the Château de Bragelonne, as sir here," he continued, pointing at Aramis, "had in his monastery. I hadn't yet committed to anything that might pit me against you. But just because I was discreet didn't mean you should take me for a fool. If I'd wanted to expose the difference between those Sir d'Herblay receives by rope and those who come by ladder, I could have."

"Where are you going with this?" cried Aramis, pale with anger at the thought that d'Artagnan might have spied him with Madam de Longueville.

"I go only where my own business takes me. I don't concern myself with things I shouldn't see – but I do hate hypocrites, and in that category I put musketeers who play at being abbots, and abbots who play at being musketeers. And sir here," he added, turning to Porthos, "agrees with me."

Porthos who hadn't uttered a word up to this point, just said, "Yes," and drew his sword.

Aramis leapt back and drew his own. D'Artagnan leaned forward, ready to attack or defend. But Athos stopped them, extending his hand with that supreme gesture of command that belonged only to him. He slowly drew his own sword with the other hand, and then broke it over his knee and threw the pieces down in front of him. Then he turned to Aramis and said, "Aramis, break your sword."

Aramis hesitated. "Do it," Athos said. Then, in a softer tone: "I wish it."

Aramis grew pale but overcame by the gesture, overwhelmed by the voice, he bent and broke his sword, and then crossed his arms and stood, quivering with rage. At this, d'Artagnan and Porthos stepped back. D'Artagnan kept his hand away from his sword, and Porthos returned his to its sheath. "Never," said Athos, slowly raising his right hand toward heaven, "never, I swear before God who sees and hears us in the solemnity of this night: never will my sword strike yours; never will my eye look upon you in anger; never will my heart beat toward you with hate. We have lived together, hated and loved together, poured out our blood together – and moreover, we are bound by what is perhaps a stronger bond than that of friendship, the bond of a shared crime. For together the four of us judged, condemned, and executed a human being that perhaps we had no right to send from this world, even if the world she seemed to belong to was Hell. D'Artagnan, I have always loved you like a

son. Porthos, we slept side by side for ten years; Aramis is your brother as he is mine, for Aramis has loved you as I love you still and will always love you. What can Cardinal Mazarin be to us, who have defied the heart and the hand of a man like Richelieu? Who is this prince or that to us, who have steadied the crown on the head of a queen? D'Artagnan, I ask your pardon for having crossed swords with you yesterday, and Aramis does the same for Porthos. So now, hate me if you must but I assure you that despite your hatred, I will have nothing but friendship and esteem for you. Now repeat my words, Aramis – and afterward, if it's what they want, and what you want, part from our old friends forever."

For a moment there was a heavy silence that was broken by Aramis. "I swear," he said, with a calm brow and steady look but in a voice that trembled with emotion, "I swear I have no hatred against those who were my friends. Porthos, I regret having crossed swords with you. I swear for good and all that my blade will never threaten you again, and moreover, that even deep in my secret thoughts, I will bear you no hostility. Now come, Athos."

Athos made a move as if to withdraw. "Oh, no you don't! You're not going anywhere!" cried d'Artagnan, led by one of those irresistible impulses that betrayed the warmth of his heart and the honesty of his soul. "You're going nowhere, because I, too, have an oath to swear. I swear I would give the last drop of my blood, the last beat of my heart to keep the esteem of a man like you, Athos, and the friendship of a man like you, Aramis."

And he leapt into the embrace of Athos. "My son!" said Athos, pressing him to his heart.

"And I," said Porthos, "I swear nothing, because I'm choking. *Damn it!* If I had to fight you, I think I'd let you stab me through and through, because I never loved anyone so much in this world!"

And honest Porthos, bursting into tears, threw himself into Aramis's arms. "My friends," said Athos, "that's what I was hoping for, that's what I was expecting from two hearts like yours. I've said it and I repeat, our destinies are inextricably twined even when we go by different routes. I respect your judgement, d'Artagnan; I respect your conviction, Porthos; but though we fight for opposing sides, we must remain friends. Ministers, princes, even kings may pass by like storms, and civil war may drown everything in flames but will we withstand all that? I believe we will."

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, "we're fellow musketeers to the end, our single flag that famous bullet-riddled napkin of the Saint-Gervais bastion that the great cardinal had embroidered with three *fleur-de-llys*."

"Yes," said Aramis, "Cardinalist or Frondeur means nothing! In duels we are each other's seconds, in dangerous affairs we're devoted friends, and in revelry we're joyous companions!"

"And every time we meet in the fray," said Athos, "recall these words: the Place Royale! Then let us shift our swords to our left hands and reach out with our right, even in the midst of slaughter!"

"I just love the way you talk," said Porthos.

"You are the greatest of men," said d'Artagnan. "Next to us, you are a true giant."

Athos smiled with ineffable joy. "Then it is settled," he said. "Come, Gentlemen, your hands. Do you consider yourself Christians?"

"For the love of God!" said d'Artagnan.

"We will be so, at least on this occasion, to remain faithful to our oath," said Aramis.

"Ah, I'll swear by whatever you like," said Porthos, "even Mahomet! Devil take me if I've ever been as happy as I am now."

And the good Porthos wiped his still-moist eyes. "Does anyone have a cross?" asked Athos.

Porthos and d'Artagnan winced and shook their heads like men embarrassed by the amount of a tavern bill. But Aramis smiled and drew from his breast a cross glittering with diamonds, hanging from his neck by a string of pearls. "I've got one," he said.

"Good!" said Athos. "Now swear on this cross that, bejewelled though it is, is still a cross – swear we shall be united, forever and always. And may this oath bind not just ourselves but even our descendants. Does this oath suit you?"

"Yes!" they said with one voice.

"You dog!" d'Artagnan whispered to Aramis. "You've made us swear on the crucifix of a lady Frondeur!"

## 202 The Oise Ferry

We hope that the reader has not forgotten the young traveller we left on the road to Flanders. As Raoul, looking behind him, finally lost sight of his guardian, whom he'd left in front of the royal basilica, he spurred his horse onward to escape his sad thoughts, and to hide from Olivain their traces on his face. An hour's brisk ride soon dissipated the dark clouds that shadowed the young man's imagination. For Raoul, the unwonted pleasures of freedom – pleasures so sweet, even to those who have never known constraint – turned to gold heaven, earth, and especially that far horizon of life called the future. However, after several attempts at conversation with Olivain, he realised that days passed in that manner would be sadly long and dull, and he missed talking with the count. That voice, so mild, so engaging and persuasive, came back to him as he passed through towns that were new to him, places that would have come alive with the fascinating, and useful, information that would have been conveyed by Athos, that wisest and most amusing of guides. A different memory saddened Raoul when they reached the town of Louvres and he saw, half-hidden behind a screen of poplars, a small château that strongly reminded him of La Vallière. He stopped to gaze at it for almost ten minutes, and then resumed his journey with a sigh, not even answering Olivain's respectful question as to what had attracted his attention. The appearance of some objects plucks at the strings of memory, striking a chord can sometimes evoke a thread that, like Ariadne's, leads through a labyrinth of thoughts where we go astray, following shadows of the past. The sight of that château had sent Raoul fifty leagues to the west, back to the moment when he'd taken his leave of little Louise, and every landmark – a copse of oaks, a wind vane atop a slate roof – reminded him that instead of returning to his childhood friends, each step took him further from them, and that perhaps he had left them forever. Head hanging, heart heavy, he ordered Olivain to lead the horses to a little inn he saw about a musket-shot up the road. There he alighted, sat at a table under a beautiful stand of flowering chestnuts murmuring with a multitude of bees, and told Olivain to go to the host and get stationery, pen, and ink. Olivain went on his way, while Raoul sat, elbows on the table, gazing sightlessly across a charming landscape of green fields dotted with stands of trees, his hair slowly frosting as blossoms fluttered down to land unnoticed on his head. Raoul sat for several minutes, lost in his reveries, before he noticed a ruddy figure had entered his field of vision, white cap on his head, apron around his waist, towel on his arm, while offering him a pen and paper. "Ah ha!" said the apparition. "It's clear that all young gentlemen think alike, as it isn't a quarter of an hour since a young lord, well mounted like you, good looking and about your age, stopped before this grove and made me bring out this table and chair. He had dinner here with an older gent I took to be his tutor, and they ate a fine loaf of pâté without leaving behind a morsel, and drained a bottle of old Macon honey without leaving a drop – but fortunately we have more loaves and more bottles, and if Sir would like to order something..."

"No, my friend," said Raoul, smiling, "I thank you but right now all I need are the things I asked for – but if the ink is black and the pen good, I'm happy to pay the price of a bottle for the pen, and a loaf for the ink."

"Well, Sir, in that case," said the host, "I'll give the loaf and bottle to your servant and throw the pen and ink into the bargain."

"Do as you like," said Raoul who was unfamiliar with this ornament of society, the brand of innkeeper who when there were robbers on the highway, served them as guests, and when there were none, did their best to take their place. The host, satisfied with this response, put paper, ink, and pen on the table. As it happened, the pen was passable, and Raoul began to write. The host lingered for a moment, struck with involuntary admiration by that charming young face, at once so sweet and so serious. Beauty has power over everyone.

"He's not like that guest who just left," the host said to Olivain, who'd come to see if Raoul needed anything. "Your young master has no appetite."

"Sir had appetite enough three days ago but what can you do? He lost it the day before yesterday." Olivain and the host walked toward the inn, with Olivain, as usual with servants who are happy in their service, regaling the innkeeper with all his young master's virtues. Meanwhile, Raoul wrote:

Sir,  
*After four hours on the march, I pause to write you because I miss you at every moment – I keep turning my head to speak to you, as if you were still there. I was so dazed when I left, so distracted by the sadness of our separation, that I only feebly expressed all the gratitude and affection I feel for you. Please pardon me, Sir, for your heart is so generous, I'm sure you understood all that was happening in mine. Write to me, Sir, I beg you, as your advice is food and drink to me – and I admit, if I may, that I'm anxious, as it seemed to me you were preparing yourself for some sort of dangerous venture, something I didn't dare ask about, since you said nothing about it to me. Now that you're no longer near I'm afraid every minute of going wrong somehow. You have always been my guide and support, Sir, and today, I swear, I feel very alone. If you receive news from Blois, Sir, would you be so kind as to pass along anything about my little friend Miss de La Vallière, whose health, you'll remember, gave me some anxiety? Please understand, my dear Guardian, how precious to me are the memories of the time I spent with you. I hope you'll also think of me sometimes, and if you miss me and regret my absence, it will fill me with joy to know you appreciate the tiniest part of how I feel about you.* Having finished his missive, Raoul felt better; he checked to make sure neither the host nor Olivain was looking, and then kissed the paper: a mute and touching gesture he hoped Athos would instinctively feel when he opened the letter. Meanwhile, Olivain emptied his bottle and ate his pâté, while the horses were also fed and watered. Raoul waved to the host, threw a crown on the table, mounted his horse, and at Senlis, dropped his letter in the mail. This brief rest enabled the riders and their horses to continue their journey without stopping. At Verberie, Raoul directed Olivain to ask about the young gentleman who preceded them; he was said to have passed not three-quarters of an hour earlier but he was well mounted, as the innkeeper had said, and was keeping a good pace. "Let's try to catch up to this gentleman," Raoul said to Olivain. "If he's going to the army like us, it'll be pleasant to have company."

It was four in the afternoon when Raoul arrived at Compiègne; he dined heartily, and again asked about the young gentleman who preceded him. He had also paused there at the Bell and Bottle Inn, the best in Compiègne but had continued on his way, saying he intended to sleep at Noyon. "Then we'll sleep in Noyon as well," said Raoul.

"Sir," said Olivain respectfully, "allow me to point out that we've already tired out our horses today. It would be better, I think, to spend the night here, and leave early in the morning tomorrow. Eighteen leagues are enough for a first day's ride."

"The Count of La Fère wants me to make haste and reach Sir Prince by the morning of the fourth day," Raoul replied. "If we push on to Noyon, that will be no longer a ride than those we made going from Blois to Paris. We'll arrive by eight, the horses will have all night to rest, and we'll be on the road again by five tomorrow morning."

Olivain didn't dare to oppose such determination but as he followed, he muttered through his teeth, "Go ahead, burn yourself out on the first day; tomorrow, instead of making twenty leagues, you'll do only ten, and then five the day after that, and you'll spend the fourth day in bed. These young folk are all such show-offs."

We can see that Olivain was not quite of the calibre of Planchet or Grimaud. Raoul was tired, in fact but he wished to test his strength, and raised on the principles of Athos, whom he was sure had spoken a thousand times of riding in twenty-five-league stages, he wanted to try to match his model. D'Artagnan as well, that man of iron who seemed made of nothing but nerve and muscle, had fired him with admiration. So, he kept pushing his horse's pace, despite Olivain's muttered commentary, following a charming little road that led to a ferry that he'd been assured would cut a league-long loop out of his route. Topping a crest, he saw before him the Oise River. A small troop of equestrians stood on the bank, preparing to embark on the ferry. Raoul had no doubt this was the gentleman and his escort; he uttered a cry but was too far away to be heard. Then, despite his horse's fatigue, he put it into a gallop but a dip in the terrain caused him to lose sight of the travellers, and when he reached the next crest, the ferry had already left the near bank and was crossing to the other side. Raoul, seeing he had no chance to catch the travellers in time, paused to wait for Olivain. Just then a cry seemed to come from the direction of the river: Raoul turned back toward it and, shading his eyes from the setting sun with his hand, called out, "Olivain! What's going on over there?"

A second cry came, more piercing than the first. "Oh, Sir!" Olivain said. "The ferry rope broke, and the boat is drifting. But is someone in the water? I can't tell."

"No doubt about it!" cried Raoul, squinting at the river against the glare from the sun. "A horse and its rider."

"They're sinking!" cried Olivain.

It was true: Raoul was certain an accident had occurred, and a man was drowning before his eyes. He slapped his horse on the withers, dug in his spurs, and the animal, inspired to move, galloped to the dock, leapt over the guardrail and plunged into the river, splashing waves of foam. "Sir!" cried Olivain. "Good God! What are you doing?"

Raoul guided his swimming horse toward the man in danger. It was a familiar exercise for the mount; raised on the banks of the Loire, it was at home in the water, and had crossed that river a thousand times. Athos, foreseeing the time when the viscount would be a soldier, had trained him in every eventuality. "*My God!*" spluttered Olivain desperately. "What would the count say if he saw you?"

"The count would do just as I'm doing," Raoul replied, pressing his horse forward.

"But but, what about me?" called Olivain, pacing back and forth along the bank. "How am I supposed to get across?"

"Jump in, faint-heart!" cried Raoul, still swimming. Then, addressing the traveller, who was struggling not twenty paces from him, he called, "Courage, Sir, courage! We're coming to help."

Olivain went forward, then back, made his horse rear, turned it away, and finally, stabbed to the heart by shame, rushed it into the river as Raoul had done while repeating, "I'm lost, I'm dead, I'm lost, I'm dead!"

Meanwhile the ferry boat drifted away, borne downstream by the current, and shouts were heard from the passengers. A grey-haired man had leapt into the river and was swimming strongly toward the drowning person but he made slow progress as he was swimming upstream. Raoul continued his efforts and was visibly gaining ground but the horse and rider were sinking right before his eyes;



the horse had only his nostrils above water, and the rider, who'd dropped the reins, was extending his arms as he slipped deeper. Another moment and he would be gone. "Courage," cried Raoul, "courage!"

"Too late," murmured the young man. "Too ... late."

The water closed over his head and his voice was silenced. Raoul stood and jumped from his horse that he left to save itself, and in three or four strokes was near the gentleman. He immediately got hold of the horse's bridle and lifted its head from the water; the animal breathed more freely, and as if it understood that help had arrived, it redoubled its efforts. Raoul meanwhile grabbed one of the young man's hands and carried it to the horse's mane that the man clung to with the tenacity of the drowning. Sure that the cavalier wouldn't let go, Raoul turned his attention to the horse that he guided to the opposite bank by swimming alongside and talking to it in an encouraging tone. At last the animal stumbled into the shoals and set firm foot on the sand. "Saved!" cried the grey-haired man as he arrived on the horse's other side.

"Saved," the young gentleman murmured weakly, releasing the mane and slipping from the horse into Raoul's arms.

Raoul was only a few steps from shore; he carried the unconscious cavalier, laid him on the grass, loosened his collar, and undid the buttons of his doublet. A moment later, the grey-haired man joined him. Olivain finally managed to reach shore as well, after making the sign of the cross over and over again. The folks on the ferry were headed back upstream as best they could, poling their boat along the shallows. Gradually, thanks to the care of Raoul and the cavalier's elder companion, the bloom returned to the victim's pale cheeks. He opened his eyes and looked around wildly but soon focused on the one who'd saved him. "Ah, Sir, there you are!" he cried. "If not for you, I'd be dead twice over."

"But you're recovering, Sir, as you see," said Raoul, "and now we can both forego our next bath."

"Oh, Sir, how much we owe you!" cried the grey-haired man.

"Ah, there you are, good d'Arminges! I gave you a scare, didn't I? But it's your own fault: as my tutor, why didn't you teach me how to swim?"

"Oh, Sir Count," said the older man. "If you had a mischance, how could I ever face your father the marshal?"

"But how did the thing happen?" asked Raoul.

"Eh, Sir, that's easy to tell," said he who'd been addressed as *count*. "We were a third of the way across when the ferry rope broke. The boatmen shouted and grabbed for it, and my horse took fright and jumped into the water. I swim badly and didn't dare to let go; I froze, and instead of helping my horse I was hindering it. I was drowning as bravely as I could, when you arrived just in time to pull me from the water. And now, since you saved my life, we must be friends till death."

"Your servant, Sir, I assure you," said Raoul, bowing.

"I'm called the Count of Guiche,"<sup>78</sup> continued the cavalier. "My father is the Marshall de Grammont. And now that you know my name, will you do me the honour to tell me yours?"

"I'm the Viscount of Bragelonne," said Raoul, blushing because he was unable to name his father as the Count of Guiche had.

"Viscount, your look, your kindness, and your courage all appeal to me – and you have my gratitude. Let's embrace and be friends."

"Sir," said Raoul, hugging the count, "I love you with all my heart already, so I beg you to consider me your devoted friend."

"So, where are you off to, Viscount?" asked de Guiche.

"To the army of Sir Prince, Count."

"Why, so am I!" laughed the young man. "All the better! We'll share our first action under fire together."

"Indeed, you should be friends," said the tutor. "You're both young, and the same star doubtless shines on you both – you were fated to meet." The two young men smiled with the confidence of youth.

"And now," said the tutor, "you must change your clothes. Your lackey, whom I gave orders to when he came off the ferry, has gone ahead to the inn. Dry linen and warmed honey await us there – let's go." The young men had no objections to this plan – in fact, they found it excellent. So, they immediately mounted, and then paused to admire each other; for a fact, they were both elegant cavaliers, lithe and slender, with broad brows above noble faces, looks gentle but proud, smiles sincere and loyal. De Guiche had to be about eighteen but he was scarcely taller than Raoul, who was only 15. They reached out spontaneously and shook hands, and then, spurring their horses, rode along the river path to the nearby inn, one laughing and enjoying the life he'd almost lost, while the other thanked God that he'd lived long enough to do a deed that would make his guardian proud. As for Olivain, he was the only one his master's exploit had left entirely dissatisfied. As he rode along, wringing out his sleeves and cuffs, he was thinking that if they'd stopped in Compiegne, he would have been spared an accident he'd barely survived, as well as the influenza and rheumatism that was bound to follow.

### 203 Skirmish

Their stay at Noyon was short, though everyone got a good night's sleep. Raoul had asked to be awakened if Grimaud arrived but Grimaud never came. The horses, for their part, doubtless appreciated the abundant hay and eight hours of complete rest they got. The Count of Guiche was awakened at five in the morning by Raoul, who came in to wish him good day. They ate a quick breakfast, and by six o'clock had already ridden two leagues. Raoul found the young count's conversation fascinating, so he mainly listened as de Guiche talked. He'd been raised in Paris that Raoul had only seen once, and largely at Court that Raoul had never seen. His youthful follies as a page, and two duels he'd managed to have despite the royal edicts and the injunctions of his tutor, excited Raoul's admiration. Bragelonne had paid only the one visit to Sir Scarron, and he named to de Guiche the people he'd seen there. De Guiche knew everybody: Madam de Neuillan, Miss d'Aubigné, Miss de Scudéry, Miss Paulet, even Madam de Chevreuse. And he made fun of everyone – Raoul trembled, afraid he was going to joke about Madam de Chevreuse, for whom he felt a deep sympathy – but either instinctively or from affection for the duchess, de Guiche spoke only good of her. This made Raoul feel even friendlier toward the count. Next, they turned to the subject of love and gallantry – and here again, Bragelonne had more to hear than to say. So, he listened, and it seemed to him that despite the count's tales of three or four thinly veiled amorous adventures that de Guiche, like himself, was hiding a secret in his heart. De Guiche, as we've said, had been brought up at Court, and the intrigues of the royal courtiers were all open secrets to him. It was the same French Court of which Raoul had heard so much from the Count of La Fère – only it had changed quite a bit since the days when Athos had frequented it. The Count of Guiche's stories were thus entirely new to his travelling companion. With comments witty and irreverent, the young noble passed everyone in review: he recounted the former affairs of Madam de Longueville with Coligny, and of the latter's fatal duel over them at the Place Royale that madam watched secretly from behind window blinds; of her new affair with the Prince de Marcillac, a jealous man who wanted to kill his rivals, even the Abbot d'Herblay, her confessor; and the romance of the Prince of Wales with Prince Gaston's daughter, *the Great Miss* notorious at a later time for her secret marriage with Lauzun. Not even the queen was spared, and Cardinal Mazarin came in for his share of mockery as well. The entire day passed as if it were no more than an hour. The count's tutor, a gentleman, bon vivant, and a *scholar to his teeth* as the saying has it, often reminded Raoul of the erudition, wit, and soaring disdain of Athos – but without his grace, delicacy, and innate nobility. In those regards, no one compared to the Count of La Fère. The horses, managed more carefully than the day before, brought them by four o'clock to Arras. They were now approaching the theatre of war, and decided to spend the night in the town, as the Spaniards sometimes took advantage of darkness to mount raids to the very outskirts of Arras. The French army held a line from Pont-à-Marq to Valenciennes, centring on Douai. It was said Sir Prince himself was at Bethune. The enemy's line extended from Cassel to Courtray, and as there was no sort of rapine and pillage they wouldn't commit, the poor folk of the border counties had left their rural homes and taken refuge in the nearby walled cities. Arras was teeming with refugees. There was talk that a decisive battle was imminent, the prince having only manoeuvrer till then while waiting for reinforcements that had finally arrived. The young men congratulated themselves on coming at the right time. They supped together, and then shared a room. They were at the age of sudden friendships, and it seemed to them that they'd known each other since birth and would never find it possible to part. The evening was spent talking about war; the lackeys polished their weapons, while the young men loaded their pistols in case of a skirmish on the morrow. They awoke feeling apprehensive, both having dreamed they'd arrived at the army too late to take part in the battle. In the morning the rumour spread that the Prince de Condé had evacuated Bethune to fall back upon Carvin, while leaving a garrison in the former town. But this news couldn't be confirmed, so the young men decided to continue making their way toward Bethune, leaving the road, if necessary, to veer right toward Carvin. De Guiche's tutor was familiar with the area and proposed that they take a byway that crossed the country midway between the road to Lens and the road to Bethune. At Ablain they stopped to make inquiries and leave directions for Grimaud. They set off again at about seven o'clock. De Guiche, who was young and hot-blooded, said to Raoul, "Here we are then, three masters and three servants. Our valets are well armed, and your lackey seems stubborn enough."

"I've never seen him in a fight," said Raoul, "but he is a Breton, and that's something."

"Yes, indeed," de Guiche replied. "I'm sure he's fired a musket or two in his time. As for me, I have two reliable men who've been to war with my father, so we're six fighters in total. If we encounter a small troop of the enemy equal in number to ourselves, Raoul, or even superior – don't you think we should charge them?"

"By all means," the viscount replied.

"Whoa, young gentlemen! Hold on, there!" said the tutor, joining the conversation. "*Virtue!* And what of my instructions, Sir Count? Do you forget that I have orders to conduct you safely to Sir Prince? Once you reach the army, go get killed all you like – but I'm warning you that until then, in my capacity as superior officer, I'll order a retreat at the first sight of an enemy's plume."

De Guiche and Raoul glanced at each other from the corners of their eyes and smiled. The country became more wooded, and from time to time they met small fleeing groups of farmers, driving their cattle before them and carrying their most valuable goods on their backs or behind them in carts. They arrived at Ablain without any trouble. There they made inquiries and learned that Sir Prince had, in fact, left Bethune and was now between Cambrin and La Venchie. After leaving word for Grimaud, they continued on their way, taking a side road that led the little band after half an hour to the banks of a small stream that flowed into the Lys. It was lovely country, crossed by small wooded valleys as green as emeralds. Occasionally the trail they were following led through small woodlands; as they approached each wood, in case of ambush, the tutor sent the count's two servants ahead as a vanguard. The tutor and the two young men formed the corps of the army, with Olivain, alert and with his carbine on his knee, as the rear guard. Eventually, they found before them the thickest wood yet; a hundred paces from its verge, Sir d'Arminges took his usual precautions, sending the count's servants ahead as scouts. The lackeys had just disappeared under the eaves of the trees, the young men and the tutor laughing and chatting as they followed a hundred paces behind, when suddenly five or six musket shots rang out. The tutor called a halt, and the young men obeyed, reining in their horses. Just then they saw the two lackeys galloping back. The two young men, eager to hear about the musketry, spurred toward the lackeys. The tutor followed, lagging behind. "Were you stopped and chased?" shouted the young men.

"No," replied one of the lackeys. "We probably weren't even seen. The gunfire broke out a hundred paces ahead of us, in pretty much the thickest part of the wood, so we came back to ask for advice."

"My advice," said Sir d'Arminges, "and my orders, if necessary, are that we retreat. This could conceal an ambush."

The other lackey said, "I thought I saw some equestrians in yellow outfits sneaking along the banks of the creek."

"That's it," said the tutor. "We've run afoul of a party of Spaniards. Fall back, Gentlemen, fall back!"

The young men looked at each other inquisitively – and at that moment they heard a pistol shot, followed by two or three cries for help. The two young men reassured each other with a nod, and as the tutor turned his horse away, they both spurred forward. Raoul cried, "With me, Olivain!"

Meanwhile the Count of Guiche shouted, "Urbain and Blanchet! *To me!*"

And before the tutor could recover from his surprise, the little troop was already disappearing into the forest. As they spurred their horses forward, both young men drew their pistols. Within moments, they arrived near where the sounds had seemed to come from. They slowed their horses and advanced cautiously. "Hush!" said de Guiche. "Equestrians."

"Yes, I see three on horseback, and three who've dismounted."

"What are they doing? Can you see?"

"They seem to be searching a dead or wounded man."

"It's some cowardly assassination!" said de Guiche.

"They're soldiers, though," said Bragelonne.

"Yes but irregulars – in other words, highway robbers."

"Let's get them!" said Raoul.

"Let's get them!" repeated de Guiche.

"Gentlemen!" cried the poor tutor. "Gentlemen, in the name of heaven..."

But young men don't listen to such talk. They took off, each vying to get ahead of the other, and the only effect of the tutor's cries was to alert the Spaniards. Immediately the three mounted soldiers charged to meet the young men, while the other three finished looting the travellers – for the young men could now see there were two victims on the ground. At ten paces away, de Guiche fired first, and missed his man. The Spaniard charging Raoul fired in his turn, and Raoul felt a sting in his left arm like the stroke of a whip. When they closed to four paces, he fired, and the Spaniard, struck in the centre of his chest, threw out his arms and fell backward off his horse that turned and fled. At that moment Raoul saw through the powder smoke the barrel of a musket levelled at him. Athos's advice came to his mind, and quick as a flash he pulled his mount and reared it back, just as the gun went off. His horse jumped sideways, lost its footing, and fell, trapping Raoul's leg beneath it. The Spaniard leapt down, grabbing his musket by the barrel to crack Raoul's skull with its butt. Unfortunately, trapped as he was, Raoul could neither draw his sword from its sheath nor reach his other

holster. He saw the heavy musket rise above his head and started to shut his eyes, when with a bound de Guiche arrived next to the Spaniard and put a pistol to his head. "Give up!" he said. "Or you're dead!"

The musket fell from the soldier's hands that he raised in surrender. De Guiche called over one of his lackeys, ordered him to guard the prisoner, and blow his brains out if he tried to escape, then leapt from his horse and approached Raoul. "My faith, Sir!" said Raoul, laughing, although his pallor betrayed the inevitable reaction to a first combat. "You pay your debts quickly, and no mistake! Without you," he added, repeating the count's own words, "I'd have been dead twice over."

"My opponent fled," said de Guiche, "so I was free to come to your aid. But are you seriously hurt? There's blood all over you."

"I think a bullet scratched me on the arm," said Raoul. "Help me get out from under my horse, and then nothing, I hope, will prevent us from continuing on our way."

Sir d'Arminges and Olivain had already dismounted, and together they worked to lift the horse that was struggling in agony. Raoul managed to get his foot out of the stirrup and his leg from under the horse, and a moment later he was standing, free. "Nothing broken?" asked de Guiche.

"*My faith*, no, thank heaven," replied Raoul. "But what happened to the poor victims waylaid by those wretches?"

"We arrived too late – they killed them, I think, and got away with their loot. My lackeys are guarding the bodies."

"Let's see if they still live, and need our help," said Raoul. "Olivain, we've inherited two horses but I've lost mine; give me yours, and take the best of the new ones." And they went to where the victims were lying.

## 204 The Monk

Two men were lying there. One was facedown, pierced by three bullets and drowned in a pool of his own blood, quite dead. The other, leaned up against a tree by the lackeys, had his eyes shut and his hands clasped in fervent prayer. A bullet had broken his thigh. The young men looked first at the corpse, and started, astonished. "He's a priest," said Bragelonne. "See his tonsure? Oh, those dogs! Raising their hands against a minister of God!"

"Come here, Sir," said Urbain, an aging veteran who'd soldiered under Cardinal Richelieu. "Over here. There's nothing you can do for the priest but maybe we can still save this one."

The wounded man smiled sadly. "Save me?" he said. "No – but you can help me to die."

"Are you also a priest?"

"No, Sir."

"Your unfortunate companion seemed to be a man of the Church," said Raoul.

"He was the Curate of Bethune, Sir; he was carrying his church's treasury and sacred vessels to safety, because Sir Prince abandoned our town yesterday, and the Spanish might occupy it tomorrow. He knew enemy troops were prowling the countryside, and the trip was perilous, so when no one else dared to accompany him, I offered to go."

"And those miserable dogs attacked you – those wretches shot a priest!"

"Gentlemen," said the wounded man, looking around him, "I'm in terrible pain but I wish you could get me to a house."

"Where you could recover?"

"No, where I can be confessed."

"Maybe you're not hurt as badly as you think," said Raoul.

"Trust me, Sir, there's no time to lose," said the wounded man. "The ball broke my thigh-bone and has lodged in my bowels."

"Are you a doctor?" asked de Guiche.

"No," said the dying man, "but I know something about wounds – and mine is mortal. So, try to get me somewhere I can find a priest, or get one and bring him here, and God will reward such a holy deed. Help save my soul, for my body is lost."

"You were undertaking a holy task. God won't abandon you."

"Gentlemen, in the name of heaven!" said the wounded man, gathering all his strength to try to get up. "Don't waste time in useless talk. Help me to get to the next village, or swear to me as you hope for salvation that you'll send me the first monk, curate, or priest you encounter. But what if no one dares do it, because they know the Spaniards are coming, and I die without absolution?" he added, in a tone of despair. "My God!" cried the wounded man with a terror that made the young men shudder. "You wouldn't allow that, would you? It would be too cruel!"

"Easy, Sir, easy," said de Guiche. "I swear we'll find you the consolation you need. Just point us toward a house where we can ask for help, or a village from which we can fetch a priest."

"Thank you, and may God reward you! There's an inn half a league along this road, and a league beyond that you'll find the village of Greney. Look for the curate but if he's not home, go to the Augustinian monastery on the far side of the town. Bring me a friar, a monk, or a curate – whoever, so long as he's received from Holy Church the power of absolution *in articulo mortis*."

"Sir d'Arminges," said de Guiche, "stay here with this poor man, and prepare to move him as gently as possible. Make a stretcher of our coats and some tree branches; two of our lackeys can carry him, with the third ready to switch out when one gets tired. The viscount and I will ride ahead to find a priest."

"Go, Sir Count," said the tutor, "but in heaven's name, don't take any risks!"

"Never fear. Besides, we're done for one day. You know the saying: *Not twice the same*."

"Don't lose heart, Sir," said Raoul to the wounded man. "We'll find what you need."

"God bless you, Gentlemen!" replied the dying man, in a tone of gratitude deep and profound.

And the two young men galloped off in the direction indicated, while the count's tutor oversaw the construction of a stretcher. Within ten minutes the young men found the inn. Raoul, without dismounting, called for the innkeeper, warned him a wounded man was being brought there, and asked him to prepare everything needed to treat him, including a bed, bandages, and lint. He also asked if there was a nearby doctor or surgeon who could be summoned, adding that he was willing to pay for a messenger. The innkeeper, addressed by two richly appointed young lords, promised to do everything they asked. Once they saw preparations were begun, the two cavaliers went on their way, spurring their horses toward Greney. They had ridden nearly a league, and had just sighted the village's first houses, whose red-tiled roofs stood out distinctly against the green of the surrounding trees, when they saw coming toward them, mounted on a mule, a poor monk wearing a broad hat and a grey woollen robe. They took him for an Augustinian friar; it seemed chance had sent them just what they needed. They cantered toward the monk. He was a man of twenty-two or twenty-three but ascetic habits seemed to have added years to his appearance. He was fair-skinned, with an unhealthy pallor tinged a bilious yellow. His short hair that extended from under his hat in a line across his forehead, was pale blond, and his eyes, though of a clear blue, seemed devoid of life. "Sir," said Raoul, with his usual politeness, "are you an ecclesiastic?"

"Why do you ask?" said the stranger, coldly impassive.

"To get an answer," said the Count of Guiche haughtily.

The stranger touched his heel to his mule and continued on his way. De Guiche turned his horse and blocked him. "Answer, Sir!" he said. "You were asked politely, and every question deserves an answer."

"I'm free, I think, to speak or not to speak to random people who decide to interrogate me on a whim."

De Guiche, with some difficulty, suppressed the urge to give the monk an immediate thrashing. "First of all," he said, making an effort to speak calmly, "we are not 'random people' – my friend here is the Viscount of Bragelonne, and I am the Count of Guiche. More importantly, we don't question you on a whim but because a man is dying nearby who needs the aid of the Church. If you're a priest, I demand, in the name of humanity, that you follow me to aid this man. If you're not – well, that's something else. But I warn you, in the cause of common courtesy which you seem to prefer to ignore, that further insolence will be punished."

The monk's face went from pale to livid, and he smiled so strangely that Raoul, who was watching him closely, felt something tighten around his heart. "He's some kind of Spanish or Flemish spy," he said, putting his hand on his pistol.

The monk's reply was a brief but menacing glare. "*Well*, Sir!" said de Guiche. "What do you have to say?"

"I am a priest, Gentlemen," said the young man.

And his face resumed its former passivity. "Then, *my Father*," said Raoul, leaving his pistol in its holster, and speaking with a respect he didn't feel in his heart, "if you're a priest, we offer you, as my friend said, an opportunity to fulfill your vows – there's a badly wounded man ahead in the next inn calling for the aid of a minister of the Lord. Our men are waiting there with him."

"I will go," said the monk.

And he dug his heels into his mule. "You'd better go, Sir," said de Guiche, "because our horses can catch your mule if you go anywhere else, and then, I swear to you, your trial will be a short one, and your execution quick, because we have rope and there are trees everywhere."

The monk's eyes flashed again but that was all; he just repeated, "I will go," and left.

"Let's follow him to make sure," said de Guiche.

"That's just what I was going to propose," said Bragelonne.

And the two young men rode slowly, matching their pace to the monk's and following about a pistol-shot behind. After five minutes the monk turned to see whether he was followed. "See that?" said Raoul. "We did the right thing."

"What a horrible face that monk has!" said the Count of Guiche.

"Appalling!" Raoul agreed. "That yellow hair, his dead eyes, and especially his expression, with those thin lips that disappear whenever he speaks."

"Yes," said de Guiche, who hadn't been as observant of these details as Raoul, who'd been looking while de Guiche was talking. "A strange face indeed – but these monks have such degrading habits. Their fasting makes them pale, they beat themselves, the hypocrites, and their eyes sink and grow dull from weeping for life's lost joys."

"At least the poor dying man will have his priest," Raoul said. "Though God knows, the penitent looks like he has a clearer conscience than the confessor. As for me, I confess I'm not used to seeing priests who look like this one."

"You aren't?" said de Guiche. "This is one of those wandering friars who go begging down the highway in hopes a benefice will fall from heaven. They're mostly foreigners: Scots, Irish, Danes – I've seen their like before."

"As hideous as this one?"

"No but pretty ugly, mostly."

"I feel bad for the dying man, having to receive consolation at the hands of such a friar!"

"Bah!" said de Guiche. "Absolution comes not from the confessor but from God. Nonetheless, I must say I'd rather die impenitent than have to spend my final minutes with the likes of him. You agree with me, don't you, Viscount? I saw you gripping the pommel of your pistol as if you wanted to crack it over his head."

"Yes, Count – it's a strange thing, and might surprise you but at the sight of that man I felt struck by a horror that's hard to describe. Have you ever been walking and almost stepped on a snake?"

"Never," said de Guiche.

"Well, that happened to me in the woods near Blois, and I can't forget the way it looked at me, its eyes dull as it reared back its head, tongue flickering. I stood stunned, frozen and fascinated, until the Count of La Fère..."

"Your father?" asked de Guiche.

"No, my guardian," replied Raoul, blushing.

"All right."

"Until the Count of La Fère said, 'Come, Bragelonne – draw your blade.' Then I drew, stepped toward the reptile, and cut it in two, just as it reared up, hissing, to strike at me. Well! I swear I felt exactly the same sensation at the sight of this fellow when he said, 'Why do you ask?' and glared at me."

"So, you're sorry you didn't cut him in half, as you did with your snake?"

"I almost wish I had," said Raoul.

At that moment they came in sight of the little inn, where they could see the procession bearing the wounded man just arriving. The tutor led the two lackeys who carried the dying man, while the third brought the horses. The young men spurred forward. "As you see, here comes the wounded man," said de Guiche as he passed the Augustinian friar. "Be so kind as to pick up your pace, Sir Monk."

Raoul, meanwhile, rode past, giving the friar as wide a berth as he could, looking aside in disgust. Thus, the young men arrived ahead of the confessor, rather than behind him. They went to meet the dying man to give him the good news. He rose slightly to look where they pointed, saw the monk approaching at the trot on his mule, and fell back again on his litter, his face glowing with joy. "Now," said the young count, "we did what we promised you, and are eager to get on to join the army of Sir Prince – so if we continue on our way, you'll excuse us, won't you, Sir? They say they're preparing for battle, and we'd hate to arrive a day late."

"Go, my young Lords," said the wounded man, "and may you be blessed for your piety. You have indeed done all you can do; I can only say once more, God bless you and those you hold dear!"

"Sir," de Guiche said to his tutor, "we're going to ride on ahead. You can catch up to us on the road to Cambrin."

The innkeeper was at the door; he'd prepared everything, bed, bandages, and lint, and had sent a groom to fetch a doctor from Lens, the nearest large town. "We'll do just as you asked," said the host, "but you, Sir," he continued, addressing Bragelonne, "won't you stop to have your wound tended to?"

"What, this wound? It's nothing," said the viscount. "It's time we got on to our next bivouac. But if a rider should stop and ask if you've seen a young man on a chestnut horse followed by a lackey, be so kind as to tell him that you've seen me, and that I plan to dine at Mazingarbe and sleep at Cambrin. That rider is my servant."

"Wouldn't it be better and more certain if I ask him his name and tell him yours?" replied the host.

"No harm in that," said Raoul. "My name is the Viscount of Bragelonne, and his is Grimaud."

At this moment the wounded man arrived from one direction, and the monk from the other; the two young men drew back to give room for the stretcher, while the monk got down from his mule, and ordered that it be taken to the stables without having its saddle removed. "Sir Monk," said de Guiche, "give that brave man a proper confession, and don't worry about your expenses or those of your mule – everything is covered."

"Thanks, Sir," said the monk with one of those false smiles that made Bragelonne shiver.

"Come, Count," said Raoul, repelled by the Augustinian. "Let's go. I feel a chill here."

"Thank you again, my fine young Lords," said the wounded man, "and remember me in your prayers."

"Rest easy!" said de Guiche, spurring along to catch up to Bragelonne who was already twenty paces ahead.

The stretcher, carried by the two lackeys, was borne into the inn. The host and his wife, who had joined him, watched from the staircase. The wounded man seemed to be in terrible pain but he seemed most concerned about whether the monk was following after him. At the sight of the pale and bloody man, the woman grasped her husband's arm. "What's the matter?" he asked her. "Are you ill?"

"No but look!" said the hostess.

"*Dame!*" said the innkeeper. "He's in bad shape."

"That's not what I mean," said the woman, trembling. "Don't you recognise him?"

"The wounded man? Wait a moment..."

"Ah! I see you do recognise him," the woman said, "because now you're as pale as I am."

"It's true!" cried the host. "Bad luck has come to our house – it's the old executioner of Bethune."

"The executioner of Bethune!" murmured the young monk, stopping short, his expression betraying the repugnance he felt for his penitent.

Sir d'Arminges, standing on the threshold, saw this hesitation. "Sir Monk," he said, "this man may have been an executioner but he is no less a man, so give him the final services he requires. It will make your labours all the more meritorious."

The monk didn't reply, just silently followed the two lackeys into the rear chamber, where they placed the dying man on a bed. Seeing the man of God approach the bedside, the lackeys went out, closing the door on the monk and the penitent. D'Arminges and Olivain were waiting for them outside; they mounted their horses, and all four trotted off after Raoul and his companion. They were just disappearing around a bend in the road when a new traveller arrived at the threshold of the inn. "What can I do for you, Sir?" asked the innkeeper, still pale and trembling from his fearful discovery.

The traveller made the gesture of a man drinking, and then dismounted, pointed to his horse, and pantomimed giving it a rubdown. "The devil!" the host said to himself. "It seems the man's a mute." He asked, "And where would you like to drink?"

"Here," said the traveller, pointing to a table.

"I was wrong," said the host to himself. "He's not a mute." So, he bowed and went to get a bottle of honey and some biscuits that he placed before his taciturn guest. "Would Sir like anything else?" he asked.

"I would," said the traveller.

"What does Sir wish?"

"To know if you've seen a young gentleman of fifteen riding a chestnut horse and followed by a lackey."

"The Viscount of Bragelonne?" said the host.

"Exactly."

"So, you're the one he called Sir Grimaud?"

The traveller nodded. "Well!" said the host. "You missed your young master by no more than a quarter of an hour. He plans to dine at Mazingarbe and sleep tonight at Cambrin."

"How far is Mazingarbe?"

"Two and a half leagues."

"Thank you."

Grimaud, certain now of rejoining his young master by the end of the day, relaxed, mopped his brow, and poured himself a glass of honey that he sipped silently. He had just set down his glass and was preparing to refill it when a terrible scream came from the back room where the monk and the dying man had gone. Grimaud leapt to his feet. "What was that?" he said. "Where was that scream from?"

"From the wounded man's room," said the host.

"What wounded man?" asked Grimaud.

"The old executioner of Bethune, who was ambushed by some Spaniards, then brought here to be confessed by an Augustinian friar. He must be suffering terribly."

"The old executioner of Bethune?" Grimaud muttered, calling up his memories. "A man of fifty-five to sixty, tall, strong, with a dark complexion, black hair and beard?"

"That's him, except his beard is grey and his hair is white. Do you know him?" asked the host.

"I met him once," said Grimaud, his expression darkening at the memory it recalled.

The hostess rushed up, trembling. "Did you hear that?" she asked her husband.

"Yes," the host replied, looking anxiously toward the door at the rear.

Just then there came a second cry, less loud than the first but followed by a long, extended groan. The three listeners shuddered. "We have to find out what's going on," said Grimaud.

"That sounded like a man being murdered," whispered the host.

"*God!*" said the woman, crossing herself.

Though Grimaud spoke slowly, he could act quickly. He rushed to the door of the back room and shook it by the knob but it was locked from within. "Open up!" cried the host. "Open up this instant, sir monk!" No one answered. "Open up, or I'll break down the door!" said Grimaud.

Silence. Grimaud looked around and spotted a crowbar in a corner of the common room. He went and grabbed it, and before the host could object, pried the door open. The back room was splattered with blood, a stream of which flowed from the mattress. The wounded man said nothing, for he was on the brink of death. The Augustinian friar had disappeared. "The monk!" cried the host. "Where's the monk?"

Grimaud rushed to the window that opened onto the courtyard. "He got out this way," he said.

"You think so?" said the host, thoroughly frightened. "Groom! See if the monk's mule is still in the stable!"

"The mule's gone!" the groom shouted back.

Grimaud frowned, while the host wrung his hands and looked around in dismay. His wife, terrified, didn't even dare to enter the room, and stood at the door. Grimaud approached the dying man, recognising his blunt, scarred features that brought back a terrible memory. Finally, after a moment of sad and silent contemplation, he said, "There's no doubt about it: it's him."

"Is he still alive?" asked the host.

Grimaud didn't reply, just opened the man's doublet to feel his heart, as the host came around to the other side. Suddenly both started back, the host uttering a cry of terror, while Grimaud turned pale. The blade of a dagger was buried to the hilt in the left side of the executioner's chest. "Run for help," said Grimaud. "I'll stay here with him." The host left the room in a hurry; as for his wife, she had fled when she heard her husband cry out.

## 205 The Absolution

Here's what had happened within the room. We've seen that it was not by his own will but rather against it that the monk attended the wounded man whose need had been forced upon him. Perhaps he'd thought to escape, if he got the chance – but he'd been prevented by the threats of the two gentlemen, and of their retainers, who'd apparently been given strict orders, as well as by the monk's own need to play the part of confessor convincingly. So, once he entered the room, he approached the wounded man's bedside. The executioner quickly looked the monk over, with the efficient glance of those who know they are dying and therefore have no time to lose. As he took in the figure of the one who was to give him consolation, he started in surprise and said, "You're very young, Father."

"Those who wear these robes are of no age," the monk replied drily.

"Please speak gently to me, Father," said the wounded man. "I need a friend in these final moments."

"Do you suffer much?" asked the monk.

"Yes – but in soul even more than in body."

"We shall save your soul," said the young man. "But tell me, were you really the executioner of Bethune, as these people say?"

"In a manner of speaking," the man replied quickly, doubtless fearing that the title of *executioner* would drive away the final blessing he needed. "At one time I was but I haven't been for fifteen years, since I sold the office. I still attend the executions but I don't strike the blow – not me!"

"But you feel horror at once having done so?"

The executioner gave a deep sigh. "As long as I swung the blade in the name of law and justice I could sleep soundly, as the responsibility was that of justice and the law – but since one terrible night when I served as an instrument of vengeance and raised my sword with hatred over one of God's creatures..."

The executioner stopped, shaking his head in despair. "Speak," said the monk who took a seat next to the bed, showing interest in the wounded man's strange story.

"*Ah!*" cried the dying man with the remorse of a long-buried grief that finally found expression. "After that, I renounced the savagery of the slayer's work, and tried to assuage my guilt by twenty years of good works. I've risked my life to aid those in peril and saved many lives to balance those I took. And that's not all: the money I made in the exercise of my vocation, I've given to the poor, to the Church, and to refugees fleeing persecution. All have pardoned me – some have even become my friends – but I believe that God has *not* pardoned me, because the memory of that execution pursues me when I sleep, and every night I see rising before me the spectre of that woman."

"A woman! So, it was a woman you murdered?" cried the monk.

"Now you say it, too!" cried the executioner. "You use the word that echoes in my ears: *murder!* I didn't execute her, I murdered her! I'm not an instrument of justice, I'm a murderer!"

And he closed his eyes with a groan. The monk must have feared the man would die before continuing, for he quickly said, "Go on, go on, I know nothing about it. When you've finished your story, then God – and I'll – judge."

"*Oh! My Father,*" continued the executioner without opening his eyes, as if he feared by opening them to see some frightful object, "especially when it's nighttime, and I'm crossing a river, this terror I can't resist overwhelms me. My hands hang so heavy I can barely lift them, as if weighted by my heavy sword; the water turns the colour of blood, and all the voices of nature, the rustling of trees, the murmur of the wind, the lapping of the waves, all share a single voice, despairing and terrible, crying out to me, 'Let God's justice be done!'"

"Delirium!" muttered the monk, shaking his head.

The executioner opened his eyes, twisted toward the young man, and seized his arm. "Delirium?" he repeated. "Delirium, you say? No, not at all. Because it was in the night – because I threw her body in the river – because the words my remorse always repeats, those very words, it was / in my pride who spoke them. After having been an instrument of human justice, I believed I embodied God's justice."

"But, look here, how did it happen? Speak," said the monk.

"It was at night; a nobleman came to me; he showed me an order, and I followed him. Four other lords awaited us. They blindfolded me and took me with them. I had always reserved the right to refuse a job if what I was asked to do seemed unjust. We rode for five or six leagues, sombre, silent, almost without saying a word. Finally, we reached a small cottage, where through the window I could see a woman leaning on a table, and they said, 'This is who you must execute.'"

"Horrid!" said the monk. "And you obeyed?"

"But *my dear Father*, they said this woman's a monster who'd poisoned her second husband and then tried to murder his brother who's among the men who'd brought me. She'd just poisoned to death a young woman who's her rival and they said that before leaving England she had conspired at the assassination of the king's favourite."

"Buckingham?" cried the monk.

"Yes, Buckingham – that's the name."

"So, this woman was English?"

"No, she was French but she'd married in England."

The monk paled, wiped his forehead, got up, and locked the door from the inside. The executioner thought he was being abandoned and fell back moaning on the bed. "No, no, here I am," said the monk, returning quickly. "Continue – who were these men?"

"One was a foreigner – English, I think. The other four were French and wore the uniform of the King's Musketeers."

"Who were they?"

"I didn't know them. But the French lords called the Englishman *milord*."

"And this woman ... was she beautiful?"

"Young and beautiful! Oh, yes! I can still see her, kneeling at my feet as she prayed, her beautiful head thrown back. I've never been able to understand how I'd have taken such a head so beautiful, so pale."

The monk seemed agitated by a strange emotion. He trembled as if he wanted to ask a question but didn't dare. Finally, after a violent effort to control himself, he asked, "And the name of this woman?"

"I don't know. As I told you, they said she was twice married, once in France and once in England."

"And she was young, you say?"

"Twenty-five."

"Beautiful?"

"Ravishing."

"Blond hair?"

"Yes."

"She had full, flowing hair, didn't she? That fell to her shoulders?"

"Yes."

"Eyes large and expressive?"

"When she wanted them to be. Oh, yes, that was her."

"A voice of strange sweetness?"

"How ... how do you know?"

The executioner raised himself on his arm and stared, terrified, at the monk, who flushed. "And you killed her!" said the monk. "You served as the tool of those cowards who didn't dare to kill her themselves! Had you no pity for her youth, beauty, and helplessness? You killed her?"

"Alas!" said the executioner. "I told you, Father, that beneath her heavenly trappings this woman hid an infernal spirit, and when I saw her, when I remembered the evil she'd done to me..."

"To you? What could she have done to you? Tell me."

"She had seduced and run off with my brother, who was a priest; she had escaped with him from her convent."

"With your brother?"

"Yes – my brother was her first lover. She was the cause of my brother's death. Oh, Father, Father! Don't look at me like that! Am I guilty? Will I not be forgiven?"

The monk composed his face. "All right, all right, I will forgive you – if you tell me everything!"

"Yes!" cried the executioner. "Everything! Everything!"

"Then answer me: if she seduced your brother ... you said she seduced him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"If she caused his death ... you said she caused his death?"

"Yes," repeated the executioner.

"Then, you must know her maiden name."

"Ah! My God, my God!" said the executioner. "I feel I'm dying. Absolution, Father! Absolution!"

"Say the name!" cried the monk. "Say the name, and I will give it."

"Her name ... ah, God pity me!" the executioner murmured.

And he fell back on the bed, pale, shivering, almost convulsing. "Her name!" repeated the monk, bending over the dying man as if to draw it out of him. "Her name! Speak, or no absolution!"

The dying man seemed to gather all his remaining strength. The monk's eyes glistened. "Anne de Breuil," the dying man murmured.

"Anne de Breuil!" cried the monk, straightening and raising his hands to heaven. "Anne de Breuil! That was the name, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was her name – and now absolve me, for I'm dying."

"I, absolve you?" cried the priest, with a laugh that made the hair stand on the dying man's head. "I, absolve you? I am no priest!"

"You're not a priest!" cried the executioner. "But ... but what are you, then?"

"I shall tell you, wretch!"

"Oh, Lord – oh, my God!"

"I am John Francis de Winter!"

"I don't know you!" cried the executioner.

"Patience, patience, because you shall know me. I am John Francis de Winter," he repeated, "and that woman..."

"That woman?"

"Was my mother!"

The executioner gave a great and horrible scream, the first cry that was heard outside. Then he gibbered, "Oh, *forgive me* if not in the name of God, then your own – if not as a priest, then as her son."

"Forgive you!" cried the false monk. "Forgive you! God may do so but as for me – never!"

"Pity me," said the executioner, holding his hands out to him.

"No pity for those who'd no pity. Die without confession – in despair – and be damned!"

And drawing a dagger from his robes, he plunged it into the man's chest. "There!" he said. "That's my absolution!" It was then that those outside heard the second, quieter cry followed by a prolonged groan. The executioner who had half risen, fell back across the bed. As for the false monk, leaving the dagger in his victim, he ran to the window, opened it, jumped out onto the flowerbed, slipped into the stable, and took his mule out the back door. He led it to the nearest copse of trees, threw off his monk's robe, pulled a full cavalier's outfit from his saddle bags, donned it, and rode to the nearest posting-house. There he hired a horse and galloped off at full speed toward Paris.

**206**

**Grimaud Speaks**

The innkeeper had gone for help, his wife was outside praying, and Grimaud was left alone with the executioner. After a moment, the wounded man opened his eyes. "Save me!" he murmured. "Save me! O, my God, is there no friend in the world who'll help me live – or die?" With an effort, he lifted his hand to his chest, and felt the hilt of the dagger. "Oh," he said like one who suddenly remembers. And he dropped his arm back on the bed. "Take courage," said Grimaud. "We've sent for help."

"Who are you?" asked the wounded man, eyes widening as he looked at Grimaud.

"An old friend," said Grimaud.

"You?" The man tried to remember him, to recognise the features of the one speaking to him. "When did we meet? What happened then?"

"It was one night twenty years ago. My master brought you from Bethune to Armentieres."

"Yes, I remember you," said the executioner. "You were one of the four lackeys."

"That's right."

"How is it you're here?"

"I was passing on the road and stopped at this inn to rest my horse. They'd just informed me the old executioner of Bethune was here when we heard your cries. We tried to rush to your aid but had to break down the door."

"And the monk?" said the executioner. "Have you seen the monk?"

"What monk?"

"The monk who was locked in with me?"

"No, he's gone; it looks like he fled out the window. Is he the one who stabbed you?"

"Yes," said the executioner.

Grimaud turned as if to leave. "What are you going to do?" asked the wounded man.

"We have to go after him."

"If you do – take care!"

"Why?"

"This was his revenge upon me, and so this is my expiation. Now I hope God will forgive me."

"Explain," Grimaud said.

"That woman that you and your masters had me kill..."

"Milady?"

"Yes, Milady, that's what you called her."

"What did this monk have to do with Milady?"

"She was his mother."

Grimaud staggered and gazed at the dying man as if stunned. "His ... mother?" he repeated.

"Yes, his mother."

"So, he knows the secret of her death?"

"I took him for a monk and told him everything in confession."

"Woe!" cried Grimaud, sweat breaking out on his brow at the thought of the consequences of such a revelation. "You ... you gave him no names, I hope?"

"No names because I knew none except the maiden name of his mother that he recognised – but he knows that his uncle was one of the judges."

And with that, the executioner fell back, exhausted. Grimaud wanted to help him and reached out for the hilt of the dagger. "Don't touch it," said the executioner. "If you pull out the dagger, I'll die."

Grimaud froze, hand outstretched, then balled it into a fist and struck his forehead. "Ah! But if that man learns who the others were, my master is lost."

"Hurry, then! Go to him!" cried the executioner. "Warn your master, if he's still alive – and warn his friends. Believe me, my death won't be the end of his terrible vengeance."

"Where was he going?" asked Grimaud.

"To Paris."

"Where in Paris?"

"To track back two young gentlemen who passed on their way to the army, one of them – I heard his companion say his name – called the Viscount of Bragelonne."

"Was that the young man who brought the monk to you?"

"Yes."

Grimaud raised his eyes to heaven. "Then it's the will of God," he said.

"It must be," said the wounded man.

"This is terrifying," muttered Grimaud. "And yet that woman deserved her fate," he said aloud. "Don't you think so?"

"When one is dying," said the executioner, "the crimes of others seem tiny compared to one's own."

And he fell back, eyes closed in exhaustion. Grimaud was torn between a pity that forbade him to leave the man before help came, and the fear that commanded him to leave at once to bring this news to the Count of La Fère. He heard a noise in the corridor and saw the host returning with the surgeon, who had finally been found. They were followed by several busybodies, drawn by curiosity; news of the strange event had started to spread. The surgeon approached the dying man, who seemed unconscious. Shaking his head doubtfully, he said, "First we must draw the blade from his chest."

Grimaud remembered what the wounded man had said and looked away. The surgeon opened the man's doublet, tore a hole in his shirt, and laid his chest bare. The blade was buried to its hilt as we said. The surgeon took hold of the pommel and pulled; as he did so the wounded man opened his eyes in a startled stare. When the blade was pulled out, a bloody froth foamed from the executioner's mouth, and when he breathed, blood spurted from his wound. The dying man fixed his eyes on Grimaud with a strange expression, uttered a muffled groan, and died in an instant. Grimaud picked up the bloody dagger from where the surgeon had dropped it on the bedroom floor, horrifying everyone, and gestured for the host to follow him. He paid all the host's expenses with a generosity worthy of his master, and then mounted his horse. At first Grimaud had thought he should return immediately to Paris but then he remembered that his prolonged absence would make Raoul anxious – Raoul, who was only two leagues ahead of him, and could be caught in a quarter of an hour. He would explain everything to Raoul, then head back to Paris. He put his horse into a gallop and fifteen minutes later he pulled up at the Crowned Mule, the only inn at Mazingarbe. After a few words with the host, he knew he was in the right place. Raoul was dining with the Count of Guiche and his tutor but the grim adventure of the morning had left the young men in a sombre mood. This didn't dampen the cheer of Sir d'Arminges, whose greater experience made him more philosophical about such events. Suddenly the door opened and Grimaud appeared before them, pale, dusty, and still spattered with the dying man's blood. "Grimaud, my good Grimaud," cried Raoul. "Here you are at last! Excuse me, Gentlemen – he's not a servant, he's a friend." And rising and racing to him, he continued, "How is Sir Count? Have you seen him since we parted? Please tell me – but I also have much to tell you. In the last three days we've had many adventures ... but what's wrong? You're so pale. And blood! What's this blood?"

"You're right, he's all bloody," said de Guiche, rising. "Are you hurt, *my friend*?"

"No, Sir," said Grimaud, "the blood is not mine."

"Whose, then?" asked Raoul.

"It's the blood of that luckless man you left at the inn, and who died in my arms."

"That man died – in your arms! But do you know who he was?"

"Yes," said Grimaud.

"He was the old executioner of Bethune."

"I know it."

"How did you know?"

"I knew him ... before."

"And he's dead?"

"Yes."

The two young men gaped at each other. "What would you have, Gentlemen?" said d'Arminges. "Death is the universal law, and not even an executioner is exempt. From the moment I saw his wound, I figured he would die – and you know, that was his opinion too that was why he asked for a monk." At the word *monk*, Grimaud paled. "Come, sit down, eat!" said d'Arminges who did not allow sentiment to get in the way of a good meal like all men of that period and especially those of his maturity.

"Yes, Sir, you're right," said Raoul. "Come, Grimaud, call for what you need, get served, and after you've rested, we'll talk."

"No, Sir, no," said Grimaud. "I can't stop for a moment – I need to get back to Paris."

"What, you, go back to Paris? You're mistaken, it's Olivain who's going back – you're staying with me."

"On the contrary, it's Olivain who's staying, and I who am leaving. I came expressly to tell you that."

"But what's the reason for this change?"

"I can't tell you."

"Explain yourself."

"I can't explain."

"Come, is this some kind of joke?"

"Sir Viscount knows I never joke."

"Yes but I also know that the Count of La Fère said you would stay with me while Olivain went back to Paris. We will follow the orders of Sir Count."

"Not in this circumstance, Sir."

"Are you disobeying me, by any chance?"

"Yes, Sir – because I must."

"You persist then?"

"Yes, because I must. I'm going. Good luck, Sir Viscount."

Grimaud bowed and turned toward the door to leave. Raoul, angry and anxious at the same time, followed and grabbed him by the arm. "Grimaud!" Raoul cried. "I said you're staying!"

Grimaud faced him. "To do that would mean the death of Sir Count."

And again, he bowed and turned to leave. "Grimaud, my friend," said the viscount, "you can't go this way, leaving me dying of worry. Grimaud, speak, speak, in heaven's name!"

And Raoul, staggering, fell into a chair. "I can tell you only one thing, Sir, for the secret you demand isn't mine to share. You met a monk, didn't you?"

The two young men exchanged fearful glances. "Yes."

"You led him back to the wounded man?"

"Yes."

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Yes."

"Enough that you'd recognise him if you met him again?"

"Yes, I swear it," said Raoul.

"And I, as well," said de Guiche.

"Well, if you ever meet him again," said Grimaud, "whether on the highway, on the street, in church, wherever – put your boot on him and crush him without pity or mercy, as you would a viper, a serpent, or a cobra. Crush him, and don't stop until you're sure he's dead; the lives of five men are in jeopardy so long as he lives."

And without adding another word, Grimaud took advantage of his audience's shock and terror to leave the premises. "Well, Count!" said Raoul, turning to de Guiche. "Didn't I tell you that monk reminded me of a snake?" A moment later they heard a horse gallop past in the street. Raoul ran to the window; it was Grimaud, returning down the road to Paris. He saluted the viscount, waved his hat, and disappeared around the corner. As he galloped Grimaud had two thoughts. The first was that, at the rate he was going, his horse wouldn't last ten leagues. The second was that he was out of money. But Grimaud's wits had been sharpened by his habitual silence: at the first relay he sold his horse and used the money to hire post-horses for the rest of the journey.

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The Eve of the Battle

Raoul was roused from these sombre reflections by the innkeeper, who rushed into the common room shouting, "The Spaniards! The Spaniards!"

If true, this was serious enough to drive all other thoughts from their minds. The young men asked for confirmation and were told that the enemy was advancing by way of Houdin and Bethune. While Sir d'Arminges called for the horses that were feeding in preparation for departure, the young cavaliers went up to the inn's highest windows, from which they could see a full corps of infantry and cavalry on the horizon toward Hersin and Lens. This wasn't just a band of irregulars, this was a whole army. It seemed like a good idea to obey the wisdom of Sir d'Arminges this time and retreat. The young men ran back downstairs. Sir d'Arminges was already mounted, Olivain held the young men's horses while the Count of Guiche's lackeys guarded the Spanish prisoner between them, mounted on a nag they'd bought to bear him. As an added precaution, his hands had been tied. The little troop left at a trot on the road to Cambrin, where they expected to find the prince. But he'd moved the evening before, drawing back toward La Bassée in response to a false report that the enemy was crossing the Lys at Estaires. In fact, misled by this information, the prince had withdrawn his troops from Bethune and concentrated all his forces between Vieille-Chapelle and La Venthie, while he himself, after a reconnaissance ride along the line with the Marshall de Grammont, had just returned to his headquarters, where he interrogated the officers of his commands as to their situations. But no one had any positive news: for forty-eight hours there had been no contact with the enemy, who seemed to have vanished. Never does an enemy army seem so near and therefore as threatening as when it disappears completely. So, the prince's mood, unlike his usual habit, was sullen and anxious, when a duty officer entered and announced to the Marshall de Grammont that someone wanted to speak to him. The Duke Grammont glanced at the prince, who nodded, and the marshal went out. The prince followed him with his eyes, his gaze fixed on the door, and no one dared to speak for fear of interrupting his thoughts. Suddenly a distant thud trembled the air. The prince leapt up, extending his hand in the direction whence the sound came. He knew quite well what it was: cannon fire. Everyone else had risen as well. At that moment the door opened: "My Lord," said the Marshall de Grammont, radiant, "if Your Highness will permit, my son, the Count of Guiche, and his travelling companion, the Viscount of Bragelonne, can give him news of the enemy – for they've seen them."

"How's that?" the prince said eagerly. "If I'll permit it? I don't just permit it, I require it! Have them enter."

The marshal pushed in the two young men, who found themselves in front of the prince. "Speak, Gentlemen," said the prince, saluting them. "Talk first, and we'll exchange the usual compliments later. The most urgent thing now is to know where the enemy is and what he's doing."

It fell naturally to the Count of Guiche to do the talking – not only was he the older of the two youths but he'd already been presented to the prince by his father. Raoul had never seen the prince before but de Guiche had known him quite a while, so he was the one who told the prince what they'd observed from the inn at Mazingarbe. Meanwhile, Raoul was studying this young general, already so famous from the battles of Rocroi, Fribourg, and Nördlingen. Since the death of his father, Henri de Bourbon, Louis de Bourbon was Prince de Condé, and was nicknamed, according to the custom of the time, “Sir Prince.” He was a young man aged twenty-six or twenty-seven, eagle-eyed and hook-nosed – an *agl' occhi grifani* as Dante put it. He was of middle height, with long, flowing hair, and had all the qualities of a great general, being decisive, courageous, and quick-witted. This didn't prevent him from being at the same time a gentleman of elegance and spirit, so that besides the revolution he brought to warfare due to the new ideas that he embodied, he also led a social revolution in Paris among the young nobles of the Court, of whom he was the natural leader. These young courtiers were called the *petit-maitres* by the aging social lions of the previous reign, for whom Bassompierre, Bellegarde, and the Duke d'Angouleme had been the models. A few words from the Count of Guiche, along with the sound of the guns, enabled the prince to grasp the situation. The enemy had crossed the Lys at Saint-Venant was marching on Lens, doubtless intending to take the city and cut off the French army from France. They could hear closer cannon fire now, louder thumps drowning out the farther thunder, as French heavy guns began to reply to the Spanish and Lorrainer artillery. But how strong was this attack? Was it just a corps intended to create a diversion, or was it the entire army?

That was the prince's next question, to which de Guiche was unable to give a definitive response. It was the critical issue, the one for which the prince needed an exact and positive answer. By this time Raoul had gotten over his initial timidity, and approached the prince to say, “If my Lord will allow me to hazard a few words on the subject, I might be able to help.”

The prince turned, looked the young man over, and seemed to size him up at a glance. Seeing the youth was no more than fifteen, he smiled reassuringly. “Of course, Sir – speak,” he said, softening his commanding voice, as if addressing a woman.

Raoul said, blushing, “My Lord might want to interrogate our Spanish prisoner.”

“You took a Spanish prisoner?” the prince cried.

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Why, so we did,” added de Guiche. “I'd quite forgotten.”

“Don't be so modest – you're the one who took him,” Raoul said, smiling.

The old marshal turned toward the viscount, grateful for this praise of his son, while the prince called out, “This young man is right – bring in the prisoner.”

While they were marching him in, the prince took de Guiche aside and asked him how the prisoner had been taken, and who this young man was. The prince, returning to Raoul, said, “Sir, I know you have a letter of recommendation from my sister, Madam de Longueville but I see you prefer to recommend yourself by giving such good advice.”

“My Lord,” said Raoul, blushing, “I didn't wish to interrupt Your Highness's important conversations with my small affairs – but here's the letter.”

“Very well,” said the prince. “You can give it to me later. Here comes the prisoner, and right now that's the urgent thing.”

They brought in the Spanish irregular. He was a *condottiere*, one of those mercenaries who at that time were still selling themselves to anyone who could pay and give them free reign to pillage. Since his capture he hadn't said a word, so that even his captors didn't know his nationality. The prince regarded him with an air of disgust. “What country do you come from?” he asked.

The prisoner replied with a few words in a foreign language. “Hmm. Apparently, he's Spanish,” said the prince. “Do you speak Spanish, Grammont?”

“Not much, My Lord.”

“And I, not at all,” said the prince, laughing. “Gentlemen,” he said to his gathered staff, “does anyone speak Spanish who can act as an interpreter?”

“I do, my Lord,” said Raoul.

“Ah! So, you speak Spanish?”

“Well enough, I think, to serve Your Highness's purpose in this matter.”

All the while, the prisoner stood impassively, as if he had no idea what was being said. “My Lord desires to know your nationality,” Raoul said in the purest Castilian.

“*Ich bin ein Deutscher*,” replied the prisoner.

“What the devil did he say?” asked the prince. “What fresh gibberish is this?”

“He says he's a German, My Lord,” said Raoul. “But I don't believe it because his accent is bad, and his pronunciation is terrible.”

“So, you speak German, too?” asked the prince.

“Yes, My Lord,” Raoul said.

“Well enough to interrogate him in that language?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Question him then.”

Raoul began the interrogation, and the results supported his first opinion. The prisoner couldn't or wouldn't understand what Raoul was saying and Raoul in return, only poorly understood his responses that came in a mix of Flemish and Alsatian. But despite the prisoner's efforts to avoid being understood, Raoul identified the man's native accent. “*Non siete Spagnuolo, non siete Tedesco, siete Italiano*,” Raoul said. “You're neither Spanish nor German, you're Italian.”

The prisoner started and bit his lip. “Ah! I understood that perfectly,” said the Prince de Condé, “and since he's Italian, I'll continue the interrogation. Thank you, Viscount,” continued the prince, laughing.

“I appoint you from this moment to be my interpreter.”

But the prisoner was no more disposed to answer in Italian than in any other language; what he wanted was to evade giving answers. Thus, he knew nothing – not the number of the enemy, nor who commanded them, nor the direction of their movements. “Very well,” said the prince, who understood what was behind this pretended ignorance. “This man was caught plundering and murdering, and could have purchased his life by answering – but since he won't talk, take him out and shoot him.”

The prisoner turned pale, and the two soldiers who'd brought him each took an arm and led him to the door, while the prince, turning to the Marshall de Grammont, seemed already to have dismissed the matter from his mind. At the door, the prisoner tried to stop the soldiers, who, following their orders, tried to force him to continue. “Hold on,” said the prisoner in French. “I'm ready to talk, My Lord.”

“Oh ho!” said the prince, laughing. “I thought you might. I have a secret method for loosening tongues; young men, profit by my example for when your time comes to command.”

“But only on condition,” continued the prisoner, “that Your Highness swears to let me live.”

“By my faith as a gentleman,” said the prince.

“In that case, ask away, My Lord.”

“Where is the army crossing the Lys?”

“Between Saint-Venant and Aire.”

“Who is in command?”

“Count Fuensaldagna, General Beck, and the archduke in person.”

“How many men do they have?”

“Eighteen thousand men and thirty-six guns.”

“And their goal?”

“They march on Lens.”

“You see, Gentlemen!” said the prince, turning in triumph toward the Marshall de Grammont and the other officers.

“Yes, My Lord,” said the marshal. “You've gained all that human intelligence could learn.”

“Call back Le Plessis-Bellière, Villequier, and d'Erlac,” said the prince. “Recall all the troops that are south of the Lys and prepare them to march tonight; tomorrow in all probability, we attack the enemy.”

“But, my Lord,” said the Marshall de Grammont, “consider that even with all the troops we have available, it's no more than thirteen thousand men.”

“Sir Marshall,” said the prince, with that noble look that belonged only to him, “it's with small armies that we win the greatest battles.” Then, turning to the prisoner: “Take this man out and guard him carefully. His life depends on the information he's given us: if it's wrong, he's to be shot.” The prisoner was led away. “Count of Guiche,” said the prince, “it's been too long since you saw your father; stay close to him. Sir,” he continued, addressing Raoul, “if you're not too fatigued, follow me.”

“To the end of the world, My Lord!” cried Raoul, feeling for this young general who seemed to live up to his reputation, a genuine admiration.

The prince smiled; he despised flatterers but enjoyed being admired. “Well, Sir,” he said, “you're a good advisor – you've already proven that. Tomorrow we'll see how you behave in action.”

“And I, My Lord,” said the marshal, “what shall I do?”

“Stay here to receive the troops. I'll either come back to take command myself, or I'll send a courier to have them led to me. Twenty guards, well mounted, is all I'll need as escort.”

“That's not very many,” said the marshal.

“It's enough,” said the prince. “Have you a good horse, Sir Bragelonne?”

“Mine was killed this morning, My Lord, and for the time being I'm mounted on my lackey's.”

“Go to my stables and choose for yourself the horse that best suits you. No false modesty, take the horse that seems best to you. You may need it tonight, and you're sure to need it tomorrow.”

Raoul didn't wait to be told twice; he knew that with superiors, and especially when superiors were princes, the height of etiquette is to obey with question or delay. He went to the stables and chose an Andalusian dun, and then put on its saddle and bridle himself – for Athos had warned him that, in times of danger, he should never entrust that important task to anyone else. He then rejoined the prince, who had just that moment mounted his own horse. “Now, Sir,” he said to Raoul, “would you show me that letter of recommendation?”

Raoul handed the letter to the prince. “Stay with me, Sir,” the prince said to him.

The prince spurred on, wrapped the reins around his saddle's pommel, as he usually did when he wanted his hands free, unsealed Madam de Longueville's letter, and galloped up the road to Lens, accompanied by Raoul and followed by his small escort. Meanwhile, the messengers who were to recall the troops were riding off at full speed in all directions. The prince read the letter as he rode.

“Sir,” he said after a moment, “you are described in the best possible terms. The only thing I have to say is, from what little I've already seen and heard, I think even better of you than they do.”

Raoul bowed. However, at every step the little troop took toward Lens, the cannon fire seemed closer. The prince's gaze turned toward the thunder with the fierce concentration of a bird of prey. It was as if his eyes had the power to see through the barrier of trees that stretched before him toward the horizon. From time to time his nostrils dilated, as if seeking the scent of gun smoke, and he blew like a horse. Finally, they heard a gun thump so close that it was obvious they were less than a league from the fighting. As they rounded a bend, they saw ahead the little village of Aunay. The peasants were in a panic. The rumours of Spanish cruelty had everyone terrified; the women had already fled, retreating toward Vitry, leaving but few men behind. They ran at the sight of the prince, until one of them recognised him. “Ah, My Lord,” he said, “have you come to chase off those wretched Spaniards and thieving Lorrainers?”

“Yes,” said the prince, “if you'd be willing to serve as my guide.”

“Willingly, My Lord. Where would Your Highness like to go?”

“To some elevated spot where I can see Lens and its environs.”

“In that case, I'm your man.”

“I can trust you? You're a good Frenchman?”

“I was a soldier at Rocroi, My Lord.”

“Here,” said the prince, giving him his purse. “That's for Rocroi. Now, do you want a horse, or would you rather walk?”

“*On foot*, my Lord – I always served in the infantry. Besides, I intend to lead Your Highness by paths we'll have to pursue afoot.”

“Let's go,” said the prince, “there's no time to lose.” The veteran set off, running ahead of the prince's horse. A hundred paces outside the village, he took a small path that wound along the bottom of a pretty glen. For half a league they rode through the woods, with cannon fire so close that it seemed after each shot they could hear the whistling of the ball. Finally, they found a path that left the valley to climb the hillside. The peasant turned up this path, inviting the prince to follow him. The latter dismounted, ordered Raoul and one of his aides to do the same, told the others to stay behind but remain on the alert, and began to climb the path. After a few minutes they reached the ruins of an old château whose tumbled walls crowned a hilltop with a view of the surrounding region. A quarter-



league away they could see Lens, and in front of Lens, the entire enemy army. At a single glance the prince surveyed the ground from Lens to Vimy. In an instant, the complete plan of the battle that was to save France the next day formed in his mind. He took a pencil, tore a page from his tablet, and wrote:

*My dear Marshal,*

*In an hour Lens will be in the hands of the enemy. Come to me and bring the whole army with you. Meet me at Vendin, where I'll have orders for the troops' disposition. By tomorrow night we'll have retaken Lens and beaten the enemy.*

Then turning toward Raoul, he said, "Go, Sir, at full speed to deliver this letter to Sir Grammont."

Raoul bowed, took the paper, ran back down the slope, jumped on his horse, and galloped off. Fifteen minutes later he reached the marshal. Some of the summoned troops had already arrived, and the rest were coming in from moment to moment. The Marshall de Grammont placed himself at the head of all the available infantry and cavalry and took the road to Vendin, leaving the Duke Châtillon to assemble and bring up the rest. All the artillery had arrived and was added to the march. It was seven in the evening when the marshal arrived at the rendezvous. The prince was there and waiting; as he'd foreseen, Lens had fallen into the enemy's hands shortly after Raoul's departure. The ending of the cannonade as good as announced this event. They waited for nightfall. As the darkness increased, the rest of the troops summoned by the prince gradually arrived. All had been ordered to march without beating drums or sounding trumpets. By nine o'clock full night had fallen, though a dim twilight still lit the plain. The French marched forward silently, the prince leading the column. Once they passed Aunay, the army could see Lens ahead: two or three houses were in flames, and distant shouts, denoting the agony of a town taken by assault, reached the soldiers' ears. The prince ordered the units into position. The Marshall de Grammont was to hold the far left, anchored on Méricourt; the Duke Châtillon commanded the centre; while the prince, commanding the right wing, formed his troops in front of Aunay. The next day's order of battle was to be based on the positions occupied during the night. Each unit would awaken on the ground from whence it would manoeuvre. The movements were executed in the most profound silence and with the greatest precision. By ten o'clock everyone was in position, and at half past ten the prince inspected the posts and gave the orders for the next day. Three instructions in particular were given to each commander, with orders that the troops were to obey them scrupulously. First, each unit in line should stay in contact with the units to its right and left, while maintaining a proper distance. Second, they were to advance at no faster than a walk. And third, they were to let the enemy fire first. The prince sent the Count of Guiche to join his father, keeping Bragelonne for himself – but the two young men asked to spend the night before the battle together, and their request was granted. A tent was raised for them near that of the marshal. Though the day had been long and tiring, neither was ready for sleep. The eve of battle is a sombre and serious time, even for old soldiers, let alone for two young men who would be seeing the terrible spectacle for the first time. On the eve of battle, the mind thinks of a thousand things forgotten or regretted. On the eve of battle, neighbours become friends and friends become brothers. It goes without saying that every feeling is exaggerated to the highest degree. And it seemed the young men had similar feelings, because each sat in his end of the tent and began to write a letter on his knee. The letters were long, at least four pages crammed with words, the writing growing successively smaller as the sheets were filled. Occasionally the young men looked up and smiled. Sensitive to each other's moods, they understood their feelings without saying anything. Their letters completed, each put his in a double envelope, so no one could see to whom the inner envelope was addressed until the outer was unsealed. Then they approached each other and exchanged their letters, smiling. "If I should suffer a mischance," said Bragelonne.

"If I should be killed," said de Guiche.

"Rest easy," they told each other. They embraced like brothers and then each wrapped himself in his cloak, lay down, and slept the deep and graceful sleep enjoyed by birds, flowers, and the young.

## 208 A Dinner as of Old

The second rendezvous of the former musketeers was not as tense and threatening as the first. With his usual clarity and perception, Athos had recognised that meeting around a dinner table would make everyone more amenable to agreement. His friends, sensitive to his current dignity and sobriety, hadn't dared to suggest a repeat of the revelry of former days at the Pomme-de-Pin or the Heretic, so he was first to propose that they meet around some well-provisioned table, where each could set aside reserve and be true to his own character, resuming that easy camaraderie they'd had when they were known as the Inseparables. This proposal was welcomed by everyone, especially d'Artagnan, who was eager to revisit the happy conviviality of his youth, as he felt that for far too long he'd had nothing but bad food and worse companionship. Porthos, on the verge of being made a baron, was delighted to have an opportunity to study the aristocratic manners of Athos and Aramis. Aramis wanted to hear the gossip from the Royal Palace from d'Artagnan and Porthos, and to stay on a good footing with friends as devoted as they, who formerly had supported his disputes with swords both ready and resolute. As for Athos, he was the only one who had nothing to gain from the others and was motivated solely by pure friendship and grandeur of soul. They'd all agreed to exchange addresses, and that when they needed to meet it would be at the sign of the Hermitage, a famous caterer in the Rue de la Monnaie. The first rendezvous was set for the following Wednesday, at eight in the evening. And so, on that day the four friends met at the appointed hour, each arriving on his own. Porthos came from trying out a new horse, d'Artagnan from his guard duty at the Louvre, Aramis from visiting one of his penitents in the neighbourhood, while Athos, who had taken up lodgings in Rue Guénégaud, was already nearby. Unexpectedly, they all arrived at the door of the Hermitage at the same time, Athos coming by way of the Pont Neuf, Porthos by the Rue du Roule, d'Artagnan by the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, and Aramis by the Rue de Béthisy. The first words exchanged between the four friends, whose manners were somewhat reserved, were rather stiff and formal. As the meal began it was apparent that d'Artagnan was forcing himself to laugh, Athos to drink, Aramis to talk, and Porthos to stay silent. Athos, noticing this mutual embarrassment, adopted the speedy remedy of ordering four bottles of champagne. Hearing this order, delivered with Athos's usual calm command, the Gascon's face brightened, and Porthos looked pleased. Aramis was astounded: he knew that not only did Athos no longer drink but he even evinced a certain distaste for honey. This astonishment redoubled when Aramis saw Athos pour himself a glass and drink it down with all his former enthusiasm. D'Artagnan immediately filled and emptied his glass, while Porthos and Aramis clinked their goblets together. In what seemed like no time, the four bottles were empty. Conviviality reigned, and the four guests seemed ready to renounce all their private agendas. Athos's excellent prescription had dissolved all the clouds that darkened their hearts. The four friends began to rattle on like old times, finishing each other's sentences and leaning casually on the table in their favourite postures. It wasn't long before the dapper Aramis actually undid the top two buttons of his doublet that was Porthos's cue to open his entirely. Old battles, desperate journeys, and blows given and received were the early topics of conversation, followed by memories of the grim conflicts waged against the man who was now called the Great Cardinal. "*My faith*," said Aramis, laughing, "After these eulogies for the dead, shall we talk a bit about the living? I'd like to share some gossip about Mazarin. Is that allowed?"

"Always," said d'Artagnan, laughing in his turn. "Tell us your story, and we'll applaud it if it's good."

"There was a great prince with whom Mazarin sought an alliance," said Aramis. "The prince was invited by Mazarin to send him a list of the conditions under which he would honour the minister by allying with him. The prince, who was somewhat reluctant to deal with such an upstart, nonetheless compiled his list and sent it along. The list contained three provisions that Mazarin didn't like, so he offered the prince ten thousand crowns to drop them."

"Oh ho! The miser!" cried his three friends. "There wasn't much risk an offer that low would be accepted. What did the prince do?"

"The prince immediately sent Mazarin fifty thousand *livres*, begging him never to write to him again, and promising twenty thousand *livres* more if he'd agree never to speak with him as well. And what do you think Mazarin did?"

"He got angry?" said Athos.

"He beat the messenger?" said Porthos.

"He took the money?" said d'Artagnan.

"You guessed it, d'Artagnan," said Aramis.

And they all laughed so loudly that the host came over to see if they needed anything. He was afraid a fight was about to break out but eventually their hilarity died down. "Can we poke some fun at Sir Beaufort?" asked d'Artagnan. "I'm in just the mood."

"As you will," said Aramis, familiar enough with the Gascon's spirit to know he'd never give up on something he was determined to do.

"All right with you, Athos?" asked d'Artagnan.

"I vow, faith of a gentleman, that if it's funny, I'll laugh," said Athos.

"Then I'll begin," said d'Artagnan. "Sir Beaufort, talking one day with one of the friends of Sir Prince, told him that during the early quarrels between Mazarin and the Parliament he'd found himself in a dispute with Sir Chavigny, who'd attached himself to the new cardinal – so Beaufort, who held to the old ways, had cudgelled him soundly. This friend, who knew Sir Beaufort was rather free with his fists, wasn't a bit surprised, and related the tale to Sir Prince. The story spread rapidly, and soon everyone was snubbing Chavigny who wanted to know the reason for such coldness but no one would tell him. Finally, someone dared to say that everyone was surprised that a gentleman would allow himself to be cudgelled, even if Sir Beaufort was a prince. 'And who said the prince had cudgelled me?' asked Chavigny.

'The prince himself,' the friend replied.

"Chavigny went back to the source and found the person to whom the prince made the remarks, who swore on his honour that's what he'd heard. In despair at this defamation, Chavigny, who couldn't understand it, declared he'd rather die than put up with it. So, he sent two emissaries to the prince to inquire if he really had said that he'd cudgelled Sir Chavigny. 'I said it, and I repeat it,' said the prince, 'because it's the truth.'

'My Lord,' said one of Chavigny's emissaries, 'permit me to say to Your Highness that blows from a gentleman degrade the giver more than the receiver. King Louis XIII was unwilling to have gentlemen as his *valets de chambre* because he wanted the right to beat his valets.'

""Wait,' asked Sir Beaufort, surprised, 'what's all this talk of beating, and who was beaten?'

""But it was you, My Lord, who boasted of having beaten ...'

""Who?'

""Sir Chavigny.'

""Me?'

""Did you not cudgel Sir Chavigny, or so at least you said, My Lord?'

""Yes.'

""Well, he denies it.'

""Ha!' said the prince. 'I cudgelled him so well, I can give you the exact words,' said Sir Beaufort with all the majesty he could muster. 'I said, "My dear Chavigny, I implore you not to heed this clown of a Mazarin.'"

""Oh, no, My Lord – now I get it,' said the second emissary. 'You meant you were *cajoling* him.'

""Cudgelling, cajoling, what's the difference?' said the prince. 'Really, our wordsmiths are such peasants! Or is that pedants?'"

Everyone laughed at the blundering speech of Sir Beaufort, whose malapropisms were becoming proverbial, and all agreed that factionalism should be banished from their friendly rendezvous: d'Artagnan and Porthos could mock the princes, and Athos and Aramis could cudgel Mazarin. "*My faith*," said d'Artagnan to his two friends, "I assure you, you've got good reason to want to hammer Mazarin, as he certainly has it in for you."

"Bah! Really?" said Athos. "If I thought that clown knew me by name, I'd go and get re-baptised. Knows me, does he?"

"He not only knows you by name, he knows you by your deeds. He knows two gentlemen were particularly responsible for helping Sir Beaufort escape, and I'm warning you, he's actively looking for you."

"For me? Who told him?"

"I did."

"What, you?"

"Yes, he sent for me this morning specifically to ask if I had any information."

"About those two gentlemen?"

"Yes."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know who they were yet but I was having dinner with two people who might tell me."

"That's what you said!" laughed Porthos, a broad smile spread across his face. "Bravo! But doesn't that frighten you, Athos?"

"No," said Athos, "it's not Mazarin looking for me that I fear."

"Oh?" said Aramis. "Tell me then what you do fear."

"Nothing – at the moment, at least."

"And in the past?" said Porthos.

"Ah, as to the past ... well, that's another thing," said Athos, with a sigh. "In the past, and in the future..."

"Are you afraid for young Raoul?" asked Aramis.

"Bah! No one dies in his first action," said d'Artagnan.

"Nor in the second," said Aramis.

"Nor in the third," said Porthos. "At least, none of our kind do, and the proof is that here we are."

"No," said Athos, "it's not Raoul that most worries me, because he'll conduct himself, I hope, like a gentleman, and if he is killed, well then! He'll die bravely. But you know, if anything did happen to him, well..." Athos drew a hand across his pale forehead.

"Well?" asked Aramis.

"Well! I would regard such a misfortune as ... an expiation."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "I know what you're saying."

"As do I," said Aramis. "But don't think about that, Athos – the past is the past."

"I don't get it," said Porthos.

"The affair at Armentieres," said d'Artagnan.

"What affair at Armentieres?" said Porthos.

"... Milady..."

"Oh, right!" said Porthos. "I'd quite forgotten that."

Athos gave him a grave look. "You'd forgotten that, Porthos?"

"My faith, yes," said Porthos. "It was a long time ago."

"So, the matter doesn't weigh on your conscience?"

"Well ... no!" said Porthos.

"What about you, Aramis?"

"It does sometimes occur to me," said Aramis. "It's a case of conscience that's not completely unambiguous."

"And you, d'Artagnan?"

"I confess that when my mind dwells on that terrible affair, I think mainly about the icy corpse of poor Madam Bonacieux. Yes, yes," he murmured, "I have a thousand regrets for the victim but none for her murderer."

Athos shook his head doubtfully. "Consider," said Aramis, "that if you admit divine justice affects the events of this world, then that woman was punished by God. We were His instruments, that's all."

"But what about free will, Aramis?"

"How does a judge do it? He has free will and condemns without fear. What about the executioner? His arms swing the blade, yet he strikes without remorse."

"The executioner..." murmured Athos.

He appeared to start at the recollection. "I know it's dreadful," said d'Artagnan, "but when I think that we've killed English, Spanish, Huguenot rebels, even Frenchmen, whose only crime was to meet us in battle and be too slow coming on guard, I'm not going to apologise for my part in that woman's murder – word of honour!"

"As for me," said Porthos, "now that you bring it to mind, Athos, I can still see the scene as if it were in front of me: Milady was there where you are" – Athos turned pale – "I was standing where d'Artagnan is. I had at my side a sword that cut like a Damascus blade ... you remember it, Aramis, because you named it Balizarde, right? *Well!* I swear to the three of you that if it hadn't been for the executioner of Bethune – it was Bethune, wasn't it? By my faith, if it wasn't for him, I'd have cut off that monster's head myself in a heartbeat, or even quicker. She was a wicked woman."

"And, really," said Aramis, with that casually philosophical tone he'd assumed since joining the Church, a calculating philosophy in which there was more atheistic logic than trust in God, "why think of all this now? What's done is done. We'll confess this act in our final hour, and God will decide whether it was a crime, a minor misdeed, or a meritorious service. You ask, do I repent of it? *My faith*, no. On my honour and on the cross, I only regret the fact that she was a woman."

"The one good point of it all," said d'Artagnan, "is that there's no trace of the deed."

"She had a son," said Athos.

"Yes, I know – so you told me," said d'Artagnan, "but who knows what's become of him? Dead the serpent, and dead her brood? Do you think de Winter, his uncle, would raise such a son of a serpent? De Winter will have rejected the son as he condemned the mother."

"If so," said Athos, "then woe to de Winter, for the child had done nothing to him."

"The child is dead, or the Devil take me!" said Porthos. "There's too much fog and damp in that country, or so d'Artagnan says."

And Porthos's conclusion might have restored the gaiety to their more-or-less worried faces but there came the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and a knock on the door. "Enter," said Athos.

"Gentlemen," said the host, "there's a fellow below who's arrived in a great hurry to speak to one of you."

"Which one?" asked the four friends.

"The one who is called the Count of La Fère."

"I am he," said Athos. "And what's this fellow's name?"

"Grimaud."

"Oh?" Athos turned pale. "Back already? What has become of Bragelonne?"

"Show him in!" said d'Artagnan. "Show him in!"

But Grimaud was already waiting on the landing. He rushed into the room and dismissed the host with a gesture. The host went out and shut the door while the four friends turned expectantly to Grimaud. His agitation, his pallor, the sweat that bedewed his face, the dust that soiled his clothing, all declared him a messenger of important and terrible news. "Gentlemen," he said, "*that woman* had a child, and the child has become a man. The tigress bore a tiger and beware! For that tiger is stalking you."

Athos looked at his friends with a shrug and a rueful smile. Porthos reached to his side for his sword that was hanging on the wall; from somewhere, Aramis had drawn a dagger. D'Artagnan arose.

"Tell us what you mean, Grimaud," he said.

"I mean that the son of Milady has left England and is in France, on his way to Paris – if he's not here already."

"The devil!" said Porthos. "Are you sure of this?"

"I'm sure," said Grimaud.

A long silence followed this statement. Grimaud was so exhausted that he collapsed onto a chair. Athos poured a glass of champagne and gave it to him. "Well, after all," said d'Artagnan, "so what if he lives, and so what if he comes to Paris? We've had enemies before, and he's just one more. Let him come!"

"Yes," said Porthos, looking longingly toward where his sword hung on the wall, "we'll be ready for him."

"Besides, he's just a boy," said Aramis.

Grimaud rose. "A boy!" he said. "Do you know what he did, this *boy*? Disguised as a monk, he discovered the whole story of Milady's death while confessing the executioner of Bethune, and after having learned everything he could from him, as absolution he planted his dagger in the dying man's heart. Here it is, still red and dripping, because it's no more than thirty hours since I took it from the wound."

And Grimaud threw on the table the dagger left by the monk in the executioner's chest. In a spontaneous movement, d'Artagnan, Porthos, and Aramis arose and grabbed their swords. Athos alone remained in his chair, calm and almost spellbound. "And you say he was dressed as a monk, Grimaud?" he asked.

"Yes, an Augustinian monk."

"What does he look like?"

"He's about my height, or so the innkeeper told me; slim, pale, with light blue eyes, and blond hair."

"And ... he didn't see Raoul?" said Athos.

"On the contrary, they met. It was the viscount himself who brought him to the bed of the dying man."

Athos rose without a word and reached for his sword. "Look at us, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, trying to laugh, "acting like a pack of silly women! Us, four men who have stood before armies, trembling in the face of a child!"

"Yes," said Athos, "but this child comes in the name of God." And they hurriedly left the hôtel.

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The Letter from Charles I

Now we must ask the reader to follow us across the Seine, to the door of the Carmelite Convent on the Rue Saint-Jacques. It was eleven in the morning, and the pious sisters were returning from a mass for the success of the arms of Charles I. Also leaving the church were a woman and a young girl wearing black, one dressed as a widow and the other as an orphan, on the way back to their cell. There, the woman knelt on a of painted wood, *pray God*, while near her the girl, leaning on a chair, stood and cried quietly. The woman would have been beautiful, had she not been aged by sorrow. The girl was charming, and her tears made her even more so. The woman looked to be aged forty, the girl about fourteen. "*My God*," said the kneeling suppliant, "protect my husband, watch over my son, and take from me this life so sad and miserable!"

"*My God*," said the girl, "preserve my mother for me!"

"Your mother is of no use to you in this world, Henrietta," replied the mournful woman. "Your mother has no throne, no husband or son, no money, no friends. Your mother, my poor child, has been abandoned by all the world."

And the mother, falling into the arms of the daughter who rushed to support her, burst into tears. "Have courage, Mother!" said the girl.

"Ah! Kings are down on their luck this year," said the mother, resting her head on her child's shoulder. "No one spares a thought for us in this country, where everyone is caught up in their own affairs. So long as your brother was with us he sustained me but now your brother is gone, and can't send news of himself to either me or his father. I've pawned my last jewels, sold all our clothes to pay the wages of your brother's servants, who refused to go with him until I made that sacrifice. Now we're reduced to living on the charity of these holy sisters – we're the poor, Henrietta, succoured only by God."

"But why don't you address yourself to the queen, your sister?" asked the girl.

"Alas!" said the weeper. "The queen my sister is no longer queen, my child, and another reigns in her name. One day you'll understand."

"Well, then, what about your nephew the king? Why not speak to him? You know how he loves me, mother."

"But my nephew the king isn't old enough to be king, and he himself, as La Porte has told us twenty times, has nothing of his own."

"Then let us turn to God," said the girl.

And she knelt beside her mother. These two women who prayed at the same pray God were the daughter and granddaughter of Henry IV – Queen Henriette and Henrietta, the wife and daughter of Charles I. Just as they were finishing their double prayer, there came a gentle scratching at the door of their cell. "Come in, Sister," said the elder of the two women, drying her tears and standing up. A nun respectfully opened the door. "Your Majesty will excuse me if I disturb her meditations," she said, "but in the parlour there's a foreign lord who's arrived from England, and who requests the honour to present a letter to Your Majesty."

"Oh, a letter! Did you hear that, Henrietta? Maybe it's a letter from the king with news from your father!"

"Yes, Madam, I heard, and I hope so too."

"And who is this lord, tell me."

"A gentleman of around forty-five or fifty."

"His name? Did he say his name?"

"Milord de Winter."

"Lord Winter!" cried the queen. "My husband's friend! Oh, let him come, let him come."

As he entered, the queen ran to meet the messenger and seized his hand eagerly. Lord Winter knelt and presented the queen a letter rolled up in a golden scroll case. "Ah, Milord," said the queen, "you bring us three things we haven't seen in a long while: gold, a devoted friend, and a letter from the king, our husband and master."

Winter bowed again but he couldn't answer, he was so deeply moved. "Milord," the queen said, taking the case, "you understand that I'm eager to know the contents of this letter."

"I will withdraw, Madam," said Winter.

"No, stay," said the queen, "and we'll read it to you. You must realise that I have a thousand questions for you." Winter stepped back and remained, standing in silence. The mother and the daughter retreated to a window embrasure, where the girl leaned on her mother's arm as they avidly read the following letter:

*Madam, My Dear Wife,*

*We are at the end. All the resources God has seen fit to leave me are concentrated in our camp at Naseby, from which I am writing in haste. Here I await the army of my rebellious subjects, and here I will fight them one last time. If the victor, I'll continue the struggle; if the vanquished, I'll have lost for the last time. I hope, in the latter case (alas, we must prepare for every outcome), to cross to the coast of France. But even if I can, will they welcome such an unlucky king to a country already in the throes of civil discord? Your affection and your wisdom must guide me. The bearer of this letter will inform you, Madam, what I dare not risk putting on paper. He will explain what action I expect from you. I also ask you to give my love to my children, and accept all my heart's affection for you, Madam and dear wife.*

The letter was signed, not "Charles, King," but "Charles, *still* King."

This sad reading that Winter followed by watching the expressions on the queen's face, nonetheless brought some hope to her eyes. "If he is no longer king," she cried, "defeated, exiled, proscribed, at least he still lives! Alas! The throne is too perilous a place nowadays for me to wish he were on it. But tell me, Milord," the queen continued, "and keep nothing from me: How do things stand? Is his position really as hopeless as he thinks?"

"Alas, Madam – even more hopeless than he thinks himself. His Majesty's heart is so good, he doesn't understand hatred; so loyal, he can't comprehend treason. England is caught in a kind of delirium, a fever that I fear can be quenched only in blood."

"But what of Lord Montrose?" asked the queen. "I've heard talk of great and rapid success, of a string of victories at Inverlochy, at Auldearn, Alford, and Kilsyth. I'd heard he was marching to the border to join his king."

"Yes, Madam – but at the border he encountered Lesley. He'd won victory by superhuman effort, until victory abandoned him: Montrose was beaten at Philiphaugh, had to dismiss what remained of his army, and flee disguised as a lackey. He's at Bergen, in Norway."

"God preserve him!" said the queen. "It's at least some consolation to know that a few of those who risked so much for us have reached safety. And now, Milord, since I see the king's position for what it is – that is to say, desperate – tell me what my royal husband asked you to say to me."

"Well, Madam," said Winter, "the king wants you to try to ascertain the feelings of the king and the queen toward him."

"Alas, as you know," the queen replied, "the king is still a child, and the queen, though a woman, is a weak woman – it's Mazarin who rules."

"Does he plan to play the same role in France that Cromwell plays in England?"

"Oh, no! He's a subtle and cunning Italian who might dream of a crime but would never dare commit it, the opposite of Cromwell, who does as he likes with the Houses of Parliament. In his battles with the French Parliament, Mazarin must stand at the side of the queen."

"All the more reason, then, why he should protect a king whom a parliament persecutes."

The queen shook her head bitterly. "From my experience, Milord," she said, "the cardinal will do nothing, or perhaps even oppose us. The presence of myself and my daughter in France already embarrasses him – imagine how he'd feel if we were joined by the king. Milord," Queen Henriette added with a melancholy smile, "I am sad and ashamed to say that we spent the winter in the Louvre without money, without linen, and almost without bread, often not getting up for lack of firewood."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Winter. "The daughter of Henry IV, the wife of King Charles! Why didn't you tell us, Madam, what had happened, what to expect?"

"You see the hospitality afforded a queen by this minister the king wishes to address."

"But I've heard talk of a marriage between His Highness the Prince of Wales and Miss d'Orléans," Winter said.

"Yes, I had a brief moment of hope. The children loved each other – but the queen, who had at first approved of their love, changed her mind, and now the Duke of Orléans, who had encouraged the beginning of their familiarity, has forbidden his daughter to think about such a union. Ah, Milord," continued the queen, without even bothering to wipe her tears, "better to fight, as the king did, and perhaps to die, than to live as a beggar as I have."

"Courage, Madam, courage," said Winter. "Don't despair. The interests of the Crown of France, even when preoccupied, must be opposed to the rebellion of the people in a neighbouring realm. Mazarin is a statesman and will understand that."

"But are you sure," said the queen doubtfully, "that you haven't been pre-empted?"

"By who?" asked Winter.

"By Joyce, by Pride, or by Cromwell."

"By a tailor! By a carter, or a brewer! I should hope, Madam that the cardinal would not enter into an alliance with such men as those."

"Well, what is he but such a man?" asked Madam Henriette.

"But for the king's honour, and that of the queen..."

"We'll have to hope he'll do something in their honour," said Madam Henriette. "With so eloquent a friend as you, Milord, I'm somewhat reassured. Give me your hand and let's go see the minister."

"Madam," said Winter, bowing, "you overwhelm me with honour."

"But if he refuses," said Madam Henriette, pausing, "and the king loses his battle – what then?"

"His Majesty might take refuge in Holland, where I've heard His Highness the Prince of Wales is."

"And can His Majesty, in flight, count on many such servants as yourself?"

"Alas, no, Madam!" said Winter. "But plans have been laid; I plan to search for allies in France."

"Allies!" said the queen, shaking her head.

"Madam," Winter replied, "If I can find the old friends I once had, I can answer for anything."

"Find them, then, Milord," said the queen with that poignant doubt that afflicts the long-suffering, "find them – and may God hear our pleas!" The queen went down to her carriage where Winter on horseback and followed by 2 lackeys, rode beside her window.

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The Letter from Cromwell

Just as Queen Henriette was leaving the Carmelite convent for the Royal Palace, a cavalier dismounted at the door of that royal residence and announced to the guards that he had something important to convey to Cardinal Mazarin. Though the cardinal feared assassins, he nonetheless needed a great deal of information and advice, so he was relatively accessible. It wasn't the first door that was hard to pass, nor the second but rather the third, where, besides guards and footmen, there stood the loyal Bernouin, that Cerberus whom no words could beguile and no golden bribe could subvert. It was at this third door that anyone who sought an audience would undergo a formal interrogation. The cavalier, having tied his horse at the courtyard gate, climbed the grand stairway, and addressing the guards in the first chamber, asked, "Sir Cardinal de Mazarin?"

"Go on in," the guards replied without even looking up from their dice and cards as if to show they didn't consider it their job to act as ushers.

The cavalier entered the second chamber that was guarded by musketeers and footmen, and repeated his question. "Do you have a Letter of Audience?" asked an usher, advancing to meet the visitor.

"I have one but not from Cardinal Mazarin."

"Enter and ask for Sir Bemouin," said the usher.

And he opened the door to the third chamber. Either by chance or because it was his usual post, Bemouin had been standing behind the door and had heard everything. "I'm the one you're looking for, Sir," he said. "From whom is the letter you bear for His Eminence?"

"From General Oliver Cromwell," said the newcomer. "Please announce this name to His Eminence, and then let me know if he'll receive me."

And he stood in that proud and sombre pose favoured by Puritans. Bernouin, after taking a long look at the young man, went into the cardinal's study, where he repeated the messenger's words. "A man bearing a letter from Oliver Cromwell?" said Mazarin. "What sort of man is he?"

"A real Englishman, my Lord: blond hair or rather red-blond, grey-blue eyes, more grey than blue, and puffed up with pride."

"See if he'll give you the letter."

Bemouin returned to the antechamber and said, "My Lord asks for the letter."

"My Lord must see the bearer to see the letter," replied the young man, "but to convince you of its bona fides, look here."

Bemouin looked at the letter's seal, and seeing that the letter really came from General Oliver Cromwell, turned to go back to Mazarin. "You may add," said the young man, "that I am not just a messenger but an envoy extraordinaire."

Bemouin re-entered the study and came out again a few seconds later. "Enter, Sir," he said, holding open the door.

Mazarin had needed the brief delay to get hold of his emotions upon hearing of the letter's origin. Meanwhile his shrewd mind was trying to figure out Cromwell's motive in sending the missive. The young man appeared in the door of the study, holding his hat in one hand and the letter in the other. Mazarin rose and said, "Sir, you claim you have a letter for me?"

"Here it is, My Lord," said the young man. Mazarin took the letter, opened it, and read:

*Mister Mordaunt, one of my secretaries, bears this letter of introduction to His Eminence Cardinal Mazarin, at Paris. He has, in addition, a second, more confidential letter.*

OLIVER CROMWELL

"Very well, Sir Mordaunt," said Mazarin, "give me this second letter and take a seat."

The young man drew a second letter from his pocket, gave it to the cardinal, and sat down. However, the cardinal, having taken the letter, thoughtfully turned it over and over in his hand instead of opening it, and then decided to sound out the messenger with some questions, as his experience had convinced him that few men could hide their secrets if watched closely while interrogated. "You're very young, Sir Mordaunt, for the difficult job of ambassador that taxes even veteran diplomats."

"My Lord, I am twenty-three but Your Eminence shouldn't be fooled into thinking me young. In my way I am older than you, though I lack your wisdom."

"How is that, Sir?" said Mazarin. "I don't understand you."

"They say, My Lord that years of suffering count double – and I have suffered for twenty years."

"Ah, yes, I see," said Mazarin, "a lack of fortune. You are poor, aren't you?" And he added to himself, "These English revolutionaries are all beggars and peasants."

"My Lord, I should have a fortune of six million but it was stolen from me."

"So, you're not a commoner, then?" said Mazarin, astonished.

"If I bore my proper title, I'd be a lord; if I wore my real name, you'd know me by one of the most illustrious in England."

"What is your name, then?" asked Mazarin.

"I'm known as Sir Mordaunt," said the young man, bowing.

Mazarin saw that Cromwell's envoy wished to maintain his incognito. He paused a moment, considering the young man more closely than he had before. The young envoy was unmoved. "To the devil with these Puritans!" Mazarin said under his breath. "They're carved of marble." Then, aloud, he said, "But your noble relatives are still alive?"

"One of them is, yes, My Lord."

"And can't he help you?"

"I've presented myself three times to my uncle to implore his aid, and three times I've been driven from his door."

"Oh, Lord help us, good Sir Mordaunt!" said Mazarin, hoping to trap the young man with false pity. "*My God*, your story moves me! So, you don't know the true facts of your high birth?"

"I have only recently learned the truth."

"And until you knew that...?"

"I'd considered myself an abandoned child."

"So, you've never seen your mother?"

"I did, My Lord, when I was a child – she came three times to my nursery, and I remember the last time as if it were yesterday."

"You have a good memory," said Mazarin.

"Oh, yes, My Lord," said the young man with a strange emphasis that sent a chill down the cardinal's spine.

"And who raised you?" asked Mazarin.

"A French nurse, who drove me away when I was five years old because she hadn't been paid, though she told me the name of the uncle my mother had spoken of."

"What happened to you?"

"I took to crying and begging on the highways, until a minister from Kingston took me in. He instructed me in the Calvinist faith, taught me everything he knew, and helped me in trying to find my family."

"And this research...?"

"It was in vain. It was chance that finally led me to the truth."

"You discovered what had become of your mother?"

"I learned that she'd been murdered by my uncle with the help of four accomplices, and that I'd been expelled from the nobility and stripped of all my rights by King Charles I."

"Ah, now I understand why you serve Sir Cromwell. You hate the king."

"Yes, my Lord, I hate him!" the young man said.

Mazarin was astonished by his diabolical expression as he uttered these words: unlike most complexions that flush red, this young man's face was livid and suffused with gall. "Your story is a terrible one, Sir Mordaunt, and touches me deeply; but fortunately, you now serve an all-powerful master who will help you in your quest. People in power have a great deal of information available to us."

"My Lord, offer the slightest scent to a well-bred hunting dog, and he'll follow the trail to the end."

"But this uncle you mentioned, would you like me to speak to him?" said Mazarin, who thought it would be useful to have an ally near to Cromwell.

"Thank you, My Lord but I'll speak to him myself."

"But didn't you say he mistreated you?"

"He'll treat me better the next time I see him."

"So, you have a way to make him listen?"

"I have a way to make him afraid."

Mazarin stared at the young man but was met by such a fiery glare that he looked down. Unwilling to continue the conversation, he opened the letter from Cromwell. Gradually the young man's eyes returned to their usual glassy passivity, and he fell into a deep reverie. After reading the first few lines, Mazarin glanced up to see if the young man was watching him, and noticing his indifference, he shrugged slightly and said to himself, "To pursue your agenda by using those who are pursuing their own is one way to conduct affairs. Let's see what this letter is all about." We reproduce it here verbatim:

*To His Eminence*

*My Lord Cardinal Mazarini*

*I would like, My Lord, to know your intentions concerning current affairs in England. Our neighbouring realms are too close for France not to care about our situation, or for us not to care about France. The English are almost unanimously opposed to the tyranny of King Charles and his supporters. Placed at the head of this movement by the public's trust, I appreciate more than anyone its nature and consequences. Today we go to war, and I will engage King Charles in a decisive battle. I will prevail, for the hope of the nation and the will of the Lord is with me. Once defeated, the king has no more resources in England or Scotland; if he is not taken or killed, he will try to escape to France to raise money, recruit soldiers, and buy arms. France has already received Queen Henriette, and thereby, unintentionally perhaps, contributed to sustaining the fires of civil war in our country; but Madam Henriette is a Daughter of France and is entitled to her hospitality. For King Charles, it is another story; if he receives refuge and aid, France would insult the English people and their government in a manner tantamount to open hostility ...*

At this point Mazarin, uneasy at the turn the letter had taken, stopped reading to glance once more at the young man. He was still lost in reverie, so Mazarin continued.

*It is urgent, my Lord, that I know therefore the intentions of France; the interests of that realm and that of England, though seemingly different, are closer than they may appear. England needs domestic tranquillity to complete the expulsion of its king, while France needs peace to secure its young monarch's throne; you, as much as we, need stability as we consolidate the power of our governments. Your disputes with your parliament, your noisy quarrels with the princes who today are with you and tomorrow are against you, the popular uprising fomented by the coadjutor, President Blancmesnil, and Councillor Broussel; all this disorder, in short that afflicts every level of government should make you wary of involvement in a foreign war – for then England, overexcited by enthusiasm for new ideas, would ally with Spain, who already desires such an alliance. So, I thought, My Lord, knowing your prudence and how affairs affect your personal situation, that you would prefer to focus your energies within the bounds of France and leave affairs in England to its new government. Such neutrality consists solely of denying King Charles entry to French territory, and all French arms, money, and troops, as he is a monarch entirely foreign to you. This letter is confidential that is why I send it to you by a trusted and devoted servant; it is intended to give Your Eminence forewarning of what measures I will take in certain events. Oliver Cromwell feels he can communicate better with an intelligence like that of Mazarini than with a queen who, though admirable for her firmness, is too susceptible to the privileges of royal birth and divine right. Farewell, My Lord. If I receive no response within two weeks, I will consider that my overtures have been rejected.*

OLIVER CROMWELL

"Sir Mordaunt," said the cardinal, raising his voice to arouse the dreamer, "my response to this letter from General Cromwell will be more satisfactory to him if no one else knows that I've made it. Wait for my reply, therefore, at Boulogne-sur-Mer, and promise me you'll leave for there by tomorrow morning."

"I shall, My Lord," replied Mordaunt, "but how many days would Your Eminence have me wait for your response?"

"If you haven't received it in ten days, you may depart." Mordaunt bowed. "That's not all, Sir," continued Mazarin. "Your personal story deeply moved me, and in addition, Sir Cromwell's letter names you an ambassador. So, tell me, I repeat, what can I do for you?"

Mordaunt thought for a moment, and, after some visible hesitation, had opened his mouth to speak, when Bernouin rushed in, leaned toward the cardinal's ear, and spoke softly. "My Lord," he whispered, "Queen Henriette, accompanied by an English gentleman, has just entered the Royal Palace."

Mazarin started in his chair, a movement that didn't escape the notice of the young man, and he suppressed the confidence he was about to share. "Sir," said the cardinal, "I hope you understand that I picked Boulogne because I assumed any city in France would suffice for you but if you prefer another, name it; however, you can see that, surrounded by the inquisitive whom I can escape only by discretion, I'd prefer no one know of your visit to Paris."

"I depart, then, Sir," said Mordaunt, turning toward the door through which he'd entered.

"No, not that way, Sir, please!" said the cardinal quickly. "Exit through this gallery that will take you to the vestibule. I wish no one to see you leave, as our interview must remain secret." Mordaunt followed Bernouin, who led him into an adjoining chamber, where an usher showed him the way out. Then Bernouin hurried back to his master to admit Queen Henriette, who was already crossing the window gallery outside.

## 211 Mazarin & Queen Henriette

The cardinal stood up and hurried to receive the Queen of England, joining her in the middle of the gallery that led to his study. He was all the more respectful of this queen who came without servants or jewellery because inside he was ashamed of his own avarice and lack of heart. As for the queen, supplicants learn to keep careful control of their expressions, and the daughter of Henry IV smiled as she went to meet a man she hated and despised. "Oh ho!" Mazarin said to himself. "What a pleasant smile! Is she coming to ask me for money?"

He gave a worried glance toward the door of his strong-room, and even turned the bezel of his magnificent diamond ring around to the inside of his palm. Unfortunately, this gem didn't have the power of Gyges's ring that when turned could render its wearer invisible. And Mazarin would have liked to be invisible at that moment because he guessed that Madam Henriette came to ask for something. When a queen he'd treated so poorly came with a smile on her lips instead of a threat, she wanted something. "Sir Cardinal," said the august visitor, "it occurred to me to talk first to the queen, my sister, about the affair that brings me to you but then I thought that politics is really the province of men."

"Madam," said Mazarin, "Your Majesty overwhelms me with this flattering distinction."

*He's being very gracious, thought the queen. Can he have guessed why I've come?*

They'd arrived in the cardinal's study, and once he'd seated the queen in his own armchair, he said, "Now give your orders to this most respectful of your servants."

"Alas, Sir," the queen replied, "I lost the habit of giving orders when I had to turn to prayer. I've come now to pray to you, and will be only too happy if you hear my prayers."

"I'm listening, Madam," said Mazarin.

"Sir Cardinal, it concerns the war that my husband wages against his rebellious subjects. You might not be aware that there is fighting in England," said the queen with a sad smile, "and that there will soon be a decisive battle."

"I had no idea, Madam," said the cardinal with a slight shrug. "Alas! Our own conflicts absorb all the time and energy of a poor minister as infirm and incapable as I am."

"Well, Sir Cardinal," said the queen, "I must inform you that my husband, Charles I, is about to make a final effort. In the event of his defeat" – Mazarin gave a start – "for we must prepare for anything, he wishes to retire to France to live here as a private individual. What do you say to this idea?"

The cardinal listened without a line on his face betraying his innermost thoughts and feelings; his expression was mild and pleasant, as usual, and when the queen had finished, he said in his softest voice, "Do you think, Madam, that France, agitated and unruly as it is now, is a safe harbour for a dethroned king? The crown already rests uneasily on the brow of King Louis XIV; how could he support a double burden?"

"The weight of a crown hasn't been so heavy as far as I'm concerned," interjected the queen with a sad smile, "and I ask no more for my husband than has been done for me. You see that we're very modest monarchs, Sir."

"Oh but you, Madam!" the cardinal said hastily, to forestall this subject before it could turn to reproaches. "You are another matter entirely, a daughter of Henry IV, of that great, of that sublime king..."

"Which doesn't prevent you from refusing hospitality to his son-in-law, does it, Sir? You should nonetheless recall that that great, that sublime king, when threatened much as my husband is now, asked for aid from England, and England granted it – although Queen Elizabeth wasn't his niece."

*"Peccato!"* said Mazarin, finding it hard to contradict such simple logic. "Your Majesty doesn't understand me; she misjudges my intentions, doubtless because I express myself poorly in French."

"Speak Italian then, Sir; Queen Marie de Médicis, our mother, taught us that language before the old cardinal, your predecessor, sent her off to die in exile. If that great that sublime King Henri of whom you spoke just now is watching us, he must be astonished at how you combine such profound admiration for him with such scant regard for his family."

Sweat began to bead Mazarin's forehead. "My admiration is, on the contrary, so great and so real, Madam," said Mazarin, declining the queen's offer to change language, "that if King Charles I – whom God protect from all misfortune! – were in France, I would offer him my house, my own home, though sadly that would be no safe haven. Someday the people will burn my house as they burned that of Marshal d'Ancre. Poor Concino Concini! All he ever thought of was the good of France."

"Yes, My Lord, just like you," said the queen ironically.

Mazarin pretended not to understand the double meaning behind this remark and continued to look sorry about the fate of Concino Concini. “So, then, My Lord le Cardinal,” said the queen impatiently, “what do have to tell me?”

“Oh, Madam,” cried Mazarin, as if deeply moved, “Madam, will Your Majesty permit me to give you some advice? Please understand that before I do anything so bold, I place myself entirely at Your Majesty’s feet to serve your desires.”

“Speak, Sir,” replied the queen. “The advice of a man as prudent as you must certainly be good.”

“Madam, believe me, the king must defend himself to the bitter end.”

“So he has, Sir, and in the coming final battle he’ll commit all his resources, though they’re less than those of his enemies, to show that he’s determined not to give up without a fight – but then what? What happens if he’s defeated?”

“Well, Madam, in that case, my advice, though I know it’s presumptuous to offer it, is that His Majesty shouldn’t leave his own realm. Absent kings are soon forgotten; if he comes to France, his cause’s lost.”

“But then,” said the queen, “if that’s your advice and you really support his best interests, send him some money and troops! I can do nothing more for him, I’ve sold everything down to my last diamond, I have nothing left, as you know better than anyone, Sir. Had I still any jewellery, I’d have bought firewood to warm my daughter and myself last winter.”

“Oh, Madam,” said Mazarin, “Your Majesty doesn’t know what she’s asking. From the moment that foreign aid enters a conflict to keep a king on his throne, it’s an admission that he no longer has the loyalty of his subjects.”

“In fact, Sir Cardinal,” said the queen, impatient with following his subtle mind through the maze of his words, “in fact, tell me yes or no: if the king stays in England, will you send him any help? If he comes to France, will you give him hospitality?”

“Madam,” said the cardinal, in a voice of utmost sincerity, “I’m going to show Your Majesty just how devoted I am, and how dedicated I am to resolving this heart-breaking affair. After that, I think Your Majesty will have no cause to doubt my eagerness to serve.”

The queen bit her lips and shifted impatiently in the armchair. At last she said, “Well, what are you going to do? Show me. Speak!”

“I shall go this instant to talk to the queen, and we shall take the matter up with parliament.”

“With whom you’re at odds, are you not? You’ll put Broussel in charge of it, perhaps. Enough, Sir Cardinal, enough. I see how things stand. Go indeed to parliament – for it’s only from parliament, that enemy to kings, that the daughter of the great, the sublime Henry IV, whom you so admire, received enough charity to avoid dying of cold and hunger last winter.”

And with these words, the queen arose in majestic indignation. The cardinal extended his clasped hands to her. “Ah, Madam, Madam, how you misunderstand me! *My God!*”

But Queen Henriette, turning her back on those hypocritical tears, crossed the study, opened the door herself, and, marching through the guards and retainers of His Eminence, and past the courtiers waiting their turns, went and took the hand of Lord Winter, who stood waiting unattended. Poor queen, already fallen, before whom all still bowed from etiquette but who had, in fact, only a single arm upon which she could lean. “That’s done,” said Mazarin, when he was alone. “It was an ugly scene, and I had to play a difficult role but still I managed to commit to nothing whatsoever. Hmm! That Cromwell is a cruel enemy to kings – I pity his ministers, if he has any. Bemouin!”

Bemouin came in. “Find out if that short-haired man in the black doublet, who was here before the queen, is still in the palace,” said Mazarin.

Bemouin went out. The cardinal spent the time waiting for his return in turning the bezel of his ring back out, polishing the diamond, admiring its clarity – and as a lingering tear in one eye was interfering with this, he shook his head to make it drop. Bemouin returned with Comminges, who was on guard duty. “My Lord,” said Comminges, “I was conducting that young man out as Your Eminence requested but as we passed the door to the window gallery he stopped and stared as if astonished at something beyond – probably that big Raphael painting. He stood spellbound for a moment, and then hurried down the stairs. I think I saw him mount a grey horse and ride out of the courtyard. Is My Lord on his way to visit the queen?”

“To what end?”

“Sir Guitaut, my uncle, just told me that Her Majesty has had news from the army.”

“Excellent. I’ll go.” At that moment Sir Villequier appeared, having been sent by the queen to find the cardinal. Mordaunt had behaved just as Comminges had reported. While crossing the hall across from the window gallery, he had seen Lord Winter where he was awaiting the outcome of the queen’s negotiations. The young man had stopped short, not in admiration of the Raphael but as if fascinated by the sight of some terrible object. His eyes had dilated, a shudder had run through his body, and he looked as if he wanted to burst through the glass wall that separated him from his prey. If Comminges had seen the young man’s face, hatred burning in his eyes as they fixated on Winter, he would have had no doubt but that the English lord was his mortal enemy. But Mordaunt stopped himself – pausing, no doubt, to think. Then, instead of following his first impulse that was to launch himself straight at Milord Winter, he went slowly down the stairs, head lowered. In the courtyard he got into the saddle, rode no farther than the corner of the Rue Richelieu, and there, eyes fixed on the gate, he waited for the English queen’s carriage to leave the palace. He didn’t have long to wait, as the queen spent no more than a quarter of an hour with Mazarin – but that quarter hour seemed like a century to he who waited. Finally, the heavy coach they termed a carriage at that time appeared, the gates groaned open, and out it came, with Winter, still mounted, riding once more at Her Majesty’s window. The horses went into a trot and made their way to the Louvre and through its gates. Before leaving the Carmelite convent, Queen Henriette had told her daughter Henrietta to wait for her at that palace, where they had lived so long, and which they’d only left because their poverty seemed harder to support while inside its still-gilded halls. Mordaunt followed the carriage, and when he saw it pass under the dark arches of the Louvre gates, he took a position in the shadow of the walls, sitting astride but immobile against the background of Jean Goujon’s mouldings, like a bas-relief of an equestrian statue. And there he waited as he had outside the Royal Palace.

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How those in Need Sometimes mistake Blind Luck for the Will of God

“Well, Madam?” Lord Winter asked, once the queen had sent away the servants.

“Well, it turned out just as I’d foreseen, Milord.”

“He refused?”

“Didn’t I say he would?”

“The cardinal refuses to receive the king? France refuses hospitality to a refugee prince? That’s never happened before, Madam!”

“I didn’t say France, Milord, I said the cardinal – and the cardinal is by no means French.”

“But the queen – have you seen her?”

“Useless,” said Madam Henriette, shaking her head sadly. “The queen will never say yes if the cardinal says no. Don’t you know the cardinal rules the Court, inside and out? Furthermore, as I told you, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d been forewarned by Cromwell – he was embarrassed while speaking to me but firm in his refusal. Plus, did you see how busy the Royal Palace was, all those people hurrying through its halls? Do you think there’s been some news, Milord?”

“It’s not news from England, Madam; I worked hard to make sure we arrived before we could be forestalled. I set out three days ago and passed by a miracle through the Puritan army. I rode post horses with my servant Tony, and the horses we ride now were bought here in Paris. Besides, before risking anything, I’m sure the king will await a response from Your Majesty.”

“You’ll tell him, Milord, that I can do nothing,” said the queen in despair. “I’ve suffered as badly as he has, or worse, obliged to eat the bread of exile and to beg hospitality from false friends who laugh at my tears. Now he must sacrifice himself and die like a king. Would that I could die by his side.”

“Madam, Madam!” cried Winter. “Your Majesty gives in to despair but we may still find some hope.”

“I’ve no more friends, Milord, no other friends in the world but you! Oh, *my God!*” cried Madam Henriette, raising her arms to heaven, “have you taken, then, all the generous hearts from the world?”

“I hope not, Madam,” Winter replied fervently. “I told you I still knew four men.”

“What do you think you can do with four men?”

“Four devoted men, four men willing to die for a cause, can do much, and believe me, Madam – the men I speak of have done a great deal in their time.”

“And these four men, where are they?”

“Ah, now that I don’t know. I’ve lost touch with them for almost twenty years, and yet every time the king was in danger, I’ve thought of them.”

“And these men were your friends?”

“One of them held my life in his hands and returned it to me; I don’t know if he’s still my friend but since that time at least I’ve always been his.”

“And these men are in France, Milord?”

“I think so.”

“Tell me their names – maybe I’ve heard of them and could help in your search.”

“One of them was called the Knight d’Artagnan.”

“Really! Unless I’m mistaken, your Knight d’Artagnan is a lieutenant of the musketeers, or so I’ve heard. But be careful, because I’m afraid he’s a cardinal’s man.”

“If true, that would be the final blow,” said Winter, “and I’d begin to believe that we’re truly cursed.”

“But the others,” said the queen, clinging to this final hope like a shipwrecked sailor to floating debris, “what of the others, Milord?”

“The second – I heard his name by chance, because before fighting a duel with us these four gentlemen told us their names – the second was called the Count of La Fère. As for the other two, the habit I had of calling them by their assumed names made me forget their real ones.”

“But it’s urgent that you find out,” said the queen, “if you think these worthy gentlemen might be able to aid the king.”

“They’re just the men for the task,” said Winter. “Think back, Madam – do you recall how Queen Anne of Austria was saved from the greatest threat any queen ever faced?”

“Yes, during her romance with Sir Buckingham – some affair involving her diamond studs.”

“That’s right, Madam – and these are the men who saved her. The sad and shameful truth is that if these gentlemen’s names aren’t known to you, it’s because the queen has forgotten them, when she ought to have made them Peers of the Realm.”

“Well, then, Milord, they must be found. But what can a mere four men do? Or rather three, for I warn you we mustn’t count upon Sir d’Artagnan.”

“At a minimum, it’s three valiant swords, four if you count mine. Four devoted men near the king to guard him from his enemies, to surround him in battle, to aid him with advice, and to escort him in his flight, that would be enough, if not to give him victory, then at least to save him if he’s defeated. Four men to bring him across the sea – and no matter what Mazarin says, once he’s ashore on the coast of France, your royal husband will find as many safe havens as a seabird on a storm-girt cliff.”

“Seek them, Milord, seek out these gentlemen, and if you find them, and if they agree to go with you to England, on the day we regain the throne I’ll give each one a duchy, and enough gold to pave the floors of Whitehall. This is the task I charge you with, Milord – find them!”

“I’ll seek them, Madam, and I’ll find them,” said Winter, “but time is running out. Has Your Majesty forgotten that the king is anxiously awaiting a reply?”

“Then we are lost!” cried the queen, in a despairing tone.

At that moment the door opened, and young Henrietta appeared. The queen, with that supreme effort that heroism provides to mothers, buried her grief in the depths of her heart, and made a sign to Baron Winter to change the subject. But her efforts, though bravely taken, didn’t escape the notice of the young princess. She stopped on the threshold, sighed, and said to the queen, “Why do you hide your tears from me, Mother?”

The queen smiled, and instead of replying to her, turned to Winter and said, “Hear that, Baron? I’ve gained one thing at least by being but half a queen – my children call me mother instead of madam.”

Then, turning to her daughter, she continued, “What do you want, Henrietta?”

“*Ma Mère*,” said the young princess, “a cavalier, who has just entered the Louvre, begs leave to pay his respects to Your Majesty. He comes from the army, he says, and has a letter to deliver to you from Marshal Grammont, I think he said.”

“Ah!” the queen said to Winter. “He’s one of my faithful. But do you notice, my dear Baron that we’re so poorly served here that my daughter has to act as usher?”

“Madam, have mercy on me,” said Winter. “You’re breaking my heart.”

“And who is this cavalier, Henrietta?” asked the queen.

“I saw him from the window, Madam; he’s a young man who looks barely sixteen years old and is called the Viscount of Bragelonne.”

The queen nodded and smiled, the young princess opened the door, and Raoul appeared on the threshold. He took three steps toward the queen and knelt down. "Madam," he said, "I bring to Your Majesty a letter from my friend, the Count of Guiche, who's given me the honour of doing you a service. This letter conveys his respect and contains important news."

At the name of the Count of Guiche, a flush rose to the cheeks of the young princess that the queen saw with disapproval. "But you told me the letter was from Marshal Grammont, Henrietta!" said the queen.

"I thought so, Madam..." the young girl stammered.

"That's my fault, Madam," said Raoul. "I did announce myself as coming from Marshal Grammont but as he was wounded in the arm, he couldn't write, so his son the Count of Guiche served as his secretary."

"So, there's been a battle?" said the queen, gesturing for Raoul to rise.

"Yes, Madam," said the young man, handing a letter to Winter, who'd advanced to receive it, and who passed it to the queen.

At this news of a battle, the young princess opened her mouth as if impelled to ask a question but then closed it without saying a word, as the roses gradually faded from her cheeks. The queen noted all this, and no doubt her maternal heart understood it, for she asked Raoul, "Has anything happened to the young Count of Guiche? For he's not only one of our faithful servants, as he told you, Sir, he's also a friend."

"No, Madam," Raoul replied. "On the contrary, he gained great glory that day, and had the honour of being embraced by Sir Prince on the battlefield."

The young princess clapped her hands together but then, ashamed of having allowed herself to be carried away to such an expression of joy, she turned away and leaned over a vase of roses, as if to sample their scent. "Let's see what the count tells us," said the queen.

"As I had the honour to say to Your Majesty, he was writing in his father's name."

"Yes, Sir." The queen unsealed the letter and read aloud:

*Madam and Majesty,*

*Not having the honour to write to you myself due to a wound suffered in my right hand, I write to you by way of my son, Sir Count of Guiche, who serves you as I do, to inform you that we have just won the Battle of Lens, and that this victory will bring power and prestige to Cardinal Mazarin and the queen, and influence in European affairs. I pray Your Majesty, if she will accept my advice, will take advantage of this occasion to seek favour for your august husband from the royal government. Sir Viscount of Bragelonne, who will have the honour of presenting this letter to you, is the friend of my son, whose life he almost certainly saved; he is a gentleman in whom Your Majesty may confide entirely, in case she has any verbal or written commands to send me.*

*With respect, signed in the name of ...*

*Marshall de GRAMMONT*

When the marshal mentioned the service Raoul had done his son, the viscount couldn't help turning to glance at the young princess, and saw in her eyes a look of infinite gratitude – so Raoul knew, beyond doubt, that the daughter of Charles I loved his friend. "The Battle of Lens is won!" the queen said. "Here they're happy, for here they win their battles. Yes, Marshal Grammont is right, this will improve their situation but I fear it will do nothing for ours, if it doesn't actually make it worse. Your news is timely, Sir," continued the queen. "I'm grateful to you for having brought it to us so diligently; without you, and this letter, I wouldn't have heard it before tomorrow, and might have been the last person in Paris to know."

"Madam," said Raoul, "the Louvre is only the second palace to receive this news; no one else knows it. I'd sworn to the Count of Guiche to deliver this letter to Your Majesty before even going to see my guardian."

"Is your guardian a Bragelonne as well?" asked Lord Winter. "I once knew a Bragelonne – is he still alive?"

"No, Sir, he's dead, and it's from him that my guardian, who was a close relative, I believe, has inherited the land whose name I now bear."

"And your guardian, Sir, what's his name?" asked the queen, who couldn't help taking an interest in this handsome young man.

"Sir Count of La Fère, Madam," replied the young man, bowing.

Winter started in surprise, and the queen looked at him, alight with joy. "The Count of La Fère!" she cried. "Isn't that the name you mentioned?"

As for Winter, he couldn't believe what he'd heard. "The Count of La Fère! Oh, Sir! Answer me, I implore you: is the Count of La Fère a noble I once knew, handsome and brave, who was a musketeer under Louis XIII, and must now be about forty-seven or forty-eight?"

"Yes, Sir, that's quite right."

"And who was serving under an assumed name?"

"Under the name of Athos. I recently heard his friend, Sir d'Artagnan, call him by that name."

"That's him, Madam, that's him. God be praised! And is he in Paris?" continued the baron, addressing Raoul. Then, returning to the queen, "Hope still – hope! Providence protects us, since it moves to help me find that brave gentleman in such a miraculous fashion. Where is he to be found, Sir, please tell me?"

"The Count of La Fère is staying in Rue Guénégaud, at the Grand Charlemagne Hôtel."

"Thank you, Sir. Ask this worthy friend to remain at home, and I'll come to see him shortly."

"Sir, I obey with pleasure, if Her Majesty will give me leave to go."

"Go, Sir Viscount of Bragelonne," said the queen, "go, and be assured of our affection."

Raoul bowed respectfully to the two Princesss, saluted Winter, and departed.

Winter and the queen continued to converse for a while in voices so low the young princess couldn't hear them – not that it mattered, as she was lost in her thoughts. Then, as Winter was about to depart, "Listen, Milord," said the queen, "I had preserved this diamond cross that comes from my mother, and this plaque of Saint Michael that came from my husband; together they're worth about fifty thousand livres. I had vowed to die of starvation before selling them but now that these two pieces might be useful to the king or his defenders, I must sacrifice everything to that hope. Take them, and if you need funds for your mission, sell them without hesitation. But if you can find a means of preserving them, know, Milord, that I'll regard you as having rendered the greatest service a gentleman can do for a queen, and that on the day of my prosperity he who can bring me this plaque and this cross will be blessed by me and my children."

"Madam," said Winter, "Your Majesty will be served with true devotion. I go now to put in a safe place these objects that I wouldn't have accepted in the days of our good fortune; but our property has been confiscated, our income is dried up, and we must succeed by making use of whatever we have. After that I'll go visit the Count of La Fère, and tomorrow Your Majesty will know where we stand."

The queen extended her hand to Lord Winter, who kissed it respectfully, and then indicating her daughter, said, "Milord, you were charged with delivering to this child something from her father."

Winter looked astonished; he wasn't sure what the queen was talking about. But young Henrietta stepped forward, smiling and blushing, and said "Tell my father that, king or fugitive, victor or vanquished, powerful or poor, he has in me the most loyal and affectionate of daughters."

And she presented her forehead to the gentleman. "I know that, Miss," replied Winter, brushing Henrietta's brow with his lips. Then he departed, going unescorted through those grand echoing chambers, now deserted and gloomy, wiping away those tears that, jaded though he was by fifty years of court life, he couldn't help shedding when faced with the sight of such deep and profound royal misery.

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The Uncle & the Nephew

Lord Winter's horse and lackey were waiting for him at the gate. Pensive, he rode toward his lodgings, looking back from time to time toward the dark and silent façade of the Louvre. It was then that he saw a cavalier detach himself, so to speak, from the wall and follow him at a distance. He remembered having seen a similar shadow behind him on the way from the Royal Palace. Lord Winter's lackey, who followed him a few paces behind, had also been watching this cavalier anxiously. "Tony," said the gentleman, beckoning his valet to approach.

"I'm here, Milord."

The valet rode up beside his master. "Have you noticed that man who's following us?"

"Yes, Milord."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. I only know he followed Milord from the Royal Palace, waited at the Louvre for you to come out, and then left when we left."

"Some spy of the cardinal's," said Winter. "Pretend not to notice his surveillance." And spurring on, he plunged into the maze of streets that led to his hôtel in the Marais quarter. Long ago he'd lodged in the Place Royale, and now Lord Winter had returned to his former neighbourhood. The unknown follower put his horse into a gallop. Winter reached his inn and went up to his rooms, where he hoped to see the spy from his windows but as he put his hat and gloves on a table he glanced in a mirror and saw a figure appear in the doorway behind him. He turned, and Mordaunt stood before him. Winter turned pale and froze. As for Mordaunt, he stood in the doorway, cold, threatening, like the statue of Don Juan's Commander. There was a moment of icy silence between the two men. Then Winter said, "Sir, I thought I'd already made it clear that your harassment is tiresome. Withdraw, or I'll have you driven off as I did in London. I'm not your uncle, and I do not know you."

"Dear Uncle," replied Mordaunt in his hoarse, mocking voice, "you're quite mistaken – you won't drive me away as you did in London. You don't dare. As for denying that I'm your nephew, think again, as I've learned many things I didn't know a year ago."

"What does it matter to me what you've learned?" said Winter.

"Oh, I'm quite sure it will matter a great deal, Uncle, as I believe you'll agree," Mordaunt added, with a smile that sent a shiver down Winter's spine. "When I first presented myself at your house in London, it was to ask what had befallen me. The second time I introduced myself, it was to ask what had tainted my name. This time I stand before you to ask a question far more terrible than those before, to ask you, as God said to the first murderer, 'Cain, where is thy brother Abel?' Milord, where is your sister, that sister who was my mother?"

Winter recoiled from the fire in those ardent eyes. "Your mother?" he said.

"Yes, Milord – my mother," replied the young man, nodding savagely.

Though battered by the memories such fierce hatred stirred up, Winter made an effort to get hold of himself, and snapped, "What's become of her? Ask for her in Hell, wretch, and maybe Hell will answer you."

Mordaunt advanced into the room until he was face-to-face with Lord Winter and crossed his arms. "I already asked the executioner of Bethune," the young man said in a hollow voice, his face livid with grief and anger, "and the executioner of Bethune told me."

Winter fell back on a chair as if struck by a thunderbolt and tried in vain to reply. "Oh, yes," continued the young man. "At his words all was explained, for they were the key that unlocked the abyss. My mother inherited from her husband, and then you assassinated my mother! My name would have given me my paternity, so you denied my name – and when you denied my name, you robbed me of my fortune. I no longer wonder why you refused to acknowledge me. When one is a thief, it's unseemly to call the one you robbed 'nephew' – when one is a murderer, it's inconvenient to recognise the one you've orphaned!"

These words produced an effect contrary to what Mordaunt had expected, as they only served to remind Winter what a monster Milady had been. He rose, calm and grave, and his severe look disconcerted the furious young man. "Do you want to know the whole truth of this horrible secret, Sir?" Winter said. "Well, then, let me tell you about the woman of whom you come today to call me to account. This woman had in all likelihood poisoned my brother, and in order to inherit from me, planned to assassinate me in my turn; of that I have proof. Now what do you have to say?"

"I say she was my mother!"

"She took a man formerly just, good, and pure and seduced him into stabbing the Duke of Buckingham to death. Of that crime I have proof. Now what do you say?"

"She was my mother!"

"Returned to France, at the Augustine convent in Bethune, she poisoned a young woman just because she loved one of her enemies. Will that crime persuade you of the justice of her punishment? For of that crime, I have proof!"

"She was my mother!" the young man cried even louder than before.

"At last, filthy with murder and debauchery, abhorrent to all, still as menacing as a bloodthirsty panther, she was captured by five men she'd driven to despair, though they'd never caused her the slightest harm. She was found and judged for her appalling crimes. This executioner with whom you spoke, whom you said told you all – if he'd really told you everything, he must have told you that he trembled with joy when he avenged the shame and suicide of his debauched brother. Perverted daughter, adulterous wife, unnatural sister, poisoner, assassin, an abomination to all who knew her, to every nation that received her – that's what that woman was."



An involuntary sob tore from Mordaunt's throat and brought the blood mounting back to his pallid face. He clenched his fists, his face streamed with sweat, his hair bristling on his head like Hamlet's, and trembling with fury, he cried, "Silence! Silence! She was my mother! These quarrels, these vices, these crimes – I don't know them! What I do know is that I had a mother, and that five men, conspiring against one woman, killed her secretly, silently, vindictively, like cowards! What I know is that you were one of them, Sir, and that it was you, Uncle, who said, loudest and most fervently, that she must die! So now I warn you: listen to these words and engrave them on your memory so you'll never forget them – this murder that drives me mad, this murder that has taken my name, this murder that has impoverished me, this murder is what's made me corrupt, wicked, and implacable! I demand an accounting for it, first of all from you, and then, when I find them, from your accomplices." Hatred in his eyes, froth rimming his mouth, his fist outstretched, Mordaunt took a terrible and menacing step toward Winter. But the latter put his hand on his sword, and said, with the smile of a man who has gammed with death for thirty years, "Would you try to assassinate me, Sir? Then I'd have to acknowledge you as my nephew, for you'd reveal yourself as your mother's son."

"No," replied Mordaunt, exerting an iron will and forcing all the muscles of his face and body back into their usual slackened state. "No, I won't kill you – at least not now. For I need you to lead me to the others. But when I find them, sir, you may then tremble ... for I'll treat you as I did the executioner of Bethune. Him I stabbed to the heart without pity or mercy and he's the least guilty of all of you." At these words, the young man departed, descending the stairs so quietly he was unnoticed, even by Tony, waiting on the landing for a call from his master. But Winter didn't call; shaken, near fainting, he stood frozen, listening hard until he heard hoof beats as a horse rode away. Then he collapsed in a chair, whispering, "I'm thankful, dear God, that he knows only my name."

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Paternity

While this terrible scene was playing out at Lord Winter's, Athos, seated by the window of his chamber, his elbow resting on a table and his head resting on his hand, listened rapt as Raoul recounted the events of his journey and the details of the battle. The gentleman's handsome and noble figure almost glowed with joy at the recital of the youth's first adventures; he drank in the sound of that youthful voice, so fresh and pure, as if listening to harmonious music. He forgot everything dark in the past, and everything cloudy in the future, as if the return of the beloved child had turned even fears into hopes. Athos was happy, as happy as he'd ever been. "And you saw and took part in this great battle, Bragelonne?" said the former musketeer.

"Yes, Sir."

"And it was fierce, you say?"

"Sir Prince personally led the charge eleven times."

"He is a great man of war, Bragelonne."

"He's a hero, Sir – I didn't lose sight of him for a second. Oh, it's a grand thing, Sir, to bear such a name as Condé!"

"Brilliant, and yet calm, is he not?"

"Brilliant as if at a party and calm as if on parade. When we approached the enemy, it was on the double; we were forbidden to fire first, and marched at the Spaniards, who awaited us on a crest, musketoon at the ready. At a range of thirty paces, the prince turned to our soldiers. 'Boys,' he said, 'you're about to withstand a furious volley; but afterward, believe me, they'll pay the price for it.' There was such a hush that the soldiers on both sides heard every word. Then raising his sword, he cried, 'Sound the trumpets.'"

"Well, well! ... When the time comes, you'll do the same thing, won't you, Raoul?"

"Absolutely, Sir, for I found it both grand and moving. At a range of twenty paces we saw their muskets glint as they lowered them on us, for the sun gleamed on the barrels. 'At a walk, *my boys*,' said the prince, 'now's the time.'"

"Were you scared, Raoul?" asked the count.

"Yes, Sir," the young man said naively, "I felt a chill grasp my heart, and as the word 'Fire!' echoed down the enemy ranks, I closed my eyes and thought of you."

"Did you indeed, Raoul?" said Athos, taking his hand.

"Yes, Sir. At that moment there was such an explosion you would have said that Hell had opened its gates, and those who weren't killed felt the heat of the flames. I opened my eyes, astounded at not being dead, or at least wounded; a third of the squadron was lying on the ground, bloody and mutilated. At that moment I met the prince's eye and thought of nothing except that he was looking at me. I drove in both spurs and found myself amidst the ranks of our enemies."

"And the prince was pleased with you?"

"He told me so at least, Sir, when he asked me to ride to Paris with Sir Châtillon, sent to bring the queen the news along with our captured banners. 'Go,' said the prince. 'The enemy won't regroup for a fortnight. Until then I don't need you. Go and embrace those you love and who love you, and tell my sister de Longueville that I thank her for the gift she gave me in sending you.' And so, I came, Sir," added Raoul, looking at the count with a loving smile, "for I thought you'd be glad to see me again."

Athos drew the young man to him and kissed him on the forehead as he would a young girl. "And so," he said, "you are launched, Raoul. You have dukes as friends, a Marshal of France for a godfather, a Prince of the Blood as your captain, and in one day you've been received by two queens. Not bad for a novice."

"Oh, Sir!" said Raoul suddenly. "You've reminded me of something I forgot to say, I was so eager to recount my adventures: in the Queen of England's chamber was a gentleman who, when I mentioned your name, gave a cry of surprise and joy. He said he was a friend of yours, asked me your address, and said he's coming to see you."

"What was his name?"

"I didn't dare to ask him, Sir; but, though he spoke quite well, based on his accent I think he's English."

"Ah!" said Athos. He bent his head as if searching his memory but when he looked up, the memory was before him as a man was standing in the half-open doorway and looking at him fondly. "Lord Winter!" cried the count.

"Athos, my friend!"

The two gentlemen embraced for a long moment. Then Athos, taking him by the hands, looked at him and said, "What's the matter, Milord? You seem as sad as I am happy."

"Yes, dear friend, it's true – and moreover, the sight of you redoubles my fears."

And Winter looked around as if seeking something. Raoul understood that what he wanted was privacy and left the two old friends without hesitation. "Now that we're alone," said Athos, "let's speak of you."

"While we're alone, we must speak of both of us," replied Lord Winter. "*He's* here."

"Who?"

"The son of Milady."

Athos, struck again by this name that seemed to pursue him like a fatal echo, hesitated a moment, frowned slightly, and then calmly said, "I know."

"You know?"

"Yes. Grimaud ran into him between Bethune and Arras, and returned at the gallop to warn me of his coming."

"Grimaud recognised him then?"

"No but he stood at the deathbed of a man who did."

"The executioner of Bethune!" cried Winter.

"How do you know that?" said Athos, astonished.

"From the son – I just saw him," Winter replied, "and he told me everything. Ah, my friend, what a terrible plight! We should have buried the child with the mother!"

Athos, like all noble natures, didn't inflict his painful feelings on others; instead he swallowed them, and tried to replace them by emanating hope and encouragement. It was as if he transformed his personal griefs into shared consolation. "What are you afraid of?" he said, understanding the need to address that instinctive terror he had also felt at first. "Is this young man a trained assassin who murders in cold blood? He slew the executioner of Bethune in a mad rage but now his fury is sated."

Winter smiled sadly, shook his head, and said, "Don't you know whose blood he shares?"

"Bah!" said Athos, trying to smile. "Such ferocity would be diluted in younger generations. Besides, friend, Providence has warned us, so we're on our guard. All we can do is wait, so let's wait. But as I said before, let's talk about you. What brings you to Paris?"

"Some important matters I'll eventually get to. First, what's this I hear from Her Majesty the Queen of England that d'Artagnan is one of Mazarin's men? Pardon my bluntness, my friend – I have nothing against the cardinal, and I trust your judgement completely but are you by any chance also with his party?"

"Sir d'Artagnan is in the service," said Athos, "and as a soldier, he obeys the constituted authority. D'Artagnan isn't wealthy and needs his lieutenant's salary. Millionaires like you, Milord, are rare in France."

"Alas!" said Winter. "I'm now as poor as or even poorer than he is. But let's return to you."

"So, you want to know if I'm with Mazarin? Well, pardon my bluntness, Milord but no – a thousand times no."

Winter rose and pressed Athos in his arms. "Thank you, Count," he said, "thanks for this wonderful news. I rejoice and am rejuvenated! You're not with Mazarin – what great good luck! Of course, you couldn't possibly be one of his minions. But, pardon my asking, are you at liberty?"

"What do you mean, at liberty?"

"I'm asking if you're married."

"Oh, as to that – no," said Athos, smiling.

"I wondered: that young man, so handsome, so elegant, so gracious..."

"He's a child whom I raised, and who doesn't know his father."

"Ah, very good. You're still the same, Athos, grand and generous."

"Come, Milord, why do you ask?"

"You're still in touch with your friends Gentlemen Porthos and Aramis?"

"And d'Artagnan as well, Milord. We are four friends who are as devoted to each other as always – but when it comes to serving the cardinal or opposing him, as Mazarin's men or Frondeurs, we are in two camps."

"Sir Aramis sides with d'Artagnan?" asked Lord Winter.

"No," said Athos, "Sir Aramis does me the honour to share my convictions."

"Can you put me in touch with your charming and witty friend?"

"Indeed, whenever you like."

"Has he changed?"

"He's become an abbot, that's all."

"Now that worries me – for surely that's made him give up on adventures."

"On the contrary," said Athos with a smile, "he was never more of a musketeer than he is since becoming an abbot – you'll find him a veritable Galaor. Do you want me to send Raoul for him?"

"Thank you, Count but he might not be instantly available. But if you think you can answer for him..."

"As much as for myself."

"Then would you engage to bring him at ten o'clock tomorrow morning to the Louvre drawbridge?"

"Oh ho!" said Athos, smiling. "Do you have a duel arranged?"

"Yes, Count, a fine duel, a duel of which you'll approve, I hope."

"Where shall we go, Milord?"

"To see Her Majesty the Queen of England, who has charged me with bringing you to her."

"Her Majesty knows of me, then?"

"No but I know you."

"A conundrum!" said Athos. "But I agree nevertheless, and you have my word on it – I don't need to know more. Will you do me the honour of dining with me, Milord?"

"Thank you, Count," Winter said, "but that young man's visit, I must confess, has robbed me of my appetite, and will probably rob me of my sleep. Why did he come to Paris? It wasn't to track me down, because he didn't know I was here. That young man terrifies me, Count; he's a future of blood ahead of him."

"What has he been doing in England?"

"He's one of the most ardent followers of Oliver Cromwell."

"What brought him to that cause? His mother and father were Catholics, I believe."

"The hatred he bears for the king."

"He opposes the king?"

"Yes, the king declared him a bastard, deprived him of his property, and forbade him to use the name of Winter."

"What name does he go by now?"

"Mordaunt."

"A Puritan, disguised as a monk, travelling alone on the roads of France."

"A monk, you say?"

"Yes, didn't you know?"

"I know only what he told me."

"It's true, and by that imposture – may God pardon me if I blaspheme – he was able to hear the confession of the executioner of Bethune."

"Then I think I understand at last. He's an envoy sent by Cromwell."

"To whom?"

"To Mazarin. And the queen had guessed rightly: we were forestalled. Everything is clear to me now. Goodbye, Count, until tomorrow."

"But the night is pitch black," said Athos, seeing Lord Winter anxious and trying to hide it. "Have you any lackeys with you?"

"I have Tony – a good lad but green."

"Whoa! Olivain, Grimaud, Blaisois – get your musketoon and go with Sir Viscount."

Blaisois was a big fellow, half servant, half peasant, whom we glimpsed at the Château de Bragelonne announcing that dinner was served, and whom Athos had baptised with the name of his province. Hearing these orders, Raoul came in. "Viscount," said Athos, "you will escort milord to his inn, and not allow anyone else to approach him."

"Really, Count," Winter said, "what do you take me for?"

"For a stranger who doesn't know his way around Paris," said Athos, "so let the viscount lead the way."

Winter shook his hand. "Grimaud," said Athos, "place yourself in the vanguard of the troop, and watch out for the monk."

Grimaud started and then nodded, caressing the stock of his musketoon with eloquent silence. "Until tomorrow, Count," said Winter.

"Yes, Milord."

The little troop made its way toward Rue Saint-Louis, Olivain trembling like Sosia at every shadow, Blaisois confident because he was unaware of what risks they were running, and Tony looking left and right without saying a word, since he didn't speak French. Winter and Raoul marched side by side and spoke together. Grimaud, at Athos's orders, preceded the band with a torch in one hand and his musketoon in the other, leading the way to Winter's inn where he knocked on the door with his fist. When they came to open it, he bowed to the lord without a word. They followed the same routine for the return. Grimaud's piercing gaze saw nothing suspicious until he spotted a strange shadow at the corner of the quay and Rue Guénégaud. It seemed to Grimaud that he'd seen this shadow before, and he darted toward it but before he could reach it the shadow disappeared into a dark alley where Grimaud didn't think it would be prudent to pursue. Athos was informed of the expedition's success, and as it was ten in the evening, everyone retired to their rooms. The next morning, upon opening his eyes, the count found Raoul waiting at his bedside. The young man was fully dressed and was reading a new book by Sir Chapelain. "Up already, Raoul?" said the count.

"Yes, Sir," replied the young man, after a slight hesitation. "I slept poorly."

"You slept poorly – you, Raoul? Was something bothering you?" asked Athos.

"Sir, you'll say I'm too eager to leave you again when I've only just arrived but..."

"So, you had only two days' leave, Raoul?"

"On the contrary, Sir, I had ten; I wasn't planning to go back to camp yet."

Athos smiled. "To where, then, if it's not a secret, Viscount? Having fought your first battle, you're almost a man, and have earned the right to go where you like without telling me about it."

"Never, Sir," said Raoul. "So long as I have you as my guardian, I wouldn't think of it. I was just thinking I'd pass a day or two at Blois. Wait, are you laughing at me?"

"No, not at all," said Athos, suppressing a sigh. "No, I'm not laughing at you, Viscount. If you want to visit Blois, that's entirely natural."

"Then, you'll let me go?" Raoul said happily.

"Certainly, Raoul."

"And in your heart, Sir, you have no qualms?"

"Not at all. Why should I be concerned by what pleases you?"

"Oh, Sir, how good you are," cried the young man, who went to embrace Athos, then stopped out of respect. But Athos opened his arms to him.

"Then I can leave right away?"

"Whenever you like, Raoul."

Raoul took three steps toward the door, then stopped and said, "Sir, there is one thing: it was thanks to the Duchess de Chevreuse, who was so good to me, that I owe my introduction to Sir Prince."

"And you owe her some gratitude – is that it, Raoul?"

"So, it seems to me, Sir ... but it's up to you to decide."

"Send to the Hôtel de Luynes, Raoul, and ask if the duchess can receive you. I'm very pleased that you remember your manners. Take Grimaud and Olivain with you."

"Both of them, Sir?" asked Raoul, astonished.

Athos nodded, so Raoul bowed and went out. Watching him close the door and hearing him call out in a joyful voice to Grimaud and Olivain, Athos sighed. *All too soon he leaves me*, he thought, shaking his head but *it's only to be expected, for it's Nature's law to look forward. He certainly loves that child in Blois; but must he love me less for loving others?* Athos admitted to himself that he hadn't expected such a speedy departure but Raoul was so happy about it, that swept away any concerns. By nine o'clock everything was prepared for the departure. As Athos watched Raoul mount his horse, a footman arrived for him from Madam de Chevreuse. He'd been sent to tell the Count of La Fère that she'd heard of the return of his young protégé, as well as of his conduct at the battle, and that she'd be very glad to congratulate him in person. "Tell Madam Duchess," replied Athos, "that the Viscount of Bragelonne is mounted and on his way to the Hôtel de Luynes." Then, after giving Grimaud some instructions, Athos made a sign to Raoul that he could depart. *It occurs to me*, Athos thought, remembering his own appointment, *that maybe it's best for Raoul to be away from Paris at just this moment.*

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The Queen asks for Aid Once More

In the morning, Athos had sent a message to Aramis by way of Blaisois, his only remaining servant. Blaisois found Bazin donning his beadle's robe; it was his day of service at Notre Dame. Athos had ordered Blaisois to try to speak to Aramis personally. Blaisois, a brawny but simple lad, who knew only what he'd been told, had asked for the Abbot d'Herblay, and despite Bazin's telling him he wasn't at home, had insisted so persistently that Bazin had lost his temper. Blaisois, seeing Bazin dressed as a man of the Church, wasn't bothered by his anger and tried to go around him, assuming the man he was dealing with possessed the virtues of the cloth that is, patience and Christian charity. But Bazin, still the valet of a musketeer when the blood rose to his round face, grabbed a broomstick and struck at Blaisois, saying, "You've insulted the Church, you lout – you've insulted the Church!"

At this unaccustomed commotion, Aramis finally appeared, cautiously opening the door of his bedchamber. Bazin respectfully grounded one end of his stick, as he'd seen the Swiss Guards do at Notre Dame, while Blaisois, with a glare at the rotund Cerberus, drew his letter from his lapel and presented it to Aramis. "From the Count of La Fère?" said Aramis. "Very good." He took it and went back into his room without even asking the reason for all the noise. Blaisois returned sadly to the Grand Charlemagne Inn, where Athos asked him for a report on his mission. Blaisois told his story. "Idiot!" said Athos, laughing. "Didn't you tell Bazin that you'd come from me?"

"No, Sir."

"And what did Bazin say when he learned you were mine?"

"Ah, Sir, he made all kinds of apologies and forced me to drink two glasses of very good Muscat with him in which we dipped three or four excellent biscuits. But he's still a brutal devil. A beadle, acting that way!"

*Well*, thought Athos, *since Aramis's received my letter, then unless he's forestalled, he'll be there.* At ten o'clock, Athos, with his usual punctuality, stood on the bridge of the Louvre. There he met Lord Winter, who arrived at the same time. They waited about ten minutes until Winter began to worry that Aramis wasn't coming. "Patience," said Athos, who was looking toward the Rue du Bac. "I see an abbot clouting a man and bowing to a woman: that must be Aramis."

It was him, in fact. A lad chasing birds had splashed him as he passed, and with a blow of his fist Aramis had sent him reeling. Then he met one of his congregation, and as she was young and pretty, Aramis had bowed to her with a most gracious smile. A moment later he arrived in front of the Louvre. At his reunion with Lord Winter, there were several hearty embraces, as one might imagine.

"Where are we going?" Aramis asked. "Is it a fight? If so, *damn it*, I'll have to run back to my house for my sword."

"No," Winter said, "we're paying a visit to Her Majesty the Queen of England."

"Ah, very good," said Aramis, and added in an undertone to Athos, "and what's the purpose of this visit?"

"My faith, I have no idea. Some evidence needed from us, perhaps?"

"I hope it's not about that cursed affair of the son," said Aramis. "If it is, I'm not eager to be reproached about it. I give reprimands to others, and don't like receiving them myself."

"If that were the case," said Athos, "we wouldn't be conducted to Her Majesty by Lord de Winter as he was one of us, and shares the blame."

"Yes, quite so. Let's go then."

Upon entering the Louvre, Lord Winter went in first. There was just a single usher at the door, and in the cold light of day Athos, Aramis, and the Englishman couldn't avoid seeing the awful destitution of the lodging a miserly charity afforded the unlucky queen. The grand halls were stripped of furniture; the cracked and faded walls were enlivened only by bits of gold moulding that hadn't fallen yet; windows that no longer shut properly, were missing panes of glass; and there were no carpets, no guards, and no servants. This sad dilapidation hit Athos hard, and he silently pointed out the worst of it to his companion, nudging him with his elbow and indicating with his eyes. "Mazarin lives a good deal more grandly than this," said Aramis.

"Mazarin is nearly a king," said Athos, "and Madam Henriette is almost no longer a queen."

"If you'd only made the effort to be witty, Athos," said Aramis, "I believe you'd have outdone even Sir Voiture."

Athos smiled. It seemed the queen was waiting impatiently, for at the first movement she heard from the hall outside her chamber, she herself came to the doorway to receive the witnesses of her misfortune. "Come in and be welcome, Gentlemen," she said.

The gentlemen entered, and at first they stood but at a gesture from the queen, who invited them to be seated, Athos set the example of obedience. He was grave and calm but Aramis was angry; this insult to distressed royalty infuriated him, and he glared at the signs of misery around him. "You've noticed my luxurious lodgings?" Queen Henriette said with a sad look around the room.

"Madam," said Aramis, "I beg Your Majesty's pardon but I can't contain my indignation at seeing how the Court of France treats the daughter of Henry IV."

"Sir is not a cavalier?" asked the queen of Lord Winter.

"Sir is the Abbot d'Herblay," he replied.

Aramis flushed. "Madam," he said, "I am an abbot, it's true but it's not my preference, as I've never had a vocation for the cloth. My cassock is held on by a single button, and I'm always on the verge of doffing it and becoming a musketeer once more. This morning, unaware that I was to have the honour of addressing Your Majesty, I donned my clerical outfit but I'm nevertheless a man Your Majesty will find utterly devoted to her service, should she wish to command me."

"Sir Knight d'Herblay," added Winter, "was one of those valiant musketeers of His Majesty King Louis XIII of whom I've spoken to Your Majesty." Then, indicating Athos, he continued, "As for Sir here, he's the noble Count of La Fère whose reputation is so well known to Madam."

"Gentlemen," said the queen, "just a few years ago I was surrounded by wealth, soldiers, and loyal gentlemen who would obey my command at a gesture. Today as you look around me you might be surprised by my situation, for now, to accomplish a plan that will save my life, I have only Lord Winter, a friend of twenty years, and you, Gentlemen, whom I've just met for the first time, and know only as my compatriots."

"That will be enough, Madam," said Athos, bowing deeply, "if the lives of three men can redeem yours."

"Thank you, Gentlemen. Now hear me," she continued, "I'm not only the most wretched of queens but the unhappiest of mothers and the most desperate of wives. Two of my children, the Duke of York and Princess Elizabeth, are far from me, exposed to the attacks from our enemies and ambitious opportunists; my husband the king is trapped in England, enduring a life so painful that death might be better. Here, Gentlemen, is the letter he sent me by Lord Winter. Read it."

Athos and Aramis tried to decline but, "Read it," said the queen.

Athos read aloud from the letter, the contents of which we know, in which King Charles asked to obtain refuge in France. "Well?" asked Athos, after he'd finished reading.

"Well!" said the queen. "Mazarin has refused."

The two friends exchanged smiles tinged with contempt. "And now, Madam, what is to be done?" asked Athos.

"Then you can have compassion for so much misfortune?" the queen said, moved.

"I have had the honour to ask Your Majesty what Sir d'Herblay and I can do in her service; we are ready."

"Ah, Sir, you truly have a noble heart!" the queen burst out, her voice choked with gratitude, while Lord Winter gave her a look that seemed to say, *Didn't I tell you so?*

"And you, Sir?" the queen asked Aramis.

"Wherever the count goes," he replied, "I follow without question, Madam, even unto death – but when it comes to the service of Your Majesty," he added, with a look as ardent as in his youth, "I go before even Sir Count."

"Well, Gentlemen!" said the queen. "If that is so, and you're willing to devote yourself to the service of a poor princess whom the rest of the world abandons, here is what you can do for me. The king is all alone, except for a few remaining gentlemen whom he expects to lose any day, and is among the Scots, whom he mistrusts, though he's Scottish himself. Since Lord Winter left him, I scarcely dare breathe. Well, Gentlemen, though I'm in no position to ask, please: go to England, join the king, be his friends and his guards, march by his side in battle, and stand next to him in his house, where there are dangers even greater than the risks of war; and in exchange for this sacrifice I promise, not to reward you – for I think you would find that insulting – but to love you like a sister, and to regard you above all others but my husband and my children, so swear I before God!"

And the queen slowly and solemnly raised her eyes toward heaven. "Madam," said Athos, "when shall we depart?"

"You agree, then?" said the queen with joy.

"Yes, Madam, though Your Majesty goes too far, it seems to me, in offering a friendship that is beyond our merits. We serve God, Madam, by serving such an unhappy prince and virtuous queen. We are yours, body and soul."

"Oh, Gentlemen," said the queen, moved to tears, "this is the first moment of hope and joy I've felt in five years. Yes, you serve God, and as I'm too weak to recompense your efforts, it's from him your reward will come, from him who reads in my heart all the gratitude I feel for you and yours. Save my husband; save the king; and though you may never receive what you deserve for it here on Earth, at least I can hope to live long enough to thank you in person. Until then, I wait. Is there anything I can do for you? For now that you're my friends, and involved in my affairs, I should do whatever I can."

"I have nothing to ask of Her Majesty but her prayers," said Athos.

"And I," said Aramis, "am alone in the world, and have no one to serve but Your Majesty."

The queen offered them her hand that they kissed, and then whispered to Winter, "If you're short of money, Milord, don't hesitate for a moment to break up that jewellery I gave you, and sell some of those diamonds to a moneylender – they ought to be worth fifty or sixty thousand livres. Sell them if necessary but make sure these gentlemen are treated as they should be, in other words, like kings."

The queen had two letters ready, one she'd written herself, and one written by her daughter Princess Henrietta. Both were addressed to King Charles. She gave one to Athos and one to Aramis, so that if they became separated, each would still have an introduction to the king; then they withdrew. At the base of the stairs, Winter paused. "Let's each of us go to our own lodgings, Gentlemen, so as not to arouse suspicion," he said, "and then meet tonight at nine at the Saint-Denis gate. We'll ride on my horses as far as they'll take us, and thereafter travel by post-horse. Once again, I thank you, my dear friends, both in my name and in the name of the queen."

The three gentlemen shook hands, then Baron Winter went down Rue Saint-Honoré, leaving Athos and Aramis, who remained together. "Well!" said Aramis, once they were alone. "What do you think of this affair, my dear Count?"

"It's bad," replied Athos, "very bad."

"But you took to it with such enthusiasm!"

"As I will always come to the defence of such an important principle, my dear d'Herblay. Kings aren't great without their nobility, and the noblesse is only as great as its kings. In supporting the monarchies, we support ourselves."

"We're going to get murdered over there," said Aramis. "I hate the English – they're coarse, like all folk who drink beer."

"Would it be better to stay here and serve a sentence in the Bastille or the dungeon of Vincennes, since we helped Sir Beaufort to escape?" said Athos. "*My faith*, Aramis, believe me, there's nothing to regret about this. We stay out of prison and get to be heroes – it's an easy choice."

"True enough, *my friend*. But at the beginning of every affair, we face the same question, vulgar though it may be: do you have any money?"

"Around a hundred pistoles that my tenants had sent me before leaving Bragelonne but I must leave fifty for Raoul, as a young noble must live with dignity. That leaves about fifty for me. And you?"

"If I go home and turn out all my pockets and search in all my drawers, I'm sure I can turn up ten *Louis d'or*. Fortunately, Lord de Winter is rich."

"Lord de Winter is ruined, for the moment, because Cromwell has confiscated his revenue."

"This is where having Baron Porthos with us would be handy," said Aramis.

"I also regret not having d'Artagnan," said Athos.

"What a bulging purse!"

"What a proud sword!"

"Let's recruit them."

"This secret isn't ours to share, Aramis. I don't think we should take anyone into our confidence. Besides, recruiting our friends would seem like we doubted ourselves. Let's regret their absence but privately, and say nothing."

"You're right. What are you doing for the rest of the day? I must postpone a couple of matters."

"Are they matters that *can* be postponed?"

"*Dame!* They have to be."

"What are these matters?"

"First, I owe a sword-thrust to the coadjutor, whom I saw last night at Madam de Rambouillet's, where he made some remarks about me in an offensive tone."

"What? A duel between priests! A fight between allies!"

"What would you have, *my dear*? He's a swordsman, and so am I; he's a rabble-rouser, as I am; his cassock weighs on him, as mine does on me; I sometimes wonder which of us is Aramis and which the coadjutor, we're so alike. This doppelganger business vexes me and makes me feel like a shadow. Besides, he's a bungler who will ruin our faction. I'm convinced that if I hit him hard enough, as I did with that lad who splashed me this morning, it would change the face of affairs."

"And I, my dear Aramis," Athos replied calmly, "think it would just change the face of Sir Retz. Besides, it's best to leave things as they stand; he belongs to the Fronde as you now do to the Queen of England. Now, if the second matter you must postpone is no more important than the first..."

"Oh, it's much more important."

"Then get it over with quickly."

"Unfortunately, it's not something I can do whenever I please; it must be done at night, late at night."

"I see," said Athos, smiling. "At midnight?"

"Thereabouts."

"Well, my friend, these affairs must be postponed, all the more because you'll return with such a good excuse for having postponed them."

"Yes – if I return."

"If you don't return, what does it matter? Be reasonable. Come, Aramis, you're no longer twenty years old."

"To my great regret, Mordieu! Ah, if only I were!"

"Indeed, I think you'd involve yourself in some grand follies!" said Athos. "But we must part; I have one or two visits to make myself and a letter to write. Come to my place at eight o'clock – unless you'd rather dine with me first at seven."

"All right," said Aramis. "Though I have to make about twenty visits and write about that many letters." They took their leave of each other. Athos went to visit Madam de Vendome, had a word with Madam de Chevreuse, and wrote the following letter to d'Artagnan:

*Old friend, I'm going off with Aramis on a matter of importance. I'd prefer to bid you farewell personally but don't have time for it, so I'm writing to remind you of how fond I am of you. Raoul has gone to Blois and doesn't know of my departure. Watch over him in my absence as best you can, and if you haven't heard from me in three months, tell him to open a sealed packet he'll find in my bronze coffer there, the key to which I'll enclose with this letter. Embrace Porthos for Aramis and for me. Farewell, and perhaps goodbye.*

And he sent Blaisois off with the letter. Aramis arrived at the appointed hour. He was on horseback and had at his side that trusted sword that he'd drawn so often, more often now than ever. "*Oh that!*" he said. "I think it's a mistake to go off like this without notifying Porthos and d'Artagnan."

"I took care of it, my friend," said Athos, "and sent them both our embraces."

"You're an admirable man, my dear Count," said Aramis, "and you think of everything."

"Well, then! Are you ready to set off on our journey?"

"Absolutely – and the more I think about it, the happier I am to be away from Paris at this time."

"And I, as well," replied Athos. "I regret not saying goodbye to d'Artagnan in person but he's such a clever devil he'd have guessed what we're up to."

As they were finishing supper, Blaisois returned. "Sir, here's the reply from Sir d'Artagnan."

"But I didn't tell you to wait for a reply, you imbecile!" said Athos.

"Well, I started to leave without waiting for one but then he called me back and gave me this." And he held out a little leather purse, round and jingling. Athos opened the brief note that read as follows: *My dear Count,*

*When one travels, especially for three months, one never has enough money. Now, I remember our times of hardship, so I'm sending you half my money in this purse. It's cash that I managed to sweat out of Mazarin but don't use it poorly on that account. As for the idea that I might not see you again, I don't believe a word of it. A man with your heart – and your sword – can pass through anything.*

*Farewell and not goodbye. It goes without saying that from the day I met Raoul I've loved him as if he were my own; but believe me when I say I sincerely pray to God to keep me from becoming his father, no matter how proud I'd be of a son like him.*

Your D'ARTAGNAN

P.S.: Of course, the fifty Louis I'm sending you are as much Aramis's as they are yours.

Athos smiled, and tears welled up in his eyes. D'Artagnan, whom he'd always loved, still loved him, even if he was allied with Mazarin. "And, my faith, here they are – fifty Louis," said Aramis, emptying the purse on the table, "each one with Louis XIII's face on it. Well, what shall we do with this money, Count – keep it, or send it back?"

"We keep it, Aramis, though we won't have it for long. What is offered so nobly should be nobly accepted. You take twenty-five, Aramis, and give the other twenty-five to me."

"It's a timely gift, and I must say I agree with you. Now, then, shall we be off?"

"Whenever you like ... but aren't you bringing any lackeys?"

"No, that fool of a Bazin had the bad judgement to become a beadle, and now he can't leave Notre Dame."

"Well, you take Blaisois then whom I don't need since I already have Grimaud."

"Willingly," said Aramis.

At that moment, Grimaud appeared on the threshold. "Ready," he said, laconic as usual.

"Then let's go," said Athos.

Indeed, the horses were saddled and waiting, and the lackeys were prepared. They rode into the night but at the corner of the quay they encountered Bazin who ran up to them all out of breath. "Ah, sir!" he huffed. "Thank God I caught you in time."

"What is it?" said Aramis.

"Sir Porthos stopped by the house and left this for you, saying it was very urgent and you had to have it before you left."

"What's this?" said Aramis, taking a purse from Bazin.

"Wait, Sir Abbot, there's a letter too."

"You know I warned you that if you called me anything other than *knight* that I'd break your bones. Let's see the letter."

"How are you going to read it?" said Athos. "It's as dark as the bottom of a well."

"Wait," said Bazin. He took out a flint and lit a taper of the kind used to light church candles. By its light, Aramis read the following:

*My dear d'Herblay,*

*I hear from d'Artagnan, who embraces me on your behalf and that of the Count of La Fère, that you're leaving on an expedition that may last two or three months. Since I know you don't like to ask aid of your friends, I offer this so you don't have to: here are two hundred pistoles you can use as you think best, and which you can repay if it's ever convenient. Don't worry about putting me in hardship; if I need some money I'll just send to one of my châteaux: at Bracieux alone I have twenty thousand livres in gold. So, I could have sent more but I was afraid you wouldn't take it if I sent too much. I address this to you because you know the Count of La Fère always intimidates me a little, although I love him with all my heart. But you understand that what I offer to you, I offer equally to him.*

*I am, as you should never doubt, your devoted*

*DU VALLON DE BRACIEUX DE PIERREFONDS*

"Well!" said Aramis. "What do you say to that?"

"I say, my dear d'Herblay, that it would be sacrilege to doubt in Providence when one has such friends."

"And so?"

"And so, let's share out Porthos's pistoles as we did d'Artagnan's Louis." They split the money by the light of Bazin's taper, and then resumed their journey. A quarter of an hour later they were at the Saint-Denis gate, where Lord Winter was waiting for them.

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The 1<sup>st</sup> Impulse is always the Right One

The three gentlemen took the road to Picardy, that road so familiar to them, reminding Athos and Aramis of some of the most colourful adventures of their youth. "If Mousqueton were with us," said Athos, as they arrived at the spot where they'd fought with the road workers, "he'd tremble as we rode past. Do you remember, Aramis? This is where he took that famous musket ball."

"And I'd let him tremble, by my faith," said Aramis, "for he's not the only one to shiver at this place: there, beyond that tree, is a little spot where I thought I was a dead man."

They went on their way. Soon it was Grimaud who was taken by a memory. As they arrived before an inn where he and his master had dined so long and so well, he approached Athos, pointed at the cellar door, and said, "Sausages!"

Athos began to laugh, as amused by this recollection of his youth as if hearing a mad tale told about someone else. At last, after riding two days and a night, they arrived, in magnificent weather, at Boulogne. At that time, it was still a small town, lightly populated, and built up on the heights; the district now known as the lower town didn't yet exist. But behind its walls, Boulogne had a formidable position. Arriving at the gates of the city, Lord Winter said, "Gentlemen, let's do as we did in Paris, and separate to avoid suspicion. I know an inn that is little frequented but where the host is entirely devoted to me. I'm going to go there, because that's where letters will be waiting for me. You should go to one of the city's leading inns such as the Épée du Grand Henry and briefly rest and recuperate. Then meet me on the jetty in two hours, where our boat will be waiting for us."

They agreed. Lord Winter followed the road around the walls and entered the city by another gate while the two friends went in through the gate in front of them. A few hundred paces inside they came upon the large inn Winter had recommended. The horses were fed and rested but not unsaddled, and the lackeys were sent to supper. It was beginning to grow late, and the two masters, impatient to embark, told their lackeys to meet them on the jetty, and meanwhile to speak to no one. Of course, this latter instruction applied only to Blaisois; the silent Grimaud needed no such orders. Athos and Aramis went down to the harbour. By their dust-covered clothes, and by a certain easy manner that always indicates a man accustomed to travel, they attracted the attention of several dockside loiterers. There was one on whom their arrival had made a definite impression. This man, whom they'd noticed for the same reasons others had noticed them, was walking morosely up and down the jetty. However, once he saw Athos and Aramis he stared, and seemed taken with a sudden need to speak with them. This man was young and pale, with eyes of such a light variable blue that they seemed, like a tiger's, to change to reflect his mood. His walk, though slow and wandering, was stiff and determined; he was dressed all in black and wore a long sword at his side with the ease of familiarity. Stepping onto the jetty, Athos and Aramis paused to look at a small boat moored to the pier and equipped as if ready to go. "No doubt that's ours," said Athos.

"Yes," Aramis replied, "and that sloop at anchor out there's probably the one intended for us. Now if only de Winter won't keep us waiting; there's no amusement to be had here and not a woman in sight."

"Hush!" said Athos. "Someone might be listening."

In fact, the pale loiterer, who, after staring at the two friends, had resumed walking up and down, paused at the name of *de Winter* – but as his face showed no emotion upon hearing this name, he might just have paused by chance. Turning, the young man bowed to them and said politely, "Gentlemen, pardon my curiosity but I see that you've come from Paris, or are at least newcomers to Boulogne."

"Yes, we have come from Paris, Sir," Athos replied just as politely. "What can we do for you?"

"Sir," the young man said, "could you please tell me if it's true that Cardinal Mazarin is no longer prime minister?"

"That's a strange question," said Aramis.

"He's and isn't," Athos replied. "By which I mean that half of France opposes him but by balancing intrigue with promises, the other half supports him. That situation might continue for quite a while."

"Then, Sir," the stranger said, "he's neither fled nor in prison?"

"No, Sir – not for the moment, at least."

"Gentlemen, my thanks for your courtesy," said the young man as he walked away.

"What do you think of this inquisitive fellow?" said Aramis.

"I think he's either a bored provincial or a nosy spy."

"And that's the answer you give to a spy?"

"I could scarcely have replied otherwise. He was polite to me, as I was to him."

"But if he's a spy..."

"What's a spy going to do to us? We're no longer in the reign of Cardinal Richelieu, who could close the ports on a mere suspicion."

"Nonetheless, it was a mistake to answer him that way," said Aramis, watching the young man as he disappeared among the dunes.

"And you," said Athos, "forget that you committed an imprudence of your own when you mentioned the name of Lord de Winter. Didn't you notice that that's what attracted the young man?"

"All the more reason, when he spoke to you, to tell him to move along."

"And start a quarrel?" said Athos.

"Since when are you afraid of a quarrel?"

"I'm always afraid of a quarrel when I'm on a mission that a quarrel might endanger. Besides, to tell the truth, I wanted a close look at this young man."

"Why's that?"

"Aramis, you're just going to laugh at me, tell me I'm seeing things, and am obsessed with a single idea."

"Let's hear it. What, then?"

"Who do you think that man looks like?"

"In ugliness or in beauty?" asked Aramis, laughing.

"In ugliness, insofar as a man can resemble a woman."

"Ah, for the love of God!" said Aramis. "Now you've set me to thinking. No, of course you're not seeing things, *my dear friend*, and now that I think about it, you're right: that thin, narrow mouth, those eyes that take orders only from the mind and not from the heart. It's Milady's bastard, of course!"

"You laugh, Aramis!"

"From habit, that's all. For I swear to you, I'd hate to encounter such a serpent in our path as much as you would."

"Ah, here comes de Winter at last," said Athos.

"Good, then there's only one thing lacking," said Aramis. "Now we need only our servants."

"No," Athos said, "I see them, they're about twenty paces behind milord. I recognise Grimaud with his cocked head and long legs. Tony is bringing our carbines."

"Are we going to embark at night, then?" asked Aramis, glancing toward the west where the sun was just a golden haze sinking into the sea.

"It seems likely," said Athos.

"The devil!" replied Aramis. "Even by day I don't like the sea, and it's worse at night – the slap of the waves, the whine of the wind, the dreadful shifting of the deck – I'd much rather be in the monastery at Noisy."

Athos smiled his melancholy smile, for though he seemed to be listening to his friend, it was clear he really was thinking about something else. He made his way toward Winter, and Aramis followed him. "What's wrong with our friend?" Aramis said. "He looks like those damned in Dante who had their necks twisted by Satan to turn backward. What the devil is he looking for behind him?"

Noticing them, Winter doubled his pace and reached them in no time. "What's wrong, Milord?" said Athos. "You're out of breath."

"Nothing," said Winter, "nothing. Only, passing by the dunes, it seemed to me..." and he turned and looked anew. Athos gave Aramis a look. "But let's depart," Winter continued. "Here's the boat waiting for us, and our sloop is at anchor – do you see it there? I wish I was already on it." And he turned again and looked back.

*"Ah çà!"* said Aramis. "Did you forget something?"

"No, I'm just distracted..."

"He saw him," Athos whispered to Aramis.

They arrived at the gangway to the boat. Winter first sent down the lackeys carrying their arms, next the porters with their trunks, and then began to follow them. As he did, Athos noticed a man who was hastening along the shoreline parallel to the jetty, as if trying to reach the opposite wharf across from where they were embarking. He thought, through the descending twilight, that he recognised the young man who'd questioned them. "Oh ho!" he said to himself. "Is he a spy after all, and planning to block our departure?"

But if that was the stranger's plan, it was already too late to put it into action. Athos, in his turn, went down the gangway but without losing sight of the young man, who went out upon the breakwater. *He seems to be angry at us*, thought Athos but *let's just depart. Once we're on the open sea, he can be as angry as he likes*.

Athos leapt into the boat, the ropes were loosed, and it began to pull away due to the efforts of four brawny rowers. But the young man began to follow the boat along the breakwater, or rather precede it. The boat had to pass between the end of the jetty, where the harbour lighthouse had just been lit, and a boulder at the end of the breakwater. The man could be seen climbing the boulder so as to tower over the boat as it passed. "See there?" said Aramis to Athos. "That young man is definitely some sort of spy."

"What young man?" asked Winter, turning to look.

"That one, who spoke to us earlier, followed us, and now awaits us. See!"

Winter looked where Aramis was pointing. The lighthouse clearly illuminated the little strait they were about to pass through, and the boulder where the young man stood waiting, head bare and arms crossed. "It's him!" Lord Winter cried, grabbing Athos by the arm. "It's him. I thought I'd seen him, and I was right."

"Him? Who?" asked Aramis.

"Milady's son," Athos replied.

"The monk!" cried Grimaud.

The young man heard these words and perched over the water on the edge of the boulder, he looked like he was ready to pounce. "Yes, Uncle, here I'm. I, Milady's son; I, the monk; I, the aide and friend to Cromwell – and I recognise you and your companions."

There were three brave men in that boat, men of whom no man could dispute the courage – but at that voice, in that tone, they felt a shiver of terror run down their spines. As for Grimaud, his hair was bristling on his head, and sweat poured from his brow. "Ah!" said Aramis. "So, this is the nephew, the monk, and Milady's son – that's him, is it?"

"Alas, yes," murmured Winter.

"All right, then," said Aramis.

And he picked up with that terrible sangfroid he displayed in extremity, one of Tony's muskets, loaded it, and took aim at the man standing on the rock like an angel of malediction. "Fire!" cried Grimaud beside himself.

Athos knocked aside the musket barrel before Aramis could shoot. "The devil take you!" Aramis exclaimed. "You ruined my shot just when I was about to put a ball into his chest."

"It's quite enough to have killed the mother," said Athos gruffly.

"The mother was a monster who hurt us and those dear to us."

"Yes but the son has done us no harm."

Grimaud, who had risen when Aramis took up the musket, fell back discouraged, wringing his hands. The young man burst out laughing. "Ah, it is you, for sure – and now I know you."

His harsh and menacing laughter rang out over the water, fading as the boat rowed on into the darkness. Aramis shuddered. "Calm down," said Athos. "What the devil! Are we men, or aren't we?"

"We are," said Aramis, "but him – he's a demon. Just ask the uncle if he thinks I'd have done wrong to rid him of his nephew."

Winter's only response was a sigh.

"I could have finished this," Aramis went on. "Agh! I'm afraid, Athos, that your restraint has led you into folly."

Athos took Winter's hand and said, changing the subject, "How long will it take to reach England?" But Winter wasn't listening and didn't answer.

"Look, Athos," said Aramis, "maybe it isn't too late. Look, he's still in the same place."

Athos turned with an effort, as the sight of the young man seemed painful to him. Indeed, he still stood on the rock, the glow from the lighthouse making a halo around him. "But what is he doing in Boulogne?" asked Athos who sought the cause for everything, being reason incarnate, little caring for the effect.

"He followed me, he followed me," said Winter, who this time had heard Athos, since the words echoed his own thoughts.

"To follow you, my friend," said Athos, "he would have had to know we were leaving; and besides, it seems probable he was here ahead of us."

"Then I can't understand it!" said the Englishman, shaking his head like a man who sees no use in battling the supernatural.

"Decidedly, Aramis," said Athos, "I think I was wrong not to let you do it."

"Oh, hold your tongue," Aramis replied. "You'd make me weep, if I was the sort of man who could weep."

Grimaud just uttered a deep, mournful groan. At that moment, a voice hailed them from the sloop. The pilot, who was seated at the rudder, answered the call, and the boat approached the vessel.

Within minutes, the gentlemen, their servants, and baggage were all aboard. The captain waited only for the porters to return to the boat; as soon as they were clear, he set a course for Hastings, where they were to land. Meanwhile the three friends, anxious despite themselves, peered back toward the breakwater, where, on the boulder at the end, the menacing shadow that pursued them was still visible. A voice echoed across the water with a final threat: "We'll meet again, Gentlemen – in England!"

**217**

**The *Te Deum* [] for the Victory at Lens**

The commotion in Paris that Queen Henriette had noticed was caused by news of the victory at Lens, brought by the Duke Châtillon on behalf of Sir Prince. The duke who'd had such a noble share in the triumph, was also charged with hanging 22 flags in the vault of Notre-Dame, banners captured from the Lorrainers and Spaniards. This news was decisive in resolving the conflict with parliament in favour of the Royal Court. All the taxes that had been decreed and the Parliament had opposed, were immediately ratified to sustain the honour of France during the ongoing battle with its enemies. The country had experienced nothing but defeats since the Battle of Nördlingen, and parliament had had a fine time mocking Mazarin\* for the promised victories that never occurred but now victory was in hand at last, and a great victory, too: everyone regarded it as a double triumph for the Court, giving it the upper hand over enemies both domestic and foreign so that the young King Louis XIV upon hearing the news, declared, "Ah, gentlemen of the Parliament, what do you have to say now?"

Hearing that, Queen Anne\* had hugged to her heart her royal child, whose hauteur accorded so well with her own. A council was called that very evening, summoning Marshall de La Meilleraie and Sir Villeroy because they were Cardinalists, Chavigny\* and Séguier because they hated parliament, and Guitaut\* and Comminges because they were devoted to the queen. None of this council's decisions were made public, except that on the following Sunday there would be a *Te Deum* sung at Notre-Dame in honour of the victory at Lens. That Sunday, the Parisians awoke with joy: at that time a *Te Deum* was a grand affair, not yet made routine by overuse, and it was widely hailed. The sun that seemed a willing partner in the festivities, had risen radiant, gilding the sombre towers of the city, its streets already teeming with immense crowds; even the darkest alleys had taken on a festive air, and along the quays streamed long lines of citizens, workers, women, and children moving toward Notre-Dame, like fish in a river ascending toward its source. The shops were deserted, the houses closed up; everyone wanted to see the young king, his royal mother, and the famous Cardinal Mazarin, whom they hated so much they couldn't do without him. Freedom of speech reigned among the surging crowds; every shade of opinion was loudly expressed, and rang out like a call to riot, just as the thousand bells of the churches of Paris rang out the *Te Deum*. The citizens of Paris made their own rules that day and ensured that nothing dampened the cries of hatred or stilled the flow of slander. At eight in the morning, the Regiment of the Queen's Guards, commanded by Guitaut and seconded by his nephew, Comminges, had marched, to the sound of drums and trumpets, from the Royal Palace to Notre-Dame, a manoeuvre which the Parisians had watched with their habitual admiration of military music and bright uniforms. Friquet was part of the crowd, dressed in his best, able to attend thanks to a temporary swelling caused by jamming a huge number of cherry pits into the side of his mouth that had persuaded Bazin to give him the day off. Bazin had refused at first, for the beadle was in a lousy mood, first due to the departure of Aramis who had left without telling him where he was going, and then from having to serve at a mass in honour of a victory that didn't accord with his opinions – Bazin, we recall, was a Frondeur. If there was some way by which, despite the dignity of his position, the beadle could absent himself as easily as the choirboy, Bazin would certainly have made the same request of the archbishop the choirboy had made of him. Thus, he had refused Friquet at first but the boy's cheek continued to swell, so for the honour and reputation of the choir that couldn't be compromised by such a deformity, he had finally given in, muttering to himself. Outside the church door, Friquet had spat out the cherry pits and sent toward the oblivious Bazin one of those supremely rude gestures that demonstrate the superiority of the Parisian gamin to all other guttersnipes. As for his tavern job, he had naturally avoided that by saying he'd be serving at the mass at Notre-Dame. Friquet was thus free, and as we mentioned, dressed in his very best, capped by a remarkable ornament, one of those bulbous bonnets worn during the period between the cap of the Middle Ages and the brimmed hat of the reign of Louis XIII.\* His mother had made this grotesque headgear for him, and either from whim or from a lack of uniform fabric, had sewn it from an assortment of colours, so that this paragon of 17<sup>th</sup>-century haberdashery was yellow and green on one side and red and white on the other. This made Friquet, who had always loved bright colours, all the more proud and triumphant. After leaving Bazin, Friquet ran toward the Royal Palace. He arrived just as the regiment of guards was marching out, and as he hadn't come for any reason other than to see the sights and enjoy the music, he took a position marching at the head of the column, beating a tattoo with two wooden slats. From the tambour he passed on to the trumpet that he imitated with his mouth in a way that was the envy of his fellow amateurs of musical imposture. This amusement lasted from the Barrière des Sergents all the way to Place Notre-Dame, and Friquet thoroughly enjoyed it. But then the regiment halted, and the companies deployed along the streets in the heart of the Île de la Cité, from the end of Rue Saint-Christophe almost to Rue Cocatrix where Broussel lived. Then Friquet, remembering he'd not yet had breakfast, considered where best to acquire this important meal, and after thinking for a moment, decided to let Councillor Broussel pick up the tab. Following this impulse, he ran till he was out of breath, and was soon knocking loudly at the councillor's door. His mother, Broussel's aging maidservant, opened and said, "What are you doing here, lad, and why you aren't at Notre-Dame?"

"I was there, Mother Nanette," said Friquet, "but I saw things going on that Master Broussel should be warned about, so with the permission of Sir Bazin – you know him, Bazin the beadle, right? – I've come to speak to Sir Broussel."

"And what do you want to say, you monkey, to Sir Broussel?"

"I'll tell him that personally."

"Well, you can't, because he's working."

"Then I'll wait," said Friquet, pleased because that suited how he intended to spend the time.

And he ran quickly up the stairs, with Dame Nanette following slowly behind him. "But what do you want with Sir Broussel?" she called.

"I want to tell him," shouted Friquet at the top of his lungs, "that there's a whole regiment of guards coming this way! And since everybody says the Court is angry with him, I've come to warn him to look out!"

Broussel heard the young prankster's cries and, charmed by this display of zeal, came down to the first floor from where he'd been working up above. "What's this about a regiment of guards, my friend?" he said. "You simpleton, you'll start a panic. Don't you know it's their custom to march this way, and that the regiment always lines the streets where the king is to pass?"

Friquet pretended to be surprised, and said, turning his new hat between his hands, "Well, of course you'd know that, Sir Broussel, because you know everything. But I didn't know it, I swear to God, and thought I was bringing you important news. Please don't be angry with me, Sir Broussel."

"On the contrary, my dear lad, your zeal pleases me. Dame Nanette, see if you can find those apricots Madam de Longueville\* sent us yesterday from Noisy, and give a half dozen to your son with a crust of fresh bread."

"Ah, thank you, Sir Broussel!" said Friquet. "I like apricots a lot."

Broussel went to find his wife and ask for his own breakfast. He stopped at the window; the street was completely deserted but in the distance could be heard like the rush of an incoming tide, the waves of sound that were rising from the crowds around Notre-Dame. This sound redoubled when d'Artagnan arrived at the head of a company of musketeers to take up a position at the doors of Notre-Dame. He'd invited Porthos to join him and take the opportunity to see the ceremony, and Porthos, in full court dress and mounted on his finest horse, was playing the part of an honorary musketeer, as d'Artagnan had so often done. The company's sergeant, a veteran of the wars with Spain, had recognised his old companion Porthos, and was regaling his subordinates with tales of the deeds of this giant, a champion of the King's Musketeers under old Captain Tréville. The company, therefore, had welcomed him with pride. At ten o'clock, the cannon of the Louvre announced the king's departure. A movement like that of the trees bending before a windstorm swept along the ranks of the crowd, stirring behind the rigid hedge of the muskets of the guards. At last the king appeared

in a gilded carriage with his mother the queen. This was followed by ten other carriages containing the ladies of honour, the officers of the royal house, and the other members of the Court. “*Long live the king!*” came the cheers from every side.

The young king gravely brought his head to the carriage door, made a face that might have been approval, and bowed slightly that made the crowd cheer all the louder. The procession advanced slowly, taking almost half an hour to advance from the Louvre to Place Notre-Dame. Arriving there, the Court moved group by group into the vast and sombre vault of the church, and the divine service began. As the procession was arriving, a coach bearing the arms of Comminges left the line of carriages waiting to disembark their courtiers and turned slowly down Rue Saint-Christophe, now entirely deserted. Once parked around the corner, four guards and an officer went into the heavy coach and closed all the shutters, leaving only the one in front slightly open so the officer could look out toward Rue Cocatrix, as if waiting for someone to arrive. Everyone was occupied with the ceremony, so no one paid any attention to the coach or the careful precautions of those within. Friquet, the only one nosy enough to spot them, had climbed up onto a house opposite Notre-Dame, where he savoured his apricots as he watched the arrival of the king, the queen, and Cardinal Mazarin, and heard the mass as well as if he’d been taking part in it. Toward the end of the service, the queen, seeing that Comminges was standing near at hand awaiting confirmation of the order she’d given before they left the Louvre, said to him in a low voice, “Go, Comminges – and may God go with you!”

Comminges went at once, leaving the church and turning down Rue Saint-Christophe. Friquet, who noticed this handsome officer marching with two guards behind him, amused himself by following along, as the ceremony had ended and the king had re-entered his carriage. As soon as the officer in the coach saw Comminges arrive at the end of Rue Cocatrix, he spoke an order to the driver, who put the vehicle into motion and drove it to Broussel’s door. Comminges began knocking on that door just as the coach arrived. Friquet came up behind Comminges as he was knocking on the door.

“What are you doing here, monkey?” asked Comminges.

“I’m waiting to go into Councillor Broussel’s house, Sir Officer,” Friquet said in that obsequious tone the Parisian gamin can adopt at need.

“Does he live here?” Comminges asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

“On what floor?”

“All of them,” said Friquet. “The whole house is his.”

“But where is he usually found?”

“He works on the second floor but comes down to the first for his meals. Right now, he must be eating, since it’s noon.”

“Good,” said Comminges.

Just then the door opened. The officer questioned the servant, learning that Broussel was at home and dining. Comminges followed the servant up the stairs, and Friquet went up behind Comminges. Broussel was seated at the table with his family, his wife across from him, and his two daughters by his side, and at the end of the table was his son, Louvières whom we already met on the day of the councillor’s accident, from which he was now fully recovered. The good man, restored to full health, was enjoying the apricots sent by Madam de Longueville. Comminges who had stopped the servant by grabbing his arm as he was about to open the door and announce him, opened the door himself and was face-to-face with this family tableau. At the sight of the officer Broussel felt uneasy but as the officer bowed politely, he rose and did the same. Despite this polite exchange, the women looked anxious, while Louvières, turning pale, waited impatiently for the officer to explain himself. “Sir,” said Comminges, “I’m the bearer of an order from the king.”

“Very well, Sir,” Broussel replied. “Where is this order?”

And he extended his hand. “I’m commissioned to detain you, Sir,” said Comminges in the same polite tone, “and if you’ll take my word for that, it’ll save you the trouble of reading this long letter. Please follow me.” If a thunderbolt had fallen among those good people, so peacefully gathered, it couldn’t have had a more terrible effect. Broussel backed away, trembling. It was a terrible thing at that time to be imprisoned by direct order of the king. Louvières made a movement toward his sword that hung on a chair in the corner but a look from Broussel, who was determined not to lose his head, stopped him. Madam Broussel, separated from her husband by the width of the table, burst into tears, and the two young daughters embraced their father. “Come, Sir, make haste,” said Comminges. “We must obey the king.”

“Sir,” said Broussel, “I’m in poor health and in no condition to give myself up – I need some time.”

“Impossible,” replied Comminges. “It’s a formal order and must be executed at once.”

“Impossible?” said Louvières. “Sir, be careful you don’t drive us to desperate measures.”

“Impossible!” screeched a voice from the rear of the room.

Comminges turned to see Dame Nanette, broomstick in hand and eyes aflame with anger. “My good Nanette, calm down,” said Broussel, “I beg you.”

“Me, calm down while they arrest my master, the supporter, the liberator, the father of the people! Oh, right! You know me better than that! You,” she said to Comminges, “get out of here!”

Comminges smiled. “Come, Sir,” he said, turning to Broussel, “silence this noisy woman and follow me.”

“Silence me! Me!” said Nanette. “It will take more than just you to do that, my king’s pretty coxcomb. You’ll see.” And Dame Nanette rushed to the window, opened it, and shouted in a voice so piercing it could be heard in the Place Notre-Dame, “Help! *Help!* They’re arresting my master! They’re arresting Councillor Broussel! Help!”

“Sir,” said Comminges, “make up your mind: will you obey, or do you intend rebellion against the king?”

“I obey, I obey, Sir,” cried Broussel, trying to disengage himself from his clinging daughters, and from his son, who wanted to help him escape.

“In that case,” said Comminges, “make this old crone shut up.”

“Oh! Crone, is it?” said Nanette. And, clinging to the bars of the window, she began to scream even louder, “Help! Help! Help for Master Broussel, who’s being arrested for defending the people! Help!”

Comminges grabbed the maidservant by the arm and tried to drag her from the window but another voice, issuing falsetto from the ground floor below, took up the cry: “Murder! Fire! Assassination! They’re slaughtering Sir Broussel!”

It was Friquet. Dame Nanette, encouraged by his support, joined loudly in chorus. Already a few curious heads were appearing at neighbouring windows. People, attracted to the end of the street, came around the corner at a run, individuals, groups, and then a whole crowd. They saw the coach but didn’t understand what it meant. Friquet leapt from the staircase to the top of the vehicle. “They’re trying to arrest Sir Broussel!” he cried. “There are guards in the coach, and an officer upstairs!”

The crowd began to shout and approach the coach and horses. The two guards who’d stayed in the street went inside to assist Comminges, while those in the coach came out and blocked the doorway with crossed halberds. “Do you see them?” cried Friquet. “Look! Here they are!”

The driver turned and gave Friquet a blow with his whip that made him howl in pain. “*Agh!* You devil’s coachman! You want a fight? Just wait!”

And he jumped back to the staircase, from which he peppered the driver with whatever projectiles came to hand. Despite the guards’ aggressive response, or perhaps because of it, the crowd began to close in on the coach. The guards struck out with the flats of their halberds, and the rebels were driven back. However, the tumult continued to increase, and soon the street was overflowing as the mob came from every direction, and people began to invade the space between the coach and the formidable pole arms of the guards. The soldiers, compressed as by living walls, seemed about to be crushed against the wheels and side of the vehicle. The cry, “In the king’s name!” repeated twenty times over by the officer just seemed to make the mob angrier – until a young cavalier, hearing the king’s name invoked and seeing uniformed soldiers being mistreated, rushed into the fray with his sword in his hand, bringing unexpected aid to the guards.

This young man, fifteen or sixteen years old, was pale with anger. Like the guards, he dismounted, put his back against the shaft of the coach, made a rampart of his horse, drew his pistols from the saddle holsters, thrust them through his belt, then drew his sword and began to use it like a man who knows how. For several minutes, the young man on his own fended off the attacks of the crowd. But then the mob saw Comminges come out, pushing Broussel before him. “Smash the coach!” cried the crowd.

“Help! Help!” cried the old woman.

“Murder! Murder!” cried Friquet as he continued to pepper the guards with everything he could find.

“In the king’s name!” cried Comminges.

“The next one who tries something is dead!” cried Raoul de Bragelonne who feeling himself pressed especially by a giant of a man who looked ready to crush him, pricked him with the point of his sword and the giant recoiled with a howl, feeling himself wounded.

For it was indeed Raoul, who, returning from Blois after five days’ absence, as he’d promised the Count La Fère, had wished to have a look at the ceremony, and was thus in the streets that led to Notre-Dame. Arriving in the neighbourhood of Rue Cocatrix, he’d found himself swept along by the huge crowd – and hearing the words, *In the king’s name*, he’d recalled that Athos had told him, “Serve the king.”

And he’d rushed into the fight to defend the royal guards. Comminges basically threw Broussel into the carriage and tumbled in after him. At that moment a harquebus was fired, the ball perforated Comminges’s hat, and went on to break a guard’s arm. Comminges looked up and saw, behind the powder smoke, the menacing figure of Louvières at the second-floor window. “Very well, Sir,” Comminges called, “you’ll be hearing from me about this.”

“As you’ll hear from me, Sir,” Louvières said, “and we’ll see who speaks the loudest.”

Friquet and Nanette were still screaming; the shouts, the sound of the shot, the smell of gunpowder, always so intoxicating, all these had their effect. “Kill the officer! Kill him!” the crowd cried.

And they surged forward. “One more step,” shouted Comminges, knocking open the shutters so everyone could see into the carriage, and placing the point of his sword on Broussel’s chest, “one more step and I kill the prisoner. I was ordered to bring him in dead or alive, and I’ll bring him in dead if I have to.” There was a terrible cry from above, as Broussel’s wife and daughters held out their hands in supplication to the people. And the people realised that this officer, so pale but seemingly so resolute, would do as he said, so they continued to threaten but drew back a bit. Comminges had the wounded guard get into the coach with him and ordered the others to shut the door. “To the palace,” he called to the driver who was more dead than alive.

The coachman whipped up his animals, who forced their way through the crowd. But upon reaching the quay they could go no further; the coach was upset, and the horses carried away by the crowd. Raoul, still on foot, as he’d never had time or space to remount his horse, gave up striking with the flat of his blade and began using the point. But this last resort only infuriated the mob. Weapons began to appear in the crowd, a musket barrel here, a rapier blade there; shots rang out, a sound that only added to the excitement, and projectiles rained down from the windows above. The crowd’s voice rose to that roar heard only in a true riot, and faces showed expressions seen only on days of bloody conflict. Shouts of “*À mort!* Kill the guards! Throw the officer in the Seine!” could be heard even above the clamour of the crowd.

Raoul felt that not just his strength but his very reason began to abandon him, his hat crushed, face bloody. His vision clouded with a reddish mist, and through this fog he saw a hundred arms reaching out to menace him, ready to seize him when he fell. In the overturned coach, Comminges tore his hair in rage. The guards couldn’t help him, as they could barely defend themselves. It was all over: coach, horses, guards, officer, maybe even the prisoner, all seemed likely to be torn to pieces – when suddenly a voice well-known to Raoul rang out, and a familiar sword shone in the air. The crowd separated and reeled back as an officer of the King’s Musketeers, striking and slashing left and right, ran to Raoul and took him in his arms just as he was about to fall. “*God!*” the officer cried. “Have they murdered him? If so, woe unto them!”

And he turned, bristling with such fury, menace, and force that even the angriest rebels recoiled, some retreating right into the Seine. “Sir d’Artagnan,” Raoul murmured.

“Yes, God’s blood! In person and fortunately for you it seems, my young friend. This way! Over here!” he called, leaping back into the saddle and waving his sword to the rest of his musketeers, who were just catching up. “Come on, drive this rabble back! Muskets at the ready! Present arms! Prepare to fire! Ready…”

At this order the populace withdrew so suddenly that d’Artagnan couldn’t restrain a burst of Homeric laughter. “Thank you, d’Artagnan,” said Comminges, protruding half out the door of the overturned coach. “And thank you, my young gentleman. Your name? For I must tell the queen.”

Raoul was about to respond, when d’Artagnan leaned down and said in his ear, “Keep quiet, and let me do the talking.” Then, turning to Comminges, he said, “No time for that now, Comminges. Get out of this coach if you can, and let’s find you another.”

“Another? What other?”

“*For the love of God*, the first one that comes along! They’ll be happy, I’m sure, to lend their carriage to the service of the king.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Comminges.

“Let’s move, or in five minutes that rabble will be back with swords and muskets. You’ll be killed and your prisoner set free. Come on. Ah, here comes a carriage now.”

Then, leaning back toward Raoul, d’Artagnan whispered, “No matter what, don’t mention your name.”

The young man looked at him in astonishment. “Very well, we’ll go then,” said Comminges. “But if the crowd comes back, open fire.”



"No, by no means," replied d'Artagnan. "On the contrary, nobody make a move. A shot fired today would be dearly paid for tomorrow." Comminges took his four guards and the same number of musketeers and ran to the approaching carriage. He made the passengers get out and brought the carriage to the overturned coach. But when Broussel was to be transferred from the broken vehicle to the new one, the people, who saw the man they called their liberator, uttered angry screams and rushed forward anew. "Go," said d'Artagnan. "I'm sending ten musketeers with you; I'll keep twenty to hold back the crowd. Go, and don't lose a moment. Ten men for Sir Comminges!" Ten men separated from the troop, surrounded the new carriage, and departed at a gallop. At the departure of the carriage the cries redoubled; ten thousand people crowded the quays, thronging the Pont Neuf and the nearby streets. A few shots rang out. A musketeer was wounded. "Forward," cried d'Artagnan, pushed to the limit and gnawing his moustache.

And with his twenty men he charged the entire crowd, who fell back in terror. Only one man stood fast, holding a harquebus. "Ah!" said the man. "It's you, the one who tried to trample the councillor! Now we'll see."

And he lowered his harquebus on d'Artagnan, who approached at the gallop. D'Artagnan leaned low on his horse's neck as the young man fired, so the ball only cut the plume from his hat. The furious horse hurtled into the reckless young man, who'd tried single-handed to stop a tempest, and threw him against a wall. While his musketeers continued their charge, d'Artagnan reined in his horse and raised his sword over the man he'd knocked down. "Wait!" cried Raoul who recognised the young man from Rue Cocatrix. "Spare him, sir – that's Broussel's son."

D'Artagnan lowered his sword. "Ah, you're his son?" he said. "That changes things."

"Sir, I surrender," said Louvières, holding out his smoking harquebus.

"Not at all! Surrender? *Mordieu*, on the contrary, run for it, and quickly! If you're captured, you'll hang."

The young man didn't wait to be told twice. He ducked under the horse's neck and disappeared around the corner of Rue Guénégaud. "*My faith*," d'Artagnan said to Raoul, "it was high time to stop me, because he was a dead man otherwise, and if I'd killed him and then learned who he was, I'd have regretted it."

"Please, Sir," said Raoul, "allow me, after thanking you for saving that poor lad, to thank you for saving me. I was as good as dead when you arrived."

"Hush, my young friend, save your breath till you recover." Then, drawing from a saddle bag a canteen of Spanish honey, he said, "Drink two sips of this."

Raoul drank, then tried to renew his thanks. "Dear lad," d'Artagnan said, "we'll talk about this later."

Then, seeing that his musketeers had swept the crowd away from the Pont Neuf to the Quai Saint-Michel and were returning, he waved his sword to signal haste. The musketeers arrived at the trot but at the same time, the ten troopers who'd been sent as escort with Comminges reappeared at the end of the quay. "*Whoa!*" called d'Artagnan. "What's happened?"

"Eh, Sir," said the sergeant, "that carriage is broken down as well. It's like a curse or something."

D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders. "Incompetence," he said. "Why couldn't they choose a decent carriage? If you set out to arrest a Broussel, you need a carriage strong enough to carry a thousand."

"What are our orders, Lieutenant?"

"Take the detachment and escort them home."

"But you're going off alone?"

"I am. Do you think I'm in need of an escort?"

"Well..."

"Get going."

The musketeers departed, leaving Raoul with d'Artagnan, who said to him, "Now, are you hurt?"

"Yes, Sir, they cracked my head well."

"Your head? Let's take a look," d'Artagnan said, lifting Raoul's hat. "Ow, look at that bump."

"Yes, I think they hit me with a flower pot."

"The rabble!" said d'Artagnan. "But you're wearing spurs – were you on horseback?"

"Yes, I dismounted to defend Sir Comminges, and then my horse disappeared. But wait, here it comes."

In fact, at that moment Raoul's horse came galloping along, ridden by Friquet, who was waving his hat of four colours and crying, "Broussel! Broussel!"

"Hold on! Pull up, you young rascal," d'Artagnan cried. "Bring that horse over here."

Friquet heard him but pretended not to, trying to continue on his way. D'Artagnan thought about running after him but didn't want to leave Raoul, so he just pulled out a pistol and cocked it. Friquet had a sharp eye and a keen ear; he saw what d'Artagnan was up to and stopped the horse short. "Ah, it's you, Sir," he said, riding up to d'Artagnan. "I'm very glad to see you."

D'Artagnan looked at Friquet and recognised him as the gamin of the Rue de la Calandre. "Ah, it's you, little jester," he said. "Come here."

"Why yes, it's me, Sir Officer," Friquet said innocently.

"Have you found a new calling? Are you no longer a choirboy or a potboy? Are you a horse thief now?"

"Oh, Sir, how can you say that?" said Friquet. "I was looking for the gentleman who owns this horse, a young cavalier as brave as Caesar ...." He then pretended to see Raoul for the first time. "Why, if I'm not mistaken, here he is! Sir, you remember me, don't you?"

Raoul put his hand into his pouch. "What do you think you're doing?" said d'Artagnan.

"Giving ten livres to a brave young lad," Raoul replied, pulling a pistole from his pocket.

"Ten whacks on the head is more like it," said d'Artagnan. "Get going, jester! And don't forget I know where you live." Friquet, who hadn't expected to get off so easy, dismounted and disappeared up the Rue Dauphine. Raoul regained his horse and at a walking pace, d'Artagnan guarding the young man as if he were his own son, they made their way to Rue Tiquetonne. Along the way they could hear tumult in the distance and were given threatening looks but the appearance of this officer, so upright and martial, and the sight of the well-worn sword in his determined grip, kept trouble at bay, and no serious attempts were made to interfere with the two cavaliers. They arrived without incident at the Hôtel de La Chevrette. There, the lovely Madeleine reported to d'Artagnan that Planchet had returned accompanied by Mousqueton, who had heroically borne the extraction of the musket ball and was as well as could be expected given his condition. D'Artagnan asked her to call Planchet but though Planchet was summoned, he didn't appear – he was gone. "In that case, some honey!" said d'Artagnan.

Once the honey had been brought, and d'Artagnan was alone with Raoul, he looked Raoul straight in the eye and said, "You're quite pleased with yourself, aren't you?"

"But yes," said Raoul. "It seems to me I did my duty. Didn't I defend the king?"

"And who told you to defend the king?"

"Why, the Count La Fère himself."

"Right, he said the king. But today you didn't defend the king, you defended Mazarin that isn't the same thing at all."

"But, Sir..."

"You have blundered, young man, and mixed yourself up in things that don't concern you."

"But you yourself..."

"Oh, me! That's another thing entirely. I had to follow the orders of my commander. Hear me well: your commander is Sir Prince, and you have no other. But today you had the ridiculous idea of assisting Mazarin, and helping him to arrest Broussel, of all things! Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. Why, the Count La Fère would be furious."

"You think the Count La Fère would be angry with me?"

"Think so? I'm sure of it! If it wasn't for that I'd thank you, for you certainly worked hard on our behalf. So, I'll scold you in his place – and believe me, the storm of my reproof is a lot milder than his would be. Anyway," d'Artagnan added, "I'm just exercising the responsibilities your guardian placed on me in his absence."

"I don't understand, Sir," Raoul said.

D'Artagnan got up, went to his desk, picked up a letter and presented it to Raoul. Raoul finished reading the letter and looked up in dismay. "My God!" he said, his handsome eyes moist with tears.

"Has Sir Count left Paris without even seeing me?"

"He left four days ago," d'Artagnan said.

"But his letter implies he runs the risk of death."

"What, *him* – in danger of death? Hardly. He's travelling on business and will return soon enough. In the meantime, I hope you're not reluctant to accept me as your acting guardian."

"Oh, no, Sir d'Artagnan!" Raoul said. "You're such a brave gentleman, and Sir Count loves you!"

"Then, by God, you should love me as well! I promise not to torment you more than you deserve, my young friend, on the condition that you remain a Frondeur – and a dedicated Frondeur, at that."

"But may I continue to see Madam de Chevreuse?"\*

"*Mordieu*, I should think so! And the coadjutor\* as well, and Madam de Longueville, and even good Councillor Broussel, whom you so foolishly helped to arrest. If you see him, apologise at once, and kiss him on both cheeks."

"All right, Sir, I'll obey you, though I don't understand you."

"It's not necessary for you to understand me," said d'Artagnan, turning toward the door as it opened. "And now here comes Sir du Vallon with his fine clothes all torn."

"Yes," said Porthos, dripping with sweat and covered in dust, "but in exchange I tore a lot of others' skin. *Plague!* The rabble actually tried to take away my sword. It's an uprising, I tell you," the giant continued, dusting himself serenely. "But I knocked over a good twenty of them with the pommel of Balizarde here. A little honey, if you please, d'Artagnan."

"Oh, it's an uprising, I quite agree with you," said the Gascon, filling Porthos's glass to the brim. "But once you've had a sip, I'd like your opinion on something."

Porthos drank the honey in a single swallow, sucked his moustache, put down the glass, and said, "On what?"

"You see before you," d'Artagnan replied, "one Sir Bragelonne, who did everything he could to assist at the arrest of Broussel, and whom I prevented from defending Sir Comminges only with the greatest of difficulty."

"*Plague!*" said Porthos. "And his guardian? What would he say if he learned of this?"

"You see?" d'Artagnan said to Raoul. "Be a Frondeur, my young friend, and take my word in everything as if I were the count." Then, turning to his companion, he said, "Are you coming, Porthos?"

"Where to?" asked Porthos, pouring himself another glass of honey.

"To pay our compliments to the cardinal." Porthos swallowed the second glass with the same tranquillity he had the first, picked up his hat, and followed d'Artagnan. As for Raoul, he stayed behind and tried to sort out the confusing things he'd been told, remaining in his chamber, at d'Artagnan's request, until all the commotion in the streets had died down.

D'Artagnan's delay in reporting to the Royal Palace was entirely calculated; it had given Comminges time to arrive before him, and to inform the cardinal of the valuable services which he, d'Artagnan, and his friend had performed that morning on the queen's behalf. So, they were well received by Mazarin, who paid them many compliments, and told them they were more than halfway to the goals they desired, that is, d'Artagnan to his captaincy and Porthos to his barony. D'Artagnan would rather have had money than compliments, for he knew that Mazarin promised more often than he paid off. He regarded the cardinal's promises as mists and smoke but tried to appear satisfied while in the presence of Porthos, whom he didn't want to discourage. While the two friends were with the cardinal, the queen sent for him. The cardinal thought he saw a way to increase the zeal of his two champions by procuring for them the queen's personal thanks, so he beckoned them to follow him. D'Artagnan and Porthos protested, displaying their torn and soiled garments but the cardinal shook his head. "These outfits," he said, "are better than those of the courtiers you'll find around the queen, for these are the uniforms of war."

D'Artagnan and Porthos obeyed. The court of Anne of Austria was crowded and joyfully loud, for, after having won a victory over the Spanish, they'd won another victory over the people. Broussel had been taken out of Paris without resistance and by this hour should be in the prison at Saint-Germain. Blancmesnil, who'd been arrested at that same time as Broussel but without noise or difficulty, was already incarcerated in the Château de Vincennes. Comminges was near the queen, who was asking him about the details of his expedition, and everyone was listening to his account when he saw d'Artagnan and Porthos at the door, entering behind the cardinal. "Ah, Madam," he said, rushing over to d'Artagnan, "here's someone who can tell you better than I, for he was my saviour. If not for him, at this moment my body would probably be getting caught in the fish-nets at Saint-Cloud, for the mob was about to throw me into the river. Speak, d'Artagnan, speak."

He just bowed. Since he was a Lieutenant of the Musketeers, d’Artagnan had found himself in the same room as the queen a hundred times before but she’d never spoken with him. “Well, Sir, after having rendered me such a service, you remain silent?” Anne of Austria said.

“Madam,” d’Artagnan replied, “I have nothing to say other than that my life is in Your Majesty’s service, and I’ll be happy on the day I lose it for her.”

“I know that, Sir, I know that,” the queen said, “and have for a long time. So, I’m delighted to have an opportunity to make a public show of my esteem and gratitude.”

“Allow me, Madam,” said d’Artagnan, “to share some of that with my friend, a former musketeer of the company of Tréville, as I was” – he emphasised these words – “and who has performed wonders.” “Sir’s name?” the queen asked.

“In the musketeers,” d’Artagnan said, “he was known as Porthos” – the queen started – “but his real name is the Knight du Vallon.”

“De Bracieux de Pierrefonds,” added Porthos.

“These names are too numerous for me to remember them all – and I prefer to remember only the first,” the queen said graciously.

Porthos bowed. D’Artagnan took two steps back. Just then the coadjutor was announced. There was a cry of surprise from the royal assembly. Though the coadjutor had preached at the morning’s mass, it was known that he leaned strongly toward the Fronde; Mazarin, in asking the Archbishop of Paris to have his nephew conduct a victory mass, had evidently intended to bestow upon Sir Retz one of those underhanded Italian blows of which he was so fond. In fact, upon leaving Notre-Dame, the coadjutor had learned what was going on. Though friendly with the leading Frondeurs, he wasn’t in so deep that he couldn’t retreat if the Court offered him the right incentives; for him, the office of coadjutor was just a means to an end. Sir Retz wanted to be an archbishop like his uncle, or a cardinal like Mazarin, and the people’s faction could hardly award him those royal favours. He’d come to the palace to compliment the queen on the victory at Lens, and how his compliments were received would determine whether he would side for or against the Court. So, the coadjutor entered, and at his appearance, the entire Court, giddy with triumph, turned in curiosity to hear what he had to say. Now the coadjutor, by himself, almost had more wit than all those gathered there prepared to mock him. His speech was so eloquent and proper that those who were ready to ridicule him could find no fault to seize upon. He concluded by placing all his weak and unworthy powers at the feet of Her Majesty. The queen appeared, while it lasted, to enjoy the coadjutor’s address but when it ended with that expression of devotion – the only phrase that provided any pretext for mockery – she turned away from him toward her favourites with a look that said that now he was fair game. At once the court wits began pretending surprise and mystification. Nogent-Bautru, the Court’s leading clown, declared that the queen must be thrilled to have the support of the Church, though it came when she no longer needed it. Everyone started to laugh. The Count Villeroi said that he didn’t see how anyone could have been anxious for a moment when the Court had as a defender against parliament and the mob one such as the coadjutor, who with a word could raise an army of curates, beadles, and choirboys. The Marshall de La Meilleraie added that, if it came to blows, the coadjutor should join in, though it would be a shame they wouldn’t be able to recognise him in the mêlée by a red cardinal’s hat, the way Henry IV had been known by his white plume at the Battle of Ivry. Coadjuteur de Gondy remained calm and serene before this storm that he could turn about and make deadly to his mockers. The queen then asked him if he had anything to add to the fine speech he’d just made. “Yes, Madam,” said the coadjutor. “Victories are fine things but I must beg you to think twice before throwing the kingdom into civil war.”

The queen turned her back and the laughter resumed. The coadjutor bowed and left the chamber, after sending the cardinal who was watching him, one of those looks that everyone knew declared them mortal enemies. This look was so sharp that it went right to Mazarin’s heart, and he, sensing that it was a declaration of war, grabbed d’Artagnan by the arm and said, “When the time comes, you’ll recognise that man, won’t you? The one who just went out.”

“Yes, My Lord,” d’Artagnan said. Then, turning to Porthos, he added. “The devil! I don’t like quarrels with men of the Church.”

Meanwhile, Gondy made his way out of the palace, bestowing blessings as he went, and savouring the pleasure of making his enemies’ servants fall on their knees. “Oh,” he muttered, passing through the palace gate, “what an ungrateful court – a perfidious court – a cowardly court! Tomorrow they’ll be laughing in a different tone.”

But while the courtiers at the Royal Palace outdid each other in transports of joy to entertain and exalt the queen, Mazarin, who was a man of sense, and who, moreover, had the foresight that comes from fear, wasted no time in vain and dangerous distractions: he left right behind the coadjutor, secured his account books, locked up his gold, and with workers he trusted, contrived new secret caches in the walls. On returning home, the coadjutor learned that a young man had arrived after his departure and now awaited him; he asked for the young man’s name and started with pleasure when he heard it was Louvières. He rushed to his office, where Broussel’s son was in fact waiting for him, still furious and bloodstained from his fight with the king’s guards. The only precaution he’d taken before coming to the archbishopric had been to leave his arquebus with a friend. The coadjutor went up to him and held out his hand. But the young man looked searchingly at him, as if trying to plumb the depths of his heart. “My dear Sir Louvières,” said the coadjutor, “please believe that I am personally moved by the tragedy that’s come upon you.”

“Is that true? Do you mean it sincerely?” asked Louvières.

“From the bottom of my heart,” Gondy said.

“In that case, My Lord, the time for words has passed, and the hour for action has come. My Lord, if you will it, within three days my father will be out of prison, and within six months you will be a cardinal.”

The coadjutor flinched. “Oh, let’s speak frankly!” said Louvières. “Let’s put all our cards on the table. One doesn’t hand out thirty thousand crowns in alms, as you’ve done in the past six months, from pure Christian charity – no one is that good. You are ambitious: you’re a man of genius, and you want your worth to be recognised. As for what I feel, I hate the Court, and at this moment my sole desire is for vengeance. Give us the clergy and the working poor, I’ll bring you the bourgeoisie and the Parliament, and with these four elements, Paris will be ours within a week. And then believe me, Sir Coadjuteur, the Court will give us out of fear what they won’t give out of benevolence.”

The coadjutor looked at Louvières with his piercing gaze, and said, “But, Sir Louvières, don’t you know that what you’re proposing is nothing less than civil war?”

“You’ve been preparing for that for a long time, My Lord, so that should be welcome to you.”

“Regardless,” said the coadjutor, “you understand that what you propose requires reflection?”

“How much time are you asking for?”

“Twelve hours, Sir. Is that too long?”

“It’s noon; I’ll be back here at midnight.”

“If I haven’t returned by then, wait for me.”

“Good! At midnight then, My Lord.”

“At midnight, my dear Sir Louvières.”

Left alone, Gondy summoned all the curates with whom he was in contact. Two hours later, he had assembled the thirty priests whose parishes were the most populous, and thus the most contentious, in Paris. Gondy related the insults he’d suffered at the Royal Palace, and the mockeries of Bautru, the Count Villeroi, and the Marshall de La Meilleraie. The curates asked him what was to be done. “It’s very simple,” the coadjutor said. “You are the conscience of the people. Well! You must undermine the culture of respect and fear of kings. Tell your congregations that the queen is a tyrant, and repeat, forcefully so that everyone knows, that all the evils France suffers come from Mazarin, her lover and her corrupter. Begin this work today, this very hour, and within three days I hope to see results. Now, if any of you have useful advice to give me, stay behind and I’ll be pleased to listen.”

After the others had left three priests remained, the curates of Saint-Merri, of Saint-Sulpice, and of Saint-Eustache. “You think you have better ways to help me than your colleagues?” Gondy asked.

“We hope so,” the curates replied.

“Come, let’s start with you, priest of the parish of Saint-Merri.”

“My Lord, I have in my parish a man who might be of great service to you.”

“Who is this man?”

“A merchant of the Rue des Lombards who has great influence over the local tradesmen.”

“What is he called?”

“He’s named Planchet; he started a riot all by himself about six weeks ago but afterward, since they were out to hang him, he’s disappeared.”

“And can you find him again?”

“I hope so. I haven’t heard that he was arrested, and since I’m his wife’s confessor, if she knows where he is, I’ll know too.”

“Very well, Sir Curé, seek out this man, and if you find him, bring him to me.”

“At what time, My Lord?”

“At six o’clock, if you can.”

“I’ll bring him to see you at six o’clock, My Lord.”

“Go then, my dear Curate, and God go with you!”

The curate departed. “And you, Sir?” Gondy said, turning to the Curate of Saint-Sulpice.

“I, My Lord,” said the latter, “know a man who’s done great things for one of the popular princes. He’d make an excellent rebel captain, and I can place him at your disposal.”

“What do they call this man?”

“Sir Count Rochefort.”\*

“Yes, I know him too – but unfortunately he isn’t in Paris.”

“My Lord, he’s in Rue Cassette.”

“Since when?”

“Since about three days ago.”

“Why hasn’t he come to see me?”

“They told him ... My Lord will pardon me...”

“Of course. Speak.”

“He heard My Lord was negotiating with the Court.”

Gondy bit his lips. “He was mistaken. Bring him to me at eight o’clock, Sir Curé, and may God bless you as I bless you!”

The second curate bowed and departed. “It’s your turn, Sir,” said the coadjutor, turning to the remaining curate. “Do you have something to offer me as good as those two?”

“Better, My Lord.”

“The devil! Take care not to exaggerate; the one offered me a merchant, the other a count. Do you offer me a prince, then?”

“My Lord, I offer you a beggar.”

“Indeed!” said Gondy, reflecting. “You’re right, Sir Curé – I could use someone who could rouse that legion of the poor who choke the streets of Paris, who could make them shout out loud enough for all France to hear that it was Mazarin who reduced them to beggary.”

“I have just the man.”

“Bravo! And who is this man?”

“A simple beggar, as I said, My Lord, who for some years has asked alms by dispensing holy water on the steps of the Church of Saint-Eustache.”

“And you say he has influence over his fellow beggars?”

“Is My Lord aware that begging is an organised occupation, a sort of association of those of no association, to which each contributes a share and reports to a chief?”

“Yes, I’d heard that,” replied the coadjutor.

“Well! This man I offer you is one of their syndics.”

“And what do you know of this man?”

“Nothing, My Lord, other than that he seems to me tormented by remorse.”

“What makes you think that?”

“On the twenty-eighth of each month he has me say a mass for the rest of the soul of a person who died a violent death; just yesterday I said this mass again.”

“What do you call him?”

"Maillard – but I don't think that's his real name."

"And do you think that right now we'd find him at his post?"

"Certainly."

"Let's go see your beggar, Sir Curé – and if he's all you say he is, then you're right, it's you who's brought me the real treasure."

Gondy dressed as a cavalier, wearing a large felt hat with a red plume, a long sword at his belt, and spurs buckled on his boots, then enveloped himself in a large cloak and followed the curate. The coadjutor and his companion traversed the streets between the archbishopric and the Church of Saint-Eustache, taking careful note of the temper of the populace. The people were aroused but like a swarm of bees uncertain of where to settle, and if no leadership was found for them, their buzzing would simply fade and die. Upon arriving at the Rue des Prouvaires, the curate pointed toward the square before the church. "There," he said, "see him, he's at his post."

Gondy looked and saw a poor man sitting on a cheap chair and leaning against a balustrade. He had a small bucket next to him and held a holy water sprinkler in his hand. "Does he have that spot by special privilege?" Gondy asked.

"No, My Lord," said the curate, "he made a deal with his predecessor for the position of holy water dispenser."

"A deal?"

"Yes, these positions are bought and sold. I believe he paid a hundred pistoles for it."

"So, this rascal is rich?"

"Some of these men die leaving behind twenty or thirty thousand crowns – or more."

"Huh!" said Gondy, laughing. "I didn't know my alms were such a good investment."

Meanwhile they were advancing into the square; when the curate and the coadjutor reached the base of the church stair, the beggar rose and lifted his aspergillum. He was a man of between sixty-five and seventy, small and portly, with grey hair and light eyes. His face was stamped with the struggle between two opposing principles, an evil nature constrained by sheer force of will, perhaps through repentance. On seeing the cavalier who accompanied the curate, he started slightly and stared, surprised. The curate and the coadjutor touched the holy water sprinkler with their fingertips and made the sign of the cross, and the coadjutor dropped a silver coin into the open hat sitting on the ground. "Maillard," said the curate, "we've come, sir and I, to speak with you for a moment."

"With me!" said the beggar. "This is quite an honour for a poor holy water dispenser." The man's voice was accented with a tone of irony he couldn't quite suppress, and which astonished the coadjutor. The curate, apparently accustomed to this tone, went on, "Yes, we wanted to get your opinion on the events of the day, and what you're hearing from people going in and out of the church."

The beggar shook his head. "These are sad times, Sir Curé, and as always, the poor people have the worst of it. As for what's being said, everyone is dissatisfied, and everyone complains but when you say everybody, you say nobody."

"Explain yourself, my friend," said the coadjutor.

"I say that all these cries, all these complaints and curses, are nothing but wind and thunder, and without a leader to steer the storm, no lightning will strike."

"My friend," said Gondy, "you seem like a clever fellow. If we had a little civil war, would you be inclined to place at the disposal of its leader, if we find one, the personal power and influence you have over your comrades?"

"Yes, Sir, provided this war was blessed by the Church, and thus could lead me to my goal that is the remission of my sins."

"This war will not only be blessed by the Church, it will be led by it. As for the remission of your sins, we'll have on our side the Archbishop of Paris, who has all the powers of the Court of Rome, and even Sir Coadjuteur, who can grant plenary indulgences; we could recommend you to him."

"Consider, Maillard," said the curate, "that I've vouched for you to sir, who is a powerful lord, so in a way I'm responsible for you."

"I know, Sir Curé, that you've always been very good to me," said the beggar, "so I'm inclined to serve you."

"And do you think your influence with your colleagues is as great as Sir Curé tells me it is?" asked Gondy.

"They hold me in a certain esteem," said the beggar with pride. "They'll do whatever I ask of them, and wherever I go, they'll follow."

"And do you think you could find for me fifty reliable and energetic men ready for a brawl, and able to shout, 'Down with Mazarin!' loud enough to bring down the walls of the Royal Palace as was done at Jericho?"

"I think," said the beggar, "we could undertake to do things even more difficult and significant than that."

"Ah!" said Gondy. "Could you undertake to build a dozen barricades overnight?"

"I could undertake to build fifty of them, and to defend them, when the time comes."

"*For the love of God,*" said Gondy, "you speak with an assurance that pleases me, and since Sir Cure vouches for you..."

"I do," said the curate.

"Here's a purse containing five hundred pistoles in gold. Make all your arrangements and tell me where I can meet you this evening at ten o'clock."

"It would have to be a high place, from which we can see every quarter of Paris."

"Would you like me to have a word with the vicar of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie? He could let you up into the tower," said the curate.

"Perfect," said the beggar.

"Then till this evening, at ten o'clock," said the coadjutor. "And if I'm satisfied with you, you'll have another purse of five hundred pistoles."

The beggar's eyes shone with a gleam of greed, quickly suppressed. "Until tonight, Sir," he said. "Everything will be ready." He took his chair, pail, and aspergillum and stored them in the church, dipped some holy water from the basin as if he had no confidence in his own, and went on his way.

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The Tower of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie

By a quarter to six, Sir Gondy had made all his arrangements and had returned to the archbishop's palace. At six o'clock the Curate of Saint-Merri was announced. The coadjutor noticed that he was followed by another man. "Come in," he said.

The curate entered, with Planchet right behind him. "My Lord," said the Curate of Saint-Merri, "this is the person whom I had the honour to tell you about."

Planchet bowed with the air of a man familiar with genteel houses. "Are you disposed to serve the cause of the people?" Gondy asked.

"I certainly am," said Planchet. "I'm a Frondeur to the soul. I stand before you, My Lord, a man condemned to be hanged."

"For doing what?"

"From the hands of Mazarin's officials, I liberated a noble lord whom they were escorting back to the Bastille where he'd languished for five years."

"His name?"

"Oh, My Lord knows him well! It was the Count Rochefort."

"Ah! Yes indeed!" said the coadjutor. "I've heard talk of this affair – you raised the whole quarter, I was told."

"Very nearly," said Planchet with a satisfied air.

"And your situation is...?"

"Confectioner, Rue des Lombards."

"Explain to me how it happens that, coming from such a gentle occupation, you have such warlike inclinations?"

"How is it that My Lord, a man of the Church, receives me now dressed as a cavalier, with a sword at his side and spurs on his boots?"

"*My faith!* Not bad!" said Gondy, laughing. "But you know I've always had warlike inclinations despite my clerical calling."

"Well, My Lord, before I was a confectioner, I spent three years as a sergeant in the Piedmont Regiment, and before that for eighteen months I was lackey to Sir d'Artagnan."

"The Lieutenant of Musketeers?" Gondy asked.

"The same, My Lord."

"But who's said to be loyal to Mazarin?"

"Uh..." stammered Planchet.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing, My Lord. Sir d'Artagnan is in the service, so Sir d'Artagnan obeys Mazarin, who pays him, just as we bourgeois Frondeurs attack Mazarin, who robs us."

"You're a smart fellow, my friend but are you reliable?"

"I think Sir Curé can vouch for that," said Planchet.

"Indeed but I'd prefer to hear it from your own mouth."

"You can count on me, My Lord, if it's a matter of inciting a riot in the streets."

"That's exactly what this is. How many men do you think you could assemble in a night?"

"Two hundred muskets and five hundred halberds."

"If we had just one man in each quarter who could do the same, by tomorrow we'd have a mighty army."

"That's so."

"Would you be willing to follow the orders of the Count Rochefort?"

"I'd follow him into hell – which is no small statement, considering I think he's capable of getting there."

"Bravo!"

"What sign shall we use to distinguish friend from enemy?"

"Have every Frondeur wear a knot of straw in his hat."

"Good. I'll spread the word."

"Do you need money?"

"Money never hurts, My Lord – if we don't have any, we'll do without but if we have some, things will go better and faster."

Gondy went to a coffer and pulled out a sack. "Here are five hundred pistoles," he said. "If the action goes well, count on receiving a similar sum tomorrow."

"I'll give My Lord a faithful accounting of how it's spent," said Planchet, tucking the sack under his arm.

"If it's an accountant you want to follow, I recommend the cardinal to you."

"Nevertheless, it's in good hands."

Planchet went out but the curate stayed behind for a moment. "Are you satisfied, My Lord?" he said.

"Yes, he seems like a dependable rascal."

"He'll deliver even more than he promises."

"If so, he's a wonder."

And the curate left to rejoin Planchet, who was waiting for him on the stairs. Ten minutes later the Curate of Saint-Sulpice was announced. As soon as the door to Gondy's office was opened a man rushed in – the Count Rochefort. "So, it *is* you, my dear Count!" said Gondy, holding out his hand.

"Have you finally decided you're with us, my Lord?" asked Rochefort.

"I always was," said Gondy.

"Then we won't mention it again – if you say so, I believe you. We're going to invite Mazarin to a ball."

"Well ... I hope so."

“And when shall the dancing begin?”

“The invitations were sent out tonight,” said the coadjutor, “but the violins won’t begin to play until tomorrow.”

“You can count on me, plus fifty soldiers promised me by the Knight d’Humières whenever I need them.”

“Fifty soldiers?”

“Yes, he’s raising recruits that he’ll lend to me; when the dance is over, I’ll find a way to replace any losses.”

“Very good, my dear Rochefort – but that’s not all.”

“What else is there?” asked Rochefort, smiling.

“Sir Beaufort,\* what is he doing?”

“He’s in the Vendômois, where he’s waiting until I write and tell him it’s time to return to Paris.”

“Write to him; it’s time.”

“Then you’re sure about this business?”

“Yes but he should hurry: once the people of Paris are in revolt, we’ll have ten princes who want to place themselves at their head. If he’s late, he’ll find someone else in his place.”

“Can I tell him that comes straight from you?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“And can I tell him he can count on your support?”

“Completely.”

“And you’ll put him in charge?”

“Of the war, yes – but as to policy…”

“You know that’s not his strong suit.”

“He must allow me to bargain for my cardinal’s hat as I think best.”

“Why do you want one?”

“Since I must wear a hat that isn’t a helmet,” said Gondy, “I at least want it to be red.”

“There’s no need to argue about shapes and colours,” said Rochefort with a laugh. “I’ll answer for his consent.”

“You’ll write to him tonight?”

“I’ll do better than that – I’ll send a messenger.”

“How long will it take him to get here?”

“Five days.”

“Let him come. He’ll find things have changed.”

“So I hope.”

“I’ll answer for it.”

“What now?”

“Go assemble your fifty men and stand ready.”

“For what?”

“For anything.”

“Is there a rallying sign?”

“A straw knot on the hat.”

“Very good. Goodbye, My Lord.”

“Goodbye, my dear Rochefort.”

“Ah, Mazarin! Mazarin!” said Rochefort, trailed by his curate, who hadn’t been able to get a word into the conversation. “Now you’ll see if I’m too old to be a man of action!”

It was half past nine, and it took a half hour to go from the archbishopric to the tower of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie. The coadjutor noticed a light glimmering in one of the highest windows of the tower.

“Good,” he said, “our syndic is at his post.”

He knocked, and they opened the door for him. The vicar himself led him up, lighting the way to the top of the tower; arriving there, he opened a small door, set the lantern in a corner so the coadjutor could find it upon leaving, and went back down. Though the key was in the door, the coadjutor knocked. “Enter,” came a voice the coadjutor recognised as that of the beggar.

Gondy entered, and indeed there was the holy water dispenser of the Saint-Eustache square, reclining on a sort of pallet. Upon seeing the coadjutor come in, he rose. Ten o’clock sounded. “Well!” said Gondy. “Have you kept your word?”

“Not exactly,” said the beggar.

“What do you mean?”

“You asked me for five hundred men, yes?”

“Yes – well?”

“Well! I will have two thousand.”

“That’s no boast?”

“Would you like proof?”

“I would.”

Three candles were burning, each in front of a different window, one facing the Île de la Cité, the second toward the Royal Palace, the third toward Rue Saint-Denis. The man went silently to each of these candles and, one by one, blew them out. The coadjutor found himself in darkness, the room lit only by the uncertain rays of a moon lost among the clouds, edging their dark masses with silver.

“What did you do?” the coadjutor asked.

“I’ve given the signal.”

“To do what?”

“To raise the barricades.”

“Ah!”

“When you leave here you’ll see my men at work. Take care not to break your legs by tripping over a chain or falling into a trench.”

“Good! Here’s a sum equal to what you received before. Now remember that you’re a leader and stay away from drink.”

“For the last twenty years I’ve drunk nothing but water.”

The man took the purse from the coadjutor, who could hear him handling it and feeling the coins within. “Ah ha!” Gondy said to himself. “You are a greedy rascal, after all.”

The beggar sighed and put the purse down. “Will I never change?” he said. “Will I never be able to set aside the man I was? What vanity! What misery!”

“But you’ll take it, won’t you?”

“Yes, though I swear a vow before you now that whatever remains afterward will be spent in pious works.” His face was pale and drawn like that of a man who has fought an inner battle.

“Strange man!” Gondy murmured.

He picked up his hat but turning to go he saw the beggar between him and the door. His first thought was that the man meant him some harm – but the beggar only clasped his hands and fell to his knees. “My Lord,” he said, “before you leave, give me your blessing, I pray you.”

“My Lord?” Gondy said. “My friend, you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

“No, My Lord, I take you for who you are, that is, Sir Coadjuteur. I knew you at first glance.”

Gondy smiled. “And you want my blessing?” he said.

“Yes. I need it.”

The beggar said these words in a tone of humility so great and of repentance so profound, that Gondy extended his hand and gave him his blessing with all the unction at his command. “Now there is communion between us,” said the coadjutor. “I have blessed you, and you are sacred to me, as I am to you. Come, have you committed any crime for which human justice pursues you, and from which I can protect you?”

The beggar shook his head. “My crime, My Lord, is not a matter for human justice, and you can only help me by freely blessing me as you have.”

“Come, be frank with me,” said the coadjutor. “You haven’t always followed your current calling?”

“No, My Lord, only for the last six years.”

“What did you do before that?”

“I was in the Bastille.”

“And before you were in the Bastille?”

“I will tell you, My Lord, on the day you hear my confession.”

“Very well. Remember that at whatever hour of the day you choose to present yourself, I’ll be ready to give you absolution.”

“Thank you, My Lord,” the beggar said in a low voice, “but I’m not yet ready to receive it.”

“Very well. Goodbye then.”

“Goodbye, My Lord,” said the beggar, opening the door and bowing before the prelate. The coadjutor picked up the lantern and went down the stairs, leaving the supplicant to himself.

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The Riot

It was about eleven o’clock at night. Gondy had scarcely gone a hundred steps along the streets of Paris when he saw that strange changes were underway. The whole city seemed inhabited by spectres, silent shadows that could be seen flitting down the streets, or dragging and overturning carts, while others dug trenches deep enough to swallow entire companies of cavalry. All these energetic figures toiled away busily, like demons performing some unknown labour. These were the beggars of the Court of Miracles, the agents of the holy water dispenser of Saint-Eustache, preparing the barricades for the following day. Gondy regarded these men of the darkness, these nocturnal labourers, with a certain terror; he wondered if, having summoned these unclean creatures from their lairs, he would have the power to compel them to return there. When one of these figures neared him, he was moved to make the sign of the cross. He reached Rue Saint-Honoré and went along it toward the Rue de la Ferronnerie. There, the situation changed: merchants were going from shop to shop, closing shutters and locking doors, opening them only long enough to admit men trying to conceal what they were carrying – shopkeepers bringing spare weapons to lend to those who had none. One individual went from door to door, bending under a stack of swords, harquebuses, muskets, and weapons of every kind that he deposited as he went along. As he passed near a lantern, the coadjutor recognised Planchet. The coadjutor returned to the river by the Rue de la Monnaie; along the quays, groups of citizens in cloaks of black or grey, depending on whether they were of the upper or lower bourgeoisie, stood waiting, while isolated individuals passed from one group to another. All these grey or black cloaks bulged out behind with the point of a sword, or in front with a harquebus or musket. On arriving at the Pont Neuf, the coadjutor found that the bridge was guarded. A man approached him and asked, “Who are you? I don’t recognise you as one of us.”

“Then you fail to recognise your friends, my dear Sir Louvières,” said the coadjutor, raising his hat. Louvières saw who it was and bowed.

Gondy crossed the river and turned toward the Tour de Nesle. There, he saw a long line of people filing past the city wall. One might have taken them for a procession of phantoms, for they were all enveloped in white cloaks. At a certain point, these men seemed to vanish one after another. Gondy drew closer and watched them disappear into the earth from the first to the last. The final phantom looked up as if to make sure that he and his companions weren't observed, and saw Gondy watching from the shadows. This phantom marched right up to him and put a pistol to his head. "*Hey*, Sir Rochefort," said Gondy with a laugh. "Let's not get too playful with the firearms."

Rochefort recognised the voice. "Ah! Is it you, My Lord?" he said.

"Myself. What are these people doing entering the bowels of the earth?"

"They're my fifty recruits from the Knight d'Humières, who are wearing white cloaks as they're destined for the light horse."

"Where are they going?"

"We're assembling in the underground studio of a sculptor friend of mine, going in through the trap door where they bring in the slabs of marble."

"Fine," said Gondy.

And he shook hands with Rochefort, who followed his men down and closed the trap door behind him. The coadjutor returned home. It was one o'clock in the morning. He opened his window and leaned out to listen. An uncanny ferment, unprecedented, unknown, sounded from the city. One could hear echoing down the streets, dark and hollow, something strange and terrible. From time to time a rumbling like a distant storm or rising swell could be heard but there was nothing clear, nothing distinct, nothing intelligible about it. It was like that mysterious and subterranean growling said to precede earthquakes. The work of preparing for revolt lasted all night. The next day Paris, upon awakening, seemed to tremble at her own appearance. It was like a city under siege. Armed men stood at the barricades, their eyes menacing, their muskets at the ready; passwords, slogans, interrogations, and arrests were what passers-by encountered in every block. Those with plumed hats and gilded swords were stopped and made to cry out, "Long live Broussel! Down with Mazarin!"—

And any who resisted this ceremony were booed, spat upon, and even beaten. No one was killed as yet but the desire to do so was evident. The barricades had been pushed almost to the Royal Palace. From the Rue des Bons-Enfants to Rue de la Ferronnerie, from Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre to the Pont Neuf, from Rue Richelieu to the Saint-Honoré gate, there were more than ten thousand men under arms, the most forward of whom called challenges to the impassive sentinels of the regiment of guards placed in defensive positions around the Royal Palace, the gates of which were closed behind them that made their situation precarious. In between the barricades there circulated, in bands of a hundred or more, ragged and desperate men bearing banners that read, *Behold the misery of the people!* Wherever these folk passed, shouts and frantic cries went up — and there were many such bands roaming the streets. Upon arising, Anne of Austria and Mazarin were astonished when they were informed that the city that had been tranquil the evening before, now trembled with fever and emotion; neither of them would believe the reports until they witnessed it with their own eyes and ears. An outer window was opened for them: they saw, they heard, and were convinced. Mazarin shrugged his shoulders and pretended to dismiss this fever of the populace but he paled visibly, and, at the first opportunity, rushed to his study, where he shut himself up with his gold and jewels, running his hands over the finest of his diamonds. As for the queen, furious and left to her own devices, she summoned Marshall de La Meilleraie and ordered him to take as many men as he pleased and go find out the meaning of this nonsense. The marshal was both adventurous and arrogant, displaying that disdain for the commoners typical of men of the sword. He took a hundred and fifty men and tried to march out by the Louvre Bridge but he encountered the barricades built by the beggar of Saint-Eustache. They were guarded, not only by armed men but also by women and children. Master Friquet, owner of a pistol and a sword given him by Louvières, had organised a band of rascals like himself, and if nothing else they made a lot of noise. The marshal thought these defences less well guarded than the others and tried to force them. He ordered twenty men to dismount and storm the first barricade, while he and the rest of the mounted troop protected the assailants. The twenty men marched right up to the obstacle but from behind the beams, through the cart wheels, from the windows on either side, came a terrible fusillade. At the sound of this musketry, Planchet's halberdiers appeared at the corner of the Cemetery of the Innocents while Louvières's bourgeois came up the Rue de la Monnaie. The Marshall de La Meilleraie was taken between two fires. But the marshal was brave, and resolved to die where he stood. His men gave back blow for blow and screams of pain began to rise from the crowd. The guards, better trained, dealt out more damage but the citizens so outnumbered them they began to drop beneath a veritable hurricane of iron. Casualties fell so fast it was almost like Rocroi or Lérída. Fontrailles, the marshal's aide-de-camp, had his arm broken, and his horse took a ball in the neck, the pain of which drove it nearly mad and made it impossible to control. It was at this climactic moment, when even the bravest felt a thrill of fear and a cold sweat, that the crowd opened up toward the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec, shouting, "*Vive le Coadjuteur!*" Gondy appeared, in a surplice and hood of chainmail, and walked serenely into the midst of the fusillade, distributing blessings left and right as calmly as if he were conducting the Procession of Corpus Christi. Everyone fell on their knees. The marshal recognised Gondy and rushed up to him. "Get me out of here, in the name of heaven," he said, "or I and all my men are going to lose our skins." There was such a clamour that in the midst of it not even thunder could have been heard. Gondy raised his hand to demand silence. Everyone fell quiet. "My children," he said, "this is the Marshall of La Meilleraie whose actions you have misunderstood. He intends, upon returning to the Louvre, to ask the queen in your name for the release of our Broussel. You agree to this, don't you, Marshal?" added Gondy, turning to La Meilleraie.

"*Morbleu!*" the latter cried. "Agree to it? I should think so! I never hoped to get off so cheaply."

"He gives you his word as a gentleman," said Gondy.

The marshal raised his hand in sign of assent. "Long live the coadjutor!" the crowd shouted. Some even added, "Long live the marshal!" But then everyone returned to the refrain: "Down with Mazarin!"

The crowd drew back. The Rue Saint-Honoré was the shortest route, so the barricades were opened, and the marshal and his remaining troops retreated, led by Friquet and his rascals, some pretending to beat on drums while others imitated trumpets. It was almost a triumphal march — except that the barricades closed again behind them. The marshal gnawed on his knuckles. Meanwhile, as we've said, Mazarin was in his study, putting his affairs in order. He had sent for d'Artagnan but in all the tumult he didn't expect to see him, since d'Artagnan wasn't on duty. But after about ten minutes the lieutenant appeared in the doorway, followed by his inseparable Porthos. "Ah! *Come in*, sir d'Artagnan," cried the cardinal, "and be welcome, your friend as well. But what's going on in this damned Paris?"

"What's going on, My Lord? Nothing good," said d'Artagnan, shaking his head. "The city is in open revolt, and just now, as I was crossing Rue Montorgueil with your servant Sir du Vallon, in spite of my uniform — or maybe because of my uniform — they tried to get us to shout, 'Long live Broussel!' And can I tell you, My Lord, what else they wanted us to shout?"

"Tell me."

"*Down with Mazarin!* And *my faith*, that was the more popular cry."

Mazarin smiled but became very pale. "And did you shout it?" he said.

"My faith, no," said d'Artagnan. "I was not in good voice, and Sir du Vallon, who has a cold, also refused to shout. Then, My Lord..."

"Then what?" asked Mazarin.

"Take a look at my hat and my cloak." And d'Artagnan showed him four bullet holes in his cloak and two in his hat. As for Porthos's clothing, a halberd had slashed open the side of his doublet, and a pistol shot had cut short his plume.

"*Diavolo!*" said the cardinal thoughtfully, regarding the two friends with genuine admiration. "Even I would have shouted it."

At that moment the tumult seemed to grow nearer. Mazarin wiped his forehead and looked around. He wanted to go to the window but didn't dare. "See what's going on, Sir d'Artagnan," he said.

D'Artagnan went to the window with his usual nonchalance. "Oh ho!" he said. "What have we here? Marshall de La Meilleraie is returning without his hat, Fontrailles has his arm in a sling, I see wounded guards, horses covered in blood ... but wait! What are the sentries doing? They're presenting arms and preparing to fire!"

"They've been ordered to fire upon the people," said Mazarin, "if the people approach the Royal Palace."

"But if they fire, all is lost!" cried d'Artagnan.

"We still have the gates."

"The gates! They'll have those down inside of five minutes, torn right from their hinges! Don't shoot, *Mordieu!*" d'Artagnan cried, opening the window.

Despite this desperate cry that, in all the clamour, hadn't even been heard, three or four musket shots sounded out, and in reply there was a terrible fusillade. They heard the patter of musket balls on the façade of the Royal Palace, and one passed under d'Artagnan's arm and shattered a mirror, at which Porthos glanced complacently. "*Ohimé!*" cried the cardinal. "My Venetian glass!"

"Oh, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, quietly closing the window, "don't bother weeping now, it's not worth it, since inside of an hour, in all likelihood, there won't be a single mirror still intact in the Royal Palace, whether Venetian or Parisian."

"But what should we do, then?" said the cardinal, trembling.

"Why, *morbleu!* You'd better give them Broussel, since that's what they demand. What the devil do you want with a Councillor of Parliament anyway? He's good for nothing."

"And you, Sir du Vallon, is that your advice? What would you do?"

"I'd give up Broussel," said Porthos.

"Come, come, Gentlemen," cried Mazarin, "I must speak of this matter to the queen."

At the end of the corridor he paused. "I can count on you, can't I, Gentlemen?" he said.

"We don't give our loyalty twice," said d'Artagnan. "We're committed to you and will follow your orders."

"Good!" said Mazarin. "Wait here in this office." And turning aside, he went into the salon by a different door.

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### The Riot becomes a Revolt

The office in which d'Artagnan and Porthos were waiting was separated from the queen's salon by nothing but tapestry doors. This thin partition made it possible to hear everything that was passing within, while the gap between the curtains, narrow though it was, made it possible to see. The queen stood in the centre of her salon, pale with anger but her self-control was so great that but for her pallor, one would have said she was quite undisturbed. Behind her were Comminges, Villequier, and Guitaut, while beyond them were her lords and ladies. In front of her, Chancellor Séguier — the same man who, twenty years before, had so persecuted her — recounted how his carriage had been upset, how he'd been pursued into the Hôtel d'O, and how that house had been immediately invaded, plundered, and devastated. Luckily, he'd had time to get into a closet behind a tapestry, where an old woman had hidden him and his brother the Bishop of Meaux. But the danger had been so real, as madmen searched the house shouting threats, that the chancellor had believed his hour had come, and he'd confessed himself to his brother, so he'd be prepared for death if discovered. Fortunately, that hadn't happened, and the mob, believing he'd gotten out by some back door, marched off and gave him a chance to escape. He'd disguised himself by dressing in some of the Marquis d'O's clothes and had left the hôtel, stepping over the bodies of an officer and two guards who had died defending the door to the street. During this account, Mazarin had come in, quietly glided over next to the queen and listened. "And so?" the queen asked the chancellor once he'd finished. "What do you have to say about this?"

"I think the situation is very serious, Madam."

"But what advice do you have for me?"

"There is a course I would propose to Your Majesty but I dare not."

"Oh, be daring, Sir," said the queen with a bitter smile. "You have dared other things."

The chancellor reddened and stammered out a few words. "This has nothing to do with the past, just the present," said the queen. "You said you have some advice to give me. What is it?"

"Madam," said the chancellor, hesitating, "it would be to release Broussel."

The queen, already pale, turned even paler, and her face contorted. "Release Broussel!" she said. "Never!"

At that moment steps were heard in the antechamber, and without being announced, the Marshall de La Meilleraie appeared on the threshold. "Ah! There you are, Marshal!" Queen Anne cried joyfully.

"You've taught that rabble to see reason, I hope?"

"Madam," said the marshal, "I've left three men dead on the Pont Neuf, four at Les Halles, six at the corner of the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec, and another two at the gates of the palace, fifteen in all. I have ten or twelve wounded. My hat is I know not where, carried away by a bullet, and in all probability, I'd be with my head if it wasn't for Sir Coadjuteur, who came and got me out of that mess."

"Ah!" said the queen. "I would have been surprised not to find that bow-legged hound mixed up in this."

"Madam," said La Meilleraie with a laugh, "don't speak ill of him in front of me, I beg, for the service he's done me is still too recent."

"Very well," said the queen, "be grateful to him all you like but that doesn't bind me. You're safe and sound, and to me that's what matters. Your safe return is very welcome to us."

"Yes, Madam – but I've been allowed to return on one condition that is that I convey to you the will of the people."

"Their will!" said Anne of Austria, frowning furiously. "Oh, Sir Marshall, you must have found yourself in great danger indeed to accept so strange a mission!"

These words were pronounced with an accent of irony that didn't escape the marshal. "Your pardon, Madam," said the marshal. "I'm not a diplomat, I'm a man of war, so perhaps I don't weigh my words well; I should have said the desire of the people, and not their will. As to the reply with which you honoured me, I believe you were implying that I was afraid."

The queen smiled. "Well! Yes, Madam, I was afraid. This is only the third time in my life it's happened though I've been in a dozen pitched battles and I don't know how many fights and skirmishes; yes, I was afraid, and I'd rather be here facing Your Majesty, no matter how threatening your smile, than facing those demons from hell who chased me back here, and who come from I know not where."

"Bravo!" said d'Artagnan quietly to Porthos. "Well answered."

"Well, then!" said the queen, biting her lips, while the courtiers looked on in astonishment. "What is this desire of my people?"

"To release Broussel, Madam," said the marshal.

"Never!" said the queen. "Never!"

"Your Majesty commands," said La Meilleraie, bowing and taking a step back.

"Where are you going, Marshal?" said the queen.

"I go to take Your Majesty's response to those who await it."

"Stay here, Marshal – I don't wish to appear to be parleying with rebels."

"Madam, I have given my word," said the marshal.

"Which means what?"

"That unless you arrest me, I'm compelled to return to them."

Anne of Austria's eyes flashed like lightning. "Oh! If it comes to that, Sir," she said, "I've arrested greater men than you. Guitaut!"

Mazarin hastened forward. "Madam," he said, "if I might dare to offer some advice..."

"If it's also to release Broussel, Sir, you may dispense with it."

"No," said Mazarin, "Though that advice might be as good as any."

"What is it, then?"

"It's to call for Sir Coadjuteur."

"The coadjutor!" cried the queen. "That miserable troublemaker! He's the one who's behind the entire revolt."

"All the more reason," said Mazarin. "If he did it, he can undo it."

"And here's the opportunity," said Comminges, who was near a window and looking out, "because there he is, giving blessings in the square outside the Royal Palace."

The queen rushed to the window. "It's true!" she said. "Look at him, the great hypocrite!"

"What I see is that everyone kneels to him although he's just a coadjutor," said Mazarin, "while if I were out there they'd tear me to pieces, even though I'm a cardinal. I persist, then, in my *desire*" – Mazarin emphasised the word – "that Your Majesty receive the coadjutor."

"Why not just say it's your *will*?" replied the queen in a low voice.

Mazarin just bowed. The queen stood thoughtfully for a moment. Then, raising her head, she said, "Sir Marshall, go find the coadjutor and bring him to me."

"And what shall I say to the people?" asked the marshal.

"To have patience," said Anne of Austria, "as I've had!"

In the voice of the proud Spaniard there was an accent so imperious that the marshal refrained from a reply; he bowed and went out. D'Artagnan turned toward Porthos and said, "How do you think this will end?"

"We'll see soon enough," said Porthos, calm as ever.

Meanwhile Anne of Austria went to Comminges and spoke to him in a whisper. Mazarin, uneasy, glanced toward where he knew d'Artagnan and Porthos were. The other advisors exchanged words in low voices. The door reopened, and the marshal reappeared, followed by the coadjutor. "Here's, Madam," said the marshal, "Sir Gondy who hastens to comply with Your Majesty's orders."

The queen took a couple of steps toward him and stopped, cold and stern as a statue, her lips curled in disdain. Gondy bowed respectfully. "Well, Sir," said the queen, "what's the meaning of this riot?"

"It's no longer just a riot, Madam," the coadjutor replied, "it's a revolt."

"The revolt is on the part of those who think my people *can* revolt!" cried Anne, unable to contain herself before the coadjutor, whom she seemed to regard as the one responsible for the disturbance.

"Those who incite such unrest may dignify it with the name of revolt but just wait – the authority of the king will soon restore order."

"Is it to tell me that, Madam," Gondy replied coldly, "that Your Majesty has admitted me to the honour of her presence?"

"No, my dear Coadjutor," said Mazarin, "it's to ask your advice in the unfortunate situation in which we find ourselves."

"Can it be true," said Gondy, feigning astonishment, "that Her Majesty has summoned me to ask for my advice?"

"Yes," said the queen. "I wish it."

The coadjutor bowed. "Then Her Majesty desires..."

"That you tell her what you would do in her place," Mazarin hastened to reply.

The coadjutor looked at the queen, who signified her assent. "In Her Majesty's place," Gondy said coldly, "I wouldn't hesitate: I'd release Broussel."

"And if I don't release him," the queen snapped, "what do you think will happen?"

"I think Paris will be rubble by tomorrow," said the marshal.

"I didn't ask you," said the queen drily, without even turning around, "I asked Sir Gondy."

"If it's me Her Majesty is asking," replied the coadjutor in the same tone, "I would say that I'm of the same opinion as the marshal."

The blood mounted to the queen's face, and her beautiful blue eyes seemed ready to start from her head; her rosy lips, compared by all the poets of the time to flowers in bloom, turned pale and trembled in rage. She very nearly frightened even Mazarin, accustomed as he was to her furies. "Release Broussel!" she finally spat with a frightful smile. "Fine advice, *my faith*! It's obvious it comes from a priest!"

Gondy stood firm. The insults of this day seemed to have no more effect on him than the mockeries of the day before – but hatred and desire for revenge were glowing like burning coals in the bottom of his heart. He looked coldly at the queen who nudged Mazarin to get him to add something. Mazarin, as usual, thought a great deal but said little. "Hmm," he said, "good, friendly advice. I, too, would release Sir Broussel, dead or alive, and that would be an end to it."

"If you release him dead, everything will be at an end, My Lord, though perhaps not in the way you mean," said Gondy.

"Did I say dead or alive?" replied Mazarin. "It's just a manner of speaking. You know I'm not as good with French, spoken or written, as you are, Sir Coadjuteur."

"Here's a real Council of State," said d'Artagnan to Porthos, "but we've had better than this at La Rochelle, with Athos and Aramis."

"At the Saint-Gervais bastion," said Porthos.

"There, and elsewhere."

The coadjutor allowed the brief shower of sarcasm to pass, and then replied, still in his calm tone, "Madam, if Your Majesty doesn't appreciate the advice I submit to her, doubtless it's because she has better advice to follow; I know too well the wisdom of the queen and her advisors to expect that they'll leave the city for long in a state so troubled that it might lead to revolution."

"So, in your opinion," replied the royal Spaniard with a sneer, biting her lips in anger, "the riot of yesterday that is a revolt today, may tomorrow become a revolution?"

"Yes, Madam," the coadjutor said gravely.

"To hear you tell it, Sir, the people have no self-restraint."

"It's a bad year for kings," said Gondy, shaking his head. "Look at England, Madam."

"Yes but fortunately we have no Oliver Cromwell\* in France," the queen replied.

"Who knows?" said Gondy. "Such men are like lightning, unexpected till they strike."

Everyone shuddered, and there was a moment of silence. Meanwhile, the queen had both hands resting on her chest, and one could see that she was trying to steady her own heartbeat. "Porthos," murmured d'Artagnan, "take note of this priest."

"All right, I see him," said Porthos. "Well?"

"Well! There stands a man."

Porthos looked at d'Artagnan with surprise; it was obvious he didn't quite understand what his friend was telling him. "Your Majesty intends to take such measures as suits herself," continued the coadjutor, pitilessly. "But I predict their nature will be such as to only infuriate the rebels even further."

"In that case you, Sir Coadjuteur, who have such influence over them, and who are our friend," said the queen ironically, "will calm them by giving them your blessings."

"Perhaps it will be too late," said Gondy, still icy, "and perhaps I will have no more influence – whereas by releasing Broussel, Your Majesty removes the excuse for rebellion, and gains the right to cruelly punish any recurrences of revolt."

"Do I not have that right already?" cried the queen.

"If you have it – use it," Gondy replied.

"*Plague!*" said d'Artagnan to Porthos. "That's the sort of character I like. If only *he* were my minister, and I were his officer, instead of my being attached to Mazarin. Ah, *Mordieu!* What great things we would do!"

"Yes," said Porthos.

The queen, with a gesture, dismissed her Court, except for Mazarin. Gondy bowed and began to withdraw with the others but the queen said, "Remain, Sir."

"Good," Gondy said to himself, "she's going to yield."

"She's going to have him killed," said d'Artagnan to Porthos. "But if she does, I won't be the one to do it. I swear to God that on the contrary, if anyone comes to attack him, I'll fall on them myself."

"Me too," said Porthos.

"Good!" murmured Mazarin, taking a seat. "Now we'll see something new."

The queen watched her people go, following them out with her eyes. When the last one had closed the door, she turned. One could see what efforts she was making to contain her anger; she fanned herself, inhaled some perfume, and walked up and down. Mazarin remained seated, apparently thinking. Gondy, who'd begun to get uneasy, scanned the tapestries and curtains, tapped the cuirass he wore under his long robe, and checked from time to time to make sure the good Spanish dagger he also had under his robe was easy to get at. "Now," said the queen, pausing at last, "now we're alone, repeat your advice, Sir Coadjuteur."

"Here it is, Madam: to feign reflection, and then publicly acknowledge having made a mistake, a mark of a strong government; then let Broussel out of prison and return him to the people."

"Oh!" cried Anne of Austria. "To humiliate me so! Am I not the queen? Are those howling rabble my subjects or not? Have I no friends, no guards? Ah! By Our Lady, as Queen Catherine used to say," she continued, her voice rising, "before I'll give up this insolent Broussel, I'll strangle him with my own hands!"

And she shook her clenched fists at Gondy who at that moment she hated at least as much as she hated Broussel. Gondy remained motionless; not a muscle on his face even twitched – but his icy glance crossed like a sword with the furious gaze of the queen. "There stands a dead man, if there was still someone like Vitry at Court, and he came in at this moment," said the Gascon. "But before he could reach this good prelate, I'd kill such a Vitry on the spot! And Cardinal Mazarin would be infinitely grateful to me."

"Hush!" said Porthos. "Listen."



"Madam!" cried the cardinal, drawing Anne of Austria back. "Madam, what are you doing?" Then he added in Spanish, "Anne, are you crazy? You're fighting with a churchman – you, a queen! Don't you see that you have before you, in the person of this priest, all the people of Paris, whom it's dangerous to insult, especially now, since if he wills it, he could have your crown within the hour! Another day, another time, you will stand firm and strong but this is not that time. Today you will flatter and cajole, not quarrel like a fishwife."

At the first words of this speech d'Artagnan had taken Porthos by the arm and squeezed it gradually tighter, only letting go when Mazarin was through. "Porthos," he whispered, "never mention in Mazarin's hearing that I understand Spanish, or I'm a dead man, and so are you."

"Fine," said Porthos.

This sharp reprimand, marked by the eloquence characteristic of Mazarin when he spoke Italian or Spanish, and which he completely lacked in French, was spoken with such an impassive expression on his face that Gondy, skilled at reading people though he was, thought Mazarin was just warning her to be more moderate. The queen, thus sharply rebuked, quickly turned milder; she let the fire in her eyes die down, her flush paled away, and she swallowed the angry words on her lips. She sat down, dropped her arms to her sides, and said in a voice edged with tears, "Pardon me, Sir Coadjuteur, and blame my outburst on my suffering. I'm a woman, and subject to the weaknesses of my sex; I'm terrified of civil war but as a queen accustomed to obedience, I can't abide contradiction."

"Madam," said Gondy with a bow. "Your Majesty would be wrong to reject my sincere advice. Your Majesty has only submissive and respectful subjects. It's not the queen the people oppose, they just want Broussel, that's all. If Your Majesty releases Broussel, they'll be only too happy to live under Your Majesty's laws," Gondy added, smiling.

At the words, *It's not the queen the people oppose*, Mazarin thought the coadjutor was going to mention their oft-repeated cry of "Down with Mazarin!" He was grateful when Gondy didn't, and said, with an imploring expression and in his silkiest voice, "Madam, do believe the coadjutor, who's one of our most able politicians. The first available cardinal's hat seems made to order for him."

"Ah!" Gondy said to himself. "I see how badly you need me, you cunning rogue!"

"And what will he promise us," whispered d'Artagnan, "on the day they want us to kill Gondy? *Plague*, if he gives out red hats so easily, get ready, Porthos, as we're each going to ask for a regiment tomorrow. *God!* If the civil war only lasts a year, I'll get them to revive the Sword of the Constable for me!"

"And for me?" said Porthos.

"For you? I'll see that you get the marshal's baton of Sir La Meilleraie, since it looks like he's going to be out of favour."

"So, Sir," said the queen, "you seriously fear a popular uprising?"

"To be serious, Madam – I do," said Gondy, astonished at how little progress he was making. "When a flood breaks through a dike, it can cause terrible damage."

"And I," said the queen, "think that in that case, we must build new dikes. I will consider; you may go."

Gondy looked at Mazarin in astonishment. Mazarin approached the queen to speak to her. Just then a terrible tumult erupted outside the gates of the Royal Palace. Gondy smiled, the queen's eyes kindled, and Mazarin paled. "Now what?" he said.

At that moment Comminges rushed into the salon. "Pardon, Madam," he said to the queen as he entered, "but the people have crushed the sentries against the gates and are starting to force them open. What are your orders?"

"Listen, Madam," said Gondy.

The roar of waves, the crash of thunder, the rumblings of a volcano were nothing compared to the tempest of cries that now arose. "What are my orders?" said the queen.

"Yes, time is short."

"How many men do you have in the Royal Palace?"

"Six hundred."

"Put a hundred men around the king, and with the rest sweep away this rabble."

"Madam," said Mazarin, "what are you doing?"

"Go!" said the queen.

With the passive obedience of a soldier, Comminges left. Just then a horrible, grinding crash was heard, as one of the gates gave way. "Ah, Madam!" said Mazarin. "You're gonna ruin us all – you, me, and the king." Anne of Austria, at this cry of fear from the depths of the cardinal's soul, at last grew afraid as well, and called back Comminges. "It's too late!" said Mazarin, tearing his hair. "It's too late!" The other gate fell and they could hear the people howling with glee. D'Artagnan drew his sword and gestured to Porthos to do the same. "Save the queen!" cried Mazarin to the coadjutor. Gondy rushed to the window and opened it; he recognised Louvières at the head of a mob of maybe three or 4000 men. "Not another step!" he shouted. "The queen will sign!"

"What are you saying?" cried the queen.

"The truth, Madam," said Mazarin, presenting her with a pen and paper. And he added, "Sign it, Anne, please – I beg of you."

The queen collapsed on a chair but took the pen and signed. Contained by Louvières, the people had paused but the terrible growl of their anger continued. Above her signature, the queen wrote, "The Concierge of the Prison of Saint-Germain's to set Councillor Broussel at liberty."

The coadjutor who devoured her every movement with his eyes, grabbed the paper as soon as she was done, returned to the window and waved it, saying, "This is the order!"

All Paris seemed to draw breath, and then cry out in joy, "Long live Broussel! Long live the coadjutor!"

"Long live the queen!" said the coadjutor.

But few took up the cry. And perhaps the coadjutor only made it to emphasise to Anne of Austria her weakness. "And now that you've what you came for, Sir Gondy," she said, "go."

"When the queen needs me," said the coadjutor, bowing, "Her Majesty knows that I'm at her service."

The queen nodded and Gondy withdrew. "Ah! Cursed priest!" cried Anne of Austria, shaking her fist toward the door that had scarcely closed. "One day I'll make you drink from the poisoned draught you poured out for me today."

Mazarin tried to approach her. "Be gone!" she said. "You are no man!"

And she went out. "It's you who're no woman," murmured Mazarin.

Then, after a moment's thought, he remembered that d'Artagnan and Porthos were at hand and must have heard everything. He frowned, went to the tapestry door and opened it – but the chamber beyond was empty. At the queen's final words, d'Artagnan had grabbed Porthos by the arm and dragged him out to the gallery. In his turn, Mazarin came out to the gallery, where he found the two friends walking up and down. Mazarin said, "Why did you leave the antechamber, Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Because the queen ordered everyone to leave," said d'Artagnan, "and I thought that order included us as well as the others."

"Then you've been here for..."

"For about a quarter of an hour," said d'Artagnan, giving Porthos a look telling him not to contradict him.

Mazarin noticed this look and was convinced that d'Artagnan had seen and heard everything but was grateful for the falsehood. "Decidedly, Sir d'Artagnan," he said, "you're the man I've been looking for, and you can count on me to be your friend." Then, gracing the two friends with his most charming smile, he returned quietly to his study, for with the departure of Gondy, the tumult had ceased as if by magic.

## 222

### Misfortune aids the Memory

Anne had stormed off to her private chapel. "What!" she cried, flailing her beautiful arms "The people saw Sir Condé, the First Prince of the Blood," arrested by my mother-in-law, Marie de Médicis; they saw my mother-in-law, their former regent, driven out by Cardinal Richelieu;\* they saw Sir Vendôme, the son of Henry IV, imprisoned in Vincennes; they said nothing while all these great persons were threatened, insulted, and imprisoned – but they rise up for Broussel! Jesus, what is the point of royalty?"

Anne had touched on the burning question of the day. The people had said nothing for the princes but they'd arisen for Broussel. It was because he was a commoner, and in defending Broussel, the people instinctively knew they defended themselves. Meanwhile, Mazarin was pacing back and forth in his study, glancing from time to time at the splintered shards of his Venetian mirror. "Eh!" he said.

"It's sad to have to yield this way but bah! We'll have our revenge. What does one Broussel matter, more or less? He's just a symbol, not a faction."

Mazarin, able politician though he was, had got it wrong this time: Broussel was more than just a symbol. The next morning, when Broussel made his entry into Paris in a splendid carriage, with his son Louvières beside him and Friquet riding up behind, all the armed citizens rushed to see him pass. The cries of "*Vive Broussel!* Long live our father!" arose on all sides, and sounded like impending death to Mazarin; the reports of the cardinal's many spies brought nothing but bad news that made the minister grow anxious and the queen grow very quiet. Her Majesty appeared to be nerving herself up to some great resolve that only made the cardinal more worried. For he knew that proud princess and feared the resolve of Anne of Austria. The coadjutor had returned to parliament more of a monarch than the king, queen, and cardinal put together; on his advice, an edict of parliament had invited the citizens to lay down their arms and demolish the barricades. Of course, they knew that the people could re-arm themselves in an hour and the barricades could be rebuilt overnight. Planchet returned to his shop. The victory was as good as an amnesty, and he had no more fear of being hanged. He was convinced that if an attempt was made to arrest him, the people would rise up for him as they had for Broussel. Rochefort returned his troop of light horse to the Knight d'Humières; at the roll call two were found missing but the knight, who was a Frondeur at heart, refused all offers of indemnity. The beggar had resumed his post in the plaza outside Saint-Eustache, once more distributing his holy water with one hand while asking for alms with the other – and no one suspected those hands of having pried at the foundation stones of the edifice of royalty. Louvières was satisfied and proud; he'd taken his revenge upon Mazarin, whom he detested, he'd been instrumental in getting his father released from prison, his name was now repeated in terror at the Royal Palace, and he said with a laugh when the councillor was once more among his family, "Do you think, Father, that if I asked the queen for the command of a regiment that now she'd give it to me?"

D'Artagnan took advantage of the moment of calm to send off Raoul, whom he'd had difficulty in keeping indoors during the riot, when he'd been eager to draw his sword for one side or the other. The lad had been stubborn about it until d'Artagnan had invoked the name of the Count La Fère. Raoul first paid a visit to Madam de Chevreuse and then departed to rejoin the army. Rochefort alone was sorry the affair was over – he'd sent to the Duke Beaufort to come to Paris, and the duke would arrive to find the city tranquil. He went to the coadjutor to ask if he thought the prince should be met on the road and turned around; Gondy thought for a moment, and then said, "Let him come anyway."

"Then it's not over yet?" Rochefort asked.

"Over! My dear Count, it's barely begun."

"What makes you think that?"

"My understanding of the queen's heart: she won't stand for being beaten."

"Is she preparing something?"

"I hope so."

"But what do you know?"

"I know that she wrote to Sir Prince to return from the army in haste."

"Oh ho!" Rochefort said. "You're right, we must encourage Sir Beaufort to come."

That very evening, word went around that the Prince de Condé had arrived. There was nothing strange about this but the news made a great impression. Madam de Longueville, it was said, had been indiscreet, repeating some confidences made to her by Sir Prince, whom gossip accused of having for his sister a tenderness beyond the bounds of fraternal friendship. These secrets involved some sinister plans on the part of the queen. On the evening of the Prince de Condé's arrival, some of the more radical high-ranking citizens, aldermen and ward captains, got together and said, "Why shouldn't we take charge of the king and install him in the Hôtel de Ville? It's a mistake to leave him to be raised by our enemies, who fill his head with bad advice. Now if the coadjutor was his mentor, he'd absorb more tolerant principles, and learn to love the people."

That night was busy with furtive activity, and the morning saw the return of the grey and black cloaks, the bands of beggars, and patrols of armed merchants. The queen had spent the night in private conference with Sir Prince, who had been admitted to her chapel at midnight and had stayed there until five in the morning. Then the queen went to the cardinal's study. She'd been up all night but he was already awake and at work. He was writing a reply to Cromwell, 6 days having already passed of the ten he'd asked Mordaunt to wait. "I may've kept him waiting," he said to himself, "but Cromwell knows something of revolutions and will understand."

As he reread with satisfaction the first paragraph of his letter, a scratching came from the door of the passage that led to the queen's chambers. Anne of Austria was the only one who'd use that door, so the cardinal got up to open it. The queen hadn't yet dressed but undress suited her, for, like Diane de Poitiers and Ninon de Lenclos, Anne of Austria had the gift of looking beautiful in every condition – and that was never truer than on this morning, when her eyes were radiant with an inner joy. "What is it, Madam?" asked Mazarin, inwardly anxious. "You seem bursting with pride."

“Yes, Giulio,” she said, “pride and happiness, for I’ve found the means to slay the hydra.”

“Then you are a great politician, my Queen,” said Mazarin. “Tell me of this means.”

And he slid the unfinished letter under another sheet. “You’ve heard they want to take the king from us?” said the queen.

“Yes – and hang me while they’re at it!”

“They shall not have the king.”

“And they certainly won’t hang me, *very well*.”

“Listen: I myself will spirit my son away, and you with us. It will change the face of things overnight – but I want it done without warning, unknown in advance to anyone but you, me, and a third person.”

“And who is this third person?”

“Sir Prince.”

“So, he’s arrived, as I’d heard?”

“Last night.”

“And you’ve seen him?”

“I just left him.”

“He’s ready to assist this project?”

“It was his idea.”

“And Paris?”

“We starve the city and force it at length to surrender.”

“The proposal isn’t without grandeur but you may have overlooked something.”

“What?”

“The fact that it’s impossible.”

“Nonsense. Nothing is impossible.”

“In theory.”

“And in execution! How much money do we have?”

“A little,” said Mazarin, trembling for fear that Anne of Austria might empty his purse.

“How many troops?”

“Five or six thousand.”

“And have we no courage?”

“Plenty of that.”

“Then we’ll do it, and easily. Oh, can’t you see it, Giulio? Paris, wretched Paris, awakening in the morning to find king and queen gone, the city surrounded, besieged, starving, with no one to turn to but that stupid parliament and their bow-legged coadjutor!”

“Yes, very pretty – it’s a lovely dream. I just don’t see any way of making it a reality.”

“I’ll find a way!”

“You’re talking about war, *civil* war: furious, relentless, and implacable.”

“Oh, yes, it’s war, all right” said Anne of Austria. “I want to reduce this rebellious city to ashes; I want to extinguish the fire with blood; I want to punish their crimes with a terrible example. Paris! I hate it. I detest it!”

“Gently, Anne; how bloodthirsty you are! Take care, these aren’t the days of Malatesta and Castruccio Castracani who plunged all Italy into bloody strife. You’ll get yourself decapitated, my sweet Queen, and that would be a shame.”

“You laugh.”

“I laugh very little at war, especially against an entire nation. Look at your brother-in-law Charles I\* – he’s in a bad way, very bad.”

“We’re in France. And I am Spanish.”

“All the worse for us, *for Bacchus*. I’d like it better if you were French, and me too, for that matter. They wouldn’t hate us so much.”

“However – do you approve of my plan?”

“Yes, if I could see how it was possible.”

“It is, I’ll answer for it. Get ready to depart.”

“Me! I’m always ready to depart – only, you know, I never actually go. And this time is probably no different than the others.”

“Well, if I go, will you go with me?”

“I’ll try.”

“You’re killing me with your fears, Giulio. What is it you’re afraid of?”

“A lot of things.”

“Such as?”

Mazarin’s expression that had been mocking, turned sombre. “Anne,” he said, “you’re a woman, and as a woman you can insult men as you please, sure you can do so with impunity. You accuse me of being afraid – but I’m not as fearful as you, for I wasn’t planning to run. Whose downfall does the mob cry out for? Who is it they want to hang – you or me? Nonetheless, I stand up to the storm – not with bravado, that’s not my style – but I hold out. Yet you call me afraid. Imitate me: less noise, more effect. You make loud declarations but nothing comes of them. And now you talk about fleeing!”

Mazarin shrugged, took the queen’s hand and led her to the window. “Look!”

“Well?” said the queen, blinded by obstinacy.

“Well, what do you see from this window? Those are, unless I’m mistaken, your subjects out there wearing cuirasses and helmets and armed with good muskets, like in the days of the Catholic League – and they’re staring right at this window. If you lifted the curtain a bit, you’d be recognised. Now, look out this other window: what do you see? Armed Parisians just outside your gates. You’d see the same thing from any other window in this palace: your gates are guarded, as are your postern doors, your sally ports, even the vents of your cellars. I say to you what La Ramée told Sir Beaufort: unless you’re a bird or a mouse, you cannot get out.”

“But Beaufort got out, didn’t he?”

“Do you plan to get out the same way he did?”

“Then ... I’m a prisoner?”

“*For God’s sake!* Isn’t that what I just proved to you?”

And Mazarin sat down and quietly went back to work on his letter, picking up from where he’d been interrupted. Anne, flushed and trembling with anger and humiliation, left the study, slamming the door hard behind her. Mazarin did not even turn his head. Returning to her chambers, the queen threw herself into an armchair and began to cry. Then she was struck by a sudden idea. “I’m saved!” she said, arising. “Of course! Yes, I know a man who can get us out of Paris, a man I’ve forgotten for far too long.” Alight with joy, she said, “Ingrate that I’m, for twenty years I’ve forgotten this man whom I should have made a Marshal of France. My mother-in-law lavished gold, titles, and caresses on Concini who plotted against her; the king my husband made Vitry a Marshal of France for assassinating Concini; but I, I left in obscurity and misery that noble d’Artagnan who saved me.” She rushed to a table where she found paper, ink, and began to write.

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The Interview

That morning d’Artagnan was in Porthos’s room, still asleep. Sharing a room was a habit the two old friends had resumed since the disturbances had begun. Their swords were under their pillows, and their pistols were on a table near at hand. D’Artagnan was dreaming that the sky was covered by a great glowing cloud, and from this cloud fell a rain of gold that he was catching in his hat. Porthos, meanwhile, was dreaming that his carriage’s door panel wasn’t large enough to contain the coat of arms he was having painted on it. They were awakened at seven o’clock by a valet wearing no livery who brought a letter for d’Artagnan. “From whom?” asked the Gascon.

“From the queen,” replied the valet.

“Hey!” said Porthos, rising on his bed. “What does it say?”

D’Artagnan asked the valet to wait in the next room, and as soon as the door was closed he leapt from his bed and quickly read the letter, while Porthos watched with wide eyes, not daring another question. “Friend Porthos,” said d’Artagnan, handing him the letter, “here’s your title of baron and my promotion to captain. Read it and see if I’m wrong.” Porthos reached out, took the letter, and read in a trembling voice:

*The queen wishes to speak with Sir d’Artagnan who’s to follow the bearer of this letter.*

“Well!” said Porthos. “I see nothing here out of the ordinary.”

“Whereas I see much that is extraordinary,” said d’Artagnan. “If I’m summoned, it’s because there’s going to be trouble. Consider what upheaval must have taken place in the mind of the queen to make her suddenly remember me after twenty years.”

“You’re right,” said Porthos.

“Sharpen your sword, Baron, load your pistols, and ready your horses, as I foresee big news by tomorrow. And keep this quiet!”

“*Oh that!* But are you sure this isn’t some kind of a trap to get rid of us?” said Porthos, always worried that others might feel threatened by his future greatness.

“If it’s a trap, rest assured, I’ll smell it,” said d’Artagnan. “Mazarin may be an Italian but I’m a Gascon.” And d’Artagnan dressed himself in less than a minute. As Porthos, still in bed, reached for his cloak, there came another knock at the door. “Come in,” said d’Artagnan.

A second valet entered and handed d’Artagnan a second letter, saying, “On the behalf of His Eminence Cardinal Mazarin.”

D’Artagnan looked at Porthos. “This is awkward,” said Porthos. “Who do you answer first?”

“No, it’s perfect,” d’Artagnan said. “His Eminence summons me to an appointment in half an hour.”

“Good.”

“*My friend*,” said d’Artagnan, turning to the valet, “tell His Eminence that in half an hour I’ll be at his command.”

The valet bowed and went out. “It’s lucky he didn’t see the other valet,” d’Artagnan said.

“Then you don’t think the two have sent to you for the same meeting?”

“I not only don’t think so, I’m certain of it.”

“Then go, d’Artagnan, and quickly! The queen is waiting for you – and after the queen, the cardinal. And after the cardinal, me!”

D’Artagnan called back Anne of Austria’s valet. “I’m ready, friend,” he said. “Lead on.”

The valet took him by way of the Rue des Petits-Champs, where, turning left, he led him through a small door into a garden adjacent to Rue Richelieu, where they entered a secret staircase that brought d’Artagnan to the queen’s chapel. A certain unexpected emotion made the lieutenant’s heart beat faster. He no longer had the blind confidence of youth, and experience had taught him the gravity of involvement in events like this. He understood the power of princes and the majesty of kings, and the insignificance of his family and fortune in comparison. Once he would have approached Anne of Austria as a young man going to pay his respects to a lady; but now he went to her as a humble soldier does to a commander. A slight noise broke the silence of the chapel, and d’Artagnan started as

a white hand drew back a tapestry – a hand white in colour and beautiful in shape, a royal hand he recognised and once had kissed. The queen entered. “It’s you, Sir D’Artagnan,” she said, regarding the officer with a look of affectionate melancholy, “it’s you – I know you well. Look at me, I am the queen – do you recognise me?”

“No, Madam,” replied d’Artagnan.

“But don’t you recall,” continued Anne of Austria, in that sweet tone she could adopt when it pleased her to do so, “how a queen once needed a brave and devoted young cavalier, and found that cavalier, and who, though he might have believed that she’d forgotten him, kept him in a place in the bottom of her heart?”

“No, Madam, I don’t recall that,” said the musketeer.

“So much the worse, Sir,” said Anne of Austria, “so much the worse, at least for the queen, for that queen once again has need of that bravery and devotion.”

“What!” said d’Artagnan. “The queen, surrounded as she is by servants so devoted, by counsellors so wise, by men so mighty in merit and position, deigns to cast her eyes on an obscure soldier!”

Anne understood this veiled reproach but she was more moved than angered by it. The Gascon gentleman’s patient and unselfish service had long been an unacknowledged humiliation for her, and she was outdone by his generosity. “Everything you say about those around me, Sir d’Artagnan, may perhaps be true,” said the queen, “but you are the only one I can trust. I know you serve the cardinal but serve me as well, and I will make your fortune. Come, would you do for me today what the cavalier you don’t recall once did for his queen?”

“I am at the orders of Your Majesty,” said d’Artagnan.

The queen reflected for a moment on the circumspect attitude of the musketeer. “Perhaps you prefer ease and repose?” she said.

“I wouldn’t know, Madam – I’ve never had any.”

“Do you have any comrades?”

“I’d three: two have left Paris and gone I know not where. Only one’s still with me – but he’s one of those who knew, I think, the cavalier of whom your Majesty’s done me the honour to speak.”

“Very well,” said the queen. “You and your friend are worth an army.”

“What must I do, Madam?”

“Come back at five o’clock and I’ll tell you – but in the meantime, Sir, don’t tell a living soul about that rendezvous.”

“No, Madam.”

“Swear it by Christ.”

“Madam, I never lie once I’ve given my word; if I say no, I mean no.”

The queen, though astonished by such language, so different from what she heard from her courtiers, took it as a sign of the zeal d’Artagnan would apply to the accomplishment of her plan. It was an occasional artifice of the Gascon’s to hide his deep subtlety under a guise of brusque loyalty. “The queen has no further orders for the moment?” he said.

“No, Sir,” replied Anne of Austria, “and you may retire until the time I’ve appointed.”

D’Artagnan bowed and went out. “The devil!” he said once he had passed through the door. “There seems to be a great need for me around here.”

Then, as the half hour had passed, he went across the gallery and knocked on the cardinal’s door. Bernouin\* let him in. “I’ve come at your orders, My Lord,” d’Artagnan said to the cardinal. As was his custom, he took a quick glance around the room, noticing that Mazarin had a sealed letter before him – but it was placed face down on the desk, so it was impossible to see to whom it was addressed.

“You’ve just come from the queen?” said Mazarin, looking directly at d’Artagnan.

“Me, My Lord? Who told you that?”

“No one – but I know it.”

“I’m sorry to tell my Lord he’s mistaken,” the Gascon replied shamelessly in accord with the promise he had just made to Anne of Austria.

“I was at the door of the antechamber and saw you coming from the end of the gallery.”

“That’s because I was brought in by the secret staircase.”

“Why was that?”

“I don’t know; there may have been some mistake.”

Mazarin knew how hard it was to get d’Artagnan to talk when he did not want to so he decided to set aside for later the mystery of whatever the Gascon was hiding. “Let’s discuss my affairs,” said the cardinal, “since you’ll tell me nothing about yours.” D’Artagnan bowed. “Do you like travelling?” asked the cardinal.

“I’ve spent my life on the high roads.”

“There’s nothing to keep you here in Paris?”

“Nothing but the orders of my superior.”

“Good. Here’s a letter that must be delivered to a certain address.”

“An address, My Lord? But it’s none.”

And in fact, the side opposite the seal was blank. “That’s because it’s a double envelope,” said Mazarin.

“I understand – I must open the outer one only after I’ve arrived at a given place.”

“Exactly. Take it and go. You’ve a friend, Sir du Vallon whom I like very much – take him as well.”

“The devil!” d’Artagnan said to himself. “He knows we overheard his conversation yesterday and wants to get us out of Paris.”

“You hesitate?” asked Mazarin.

“No, my Lord, I leave at once. There’s only one thing I request…”

“What’s that? Speak.”

“It’s that Your Eminence should go to the queen.”

“When?”

“Right away.”

“To do what?”

“Just to say this: ‘I have sent Sir d’Artagnan somewhere and asked him to leave immediately.’”

“So, I see,” said Mazarin, “that you have met with the queen.”

“I had the honour to tell Your Eminence that it’s possible there’d been some mistake.”

“What does that mean?” Mazarin asked.

“Shall I renew my request of His Eminence?”

“Very well, I’ll go. Await me here.”

Mazarin checked carefully to make sure none of the keys had been left in the strongbox locks and went out. Ten minutes elapsed, during which d’Artagnan did everything he could to try to read the address of the inner envelope through the fabric of the outer, to no avail. Mazarin returned, pale and deeply preoccupied, and sat at his desk. D’Artagnan examined his expression as closely as he had the dispatch but the envelope of the cardinal’s face was as impenetrable as the envelope of the letter. “Uh-oh,” the Gascon said to himself, “he looks angry. Is it toward me? He’s considering – is he thinking of clapping me in the Bastille? Good luck, My Lord! At the first order you issue to do so, I’ll strangle you and turn Frondeur. They’ll carry me in triumph like Sir Broussel, and Athos will proclaim me the French Brutus. That would be funny.”

The Gascon, with his ever-active imagination, had already carried his hypothetical situation to its end. However, Mazarin gave no such order but on the contrary said, in a cajoling tone, “You’re quite right, my dear Sir d’Artagnan, you can’t leave us so soon.”

“Ah!” said d’Artagnan.

“Return to me that dispatch if you please.”

D’Artagnan obeyed. Mazarin assured himself the seal was still intact. “I’ll need you this evening,” he said. “Come back in eight hours.”

“In eight hours, My Lord,” said d’Artagnan, “I’ve an appointment that I can’t fail to keep.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Mazarin, “it’s all the same business.”

Good! D’Artagnan thought. *I suspected as much.*

“Return then at five o’clock and bring with you that dear Sir du Vallon – only leave him in the antechamber, as I’ll want to speak to you alone.”

D’Artagnan bowed, saying to himself, “The same order from both, at the same hour and the same place, the Royal Palace – I get it. Ah, now here’s a secret Sir Gondy would pay a hundred thousand livres for.”

“You have a concern?” said Mazarin anxiously.

“Yes, I was wondering if we should come armed or not.”

“Armed? To the teeth!” said Mazarin.

“Very well, My Lord, we shall be.” D’Artagnan bowed, went out, and hurried back to his friend to report on the interview, including Mazarin’s flattery and promises that made Porthos very happy.

## 224

### The Escape

When d’Artagnan returned at five in the evening, the Royal Palace, despite the signs of agitation in the city, presented a cheerful appearance. This wasn’t surprising: the queen had given up Broussel and Blancmesnil to the people, so the queen had nothing more to fear, as the people had nothing more to ask. But inside her emotions were still overwrought, a disturbance that would take some time to dissipate, as after an ocean storm it sometimes takes several days for the swell to subside. There had been a grand formal dinner, the pretext for which had been the return of the victor of Lens. The princes and princesses had all been invited, and their carriages had crowded the courtyard since midday. After dinner, there was to be gaming in the queen’s apartments. Anne of Austria was charming that day, graceful and witty, and had never been seen in better humour. The joy of vengeance to come shone in her eyes and on her lips. As soon as they rose from the dinner table, Mazarin slipped away. D’Artagnan was already awaiting him in the antechamber. The cardinal arrived chuckling, took d’Artagnan by the hand and drew him into his study. “My dear Sir d’Artagnan,” said the minister, sitting down, “I will show you the greatest mark of confidence a minister can give an officer.”

D’Artagnan bowed. “I hope,” he said, “that My Lord grants it to me without hesitation, and in the conviction that I’m worthy of it.”

“The worthiest of all, *my dear friend*, since it’s to you that I give it.”

“Well,” said d’Artagnan, “I must admit, My Lord, that I’ve been waiting so long to hear that, I hope you’ll speak quickly and delay no longer.”

“This evening, my dear Sir d’Artagnan,” replied Mazarin, “you’re going to have the security of the entire state in your hands.”

He paused. “Please explain, My Lord. I’m waiting.”

“The queen has decided to take the king on a short trip to Saint-Germain.”

“Ah!” said d’Artagnan. “What you mean is, the queen has decided to leave Paris.”

“A feminine caprice – you understand.”

“Oh, I understand very well,” d’Artagnan said.

“That was why she sent for you this morning and asked you to return at five o’clock.”

“So much for going to all that trouble to have me swear not to mention the appointment to anyone!” murmured d’Artagnan. “Ah, the women! Even when they’re queens, they’re still women.”

“Do you disapprove of this little sojourn, my dear Sir d’Artagnan?” asked Mazarin anxiously.

“Me, My Lord?” said d’Artagnan. “Why do you ask?”

“You shrugged your shoulders.”

"That's just my habit when talking to myself, My Lord."

"Then you approve of this journey?"

"I neither approve nor disapprove, My Lord – I follow orders."

"Good – because you're the one I've chosen to get the king and queen safely to Saint-Germain."

"A double deceit," d'Artagnan said to himself.

"So, you see," continued Mazarin, trying to penetrate d'Artagnan's impassivity, "that as I said, the security of the State will be in your hands."

"Yes, My Lord, and I feel all the responsibility of such a charge."

"You accept, though?"

"I always accept."

"You think the thing is possible?"

"Everything is possible."

"Will you be attacked on the way?"

"It seems likely."

"How will you handle that?"

"I'll ride through the attackers."

"What if you can't get through them?"

"If I can't go through them, I'll go over them."

"And you'll bring the king and queen safe and sound to Saint-Germain?"

"Yes."

"On your life?"

"On my life."

"You're a true hero, *my dear!*" said Mazarin, looking admiringly at the musketeer.

D'Artagnan smiled.

"And me?" said Mazarin after a moment of silence, looking fixedly at d'Artagnan.

"What about you, My Lord?"

"What if I want to go along?"

"That ... would make it harder."

"How so?"

"Your Eminence might be recognised."

"Even wearing this disguise?"

And he lifted a cloak from an armchair, under which was a complete cavalier's outfit of pearl grey and garnet with silver lace. "If Your Eminence is disguised, the matter is easier."

"Ah!" said Mazarin with a sigh of relief.

"But it means that Your Eminence must do what he said he'd have done the other day in our situation."

"What do I have to do?"

"Shout, 'Down with Mazarin!'"

"I can shout that."

"In French, in *good* French, My Lord, taking care with the accent. They killed six thousand Angevins in Italy because they spoke bad Italian. Be careful so the French don't take their revenge for the Sicilian Vespers."

"I'll do my best."

"There are a lot of armed men in the streets," continued d'Artagnan. "Are you sure no one else knows about the queen's plan?"

Mazarin reflected.

"It would be a pretty risky affair if this matter fell into the hands of a traitor, My Lord. The trip you propose would provide an opportunity for the worst sort of mischief."

Mazarin shuddered – *That's an implied threat?* – But then considered that a man who planned treachery wouldn't say so. "No," he said briskly. "I rely on just no one and the proof's that I've chosen you to escort me."

"You're not going with the queen?"

"No," said Mazarin.

"You plan to go after the queen does?"

"No," Mazarin said again.

"Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan who was beginning to understand.

"Yes, I have my own plans," the cardinal continued. "If I go with the queen, I double her danger; if I follow the queen, I double my own. Besides, the Court, once saved, might forget about me – the great can be so ungrateful."

"That's true," said d'Artagnan, glancing in spite of himself at the queen's diamond ring on Mazarin's finger.

Mazarin noticed this look and gently turned the ring's stone inside. "I wish, then," said Mazarin with his handsome smile, "to keep them from being ungrateful to me."

"It's just Christian charity not to lead one's neighbour into temptation," said d'Artagnan.

"And that's exactly why I want to leave ahead of the others," said Mazarin.

D'Artagnan smiled; he was the sort of man who could appreciate the Italian's trick. Mazarin saw him smile and took advantage of the moment. "Then you'll undertake to get me out of Paris first, my dear Sir d'Artagnan?"

"That's no easy task, My Lord!" said d'Artagnan, resuming his serious air.

"But," Mazarin said, looking at him attentively, "you made no such objections regarding the king and the queen."

"The king and the queen are my queen and my king, My Lord," the musketeer replied. "My life is theirs; I belong to them. What they ask of me, I do – without objection."

"That's fair," Mazarin said quietly. "As your life isn't mine, then, I must buy it from you, no?" And with a heavy sigh, he began to rotate the ring's diamond back out. D'Artagnan smiled. These two men had one thing in common: cleverness. If on top of that they'd only had courage in common, they would have done great things together. "You understand then," said Mazarin, "that if I ask this service of you, it's with the intention to be grateful for it."

"Does My Lord have only the intention?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Here," said Mazarin, pulling the ring from his finger. "Here, my dear Sir d'Artagnan, is a diamond that once belonged to you; it's only right that it should return. I beg of you, take it."

D'Artagnan didn't put Mazarin to the trouble of insisting; he took it, inspected the stone to make sure it was the same, recognised the purity of its water, and placed it on his finger with profound pleasure.

"I was ... very attached to it," said Mazarin, giving it a last look. "But no matter, I'm very pleased to give it to you."

"And I, My Lord, am very pleased to receive it," said d'Artagnan. "Come, let's talk about your little affair. You want to leave before everyone else?"

"Yes, I do."

"At what time?"

"At ten o'clock?"

"And the queen, when does she leave?"

"At midnight."

"Then it's possible – I'll get you out first, leave you outside the gates, and return to bring her."

"Wonderful but how can I get safely out of Paris?"

"Oh, as to that, leave it to me."

"You're in charge; bring as large an escort as you like." D'Artagnan shook his head. "But surely that's the safest way," said Mazarin.

"Maybe for you, my Lord but not for the queen."

Mazarin bit his lip. "Then how will we manage things?" he said.

"You must let me manage them, My Lord."

"Hmm!" said Mazarin.

"You must put me in full command of this exercise."

"Yes but..."

"Or find somebody else," said d'Artagnan, turning to go.

"Eh?" Mazarin said to himself. "I think he's leaving with my diamond." He called him back, in a cajoling voice: "Sir d'Artagnan, my dear Sir d'Artagnan."

"My Lord?"

"You'll answer for whatever happens?"

"I guarantee nothing – but I'll do my best."

"Your best?"

"Yes."

"Well, then! We must trust in that."

"At last," d'Artagnan said to himself.

"Then you'll come back at half past nine?"

"Will I find Your Eminence ready?"

"Entirely ready."

"Then we're agreed. Now, My Lord, will you take me to see the queen?"

"To what end?"

"I'd like to get Her Majesty's orders from her directly."

"She's directed me to give them to you."

"She might have forgotten something."

"You have to see her?"

"It's indispensable, My Lord."

Mazarin hesitated a moment but d'Artagnan remained implacable. "Let's go, then," said Mazarin. "I'll take you to see her but don't say a word about our conversation."

"What was said between us regards only us, My Lord," said d'Artagnan.

“You swear to say nothing?”

“I never swear, My Lord. I say *yes* or I say *no*, and as I’m a gentleman, I keep my word.”

“All right, I see I must trust you completely.”

“Believe me, My Lord, that’s the best possible course.”

“Come,” said Mazarin.

He conducted d’Artagnan to the queen’s chapel and told him to wait there. D’Artagnan didn’t have to wait long. Five minutes later the queen came into the chapel, still in her full regalia. Dressed thus she was still beautiful and seemed no older than thirty-five. “Ah, Sir d’Artagnan,” she said with a gracious smile. “I’m glad you insisted on seeing me.”

“I beg Her Majesty’s pardon,” said d’Artagnan, “but I thought it best to receive Madam’s orders directly.”

“You know what they concern?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“And you accept this mission I entrust to you?”

“Gratefully.”

“Very good. Be here at midnight.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Sir d’Artagnan,” said the queen, “I know your honest loyalty too well to speak to you now of my gratitude but I swear to you I will not forget this second service as I did the first.”

“I don’t know what any of that means; Her Majesty is entitled to decide what to forget, and what to remember.”

And d’Artagnan bowed. “Go, Sir,” said the queen with her most charming smile. “Go, and return at midnight.”

She gestured in farewell and d’Artagnan withdrew; but as he retired he glanced at the way the queen had come in and at the foot of the tapestry he saw the tip of a velvet shoe. “So,” he said to himself,

“Mazarin eavesdropped to see if I’d betray him. Truly, this Italian puppet doesn’t deserve the service of an honourable man.”

D’Artagnan was nonetheless punctual with his appointment, and at half past nine he entered the cardinal’s antechamber. Bernouin was waiting and showed him in to the study. He found the cardinal dressed as a cavalier; that kind of attire suited him, as we’ve said, and he wore it elegantly, though he was very pale and trembling slightly. “Just you?” said Mazarin.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And the good Sir du Vallon, will he be joining us?”

“Yes, my Lord, he’s waiting at the carriage.”

“Where’s that?”

“At the Royal Palace’s garden gate.”

“Then we’re going in a carriage?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And with no other escort but you two?”

“Isn’t that enough? One of us would suffice!”

“In truth, my dear Sir d’Artagnan, you terrify me with your nonchalance,” said Mazarin.

“I’d have thought, on the contrary, that it would inspire confidence.”

“And Bernouin, am I not taking him?”

“There’s no room for him; he can follow with the others and rejoin Your Eminence later.”

“All right,” said Mazarin, “since I must do everything just the way you want.”

“My Lord, there’s still time to call it off, and Your Eminence is perfectly free to do so,” said d’Artagnan.

“No, no,” said Mazarin, “let’s be on our way.”

And they went down by the secret staircase, Mazarin holding onto the arm of d’Artagnan, who could feel him trembling. They crossed the courtyards of the Royal Palace, where a few carriages awaiting guests were still lingering, reached the garden, and found the little door. Mazarin tried to unlock it with a key he drew from his pocket but his hand trembled so much he couldn’t find the keyhole. “Let me,” said d’Artagnan. Mazarin gave him the key; d’Artagnan opened the door and put the key into his own pocket. He expected to need it when he returned. Beyond was the carriage, its footboard lowered and door open; Mousqueton stood at the door, with Porthos on the rear seat. “Get in, my Lord,” said d’Artagnan. Mazarin didn’t wait to be told twice; he leapt into the vehicle. D’Artagnan got in behind Mazarin, Mousqueton closed the door, and then climbed with many a groan up onto the carriage’s rear step. He had made some objections about coming along on the pretext that he was still suffering from his wound but d’Artagnan had said to him, “Stay if you like, my dear Sir Mouston but I warn you that tonight, Paris will burn.”

After that, Mousqueton had stopped complaining, and declared he was ready to follow his master and Sir d’Artagnan to the ends of the world. The carriage set off at a steady trot, though not so fast as to imply that its passengers were in a hurry. The cardinal wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and looked around. He had Porthos on his left and d’Artagnan on his right, each guarding a door and serving as a rampart. Facing them, on the front seat, were two pairs of pistols, one before Porthos and the other before d’Artagnan. Both men held their swords beside them. A hundred paces from the Royal Palace the carriage was stopped by a people’s patrol. “Who goes there?” said the leader.

“Mazarin!” replied d’Artagnan, laughing.

The cardinal felt the hair rise on his head. This joke seemed like a good one to the citizens who seeing a carriage without arms or escort, did not think to believe the response could be a reality. “*Have a safe trip!*” they cried.

And they let the carriage pass. “Ha!” said d’Artagnan. “How did My Lord like my answer?”

“Oh, you’re quite the wit,” said Mazarin, sweating.

“By the way,” said Porthos, “I got that one.”

In the middle of the Rue des Petits-Champs, the carriage was stopped by a second patrol. “Who goes there?” called the patrol’s leader.

“Prepare yourself, My Lord,” said d’Artagnan.

Mazarin sank down so deeply between his two guardians that he disappeared completely. “Who goes there?” the voice repeated impatiently.

D’Artagnan saw that they were making ready to seize the horses’ heads; he leaned halfway out the carriage door and called, “Hey, Planchet!”

The leader approached. It was indeed Planchet – d’Artagnan had recognised his former lackey’s voice. “Why, Sir!” said Planchet. “Is that you?”

“*My God*, yes, old friend. Our dear Porthos has just taken a sword-wound, and I’m bearing him back to his country house at Saint-Cloud.”

“Really?” Planchet said.

“Porthos, friend Porthos, if you can still talk,” said d’Artagnan, “say a few words to our good Planchet.”

“Planchet, my friend,” said Porthos with a groan, “I feel awful; if you meet a doctor, and please send him along after me.”

“Oh! Great God, what a terrible thing!” said Planchet. “How did this happen?”

“I’ll tell you that,” said Mousqueton while Porthos gave a great groan.

“Make way, Planchet, or he won’t make it,” said d’Artagnan in a low voice. “He took it through the lungs.”

Planchet shook his head with the air of a man who says, *In that case, it’s all over*. Then, turning to his men, he said, “Let them pass – they’re friends.”

The carriage resumed its ride, and Mazarin who had been holding his breath, dared to exhale. “*Rogues!*” he murmured.

A few paces short of Porte Saint-Honoré they encountered a third troop, this one composed of ragged men who looked more like bandits than anything else. They were the men of the beggar of Saint-Eustache. “Beware, Porthos!” said d’Artagnan. Porthos reached for his pistols.

“What is it?” said Mazarin.

“My Lord, I think we’ve fallen into bad company.”

A man carrying a sort of scythe came to the door; it was the beggars’ chief himself. “Who goes there?” he asked.

“Dolt! Don’t you recognised the carriage of Sir Prince?” said d’Artagnan.

“Prince or not,” said the beggar, “open up! It’s our duty to guard the gate, and no one passes who we don’t know.”

“What should we do?” asked Porthos.

“*For the love of God!* We go on,” said d’Artagnan.

“Go on? But how?” said Mazarin.

“Through them or over them. Coachman, at the gallop!”

The driver raised his whip. “Not one step further,” said the beggar who seemed to be the leader, “or I’ll hamstring your horses.”

“*Plague!* That would be a shame,” said Porthos. “Those horses cost me a hundred pistoles.”

“I’ll pay you two hundred,” said Mazarin in a low voice.

“Sure,” said d’Artagnan, “but after they hamstring the horses, they’ll hack off our heads.”

“There’s one on my side,” hissed Porthos. “Should I kill him?”

“Do it – with your fist, if you can. No shooting unless we have to.”

“I can do that,” said Porthos.

“Come have a look, then,” called d’Artagnan to the man with the scythe, meanwhile picking up one of his pistols by the barrel so he could strike with the butt.

The man approached. D’Artagnan leaned halfway out the door into the light of a lantern to gain room to move. His eyes met those of the beggar who seemed to recognise the musketeer for he suddenly turned pale – and d’Artagnan seemed to recognise him, for a visible shudder ran through him. “Sir d’Artagnan!” the man gasped, recoiling a step. Then he shouted, “It’s Sir d’Artagnan! Let them pass!” D’Artagnan might have replied to this but a sound came like that of a sledge-hammer striking an ox on the head; it was Porthos felling his man. D’Artagnan turned to see the poor man lying four paces from the carriage. “Whip on! Whip on!” he cried to the driver. “Now! Belly to the ground!” The coachman cracked his whip over the horses, and the noble animals leapt forward. Cries came as men were thrown aside. There was a double jolt as the wheels passed over a body. Then there was a moment of quiet as the carriage passed through the gate. “To the Cours-la-Reine!” d’Artagnan called to the driver. Then, turning to Mazarin, he said, “Now, My Lord, you may say five *Paters* and five *Aves* to thank God for your deliverance – you are free, and you are safe!”

Mazarin’s only reply was a sort of groan. He didn’t believe in miracles. Five minutes later the carriage stopped, having arrived at the Course-la-Reine. “Is My Lord satisfied with his escort?” asked the musketeer.

“Enchanted, Sir,” said Mazarin, risking a look out one of the doors. “Now do the same for the queen.”

“That will be less difficult,” said d’Artagnan, jumping to the ground. “Sir du Vallon, I commend His Eminence to your care.”

“Rest easy,” said Porthos, extending his hand.

D’Artagnan took Porthos’s hand and shook it. “Ouch!” said Porthos.

D’Artagnan looked at his friend in astonishment. “What’s wrong?”

“I think I sprained my wrist,” said Porthos.

“Why the devil did you hit him? Didn’t you hear my man?”

“I had to do it, he was aiming his pistol. But you, how did you get rid of your man?”

“Oh!” said d’Artagnan. “Mine was no man.”

“What was he, then?”

"He was ... a spectre."

"And...?"

"And so, I conjured him away." Without further explanation, d'Artagnan took his pistols from the front seat, thrust them through his belt, wrapped himself in his cloak, and then, not wishing to return through the same gate they'd come out, made his way toward Porte Richelieu.

## 225

### The Carriage of Sir Coadjuteur

Instead of re-entering the city by Porte Saint-Honoré, d'Artagnan, who had a little time, rode around and returned through Porte Richelieu. There citizen guards stopped him for inspection, and, when they saw he was a musketeer with his feathered hat and embroidered cloak, they surrounded him and insisted that he shout, "Down with Mazarin!"

At first, he considered refusing but then he remembered what mission he had ahead of him, and cried out so enthusiastically that the citizens were satisfied. He rode in along the Rue de Richelieu, considering how he would get the queen out in her turn that he certainly couldn't do in a coach displaying the Arms of France when he spotted a carriage standing at the gate of Madam de Guéménée's mansion, and was struck by an idea. "Ah, *for the love of God*," he said, "it'd be poetic justice." He approached the carriage until he could see what arms were painted on the door and whose livery was worn by the coachman – an examination made all the easier as the driver was asleep, snoring on his seat. "No doubt about it: this is Sir Coadjuteur's carriage," he said. "Upon my word, I begin to believe we may have Providence on our side."

He climbed quietly into the carriage, found the silk cord the passengers used to communicate with the coachman, tugged on it and called, "To the Royal Palace!"

The driver awakened with a start, and drove off toward the given destination, without the least suspicion that the order had come from anyone but his master. The Swiss Guards at the gate almost barred their entry but the sight of the magnificent vehicle persuaded them the visit must be one of importance, so they let the carriage pass, and it stopped beneath the portico. Only then did the coachman notice the carriage had no lackeys on the rear step. He thought the coadjutor must have given them other orders, so he jumped down from his seat to open the door. D'Artagnan leapt out of the carriage, and as the coachman, frightened at not seeing his master, took a step back, the musketeer grabbed him by the collar with his left hand and clapped a pistol to his head with the right. "Say one word and you're dead," said d'Artagnan.

The coachman saw by the expression on his captor's face that he'd fallen into a trap, and he froze, gaping and wide-eyed. Two musketeers were crossing the courtyard; d'Artagnan called them over by name. "Sir Bellière," he said to one of them, "do me the favour of taking this brave man's reins, climbing up onto his seat, and driving the carriage to the door of the private staircase. Await me there, on a matter of the greatest importance and in the king's service."

The musketeer who knew his lieutenant would never joke about a matter of the king's service, obeyed without saying a word, though the order seemed strange to him. Then, turning to the second musketeer, he said, "Sir du Verger, help me conduct this man to a safe place."

The musketeer, thinking his lieutenant must have just arrested some disguised rebel prince, bowed, drew his sword, and indicated he was ready. D'Artagnan went up the stairs, followed by his prisoner and the other musketeer, crossed the vestibule, and entered Mazarin's antechamber. Bernouin was there, waiting impatiently for news of his master. "Is all well, sir?" he asked.

"Extremely well, my dear Sir Bernouin. But here, if you please, is a man who needs to be put someplace for safekeeping."

"Where would that be, Sir?"

"Wherever you like, provided the place has shutters with a padlock and a door that locks with a key."

"That we have, Sir," said Bernouin. And he led the poor coachman into a small counting-room that had iron bars across the window and resembled a prison cell. "Now, *my friend*," said d'Artagnan, "I invite you to remove your hat and cloak and lend them to me."

The coachman, as might be imagined, made no resistance – besides, he was so stunned by events that he staggered and stammered like a drunk. D'Artagnan put the hat, cloak under Bernouin's arm, and said, "Now, Sir du Verger, stay in here with this fellow until Sir Bernouin returns to let you out. This sentry duty may be long and not very amusing, I know – but it's on the king's service," he added gravely.

"As you command, Lieutenant," replied the musketeer who could see he was involved in serious matters.

"By the way," said d'Artagnan, "if this man tries to shout or get away, run him through." The musketeer made a formal salute. D'Artagnan went out, taking Bernouin with him. Midnight was sounding.

"Take me to the queen's chapel," d'Artagnan said. "Inform her that I'm there, and then take that bundle there – the one with the loaded carbine – down and put it on the seat of the carriage waiting at the bottom of the private staircase."

Bernouin conducted d'Artagnan into the chapel, where he sat down, thoughtfully. Everything seemed in order at the Royal Palace as usual. By ten o'clock all the evening's guests had retired; those that were to flee with the Court had been given the secret password and told to make their way to the Cours-la-Reine between midnight and one o'clock. At ten o'clock, Anne of Austria had gone in to see the king. They had already put Sir, his brother, to bed, and young Louis, who was still up, was enacting a battle with some lead soldiers, a game he greatly enjoyed. Two children of honour were playing with him. "La Porte,"\* said the queen, "it's time for His Majesty to go to bed."

The king asked to stay up, as he wasn't ready for sleep but the queen insisted. "Don't you plan to go at six in the morning to bathe at Conflans? That was your own idea, as I recall."

"You're right, Madam," said the king, "and I'm ready to retire to my room as soon as you kiss me goodnight. La Porte, give the candlestick to the Knight of Coislin."

The queen rested her lips on the pale royal forehead which the august child offered with all the gravity of etiquette. "Fall asleep quickly, Louis," said the queen, "because you're getting up early."

"I'll do my best to obey you, Madam," said young Louis, "though I don't really feel sleepy."

"La Porte," whispered Anne of Austria, "find some very boring book to read to His Majesty but don't undress."

The king retired, accompanied by the young Knight of Coislin as candle-bearer; the other child of honour went off to his room. Then the queen returned to her own apartments. Her women, that is to say Madam de Brégy, Miss Beaumont, Madam de Motteville, and her sister Socratine, so called due to her wisdom, had just brought into the dressing room the remains of the dinner, upon which the queen supped, as was customary. The queen then gave her final orders, spoke about a dinner for her the following day hosted by the Marquis de Villequier, designated those to be honoured by dining with her, and announced that on the day after that she would pay a visit to Val-de-Grâce, where she intended to make her devotions. She then told Beringhen, her premier *valet*, to accompany her. The ladies having finished their supper, the queen pretended to be very tired and went into her bedchamber. Madam de Motteville, who was on duty that evening, followed her in and helped her undress. The queen got into bed, spoke to her affectionately for a few minutes, and then dismissed her. It was at that moment that d'Artagnan was entering the Royal Palace courtyard with the coadjutor's coach. Just after that, the carriages of the ladies of honour drove out, and the gate was shut behind them. Midnight sounded. Five minutes later, Bernouin knocked at the queen's door, coming through the secret passage from the cardinal's study. Anne of Austria opened the door herself. She was already dressed, that is, she'd put on her stockings and wrapped herself in a long robe. "Is that you, Bernouin?" she asked, "And is Sir d'Artagnan there?"

"Yes, Madam, in your chapel, where he's waiting until Your Majesty is ready."

"I'm ready. Go and tell La Porte to awaken and dress the king, and from there go to the Marshall de Villeroy and ask him to come to me."

Bernouin bowed and went out. The queen went to her chapel that was lit by a single Venetian lamp. There she found d'Artagnan waiting for her. "It's you?" she said to him.

"Yes, Madam."

"You're ready?"

"Quite ready."

"And the cardinal?"

"Got out without injury. He awaits Your Majesty at the Cours-la-Reine."

"But in what carriage will we go?"

"I've arranged everything; a carriage is waiting for Your Majesty below."

"Let's go to the king."

D'Artagnan bowed and followed the queen. Young Louis was already dressed in everything but his shoes and his doublet. He allowed himself to be dressed despite his astonishment, and showered La Porte with questions, who just told him, "Sire, this is by the queen's orders."

The royal bedcovers were thrown back, exposing sheets so worn there were holes in some places – evidence of Mazarin's shameful stinginess. The queen came in, while d'Artagnan remained on the threshold. The child, seeing the queen, escaped from La Porte's hold and ran to her. The queen beckoned d'Artagnan to approach. D'Artagnan obeyed, removing his hat. "My son," said Anne of Austria, pointing to the musketeer, who stood calm and upright, "here is Sir d'Artagnan, who is as brave as one of those noble knights whose stories you love so much when my ladies read them to you. Remember his name and take a good look at him so you will recognise him again, for tonight he renders us a great service."

The young king regarded the officer with his proud gaze and repeated, "Sir d'Artagnan?"

"That's him, my son."

The young king slowly raised his boyish hand and extended it to the musketeer, who fell to one knee and kissed it. "Sir d'Artagnan," Louis repeated, nodding. "It is well, Madam."

At that moment they heard an approaching clamour. "What's that?" said the queen.

"Uh-oh," d'Artagnan said, cocking his intelligent head. "It's the sound of the people, aroused."

"We must flee!" said the queen.

"Your Majesty has granted to me the direction of this affair – and I say we must stay until we know what this noise means."

"Sir d'Artagnan!"

"I'll answer for everything."

Nothing is more contagious than confidence. The queen, herself strong and brave, responded to those virtues in others. "So be it," she said. "I rely on you."

"Will Her Majesty permit me to give orders in her name?"

"Give your orders, Sir."

"What is it the people want?" asked the king.

"We'll soon know, Sire," said d'Artagnan.

And he quickly left the room. The tumult grew, until it seemed to envelop the entire Royal Palace. Cries came from within, the meaning of which was unclear – but there was evidently some commotion and unrest. The king, half dressed, the queen, and La Porte all remained just as they were, listening and waiting. Comminges, who was on guard duty that night at the Royal Palace, rushed in; he reported that he had about two hundred men in the courtyards and the stables, and placed them at the queen's disposal. "Well?" Anne of Austria asked as d'Artagnan reappeared. "What's going on?"

"A rumour has spread that the queen has left the Royal Palace, taking the king with her, and the people demand proof to the contrary, or they threaten to demolish the palace."

"Oh! This time, it's too much," said the queen. "I'll prove to them that I haven't gone."

D'Artagnan saw, from the queen's face, that she was going to order some violent retaliation. He approached her and whispered, "Does Your Majesty have full confidence in me?"

His voice made her tremble. "Yes, Sir – full confidence," she said.

"Will the queen deign to follow my advice?"

"Speak."

"Would Your Majesty be so kind as to dismiss Sir Comminges and have him order his troops to withdraw into the guardhouse and stables?"

Comminges gave d'Artagnan that envious look with which every courtier regards a new favourite. "Did you hear, Comminges?" said the queen.

D'Artagnan turned to Comminges, and with his usual shrewdness recognised the man's unease. "Sir Comminges," he said, "pardon me but we're both servants of the queen, aren't we? It's my turn to be useful to her; don't be envious of my moment."

Comminges bowed stiffly and went. *And thus*, thought d'Artagnan, *I've managed to make myself another enemy*.

"Now," said the queen, addressing d'Artagnan, "what's to be done? For as you can hear, instead of decreasing, the noise is growing louder."

"Madam," d'Artagnan replied, "if the people want to see the king, they should see him."

"What do you mean, they should see him – and where? On the balcony?"



"Not there, Madam but here in bed, asleep."

"Oh, Your Majesty, Sir d'Artagnan is absolutely right!" said La Porte.

The queen thought for a moment, and then smiled like a woman to whom duplicity is no stranger. "We'll do it," she murmured.

"Sir La Porte," said d'Artagnan, "go out through the palace gates and announce to the people that if they would be satisfied, in five minutes they will not only see the king but see him in his bed – however, add that the king is asleep, and the queen begs that they remain silent so as not to awaken him."

"You mean everyone, not just a delegation of a few persons?"

"Everyone, Madam."

"But think about it, this will take all night."

"It will take a quarter of an hour. Trust me on this, Madam – believe me, the people are like big children who just need to hear some calm words. At the sight of the sleeping king, they will be silent, sweet, and gentle as lambs."

"Go, La Porte," said the queen.

The young king approached his mother. "Why do we have to do what these people ask?" he said.

"Because we must, my son," said Anne of Austria.

"But then, if I must do what they tell me, am I still the king?"

The queen said nothing. "Sire," said d'Artagnan, "will Your Majesty permit me to ask him a question?"

Louis XIV turned, astonished that someone should address him uninvited. The queen took hold of his hand. "...Yes, Sir," he said.

"Does Your Majesty remember playing in the park at Fontainebleau, or in the courtyards at Versailles, when suddenly the sky clouded over and there came the sound of thunder?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well! That thunder, no matter how much Your Majesty wished to continue to play, said to you, 'Sire, you must go inside.'"

"No doubt, Sir – but I was always told that the sound of thunder was the voice of God."

"Well, Sire," said d'Artagnan, "if you listen to the voice of the people, you'll hear that it sounds a lot like thunder."

In fact, at that moment a terrible rumble was borne in on the night breeze. Then suddenly it stopped. "There, Sire," said d'Artagnan, "they just told the people that you are asleep. And by that you see that you are still the king."

The queen looked with astonishment at this strange man whose courage was equal to the bravest, and whose subtle and clever wits were the equal of anyone's. La Porte came in. "Well, La Porte?" the queen asked.

"Madam," he replied, "Sir d'Artagnan's prediction was justified – they've calmed down as if by magic. We're going to open the doors to them, and in five minutes they'll be here."

"La Porte," said the queen, "if you substituted one of your sons for the king that would give us time to escape."

"If Your Majesty so commands," said La Porte. "My sons, like myself, are at the queen's service."

"No," said d'Artagnan. "If just one of them knew His Majesty by sight and detected the trick, all would be lost."

"You're right, Sir – always right," said Anne of Austria. "La Porte, put the king to bed."

La Porte put the king, dressed as he was, into bed, and pulled the sheet up to his shoulders. The queen bent over him and kissed him on the forehead. "Pretend to be asleep, Louis," she said.

"All right," said the king, "but I don't want any of those people to touch me."

"Sire, I'm right here," said d'Artagnan, "and I say to you that if any one of them is so presumptuous, he'll pay with his life."

"Now, what should we do?" asked the queen. "I hear them coming."

"Sir La Porte, go to meet them, and remind them to stay silent. Madam, wait there by the door. I'll be at the king's bedside, prepared to die for him."

La Porte went out, the queen stood by the tapestry door, and d'Artagnan slipped behind the bed, hidden by its curtains. Then came the plodding march of a multitude of men; the queen raised the tapestry herself, finger to her lips. When they saw the queen, the citizens stopped in respect. "Come in, Gentlemen, come in," said the queen.

Then the people hesitated, as if ashamed. They'd expected resistance; they'd expected to be opposed; they'd expected to have to force the gates and overwhelm the guards – but the gates had been opened for them, and the king, seemingly, had no one to guard him but his mother. The men in front stammered and tried to back up. "Come in, Gentlemen," said La Porte, "Since the queen permits it."

One man, bolder than the others, ventured beyond the threshold and advanced on tiptoe. The others imitated him, and the room fell silent, as if these men were nothing but the most humble and devoted courtiers. Outside the door could be seen the heads of those who, unable to fit, stood on tiptoe to peer in. D'Artagnan saw everything through a gap he'd made in the curtains – and he recognised the man who entered first as Planchet. "Sir," the queen said to him, regarding him as the leader of that band, "you wished to see the king, and I wished to show him to you myself. Approach, look at him, and say if this looks like people who are trying to escape."

"It ... it doesn't," said Planchet, rather astonished at receiving such an honour.

"Then you must tell my good and loyal Parisians," replied Anne of Austria, with a smile that didn't fool d'Artagnan in the slightest, "that you have seen the king abed and asleep, and the queen prepared to go to bed in her turn."

"I'll tell them, Madam, and all those with me will tell them as well but..."

"But what?" asked Anne of Austria.

"I hope Your Majesty will forgive me," said Planchet, "but is that really the king I see lying there?"

Anne of Austria trembled. "If there is anyone among you who knows the king," she said, "let him come forth and state whether this is truly His Majesty."

A man wrapped in a cloak, draped to hide his face, came in, approached the bed, and took a long look. D'Artagnan thought the man might intend harm, and put his hand to his sword but the cloak slipped slightly, and d'Artagnan recognised the coadjutor. "It is indeed the king," the man said in a muffled voice. "God bless His Majesty!"

"Yes," answered Planchet, in a stage whisper, "yes, God bless His Majesty!"

And all those men, who had come in furious, went from anger to sympathy, and murmured blessings on the royal child. "Now," said Planchet, "let's thank the queen, my friends, and depart."

Everyone bowed, and then one by one they quietly went out the way they'd come in. Planchet, the first to enter, was the last to leave. The queen stopped him. "What is your name, my friend?" she asked.

Planchet turned, astonished by this question. "Yes," said the queen. "I'm as honoured to have received you this evening as if you were a prince, and I desire to know your name."

Oh, yes, thought Planchet, *so you can treat me the way you treat the princes!*

D'Artagnan shuddered at the idea that Planchet, seduced like the raven of the fable, might say his name, and that the queen, hearing his name, might learn that Planchet belonged to him.

"Madam," Planchet respectfully replied, "I'm called Dulaurier, at your service."

"Thank you, Sir Dulaurier," said the queen. "And what do you do?"

"Madam, I'm a draper in the Rue des Bourdonnais."

"That's all I wanted to know," said the queen. "Much obliged, my dear Sir Dulaurier. You'll be hearing from me."

"Well, now," murmured d'Artagnan behind his curtain, "clearly Master Planchet is no fool, and learned his lessons in a good school."

The door dropped, and the various actors of this strange scene stood for a moment in tableau without saying a word, the queen standing by the door, d'Artagnan half out of his hiding place, and the king raised up on one elbow and ready to fall back again at the least noise that indicated the return of the mob – but instead of approaching, the noise grew more and more distant, and finally disappeared altogether. The queen exhaled slowly; d'Artagnan mopped his damp forehead; the king slid out of bed, saying, "Let's leave."

Just then La Porte reappeared. "Well?" asked the queen.

"Well, Madam," replied the valet, "I followed them to the gates, where they announced to everyone that they'd seen the king, and the queen had spoken to them, so they all went away proud and happy."

"Oh, the wretches!" murmured the queen. "They'll pay dearly for their insolence, this I promise!" Then, turning to d'Artagnan, she said, "Sir, this evening you've given me the best advice I've ever received. To continue, what should we do now?"

"Sir La Porte, finish dressing His Majesty," said d'Artagnan.

"Then we can go now?" asked the queen.

"Whenever Your Majesty likes. She has only to go down the secret staircase, where she will find me at the door."

"Go, Sir," said the queen. "I shall follow."

D'Artagnan went down, where he found the carriage waiting, with the musketeer on the driver's seat. D'Artagnan picked up the package he'd directed Bernouin to put in the carriage that included the hat and cloak of Sir Gondy's coachman. He wrapped the cloak around his shoulders and put the hat on his head. The musketeer de Bellière got down from the driver's seat. "Sir," said d'Artagnan, "I'm sending you to set free your companion, who's guarding the coachman. Then I want you to mount up and ride to Rue Tiquetonne, the Hôtel de La Chevrette, where you'll find my horse and that of Sir du Vallon. Saddle and equip them as if for war, then lead them out of Paris and bring them to us in the Cours-la-Reine. If you can't find us at the Cours-la-Reine, then continue on to Saint-Germain. In the king's service!"

The musketeer put his hand to his hat in salute and departed to fulfil his orders. D'Artagnan climbed up on the driver's seat. He had a brace of pistols in his belt, a carbine at his feet, and his naked sword on the seat behind him. The queen appeared, followed by the king and his younger brother, the Duke d'Anjou. "The coadjutor's carriage!" she cried, recoiling a step.

"Yes, Madam," said d'Artagnan, "but it's all right, because I'm driving it."

The queen stifled a cry of surprise and entered the carriage. The king and Sir followed and sat down beside her. "Come, La Porte," said the queen.

"What, Madam!" said the valet. "How can I ride in the same carriage as Your Majesties?"

"This isn't a matter of royal etiquette but of saving the king. Get in, La Porte!" La Porte obeyed. "Pull down the shades," said d'Artagnan.

"But won't that look suspicious, Sir?" asked the queen.

"Rest easy, Your Majesty. I have my responses ready," said d'Artagnan. The shades were pulled down, and they set off at a gallop along the Rue de Richelieu. On arriving at the gate, the leader of the citizen guards came out with a lantern in his hand, followed by a dozen men. D'Artagnan made a sign for him to approach. "Do you recognise this carriage?" he said to the sergeant.

"No," the man replied.

"Take a look at the arms on its door."

The sergeant brought his lantern near the door panel. "The arms of Sir Coadjuteur!" he said.

"Hush! He's receiving the favours of Madam de Guéménée."

The sergeant began to laugh. "Open the gate," he called, "I know who this is." Then, approaching the door and speaking through the shades, he said, "You're a lucky man, My Lord!"

"Not so loud!" said d'Artagnan. "Do you want to get me in trouble?"

The gate creaked on its hinges, and d'Artagnan, seeing the way opened, whipped up the horses and departed at a trot. Five minutes later they arrived where the cardinal's carriage was waiting.

"Mousqueton," called d'Artagnan, "come open the door of Her Majesty's coach."

"It's him," said Porthos.

"On the driver's seat!" cried Mazarin.

"Of the coadjutor's carriage!" said the queen.

"God, Sir d'Artagnan!" said Mazarin. "You are worth your weight in gold!"

### D'Artagnan & Porthos gain 219 & 211 Golden Louis by Selling Straw Respectively

Mazarin wanted to leave at once for Saint-Germain but the queen declared she would wait for the others who were expected to join them. But she invited the cardinal to take La Porte's place in her vehicle. The cardinal accepted and crossed from one carriage to the other. There was a reason that the rumour had spread that the king was to leave Paris in the night: ten or twelve persons had been in on the secret since six o'clock in the evening, and no matter how discreet they might be, they hadn't been able to give their orders for departure without the word getting out. Besides, each of these persons had one or two other close associates, family or dear friends, and as no one believed that the queen intended to leave Paris without plans for taking her revenge, they had warned their friends and relations, and the rumour of the departure had spread like wildfire through the streets of the city. The first carriage to arrive after that of the queen was that of Sir Prince, containing the Prince de Condé, Madam Princess, and Madam the Princess Dowager. The latter two had been awakened in the middle of the night and had no idea of what was happening. The second carriage contained Sir Duke of Orléans, Madam Duchess, la Grande Miss, and the Abbot de La Rivière, the prince's inseparable favourite and intimate counsellor. The third carriage to arrive contained Sir Longueville and the Prince de Conti,\* brother-in-law and brother of Sir Prince. They got out, approached the carriage of the king and the queen, and paid their respects to Their Majesties. The queen looked across into their carriage, the door of which stood open, and saw that it was empty. "But where then is Madam de Longueville?" she asked.

"Indeed, where's my sister?" asked Sir Prince.

"Madam de Longueville is ill, Madam," the duke responded, "And charged me with conveying her apologies to Your Majesty."

Anne glanced quickly at Mazarin, who responded with an almost-imperceptible shake of the head. "What do you think?" the queen asked.

"I think she's a hostage for the Parisians," replied the cardinal.

"Why didn't she come?" asked Sir Prince in a low voice to his brother.

"Hush!" Conti replied. "No doubt she has her reasons."

"She's betraying us," murmured the prince.

"She's saving us," said Conti.

Other vehicles arrived in a rush. Marshall de La Meilleraie, Marshall de Villeroy, Guitaut, Comminges, and Villequier all came in convoy. The two musketeers arrived leading the horses of d'Artagnan and Porthos, who got into their saddles. Porthos's coachman replaced d'Artagnan on the seat of the royal carriage, and Mousqueton replaced the coachman, standing up in the seat and driving erect for reasons best known to himself, like Achilles's driver Automedon. The queen, though occupied with a thousand details, sought for d'Artagnan but the Gascon, with his usual prudence, had already disappeared into the crowd. "Let's make up the vanguard," he said to Porthos, "and find ourselves some decent lodgings at Saint-Germain, as no one will think to do it for us. I feel rather fatigued."

"I'm about ready to fall off my horse," said Porthos, "and there wasn't even a proper battle. Really, the Parisians are such fools."

"Isn't it rather that we were very clever?" said d'Artagnan.

"Maybe."

"And how is your wrist doing?"

"Better. But do you think we've won them this time?"

"What?"

"You, your promotion, and me, my title?"

"Faith! Yes, I'd just about bet on it. Besides, if this time they forget, I'll make sure they remember."

"I think I can hear the voice of the queen," said Porthos. "She's asking to ride on horseback."

"Yes, she might like that but..."

"But what?"

"But the cardinal won't want it. Gentlemen," d'Artagnan continued, addressing the two musketeers, "ride escort on the queen's carriage, staying right next to the doors. We're going ahead to prepare lodgings."

And d'Artagnan spurred off toward Saint-Germain, accompanied by Porthos.

"On our way, Gentlemen! Let's go!" said the queen. And the royal carriage set out, followed by the other carriages and more than fifty mounted cavaliers. They arrived at Saint-Germain without accident. Upon descending from her carriage, the queen found Sir Prince waiting at the step, uncovered and offering his hand. "It will be a rude awakening for the Parisians!" said Anne of Austria, radiant.

"It means war," said the prince.

"Well! It's war then. Don't we have on our side the victor of Rocroi, of Nördlingen, and of Lens?"

The prince bowed in token of thanks. It was three o'clock in the morning. The queen was the first to enter the château, and then everyone followed her; about two hundred people had joined in the escape. "Gentlemen," said the queen, laughing, "find lodging in the château where you will – it's vast, and there's plenty of room but as we couldn't warn them we were coming, I'm afraid there are only three beds: one for the king, one for me..."

"And one for Mazarin," said Sir Prince in an undertone.

"And me, am I supposed to sleep on the floor?" asked Gaston d'Orléans\* with a worried smile.

"Not at all, My Lord," said Mazarin. "The third bed is destined for Your Highness."

"But what of you?" asked the prince.

"Oh, I won't go to bed," said Mazarin. "I have work to do."

Gaston was shown to the room where he could find the third bed, without worrying about where his wife and daughter might stay. "Yes, well, I'm certainly going to bed," said d'Artagnan. "Come with me, Porthos."

Porthos followed d'Artagnan with the profound confidence he had in the wits of his friend. As they walked across the château courtyard, Porthos looked with surprise at d'Artagnan, who was calculating something on his fingers. "Four hundred at a pistole apiece makes four hundred pistoles."

"Yes, that makes four hundred pistoles," said Porthos. "But *what* makes these four hundred pistoles?"

"A single pistole isn't enough," continued d'Artagnan. "It's worth a full *louis*."

"What's worth a louis?"

"Four hundred, at a louis each, makes four hundred louis."

"Four hundred?" said Porthos.

"Yes, there are two hundred of them, and it takes at least two per person, thus two per person makes four hundred."

"But four hundred what?"

"Listen," said d'Artagnan.

And as there were all sorts of people around watching in amazement as the Court arrived, he finished his sentence with a whisper in Porthos's ear. "I understand," said Porthos, "My faith, I understand perfectly! Two hundred Louis for each of us sounds lovely – but what will the Court say?"

"They can say what they like. Besides, how will they know we were behind it?"

"But who will take charge of the distribution?"

"Mousqueton's here, isn't he?"

"In my livery!" said Porthos. "Which will be recognised."

"He can turn his coat inside out."

"You're right, as always, my friend," said Porthos. "Where the devil do you get all these ideas from?"

D'Artagnan smiled. The two friends turned up the first street they came to, Porthos knocking on the doors on the right, while d'Artagnan took the doors on the left. "Straw!" they called. "We need straw."

"Sir, we don't have any," replied the first man to open to d'Artagnan. "You should ask the fodder merchant."

"And where do I find this fodder merchant?"

"Behind the large gate at the end of the street."

"On the right or the left?"

"The left."

"And are there any other such merchants in Saint-Germain?"

"There's the innkeeper of the Crowned Mutton, and Gros-Louis the farmer."

"Where do they live?"

"Rue des Ursulines."

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Excellent!"

The two friends got directions as clear and exact for the second and third addresses as they had for the first, and then d'Artagnan went to the fodder merchant's and bargained with him for a hundred and fifty bundles of straw that he bought for the sum of three pistoles. He then went to the innkeeper, where he found that Porthos had just purchased 200 bundles for about the same price. They got a final one hundred and eighty from Gros-Louis the farmer that brought their total to four hundred and thirty bundles of straw. At the Château de Saint-Germain, there were none. All this trading took no more than half an hour. Mousqueton, duly briefed, was made the figurehead of the com-thank youal venture. He was advised to not to let a single bundle of straw get out of his hands for less than a louis that meant they were counting on him to bring in four hundred thirty louis. Mousqueton nodded his head and shrugged, not quite understanding the nature of the enterprise. D'Artagnan, carrying three bundles of straw, returned to the château, where everyone, weary and shivering with cold, looked on in envy at the king, the queen, and Sir in their beds. The musketeer's entry into the great hall carrying an armload of straw produced a general reaction of laughter, until d'Artagnan who didn't seem to notice he was an object of derision, began with deliberation and cheer to form his straw into a comfortable sleeping pallet, at which everyone else regarded him with sudden envy. "Straw?" they cried. "A pallet of straw! Where can we get hold of some straw?"

"I can show you," said Porthos.

And he led the nobles to Mousqueton, who generously distributed his straw at a Louis a bundle. They thought it a bit expensive. But when one is desperate for a good night's sleep, who wouldn't pay two or three Louis for such a luxury?

D'Artagnan sold his bed to an eager customer, got some more straw, and did the same thing again ten times over – and since he was supposed to have bought his straw like the others, he pocketed about thirty Louis in less than an hour. By five in the morning straw was going for three Louis a bundle but there was no more to be had. D'Artagnan had taken care to set four bundles aside for himself. He put into his pocket the key of the closet where he'd hidden them, and then, accompanied by Porthos, went back to Mousqueton, who, shrewdly and like the worthy steward that he was, turned over four hundred and thirty louis to them, keeping an extra hundred for himself. Mousqueton, who knew nothing of what was going on in the château, couldn't understand how it had never occurred to him before to go into the straw-selling business. D'Artagnan collected the coins in his hat, and on the way back, split them with Porthos. Each ended up with 215 Louis. Only then did Porthos realise he'd kept no straw for himself. He returned to Mousqueton but he'd sold the straw down to the last bundle. Porthos went back to d'Artagnan, whom he found making, with his four bundles of straw, a bed so soft, luxurious, and well-padded that the king himself might have envied it, if he hadn't had a bed of his own. D'Artagnan refused to sell his glorious bed to Porthos at any price – but for 4 Louis, paid in advance, he did agree to share it. D'Artagnan placed his sword at his head, his pistols at his side, covered himself in his cloak, propped his hat on his head, and stretched out voluptuously upon the crackling straw. He was already sinking into the sweet dreams that came after collecting 219 *Louis* in an hour when a voice rang out in the great hall, making him jump. "Sir d'Artagnan!" it cried. "Sir d'Artagnan!"

"Over here!" said Porthos who knew that if d'Artagnan was called away, he'd have the entire bed to himself.

D'Artagnan raised himself on one elbow as an officer approached. "Are you Sir d'Artagnan?" he said.

"Yes, Sir. What do you want from me?"

"I've been sent to find you."

"On whose behalf?"

"That of His Eminence."

"Tell His Eminence that I'm going to sleep, and I advise him as a friend to do the same."

"His Eminence hasn't gone to bed and isn't planning to. He requests you to come at once."

"Plague take this Mazarin, who doesn't know how to sleep!" murmured d'Artagnan. "What does he want? Is it to promote me to captain? In that case, I'll forgive him."

And the musketeer got up, muttering, took his sword, pistols, hat, and cloak, and then followed the officer, leaving Porthos in sole possession of the bed, arranging himself as d'Artagnan had. "Sir d'Artagnan," said the cardinal, upon seeing the man he'd so untimely summoned, "I haven't forgotten how zealously you've served me, and I'll give you a proof of that."

*Well!* D'Artagnan thought. *This certainly sounds promising.* He said, "Oh, My Lord ...!"

Mazarin was watching the musketeer and had seen his face flush. He said, "Sir d'Artagnan, do you really desire to be a captain?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"And does your friend still wish to be a baron?"

"At this very moment, My Lord, he's dreaming that he already is!"

"Then," said Mazarin, drawing from a satchel the letter he'd shown d'Artagnan previously, "take this dispatch and carry it to England."

D'Artagnan looked at the envelope; it still had no address. He said, "Can I know to whom I should deliver it?"

"You'll know when you arrive in London, because that's when you'll open the outer envelope."

"And what are my instructions?"

"To obey in every respect the one to whom this letter is addressed."

D'Artagnan was about to ask further questions when Mazarin added, "You will travel by way of Boulogne. There, at the English Arms, you'll find a young gentleman named Sir Mordaunt."

"Very well, My Lord – and what shall I do with this gentleman?"

"Follow him wherever he takes you."

D'Artagnan looked at the cardinal in astonishment. "You have your instructions," said Mazarin. "Now go."

"Go! That's easy to say," D'Artagnan replied, "but to go takes money, and I've none."

"Really?" said Mazarin, scratching his ear. "You say you don't have any money?"

"None, My Lord."

"What about that diamond I gave you last night?"

"I treasure that as a memento of Your Eminence." Mazarin sighed. "It's expensive to live in England, my Lord, especially as an envoy extraordinaire."

"Not so!" said Mazarin. "It's a simple and sober country, never more so than since the revolution. But no matter." He opened a drawer and drew out a purse. "What do you say to a thousand crowns?"

D'Artagnan pushed out his lower lip in disapproval. "I say, My Lord, that it isn't much, since I won't be travelling alone."

"I'm counting on it," replied Mazarin. "That worthy gentleman Sir du Vallon must accompany you, my dear Sir D'Artagnan – there's no man in France I esteem more than he."

"Then, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, indicating the purse that Mazarin still held, "in consideration of your esteem for him..."

"Indeed! In consideration of that, I'll add two hundred crowns more."

"Miser!" d'Artagnan murmured, then added aloud, "But upon our return, at least, we can count on Sir Porthos receiving his baronetcy and I my promotion?"

"Faith of a Mazarin!"

*I don't put much stock in that oath*, d'Artagnan thought to himself, then said, "May I pay my respects to Her Majesty the Queen?"

"Her Majesty is asleep," Mazarin replied briskly, "and you must leave without delay. Go, Sir."

"One more word, My Lord: if they're fighting in the place where I'm going, shall I fight?"

"You will follow the orders of the person I've sent you to."

"Very well, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, extending his hand for the purse, "then I'll leave my respects with you."

D'Artagnan carefully placed the purse in his largest pocket, and then turned to the officer who'd brought him and said, "Sir, will you go awaken Sir du Vallon on the orders of His Eminence, and tell him I await him at the stables?"

The officer immediately set off with an eagerness in which d'Artagnan thought he detected some self-interest. Porthos had finally made himself completely comfortable on his bed and had begun his usual vigorous snoring when he was awakened by a tap on the shoulder. He thought it was d'Artagnan returning and didn't move. "On the orders of the cardinal," said the officer.

"Eh?" said Porthos, opening his eyes wide. "What did you say?"

"I say that His Eminence sends you to England, and Sir d'Artagnan awaits you at the stables." Porthos gave a deep sigh, got up and took his sword, pistols, hat, and cloak, and left after a final regretful look at the bed in which he'd hoped to sleep so well. He had scarcely turned his back before the officer had taken his place and was barely out the door before his successor began to snore. Which was only natural, because of the entire Court, only the king, the queen, and My Lord Gaston d'Orléans had a better bed than he.

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A Warning from Aramis

D'Artagnan had gone straight to the stables. Day was just dawning; he recognised his horse and that of Porthos tied to the manger but it was empty. He felt pity for the poor animals and went toward a corner of the stable where he saw a few wisps of straw. But upon sweeping up this straw with his foot, hit boot connected with a round body that, doubtless touched in a sensitive place, cried out, rose to its knees, and rubbed its eyes. It was Mousqueton who, having no straw for himself, had borrowed the hay from the horses. "Mousqueton!" said d'Artagnan. "Come on, we're leaving."

Mousqueton, recognising the voice of his master's friend, hastened to rise, accidentally dropping some of the extra coins he'd raked off from selling the straw. "Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan, picking up a Louis and sniffing it. "This gold has a funny odour – it smells like straw!"

Mousqueton blushed so openly and seemed so embarrassed that the Gascon laughed and said to him, "Porthos might be angry, my dear Sir Mousqueton but as for me, I pardon you. Just remember that this gold must serve as a balm for your wound as we ride, for we must travel!"

Mousqueton pretended to smile, quickly saddled his master's mount, and then climbed on his own without too much wincing. Meanwhile Porthos arrived in a sullen mood, and was surprised to find d'Artagnan resigned, and Mousqueton almost happy. "*Oh that*," he said, "have we got your promotion and my barony?"

"We're on our way to secure the brevet and patent," said d'Artagnan, "and on our return Mazarin will sign them."

"And where are we going?" asked Porthos.

"To Paris, first of all," d'Artagnan replied. "I want to settle some business there."

"Then let's go to Paris," said Porthos.

And they set off for Paris. When they reached the gates, they were surprised by the menacing aspect of the capital. Around a shattered carriage a crowd was crying threats and insults, holding the passengers who'd tried to flee as prisoners. These were an old man and two women. However, when d'Artagnan and Porthos demanded entry, the people fawned upon them, assuming they were deserters from the royalist party had come to join the citizens' faction. "What's the king doing?" they asked.

"He's sleeping."

"And the Spaniard?"

"She's dreaming."

"And that cursed Italian?"

"He's watching. So, stand firm – for if they've fled, it's because they must have a plan," said d'Artagnan. "But since, at the end of the day, you're the strongest, never fear women and old men, and stay true to your cause." The people felt better upon hearing this, and released the ladies, who thanked d'Artagnan with an eloquent look. "And now, onward!" said d'Artagnan.

They continued on their way, crossing barricades, passing chains, and answering questions. In the square outside the Royal Palace, d'Artagnan saw a sergeant who was drilling five or six hundred citizens. It was Planchet, employing his experience in the Piedmont Regiment for the benefit of the urban militia. As d'Artagnan passed, he recognised his former master. "*Hello*, Sir d'Artagnan!" said Planchet proudly.

"Hello, Sir Dulaurier," d'Artagnan replied. Planchet stopped short, staring wide-eyed at d'Artagnan. The first rank of militia, seeing him stop, did the same, and each successive rank followed suit. "These bourgeois are just ridiculous," d'Artagnan said to Porthos as they continued on their way. Five minutes later they dismounted at the Hôtel de La Chevrete. The lovely Madeleine rushed out to greet d'Artagnan. "My dear Madam Turquoise," said d'Artagnan, "if you have any money, bury it fast; if you have any jewellery, hide it even faster; if you have any debtors, call in your debts; and if you have any creditors, by no means pay them."

"Why's that?" asked Madeleine.

"Because Paris will soon be rubble and as ruined as old Babylon, of which you might have heard tell."

"And that's the moment you choose to leave me?"

"That very moment," said d'Artagnan.

"And where are you going?"

"Ah! If you could tell me that, you'd be doing me a real service."

"Oh, *my God! My God!*"

D'Artagnan gestured to his hostess to spare him her laments, as they were useless and unnecessary, and asked, "Have any letters come for me?"

"There's only this one that just arrived." And she gave the letter to d'Artagnan.

"From Athos!" cried d'Artagnan, recognising his friend's firm and formal handwriting.

"Ah!" said Porthos. "Let's see what he has to say." D'Artagnan opened the letter and read:

*Dear d'Artagnan, and my dear du Vallon – my friends, this may be the last time you hear from me. Aramis is distressed but God, our courage, and the memory of your friendship support us. Take care of Raoul. Certain written instructions have been left at Blois, and if you haven't heard from us within two and a half months, please take note of them. Embrace the viscount with all the heart you have for your devoted friend,*

ATHOS

"I'm going to take this to heart," said d'Artagnan, "and embrace Raoul when I can, since he's on our probable route. And if he has the misfortune to lose our poor Athos, from that moment on he becomes my son."

"And I will make him my sole heir," said Porthos. "But look, on the back Athos added a postscript: *And if, on your way, you meet a Sir Mordaunt, defy him. I can say no more in a letter.*"

"Sir Mordaunt!" said d'Artagnan in surprise.

"Sir Mordaunt, right," said Porthos, "we'll remember that. But see here, there's another postscript, this one from Aramis."

"Indeed," said d'Artagnan. And he read: "*We're keeping our location a secret, dear friends, because knowing your fraternal devotion, you'd come to die with us.*"

"*Damn it!*" interrupted Porthos, in an angry explosion that made Mousqueton jump across the yard. "Are they really in danger of death?"

D'Artagnan continued, “*Athos entrusts you with Raoul, and I bequeath you a vengeance. If you find yourself within arm’s-reach of a certain Mordaunt, tell Porthos to take him into a corner and twist his head from his neck. I dare say no more in a letter.* –ARAMIS.”

“Is that all?” said Porthos. “It’s easily done.”

“On the contrary,” said d’Artagnan sombrely, “it’s quite impossible.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s this very Sir Mordaunt whom we’re supposed to meet in Boulogne and who is supposed to escort us to England.”

“Well, then! Suppose that instead of going to join Sir Mordaunt, we go to join our friends?” said Porthos, shaking a fist that would frighten an army.

“I considered that,” said d’Artagnan, “but this letter has neither date nor address.”

“That’s true,” said Porthos, frowning.

And he began striding up and down like a wild man, gesticulating and sometimes half-drawing his sword. As for d’Artagnan, he stood rooted in place like a man afflicted with uncertainty, dismay painted all over his face. “Oh, this is bad,” he said. “Athos insults us by wanting to die by himself. This is awful.” Mousqueton, seeing these two great men in despair, sat down in another corner and burst into tears. “Come,” said d’Artagnan, “this is getting us nowhere. Let’s go, find Raoul and embrace him, and see if he’s heard any news from Athos.”

“Now there’s a good idea,” growled Porthos. “In truth, d’Artagnan, I just don’t know how one man can have so many ideas. Let’s go embrace Raoul.”

“I wouldn’t give a *denier* for the life of anyone who’d cross my master at this moment,” muttered Mousqueton.

They mounted their horses and set out. On arriving in Rue Saint-Denis, they encountered a great crowd of people. Sir Beaufort had just arrived from the Vendômois, and the coadjutor was presenting him to the Parisians, who were beside themselves with joy. With the arrival of the Duke Beaufort, they regarded themselves as invincible. The two friends turned down a side street to avoid the prince and thereby reached the Saint-Denis barrier. “Is it true,” the guards asked the two cavaliers, “that Sir Beaufort has arrived in Paris?”

“It couldn’t be truer,” said d’Artagnan, “and the proof is that he’s sent us out to meet Sir Vendôme, his father, who’s coming in his turn.”

“Long live Sir Beaufort!” cried the guards.

And they parted respectfully to allow the envoys of the great prince to pass. Once beyond the barrier, they raced up the road like riders to whom fatigue and discouragement were unknown. Their horses fairly flew, and all along the way they spoke of Athos and Aramis. Mousqueton was suffering terrible torments but he consoled himself with the thought that his masters had sufferings of their own. Indeed, he’d come to regard d’Artagnan as his second master, and obeyed him if anything more promptly than he did Porthos. The army’s camp was between Saint-Omer and Lambres, so the two friends made a detour thereto, and informed the general staff of the escape of the king and the queen, the details of which had remained a secret until then. They found Raoul near his tent, lying on a bale of hay from which his horse was tearing a few scraps. The young man had red eyes and seemed dejected; the Marshall de Grammont and the Count Guiche had returned to Paris, leaving the poor lad on his own. After a few moments Raoul looked up and saw the two cavaliers looking down at him; he recognised them and ran to them with open arms. “Oh! It’s you, dear friends!” he cried.

“Were you coming to get me? Are you taking me with you? Have you brought any news of my guardian?”

“Have you no news yourself?” d’Artagnan asked the young man.

“Alas! None, Sir, and in truth I don’t know what’s become of him. I’m so worried I could almost cry.”

And indeed, two fat tears rolled down the young man’s tanned cheeks. Porthos turned his head to conceal the feelings in his own heart. “The devil!” said d’Artagnan, more upset than he’d been in a long time. “Don’t despair, my friend – if you haven’t received any letters from the count, we at least have had ... er ... one ....”

“Really?” cried Raoul.

“And a very reassuring one, too,” said d’Artagnan, seeing what joy this news brought the young man.

“Do you have it?” asked Raoul.

“Yes – or anyway, I had it,” said d’Artagnan, pretending to search his clothes. “Wait, it was right here in my pocket. He spoke of his return, didn’t he, Porthos?”

Gascon though he was, d’Artagnan didn’t want to bear the entire burden of this falsehood. “Yes,” said Porthos, coughing.

“Oh, give it to me!” said the young man.

“Sure, you can read the whole thing. Oh, wait, it’s gone! There’s a hole in my pocket!”

“What a shame, Sir Raoul,” said Mousqueton. “The letter was really very comforting. These gentlemen read it to me, and I wept with joy.”

“So at least, Sir d’Artagnan, you know where he is?” asked Raoul, half reassured.

“Well, of course I know where he is,” said d’Artagnan, “but it’s a secret.”

“Not from me, I hope.”

“No, not from you ... so I’ll tell you where he is.”

Porthos looked at d’Artagnan with eyes wide in astonishment.

D’Artagnan muttered, “Where the devil can I say he’s gone so Raoul won’t try to follow him?”

“Well? Where is he, Sir?” asked Raoul in his soft, hopeful voice.

“He’s ... in Constantinople!”

“Among the Turks!” cried Raoul in dismay. “Good God! What are you telling me?”

“Why, what are you afraid of?” said d’Artagnan. “Bah! What are the Turks to men like the Count La Fère and the Abbot d’Herblay?”

“Oh, so his friend is with him?” said Raoul. “That reassures me a little.”

“This d’Artagnan has the Devil’s own wit!” said Porthos to himself, amazed by his friend’s cunning.

“Now,” said d’Artagnan, eager to change the subject, “Here are fifty pistoles Sir Count sent by the same courier. I assume by now you must be out of money, and this will be welcome.”

“I still have twenty pistoles, Sir.”

“Never turn down money. Take these, and then you’ll have seventy.”

“And if you want any more...” said Porthos, putting his hand to his pocket.

“Thank you,” said Raoul, blushing. “A thousand thanks, Sir.”

At that moment, Olivain ambled up. “By the way,” said d’Artagnan, loud enough so the lackey could hear, “are you satisfied with Olivain?”

“Yes, mostly.”

Olivain pretended not to have heard and went into the tent. “You have complaints about this buffoon?”

“He’s a glutton.”

“Oh, Sir!” said Olivain, reappearing at this accusation.

“He’s a petty thief.”

“Oh, now, Sir!”

“And worst of all, he’s a coward.”

“Ah, Sir, you dishonour me!” said Olivain.

“*Plague!*” said d’Artagnan. “Understand, Master Olivain, that people like us aren’t served by cowards. Steal from your master, eat his rations and drink his honey but *cap de Diou*, don’t be cowardly, or I’ll cut off your ears! Look at Sir Mousqueton, ask him to show you the honourable wounds he’s taken, and see the dignity his habitual bravery has stamped upon his face.” Mousqueton was in seventh heaven at this praise, and would have embraced d’Artagnan if he’d dared, while promising himself to die for him at the first opportunity. “Send this dolt home, Raoul,” said d’Artagnan, “for if he’s a coward, someday he’ll dishonour himself – and you.”

“Sir says I’m a coward,” cried Olivain, “because the other day he wanted to fight with a cornet of the Grammont Regiment, and I refused to accompany him.”

“Sir Olivain, a lackey must never be disobedient,” said d’Artagnan sternly. Then, drawing him aside, he added, “If your master was in the wrong, then here’s a crown for you. But if he’s ever insulted and you don’t get cut into quarters defending him, I’ll cut out your tongue and ruin your looks. Remember that well.” Olivain bowed and put the crown in his pocket. “And now, friend Raoul, we must depart, Sir du Vallon and I, on our mission as ambassadors,” said d’Artagnan. “I can’t tell you more than that, because I don’t know myself but if you need anything, write to Madam Madeleine Turquaine, à la Chevette, Rue Tiquetonne, and draw on her funds as you would on a banker – but gently, as her vault is not as well furnished as that of Sir d’Émery.” And then, having embraced his temporary ward, he passed him over to the mighty arms of Porthos who hugged him right off the ground and held him suspended against the noble heart of the formidable giant. “Come,” said d’Artagnan, “let’s be on our way.” They set out again for Boulogne, where they arrived toward evening, their horses soaked with sweat and white with foam. Ten paces from where they paused before entering the town was a young man dressed in black who seemed to be waiting for someone, and whose eyes were fixed upon them from the moment they appeared. D’Artagnan approached him and seeing that his gaze never dropped, said, “See here, friend, I don’t like being stared at.”

“Sir,” said the young man, ignoring d’Artagnan’s remark, “you come from Paris, don’t you?”

D’Artagnan thought he must just be a curious fellow looking for news from the capital. “I do, Sir,” he replied in a milder tone.

“Are you planning to stay at the English Arms?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Are you charged with a mission from His Eminence Cardinal Mazarin?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“In that case,” said the young man, “you’re looking for me. I am Sir Mordaunt.”

“Ah ha!” said d’Artagnan in a low voice. “He’s the one Athos told us to distrust.”

“Oh ho!” whispered Porthos. “And the one Aramis wants me to strangle.”

And they both looked attentively at the young man, who mistook the meaning of their gaze. “Do you doubt my word?” he said. “If so, I can provide you with proof.”

“Not at all, Sir,” said d’Artagnan, “and we place ourselves at your disposal.”

“In that case, Gentlemen, we’ll leave without delay,” said Mordaunt, “for it’s the last day of the period the cardinal asked me to wait. Our vessel is ready, and if you hadn’t come, I was going to leave without you, for General Oliver Cromwell\* must be waiting impatiently for my return.”

“Ah,” said d’Artagnan, “so it’s to General Cromwell that we’re dispatched.”

“Don’t you bear a letter for him?” asked the young man.

“I have a letter inside a double envelope that I’m supposed to open once we reach London – but since you tell me to whom it’s addressed, there’s no point in waiting until then.” D’Artagnan tore open the outer envelope, revealing a letter addressed, “*To Sir Oliver Cromwell, General of the Armies of the English Nation.*”

“Ah!” said d’Artagnan. “A singular commission!”

“Who is this Oliver Cromwell?” asked Porthos in a low voice.

“A former brewer,” d’Artagnan replied.

“Does Mazarin want to speculate in beer as we did in straw?” asked Porthos.

“Come, Gentlemen,” said Mordaunt impatiently. “Let’s go.”

“What?” said Porthos. “Without dinner? Can’t Sir Cromwell wait a little longer?”

“Yes but I...” said Mordaunt.

“Yes but you?” said Porthos. “What?”

“I am in haste!”

“Hasten, then,” said Porthos. “That’s nothing to do with me. I intend to dine with or without your permission.”

The young man's mild gaze suddenly inflamed, and he seemed about to reply angrily but he restrained himself. "Sir," said d'Artagnan, "please excuse a pair of hungry travellers. Besides, our dinner won't delay you much, and we must take care of our horses. Walk on down to the port, we'll eat a few bites, and be there at almost the same time you will."

"Whatever you like, Gentlemen, so long as we go," said Mordaunt.

"All right ... this time," murmured Porthos.

"The name of the vessel?" asked d'Artagnan.

"The *Standard*."

"Very well. We'll be on board inside half an hour." And the pair pricked up their horses, spurring on to the English Arms. "What do you think of this young man?" asked d'Artagnan as they rode.

"I think I don't like him one little bit," said Porthos, "and I have a strong inclination to follow Aramis's advice."

"Take care, my dear Porthos, this man is an envoy of General Cromwell, and Cromwell won't receive us very well if we report that we've wrung his agent's neck."

"Just the same," said Porthos, "I've always felt that Aramis was a man who gave excellent advice."

"Listen," said d'Artagnan, "when our embassy is over..."

"What then?"

"If he escorts us back to France..."

"Well?"

"Well! Then we'll see."

The two friends arrived at the English Arms, where they dined with good appetite, and then went straight to the port. A brig was ready to set sail, on the deck of which they recognised Mordaunt, who was pacing up and down impatiently. "It's amazing," said d'Artagnan as the longboat ferried them out to the *Standard*, "how much this young man resembles someone I once knew but can't say who." They hove to at the ladder, and a moment later they were aboard. But the embarkation of the horses took longer than that of the men, and the brig couldn't weigh anchor until eight in the evening. Then the young man, stamping with impatience, ordered them to raise every sail. Porthos, exhausted by three sleepless nights and a horseback ride of seventy leagues, retired to his cabin and slept. D'Artagnan, overcoming his repugnance to Mordaunt, walked with him on deck and engaged him with a hundred stories to try to draw him out. Mousqueton was seasick.

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### The Faithless Scot sold his Monarch for the Love of Gold like Judas

And now, as the *Standard* sails, not for London, where d'Artagnan and Porthos thought they were going but to Durham, where letters Mordaunt had received from England during his stay in Boulogne had ordered him to go, our readers must leave them and follow us to the royalist camp, located on the banks of the Tyne near the city of Newcastle. It's here, between two rivers, on the frontier of Scotland but the soil of England, that the tents of a small army are spread. It is midnight. Men who can be recognised as Highlanders by their bare legs, their short skirts, their colourful plaids, and the feathers on their bonnets, keep a casual watch. The moon, gliding between large clouds, illuminates through the gaps the sentries' muskets and outlines the walls, roofs, and towers of Newcastle, the town that Charles I has just turned over to the parliamentary forces, along with Oxford and Newark that had held out for him in hope of a negotiated peace. At one end of the camp, beside a sprawling canvas pavilion full of Scottish officers holding a council presided over by their chief, the old Earl of Leven, a man, dressed as a cavalier, sleeps on the grass, his hand on his sword. 15 paces beyond, another cavalier chats with a Scottish sentry, and though foreign, his grasp of the English language is good enough to enable him to understand the soldier's thick Perth dialect. As one o'clock struck in the town of Newcastle, the sleeper awoke, and after going through all the gestures of one who's awakened from a deep sleep, he looked around him, and finding himself alone, got up and went to pass by the cavalier who was talking to the sentry. That cavalier must have finished his conversation, for after a moment he took his leave of the sentry and followed the awakened cavalier. In the shade of a tent pitched near the path, the first cavalier awaited the second. "Well, *my dear friend*?" he said in the purest French as it was spoken between Rouen and Tours.

"Well, my friend, there's no time to lose if we're going to warn the king."

"What's going on?"

"It would take too long to tell you and besides, you're about to hear it anyway. Another word wasted here and all may be lost. We must go find Milord de Winter."

And the pair made their way toward the other end of the camp – but as the camp was no more than 500 paces square, they soon reached the tent of the man they were looking for. "Your master asleep, Tony?" said one of the cavaliers in English to a servant lying under the outer awning that served as an antechamber.

"No, Sir Count," replied the footman, "or if so it hasn't been for long, since after leaving the king he was pacing back and forth for a good two hours, and the noise of his footsteps only quit about ten minutes ago. Anyway," said the servant, lifting the door of the tent, "you can see for yourself."

In fact, Winter was seated before an opening in the canvas like a window that allowed the entry of the night air, and through which with melancholy eyes he watched the moon as it sailed lost among the dark clouds. The two friends approached Lord Winter who, head leaning on his hand, gazed up into the sky, oblivious to their arrival until he felt a hand on his shoulder. Then he turned, recognised Athos and Aramis, and extended his hand. "Have you noticed," he said, "how the moon tonight is tinged with blood?"

"No, it seemed normal to me," said Athos.

"Look, Knight and Count," said Winter.

"I confess," said Aramis, "that like the Count La Fère, I see nothing unusual about it."

"Milord," said Athos, "in a position as precarious as ours, it's the earth we should study, and not the heavens. Have you considered the Scots, and are you quite sure of them?"

"The Scots?" asked Winter. "Which Scots?"

"Eh? Why, our Scots, *for the love of God*!" said Athos. "Those to whom the king is entrusted – the Scots of the Earl of Leven."

"No," said Lord Winter. Then he added, "Are you telling me that you can't see the reddish tint that spreads across the sky?"

"Not at all," said Athos and Aramis.

"Tell me," continued Winter, obsessed with his idea, "isn't it said in France that the night before he was assassinated, King Henry IV, who was playing chess with Bassompierre, saw bloodstains on the chessboard?"

"Yes," said Athos, "I heard the late marshal say so myself."

"That's it," Winter murmured, "and the next day Henry IV was dead."

"But how can Henry IV's vision matter to you, Milord?" asked Aramis.

"It can't, Gentlemen, and indeed it's madness to speak of such things, when your arrival at my tent at this hour tells me you must bring news of importance."

"Yes, Milord," said Athos. "I would like to speak to the king."

"To the king? But the king is asleep."

"I have some very important matters to place before him."

"Can't these matters wait until tomorrow?"

"He must hear them immediately, and even now it may be too late."

"Then follow me, Gentlemen," said Winter.

The baron's tent was next to the royal pavilion, and a corridor of canvas connected the two. This corridor was guarded, not by a sentry but by a confidential valet of Charles I, so that in urgent need the king could send immediately for his devoted guardian Winter. "These gentlemen are with me," Winter said.

The valet bowed and let them pass. Within, on a camp bed, dressed in his black doublet and long boots, with his belt loosened and his hat beside him, King Charles had succumbed to sleep. The men approached, and Athos, who was in the lead, considered for a moment in silence that noble visage, so pale, framed by his long black hair, damp with the sweat of a troubled sleep, around eyes that seemed swollen with fatigue. Athos gave a deep sigh, and the king's sleep was so shallow this awakened him. He opened his eyes, raised himself on one elbow, and said, "Ah, is that you, Count La Fère?"

"Yes, Sire," replied Athos.

"You didn't come to watch me sleep – you have news."

"Alas, Sire!" said Athos. "Your Majesty has guessed right."

"And the news is bad, isn't it?" said the king, smiling sadly.

"Yes, Sire."

"No matter, the messenger is welcome, and you can never enter my presence without bringing me pleasure. You, whose devotion transcends nation and misfortune, who are sent to me by Henriette – whatever news you have to bring me, relate it with confidence."

"Sire, Sir Cromwell arrived tonight in Newcastle."

"Ah!" said the king. "Has he come to fight me?"

"No, Sire – he's come to buy you."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Sire, that the Scottish army is owed four hundred thousand pounds sterling."

"Their back pay? Yes, I know; for nearly a year my brave and loyal Scots have been fighting for honour."

Athos smiled. "Well, Sire, though honour is a fine thing, they've grown tired of being paid with it, and tonight they've sold you for two hundred thousand pounds, in other words, half of what they're due."

"Impossible!" cried the king. "The Scots, to sell their king for two hundred thousand pounds?"

"The Jews sold their God for thirty silver pieces."

"And who is the Judas who's made this infamous deal?"

"The Earl of Leven."

"Are you sure of that, Sir?"

"I heard it with my own ears."

The king breathed a deep sigh, as if his heart were breaking, and took his head in his hands. "Oh, the Scots, the Scots!" he said. "The Scots, whom I called my own! The Scots, whom I trusted, when I could have gone to Oxford! The Scots, my compatriots! The Scots, my brothers! ... But are you entirely sure, Sir?"

"I lay behind the Earl of Leven's tent, where I lifted the canvas, and saw and heard everything."

"And when will this odious bargain be completed?"

"Today, this very morning. As Your Majesty can see, there's no time to lose."

"But since I've been sold out, what should I do?"

"Cross over the Tyne to reach Scotland, and join up there with Lord Montrose, who will never sell you."

"And what would I do in Scotland? Wage war on my country from beyond its borders? Such a war is unworthy of a king."

"The example of Robert the Bruce is there as a precedent, Sire."

"No, no! I've fought for too long; if they've really sold me, then let me be betrayed, and let the eternal shame of their treason fall upon them."

"Sire," said Athos, "perhaps that's what a king should do but not a husband and a father. I have come at the urging of your wife and your daughter, and in their names, and in the names of the other two children you have in London, I say to you: Live, Sire. God wills it!"

The king got up, tightened his belt, buckled on his sword, mopped his glistening brow with a handkerchief, and said, "Well, what is to be done?"

"Sire, is there in your army a regiment you can count on?"

"Winter," said the king, "do you trust in the loyalty of yours?"

"Sire, they are only men, and men have shown themselves to be very weak or very wicked. As for their loyalty, I'd trust my own life to them but I hesitate to entrust that of Your Majesty."

"Well!" said Athos. "We may not be a regiment but we are three devoted men. We'll do. Let Your Majesty mount his horse and place himself between us. We'll cross the Tyne, reach Scotland, and we'll be safe."

"Is that your advice, Winter?" asked the king.

"Yes, Sire."

"And yours, Sir d'Herblay?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Then let it be done. Winter, give the orders."

Winter went out, while the king finished dressing. The first rays of daylight were filtering into the tent when Winter returned. "Everything is ready, Sire," he said.

"And us?" asked Athos.

"Grimaud and Blaisois have your horses saddled."

"In that case," said Athos, "let's lose not a moment more, and go."

"Let's go," said the king.

"Sire," said Aramis, "does Your Majesty need to warn his friends first?"

"My friends?" said Charles I, shaking his head sadly. "I have none here but the three of you: a friend of twenty years who's never forgotten me, and two friends of a week whom I'll never forget. Come, Gentlemen – let's go."

The king went out of his tent and found his horse was ready for him. It was a dun-coloured charger he'd been riding for three years and of which he was very fond. The horse, seeing him, neighed with pleasure. "Ah!" said the king. "I spoke unfairly – here's someone who, if not a friend, is at least a creature who loves me. You'll be faithful to me, won't you, Arthus?"

As if he'd understood these words, the horse brought its snuffling nose near the king's face, and happily showed its white teeth. "Yes, yes," said the king, stroking him, "yes, you're good, Arthus, and I'm very pleased with you."

And then, with that deftness that made the king one of the best equestrians in Europe, Charles swung himself into the saddle, and said, turning toward Athos, Aramis, and Winter, "Well, then, Gentlemen – I await you."

But Athos stood motionless, his eyes fixed beyond, and pointed toward a dark line along the banks of the Tyne that extended for twice the length of the camp. "What is that line?" Athos said, for the last long shadows of night struggling with the first rays of the day prevented him from seeing clearly. "What is that line? I didn't see it yesterday."

"It's probably just mist rising from the river," said the king.

"Sire, that's something more solid than steam."

"In fact, I see something like a reddish rampart," said Winter.

"It's the enemy, advancing from Newcastle to envelop us," cried Athos.

"The enemy!" said the king.

"Yes, the enemy. It's too late. Look, look! In that sunbeam, there, toward the town, do you see the shining breastplates of the Ironsides?"

(That's what they called the cuirassiers that Cromwell had made his guards.) "Ah!" said the king. "Now we'll see if it's true that my Scots have betrayed me."

"What are you going to do?" said Athos.

"Give them the order to charge and break through those miserable rebels." And the king, spurring his horse, dashed off to the tent of the Earl of Leven.

"After him," said Athos.

"Let's go," said Aramis.

"But is the king wounded?" said Winter dazedly. "I see spots of blood on the ground."

He pricked up to follow the two friends but Athos stopped him. "Go and assemble your regiment," he said. "I'm afraid we're going to need it very soon."

Winter reined aside, and the two friends continued on their way. Within seconds the king had arrived at the pavilion of the general in chief of the Scottish army. He jumped down and went in. The general was surrounded by his officers. "The king!" they cried, rising and staring at each other in surprise.

Charles stood before them, his hat on his head, his brows furrowed, whipping his boot with his riding crop. "Yes, Gentlemen," he said, "the king, in person. The king, who comes to ask you for an explanation of what's going on."

"What's the matter, Sire?" asked the Earl of Leven.

"The matter, Milord," said the king, letting himself get carried away by anger, "is that General Cromwell arrived last night in Newcastle, and that you knew and didn't warn me; that the enemy has left the city and blocked the passage of the Tyne, and that your sentinels must have seen this movement but you didn't alert me; that you have, through an infamous bargain, sold me to the Parliament for two hundred thousand pounds sterling – but at least there I've been warned. That is what's the matter, Gentlemen – now excuse or explain yourselves, for I hereby accuse you."

"Sire," stammered the Earl of Leven, "Your Majesty must have been deceived by some false report."

"I have seen with my own eyes the enemy's army arrayed between me and Scotland," said Charles, "and I can very nearly say I heard with my own ears the details of the bargain."

The Scottish leaders looked at each other, frowning and coughing. "Sire," murmured the Earl of Leven, head bowed down with shame, "Sire, we're ready to give you every proof of our loyalty."

"I ask only one," said the king. "Put the army into line of battle and march on the enemy."

"That cannot be, Sire," said the earl.

"What? It cannot be! And what prevents it from happening?" cried Charles I.

"Your Majesty is well aware there's a state of truce between us and the English army," the earl replied.

"If there's a truce, the English army broke it when they left the city, against the article that kept them there. Now, I say to you, pass with me through that army and back into Scotland, for if you don't, then ... Well! Choose the shameful name by which you'll be known to all men henceforth – as either cowards or traitors!"

The Scots' eyes flamed, and as often happens on such occasions, they instantly went from being ashamed to being reckless. Two clan chiefs stepped forward, to either side of the king, and one said, "Promises? That's right – we promised to deliver Scotland and England from the one who's been draining them of blood and gold for twenty-five years. And we'll keep that promise. King Charles Stuart, you are our prisoner." And they both reached out to seize the king but before they could touch him they both fell, one knocked out and the other dead. Athos had clouted one with the pommel of his pistol, and Aramis had run the other through with his sword. Then, as the Earl of Leven and the other chiefs recoiled from this unexpected attack that seemed to fall from heaven to steal away one they'd already considered captured, Athos and Aramis pulled the king out of that tent of treachery, into which he'd so imprudently ventured, and, leaping on their horses, galloped back to the royal pavilion. On their way they saw Winter at the head of his regiment, and the king beckoned him to follow.

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The Avenger

The four entered the king's tent; they had no plan and had to make one quickly. The king dropped onto a camp chair. "I am lost," he said.

"No, Sire," replied Athos, "you are only betrayed."

The king gave a deep sigh. "Betrayed, betrayed by the Scots, among whom I was born, and whom I always preferred to the English. Oh, the wretches!"

"Sire," said Athos, "this is not the hour for recriminations but the moment to show that you are a king and a gentleman. Rise, Sire, rise! For you have at least three men who, you may rest assured, will not betray you. Ah, if only they were five!" he murmured, thinking of d'Artagnan and Porthos.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Charles, rising.

"I think, Sire, we have only one chance. Milord de Winter answers for his regiment, or nearly so – we won't quibble over words. He must place himself at the head of his troops, while we stand beside Your Majesty, and together we'll cut our way through Cromwell's army and reach Scotland."

"As another precaution," said Aramis, "if one of us would wear the king's clothing and ride his horse, he might be pursued while the king gets through."

"That's good advice," said Athos, "and if His Majesty wishes to honour one of us with that role, we would be very grateful to him."

"What do you think, Winter?" said the king, regarding with admiration these two men whose only thought was to take his perils upon themselves.

"I think, Sire, that if there's a way to save Your Majesty, it's what Sir d'Herblay just proposed. I therefore humbly beg Your Majesty to choose quickly, as we have no time to lose."

"But if I accept, it's death, or at least prison, for the one who takes my place."

"It's the honour of having saved one's king!" cried Winter.

The king looked at his old friend with tears in his eyes, and then detached the ribbon of the Order of Saint-Esprit that he was wearing in honour of the two Frenchmen, and hung it around Winter's neck, who fell to his knees to receive this fatal mark of the esteem and confidence of his sovereign. "That's only right," said Athos. "He has served far longer than we have."

The king heard that and turned with eyes damp with tears. "Wait a moment, Gentlemen," he said, "I also have a ribbon for each of you."

And he went to a wardrobe containing his private effects and drew out two Orders of the Garter. "Such orders are not for us," said Athos.

"And why not, Sir?" asked Charles.

"These orders are for the royal, or nearly so, and we are simple gentlemen."

"If all the thrones of the world passed before me in review, I'd find no greater souls than yours," said the king. "You don't do yourselves justice, Gentlemen, so I'm here to do it for you. On your knees, Count"

Athos knelt, the king passed the order's ribbon around his neck from left to right, as was traditional, and raised his sword but instead of the usual words – *I dub you a knight; be brave, faithful, and loyal* – he said, "You are brave, faithful, and loyal; I dub you a knight, Sir Count."

Then turning to Aramis, he said, "Now for you, Sir Knight."

And he performed the same ceremony with the same words, while Winter, helped by his squire, removed and donned Charles's shining cuirass, so he might more easily be mistaken for the king. When Charles was finished with Athos and Aramis, both were embraced by Winter who had recovered all his courage in the face of such devotion. "Sire," he said, "we're ready."

The king looked at the three gentlemen. "Then we really must flee?"

"In every country in the world, Sire," said Athos, "fleeing through an army is called charging."

"Then I shall die with the sword in my hand," said Charles. "Sir Count, Sir Knight, if ever I am king..."

"You have already honoured us above the deserts of simple gentlemen, so the gratitude is all ours. But let's lose no more time, for we've already lost enough."

The king shook each man's hand for the final time, exchanged his hat with Winter's, and went out.

Winter's regiment was drawn up on a little rise that dominated the centre of the camp. The king, followed by the three friends, went straight to them.

The Scottish camp seemed to be awake at last; the men had left their tents and assumed ranks as if for battle. "Look," said the king. "Maybe they've repented and are ready to march."

"If they've repented, Sire, they'll follow us," said Athos.

"Good!" said the king. "What do we do next?"

"Observe the enemy army," said Athos.

They turned their eyes toward the line that, at the day's dawning, they'd taken for fog, and which the first rays of the sun now clearly delineated as an army arrayed for battle. The air was as clear and crystalline as it usually was at that hour of the morning. One could easily distinguish the various regiments, their standards, and even their horses and the colours of their uniforms. Then on a low crest ahead of the enemy line a man appeared, short and stout, amid a group of officers. He pointed a telescope toward the king and his small group. "Does Your Majesty recognise that man?" asked Aramis.

Charles smiled. "That man is Cromwell," he said.



"Then lower the brim of your hat, Sire, so he doesn't notice our little substitution."

"Ah!" said Athos. "We've lost a lot of time."

"Then give the order, and let's go," said the king.

"Will you give it, Sire?" asked Athos.

"Not me, I'm just a lieutenant general here," said the king.

"Listen then, Milord de Winter," said Athos. "Give us a little room, if you will, Sire – what we have to say doesn't concern Your Majesty." The king smiled and stepped away. "This is what I propose," continued Athos. "Divide your regiment into two squadrons. Put yourself at the head of the first, and His Majesty and us with the second. If nothing bars our passage, we'll charge together to force the enemy line and throw ourselves into the Tyne that we'll cross by fording or swimming. On the other hand, if we encounter an obstacle on the way, you and your troops will take the lead and fight to the last man, while we continue on with the king. Once we've reached the banks of the river, your squadron will have done its duty, and the rest is up to us."

"To horse!" said Winter.

"To horse!" said Athos. "Everything is decided."

"Then forward, Gentlemen!" said the king. "Let us charge to the old French cry of '*Montjoie and Saint-Denis!*' The cries of England have been too tainted by traitors."

They mounted, the king on Winter's horse, and Winter on the king's. Then Winter took the lead position of the first squadron, while the king, with Athos to his right and Aramis to his left, assumed the lead of the second. The entire Scottish army watched these preparations without moving and with the silence of shame. A few chiefs could be seen stepping out of the ranks and breaking their swords.

"Come, that's some consolation," said the king. "They're not all traitors."

Then Winter's voice rang out, crying, "Forward!"

The first squadron moved out, and the second followed, riding down from the rise. A regiment of cuirassiers nearly equal in numbers to theirs formed in front of the crest ahead and charged toward them. The king pointed them out to Athos and Aramis. "This contingency is planned for, Sire," said Athos. "If Winter's men do their duty, this manoeuvre will save us rather than doom us."

And then they heard, above the galloping and neighing of the horses, the voice of Winter crying, "Draw your sabres!"

The sabres flashed from their scabbards like lightning. "Come, Gentlemen!" cried the king in his turn, intoxicated by the sound and fury. "Gentlemen, draw your sabres!"

But to this command, despite the example of the king, only Athos and Aramis obeyed. "We are betrayed," said the king in a low voice.

"Not so fast," said Athos. "Maybe they didn't recognise Your Majesty's voice and are waiting for their commander's orders."

"Haven't they heard the voice of their colonel? But look!" cried the king, stopping his horse short with a shock, and grabbing the bridle of Athos's horse.

"Ah! Cowards! Wretches! Traitors!" shouted Winter while his men scattered across the fields, leaving their ranks.

Only about 15 men remained around him, awaiting the charge of Cromwell's cuirassiers. "Let's die with them!" said the king.

"Forward!" said Athos and Aramis. "To death!"

"To me, all faithful hearts!" cried Winter.

The two friends heard him and set off at the gallop. "No quarter!" came a cry in French, replying to Winter, at the sound of which he trembled. "No mercy!" came the voice.

Winter turned pale and froze. The voice was that of a cavalier mounted on a magnificent black horse, and who charged, in his zeal, ten paces ahead of the rest of the English regiment. "It's him!" murmured Winter, staring, his sword hanging limp in his hand.

"The king! The king!" cried several voices, fooled by Winter's disguise. "Take him alive!"

"That's not the king!" cried the cavalier. "Don't be deceived! It's Milord Winter, and not the king. Because you *aren't* the king, are you, Uncle?"

At the same time, Mordaunt, for it was he, pointed the barrel of a pistol at Winter and fired. The ball penetrated the chest of the older gentleman, who fell back from his saddle and into the arms of Athos, gasping, "The avenger!"

"Remember my mother!" snarled Mordaunt as he passed in a rush, carried on by his horse's furious charge.

"You wretch!" cried Aramis, aiming his pistol at point blank range as he passed but only the priming went off and the shot misfired.

At that moment the entire regiment fell upon the few men around Winter and the two Frenchmen were surrounded in the press. Athos, after ascertaining that Winter was dead, dropped the body and drew his sword, shouting, "Come, Aramis – for the honour of France!"

And the two Englishmen closest to the two friends fell instantly, mortally wounded. With an angry roar thirty blades flashed above their heads. Suddenly a man burst from the English ranks, leaped upon Athos with arms of iron, snatched away his sword, and held him in place, whispering in his ear, "Silence – Place Royale! To yield to me is no surrender."

A giant had likewise taken hold of Aramis, who struggled in vain to escape his grip. "Place Royale," said the giant, looking Aramis in the eye.

Aramis nodded his head, as Athos turned around. "D'Art ...!" cried Athos as the Gascon clapped a hand over his mouth.

"I surrender," said Aramis, handing his sword to Porthos.

"Shoot them! Shoot!" cried Mordaunt, returning to the group around the two men.

"Shoot them? Why?" said the English colonel. "Everyone has surrendered."

"He's the son of Milady," said Athos to d'Artagnan.

"I recognised him."

"It's the murdering monk," said Porthos to Aramis.

"I know."

At the same time the ranks began to open. D'Artagnan took Athos's horse by its reins, while Porthos took those of Aramis, and they began to lead their prisoners from the battlefield. This opened a space around the spot where Winter's body had fallen. With the instincts of hatred, Mordaunt had found him, and looked down from his horse with a hideous smile. Athos, as calmly as ever, put his hand to the pistol in his saddle holster. "What are you doing?" said d'Artagnan.

"Let me kill him."

"Don't make a move or say a single word that shows you know who he is, or all four of us are lost." Then, turning to the young man, he called, "Fine prizes, friend Mordaunt! Sir du Vallon and I have each got one – Knights of the Garter, no less!"

"But how could that be?" cried Mordaunt, looking at Athos and Aramis with blood in his eyes. "Aren't they Frenchmen?"

"I know nothing about it. Are you French, Sir?" d'Artagnan asked Athos.

"I am," Athos replied gravely.

"Well, my dear Sir, you are the prisoner of a compatriot."

"But what about the king?" said Athos in dismay, "The king?"

D'Artagnan gripped his prisoner's hand tightly, and said, "The king? We have him."

"Yes," said Aramis, "by disgraceful treachery."

Porthos gripped his friend's wrist so hard he nearly crushed it, and said, "Well, Sir, war is won as much by finesse as by force: look!"

In fact, at that moment the squadron that was to have protected Charles during his escape was advancing slowly toward the English regiment, surrounding the king, who was marching alone on foot in an empty space in their centre. The monarch seemed calm but one could see it took an effort to appear that way: sweat beaded his forehead, and he wiped his temples and mouth with a handkerchief that came away from his lips with bloodstains. "Behold Nebuchadnezzar!" cried one of Cromwell's cuirassiers an old Puritan whose eyes blazed at the sight of the one they called the tyrant.

"Who are you calling Nebuchadnezzar?" said Mordaunt with a dreadful smile. "No, that's King Charles I, that good King Charles who strips his subjects of their estates."

Charles raised his eyes to look at the man who spoke with such insolence but didn't recognise him. Yet the calm and serene majesty of his face made Mordaunt look away. "Good morning, Gentlemen," said the king to the two gentlemen he saw in the hands of d'Artagnan and Porthos. "It's an ill day but that's no fault of yours, thank God! Where's my old friend Winter?"

The two gentlemen turned their heads and remained silent. "He's gone to meet Strafford!" said Mordaunt harshly.

Charles started – the demon had struck home. The death of Strafford was his eternal remorse, the shadow of his days and the ghost that haunted his nights. The king looked down and found a corpse at his feet. It was that of Lord Winter. Charles didn't speak a word or shed a tear, only grew more pallid. He fell to one knee, raised Winter's head, and kissed him on the brow, then took the ribbon of the Order of Saint-Esprit from Winter's neck and placed it solemnly on his chest. "De Winter is dead, then?" asked d'Artagnan quietly, his eyes fixed on the cadaver.

"Yes," said Athos, "and at the hands of his nephew."

"Ah, well! There goes the first of us," murmured d'Artagnan. "May he rest in peace; he was a brave man."

"Charles Stuart," said the colonel of the English regiment, advancing toward the king, who had just regained his royal regalia, "will you surrender yourself to us?"

"Colonel Tomlinson," said Charles, "the king does not surrender, though the man must yield to force."

"Your sword."

The king took his sword and broke it across his knee. At that moment a horse without a rider, dripping with foam, eyes red and nostrils wide, galloped up and, recognising its master, stopped and neighed with joy; it was Arthus. The king smiled, caressed him with his hand, and jumped lightly into the saddle. "Come, Gentlemen," he said, "take me where you will." Then, turning quickly, he said, "Wait, I thought I saw Lord Winter stir. If he lives, by whatever you hold sacred, don't abandon this noble gentleman."

"Oh, don't worry about him, King Charles!" said Mordaunt. "The ball pierced his heart."

"Don't breathe a word, don't move a muscle, don't even risk a glance at me or Porthos," said d'Artagnan to Athos and Aramis, "for Milady isn't dead – her soul lives on in this demon's body!" And the detachment moved off toward the town, bearing its royal prisoner – but halfway there, an aide-de-camp from General Cromwell brought Colonel Tomlinson an order to escort the king to Holdenby Castle. At the same time couriers were dispatched in all directions to announce to England and all Europe that King Charles Stuart was the prisoner of General Oliver Cromwell.

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Oliver Cromwell

"I came to congratulate you."

"Congratulate me? On what?"

"On the capture of Charles Stuart. Now you are the master of England."

"I was much more so two hours ago," said Cromwell.

"How's that, General?"

"Then England needed me to take the tyrant – but now the tyrant is taken. Have you seen him?"

"Yes, Sir," said Mordaunt.

"What was his attitude?"

Mordaunt hesitated but the truth seemed to escape from his lips. "Calm and dignified," he said.

"Did he say anything?"

"Just a few words of farewell to his friends."

"To his friends!" murmured Cromwell. "He still has friends, then?" Aloud he added, "Did he defend himself?"

"No, Sir – he was abandoned by everyone but three or four friends. Defence was impossible."

"To whom did he surrender his sword?"

"He didn't surrender it, he broke it."

"A fine gesture. But instead of breaking it, he'd have done better to wield it well."

There was a moment's silence. Then Cromwell, looking closely at Mordaunt, said, "The colonel of the regiment that was to escort King Charles – he was killed, was he not?"

"Yes, Sir."

"By whom?"

"By me."

"What was his name?"

"Lord Winter."

"Your uncle?" cried Cromwell.

"My uncle!" replied Mordaunt. "Traitors to England are no family of mine."

Cromwell looked at the young man thoughtfully for a moment, then said, with that deep melancholy so well portrayed by Shakespeare, "Mordaunt, you are a fearsome servant."

"When the Lord commands, there is no arguing with his orders," said Mordaunt. "Abraham raised his knife over Isaac, and Isaac was his son."

"Yes," said Cromwell, "but the Lord then forbade the sacrifice."

"I looked around me," said Mordaunt, "and I saw neither goat nor kid caught in the thickets of the field."

Cromwell inclined his head. "You are mighty even among the strong," he said. "And how did our Frenchmen conduct themselves?"

"Like men of courage, Sir," said Mordaunt.

"Yes, they would," said Cromwell, musing. "The French are good fighters. In fact, through my telescope, it seems to me I saw them in the front ranks."

"That's where they were," said Mordaunt.

"Behind you, however," said Cromwell.

"That wasn't their fault, it was the fault of their horses."

There was another moment of silence, then Cromwell asked, "And the Scots?"

"They kept their word," said Mordaunt, "and didn't move a step."

"Miserable wretches!" murmured Cromwell.

"Their officers ask to see you, Sir."

"I don't have the time. Have they been paid?"

"Tonight."

"Let them go, then – let them return to their mountains where they can hide their shame, if their mountains are high enough for that. I have no more business with them, nor they with me. And now you may go, Mordaunt."

"Before I go, Sir" said Mordaunt, "I have a few questions to ask you, Milord, and a request to make."

"Of me?"

Mordaunt bowed. "I come to you, my hero, my protector, my father, to ask you this: Master, are you satisfied with me?"

Cromwell looked at him in astonishment. "Yes," he said, "since I've known you, you've done, not just your duty but more than your duty. You've been a loyal friend, a capable negotiator and a fine soldier."

"Do you recall, Sir that I was the one who first had the idea of bargaining with the Scots to give up their king?"

"Yes, that thought did come from you, it's true. I had not yet reached that level of contempt for mankind."

"Was I a good envoy to France?"

"Yes, you got everything from Mazarin that I asked for."

"Have I always fought zealously for your interests and your glory?"

"Too zealously, perhaps – which is what I reproached you for just now. But where are you going with all these questions?"

"To tell you, Milord, that the moment has come when you can reward all my services with one word."

"Ah!" said Cromwell, with a slight shrug of disdain. "True, I'd forgotten that every service deserves its reward, that you have served me, and that I've not yet rewarded you."

"Sir, I can be justly rewarded this instant, beyond even what I'd wished."

"How so?"

"The price is here and almost in my hands."

"And what is this price?" asked Cromwell. "Do you want gold? Position? A governorship?"

"Sir, will you grant me my request?"

"Let's hear what it is first."

"Sir, when you've said to me, 'You must carry out an order,' have I ever said: *First let's hear the order?*"

"Your request might be impossible to fulfil."

"When you had a desire and charged me with fulfilling it, did I ever reply, 'That's impossible'?"

"But a request couched in such exacting terms..."

"Oh, rest assured, Sir," said Mordaunt in a tone of sincerity, "it won't ruin you."

"Well, then," said Cromwell, "I promise to grant your request insofar as it's within my power. Ask."

"We took two notable prisoners this morning, Sir," Mordaunt replied. "I ask you to give them to me."

"Have they offered a substantial ransom?" said Cromwell.

"On the contrary, Sir, I don't think they're at all wealthy."

"Are they friends of yours, then?"

"Yes, Sir, that's it," cried Mordaunt. "They're friends of mine, dear, dear friends, and I'd give my life for them."

"Fine, Mordaunt," said Cromwell, happy to have his good opinion of the young man restored. "Fine, I give them to you. I don't even need to know who they are; do as you please."

"Thank you, sir," cried Mordaunt, "thank you! My life is now yours, and even if I lose it I'll still be indebted to you. Thank you, you've paid me magnificently for my services."

He threw himself at Cromwell's feet and despite the efforts of the Puritan general to prevent him, who didn't want or pretended not to want this almost royal homage, he took Cromwell's hand and kissed it. "What!" said Cromwell, rising and making him stop. "No other reward? No money? No promotion?"

"You've given me all that I desire, Milord, and I'll never ask for more."

And Mordaunt rushed from the general's tent with the joy in his heart shining from his eyes. Cromwell watched him go. "Killed his own uncle!" he muttered thoughtfully. "Alas! What kind of men are my servants? It may be that this one, who asks for nothing, or seems to, asks a higher price in the sight of God than those who ask for the wealth of a province, or to steal the bread of the unfortunate. No one serves me for nothing; even Charles, my prisoner, still has friends. I? I have none." And with a sigh, he resumed the reverie that Mordaunt had interrupted.

231  
Gentlemen

While Mordaunt made his way to Cromwell's tent, d'Artagnan and Porthos conducted their prisoners back to the house that had been assigned to them as lodging in Newcastle. Mordaunt's brief aside with his sergeant hadn't escaped the Gascon, so he'd warned Athos and Aramis to take every precaution. Consequently, the pair had marched along in silence, keeping near their ostensible captors, while wrapped in their own thoughts. If ever a man was astonished, it was Mousqueton when he saw from the doorway the approach of the four friends, followed by the sergeant with almost a dozen men. He rubbed his eyes, unable to believe in the sight of Athos and Aramis but finally he was forced to give in to the evidence. He was about to explode into questions and exclamations when a look from Porthos silenced him without argument. Mousqueton stepped back from the doorway but continued to stare, dismayed by the way the four friends didn't seem to recognise each other. The house to which d'Artagnan and Porthos had brought Athos and Aramis was where they'd been staying since the day before, when Cromwell had assigned it to them. It was on the corner of a street, had a small garden, and a stable around the corner on the side. The windows on the ground floor were barred, as is often the case in small provincial towns, making it somewhat resemble a prison. The two friends ordered Mousqueton to take their horses to the stable, then paused on the threshold of the door to let their prisoners enter first. "Why aren't we going in with them?" said Porthos.

"Because first," replied d'Artagnan, "we must see what this sergeant and the men who came with him want from us."

The sergeant and his men were taking up a position in the small garden. D'Artagnan asked them what they wanted and why there were posted there. "We were ordered to help you guard your prisoners," said the sergeant.

Nothing could be said against that; on the contrary, it had to be regarded as a sort of favour, an attention for which one should show gratitude. D'Artagnan thanked the sergeant and give him a crown with which to drink to the health of General Cromwell. The sergeant replied that Puritans didn't drink but still put the crown in his pocket. "Ah, d'Artagnan!" said Porthos when he returned. "What a terrible day!"

"What do you mean, Porthos? How can you complain about a day on which we found our friends?"

"Yes but consider the circumstances!"

"It's true that our current situation is a trifle embarrassing," said d'Artagnan, "but no matter, let's go inside and see if we can clear things up a little."

"It's a complete mess," said Porthos, "and now I understand why Aramis recommended I strangle that dreadful Mordaunt."

"Be silent!" said d'Artagnan. "Don't say that name."

"But I'm speaking French, and those soldiers speak English," said Porthos.

D'Artagnan gaped at Porthos with the awe of a man of reason in the presence of a prodigy. Then, as Porthos just stared back with a look of incomprehension, d'Artagnan pushed him toward the house and said, "Let's go in."

Porthos entered first, followed by d'Artagnan, who carefully closed the door before embracing his two friends. Athos was stricken with sorrow. Aramis looked at Porthos and d'Artagnan without saying a word but his look was so expressive that d'Artagnan understood it. "You wonder how it is we come to be here, eh? *My God*, that should be easy to guess: Mazarin ordered us to carry a letter to General Cromwell."

"But how is it you come in the company of Mordaunt?" said Athos. "Mordaunt, whom I warned you against, d'Artagnan."

"And whom I advised you to strangle, Porthos," said Aramis.

"Mazarin again," said d'Artagnan. "Cromwell had sent him to Mazarin, and Mazarin sent us to return with him to Cromwell. Fate seems to have taken a hand in this."

"Yes, you're right, d'Artagnan – fate which divides us, and then ruins us. So, Aramis, let's say no more about it and prepare ourselves to submit to fate."

"God's blood!" d'Artagnan swore. "On the contrary, we're going to talk about it, because we agreed once and for all that we would always support each other, even if we were on different sides."

"Very different indeed," said Athos with a sour smile. "For here I must ask you that side do you serve? Ah, d'Artagnan, you see what serving that wretch Mazarin has gotten you? Do you know what crime you were guilty of today? Of the capture of the king – of his humiliation – of his death."

"Oh!" said Porthos "Do you really think that?"

"You exaggerate, Athos," said d'Artagnan. "They won't go that far."

"Won't they, by God? On the contrary. Why does someone arrest their king? If you wish to respect him as a master, you don't buy him like a slave. Do you think it was to restore him to the throne that Cromwell paid two hundred thousand pounds for him? Friends, they mean to kill him, you can be sure of that at the very least. It's better to behead a king than to beat and belabour him."

"That may be possible, I won't argue," said d'Artagnan. "But what does that have to do with us? I'm here because I'm a soldier, and I serve my commander, from whom I draw my pay. I swore an oath to obey, and so I obey. But you, who have sworn no oath, why are you here, and what cause do you serve?"

"The most sacred cause in the world," said Athos. "That of chivalry, royalty, and religion. A friend, a wife, and a daughter did us the honour to ask for our help. We served them as best as our feeble means allowed, and God will measure our intentions rather than our abilities. You see things differently, d'Artagnan, and though I don't turn away from you, I do blame you for it."

"Oh?" said d'Artagnan. "And what's it to me if Sir Cromwell, who's English, wants to rebel against his king, who's Scottish? I'm French, I am, and none of these things concern me. Why hold me responsible for them?"

"That's right," said Porthos.

"Because all gentlemen are brothers; because you are gentlemen; because the kings of all nations are the first among gentlemen; because the peasants, like blind, ungrateful beasts, take pleasure in tearing down their betters – and it's you, d'Artagnan, a man of the old aristocracy, a man of good name, a nobleman of the sword, it's you who helped deliver a king into the lowly hands of brewers, tailors, and carters! Oh, d'Artagnan – as a soldier perhaps you did your duty but as a gentleman, I say you've failed." D'Artagnan felt ill at ease and did not answer, chewing on a straw. He looked away from Athos, only to meet the eyes of Aramis. "And you, Porthos," continued the count as if to avoid further embarrassing d'Artagnan, "you, the warmest heart, the best friend, the finest soldier I know; you, whose greatness of soul makes you worthy enough to have been born at the foot of a throne, as will someday be recognised by an intelligent king; you, my dear Porthos, a gentleman by manners, by taste, and by boldness – you are as guilty as d'Artagnan."

Porthos blushed, with pleasure rather than shame but nonetheless bowed his head as if humiliated, and said, "Yes, yes, I'm sure you're right, my dear Count."

Athos rose. "Come," he said, approaching d'Artagnan and offering his hand, "come, don't be dismayed, my dear son, for everything I've said to you, I've said it if not in the voice, then at least with the heart of a father. It would have been easier, believe me, just to thank you for saving my life, without revealing a word of my feelings."

"No doubt, Athos," said d'Artagnan, clasping his hand, "but the kind of feelings you have in that great heart are like those of no one else. Who could imagine that a reasonable man would leave France, his home, and his ward, a charming young man whom we visited in camp – to go where? To try to rescue a rotten and worm-eaten monarchy ready to collapse any day like an old barracks. The feelings you speak of are noble and high, certainly but so high they're superhuman."

"Whatever they may be, d'Artagnan," replied Athos, without falling into the trap his Gascon friend had set by alluding to his paternal affection for Raoul, "whatever they may be, you know very well in the bottom of your heart that they're right – but it is wrong of me to dispute so with my master. I'm your prisoner, d'Artagnan, and you may treat me as such."

"Ah, *for the love of God!*" said d'Artagnan. "You're well aware that you won't be my prisoner for long."

"No," said Aramis, "they will doubtless treat us like those who were taken at Philphaugh."

"And how were they treated?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Half of them were hanged, and the other half were shot," said Aramis.

"Indeed?" said d'Artagnan. "Well, I'm telling you now that as long as there's a drop of blood in my veins, you'll be neither hanged nor shot. *God!* Let them come! Athos, do you see this door?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Well! You can use this door whenever you please – and as soon as you do, you and Aramis are as free as air."

"Now there I recognise my brave d'Artagnan," replied Athos, "but you're not the power that holds us – that door is guarded, d'Artagnan, as you're well aware."

"Oh, you'll get through," said Porthos. "What's there to stop you? Ten men at the most."

"That would be nothing for the four of us but it's too much for just us two. No, divided as we are now, we're doomed. You've already seen the example, on the high road to Vendôme where d'Artagnan, though brave, and Porthos, though valiant and strong, were defeated. And now, for Aramis and me, it's our turn. That never happened when we four were united but now, well, let us die as de Winter died. As for me, I declare I refuse to flee unless we all four go together."

"Impossible," said d'Artagnan. "We're here under Mazarin's orders."

"I know it, and I won't press you further. My arguments have been useless; they must have been bad arguments, since they haven't persuaded minds as fair as yours."

"Besides, even if we'd succeeded," said Aramis, "we'd just have compromised our two fine friends, d'Artagnan and Porthos. Rest easy, Gentlemen – we'll honour you by dying well. As for me, I'm proud to stand up before the bullets, or even go to the rope with you, Athos, for you've never seemed to me as great as you do today."

D'Artagnan said nothing but after chewing his straw down to a nub, he gnawed his fingers. Finally, he said, "Do you really think they want to kill you? And why? Who would have an interest in your death? Besides, you're *our* prisoners."

"Fool, triple fool!" said Aramis. "I thought you said you knew Mordaunt? Well, I exchanged just a single glance with him, and by that look I knew we were condemned."

"As a matter of fact, I'm sorry I didn't strangle him as you advised, Aramis," said Porthos.

"Bah! Don't talk to me about Mordaunt!" snapped d'Artagnan. "That insect! Cap de Diou! If he buzzes too close to me, I'll crush him. There's no reason to flee, because, I swear to you, you're as safe here as you were twenty years ago, when Athos was in Rue Férou and Aramis in Rue de Vaugirard."

"Enough," said Athos, pointing out one of the two barred windows that admitted light into the room. "You'll know soon enough whether you can hold us, because here he comes now."

"Who?"

"Mordaunt."

In fact, looking where Athos had indicated, d'Artagnan saw a cavalier approaching at a gallop. It was indeed Mordaunt. D'Artagnan darted to the door. Porthos began to follow him but d'Artagnan said, "Wait here. Don't come out until you hear me drum my fingers on the door."

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When Mordaunt arrived before the house, he saw d'Artagnan at the doorway, and the soldiers sprawled out in the garden next to their weapons. "Hey!" he called, out of breath from his swift ride. "Are the prisoners still there?"

"Yes, Sir," said the sergeant, rising quickly along with his men, who, like him, raised hands to hats in sudden salutes.

"Good. Four men are to take them right away to my quarters."

Four men prepared themselves. "What's your pleasure?" said d'Artagnan in that mocking air with which our readers are familiar. "What's all this, if you please?"

"What it is, Sir," said Mordaunt, "is that I've ordered four men to take charge of the prisoners taken this morning and escort them to my quarters."

"And why is that?" asked d'Artagnan. "You'll pardon my curiosity but you can understand my desire to be educated on the subject."

"Because these prisoners are mine now," replied Mordaunt haughtily, "and I can dispose of them as I like."

"Permit me, my young gentleman, to point out that you're in error," said d'Artagnan. "The custom's that prisoners go to those who took them, and not to those who watched them taken. You'd have taken Milord de Winter who was your uncle or so they say but you preferred to kill him. Well, Sir Vallon and I'd have killed these two gentlemen but we preferred to take them. Everyone to his taste."

Mordaunt went white to his lips. D'Artagnan realised that things were about to get out of hand and drummed the march of the guards on the door. Porthos emerged and stood just outside the door, his giant frame filling the doorway. The significance of this move wasn't lost on Mordaunt. "Sir," said he, anger starting to rise, "to resist is useless, as these prisoners have been given to me just now by the general in chief, my illustrious patron, Oliver Cromwell."

These words struck d'Artagnan like a thunderbolt. He flushed to his temples, a cloud passed before his eyes, and as he comprehended the young man's fierce hopes, his hand dropped instinctively toward the hilt of his sword. As for Porthos, he watched d'Artagnan to match his own actions to the Gascon's. This look from Porthos worried rather than reassured d'Artagnan, who was beginning to be sorry he'd deployed the brute force of Porthos into a matter it now seemed to him had to be handled by a ruse. "Violence can't solve this," he said to himself. "D'Artagnan, *my friend*, you must prove to this young serpent that you are not only stronger than he but smarter as well."

"Ah!" he said aloud, making a deep bow. "Why didn't you say that before, Sir Mordaunt? You come on behalf of Oliver Cromwell, the most illustrious captain of our times?"

"I just left him, Sir, this very minute," said Mordaunt, dismounting and giving his horse to one of his soldiers.

"You should have said so immediately, *my dear Sir!*" continued d'Artagnan. "All England is at the command of Sir Cromwell, and since you demand the prisoners in his name, I bow to you, Sir, and say to you, take them."

Mordaunt advanced, radiant, while Porthos, devastated, looked at d'Artagnan in a profound stupor, and opened his mouth as if to speak. But d'Artagnan kicked Porthos, who then understood that his friend was playing a game. Mordaunt mounted the doorstep and then, hat in hand, prepared to pass between the two friends, while gesturing to his four men to follow him. "But, begging your pardon," said d'Artagnan with his most charming smile, while resting his hand on the young man's shoulder, "if the illustrious General Oliver Cromwell has disposed of these prisoners in your favour, you no doubt have a writ that orders such a disposition."

Mordaunt stopped short. "If you can show me such a letter, even the least little note, that attests you come in his name, then give me that scrap so I will have at least some pretext for handing over my compatriots. Otherwise, you understand, though I'm sure General Cromwell wishes them no harm, it would have an improper appearance."

Mordaunt drew back, feeling the blow, and glowered fiercely at d'Artagnan but the latter just maintained the most friendly and amiable expression ever seen on any face. "When I tell you something, Sir," said Mordaunt, "will you insult me by doubting it?"

"If!" exclaimed d'Artagnan. "I, to doubt what you say? God forbid, my dear Sir Mordaunt. On the contrary, I regard you as a worthy and accomplished gentleman – to all appearances. But come, Sir, will you speak frankly with me?" continued d'Artagnan, all sincerity.

"Speak, Sir," said Mordaunt.

"Sir du Vallon who's rich, has an income of forty thousand livres a year, and has no further need of money – so I don't speak for him, only myself."

"Go on, Sir."

"But as for me, I'm not wealthy. In Gascony, that's no dishonour, no one is – even Henry IV, of glorious memory, who was King of the Gascons, as His Majesty Philip IV is king of all Spain, even he never had a penny in his pocket."

"Get to it, Sir," said Mordaunt. "I think I see where you're going, and if that's the hold up, that difficulty can be overcome."

“Ah! I knew all along,” said d’Artagnan, “that you were a man of intelligence. Well, here’s the point, the spot where the saddle rubs, as we Frenchmen say: I’m a soldier of fortune, nothing more; I have only what my sword gets for me that is usually more blows than bank-notes. Now, upon taking this morning two Frenchmen who appear to be of high rank, two Knights of the Garter, no less, I said to myself, ‘My fortune is made.’ I say two, because under the circumstances, Sir du Vallon, who is wealthy, always yields his prisoners to me.”

Mordaunt, completely taken in by d’Artagnan’s charm offensive, smiled like a man who is in on the joke, and wryly replied, “I’ll have you your order within the hour, Sir, and two thousand pistoles to go with it – but meanwhile, let me take these men with me.”

“What does a half-hour delay matter to someone like you?” said d’Artagnan. “No, I’m an orderly man, Sir, and I like things done properly.”

“You know, Sir, that I could take them by force,” replied Mordaunt. “I command here.”

“Ah, Sir,” said d’Artagnan, smiling agreeably, “it’s clear that, though Sir du Vallon and I have had the honour of travelling in your company, you do not know us. We are veteran gentlemen of the sword, and quite capable, we two, of killing you and your eight men. Before God, Sir Mordaunt, don’t be obstinate, because when you persist I persist, and I can get terribly stubborn. And Sir here,” continued d’Artagnan, indicating Porthos, “is even more stubborn and difficult than I am – and besides, we were sent by Cardinal Mazarin, who represents the King of France. Which means that we represent the king and the cardinal, and are therefore, in our capacity as ambassadors, quite inviolable – a thing that Oliver Cromwell, who is a great politician in addition to a great general, certainly understands. Ask him for the written order. What does that cost you, my dear Sir Mordaunt?”

“Yes, a written order,” said Porthos who began to understand d’Artagnan’s intentions. “That’s all we’re asking for.”

However inclined Mordaunt might be to use force, he had to recognise that the reasons d’Artagnan had given him were good ones. Besides, d’Artagnan’s reputation was impressive, and since what he’d seen that morning had only reinforced that reputation, he paused to reflect. Also, ignorant as he was of the friendship between the four Frenchmen, his suspicions were settled by the very convincing motive of the ransom money. So, he decided to go get the requested order, and to return with the promised 2000 pistoles into the bargain. Mordaunt remounted his horse and after ordering the sergeant to remain on guard, turned and rode off. “Good!” muttered d’Artagnan. “It’ll take a quarter of an hour to reach the general’s tent, and another quarter-hour to return that is more time than we need.”

Then, turning to Porthos without the slightest change in his expression, so that anyone watching might think he was just continuing the same conversation, he said, “Friend Porthos, listen closely. First of all, not a word to our friends of what you just heard – there’s no need for them to know of the service we just rendered them.”

“All right, I understand,” said Porthos.

“Go to the stable, where you’ll find Mousqueton. Saddle the horses, load the pistols into their holsters, bring the horses out, and lead them down the street and around the corner. Then just mount and wait – the rest is up to me.”

Porthos made no remarks, just obeyed with that sublime confidence he had in his friend. “I go,” he said, “only, could I pass through the room where our friends are?”

“No, that’s unnecessary.”

“Fine! Just do me the favour to collect my purse that I left on the mantel.”

“No problem.”

Porthos walked calmly and quietly toward the stable, passing among the soldiers who, Frenchman though he was, couldn’t help but admire his great stature and mighty limbs. At the corner of the street he met Mousqueton, whom he took with him. Then d’Artagnan went inside, whistling a little air he’d begun while watching Porthos leave. “My dear Athos,” he said, “I’ve been considering your arguments, and I’m entirely convinced. I regret getting involved in this business. Mazarin is a wretch, just as you say, so I’ve decided to escape with you. No time for talk, prepare yourselves; your swords are there in the corner, and don’t forget them, as they’re tools which, under the circumstances, may prove useful. Which reminds me to get Porthos his purse – ah, here it is!” D’Artagnan put the purse into his pocket as his two friends gaped at him in amazement. “Well, what are you staring at?” he asked. “I was blind but now I see, thanks to Athos. Come over here.” His friends approached. “Do you see that street?” said d’Artagnan, pointing. “That’s where the horses will be. You’re just going to go out the door, turn left, jump on the horses, and that’s all there is to it. Just wait until you hear me call out the signal that will be: *Our Saviour!*”

“But you, d’Artagnan – give us your word that you’re coming with us,” said Athos.

“Before God, I swear it!”

“All right,” said Aramis. “At the cry of, ‘The Lord Our Saviour,’ we go out, knock over anyone who gets in our way, run to our horses, jump in the saddle, and spur off. Right?”

“As rain!”

“You see, Aramis,” said Athos, “I always tell you d’Artagnan is the best of us.”

“Fine,” said d’Artagnan, “but while you pay me compliments, I’ll get on with it. Goodbye.”

“And you’ll be right behind us, won’t you?”

“I hope so. Now don’t forget the signal: *Our Saviour!* ”

And he went back out wearing the same calm demeanour as when he’d entered, whistling the tune he’d interrupted. The soldiers dozed or played cards, while two in a corner badly sang the psalm, “By the waters of Babylon.” D’Artagnan called to the sergeant, “*My dear* Sir, Sir Mordaunt’s asked me to attend on General Cromwell. Please take good care of the prisoners.”

The sergeant shrugged to indicate that he didn’t understand French. D’Artagnan tried to make him understand by gestures and sign language what he wanted to convey, and the sergeant nodded to indicate everything was fine. D’Artagnan went around to the stable, where he found all five horses saddled, and his own among them. “Each of you take an extra horse,” he said to Porthos and Mousqueton, “and lead it around to the left to where Athos and Aramis can see you from their window.”

“Then will they come out?” said Porthos.

“In a moment.”

“You didn’t forget my purse?”

“No, never fear.”

“Good.”

And Porthos and Mousqueton, each leading another horse, rode to their position. D’Artagnan, left alone, took out flint and steel, and set fire to a tiny bit of tinder. Then he climbed on his horse, rode out into the street, and stopped in the midst of the soldiers in the yard. And there, while stroking the animal with one hand, with the other he pushed the burning tinder into its ear. It was a thing only a master horseman like d’Artagnan could risk, for as soon as the animal felt the touch of the burning ember it uttered a shriek of pain, reared back, and began leaping around as if mad. The soldiers, threatened by the flailing hooves, fell about and scattered. “Help me! Help!” cried d’Artagnan. “Stop my horse! It’s gone crazy!” And indeed, it had blood in its eyes and foam on its lips. “Help me!” d’Artagnan cried but the soldiers didn’t dare approach. “Help! Are you going to let him kill me? *Our Saviour!*”

D’Artagnan had scarcely uttered this cry before the door burst open and out rushed Athos and Aramis, swords in hand. But thanks to d’Artagnan’s ruse, the way was clear. “The prisoners are escaping!” cried the sergeant. “The prisoners are escaping!”

“Wait! Stop!” shouted d’Artagnan, releasing the reins of his furious horse that leapt forward, knocking over two or three men.

“Stop! Halt!” cried the soldiers, running to their weapons.

But the prisoners were already in the saddle, and once in the saddle they lost no time galloping toward the nearest city gate. Halfway up the street they met Grimaud and Blaisois, who were looking for their masters. At a sign from Athos Grimaud understood everything and fell in behind the little troop as it passed like a hurricane, while d’Artagnan, still shouting in feigned dismay, followed farther back. They passed through the gate in a blur, before the guards could even think about halting them, and found themselves in open country. Meanwhile, the soldiers at the house continued shouting, “Halt! Stop!” while the sergeant who realised he’d been fooled, tore at his hair.

Just then a rider came galloping up, a sheet of paper in his hand. It was Mordaunt, returning with the order. “Where are the prisoners?” he cried, leaping down from his horse. The sergeant couldn’t find the strength to answer him, just pointed toward the gaping door and the empty room. Mordaunt rushed to the doorstep, understood everything, gave a cry that seemed to come from the very depths of his being, and fell fainting to the flagstones.

Even in the Most Difficult Situations, Great Hearts Never lose their Courage & Strong Stomachs Never lose their Appetites

The little troop, without looking back or exchanging a word, rode on at the gallop, crossing a narrow river of which no one knew the name and passing a town on their left that Athos thought must be Durham. At length they came upon a little wood, and the horses were turned toward it and given a final touch of the spur. As soon as they’d disappeared behind a curtain of leaves thick enough to hide them from the eyes of pursuers, they stopped to hold a council. The horses were given to two of the lackeys so they could breathe without being unsaddled or unbridled, while Grimaud was placed as a sentinel. “First, come let me embrace you, my friend,” said Athos to d’Artagnan, “you who are our saviour, you who are the true hero among us!”

“Athos is right, and I admire you,” said Aramis, taking d’Artagnan into his arms. “Think what you could do for an intelligent master, with that infallible eye, that arm of steel, and that conquering spirit!”

“That’s all very well,” said the Gascon, “and I accept these thanks and embraces on behalf of myself and Porthos but we have no time to spare for that now.”

The two friends, reminded by d’Artagnan of what they also owed to Porthos, took turns shaking his hand. “Now,” said Athos, “it’s a matter of not riding off at random like fools, and instead coming up with a plan. What are we going to do?”

“What are we going to do? *God be with you*, that’s not hard to say!”

“Then say it, d’Artagnan.”

“We make our way to the nearest seaport, gather what resources we have, outfit a boat and cross over to France. As to me, I’ll put up everything I’ve got down to my last sou. Our chief treasure is our lives, and right now, it must be said, they’re hanging by a thread.”

“What do you say, du Vallon?” asked Athos.

“Me, I agree completely with d’Artagnan’s advice,” said Porthos. “It’s an ugly country, this England.”

“You’re determined to leave her, then?” Athos asked d’Artagnan.

“God’s blood!” said d’Artagnan. “I can’t see what there is to hold me.”

Athos exchanged a look with Aramis. “Then go on, my friends,” he said with a sigh.

“Go on! What?” said d’Artagnan. “You mean, ‘Let’s *all* go,’ don’t you?”

“No, my friend,” said Athos. “We must part.”

“We must part!” said d’Artagnan, flabbergasted.

“Bah!” said Porthos. “Why should we part, when we’re finally together?”

“Because your mission is done, and you can and ought to return to France – but ours is not.”

“Your mission isn’t finished?” said d’Artagnan, looking at Athos in surprise.

“No, my friend,” replied Athos, in that voice so gentle, yet so firm. “We came here to defend King Charles, we defended him poorly, and now we must save him.”

“Save the king!” said d’Artagnan, looking at Aramis as he had at Athos. Aramis just nodded.

D’Artagnan’s face took on an expression of deep compassion; he was beginning to think he was dealing with the mentally afflicted. “You can’t seriously mean that, Athos,” he said. “The king is surrounded by an army that’s taking him to London. That army is commanded by a butcher or the son of a butcher named Colonel Harrison. His Majesty’s trial will take place as soon as they arrive in London, I can assure you – I’ve heard enough right from the mouth of Oliver Cromwell to know what to expect.” Athos and Aramis exchanged a second glance. “And with his trial complete, his sentence will soon be executed,” continued d’Artagnan. “Oh, these Puritans don’t waste any time once they go to work!”

“And to what judgement do you think the king will be sentenced?” asked Athos.

“I’m afraid it can be nothing but death. Too much blood has been spilled for forgiveness; they have to kill him. Do you know what Cromwell said when he came to Paris and was shown the Dungeon of Vincennes, where Sir Vendôme had been held?”

“What did he say?” asked Porthos.

“‘You must strike princes only at the head.’”

"I knew it," said Athos.

"And do you think he won't put this maxim into execution, now that he has the king?"

"I'm quite sure he will – which is all the more reason not to abandon that august head."

"Athos, you've gone mad."

"No, my friend," Athos replied mildly. "You see, when de Winter came to find us in France, he took us to see Madam Henriette, and Her Majesty did us the honour, Sir d'Herblay and me, to ask our assistance for her husband. We gave her our word, and our word holds. We committed our minds, our bodies, our very lives to him. Isn't that how you see it, d'Herblay?"

"Yes," said Aramis. "We gave our word."

"Then," continued Athos, "we have another reason, and here it is, so listen carefully: all France is in a shambles at the moment. We have a ten-year-old king who doesn't know what he wants yet; we have a queen blinded by a late romantic passion; we have a minister who treats France as a vast farm to be harvested, caring for nothing but how much gold he can gather through intrigue and Italian tricks; and we have the princes whose opposition to Mazarin is entirely personal and egotistical, and will end up winning nothing but a few scraps of power and sundry bars of gold. I have served them but not out of respect – God knows I see them for who they are, and they don't rank high in my esteem – but rather on principle. Here, today, is something else: here, I find before me a terrible misfortune, a royal misfortune, a misfortune for all Europe, and I must act upon it. If we succeed in saving the king, it will be a fine thing – and if we die for him, it will be glorious!"

"So, you know in advance that it means your death," said d'Artagnan.

"We fear that it may but our only sorrow is to die apart from you."

"What can you do in a land where you're a stranger, an enemy?"

"When I was young I travelled in England, and speak English like a native, and Aramis also has some knowledge of the language. Ah, if only we had you two, my friends! With you, d'Artagnan, and you, Porthos, the four of us reunited for the first time in twenty years, we could stand up not just to England but to Scotland and Ireland into the bargain!"

"And did you promise this queen," replied d'Artagnan sarcastically, "to break into the Tower of London, kill a hundred thousand soldiers, to contest the will of an entire nation as well as the ambition of a man, when that man is named Cromwell? You haven't met that man, Athos – nor have you, Aramis. Hear me! He's a man of genius, who reminded me strongly of our old cardinal – the other, the great one, whom you knew so well. Don't exaggerate the extent of your obligations. In the name of heaven, Athos, you don't have a duty to throw away your life. When I look at you, I seem to see before me a reasonable person – but when I hear you talk, you sound like a madman. Porthos, back me up here: what do you think of this matter?"

"Nothing good," replied Porthos.

"Come," said d'Artagnan, impatient because Athos, instead of listening to him, seemed to hear only a voice within himself, "believe me, Athos, your mission is completed, and completed nobly. Come back to France with us."

"Friend," said Athos, "our resolution is unshakeable."

"Do you have some other motive for this that we don't know about?" Athos just smiled. D'Artagnan punched his thigh angrily, then resumed the battle, calmly stating all the most convincing reasons he could think of. But to all these reasons Athos merely responded with a serene and patient smile, and Aramis just shook his head. "All right!" cried d'Artagnan, losing his temper at last. "Fine! If that's what you want, let's all leave our bones in this bastard of a country, where it's always cold, where good weather is mist, where mist is rain, and where rain is a deluge; where the sun looks like the moon, and the moon looks like cream cheese. Die here, die there, since we all must die, what does it matter?"

"The way to think about it, dear friend," said Athos, "is that we just die a little sooner."

"Bah! A little sooner, a little later, it's scarcely worth fussing about."

"If I'm astonished by anything," said Porthos sententiously, "it's that it hasn't happened already."

"Oh, it's on its way, Porthos, never fear," said d'Artagnan. "So, we're agreed, assuming Porthos doesn't oppose it..."

"Me?" said Porthos. "I'll go where you go. Besides, I think the speech the Count La Fère just made for us was very pretty."

"But what about your future, d'Artagnan? And your ambitions, Porthos?"

"Our future! Our ambitions!" said d'Artagnan airily. "Why should we worry about that, since we're saving a king? We just need to rescue the king, rally his friends, defeat the Puritans, reconquer England, return him to London and place him on his throne..."

"And then he'll make us dukes and peers," said Porthos, his eyes alight, as if already living the happy ending to this fable.

"Or he'll just forget us," said d'Artagnan.

"But no!" said Porthos.

"*Dame!* We've seen that already, friend Porthos. It seems to me we performed a service for Queen Anne of Austria that wasn't much less than what we propose to do for Charles I. That didn't stop Queen Anne from forgetting us for over twenty years."

"Even so, d'Artagnan," said Athos, "are you sorry you did her that favour?"

"No, *my faith*," said d'Artagnan, "and I even admit that in hard times I've found some consolation in the memory of it."

"And you know, d'Artagnan, that though princes may be ungrateful, God will remember."

"You know, Athos," said d'Artagnan, "I think if you met the Devil on earth, you could talk him into following you into heaven."

"And so?" said Athos, offering his hand to d'Artagnan.

"And so, we're agreed," said d'Artagnan. "I find England a charming country, and I'll stay – on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That no one tries to teach me English."

"Well!" said Athos triumphantly. "Now, my friend, I swear to you, by God who hears all, and by my name which I believe to be above reproach, that there is a power who watches over us, and that gives me hope that we shall all once more return safely to France."

"May it be so," said d'Artagnan, "though I confess I can't believe it."

"Our dear d'Artagnan!" said Aramis. "He represents among us a parliament's loyal opposition that always says *no but* always does *yes*."

"And who in doing so, somehow always save the country," said Athos.

"Well, now that that's settled," said Porthos, rubbing his hands, "let's turn our thoughts to dinner! For it seems to me that, no matter what perils we've faced, we've always found time to eat."

"Ah, yes!" said d'Artagnan. "Let's speak of dinner in a land where they eat boiled mutton at every meal, and drink nothing but beer. What were you thinking when you came to such a country, Athos? Ah but pardon me," he added, smiling, "I forgot that you're no longer Athos. Never mind – let's hear your plan for dinner, Porthos."

"My plan!"

"Yes, don't you have a plan?"

"No, all I have is an appetite."

"*For the love of God!* Now that you mention it, so do I. We're going to have to find some food, or else take up eating grass like our horses..."

"Ah! When we were at the Heretic, do you remember what fine oysters we had?" said Aramis, who was not as detached from d'Arthos pleasures as Athos.

"And the lamb outlets they make in those salt marshes," said Porthos, licking his lips.

"But Porthos, don't we still have our friend Mousqueton," said d'Artagnan, "who made life so easy for you at Chantilly?"

"Indeed, we do have Mousqueton," said Porthos, "but since he became my intendant he's grown ... and grown less active. But no matter, I'll summon him." And he called out agreeably, "Hey! Mouston!"

Mousqueton appeared, wearing a most pitiful expression. "My dear Sir Mouston, what's the matter?" asked d'Artagnan. "Are you ill?"

"Sir, I'm very hungry," replied Mousqueton.

"Well! That's the very reason we called for you, my dear Sir Mouston. Could you please hunt up some nice rabbits and a few succulent partridges, like those from which you made such fricassees and soups at the Hôtel de ... *my faith*, what was the name of that inn?"

"The Hôtel de ... *my faith*, I can't remember it either."

"No matter! While you're at it, lasso up some more bottles of that Burgundy that had such curative properties when your master had his, er, sprain."

"*Alas*, Sir!" said Mousqueton. "I'm afraid what you ask for is quite hard to find in this dreadful country, and we might do better to ask for hospitality from the master of that little house one can see from the edge of the woods."

"Oh? You say there's a house nearby?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Yes, Sir," Mousqueton replied.

"Well, then, as you say, let's go ask the master of this house for some dinner. Gentlemen, are you in accord with this idea of Sir Mouston's?"

"But what if the householder is a Puritan?" said Aramis.

"*God be with you*, all the better!" said d'Artagnan. "If he's a Puritan, we'll tell him of the king's capture, and in honour of such news, he'll slaughter the fatted calf."

"And if he's a royalist?" said Porthos.

"In that case we'll look mournful, and he'll slaughter the black sheep."

"Such good cheer!" said Athos, smiling despite everything at the indomitable Gascon. "I think you could laugh at anything."

"What would you have?" said d'Artagnan. "I was born in a place without a cloud in the sky."

"Not like here," said Porthos, extending a hand to make sure what he'd felt on his cheek was a drop of rain.

"Then let's go," said d'Artagnan. "All the more reason for us to move on. Hey, Grimaud!"

Grimaud appeared. "Grimaud, my friend, have you seen anything?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Nothing," replied Grimaud.

"What blunderers," said Porthos. "They haven't even pursued us. Now, if we'd been handling it ...!"

"And a shame it is, too," said d'Artagnan. "A private place like this would be perfect for what I have to say to Mordaunt. This is a lovely spot to lay a man out."

"Decidedly, Gentlemen," said Aramis, "I don't think the son is in the same class as his mother."

"Eh, my friend," said Athos, "give him a chance. We've been gone less than two hours, and he has no idea which way we went or where we are. Don't decide he's less of a threat than his mother until we've once more set foot in France, with none of us run through or poisoned."

"Then let's have dinner while we wait," said Porthos.

"My faith, yes," said Athos, "for I'm hungry too."

"Black sheep, beware!" said Aramis. And the four friends, led by Mousqueton, advanced toward the house, already restored to their usual confidence, now that, as Athos had said, they were all four reunited.

As they approached the house, our fugitives saw that the ground around it was torn up, as if a considerable troop of equestrians had preceded them; the marks were most pronounced near the door and showed that the troop had halted there. "*For the love of God!*" said d'Artagnan. "It's as clear as writing: the king and his captors have passed here."

"The devil!" said Porthos. "In that case, they'll have eaten all the food."

"They might have missed a hen," said d'Artagnan.

He jumped from his horse and knocked on the door. But no one answered. He pushed open the door that was unlocked, and saw that the front room was empty and deserted. "Well?" asked Porthos.

"I don't see anyone," said d'Artagnan. "Ah, wait!"

“What is it?”

“Blood!”

At this word, his three friends leapt off their horses and entered the first room but d’Artagnan was already opening the door into the second, and by the expression on his face it was clear he’d found something. The three friends approached and saw a young man lying on the floor in a pool of blood. One could see that he’d tried to get to his bed but his strength had run out and he’d collapsed just short of it. Athos, who thought he’d seen a movement, was the first to approach the unfortunate young man. “Well?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Well!” said Athos. “If he’s dead, it hasn’t been for long, because he’s still warm. But no, his heart still beats. Hey, there, friend.”

The wounded man sighed. From a bowl, d’Artagnan poured some water into his cupped hand and splashed it on his face. The man opened his eyes, tried to raise his head and fell back. Athos tried to lift the man to lean him on his knee but saw that the man’s wound was to his head; his skull was split, and blood still flowed from the gash. Aramis dipped a towel in the water bowl and applied it to the wound, and the coolness brought the man around so that he opened his eyes again. He looked with surprise at these men who seemed to pity him and who as much as they could, were trying to help him. “You are among friends,” said Athos in English. “Have no fear. But if you have the strength, tell us what happened.”

“The king,” murmured the wounded man. “The king is a prisoner.”

“You saw him?” asked Aramis in the same language.

The man didn’t answer. “Don’t worry,” said Athos, “we’re loyal servants of His Majesty.”

“Are you speaking the truth?” asked the wounded man.

“On our honor as gentlemen.”

“Then I can tell you?”

“Speak.”

“I’m the brother of Parry, His Majesty’s valet.”

Athos and Aramis remembered that it was by that name that Winter had addressed the servant they’d met in the corridor of the royal pavilion. “We know him,” said Athos. “He never left the king’s side!” “Yes, that’s him!” said the wounded man. “When the king was taken, he went with him, and when they neared my house, he thought of me. He asked in the name of the king if they could stop here. The request was granted; the king, he said, was hungry. They brought him into this room so he could take his meal, and placed sentries at the doors and windows. Parry knew this room, because several times, while His Majesty was at Newcastle, he’d come to see me. He knew there was a trap door in the floor that led to the cellar, and that from the cellar one could reach the orchard. He made a sign to me about it, and I understood. But one of the king’s guardians must have seen the gesture and become suspicious. I knew nothing about that, I just wanted to save His Majesty. So, I pretended I needed to go out and get some wood, thinking there was no time to lose. I came back in through the outside door that opened into the cellar. I went to the trap door and slowly raised it, just as Parry was quietly bolting the inner door, and I beckoned to the king to follow me. But alas! He didn’t want to do it – it was as if he didn’t really want to escape. Then Parry clasped his hands and begged him, and we implored him not to lose this opportunity. Finally he decided to follow me into the cellar. I went in front, with the king a few steps behind me, when suddenly, in the passage to the outer door, a great shadow rose up in front of me. I tried to cry out to warn the king but didn’t have time – I felt a blow like the entire house falling on my head and fell unconscious.”

“Faithful servant!” said Athos. “Good and loyal Englishman!”

“When I came to, I was lying where they’d left me. I dragged myself out and around to the front but the king and his captors were gone. It took maybe an hour to crawl inside this far before my strength was gone, and I passed out for a second time.”

“And now, how do you feel?”

“Very bad,” said the brother of Parry.

“Can we do anything for you?” asked Athos.

“Help me up onto the bed; I think I’ll feel better there.”

“Is there anyone we can send to for help?”

“My wife went to Durham and should be back any time now. But you, is there anything you need, anything you want?”

“We came here intending to ask you for some food.”

“Alas! They took everything; there’s not a crust of bread left in the house.”

“Do you hear, d’Artagnan?” said Athos. “We’ll have to find our dinner elsewhere.”

“That hardly matters now,” said d’Artagnan. “I’ve lost my appetite.”

“My faith, me too,” said Porthos.

They carried the man to his bed, and sent for Grimaud, who dressed his wound. In the service of the four companions, Grimaud had had occasion to patch them up so many times that he had the skills of a field surgeon. Meanwhile the fugitives had gathered in the front room for a council. “Now we know what took place here,” said Aramis. “It was indeed the king and his captors who passed through. We should go in the opposite direction. Don’t you agree, Athos?”

Athos said nothing; he was thinking. “Yes,” said Porthos, “let’s go the other way. If we follow the king’s escort, we’ll find everything eaten up and we’ll die of hunger. This England is a cursed country but at least till now I’d always been able to find a dinner in it. Dinner is my favourite meal.”

“What do you think, d’Artagnan?” said Athos. “Do you agree with Aramis?”

“Not at all,” said d’Artagnan, “in fact I think quite the opposite.”

“What? You want to follow the escort?” said Porthos, shocked.

“No, I want to join up with them.”

Athos’s eyes sparkled with joy. “Join up with the escort!” cried Aramis.

“Hear d’Artagnan out,” said Athos. “You know he always has good ideas.”

“No doubt about it,” said d’Artagnan, “We must go where they won’t search for us. They won’t even think of looking for us among the Puritans, so among the Puritans we must go.”

“Fine, my friend – good advice!” said Athos. “I was about to say the same thing myself.”

“So, you agree with him?” asked Aramis.

“Yes. They’ll think we want to leave England, so they’ll be searching the ports. Meanwhile, we’ll go to London with the king. Once in London, we’re safe – it’s easy to hide among a million people. Not to mention,” said Athos, with a glance at Aramis, “the possible opportunities of such a journey.”

“Yes,” said Aramis, “I understand.”

“Me, I don’t understand at all,” said Porthos. “But no matter. If d’Artagnan and Athos agree on a thing, it must be the right idea.”

“But won’t Colonel Harrison be suspicious of us?” asked Aramis.

“Him? *God be with you!*” said d’Artagnan. “He’s the one I’m counting on. Colonel Harrison will welcome us; he’s seen us twice with General Cromwell, and knows we were sent from France by Mazarin. He’ll treat us like brothers. Besides, isn’t he the son of a butcher? He is, isn’t he? Well, Porthos will show him how he can knock out an ox with a punch and overturn a bull by taking it by the horns. He’ll love us.”

Athos smiled. “You’re the best comrade a man could have, d’Artagnan,” he said, taking the Gascon’s hand, “and I’m very glad we’re together again, my son.”

That is, as we know, what Athos called d’Artagnan when deeply moved. At that moment Grimaud called them in. The wounded man had been bandaged and was feeling better. The four friends bid him goodbye and asked if there was any message they could convey to his brother. The brave man said, “Tell him he should let the king know they didn’t quite kill me; no matter how unimportant I am, I’m sure His Majesty regrets my death and blames himself for it.”

“Don’t worry,” said d’Artagnan, “he’ll know it before nightfall.” The little troop resumed their march. There was no mistaking their path; the trail they had to follow was clearly visible across the fields.

After about two hours of silent march, d’Artagnan who was in the lead, stopped at a turn in the road, “Ah ha!” he said. “Here are our men.” In fact, a considerable troop of riders could be seen about a half-league ahead. “My dear friends,” said d’Artagnan to Athos and Aramis, “give your swords to Sir Mouston, who will hold them for you, and don’t forget for a moment that you’re our prisoners.”

Then they put their horses that were beginning to tire, into a final trot, and soon caught up to the escort. The king, at the head of the troop, surrounded by Colonel Harrison’s soldiers, rode impassively, dignified and resigned. On seeing Athos and Aramis, to whom he’d not even had time to say farewell, he read in the glances of the two gentlemen that he still had two friends at hand, though he thought they were prisoners. A flush of pleasure coloured the king’s cheeks. D’Artagnan reached the head of the column, where, leaving his friends guarded by Porthos, he rode straight to Harrison. The colonel recognised him from having seen him with Cromwell, and welcomed him as politely as a man of his character and background could manage. As d’Artagnan had foreseen, Harrison suspected nothing. The troop stopped at an inn; it was at this halt that the king was to dine – only this time precautions were put into place to make sure he didn’t escape. In the inn’s common room a small table was placed for the king, and a large table for the officers. “Will you dine with me?” Harrison asked d’Artagnan.

“Would I?” said d’Artagnan. “That would give me great pleasure – but I have my comrade, Sir du Vallon, and our two prisoners whom we can’t leave, and that would overcrowd your table. Maybe it would be better to set up another table in the corner, and send over to us whatever you can spare, because believe me, we’re famished. Then we’ll all be at dinner together, or at least in the same room.”

“We’ll do it,” said Harrison.

The matter was arranged as d’Artagnan had proposed, and when he returned to the colonel’s dinner with his friends, he found the king already seated at his table being served by Parry. Harrison and his officers were gathered in the centre of the room, and a side table awaited the friends in a corner. The table at which the Puritan officers were seated was round, and by chance or deliberate choice, Harrison was sitting with his back to the king. The king watched the four gentlemen enter but seemed to pay them no special attention. The four comrades went to the table set aside for them and seated themselves with their backs to the wall, facing the officers’ table and that of the king. Harrison, to do honour to his guests, sent them the best dishes from his table, though unfortunately for the four friends, there was no honey. This didn’t matter to Athos but d’Artagnan, Porthos, and Aramis grimaced every time they had to swallow beer, the drink of Puritans. “Faith, Colonel,” said d’Artagnan, “we’re very grateful for your gracious invitation, for, without you, we ran the risk of missing our dinner, and we’d already missed breakfast. My friend Sir du Vallon here shares my gratitude, as he was famished.”

“I’m still hungry,” said Porthos, saluting Colonel Harrison.

“And how did the grave calamity of your missing breakfast come about?” asked the colonel with a laugh.

“The reason is simple enough, Colonel,” said d’Artagnan. “I was eager to catch up to you, and in my haste, I followed the same route you’d taken, a mistake an old forager like me should never have made, as I should have known that where experienced troops like yours pass, they leave nothing behind. You can understand our disappointment when, upon arriving at a pretty little house at the edge of a wood, a handsome dwelling with a red roof and green shutters, instead of finding chickens to roast and ham steaks to grill, we discovered a poor devil bathed in blood .... *God be with you*, Colonel, my compliments to whichever of your officers delivered that blow, for it was so mighty it earned the admiration of my friend Sir du Vallon, who’s no amateur when it comes to blows.”

“Yes,” said Harrison, laughing and catching the eye of an officer at his table, “when Groslow takes on such a task, no follow up is needed.”

“Ah, so it was sir, here,” said d’Artagnan, saluting the officer. “I regret that sir doesn’t speak French, or I’d pay him my compliments directly.”

“I’m ready to receive them and pay you back in kind, Sir,” said the officer in reasonably good French. “I lived in Paris for three years.”

“Well, Sir,” continued d’Artagnan, “I’m pleased to tell you that your blow was so well struck that you nearly killed the man.”

“I thought I’d killed him outright,” said Groslow.

“No. It was a near thing, it’s true but he’s not quite dead.”

As he said this, d’Artagnan glanced at Parry, who stood behind the king looking pale as death that showed that the remark had found its intended audience. As to the king, he had listened to the whole conversation with a heart bursting with anguish, for at first, he didn’t understand the intentions of the French officer who spoke with such callous cruelty about the assault and was revolted. At d’Artagnan’s last words, he finally breathed freely. “Devil take it!” said Groslow. “I thought I’d done a more thorough job. If it wasn’t so far back to that dog’s house, I’d return and finish it.”

“And you’d be right to do so, if you’re afraid he’ll come after you,” said d’Artagnan, “for you know that when such a head wound doesn’t kill instantly, it heals within a week.”



And d'Artagnan cast a second glance at Parry, on whose face joy was spreading, as Charles pressed his hand and smiled. Parry bowed to his master's hand and kissed it with respect. "Truly, d'Artagnan," said Athos quietly, "you are both a man of your word and a man of wits. But what do you think of the king?"

"I like the look of him," said d'Artagnan. "He seems both noble and good."

"Yes but he let himself be taken," said Porthos. "That was a mistake."

"I have a strong desire to drink the king's health," said Athos.

"Then let me propose a toast," said d'Artagnan.

"Please do," said Aramis.

Porthos looked at d'Artagnan in surprise, ever amazed by the endless ideas his Gascon spirit supplied his comrade. D'Artagnan took up his tin goblet, filled it, and rose to his feet. "Gentlemen," he said to his companions, "let's raise a glass to he who presides over our feast. Let's drink to our colonel, to let him know that we're at his service to London and beyond."

As he said these words, d'Artagnan looked at Harrison, who thought the toast was for him. He rose and saluted the four friends, who, their eyes fixed on King Charles, drank all together, while Harrison, on his side, drained his glass without suspicion. Charles, in his turn, held out his glass to Parry, who poured in a few drops of beer – for the king had the same fare as the rest. He then raised it to his lips, and while looking at the four gentlemen, he drank with a smile full of nobility and gratitude. "Come, Gentlemen," said Harrison, resting his glass without so much as a glance at his illustrious prisoner, "let's be on our way!"

"Where do we sleep tonight, Colonel?"

"At Thirsk," replied Harrison.

"Parry," said the king, rising and turning to his valet, "my horse. I wish to go to Thirsk."

"Faith," said d'Artagnan to Athos, "your king has completely captivated me, and I'm entirely at his service."

"If you really mean that," Athos replied, "I think we can see to it that he never arrives in London."

"How so?"

"Because before then we'll have spirited him away."

"This time, Athos," said d'Artagnan, "word of honour, you really are mad."

"Do you mean to say you're out of ideas?" asked Aramis.

"Come now!" said Porthos. "It's not impossible. All we need is a good plan."

"I don't have any ideas," said Athos, "but I'll leave coming up with a plan to d'Artagnan." D'Artagnan just shrugged his shoulders and they left.

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D'Artagnan comes up with a Plan

Athos knew d'Artagnan better than d'Artagnan knew himself. He knew that dropping a thought into a fertile mind like the Gascon's was like planting a seed in a rich and well-watered field. So, he let his friend shrug his shoulders and ride along, while chatting to him about Raoul, a conversation which he'd avoided under another circumstance, it may be recalled. As night fell they arrived at Thirsk. The four friends appeared completely uninterested in and indifferent to the security precautions for the king's custody. They retired to a private house, where they took precautions for their own security, gathering in a single room that had a reliable escape route in case of attack. Each lackey was given a sentry post; Grimaud slept across the doorway on a pallet of straw. D'Artagnan was pensive and seemed for once to have no interest in talking. He didn't say a word, just paced back and forth from window to bed, whistling tunelessly. Porthos, who never saw anything beyond the obvious, spoke to him as usual but d'Artagnan replied only in monosyllables. Athos and Aramis looked at each other and smiled. The day had been tiring, and yet, with the exception of Porthos, for whom slumber was as dependable as hunger, the friends slept badly. The next morning d'Artagnan was the first one on his feet. He had already gone down to the stables, checked on the horses, and given all the orders necessary for the day by the time Athos and Aramis got up. Porthos was still snoring. At eight in the morning the entire troop set out, marching in the same order as the day before – though d'Artagnan left his group of friends and went to expand on the acquaintance with Mister Groslow begun the day before. The officer, who was still glowing from d'Artagnan's earlier praise, received him with a gracious smile. "In truth, Sir," d'Artagnan said to him, "I'm happy to find someone with whom I can speak my poor language. My friend Sir du Vallon is so melancholy a character he speaks scarcely four words in a day – while as for our prisoners, you understand that we don't engage them in conversation."

"They're royalist fanatics," said Groslow.

"All the more reason for them to sulk since we've taken the Stuart. I hope he'll be given a fine and fiery trial."

"Faith! That's what we're taking him to London for," said Groslow.

"And you don't mean to let him out of your sight, I imagine?"

"Plague! I should think not! As you see," the officer added, laughing, "we're giving him a truly royal escort."

"Yes, by day, there's no chance he might escape. But by night..."

"At night, our precautions are doubled."

"They must be pretty thorough."

"There are always eight men in his room."

"The devil!" said d'Artagnan "You do guard him well. But, besides these eight men inside, you must have a guard outside, right? You can't be too careful guarding a prisoner like this one."

"True! But on the other hand, what could two unarmed men do against eight armed guards?"

"What do you mean, two men?"

"The king and his valet."

"They gave the king permission to keep his valet?"

"Yes, the Stuart asked for that favour, and Colonel Harrison agreed. The excuse is that he's a king, so he can't dress or undress himself."

"Truly, Captain," said d'Artagnan, pushing his flattery campaign to see how far it would take him, "the more I listen to you, the more I admire the easy and elegant way you speak French. I realise you lived in Paris for three years but I'm sure I could live in London for the rest of my life and never learn English that well. What were you doing in Paris?"

"My father, who's a merchant, had placed me in the office of his continental partner, who had sent his own son to work with my father. Such exchanges are customary between trading partners."

"And did you like Paris, Sir?"

"Yes but you ought to have a revolution like ours. Not against your king, he's just a child but against that thieving Italian who's your queen's lover."

"Ha! I quite agree with you, Sir, and we could do it, too, if we had only a dozen officers like you, sharp, vigilant, and determined! We'd soon see the end of that Mazarin, and give him a little trial like the one you're going to stage for your king."

"But I thought you were in Mazarin's service," said the officer. "Wasn't it he who sent you to General Cromwell?"

"Say rather that I'm in the service of the king. Knowing that Mazarin needed to send someone to England, I asked for the mission, for the express purpose of meeting the man of genius who now commands your three kingdoms. Then, when he invited me and Sir du Vallon to draw our swords for the honour of old England, you saw how we took up his offer."

"Yes, I know you led the charge with Mister Mordaunt."

"On his left side and his right, Sir. *Plague*, he's another brave and determined young officer. Did you see how he settled his score with his traitorous uncle?"

"Do you know him, then?" asked the officer.

"Very well indeed; I can even say we have a strong connection. Sir du Vallon and I came over from France with him."

"It sounded like you made him wait quite a while at Boulogne."

"What would you have?" said d'Artagnan. "I was like you, I had a king to guard."

"Oh?" said Groslow. "Which king is that?"

"Ours, *for the love of God!* Our little king, Louis XIV."

And d'Artagnan removed his hat. The Englishman did the same out of politeness. "How long did you guard him?"

"Three nights, and, by my faith, I'll always remember those nights fondly."

"Is the young king easy to get along with?"

"The king? He was fast asleep."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"What I'm talking about is that my friends, the officers of the guards and the musketeers, came to keep me company, and we spent those nights drinking and gambling."

"Ah, yes," sighed the Englishman. "It's true, you Frenchmen make merry companions."

"You mean you don't play dice and cards while you stand guard?"

"Never," said the Englishman.

"How terribly boring! I must say, I feel sorry for you," said d'Artagnan.

"The fact is," the officer replied, "I dread my turn at guard duty. It's a long, long night with nothing to do."

"Yes, when one watches alone or with dull mates. But when we share duty with a jolly friend, and scatter gold and dice on the table, the night passes like a dream. So you don't care for dice or cards?"

"On the contrary!"

"You'd enjoy a few hands of lansquenet then?"

"I'm crazy about it – played it almost every night in France."

"And since you've been back in England?"

"I've touched neither cards nor dice-box."

"You poor fellow," said d'Artagnan, with an air of deep compassion.

"Listen," said the Englishman, "do something for me."

"What's that?"

"Tomorrow night I'm on guard."

"Around the Stuart?"

"Yes. Come spend the watch with me."

"Impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Completely."

"But why?"

"I play cards every night with Sir du Vallon. Sometimes we don't go to bed at all .... This morning, for example, we were still playing at dawn."

"Well?"

"Well, he'll be bored to death if we don't play."

"Is he a devoted player?"

"I've seen him lose two thousand pistoles on a hand and laugh it off."

"Bring him, then."

"How could I do that? What about our prisoners?"

"Ah, the devil! I forgot," said the officer. "Just tell your lackeys to guard them."

"I might as well just let them escape," said d'Artagnan. "Those lads are no kind of guards."

"Are your prisoners men of high rank, then?"

*"Plague!* I'll say! One is a rich lord of Touraine, and the other is a Knight of Malta of an ancient house. We've set the ransom for both of them: two thousand livres in silver when we arrive in France. Believe me, we're not about to leave those men for a moment, especially with lackeys who know the prisoners are rich. We gave them a once-over, a pre-ransom search, and I confess it's their gold we're playing with every night, Sir du Vallon and I. But they might have a few more gemstones hidden away in their sleeves, even a diamond of price, so we guard them like misers guard their strongboxes. One or the other of us watches over them at all times."

"Ah! Hmm," said Groslow.

"So now you understand why I must refuse your noble offer – and with sorrow, because as I'm sure you know, nothing is more tiresome than to play the same games over and over, night after night, with the same partner. Luck goes back and forth equally between you, and at the end of a month you find you're both back where you started."

"No, there's one thing even more tiresome than that," said Groslow with a sigh, "and that's not playing at all."

"I imagine you're right," said d'Artagnan.

"But see here," said the Englishman, "your prisoners, are they dangerous men?"

"How do you mean?"

"Could they make a break for it?"

D'Artagnan laughed aloud. "Lord above!" he chuckled. "The lord is weak and trembling with fever, thanks to the climate of your charming country, while the Knight of Malta is as timid as a young girl. Though to be safe, we took away their pen knives and pocket scissors."

"All right, then," said Groslow, "just bring them along."

"Really? We could do that?"

"Why not? I have eight men."

"So?"

"So four can watch your prisoners, and four can guard the king."

"You know," said d'Artagnan slowly, "I think that could work – though we're putting you to a lot of trouble."

"Bah! Come anyway; we'll figure it out."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that," said d'Artagnan. "One can trust a man like you to handle anything." At this final flattery, the officer gave one of those little chuckles of satisfied vanity that cement a new friendship between one who is pleased and one who pleases. "Now that I think of it," said d'Artagnan, "why shouldn't we start tonight?"

"What?"

"Our game."

"No reason in the world," said Groslow.

"Why don't you come play lansquenet with us tonight, and we'll return the favour with you tomorrow night. That way, if there's anything about our 'fanatical royalists' that alarms you, well! We'll just play the one night and cancel the next."

"Perfect! Tonight at your place, tomorrow night at the Stuart's, and the night after that at mine."

"And then every night in London. Hey, *God be with you!*" said d'Artagnan. "You see, one can lead a merry life anywhere."

"Yes, when one falls in with Frenchmen, and they're Frenchmen like you," said Groslow.

"Especially ones like Sir du Vallon – what a merry soul he is! He's a furious Frondeur, and terrifies Mazarin, who employs him out of fear of opposing him."

"Yes, he's an imposing figure of a man," said Groslow, "but he has a pleasant face, and I like him without even knowing him yet."

"You'll like him even more when you get to know him better. But hey! They're calling me. My apologies but unlike you, he's not clever, and can't do without me. You'll excuse me?"

"Of course!"

"Until tonight."

"At your place?"

"At our place."

The two men exchanged salutes, and d'Artagnan returned to his companions. "What the devil were you talking about with that bulldog?" said Porthos.

"My dear Porthos, don't speak that way about Sir Groslow, who is my new best friend."

"Your new best friend," said Porthos, "that murderer of peasants?"

"Hush, my dear Porthos! All right, yes, Sir Groslow may be a brute but I've discovered that he has two excellent qualities: he's proud, and he's stupid."

Porthos, bewildered, stared wide-eyed but Athos and Aramis looked at each other and smiled; they knew that d'Artagnan did nothing without a purpose.

"Soon enough, you'll come to appreciate him yourself," said d'Artagnan.

"How's that?"

"I'll introduce him to you tonight, when he comes to play cards with us."

"Oh ho!" said Porthos, his eyes lighting up. "Is he rich?"

"He's the son of one of London's leading merchants."

"And he likes lansquenet?"

"He loves it."

"And basset?"

"Crazy about it."

"He plays biribi?"

"Like an expert."

"Good," said Porthos, "we'll have a pleasant evening."

"All the more pleasant as it promises us a better night tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, we host him at gaming tonight, and he hosts us tomorrow night."

"Where will that be?"

"I'll tell you later. Tonight, we must pay attention to just one thing: making sure we're worthy hosts to Sir Groslow. We're spending the night at Derby; send Mousqueton on ahead, and if there's a bottle of honey to be had in the city, have him buy it. It wouldn't hurt for him to find something tasty and prepare us a savoury supper – though the prisoners won't join us because you, Athos, are trembling with a fever, and you, Aramis, are an effete Knight of Malta who doesn't like the harsh conversation of soldiers – it makes you blush. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," said Porthos, "but devil take me if I understand you."

"Porthos, my friend, you know that I'm descended from the prophets on my father's side and the sibyls on my mother's, and that I speak only in parables and riddles; let those who have ears listen, and those who have eyes look! I can say no more at this time."

"No need, my friend," said Athos. "I'm sure that whatever you're doing will be done well."

"And you, Aramis, do you agree with Athos?"

"Completely, *my dear* d'Artagnan."

"Behold," said d'Artagnan, "for here are true believers, and it's a pleasure to perform miracles for them. Not like the faithless Porthos, who only believes in what he can see and touch."

"I am, in fact," said Porthos with a shrewd look, "very incredulous."

D'Artagnan clapped him on the shoulder and then as the troop had arrived at their midday halt, the conversation was over. At about five in the evening, as agreed, Mousqueton was sent on ahead. Mousqueton spoke no English but since they'd been in England he'd been studying the methods of Grimaud, who never spoke a word, and nonetheless made himself understood by gestures. He'd asked Grimaud for some lessons, and thanks to studying with a master, he'd learned more than a little. Blaisois went with him. That evening the four friends, riding down Derby's principal street, saw Blaisois waiting at the gate of a fine house; this was to be their lodging for the night. All day they'd avoided the king for fear of arousing suspicion, and instead of joining Colonel Harrison's table for supper, they took that meal by themselves. Groslow arrived at the appointed hour. D'Artagnan received him as if he were a friend of twenty years' standing. Porthos looked him up and down from head to toe and smiled, for he realised that despite the remarkable blow he'd given to Parry's brother, Groslow wasn't as mighty as he. Athos and Aramis did what they could to conceal their disgust at Groslow's crude and brutal nature. In short, Groslow was pleased with his reception. Athos and Aramis played their parts. At midnight they retired to their room, the door of which was left open, on the pretext of keeping an eye on them. As they left, d'Artagnan went with them, leaving Porthos for a moment with Groslow. When he returned, they played; Porthos won fifty pistoles from Groslow, and found, by the time he retired for the night, that the man's company was less disagreeable than he'd expected. As for Groslow, he promised d'Artagnan he'd get his revenge on Porthos next time, and took his leave of the Gascon, reminding him of their rendezvous that evening. We say that evening, because by the time the players finally broke up, it was four in the morning. The day passed in the usual way; d'Artagnan went from Captain Groslow to Colonel Harrison, and from Colonel Harrison back to his friends. For one who didn't know d'Artagnan, he seemed to be in his usual cheerful mood – but to his friends, or Athos and Aramis anyway, he seemed to be in a fever of gaiety. "What's he up to?" said Aramis.

"Just wait," said Athos.

Porthos said nothing, only counted, one after another, with a visible air of satisfaction, the fifty pistoles he'd won from Groslow. Arriving that evening at Ryston, d'Artagnan assembled his friends. His face wore the expression of cheerful nonchalance it had shown all day. Athos gave Aramis a nudge and said, "The time approaches."

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, who'd heard him. "Yes, the time approaches. Tonight, Gentlemen, we rescue the king."

Athos trembled, his eyes alight. "D'Artagnan," he said, doubt momentarily displacing hope, "this isn't a joke, is it? Such a joke would be the death of me!"

"It's unlike you, Athos, to doubt me this way," said d'Artagnan. "When have you seen me jest about a friend's heart or a king's life? I told you, and I repeat, that tonight we rescue Charles I. You asked me to find a plan, and the plan is found."

Porthos gave d'Artagnan a look of deep admiration. Aramis smiled like a man who had found hope. But Athos was pale as death and trembled in every limb. "Tell us," he said.

Porthos opened his eyes wide, while Aramis hung on d'Artagnan's every word. "Did you hear that we've been invited to spend the evening with Sir Groslow?"

"Yes," responded Porthos. "He made us promise to give him his revenge."

"Good. And do you know where he's going to take this revenge?"

"No."

"In the king's quarters."

"In the king's quarters!" cried Athos.

"Yes, Gentlemen, the king's quarters. Sir Groslow is on guard duty with His Majesty tonight, and, for his amusement, has invited us to keep him company."

"All four of us?" asked Athos.

*"For the love of God!* Certainly, all four of us – do you suppose we'd let our prisoners out of our sight?"

"Oh ho!" said Aramis.

“Go on,” said Athos, excited.

“We’ll go to join Groslow, we with our swords, you with your poniards; the four of us will overwhelm those eight imbeciles and their stupid commander. What do you say to that, Sir Porthos?”

“I say it’ll be easy,” said Porthos.

“We’ll put Groslow’s clothes on the king; Mousqueton, Grimaud, and Blaisois will be waiting around the first corner with horses; we’ll jump into the saddle, and by dawn we’ll be twenty leagues from here. Will this plot do, Athos?”

Athos placed his hands on d’Artagnan’s shoulders and looked at him with his calm and gentle smile. “I declare, friend,” he said, “There isn’t another creature under the sun to equal you for nobility and courage. While we thought you indifferent to our troubles, you alone have found the answer we sought for in vain. I repeat once more, d’Artagnan, you are the best of us, and I bless you and love you, my dear son.”

“And to think that I didn’t think of it myself!” said Porthos, slapping his forehead. “It’s all so simple.”

“But as I see it,” said Aramis, “we have to kill them all, don’t we?”

Athos shuddered and turned pale. “*God be with you!*” said d’Artagnan. “You’re right, and we must. I’ve thought it through every way I can, and I don’t see how to avoid it.”

“Come,” said Aramis, “there’s no point in fretting about it. How do we proceed?”

“I have a two-part plan,” d’Artagnan replied.

“Let’s hear the first part,” said Aramis.

“You hold yourselves ready and await my signal, and when I give the word, each of us plunges a dagger into the heart of the soldier nearest to us. That puts four down right away, and evens the odds, as it leaves us four against five. These five surrender, and are bound and gagged, or they resist and are killed. If by any chance our host changes his mind and admits only Porthos and myself to the party, then, *dame!* We two will just have to do double the work. It will take longer and be louder but you’ll be nearby with swords and will rush in when you hear the commotion.”

“But what if they overwhelm you?” said Athos.

“Ha!” said d’Artagnan. “These beer-drinkers are too heavy and awkward. Besides, Porthos will punch them in the throat, and they’ll be killed before they can make a sound.”

“Sounds good!” said Porthos. “We’ll have a jolly little massacre.”

“Dreadful!” said Athos. “Dreadful!”

“Bah! Sir the sensitive,” said d’Artagnan, “you’d kill that many or more without hesitation in a battle. Besides, friend,” he continued, “if you think the king’s life isn’t worth that price, just say so, and I’ll send to Groslow to say I’m too sick to come.”

“No,” said Athos. “No, I’m wrong, my friend, and you’re right. Forgive me.”

At that moment the door opened, and a soldier appeared on the threshold. “Sir Captain Groslow,” he said in terrible French, “sends to advise Sir d’Artagnan and Sir du Vallon that he awaits them.”

“Where?” asked d’Artagnan.

“In the quarters of the English Nebuchadnezzar,” replied the soldier, a confirmed Puritan.

“Very good,” Athos replied in excellent English, though a flush had risen on his face at this insult to royal majesty. “Tell Captain Groslow we’re on our way.” The Puritan departed. The lackeys had been ordered to saddle eight horses, to stay mounted, and to keep together, in the street around the corner about twenty paces from the king’s lodging.

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The Lansquenet Party

By that time, it was nine in the evening; the previous guards had been relieved at eight, and Captain Groslow’s squad had been on duty for an hour. D’Artagnan and Porthos, armed with their swords, and Athos and Aramis, each with a poniard hidden in his doublet, made their way toward the house that served as the prison of Charles Stuart. The latter two, humble and apparently disarmed, followed their conquerors like captives. “Faith,” Groslow said when he saw them, “I’d almost given up on you.”

D’Artagnan approached him and said in a low voice, “In fact, Sir du Vallon and I were hesitant to come.”

“But why?” asked Groslow.

D’Artagnan nodded toward Athos and Aramis. “Ah!” said Groslow. “Because of their royalist sympathies? No matter. On the contrary,” he said, laughing, “Since they love the Stuart, let them see him.”

“Will we spend the evening in the king’s chamber?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Not there but in the next room – and as the connecting door will remain open, it’ll be exactly as if we were in his chamber. Did you bring enough money? Because I declare I intend to gamble like the devil tonight.”

“Hear this?” said d’Artagnan, jingling the gold in his pockets.

“Ah, very good!” said Groslow, opening the door into the room. “I only precede you to show you the way, Gentlemen,” he said, going in first.

D’Artagnan glanced at his friends. Porthos was as nonchalant as if this were an ordinary card party; Athos was pale but resolute; Aramis mopped his brow with a handkerchief. The eight guards were at their posts: four were in the king’s chamber, two at the connecting door, and two at the door through which the four friends entered. At the sight of their naked swords, Athos smiled, for that would make it a mêlée, not a massacre. From that moment his good humour returned. Charles, whom they could see through the open door, was lying on his bed fully dressed, under a simple wool throw blanket. At his bedside, Parry sat reading a chapter from a Catholic Bible in a voice that was quiet but loud enough for the king to hear. A coarse tallow candle, placed nearby on a black table, illuminated the king’s resigned face, and the far more troubled face of his loyal servant. From time to time Parry paused, thinking that the king might have fallen asleep but each time the king opened his eyes, smiled, and said, “Continue, my good Parry, I’m listening.”

Groslow advanced to the threshold of the king’s chamber, putting back on the hat he’d removed to receive his guests, looking for a moment with contempt at the simple and touching tableau of the old servant reading the Bible to his captive king. He made sure every man was at his assigned post, and, turning back to d’Artagnan, looked triumphantly at the Frenchman as if inviting a compliment on his tactics. “Well done,” said the Gascon. “*Cap de Diou!* You’d make a distinguished general.”

“And do you think,” asked Groslow, “that while I’m guarding him there’s any chance the Stuart could be rescued?”

“Absolutely not,” replied d’Artagnan, “unless an army of his friends rained down from heaven.”

Groslow beamed with pleasure. As Charles Stuart’s eyes were closed throughout this exchange, it was impossible to tell if he was aware of the Puritan captain’s insolence. But when he heard d’Artagnan’s distinctive accent, he opened his eyes in spite of himself. Parry, meanwhile, trembled and stopped reading. “Why have you stopped, Parry?” said the king. “Continue – unless you’re too tired, of course.”

“No, Sire,” said the valet, and he resumed his reading.

A table was prepared in the outer room, with a tablecloth, two lit candles, cards, dice, and a pair of dice boxes. “Gentlemen,” said Groslow to Athos and Aramis, “seat yourselves facing the Stuart, as I do, because I love to watch him in captivity. Sit there, Sir d’Artagnan, across from me.”

Athos flushed with anger but d’Artagnan frowned and gave him a look. “Fine,” he said. “You, Sir Count La Fère, sit to the right of Mister Groslow; you, Sir Knight d’Herblay, to his left; you, du Vallon, next to me. You’ll back me, and those gentlemen will back Mister Groslow.”

So it was arranged: with Porthos to his left, d’Artagnan could signal him with his knee, and since Athos and Aramis were facing him, he could communicate to them with a look. At the names of the Count La Fère and the Knight d’Herblay, Charles had opened his eyes and raised his head, taking in at a glance all the actors of the scene. Just then Parry turned a few pages in his Bible and read aloud this verse from Jeremiah: “God said: ‘Hearken to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I sent unto you, both rising up early and sending them but ye have not hearkened.’”

The four friends exchanged glances. Parry’s words indicated that he and the king recognised they were there and understood why they’d come. D’Artagnan’s eyes sparkled. “You asked me just now if I’d brought enough money?” said d’Artagnan, placing twenty pistoles on the table.

“Yes,” said Groslow.

“Well,” d’Artagnan replied, “it’s my turn to ask you that. Haul out your cash, my dear Mister Groslow, for I tell you now I’m not leaving here until I’ve won it all from you.”

“I’m not going down without a fight,” said Groslow.

“All the better,” said d’Artagnan. “To battle, my dear Captain, to battle! Whether you know it or not, that’s what we’ve come for.”

“I’m sure of that!” said Groslow with his coarse laugh. “I know it doesn’t feel like a real game for you Frenchmen without a few bumps and bruises.”

In fact, Charles had heard it all, and understood everything. A light flush rose to his cheeks. The soldiers who guarded him saw him gradually stretch his weary limbs, and on the pretence of excessive heat from a stove glowing nearly white, slowly put off the Scottish blanket under which he lay fully clothed. Athos and Aramis trembled with suppressed joy on seeing that the king was lying dressed and ready. The party began. That night fortune had changed in favour of Groslow, and he won every pot. A hundred pistoles passed from their side of the table to his. Groslow was almost giddy. Porthos, who had lost the fifty pistoles he’d won the night before, plus thirty pistoles of his own, was sullen, and kept nudging d’Artagnan with his knee, as if asking if it wasn’t time to play a different game. Athos and Aramis also watched d’Artagnan closely but he remained impassive. The clock struck ten. From outside came the sound of the sentries passing. “How many times do they make the rounds?” asked d’Artagnan, drawing two more pistoles from his pocket.

“Five,” said Groslow, “once every two hours.”

“Good,” said d’Artagnan. “Very prudent.”

And he gave Athos and Aramis a meaningful look, while responding for the first time to Porthos’s prodding with a nudge from his own knee. Meanwhile, attracted by the fitting cards and the sight of gold, so magnetic to all men, the soldiers who were on duty in the king’s chamber had one by one approached the door, where they stood, rising on tiptoe to watch over d’Artagnan’s and Porthos’s shoulders. The pair at the outer door also approached that suited the purposes of the four friends, who much preferred having them close at hand to having to chase them to the four corners of the room. The two door sentries held naked swords but they leaned on their points as they watched the players. Athos seemed to grow calm as the moment approached, his white and aristocratic hands playing with a *Louis d’or* that he bent and straightened as easily as if the gold were tin. Less master of himself, Aramis kept fumbling at his doublet, while Porthos, who always hated losing, kept plying his knee. D’Artagnan stretched and glanced behind him, seeing between two soldiers where Parry stood while Charles leaned on one elbow, his hands clasped and appearing to address God in fervent prayer. D’Artagnan realised the moment had come, that everyone was at their post and awaiting only the words, “At last!”

That were to be the signal. He cast a preparatory glance at Athos and Aramis, who pushed their chairs back slightly to have greater freedom of movement. He gave a second nudge with his knee to Porthos, who stood as if to stretch his legs, meanwhile ensuring that his sword was loose in its scabbard. “*Damn it!*” said d’Artagnan. “Another twenty pistoles gone! Truly, Captain Groslow, your luck has been in but it can’t last.” He drew twenty more pistoles from his pocket. “A final turn, Captain. These twenty pistoles on a single last turn of the cards.”

“In, then, for twenty pistoles,” said Groslow.

And he turned two cards: a king for d’Artagnan, and an ace for himself. “A king,” said d’Artagnan. “It’s a good omen. Master Groslow,” he added, “beware of the king.” And there was something strange in d’Artagnan’s voice that sent a chill through his opponent. Groslow began to go through the deck, turning cards; if he turned an ace, he won; but if a king came up first, he lost. He turned a king. “At last!” said d’Artagnan.

At these words Athos and Aramis rose, while Porthos took a step back. Poniards and swords were about to shine out when suddenly the outer door opened and Colonel Harrison appeared on the threshold, accompanied by a man wrapped in a cloak. Behind the man, light glittered on the muskets of five or six soldiers. Groslow rose hastily, ashamed of being caught with honey, cards, and dice. But Harrison paid no attention to him, marching into the king’s chamber and saying, “Charles Stuart, an order has come that you are to be escorted to London without delay, riding day and night. Prepare to leave immediately.”

“And in whose name is this order given?” asked the king. “That of General Oliver Cromwell?”

“Yes,” said Harrison, “and here is Mister Mordaunt who has just brought it and who is charged with its execution.”

“Mordaunt!” murmured the four friends, exchanging looks.

D’Artagnan stooped over the table and swept all the money he and Porthos had lost into his deepest pocket, while Athos and Aramis moved around behind him. At this movement Mordaunt turned, recognised them, and uttered a cry of savage joy. “How happy he is to see us,” d’Artagnan said to his friends. “We might be caught.”

“Not yet,” said Porthos.

“Colonel! Colonel!” said Mordaunt. “Surround the house, you’ve been betrayed. These four Frenchmen escaped from Newcastle and must intend to rescue the king. Arrest them!”

“You’ll find, young man,” said d’Artagnan, drawing his sword, “that’s an order easier to give than to execute.” Then whirling his blade, he cried, “At them, my friends!”

Then he rushed toward the door, knocking over the pair of soldiers who guarded it before they had time to raise their muskets. Athos and Aramis followed, with Porthos as rear guard, and before the soldiers, officers, and colonel had time to take a breath, all four were in the street. “Fire!” cried Mordaunt. “Shoot them!”

Two or three muskets went off but had no more effect than to show by their flashes the four fugitives as they disappeared safely around the street corner. The horses were at the appointed place; the lackeys had only to throw the bridles to their masters, who leapt into the saddles like the consummate equestrians they were. “Ride!” said d’Artagnan. “Spur on!” They took off after d’Artagnan, returning along the route they’d come during the day, that is, back toward Scotland. The town had neither gates nor walls, so they no difficulty in leaving it. Fifty paces beyond the last house, d’Artagnan stopped. “Halt!” he said.

“What do you mean, ‘Halt?’” cried Porthos. “Don’t you mean, ‘Ride like the wind?’”

“Not at all,” d’Artagnan replied. “This time we’ll be closely pursued; let’s watch them ride out of town and chase us up the road to Scotland. After they’ve passed, we’ll go in the opposite direction.” A few yards away ran a stream with a bridge across it; d’Artagnan led his horse down under the arch and his friends followed. They had been there less than a minute before they heard the rapid gallop of an approaching troop of equestrians. Moments later, this troop passed over their heads, never suspecting that they were separated from those they sought by no more than the thickness of the bridge’s arch.

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London

When the noise of the horses was lost in the distance, d’Artagnan climbed up the bank of the stream, mounted, and began to ride across the fields, turning as much as possible toward London. His three friends silently followed, until they had ridden in a wide semicircle and left the town behind them. “This time,” said d’Artagnan, when he thought they were far enough from where they’d hidden to drop from a gallop to a trot, “this time I really think everything is lost, and the best thing we can do is to try to reach France. What do you think of that idea, Athos? Does that sound reasonable to you?”

“Reasonable, yes,” Athos replied, “but I remind you that the other day you said something that sounded more admirable than reasonable, something noble and generous when you said, ‘Let’s die here!’”

“Oh, death’s nothing!” said Porthos. “Death shouldn’t bother us, since we don’t really know what it is. What tortures me is the idea of being beaten. The way things are going, we’d have to fight London, then the provinces, then all of England, and really we can’t fail to lose in the end.”

“We must follow this great tragedy to its conclusion, whatever it may be,” said Athos. “We can’t leave England until this is over. Do you think like I do, Aramis?”

“In every respect, my dear Count. And I must confess I look forward to the chance of once more meeting up with Mordaunt; it seems to me we have an account to settle with him, and it’s not our practice to leave a matter without paying that sort of debt.”

“Ah! Now that’s something else,” said d’Artagnan, “and there’s a reason I can approve. I confess that if it meant meeting Mordaunt again, I’d be willing to wait in London for a year. Only let’s find lodging with someone we can trust and where we can avoid suspicion, for at the moment Sir Cromwell is out for our blood, and from what I’ve seen, he doesn’t joke around, this Cromwell. Athos, do you know of an inn in the city where we can find clean sheets, beef that isn’t overcooked, and honey that isn’t made with hops or juniper?”

“I think I can manage it,” said Athos. “De Winter took us to a house run by a former Spaniard who is now a naturalized Englishman, thanks to the flow of guineas spent in his place by his new compatriots. What do you say, Aramis?”

“I say the idea of lodging at the house of Señor Perez sounds quite reasonable to me, and I endorse it. We’ll invoke the memory of poor de Winter, whom Perez seemed to hold in high esteem. We’ll tell him we’re here as sightseers and observers, we’ll each of us pay him a guinea a day, and with those precautions, I think we needn’t worry.”

“You did forget one precaution, Aramis,” said d’Artagnan, “maybe the most important of all.”

“What’s that?”

“We must change the way we dress.”

“Bah!” said Porthos. “Why should we change our clothes? I’m very comfortable in these!”

“So as not to be recognised,” said d’Artagnan. “Our clothes are of a cut and colour that says ‘Frenchman’ at first glance. Now, I’m not so attached to the cut of my doublet or the colour of my breeches to risk, for love of them, being hanged at Tyburn or shipped off to the Indies. I’m going to buy myself a dark brown suit. I’ve noticed that these Puritan imbeciles dote on that colour.”

“But Athos, can you find your way back to the Spaniard’s house?” said Aramis.

“Oh, absolutely! He lives in Green Hall Street, in Bedford’s Tavern; I could find my way there with my eyes closed.”

“I wish we were there already,” said d’Artagnan. “My advice is that we get to London before dawn, even if it cripples our horses.”

“Come, then,” said Athos, “for unless my calculations are off, we can’t be more than eight or ten leagues from there.”

The friends rode their horses hard, and in fact arrived by five in the morning. At the city gate they were stopped by a sentry but Athos told him in excellent English that they had been sent ahead by Colonel Harrison to notify his colleague Colonel Pride of the imminent arrival of the king. This response elicited some questions about the taking of the king but Athos gave such precise and positive details that if the guardians of the gate had any suspicions, they were quelled. The four friends were passed through amid all sorts of puritanical congratulations. Athos had spoken truly – he led them right to Bedford’s Tavern, where he reintroduced himself to the host. Perez was delighted to see him return with so many prosperous-looking guests, and gave orders to have his best rooms made ready. Though it was barely daylight, our four travellers, upon arriving in London, had found the entire city in an uproar. The rumour that the king, escorted by Colonel Harrison, was approaching the capital, had spread since the day before, and many citizens had stayed up all night in hopes of catching a glimpse of the Stuart, as they called him, making his entrance. The precaution of changing their clothing had been adopted unanimously, after some opposition from Porthos, and they put the plan into immediate execution. The host sent out for a variety of clothes on approval, as if he wanted to stock up his wardrobe. Athos donned a black suit that gave him the look of an honest bourgeois; Aramis, who didn’t want to give up his sword, chose a dark outfit in a military cut; Porthos couldn’t resist a red doublet and green breeches; while d’Artagnan, who’d already settled on his colour, found just the dark brown suit he had in mind that made him look like a retired sugar merchant. As for Grimaud and Mousqueton, since they didn’t wear livery, they were already in disguise; Grimaud looked like the calm, dry, and cautious kind of Englishman, while Mousqueton resembled the portly and complacent sort. “Now for the important part,” said d’Artagnan. “To avoid the insults of the populace, we must cut our hair. As we are no longer gentlemen of the sword, we must be Puritans of the hairstyle. It is, as you know, the key distinction between Covenanter and Cavalier.”

But on this point, key distinction or not, Aramis stubbornly refused. He was determined to keep his hair that was very handsome and of which he took the greatest care. It took Athos, who didn’t care about such things, to set the example. Porthos submitted without difficulty to the ministrations of Mousqueton, who took some shears to his master’s coarse and heavy mane. D’Artagnan gave himself a fanciful cut that made him look like a head on a medal from the times of François I or Charles IX. “We look frightful,” said Athos.

“So awful even a Puritan would shudder,” said Aramis.

“I feel a chill on my scalp,” said Porthos.

“And me, I feel like singing a psalm,” said d’Artagnan.

“Now that we can’t even recognise ourselves,” said Athos, “and therefore have no fear of being recognised by others, let’s go watch the entrance of the king. If they pushed on through the night, they can’t be far from London.”

They joined the waiting crowds, and after less than two hours loud shouts and commotion announced the arrival of Charles I. A carriage had been sent to meet him, and while it was still somewhat distant the gigantic Porthos, who was a head taller than the crowd around him, declared he could see the royal carriage approaching. D’Artagnan stood on tiptoe, trying to see, while Athos and Aramis listened to those around them to hear their opinions. As the carriage passed, d’Artagnan recognised Harrison riding at one door and Mordaunt at the other. As for the people, Athos and Aramis heard nothing but insults and imprecations toward Charles. Athos returned to the tavern in despair. D’Artagnan shook his head. “To persist seems pointless and in fact I told you the situation was bad. As for me, I intend to stick with it, mostly for your sake but also because I have a certain artistic interest in politics *à la mousquetaire*. It would be very satisfying to snatch their prey away from these louts and laugh at them. I’ll give the idea some thought.”

The next day, from the window that gave out onto the most populous parts of the city, Athos heard cried the Bill of Parliament that arraigned the ex-King Charles I, accusing him of treason and abuse of power. D’Artagnan stood by his side, while behind them Aramis consulted a map. Porthos was absorbed in finishing the final bites of a delicious breakfast. “Parliament!” cried Athos. “Parliament couldn’t possibly have passed such a bill!”

“Listen,” said d’Artagnan, “I understand very little English but as English is nothing but French very badly pronounced, when I hear, ‘*Parliament’s bill*,’ that must mean a bill of Parliament, or ‘*God damn me*,’ as they say here.”

Just then the host came in; Athos beckoned him to approach. “Has Parliament really passed this bill?” Athos asked in English.

“Yes, Milord – the Purified Parliament.”

“The *Purified* Parliament! Are there two parliaments, then?”

“Friend host,” interrupted d’Artagnan, “as I don’t understand English but we all understand Spanish, do us the pleasure to converse in that language. It’s your native tongue, so you must enjoy speaking it when you get a chance.”

“By all means,” said Aramis.

As for Porthos as we said, his attention was concentrated on a lamb chop he was occupied in picking clean. “You were asking?” said the host in Spanish.

“We’re asking,” Athos replied in the same language, “about these two parliaments, the pure and the impure.”

“Why, how bizarre!” said Porthos, slowly raising his head and looking at his friends in astonishment. “Suddenly I can understand English! I could follow every word you said.”

“That’s because we’re speaking Spanish, old friend,” said Athos with his usual sangfroid.

“Ah! The devil!” said Porthos. “What a shame – I thought I’d added a new language.”

“When I say the Pure Parliament, Señor,” replied the host, “I mean the one that Colonel Pride has purified.”

“Ah ha!” said d’Artagnan. “Really, these people are quite ingenious; when we return to France I must recommend this means to Sir Mazarin and Sir Coadjuteur. The one will purify in the name of the Court, the other in the name of the People, and soon there will be no parliament at all.”

“Who is this Colonel Pride,” asked Aramis, “and how did he go about purifying the Parliament?”

“Colonel Pride,” said the Spaniard, “is an old carter, a very clever man who had noticed something when driving his cart: when there was a stone blocking the way, it was easier to remove the stone than to try to drive the wheel over it. Of the two hundred fifty-one Members of Parliament, one hundred and ninety-one embarrassed him by blocking the wheel of his political cart. He picked them up as if they were stones and threw them out of the House.”

“Bravo!” said d’Artagnan, who esteemed cleverness wherever he encountered it.

“And all those expelled were Stuartists?” asked Athos.

“Indeed, Señor, because you understand, they would have tried to save the king.”

“*For the love of God!*” said Porthos, waving his fingers. “By my count, they made a majority.”

“And you think,” said Aramis, “that Charles will consent to appear before such a tribunal?”

“He’ll have no choice,” said the Spaniard. “If he tries to refuse, the people will force him.”

“Thank you, Master Perez,” said Athos. “That’s what I needed to know.”

“Do you begin to believe at last this is a lost cause, Athos?” said d’Artagnan. “Against such as these Harrisons, Joyces, Prides, and Cromwells, how could we defeat them?”

“It seems clear the king will be delivered to the tribunal,” said Athos. “This ‘purification’ has silenced his partisans.”

D’Artagnan shrugged his shoulders. “But surely,” said Aramis, “if they condemn the king, it will be to exile or prison, no more.”

D’Artagnan gave a sceptical little whistle. “We shall see,” said Athos, “because we’ll attend the hearings, I presume.”

“You won’t have long to wait,” said the host. “They begin tomorrow.”

“*Oh that!*” said Athos. “Were the proceedings arranged before the king was even taken?”

"Must have been, starting from the day he was bought," said d'Artagnan.

"And you know," said Aramis, "that it was our friend Mordaunt who, if he didn't finalize the deal, at least made the first overtures in that little affair."

"Sir Mordaunt again," said d'Artagnan. "The first time he falls under my hand, I think I'll kill him."

"Bah!" said Athos. "That miserable wretch?"

"It's precisely because he is such a wretch that I'll kill him," said d'Artagnan. "Ah, my friend! I've done your will often enough you should indulge me in mine. So this time, whether you like it or not, that wretch Mordaunt is a dead man. I swear it."

"As do I," said Porthos.

"As do I," said Aramis.

"So voted, so approved!" cried d'Artagnan. "And quite suited to our roles as citizens and bourgeois. Now how about a walk around town? Not even Mordaunt would recognise us from four paces away in the kind of fog they have here. Let's go take in some fog."

"Yes," said Porthos, "it'll be a nice change from beer." And the four friends went out to, as they say, take in the local air.

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The Trial

The next day Charles I was conducted by a large detail of guards to the court where he would be judged. The crowd thronged the streets and houses surrounding Westminster Hall; reaching the area, the four friends were blocked by the nearly impassable obstacle of this living wall. Some swaggering rowdies in this crowd insulted Aramis so rudely that Porthos raised his formidable fist and brought it down on the floury face of a baker, instantly changing it from white to red as his features burst like crushed grapes. This caused a great commotion; three men attacked Porthos but Athos knocked aside the first, d'Artagnan the second, and Porthos threw the third over his head. Many of the English, who are connoisseurs of boxing, admired these manoeuvres and clapped enthusiastically. Instead of being overwhelmed by the mob, as they'd feared, they suddenly found the crowd prepared to hoist Porthos and his friends to their shoulders in triumph – but the four travellers, fearing to draw attention to themselves, managed to decline the honour. Yet they gained one thing by their Herculean exploit, in that the crowd opened before them, and they succeeded in doing that which moments before had seemed impossible, that is, to get close to the hall. All London was pushing through the gates to the galleries, so that when the four friends finally got inside, they found the first three rows of benches already full. That was small loss to people who didn't want to be recognised, so they took places toward the rear and were happy with them – with the exception of Porthos, who'd wanted to show off his red doublet and green breeches and was sorry they weren't in the front row. The benches were arranged as in an amphitheatre, and from their location the four friends looked down on the entire assembly. By chance they had entered the central gallery, and found themselves facing the defendant's chair prepared for Charles I. At about eleven in the morning the king appeared from a rear doorway. He entered surrounded by guards but with an air of quiet dignity. As he looked around the hall he seemed confident and self-possessed, as if he were presiding over an assembly of submissive subjects, rather than answering the accusations of a rebel court. The judges, proud of having a king to humiliate, were eager to begin abusing the rights they'd usurped. They sent an usher to inform Charles I that it was customary for the accused to remove his hat when before his judges. Charles said not a word, just sat his broad-brimmed hat more firmly on his head, then turned and looked aside. When the usher had withdrawn, the king sat down on the defendant's chair facing the president, tapping at his boot with a riding crop he held in one hand. Parry, who'd entered with him, stood behind the chair. D'Artagnan, instead of watching these ceremonies, was looking at Athos, whose face reflected all the emotions which the king, who had to control himself, managed to suppress. Athos was usually so cool and calm that this agitation worried him. He leaned toward Athos's ear and said, "I hope you're going to follow the example of His Majesty and not get yourself killed in this death trap."

"Don't worry," said Athos.

"Look around," continued d'Artagnan, "they're certainly afraid of something: the guards have been doubled, and the additional troops are armed, not with halberds but muskets. That way they're ready for anything – the halberds are to keep back the crowd but the muskets are for us."

"Thirty, forty, fifty ... seventy men," said Porthos, counting the newcomers.

"Ho!" said Aramis. "Don't forget to count their commander, Porthos, as it seems to me he's one you don't want to miss."

"By God!" said d'Artagnan. And he turned pale with anger, for he'd recognised Mordaunt, who stood with naked sword commanding the musketeers behind the king that is, facing the galleries. "Has he recognised us?" he continued. "If so, we should beat a quick retreat. I don't mind dying but not in this trap – I'll choose my own death, not be shot like a fish in a barrel."

"No, he hasn't seen us," said Aramis. "He sees no one but the king. *Mordieu!* How he glares, the insolent dog. Does he hate His Majesty as much as he hates us?"

"*For the love of God!*" said Athos. "We took only his mother from him; the king robbed him of his name and fortune."

"That's right," said Aramis. "But hush! The president is rising to speak to the king."

President Bradshaw addressed the august defendant. "Stuart," he said, "listen as your parliamentary judges are named to you, and then address your observations to the tribunal." The king, as if these words were spoken to someone else, turned his head and looked away. The president waited, and as no answer came, he was silent for a moment. Out of 163 Members of Parliament, only 73 were present as the others, frightened by the idea of complicity in such an act, had stayed away. "Proceed with the trial," said Bradshaw, disregarding the absence of three-fifths of the assembly. And he began to name the members, present or absent. Those present responded in a voice strong or weak, depending on the courage of their convictions. The name of each absent member was followed by a short silence before the name was repeated. The name of Colonel Fairfax was spoken in its turn, and followed by the short, sombre silence that denounced those absent members who didn't want to take part in this trial. "Colonel Fairfax?" Bradshaw repeated.

"Fairfax?" replied a mocking voice that by its silvery tone was that of a woman. "He has the good sense to be elsewhere."

A huge burst of laughter greeted these words spoken with the audacity that women use to exploit their own weakness, that weakness that exempts them from retaliation. "That's a woman's voice," said Aramis. "By my faith! I'd wager she's both young and pretty." He climbed a few steps higher to get a better view of the gallery the voice had come from. "Upon my soul," he said, "she is charming! See, d'Artagnan, how everyone is looking at her, and despite Bradshaw's glare, her chin is still high."

"That's Lady Fairfax herself," said d'Artagnan. "Remember her, Porthos? We saw her with her husband at General Cromwell's."

After a moment, the calm interrupted by this wry episode was restored, and the roll call resumed. "Once these clowns see that they lack the numbers for a quorum, they'll be forced to adjourn," said the Count La Fère.

"You still don't know them, Athos. Look at how Mordaunt smiles as he stares at the king. Does he look like a man who's worried that his victim will escape? No, that's the smile of hatred satisfied, of vengeance sure and certain. Ah, you evil basilisk! It'll be a happy day when I'm able to cross you with something more than just a look!"

"The king makes a handsome showing," said Porthos. "See how well turned out he is, despite being a prisoner. Why, the plume on his hat is worth at least fifty pistoles – look at it, Aramis."

With the roll call complete, the president gave the order to proceed to the reading of the indictment. Athos paled; he'd deluded himself once more. Even without sufficient members to sit as judges, the trial was to proceed – which could only mean the king had been condemned in advance. "I warned you, Athos," said d'Artagnan, shrugging his shoulders. "But you're always so sceptical. Now I beg you, summon all your courage and listen without exploding when you hear all the petty horrors that man in black, with full license and privilege, is about to ascribe to the king."

In fact, never had more brutal accusations, never had such base insults, never had such a bloody indictment been brought against royal majesty. Previous generations had been content to simply assassinate their kings, saving all these insults for their corpses. Charles I listened to the prosecutor's speech attentively, ignoring the abuse, overlooking the insults, disregarding the grievances, and when the litany of hatred reached its height, the prosecutor threatening almost to assume the role of executioner in advance, the king's only response was a contemptuous smile. It was, nonetheless, a terrible litany in which the unhappy king heard all his indiscretions called conspiracies, and his mistakes denounced as crimes. D'Artagnan who let this torrent of insult go by with the disdain it deserved, nonetheless took note of some of the prosecutor's accusations. "The fact is," he said, "that if one punished kings for imprudence and folly, this poor king has earned some punishment; but it seems to me that what he's suffering here is quite cruel enough."

"In any case," replied Aramis, "the punishment shouldn't fall on the king but on his ministers, since the first law of the English constitution is, *the king can do no wrong.*"

*As for me, thought Porthos, looking at Mordaunt and thinking of nothing but him, if it wouldn't disrupt the solemnity of this occasion, I'd jump from the gallery to the floor, be on Mordaunt in three bounds, and wring his neck. Then I'd swing him by the feet and knock down all those phony musketeers, those mockeries of the Musketeers of France. In the meantime d'Artagnan, who's smart and quick, would have found a way to rescue the king. Maybe I should speak to him about it.*

Meanwhile Athos, with his face flushed, fists clenched, and lips bitten bloody, was squirming on the bench, enraged by this protracted parliamentary insult and royal torment; the man of iron arm and mighty heart was reduced to a trembling frame with shaking hands. Finally, the prosecutor finished his indictment, saying, "These charges are brought in the name of the English people."

There were murmurs from the galleries, and another voice, not female this time but male and furious, thundered from behind d'Artagnan: "You lie! And nine-tenths of the English people hear your words in horror!"

It was the voice of Athos, who was beside himself, standing with arm outstretched, pointing in accusation at the accuser. At this disruption king, judges, spectators, all turned their eyes to the gallery containing the four friends. Mordaunt turned like the others and recognised the gentleman around whom the other Frenchmen had risen, pale and menacing. His eyes flashed with grim joy as he realised he'd found those to whose death his life was devoted. With a furious gesture he called his twenty musketeers to arms, pointed to the benches where his enemies stood, and said, "Fire into that gallery!"

But then, quick as thought, d'Artagnan lifted Athos bodily, Porthos grabbed up Aramis, and they jumped down the steps, rushed out the corridor, hustled down the stairs, and lost themselves in the crowd outside. Meanwhile within, lowered muskets threatened three thousand spectators, whose loud cries for mercy defused the incident before it escalated into mayhem. Charles had also recognised the four Frenchmen; he put one hand to his heart to control its beating, and the other to his eyes so as not to see his faithful friends slaughtered. Mordaunt, pale and trembling with rage, naked sword in hand, dashed out of the hall at the head of ten halberdiers, searching the crowd, interrogating everyone but finally returning empty-handed. The uproar was hard to suppress, and it was half an hour before anybody could be heard once again. The judges thought the galleries were going to erupt. The spectators in the galleries saw the muskets pointed their way, and, caught between fear and anger, continued to be loud and agitated. Finally, calm was restored. "And what have you to say in your defence?" asked Bradshaw of the king.

Then, in the tone of one judging rather than being judged, his head still covered, and rising, not in humility but in majesty, Charles said, "Before questioning me, answer me this: I was free at Newcastle, where by negotiation I had concluded a treaty with these Houses. Instead of fulfilling your part of this treaty, as I fulfilled mine, you bought me from the Scots – and cheaply, I know that speaks well for your government's thrift. But having bought me like a slave, do you really hope that means I am no longer your king? It does not. To answer you would be to forget that. I will not answer until you have established your right to question me. To answer you would be to acknowledge you as my rightful judges and I see in you only my executioners." And in the midst of a deathly silence, Charles, calm, proud, his head still covered, sat back down in his chair. "Where are they, my Frenchmen?" murmured Charles, turning his eyes toward the gallery where he'd seen them for a moment. "I would like them to see that their friend, living, is worth defending – and dead, is worth weeping for."

But in vain he scanned the crowd, asking God where to find those noble and consoling countenances – but he saw only stunned and fearful faces, and felt he was trapped between horror and hatred.

"Well, then," said the president, seeing that Charles was determined to remain unmoved, "we will judge you despite your silence. You are accused of treason, abuse of power, and assassination. The witnesses will swear to it. Therefore go but at the next session we will address what you refuse to acknowledge this time."

Charles rose and turned toward Parry, whom he found pale and sweating. "But, my dear Parry," he said, "what's wrong? What agitates you so?"

"Oh, Sire!" said Parry, in a trembling voice, and with tears in his eyes. "Sire, while leaving the hall, please don't look to your left."

"Why is that, Parry?"

"Never mind, just do as I beg, my King!"

"But what is it?" said Charles, trying to see through the hedge of guards that surrounded him.

"It's just – you won't look, Sire, will you? – It's just that they've placed, on a table there, the axe they use to execute criminals. I beg you, Sire, don't look. It's hideous!"

"The fools!" said Charles. "Do they think I'm as cowardly as they are? Still, it was good of you to warn me; thank you, Parry." And then the time having come to withdraw, the king went out amidst his guards. To the left of the door, in fact, placed on a red carpet on a long table, shone the great white headsman's axe with its long haft well-polished by the hands of the executioner. Arriving in front of it, Charles stopped, turned toward it with a laugh, and said, "Ah ha! The axe! Trying to play *scarecrow* might seem a good idea to those who don't understand gentlemen – but you can't frighten me with an executioner's axe," he sneered, whipping it with his riding crop. "Thus, I strike you, and will now wait patiently like a Christian for you to return the blow." And shrugging his shoulders he continued on his way, leaving stupefied those who'd crowded around the table to see what the king's face would look like when he saw the axe that was to separate his head from his body. "Really, Parry,"

continued the king, “God forgive me! But these people seem to take me for a cotton merchant from the Indies rather than a gentleman accustomed to the shine of steel; do they think I have less nerve than a butcher?”

As he said these words, he arrived at the door to the street. A long line of people pressed forward, folk who, unable to gain admittance to the galleries, still wished to see the end of the spectacle even if they’d missed the most interesting part. The sight of this numberless multitude, studded with menacing faces, drew a sigh from the king. *So many people*, he thought, *and not a single faithful friend!* But just as he thought these words of doubt and discouragement, a voice rang out from nearby, “Long live his fallen Majesty!”

The king turned eagerly, heart leaping and tears springing to his eyes. Before him was an old soldier of his guards who hadn’t wanted to see his captive king pass by without paying him this final tribute. But the next moment the unlucky man was struck down by the pommel of a sword wielded by a man the king recognised as Captain Groslow. “Alas!” said Charles. “Such a severe punishment for a minor fault.” Then with a heavy heart, he went on his way but he hadn’t gone a hundred paces more before a furious fanatic, bursting between two soldiers in his hatred, spat in the king’s face, as once an infamous Jew had spat in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. Bursts of laughter and bitter insults sounded out together; the crowd surged back, then forward, heaving like a stormy sea, and for a moment it seemed to the king that in the middle of this living wave he saw the sparkling eyes of Athos. Charles wiped his face and said with a sad smile, “The poor churl! For a half-crown he’d have done the same to his own father.”

He hadn’t been mistaken; he really had seen Athos who, with his friends, were mingling with the mob to escort the royal martyr for a final time. When the old soldier had saluted Charles, Athos’s heart had swelled with joy, and when the beaten man came to, he found ten guineas in his pocket that had been placed there by the French gentleman. However, when the insolent churl spat in the prisoner’s face, Athos had put his hand on his dagger. But d’Artagnan clapped his hand over Athos’s and said in a hoarse voice, “Wait!” Never before had d’Artagnan given a direct command to the Count La Fère. Athos stopped himself. D’Artagnan gripped Athos by the arm, gestured to Porthos and Aramis to stay close, and took a position behind the angry lout, who was still laughing about his crude jest and being congratulated by some other fanatics. The man began making his way toward the City of London. D’Artagnan followed, still gripping Athos’s arm, beckoning Porthos and Aramis to follow as well. The churl, who looked like a butcher’s apprentice, went with a couple of companions down a lonely and narrow street that ran toward the river. D’Artagnan released Athos’s arm and marched up behind the man who’d spat on the king. Arriving at the river bank, the three men realised they were being followed, stopped, and looked insolently at the Frenchmen, exchanging some mocking jests with each other. “I don’t speak English, Athos,” said d’Artagnan, “but you do, so you must act as interpreter.” As he spoke, they rushed past the three men, then immediately turned and d’Artagnan marched up to the butcher’s apprentice. He prodded the man’s chest with his index finger and said, “Tell him this, Athos. *You’ve behaved like a coward; you’ve insulted a defenceless man; you’ve defiled the face of your king; and you’re going to die.*” Athos, pale as a spectre, translated this speech to the man, who, seeing d’Artagnan’s preparations and the look in his eye, assumed an attitude of defence. At this movement, Aramis put his hand to his sword. “No, no steel!” said d’Artagnan. “Steel is for gentlemen.” And seizing the butcher by the throat, he said, “Porthos, punish this wretch with a single blow.” Porthos raised his mighty arm, it whistled through the air like a stone from a catapult, and the heavy mass fell with a dull thud on coward’s skull, crushing it. The man fell like an ox under a sledgehammer. The man’s comrades wanted to cry out, to flee but their voices failed them, and their trembling legs folded beneath them. “Tell them this, Athos,” continued d’Artagnan. “Say, ‘Thus die all those who forget that the life of a prisoner is sacred, and that a captive king is therefore twice the representative of the Lord.’”

Athos repeated d’Artagnan’s words. The two men, mute, their hair standing on end, stared at the corpse of their comrade, who was swimming in a pool of his own black blood. Then, coming out of their paralysis, they clasped their hands in supplication, turned and ran. “Justice is done!” said Porthos, wiping his forehead.

“And now,” said d’Artagnan to Athos, “doubt me no more, and trust me on this: I hereby assume responsibility for our efforts on behalf of the king.”

### 239 Whitehall

The Parliament condemned Charles Stuart to death, as was all too predictable. Political trials are always mere formalities, for the same passions that drive the accusations result in condemnations. Such is the terrible logic of revolutions. Though our friends expected this condemnation, it filled them with grief. D’Artagnan, whose wits were never as resourceful as in these extreme situations, swore anew that he would try every possible means to avoid a bloody outcome to this tragedy. But how? So far, he had only vague ideas. Everything depended on the nature of the circumstances. The judges had decided the execution was to take place the next day, so to gain time it was essential to prevent that execution until a proper plan could be made. The only recourse seemed to be to abduct the official London executioner. With the executioner gone, the sentence couldn’t be carried out. No doubt they would send for one from the nearest city but at least it would gain them a day, and a day gained in such a case might be salvation! D’Artagnan charged himself with this difficult task. It was just as essential to warn Charles Stuart of the attempt to save him, so that he might assist his rescuers as much as possible, or at least do nothing to thwart their efforts. Aramis took on this dangerous task. Charles Stuart had asked that Bishop Juxon be permitted to visit him in his prison at Whitehall. Mordaunt had gone to the bishop that very evening to acquaint him with the king’s religious wishes, and to inform him of Cromwell’s assent. Aramis resolved to obtain from the bishop, by persuasion or intimidation, whatever he might need in sacerdotal clothing or regalia that would enable him to penetrate the palace of Whitehall. For his part, Athos undertook to arrange a means for them to leave England in a hurry, whether they succeeded or failed. As night fell, they arranged to meet back at the inn at eleven o’clock, and then each went on his way to execute his hazardous mission. Whitehall Palace was guarded by three regiments of cavalry, as well as the constant attention of Cromwell, who used it as his headquarters and was continually marching from one chamber to another, meeting his agents or generals. The condemned monarch, alone in the inner of his two rooms, lit only by a pair of candles, mused sorrowfully upon his former grandeur, as one in his last hour recalls scenes from his life at their most vivid and sweet. Parry, in the next room, never left his master, and since his condemnation had been weeping constantly. Charles Stuart sat, leaning on a table, looking at a locket containing pictures of his wife and daughter. He was waiting, first for Bishop Juxon, and after Juxon, for martyrdom. Sometimes his thoughts strayed to those brave French gentlemen who already seemed a hundred leagues away, fabulous, chimerical, like those figures from dreams that fade once we awake. In fact sometimes Charles wondered if everything that had happened to him wasn’t just a dream, or perhaps a delirium from fever. At this thought he got up, and to break out of his trance took a few steps toward the window; but beneath the window he saw the gleam of his guards’ muskets and was forced to admit that he was awake and his bloody dream was real. Charles returned silently to his chair, leaned once more on the table, let his head fall on his hand, and thought. “Alas!” he said to himself. “If I had at least as a confessor one of those lights of the Church whose soul has plumbed all the mysteries of life, from great to small, perhaps his words could silence the dark voice that laments in my soul. But they’ll send me a priest of mean spirit, someone whose career and fortune I unwittingly thwarted. He’ll speak to me of God and death as if I were any other dying man, without caring or understanding that this doomed king is leaving a throne to a usurper, while his children don’t even have bread to eat.” Then lifting the locket to his lips, he whispered the names of his children one by one. It was a night of fog and gloom. The hour slowly tolled from the belfry of a neighbouring church. The pale flames of the two candles were reflected in the corners of the tall chamber as flickering glints that shivered like ghosts. These phantoms were the painted ancestors of King Charles, whom the flickers seemed to draw out from their gold-framed portraits. Their reflections joined the last bluish flickers of the hearth’s dying coal fire. A great sadness took hold of Charles. He buried his face in his hands, thinking of the world and how beautiful it seems when we’re about to leave it, of the caresses of his children so soft and so sweet, whom he’d never see again, and of his wife, that noble and courageous creature who’d supported him to the very end. He drew from his bosom the diamond cross and the Star of the Garter that she’d sent him by those generous Frenchmen, and kissed them; then, thinking she would see these objects again only once he was lying cold and mutilated in his tomb, he felt pass through him one of those icy shudders that death sends when he begins to wrap us in his mantle. Then, in that royal chamber which recalled to him so many memories, in which so many courtiers had uttered so many flatteries, alone but for a broken servant too frail to help him, the king despaired and allowed his courage to succumb to weakness, darkness, and the winter cold; and then, sad to say, this king who’d resolved to die grandly, with a smile of noble resignation on his lips, wept in the shadows tears that fell on the table and dropped to the gold embroidered carpet below. Suddenly there were footsteps from the corridor, the door opened, torches filled the room with smoky light, and an ecclesiastic, garbed in episcopal robes, entered, followed by two guards to whom Charles made an imperious gesture. The guards withdrew, and the chamber returned to its former gloom. “Juxon!” cried Charles. “Juxon! Thank you, my final friend – you arrive just in time.” The bishop cast an anxious sidelong glance at the man who sobbed in the corner of the foyer. “Come, Parry,” said the king, “cry no more, for the consolation of God’s come to us.”

“If that’s just Parry,” said the bishop, “then I won’t worry – but, Sire, permit me to salute Your Majesty and tell him who I am, and why I’ve come.”

At that sight, and that voice, Charles was about to exclaim but Aramis put a finger to his lips, and bowed deeply to the King of England. “The knight,” murmured Charles.

“Yes, Sire,” interrupted Aramis, and then raising his voice, said, “Yes, it’s Bishop Juxon, loyal knight of Christ, who comes at Your Majesty’s request.”

Charles clasped his hands; he’d recognised d’Herblay, and was stunned by these men who though foreigners, with no motive other than the duty imposed by their own conscience, struggled almost alone against the will of a people and the destiny of a king. “You!” he said. “How did you come here? My God, if they recognise you, you’re lost.”

Parry was on his feet, his entire person expressing his feeling of simple and profound admiration. “Don’t worry about me, Sire,” said Aramis, gesturing to the king for quiet. “Just worry about yourself. Your friends are watching out for you. What we’ll do, I don’t know yet – but four determined men can do much. In the meantime, don’t close your eyes tonight, be surprised by nothing, and expect almost anything.”

Charles shook his head. “Friend,” he said, “don’t you know there’s no time to lose, and that if you wish to act, it must be now? Don’t you know that at ten tomorrow morning I must die?”

“Sire, something will happen between now and then that will make the execution impossible.”

The king looked at Aramis in astonishment. Just then there was a strange noise beneath the king’s window, like a cartload of wood being dumped, “Do you hear that?” said the king.

The sound was followed by a cry of pain. “I hear it,” said Aramis, “but I don’t understand the noise, and especially the cry.”

“I don’t know who made that cry,” said the king, “but I can account for the noise. Do you know that they plan to perform the execution right outside this window?”

And Charles gestured toward the sombre and empty courtyard, peopled solely by soldiers and sentries. “Yes, Sire,” said Aramis. “I know it.”

“Well, that pile of lumber is made up of beams and planks to construct my scaffold. Some worker must have been hurt unloading it.” Aramis shuddered in spite of himself. “So, you see,” said Charles,

“there’s no point in being so stubborn; I am condemned, let me submit to my fate.”

“Sire,” said Aramis, recovering his composure, “though they may erect a scaffold, they won’t find an executioner.”

“What do you mean?” asked the king.

“I mean that as we speak, Sire, the executioner is being bribed or abducted. Tomorrow the scaffold will be ready but the executioner will be missing, and they’ll postpone it another day.”

“And then?” said the king.

“And then,” said Aramis, “tomorrow night we will carry you off.”

“But how?” cried the king, whose face lit with joy in spite of himself.

“Oh, Sir!” murmured Parry, clasping his hands. “Be blessed, you and yours.”

“But how?” repeated the king. “I must understand, so I can assist you, if necessary.”

“I don’t know, Sire,” said Aramis, “but the most skilful, brave, and devoted of us said to me as I left, ‘Knight, tell the king that by ten o’clock tomorrow night he’ll be free.’ If he said it, it will happen.”

“Tell me the name of this devoted friend,” said the king, “that I may think of him with gratitude, whether he succeeds or not.”

“D’Artagnan, Sire, the same man who nearly saved you before Colonel Harrison made his untimely entrance.”

“You are indeed wonderful men,” said the king. “If I’d been told such things were possible, I wouldn’t have believed them.”

“Now, Sire,” Aramis replied, “listen to me. Don’t forget for a single instant that we’re preparing to save you. Take note of every gesture, every whistled song, every tiny sign that we’re near you; see all, hear all, and be ready.”

“Oh, Knight!” said the king. “What can I say to you? No words, even from the depths of my heart, can express my gratitude. If you succeed, your success won’t be that you saved a king – for royalty is not so very great a thing. It will be that you saved a husband for his wife, a father for his children. Take my hand, Knight – this is the hand of a friend who will love you till his last breath.” Aramis wished to kiss the king’s hand but the king seized the knight’s hand and pressed it to his heart. Just then a man entered without even bothering to knock; Aramis tried to pull his hand away but the king held onto it. He who entered was one of those Puritans, half-preacher and half-soldier, who clustered around Cromwell. “What do you wish, Sir?” the king said to him.

“I want to know if the confession of Charles Stuart is finished,” said the newcomer.

“What does that matter to you?” said the king. “We’re not of the same religion.”

“All men are brethren,” said the Puritan. “One of my brethren is going to die, and I come to prepare him for death.”

“Enough,” said Parry. “The king doesn’t need your preparations.”

“Be careful, Sire,” Aramis said in a low voice, “he’s probably a spy.”

“After the reverend bishop leaves,” said the king, “I shall hear you with pleasure, Sir.”



The man narrowed his eyes and withdrew but not before taking a good look at the supposed Juxon, a look that hadn't escaped the king. When the door was closed, he said, "Knight, I think you were right, and that man entered with evil intentions. Take care, and watch yourself on your way out."

"I thank Your Majesty," said Aramis, "but don't worry: under this robe I wear a coat of mail and a dagger."

"Go then, Sir, and may God keep you in safety, as I used to say when I was king."

Aramis went out; Charles escorted him to his door. Aramis pronounced his holy blessing, at which the guards bowed, passed majestically through the antechambers filled with soldiers, entered his carriage, followed by his two guards, who rode with him back to the bishopric, where they left him. Juxon was waiting there anxiously. "Well?" he said upon seeing Aramis.

"Well!" said the latter. "Everything went as planned; spies, guards, sentries, all took me for you, and the king blesses you while waiting for you to bless him."

"God protects you, my son, and your example has given me both hope and courage."

Aramis returned Juxon his robes and mantle and went out, after warning the bishop that they might have to rely upon him again. He'd gone no more than ten steps up the street before he noticed he was being followed by a man wrapped in a large cloak. He stopped and put his hand on his dagger. But the man came straight up to him – and it was Porthos. "My dear friend!" said Aramis, taking his hand. "You see, friend" said Porthos, "each of us has his mission; mine was to guard you, so you've been guarded. Have you seen the king?"

"Yes, and all is well. Now, where are the others?"

"We're to rendezvous at eleven o'clock at the inn."

"Then we have no time to lose," said Aramis.

In fact, half past ten was tolling from the bells of Saint Paul. The two friends hurried, and so arrived first. Athos came in right behind them. "All is well," he said before they had a chance to ask him.

"What have you been doing?" said Aramis.

"I've hired a little sloop, slim as a felucca and light as a swallow. It awaits us at Greenwich, across from the Isle of Dogs; it has a captain and four crew, who, for fifty pounds sterling, will be at our disposal for the next three nights. Once we board with the king, we'll sail with the tide, slip down the Thames, and be on the open sea within two hours. Then like true pirates we'll hug the coast, or if the sea is clear we'll make for Boulogne. In case I'm killed, the name of the captain is Rogers, and the sloop is the *Lightning*. A handkerchief with its four corners knotted is the recognition sign."

A moment later d'Artagnan came in. "Reach into your pockets," he said, "because we need a hundred pounds sterling – and as for mine..."

He turned his empty pockets inside out. Within seconds, the sum was collected. D'Artagnan took it, went back out, and returned again a moment later. "There!" he said. "That's done. Whew! This is no easy task."

"The executioner has left London?" asked Athos.

"Well, no! That was too uncertain a solution – he might go out one door and come back in another."

"So, where is he?" asked Athos.

"In the cellar."

"In what cellar?"

"In the cellar of our inn! Mousqueton is posted in front of the door, and here's the key."

"Bravo!" said Aramis. "But how did you persuade the man to disappear?"

"The way you persuade everyone in this world, with money. It cost me dearly but he agreed."

"And how much did it cost you, friend?" said Athos. "Because you know, now that we're once again like poor musketeers without house or home, all our expenses should be shared."

"It cost me twelve thousand livres," said d'Artagnan.

"Where ever did you find that?" asked Athos. "You had that much money?"

"No but I had the queen's famous diamond!" d'Artagnan said with a sigh.

"Ah, that's true!" said Aramis. "I'd recognised it on your finger."

"You bought it back from Sir Des Essarts?" asked Porthos.

"In a way," said d'Artagnan. "But it's written on high that it's fated not to stay with me. What would you have? Diamonds, as I understand it, have their sympathies and antipathies just like people – and it seems this one just doesn't like me."

"Well, maybe it will like the executioner," said Athos. "So much for him – but mightn't he have an apprentice or an assistant?"

"Yes, he had one but we got lucky there."

"How's that?"

"Just when I thought I was going to have to strike yet another bargain, the young buck returned home with a broken leg. In an excess of zeal, he'd gone all the way to the courtyard under the king's window with the lumber cart carrying the planks and beams for the scaffold, and one of those beams had fallen on his leg and broken it."

"Ah!" said Aramis. "That explains the cry I heard from the king's chambers."

"Probably," said d'Artagnan. "Anyway, when leaving, he promised the carpenters he'd send some hard-working friends to take his place and help them get the scaffold done in time. And so, upon returning to his master's house, wounded though he was, he wrote to his friend Tom Low, who has a crew of woodworkers, asking them to go to Whitehall to fulfil his promise. Here's the letter he sent by a courier – he paid the messenger ten pence but I bought the message for a guinea."

"And what the devil do you want with this letter?" asked Athos.

"Don't you get it?" said d'Artagnan, his eyes shining with intelligence.

"No, upon my soul!"

"Well, my dear Athos, since you speak English like John Bull himself – *you're* Master Tom Low and we're your three woodworkers. Do you get it now?" Athos uttered a cry of joy and admiration, ran to a wardrobe, and began drawing out an assortment of work clothes and throwing them to his friends. As soon as they were properly dressed they left the inn, Athos carrying a saw, Porthos a vice, Aramis an axe, and d'Artagnan a hammer and nails. At Whitehall, the letter from the executioner's apprentice proved to the master carpenter that these were the men he'd been expecting.

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The Workers

Toward the middle of the night, Charles heard a commotion beneath his window, a great racket of hammering, chopping, and sawing. As he had thrown himself fully dressed on his bed, and was just falling asleep, the noise woke him with a start. And, as in addition to its physical repercussions the sounds struck a blow to his soul, the awful thoughts of the day just ended returned to assail him again. Alone in the face of darkness and isolation, he didn't have the strength to endure this new torment that wasn't supposed to be part of his punishment, so he sent Parry to tell the sentry to please ask the labourers to work more quietly, and have pity on the final sleep of he who used to be their king. The sentry didn't want to leave his post but he allowed Parry to pass. After going out and around the palace to approach the window, Parry saw built to the level of the balcony, from which the railing had been removed, a large unfinished wooden scaffold, around which the workers were beginning to hang black serge drapery. This scaffold, raised to the height of the window, that is, about twenty feet, had two lower levels beneath it. Parry, though repelled by this sight, looked over the eight or ten workers who were building this sombre structure, the noise of which was disturbing the king, and on the second level he saw two men using a crowbar to remove the last metal anchors of the railing from the balcony; one of them, a veritable colossus, was like a human battering-ram, shattering stone at every stroke. The other, who stood just below him, cleared the debris as it fell. It was apparently these two who were making the noise of which the king complained. Parry climbed a ladder and approached them. "My friends," he said, "you'd work a little more gently, I pray you? The king's trying to get some sleep that he desperately needs."

The man pounding with the crowbar stopped and half turned but as the man was standing above him in shadow, Parry couldn't make out his face in the darkness under the scaffold. The man below him also turned, and as he was nearer and his face was lit by the lantern, Parry could see him. The man looked him in the eye and raised a finger to his lips. Parry recoiled, stupefied. "Sure, right," said the worker in excellent English. "Return and tell the king that if he sleeps poorly tonight, he'll sleep better tomorrow night."

These harsh words that, if taken literally, had a terrible meaning, were greeted by the other workers on the scaffold with a burst of mocking laughter. Parry withdrew, walking like a man in a dream. Charles was waiting for him impatiently. As Parry re-entered, the sentry at the door peeked in curiously through the opening to see what the king was doing. Charles was in bed, sitting up and leaning on one elbow. Parry shut the door and went to the king, the valet's face radiant with joy. "Sire," he said in a low voice, "do you know who those workers are who are making so much noise?"

"No," said Charles, shaking his head sadly. "How could I know that? Do I know those men?"

"Sire," said Charles, his voice even lower as he leaned on the bed toward his master, "it's the Count La Fère and his comrades."

"They're building my scaffold?" the king said, astonished.

"Yes, and while doing so, they're making a hole in the wall."

"Hush!" said the king, looking around him in terror. "Did you see them?"

"I talked to them."

The king clasped his hands and raised his eyes to heaven; then, after a short but fervent prayer, he jumped out of bed, went to the window, and drew aside the curtain. The sentries on the balcony were still there but beyond the balcony extended a dark platform upon which human shadows moved. Charles couldn't make out any details but beneath his feet he felt the thump of the blows struck by his friends. And each of these blows was now repeated by his heart. Parry hadn't been mistaken, he had in fact recognised Athos. It was he who, aided by Porthos, was carving a hole that was supposed to anchor the end of one of the transverse framing beams. This hole opened into a sort of crawlspace just beneath the floor of the royal bedchamber. Once in this narrow crawlspace, one could, with a crowbar and a good set of shoulders that Athos had, loosen one of the floorboards; the king could then slip through this opening, emerge under the scaffold which was surrounded by black drapes, dress in the worker's outfit they'd brought for him, and then simply walk out with his four companions. The unsuspecting sentries, seeing only workers coming from the scaffold, would let them pass. And then, as we said, the sloop was ready and waiting. The plan was bold, easy, and simple, like all the best plans born of desperate resolution. Enacting it, Athos lacerated his beautiful, aristocratic hands in clearing the stone shards ripped out by Porthos. Already he could fit his head through the gap beneath the carvings that edged the balcony. In two more hours, it would be big enough to admit his entire body. Before dawn, the opening would be finished, hidden behind the folds of an interior curtain d'Artagnan would hang. D'Artagnan had passed himself off as a French tapestry hanger and was nailing up the black cloth with the care of the most skilful draper. Aramis was cutting off the excess where it hung to the ground, concealing the framework of the scaffold. Daylight crept over the roofs of the houses. A bonfire of coal and peat had helped the workers pass that cold night of 29 and 30 January 1649; at any given moment several of the labourers were taking a break from the work and gathering near it to warm themselves. Only Athos and Porthos never interrupted their labours. And so, at morning's first gleam, the opening was finished. Athos crawled inside, carrying with him the clothes intended for the king, wrapped in a bolt of black cloth. Porthos passed him the crowbar, and d'Artagnan hung over the hole a large but essential luxury, the curtain that concealed the opening. Athos now had no more than two hours' work ahead of him before reaching the king – but thanks to the precautions taken by the four friends, they thought they had the whole day ahead of them, since, with the executioner missing, another would have to be summoned from Bristol. Their work done, d'Artagnan resumed his brown suit, and Porthos his red doublet; as to Aramis, he went to visit Juxon, to go in with him, if possible, to visit the king. The three agreed to rendezvous at noon outside Whitehall to see what was going on. Before leaving the scaffold, Aramis had approached the opening behind which Athos was hidden, to tell him he was going to try to visit Charles. "Goodbye then, and take heart," said Athos. "Tell the king what's happening and ask him to rap on the floor when he's alone, so I can continue my work in safety. If Parry could assist me by removing or loosening the hearthstone at the base of the chimney that is probably a marble slab, that would be a big help. You, Aramis, should try to stay near the king. Speak loudly, very loudly, because they'll be listening beyond the door. When the time comes, if there's a single sentry inside the suite, kill him out of hand. If there are two, have Parry kill one while you kill the other; if there are three, die yourself if you must but save the king."

"Never fear," said Aramis. "I'll bring two poniards so I can give one to Parry. Is that all?"

"Yes, go. But advise the king not to succumb to false generosity. If there's a struggle, while you're fighting, he must flee. With the hearthstone replaced over his head, and you dead or alive on top of it, it will take them at least ten minutes to find the hole by which he escaped. In ten minutes we can go far, and the king will be saved."

"It will be done as you say, Athos. Give me your hand, for we may never see each other again."

Athos threw his arms around Aramis's neck and hugged him tightly. "That's for you," he said. "Now, if I die, tell d'Artagnan that I love him like a son, and embrace him for me. Embrace also our good and brave Porthos. Goodbye."

“Goodbye,” said Aramis. “I’m as sure now that the king will be saved as I’m sure that I’ve just shaken the most loyal hand in the world.”

Aramis left Athos, went down from the scaffold in his turn, and returned to the inn whistling a popular pro-Cromwell tune. He found the other two seated near a good fire, drinking a bottle of port and eating cold chicken. Porthos ate while muttering insults about the infamous parliamentarians; d’Artagnan ate in silence, while reviewing the situation and considering contingency plans. Aramis told them what he and Athos had agreed; d’Artagnan nodded in approval, and Porthos said, “Bravo! Besides, we’ll be nearby when he makes his escape; there’s plenty of room to hide under the scaffold. Between d’Artagnan, me, Grimaud, and Mousqueton, we can kill eight of his pursuers while you get away with the king; I don’t count Blaisois, as he’s only good for holding the horses. At a minute a man, that’s eight minutes – though Mousqueton will kill only one, so that’s seven. Still, in seven minutes you’ll be able to ride a quarter of a league.”

Aramis quickly ate a few bites, downed some honey, and went to change his clothing. “I’m off to the bishop’s. Take charge of readying the weapons, Porthos; d’Artagnan, keep an eye on that executioner.”

“Don’t worry, Grimaud has relieved Mousqueton, and he’s got it in hand.”

“Nonetheless, redouble your watch, and don’t be idle for a moment.”

“Idle! My dear Aramis, ask Porthos: I don’t stop for a moment, and I’m on my feet so much, I might as well be a dancer. *God be with you!* How I love France at this moment, and how good it is to have a country of one’s own, when one finds life so hard elsewhere.”

Aramis left them as he’d left Athos, by embracing them. Then he went to see Bishop Juxon, to whom he made his request. Juxon quickly consented to bringing Aramis with him, as he’d foreseen the need to bring a deacon in the event the king wished to receive communion, and perhaps even hear mass said. Dressed as Aramis had been the day before, the bishop got into his carriage. Aramis, disguised more by his pallor and sadness than by his deacon’s robes, got in with him. The carriage halted at the gates of Whitehall at about nine o’clock in the morning. Nothing seemed changed; the antechambers and corridors, like the day before, were filled with guards. Two sentries were watching at the king’s door, two others marched back and forth outside on the balcony and platform of the scaffold, on which the headsman’s block had already been placed. The king was filled with hope; on seeing Aramis again, this hope became joy. He embraced Juxon and shook Aramis’s hand. The bishop spoke loudly enough for all to hear of their interview the day before. The king replied that the discussion they’d had the day before had borne fruit, and he desired to continue it. Juxon turned to his assistants and asked them to leave him and the deacon alone with the king. Everyone withdrew. Once the door was firmly shut, Aramis said rapidly, “Sire, you are saved! The executioner of London has disappeared, and his apprentice broke his leg under Your Majesty’s window – it was his cry we heard yesterday. Doubtless they’ve already noticed the absence of the executioner but there’s no replacement closer than Bristol, and it will take time to bring him, so we have until tomorrow at least.”

“But the Count La Fère?” asked the king.

“He’s two feet below you, Sire. Take the poker from the fireplace and rap the floor three times, and you’ll hear him reply.”

The king, with trembling hand, took the tool and knocked three times at equal intervals. Immediately, responding to the signal, three raps rang out from below. “So,” said the king, “he who answers me there…”

“Is the Count La Fère, Sire,” said Aramis. “He’s preparing the way for Your Majesty’s escape. Parry, for his part, will raise this marble hearthstone, and the passage will be open.”

“But I don’t have a pry-bar,” said Parry.

“Take this stout dagger,” said Aramis, “only take care not to dull the edge; you may need to cut something other than stone.”

“Oh, Juxon!” said Charles, turning to the bishop and grasping his hands. “Juxon, hear the prayer of one who was once your king…”

“Who still is and who will always be,” said Juxon, kissing the prince’s hand.

“Pray all your life for this gentleman you see here, for another we hear beneath our feet, and for two others who, no matter where they are, work for my salvation, I am certain.”

“Sire,” replied Juxon, “you will be obeyed. Every day, so long as I live, I’ll pray to God for these loyal friends of Your Majesty.”

The miner continued his work for a time, sounding ever nearer. Suddenly a noise was heard from out in the antechamber. Aramis seized the poker and sounded the signal to stop working. The noise approached, a march of equal and regular steps. The four men stood frozen, their eyes fixed on the door that opened slowly and with a sort of solemnity. Guards entered and formed two lines in the king’s outer room. A commissioner of Parliament, dressed in black and with a gravity that augured ill, entered, saluted the king, and unrolling a parchment, read to him his sentence, as is customary when the condemned is about to be marched to the scaffold. “What does this mean?” asked Aramis of Juxon.

Juxon just shrugged to show he was as ignorant as Aramis. “So, it’s for today?” asked the king with an emotion perceptible solely to Juxon and Aramis.

“Weren’t you warned, Sire, that it would be this morning?” replied the man dressed in black.

“And,” said the king, “I must die like a common criminal by the hand of the London executioner?”

“The London executioner has disappeared, Sire,” said the Commissioner of Parliament, “but a man has offered to take his place. The execution, therefore, will be delayed only so long as it takes you to put your affairs in order, temporal and spiritual.”

A light sweat that beaded the roots of Charles’s hair was the only trace of emotion he showed at this news. But Aramis went livid. His heart ceased to beat; he closed his eyes and leaned hard on a table. Seeing this deep sorrow, Charles seemed to forget his own. He went to him, lifted his hands and embraced him. “Come, friend,” he said with a sad and gentle smile. “Courage.”

Then, turning to the commissioner, he said, “Sir, I am ready. I desire only two things that won’t delay you long, I think: first, to take communion, and second, to embrace my children and to tell them goodbye for the final time. Will that be permitted me?”

“Yes, Sire,” replied the Commissioner of Parliament.

And he went out. Aramis, gripping the top of a chair, got hold of himself, and groaned from deep in his chest. “Oh, my Lord!” he cried, seizing Juxon’s hands. “*Where’s God?*”

“My son,” said the bishop firmly, “you do not see him because earthly passions hide him from you.”

“My child,” said the king to Aramis, “don’t despair so. You ask where is God? God beholds thy devotion and my martyrdom, and, believe me, both will have their reward. Blame men, therefore, for what happens, and not God. It is men who put me to death, and men who make you weep.”

“Yes, Sire,” said Aramis, “yes, you’re right; it’s men whom I shall blame for this, and who shall be held to account.”

“Now sit, Juxon,” said the king, falling to his knees, “for it remains for you to hear me, and it remains to me to confess. Stay, Sir,” he said to Aramis, who’d started to withdraw. “And you, Parry, stay. I have nothing to say, even in the privacy of penitence that cannot be said before all. Stay – and I’ve but one regret that the whole world cannot hear me as you hear me.” Juxon sat and the king, kneeling before him like the humblest of the faithful, began his confession.

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When the royal confession was finished, Charles received communion, and then asked to see his children. Ten o’clock was tolling; as the king had said, he hadn’t delayed events by much. However, the people crowding the streets surrounding the palace were already eager and ready; they knew that ten o’clock was the time fixed for the execution, and the king began to recognise that sound made by both a crowd and the sea, the one when agitated by its passions, the other by its storms. The king’s children arrived, first Princess Elizabeth, then the Duke of Gloucester – that is, a pretty blond girl with her eyes moistened with tears, and a young boy of eight or nine whose dry eye and disdainful look bespoke his proud birth. The boy had been crying all night but before the world’s eyes he would cry no more. Charles felt his heart melt at the sight of these two children, whom he hadn’t seen for two years and now met again only at the moment of his death. A tear rose in his eye and he turned to wipe it away, for he wanted to be strong before these two to whom he bequeathed such an inheritance of suffering and misfortune. Beckoning to the young girl, he spoke first to her, recommending piety, resignation, and filial love. Then he took the young Duke of Gloucester and sat him on his knee, so that at the same time he could kiss his face and press him to his heart. “My son,” he said, “you have seen in the streets and halls many people coming here; they come to take your father’s head, and you must never forget it. Because you are among them and under their control, they may someday propose to make you king, advancing you ahead of the Prince of Wales or the Duke of York, your older brothers who are away, the one in France, the other I know not where. But you are not the king, my son, and cannot be while they live. Swear to me, then, that you will never place the crown on your head unless you have a legitimate right to that crown; for hear me, my son, if you did that, then a day would come when they would take away both head and crown, and you wouldn’t be able to die at peace, as I do. Swear it, my son.”

The child put his small hand on that of his father and said, “Sire, I swear it to Your Majesty.”

Charles interrupted: “Henry,” he said, “call me your father.”

“Father,” the child replied, “I swear to you they will have to kill me before I’ll be made king.”

“Good, my son,” said Charles. “Now kiss me – you too, Elizabeth – and do not forget me.”

“Never! No, never!” cried the two children, throwing their arms around the king’s neck.

“Goodbye,” said Charles, “goodbye, my children. Take them away, Juxon; their tears would steal from me the courage to die.”

Juxon pried the poor children from their father’s arms and returned them to those who’d brought them. Once the children were outside the doors were opened, and everyone in the antechamber was allowed in. The king, finding himself alone in the crowd of guards and the curious who were beginning to invade the chamber, remembered that the Count La Fère was nearby, under the room’s parquet floor, unable to see and perhaps still hopeful. He was afraid that any noise might be taken by Athos as a signal to resume his task, thus betraying himself, so the king stood immobile, hoping that by his example the others around him would do the same. The king was right, Athos really was just below his feet. He listened carefully, and, despairing at not hearing the signal to resume, he nearly began, in his impatience, to once more pry at the stone but stopped at once, fearing to be heard. This horrible inaction lasted for two hours, during which a silence like death reigned in the royal chamber above. Then Athos made up his mind to determine the cause of that sombre silence that was troubled only by the surging sound of the crowd. He opened the hanging that hid the hole in the outer wall and climbed down to the first stage of the scaffold. Only four inches above his head were the planks of the platform that was the top of the scaffold. The roar of the crowd, deep and menacing that he had only distantly heard till then, made him start with terror. He crept to the edge of the scaffold, opened the black curtain at eye level, and looked. There was the cavalry ranked around the terrible structure, beyond the cavalry the rank of halberdiers, and beyond the halberdiers, the musketeers – and beyond the musketeers, the first lines of the people who, like a restless ocean, were seething and roaring. “What’s happened, then?” Athos asked himself, trembling like the curtain whose edge he held. “The people press forward, the soldiers are under arms, and there, among the spectators, all eyes fixed on the window, I see d’Artagnan! What’s he waiting for? What does he see? Great God, have they allowed the executioner to escape?”

Suddenly the drums rolled, stark and funereal, across the square, and the sound of steps, heavy and deliberate, resounded from above his head. It seemed a procession was marching across the floor of Whitehall, out onto the balcony, and then making the scaffold creak as it emerged into the square. Athos cast a final glance out into the yard, and the attitude of the spectators told him what the last hope in his heart had kept him from guessing. The murmurs in the square had altogether stopped. All eyes were fixed on the window of Whitehall, all mouths hanging half-open, breath suspended as all awaited the terrible spectacle. The sound of footsteps echoed from the hole beneath the king’s apartment, and then from the scaffold above Athos’s head, as the planks bent under added weight almost to the top of that distraught gentleman’s head. It seemed two lines of soldiers had marched into place. And then a noble voice, one Athos knew, pronounced these words from just above his head: “Colonel, I wish to address the people.”

Athos shuddered from head to foot – for it was the king who spoke from above him on the scaffold. In fact, after taking a few sips of honey and breaking a loaf of bread, Charles, weary of waiting for Death, had decided to go to meet him, and had given the signal to march. Then a second window on the balcony was opened, and from the depths of the chamber within, the people could see a masked man advancing silently, who from the axe in his hand they recognised as the executioner. This man approached the block and laid down his axe, with a sound that Athos heard clearly. Then, from behind this man, visibly pale but calm and marching steadily, Charles Stuart came forward flanked by two priests, between the two lines of halberdiers ranked along both sides of the scaffold, followed by some superior officers charged with presiding over the execution. The sight of the masked man had provoked the crowd to murmurs. All were curious to know the identity of this unknown executioner who’d come forward to enact the terrible spectacle promised to the people, when they’d thought the spectacle postponed to the following day. The crowd devoured him with their eyes but all they could see was a man of medium height, garbed entirely in black, and apparently of a certain age, for the tip of a greying beard extended past the bottom of the mask that covered his face. But at the sight of the king, so calm, so noble, and so dignified, silence fell once again, and everyone heard him express his desire to speak to the people. To this request, the person to whom it was addressed apparently responded with an affirmative gesture, for in a firm and resonant voice that struck Athos to the heart, the king began to speak. He explained his conduct to the people and gave them advice for the future good of England. “Oh!” Athos said to himself. “Is it really possible I’m hearing what I hear and seeing what I see? Is it possible for God so to abandon his representative on Earth to such a miserable death? And I can’t even see him! I can’t even bid him farewell!”

A noise came that sounded like the instrument of death being moved on the block. The king interrupted: “Don’t touch the axe,” he said. And he resumed his speech where he’d left off. When the speech ended, an icy silence seemed to chill the air around the count’s head. He touched his hand to his brow, and it ran with streams of sweat, though the air seemed frozen. This silence was the sign of the final preparations. When his address was over, the king looked over the crowd with an expression full of mercy, and then removed the medallion he wore that was none other than the diamond plaque

the queen had sent to him, and which he handed to the priest who accompanied Juxon. Then he drew from his breast a small diamond-crusted cross which, like the plaque, had come from Madam Henriette. "Sir," said the king, addressing the priest next to Juxon, "I'll keep this cross in my hand until the final moment; you'll take it from me once I'm dead."

"Yes, Sire," said a voice that Athos recognised as that of Aramis.

Then Charles, who until then had kept his head covered, removed his hat and set it down near him. He undid the buttons of his doublet, removed it and placed it near his hat. Then, as it was cold, he asked for his dressing gown that he donned. All these preparations were made with a frightful calm. It was as if the king were preparing to lie in his bed, not his coffin. Finally, lifting his hair from his neck with his hand, he said to the executioner, "Will this bother you, Sir? If so, it could be tied up with a cord." Charles accompanied these words with a look that seemed to penetrate the unknown's mask. This look, so noble, so calm and self-assured, forced the man to turn his eyes away. But beyond the penetrating eyes of the king he met the fiery gaze of Aramis. The king, receiving no answer, repeated his question. "It will suffice," said the man in a hollow voice, "if you spread the hair on your neck."

The king spread his hair with his hands, and then looked at the block. "This block seems quite low," he said. "Is there none higher?"

"It's the usual block," replied the masked man.

"Do you think you can cut off my head with a single blow?" asked the king.

"So I hope," replied the executioner.

There was in this phrase: *So I hope*, such a strange intonation that everyone shivered, except the king.

"Very well," said the king. "And now, executioner, listen." The masked man took a step toward the king and leaned on his axe. "I don't want you to surprise me," Charles said to him. "I'm going to kneel to pray, so don't strike just yet."

"And when shall I strike?" asked the masked man.

"When I lay my neck on the block, stretch out my arms, and say, *Remember, strike* and boldly." The masked man nodded. "Now is the time to leave the world," said the king to those around him.

"Gentlemen, I leave you in the midst of a tempest, and precede you into that country that knows no storms. Goodbye." He looked at Aramis and gave him a significant nod. "Now," he continued, "step away, and allow me a quiet prayer. You, too," he said to the masked man. "This will take just a moment and then I'll be all yours. But remember to wait for my signal." Then Charles kneeled, made the sign of the cross, and leaned his lips toward the planks as if he would kiss the platform. He put one hand on the planks, the other on the block, and then whispered in French, "Count La Fère, are you there, and can you hear me?"

This voice struck straight through Athos's heart and pierced it like a blade of ice. "Yes, Majesty," he said shakily.

"Faithful friend and generous heart," said the king, "I couldn't be saved, and indeed, didn't deserve it. Now, though it be a sacrilege, I tell you: I have spoken to the people, and I have spoken to God but I speak my final words to you. To support a cause I believed was sacred, I lost the throne of my fathers and the heritage of my children. But there remains a million in gold that was buried in the cellars of the keep at Newcastle just before I left that city. You alone know that this money exists, for you to use when you think the time is right in the best interests of my eldest son. And now, Count La Fère, bid me goodbye."

"Goodbye, M-majesty, saint, and martyr," stammered Athos, frozen with terror.

There was a moment of silence, during which it seemed to Athos that the king rose and changed his position. Then in a clear and resonant voice, so he could be heard not just on the scaffold but across the square, the king said, "*Remember.*" Charles had scarcely finished the word before a terrible blow shook the planks of the scaffold; dust billowed from the black curtain and blinded the wretched count. Then quickly and mechanically, Athos turned up his eyes, just as a drop of hot liquid fell on his forehead. He drew back with a shudder of horror as the drops turned into a black cascade from above. Athos, fallen to his knees, remained for some moments stricken with weakness and dismay. Gradually, as the murmurs died away, he realised that the crowd was leaving the square but he remained a while longer, stunned and mute. Then, turning about, he dipped the corner of his handkerchief in the blood of the martyred king, before he descended, parted the curtain, and slipped out between two horses to merge with the departing crowd, in clothing similar to theirs. He was the first to arrive back at the inn. Going up to his room, he looked at himself in a mirror, and saw his forehead was marked by a large red blot. He raised his hand to his brow, drew it away stained with the king's blood, and swooned.

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The Masked Man

Though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon, it was dark as night, the snow falling thick and damp. Aramis made his way to the inn where he found Athos, though not unconscious, thoroughly dazed. But at his friend's first words, the count emerged from the stunned lethargy into which he'd fallen. "Outdone!" said Aramis. "Vanquished by fate."

"Defeated!" said Athos. "That noble and unhappy king!"

"Are you wounded?" asked Aramis.

"No, the blood is his."

The count wiped his forehead. "Where were you?"

"Where you left me, under the scaffold."

"And you saw it all?"

"No but I heard everything. God defend me from another hour like the one I've just passed. Has my hair turned white?"

"Then you were aware I never left him?"

"I heard your voice up until the final moment."

"Here is the plaque he gave me," said Aramis, "and here the cross I took from his hand. He asked that they be returned to the queen."

"And here is a handkerchief to wrap around them," said Athos. And he drew from his pocket the handkerchief he'd soaked in the king's blood. "Now," he asked, "what has become of his poor cadaver?"

"By Cromwell's order, it's to be rendered royal honours. We put the body in a leaden coffin; the doctors are busy embalming the remains, and when they're done, the body will be taken to a chapel to lie in state."

"A mockery!" Athos muttered darkly. "Paying royal honours to one they assassinated!"

"It proves that though the king may die, royalty lives on."

"Alas!" said Athos. "It may be that the last king of ancient chivalry has passed from the world."

"Come, don't despair, Count," said a loud voice from the stairway, above the heavy footsteps of Porthos. "We're all but mortal, my poor friends."

"You're late, my dear Porthos," said the Count La Fère.

"Yes," said Porthos, "there were some people along my way who delayed me. They were dancing, the wretches! I took one by the neck and choked him a bit. Just then the Watch arrived. Fortunately, the one I'd been toying with wasn't able to speak for several minutes, and I took advantage of that to dash up a back street. The back street led to an alley, and that to another, and soon I was lost. I don't know London, I don't speak English, and I thought I'd never see you again – but here I am."

"But d'Artagnan," said Aramis, "what of him? Have you seen him?"

"We got separated in the crush, and I lost track of him," said Porthos.

"Oh," said Athos bitterly, "I saw him! He was in the front row of the crowd, admirably situated so he'd miss nothing. And as the spectacle was curious, no doubt he stayed to see the end."

"What? Now, Sir La Fère," said a voice, calm but breathing hard from exertion, "is it like you to slander the absent?"

This reproach struck Athos to the quick. But the sight of d'Artagnan at the front of the crowd had hit him hard so he replied, "I don't slander you, my friend. We're just worried about where you're and I said where I'd seen you. You didn't really know King Charles well enough to love him, he was almost a stranger to you."

As he said these words he extended his hand to his friend but d'Artagnan pretended not to see the gesture and kept his hand under his cloak. Athos allowed his hand to drop slowly away. "Whew! I'm tired," d'Artagnan said and sat down.

"Have a glass of port," said Aramis, taking a bottle from the table and filling a glass. "Drink, it'll restore you."

"Yes, let's drink," said Athos who, aware of the Gascon's resentment, hoped to touch glasses with him and amend it. "Let's drink, and then get out of this abominable country. The sloop awaits us; let's leave tonight. We have no more business here."

"You're in a great hurry, Sir Count," said d'Artagnan.

"This bloody soil burns my feet," said Athos.

"The snow doesn't have that effect on me," said the Gascon quietly.

"But what would you have us do now that the king is dead?" said Athos.

"So, Sir Count," said d'Artagnan airily, "you don't find that you have anything left to do in England?"

"Not a thing," said Athos, "other than to doubt in divine grace and curse my own weakness."

"Indeed!" said d'Artagnan. "Well, I, rustic that I am, who stood thirty feet from the scaffold the better to watch the fall of the head of this king I hardly knew, to whom I was apparently quite indifferent – I see things otherwise than Sir Count. I intend to stay."

Athos turned pale; these reproaches from his friend went straight to his heart. "Really! So, you're staying in London?" said Porthos to d'Artagnan.

"I am. And you?"

"*Dame!*" said Porthos, looking awkwardly at Athos and Aramis. "*Dame!* Since I came with you, if you're staying, then I'll stay with you. I wouldn't leave you alone in this abominable country."

"Thanks, my good friend. Then I have a little enterprise to propose to you that we shall undertake together once the count has departed, an idea that came to me while watching that spectacle you heard mentioned."

"What's that?" said Porthos.

"It's to find out the identity of that masked man who so obligingly offered to cut off the king's head."

"A masked man!" cried Athos. "Then you didn't allow the executioner to escape?"

"The executioner?" said d'Artagnan. "He's still in the cellar, where I assume he's making free with our host's bottles. But now that you mention it..." He went to the door. "Mousqueton!" he called.

"Sir?" replied a voice that seemed to come from the depths of the earth.

"You can leave the prisoner," said d'Artagnan. "It's all over."

"But then," said Athos, "who was the wretch who presumed to lay hands on the king?"

"An amateur executioner," said Aramis, "but one who, nonetheless, manages an axe with ease, for as the king hoped, it took only one blow."

"Were you able to see his face?" asked Athos.

"He wore a full mask," said d'Artagnan.

"But weren't you near to him, Aramis?"

"I saw only a bit of grey beard that stuck out below the mask."

"So, he was a man of some maturity?" asked Athos.

"Oh, that doesn't mean anything," said d'Artagnan. "One who wears a mask can wear a beard as well."

"I'm sorry now that I didn't follow him," said Porthos.

"Fortunately, my dear Porthos," said d'Artagnan, "that idea occurred to me while watching."

Athos understood everything. He rose. "Pardon me, d'Artagnan," he said. "When I doubted God, I even doubted you. Forgive me, my friend."

"We can probably find the time for that, at some point," said d'Artagnan with a half-smile.

"Well?" said Aramis.

"Well!" replied d'Artagnan. "I was looking, not at the king, as Sir Count thought – for I know what it's like for a man who's about to die, and though you'd think I'd be used to that sort of thing, it still dismays me – but rather at the masked executioner, and the idea came to me, as I mentioned, that I'd like very much to know who he was. Now, as we're in the habit of relying on each other, one hand calling for the others to join in and help, I automatically looked around to see if I could spot Porthos; I'd already recognised you near the king, Aramis, and I knew you, Count, were under the scaffold. And this is the part where I forgive you," he added, holding out his hand to Athos, "for I know how you must have suffered. Anyway, I looked around and saw standing to my right someone with a head that had been split open and then sewn back up, as well as it could be, anyway, with black silk thread. '*For God's sake*,' I said to myself, 'that work looks familiar – in fact I think Grimaud did that sewing job.' And indeed, it was that unlucky Scotsman, Parry's brother – you remember, the one on whom Groslow amused himself by trying his strength, and who had only half a head when we found him." "Absolutely," said Porthos. "The man with the black chickens."

"Just as you say! He was gesturing to someone on my left; I turned and recognised our honest Grimaud, completely occupied like me in staring at the masked executioner. *Hey*, I said to him and as this is one of the abbreviations the count uses when speaking with him, Grimaud thought it was his master who'd called, and turned like a clockwork. Seeing me instead, he pointed toward the masked man and said, '*Hein?*' which meant, 'Do you see him?'"

"*For God's sake!*" I replied. We knew we were in perfect accord. I turned back to our Scotsman, whose look said he understood as well. In the event, it all ended sadly, as you know. The people filed away as, little by little, evening came on. I'd withdrawn to a corner of the square with Grimaud and the Scotsman, whom I'd signalled to join us, and from there we watched the executioner. We could see him retire into the king's chamber to change his outfit that was doubtless bloodstained. Then he clapped a black hat on his head, wrapped himself in a cloak, and disappeared further within. I guessed he was going to go through and come out and I ran around to the front entrance. In fact, a few moments later he came out and went down the stairs."

"You followed him?" cried Athos.

"We did!" said d'Artagnan. "Though not without some difficulty, I'll tell you! Every few minutes he turned to look behind him, and we had to hide ourselves or pretend indifference. If I'd been here on my own account, I'd have just killed him but I'm not that selfish, so I saved that pleasure for you, Aramis, and you, Athos, as a small consolation. Finally, after half an hour's twisting march through the smallest and most crooked streets in the City of London, he arrived at a small, lonely house that seemed entirely deserted. Grimaud reached into his belt and drew a pistol. '*Hein?*' he asked, pointing. 'No,' I said, and put a hand on his arm. As I said, I had my own ideas. The masked man stopped in front of a low door and pulled out a key but before putting it in the lock, he turned suddenly to see if he'd been followed. I huddled behind a tree, Grimaud ducked behind a lamppost, and the Scotsman, who had nowhere to hide, threw himself face down in the street. No doubt our prey thought himself quite alone, for I heard the turning of the key; the door opened, and he disappeared."

"The wretch!" said Aramis. "In the time since you've returned, he'll have fled, and we'll never find him again."

"Come, Aramis," said d'Artagnan, "who do you think you're dealing with?"

"However," said Athos, "in your absence..."

"Well, in my absence, don't I have Grimaud and the Scot in my place? Before the man had time to take ten steps inside I'd circled around the house. At one of its doors, the one by which he'd entered, I posted the Scotsman and ordered that if the man in the black mask came out, he was to follow him. Grimaud would follow in his turn, and when the man reached his destination, Grimaud would come back and wait for us at the deserted house. Then I stationed Grimaud at the house's second door, with the same orders, and here I am. The prey is in the trap; now, who's in for the death blow?"

Athos threw himself into the arms of d'Artagnan, who was catching his breath and wiping his forehead. "Friend," Athos said, "in truth I don't deserve your forgiveness – I was wrong, a hundred times wrong. I should have trusted you but deep inside us there's a wicked will that leads us to doubt."

"Hmmm!" said Porthos. "Might the executioner by any chance be Sir Cromwell, who, to be sure the work was done right, decided to do it himself?"

"Maybe – but no. Cromwell is short and stout, while the masked man is slender, and tall if anything."

"Some condemned soldier, perhaps, who was offered amnesty as payment," said Athos, "as was done with poor Chalais."

"No, no," continued d'Artagnan. "He didn't march like an infantryman or step out like a man of the cavalry. He walked with dignity and stood with poise. Unless I'm badly mistaken, we're dealing with a gentleman."

"A gentleman!" cried Athos. "Impossible! It would be a disgrace to the entire aristocracy."

"A pretty prey!" said Porthos, with a laugh that made the windowpanes shake. "A pretty prey, *Mordieu*!"

"Are you still leaving the country, Athos?" asked d'Artagnan.

"No, I'm staying," replied the gentleman, with a gesture so menacing it promised no good for the one he was staying for.

"Then, swords all!" said Aramis. "And let's lose not a moment."

The four comrades quickly resumed their gentlemen's clothing and buckled on their swords. They called up Mousqueton and Blaisois, ordered them to settle accounts with their host, and to prepare for immediate departure, as in all probability they'd be leaving London that very night. Dark night had fully arrived, while the snow continued to fall, drawing a vast white shroud across the regicide city; it was about seven in the evening, and there were few passers-by still in the streets, talking with friends and family in low voices about the terrible events of the day. The four comrades, enveloped in their cloaks, made their way through the squares and streets of the city, so busy during the day, so deserted at night. D'Artagnan led the way, pausing from time to time to take note of the crosses he'd scratched on the walls they passed but the night was so dark it was often difficult to make out the shallow marks. However, d'Artagnan had so carefully memorized each post, sign, and fountain along the way that within half an hour he and his three companions came within sight of the lonely house. D'Artagnan thought for a moment that Parry's brother had disappeared but he was mistaken; the robust Scotsman, accustomed to winters in his mountains, had sat down with his back against a borne, and like a statue that had fallen from its pedestal, insensible to the weather, lay covered in snow; but at the approach of the four men he rose. "Come," said Athos, "here's another true and loyal servant. God's truth! The good folk are less rare than we think. That's encouraging."

"Don't be in such a hurry to plait garlands for our Scotsman," said d'Artagnan. "I think the fellow is here on his own account. I've heard that the men who hail from the north side of the Tweed are a vengeful sort. Let Master Groslow beware! He'll have a bad quarter of an hour if this man catches up with him."

He separated from his friends, approached the Scot and made himself known. Then he beckoned the others to join him. "Well?" said Athos in English.

"No one has come out," replied Parry's brother.

"Good. Stay with this fellow, Porthos, and you too, Aramis. D'Artagnan is going to lead me to Grimaud." Grimaud, no less wily than the Scotsman, had pushed himself into the hollow of a bare willow tree that he'd converted to a sentry-box. Failing at first to see him, d'Artagnan worried for a moment that the masked man had moved on and Grimaud had followed him. Then a head emerged from the tree and he heard a light whistle. "*Hey!*" said Athos.

"*Hein*," replied Grimaud.

They approached the willow. "So," d'Artagnan asked, "has anyone gone out?"

"No – but someone has gone in," said Grimaud.

"A man or a woman?"

"A man."

"Ah ha!" said d'Artagnan. "Then they are two."

"I wish they were four," said Athos. "It would make it more equal."

"Maybe there are four," said d'Artagnan.

"How's that?"

"Couldn't other men have been in the house when these later two arrived?"

"You could look," said Grimaud, pointing to an upper window through whose shutters a few rays of light shone out.

"True enough," said d'Artagnan. "Let's call the others."

And they returned to the first door to beckon the others, who hastily rejoined them. "Have you seen anything?" they asked.

"No but we're about to," replied d'Artagnan, indicating Grimaud who clinging to crevices in the wall, was already five or six feet off the ground. The four drew nearer as Grimaud continued his ascent with the dexterity of a cat. Finally, he got a hand around one of the hooks used to hold one of the shutters open against the outer wall, while his feet found purchase on a moulding that gave him solid support, and he made a sign to say that he'd reached his goal. Then he leaned toward the gap in the shutter. "Well?" asked d'Artagnan.

Grimaud raised a hand with two fingers extended. "Speak," said Athos. "We can't see your signs. How many are there?"

With an effort, Grimaud forced himself to talk. "Two," he said. "One is facing me but the other has his back turned."

"Good. Which one is facing you?"

"The man I saw enter second."

"Do you know him?"

"I thought I'd recognised him, and I wasn't wrong; he's short and stout."

"Who is he?" the four below hissed urgently.

"General Oliver Cromwell."

The four friends looked at each other. "And the other?" asked Athos.

"Slim and rather tall."

"It's the executioner," said d'Artagnan and Aramis at the same time.

"I see only his back," replied Grimaud. "But wait, he's turning, and if he's removed his mask, I'll see him ... Ah!"

Grimaud, as if stabbed to the heart, let go of the iron hook and fell backward with a muffled groan. Porthos caught him. "You saw him?" asked the four friends.

"Yes," said Grimaud, hair standing on end and sweat bursting from his brow.

"The tall, slender man?" said d'Artagnan.

"Yes."

"Was it the executioner?" asked Aramis.

"Yes."

"Well, who is he?" said Porthos.

"Him! Him!" stammered Grimaud, pale as death, grasping for his master's hands with his own trembling fingers.

"Him? Who?" demanded Athos.

"Mordaunt ...!" whispered Grimaud.

D'Artagnan, Porthos, and Aramis gasped with joy and gratification. But Athos recoiled, passed his hand across his brow, and murmured, "It's fate."

It was indeed Mordaunt that d'Artagnan had followed without recognising him. After entering the house, he had removed his mask and false beard, climbed the stairs, opened a door, and, in a chamber lit by a single lamp hung with dark-coloured curtains, found himself facing a man who was sitting at a desk and writing. This man was Oliver Cromwell. As we now know, Cromwell kept two or three of these retreats in London, safe houses known only to his most loyal aides. Mordaunt, it will be recalled, could be counted among the latter. When he entered, Cromwell raised his head. "It's you, Mordaunt," he said. "You come late."

"General," replied Mordaunt, "I wanted to see the ceremony through to the end, and that delayed me."

"Oh?" said Cromwell. "I didn't think you such a curious man."

"I'm always curious to see the fall of one of Your Honour's enemies, and this one was not the least of them. But you, General – weren't you at Whitehall?"

"No," Cromwell said.

There was a moment of silence. "Have you heard the details?" asked Mordaunt.

"No. I've been here since the morning. I know only that there was a conspiracy to save the king."

"Ah! How do you know that?" asked Mordaunt.

"No matter. Four men disguised as workers were to spirit the king away from prison and escort him to Greenwich, where a ship awaited them."

"And knowing that, Your Honour chose to remain here, far from Whitehall, quiet and passive!"

"Quiet, yes," replied Cromwell, "but what do you mean, passive?"

"But what if the plot had succeeded?"

"That would have been fine with me."

"I thought Your Honour regarded the death of Charles as a surgery, an operation necessary for the good of England."

"Well!" said Cromwell. "That's still my opinion. But so long as he died, that was all that mattered. It might have been better, perhaps, if he'd died somewhere other than on a scaffold."

"Why's that, Your Honour?"

Cromwell merely smiled. "Your pardon," said Mordaunt, "but as you know, General, I'm just a novice to politics, and wish to learn from all the lessons my master provides."

"Because it would have been said that I'd had him condemned out of justice but had let him escape out of mercy."

"But what if he'd actually gotten away?"

"Impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Yes, my precautions were in place."

"And does Your Honour know these four men who plotted to save the king?"

"It was those four Frenchmen, two of whom were sent by Madam Henriette to her husband, and two by Mazarin to me."

"And do you think, Sir that Mazarin ordered them to do what they've done?"

"It's possible but he'll just disavow them."

"You believe so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Why is that?"

"Because they failed."

"Your Honour had given me two of these Frenchmen when they were merely guilty of having borne arms for Charles I. Now that they're guilty of a conspiracy against England, will Your Honour give me all four?"

"Take them," said Cromwell.

Mordaunt bowed with a smile both fierce and triumphant. "Stop," said Cromwell, seeing that Mordaunt was about to begin thanking him. "Let's return, if you please, to the unlucky King Charles. Did the people shout and cry out much?"

"Very little, except to say, 'Long live Cromwell!'"

"Where were you located?"

Mordaunt studied the general for a moment to try to read whether he was asking a rhetorical question and actually knew the whole truth. But Mordaunt's burning gaze couldn't penetrate the dark depths of Cromwell's mind. "I was located where I could see and hear everything," replied Mordaunt.

It was Cromwell's turn to start fixedly at Mordaunt and Mordaunt's turn to be inscrutable. After a few seconds' regard, he turned his eyes away indifferently. "It seems," said Cromwell, "that the amateur executioner did his job well. The blow, or so I'm told at least, was struck as if by the hand of a master."

Mordaunt recalled that Cromwell had said he knew no details, and was now convinced that the general had attended the execution in secret, watching from behind some curtain or tapestry. "In fact," Mordaunt said, voice calm, face impassive, "one blow was enough."

"Perhaps it was a man who knew the trade," said Cromwell.

"You think so, Sir?"

"Why not?"

"The man didn't carry himself like an executioner."

"And who but an executioner," asked Cromwell, "would take on such a dreadful task?"

"Perhaps," said Mordaunt, "some personal enemy of King Charles, who had taken a vow of vengeance and has now accomplished his vow; perhaps some gentleman who had grave reasons to hate the late king, and who, knowing he was about to flee and escape, undertook the task of wearing the mask and wielding the axe less as an executioner than as an instrument of fate."

"That's possible," said Cromwell.

"And if it were so," said Mordaunt, "would Your Honour condemn such an act?"

"It's not for me to judge," said Cromwell. "That would be a matter between him and God."

"What if Your Honour knew this gentleman?"

"I do not know him, Sir," replied Cromwell, "and I will not know him. What does it matter whether it was this man, that man, or some other? From the moment Charles was condemned, it's not a man who'd take his head but the axe."

"And yet," said Mordaunt, "but for this man, the king would've been saved." Cromwell smiled. "But you said so yourself – they'd have carried him off."

"They'd have taken him to Greenwich, where the four saviours had a sloop awaiting. But the sloop was crewed by four men of mine, with five barrels of black powder in the hold. Once at sea, my four men would have left in the longboat – and you're not such a novice, Mordaunt, as to need me to explain the rest."

Mordaunt nodded. "The sea would have taken them all."

"Exactly. The explosion would have done what the axe had not. King Charles would have disappeared, annihilated. It would be said that, fleeing from human justice, he'd been overtaken by heavenly vengeance; we'd been his judges but God had been his executioner. That's what your masked gentleman cost us, Mordaunt. You see, I'm right in not wanting to know him – for in truth, despite his excellent intentions, I can't be grateful to him for what he's done."

"Sir," said Mordaunt, "as always I humbly bow before you. You are a profound thinker, and the idea of the powder-packed sloop is sublime."

"Rather, it's absurd, since it's become useless. No idea in politics is sublime unless it bears fruit; an aborted or incomplete plan is just a folly." Cromwell rose. "You will go to Greenwich tonight, Mordaunt, and ask for the master of the sloop *Lightning*. You will show him a white handkerchief with a knot in each corner that is the agreed-upon signal. Tell his men to go ashore and arrange to have the powder returned to the arsenal – unless..."

"Unless..." replied Mordaunt whose face lit up with mad joy at Cromwell's words.

"Unless this sloop as prepared would be useful for your own purposes."

"Ah, Milord! Milord!" cried Mordaunt. "God, in choosing you to do his will, has given you his vision that sees everything and misses nothing!"

"I think you just called me *milord*," Cromwell laughed. "That's fine, since we're amongst ourselves but be careful not to let such a word slip out in front of our fools of Puritans."

"Won't Your Honour be called by that title soon?"

"I hope so," said Cromwell, "but that time has not yet come." Cromwell turned and took up his cloak.

"You're going now, Sir?" asked Mordaunt.

"Yes," said Cromwell. "I slept here last night and the night before that, and you know it's against my policy to sleep in the same bed three nights in a row."

"Then," said Mordaunt, "Your Honour gives me liberty for the rest of the night?"

"And even through tomorrow if need be," said Cromwell, smiling. "Today you've done enough in my service that, if you have personal affairs to settle, you should be granted the time to do it."

"Thank you, Sir. I hope to spend this time well."

Cromwell nodded to Mordaunt, turned away, and then turned back again. "Are you armed?" he asked.

"I have my sword," said Mordaunt.

"And who awaits you at the door?"

"No one."

"Then you should come with me, Mordaunt."

"Thank you, Sir but your long route through the underground passage will cost me too much time, and from what you told me, I may not have any to spare. I'll use the outer door."

"Go, then," said Cromwell.

He pressed a concealed lever that opened a door so hidden behind a tapestry not even the sharpest eye could spot it. He went past the open door that then moved by a steel spring, closed behind him. This was one of those secret exits that, as history tells us, Cromwell had installed in all of his safe houses. It led to an underground tunnel a hundred paces long that passed under the street and opened in the garden grotto of another house, one that faced away from the house the future Protector had just left. It was during the latter part of this scene that, through the gap in the shutters, Grimaud had spied on the two men whom he eventually recognised as Cromwell and Mordaunt. We have seen the effect of his news on the four friends. D'Artagnan was the first to come to his senses. "Mordaunt!" he said. "By heaven! It's God himself who sends him to us."

"Yes," said Porthos. "Let's break down the door and get at him."

"On the contrary," said d'Artagnan, "do nothing, and make no noise; if Mordaunt is, as Grimaud says, with his worthy master, there must be some hard men in iron armour not fifty paces from here. *Whoa!* Grimaud, stop shaking and come here."

Grimaud approached. He was firm again, fury in him having replaced fear. "Good man," said d'Artagnan. "Now go back up to that window and tell us if Mordaunt still has company. If he does or is about to go to bed, we'll just have to wait until he's alone. If he comes out, we'll take him as he leaves. If he turns in alone, we'll enter by the window – that's always quieter and less difficult than a door."

Grimaud began to climb quietly back up to the window. "Guard the other exit, Athos and Aramis," said d'Artagnan. "I'll stay here with Porthos."

His two friends obeyed. "Well, Grimaud?" hissed d'Artagnan.

"He's alone," said Grimaud.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"We didn't see his companion come out."

"Maybe he left by the other door."

"What's he doing?"

"He's donned his cloak and is putting on his gloves."

"He's ours!" murmured d'Artagnan.

Porthos put his hand to his poniard and began to draw it from its sheath. "Not so fast, friend Porthos," said d'Artagnan. "This is not a case of striking first. We've got him and must do things in the proper order. We have questions to ask, and explanations to make, because this is the final outcome of that business in Armentieres. Let's hope Mordaunt doesn't have any offspring – but if he does, this time we exterminate the entire nest."

"Hush!" said Grimaud. "He's getting ready to leave. He approaches the lamp – blows it out – I can see nothing."

"Come down, then!"

Grimaud leapt down and landed on his feet, the snow absorbing the sound. D'Artagnan said, "Go and warn Athos and Aramis to stand one to each side of the door, as Porthos and I will do here. Let them clap their hands if they get him, and we'll do the same."

Grimaud disappeared.

"Porthos, Porthos," said d'Artagnan, "better hide those big shoulders of yours against the wall, friend – if he sees them, he won't come out."

"Oh, I do so hope he comes out this way!"

Porthos flattened himself against the wall to one side of the door and d'Artagnan did the same on the other. Mordaunt's footsteps could be heard coming down the staircase. A door somewhere inside creaked on its hinges; within, Mordaunt looked out suspiciously but thanks to the pair's precautions, he saw nothing. He turned the key in the lock, opened the outer door and stepped onto the threshold – where found himself face-to-face with d'Artagnan. He tried to pull the door shut but Porthos grabbed the knob and jerked it open. Porthos clapped three times. Athos and Aramis came running. Mordaunt was livid but he didn't say a word or call out for help. D'Artagnan marched straight in on Mordaunt, thrusting him back bodily, to the foot of the staircase and up it. The light from a hanging lamp enabled the Gascon to keep an eye on Mordaunt's hands in case he went for a weapon but Mordaunt knew that even if he killed d'Artagnan, he'd just have to face the other three, so he was careful not to make any threatening moves, or even to defend himself. Reaching the landing, Mordaunt, his back against the door, felt cornered, and no doubt thought it was all over with him but he was wrong – d'Artagnan merely reached around him and opened the door. He and Mordaunt were then in the room where a few minutes earlier the young man had been speaking with Cromwell. Porthos came in behind d'Artagnan; he had taken the hanging lamp on his way up and brought it in with him, and he used this first lamp to light a second. Athos and Aramis followed him through the door that they locked behind them. "Here, have a seat," said d'Artagnan, presenting a chair to the young man. The latter took the chair and sat down, pale but calm. Three paces in front of him, Aramis placed three chairs in a line for himself, d'Artagnan, and Porthos. Meanwhile, Athos, seeming overwhelmed, went and took a seat in the room's farthest corner, apparently determined to remain a spectator to events. Porthos sat to the left of d'Artagnan, Aramis to his right. Porthos rubbed his hands together with nervous impatience. Aramis was smiling but biting his lips till they bled. Only d'Artagnan seemed fully in command of himself. "Sir Mordaunt," he said, "after so many days apart from each other, chance seems to have brought us together again. Let's have a little talk."

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A Little Talk

Mordaunt, surprised so completely and unexpectedly, and marched upstairs in fear for his life, found his thoughts in disarray. Ambushed, he was overcome by terror, a man who found himself in the hands of mortal enemies he'd been certain were safely elsewhere. But once he was seated, and saw that he was granted a reprieve, for whatever reason, he concentrated his thoughts and summoned his strength. D'Artagnan's fiery gaze, burning with menace, electrified rather than intimidated him, for the look was open in its anger and hatred. That set Mordaunt to prepare to seize, by force or by cunning, any opportunity for recovery that offered itself, and he gathered himself together – much as a bear, pursued into its den and seemingly cornered, eyed every movement of the hunter who'd trapped him there. He only glanced down for a moment at the long sword that hung at his hip, and as he sat on the chair d'Artagnan had indicated, he brought the hilt forward with his left hand until it was near to his right. D'Artagnan was quiet, waiting for his prey to burst into one of those threatening tirades with which he'd mocked them in the past. Aramis said to himself, "Now we'll hear some double-talk."

Porthos gnawed at his moustache muttering, "God! There's more than one way to crush this little serpent!"

Athos withdrew further into his corner, motionless and pale as a marble statue, albeit a statue whose brow was beaded with sweat. Mordaunt said nothing. Once he'd assured himself that his sword's hilt was at hand, he nonchalantly crossed his legs and sat, silent. This silence couldn't last long before it became ridiculous. D'Artagnan understood the ploy, and since he was the one who'd invited Mordaunt to sit and talk, he felt it behoved him to start the conversation. "It seems to me, sir," he said with brittle courtesy, "that you change your costume nearly as often as those Italian commedia mimes that Cardinal Mazarin brought over from Bergamo, and which he doubtless took you to see during your visit to France."

Mordaunt said nothing. "A few minutes ago," d'Artagnan continued, "you were disguised – I mean *dressed* – in an assassin's garb, and now..."

"And now, on the contrary, I wear the garb of one who is to be assassinated?" replied Mordaunt in a voice calm and curt.

"Why, Sir!" said d'Artagnan. "How can you say such a thing when in the company of gentlemen, and with such a long sword still at your side?"

"There is no sword long enough, Sir, to counter four swords and four daggers, not to mention the swords and daggers of your men-at-arms outside."

"Pardon me, Sir, if I correct you," said d'Artagnan, "but the men outside aren't soldiers, just our lackeys. I'd like to keep our talk on a truthful basis."

Mordaunt answered only by tightening his lips in an ironic smile. "But that's beside the point, and so I return to my question," d'Artagnan said. "I had the honour to ask you, Sir, why you'd changed your appearance. The mask seemed to cause you no inconvenience, and I thought the grey beard rather suited you. And as to that axe which you wielded so famously, it seems to me it might come in handy right about now. Why did you give it up?"

"Because, knowing of the event at Armentieres, I assumed I'd find myself between four executioners and be outnumbered four axes to one."

"Sir," replied d'Artagnan, supremely cool, though the twitch of an eyebrow revealed that he was beginning to heat up, "Sir, though you are thoroughly vicious and corrupt, you're also very young, so I'll overlook your frivolous remarks. Yes, frivolous – for the scene at Armentieres in no way compares to your present situation. We couldn't very well offer your mother a sword and challenge her to fence with us. But you, Sir, a young cavalier who handles the dagger and pistol as we've seen you do so well, and who wears a sword as long as that one, are certainly a person of whom one has the right to ask the favour of a meeting."

"Oh ho!" said Mordaunt. "So, it's a duel you want?"

And he rose, eyes flashing, as if he were ready to take up the challenge at once. Porthos, always ready for a fight, got up as well. "Patience, patience," said d'Artagnan, still cool. "There's no rush, and we all want to make sure this thing is done according to the rules. Sit down, friend Porthos – and you, Sir Mordaunt, calm yourself. We're going to settle this matter properly. Will you admit, Sir Mordaunt, to a desire to kill one or another of us?"

"One and all of you," replied Mordaunt.

D'Artagnan turned to Aramis and said, "It's fortunate, I'm sure you agree, Aramis, that Sir Mordaunt is so well acquainted with the nuances of the French language that it will enable us to arrange the affair without the least misunderstanding." Turning back to Mordaunt, he continued, "Dear Sir Mordaunt: I hereby inform you that these gentlemen all return your fine sentiments and would be delighted to kill you as well. Moreover, I can assure you that they *would* kill you, honourable gentlemen that they are, except for what I'm about to tell you that is this." And with these words d'Artagnan threw his hat on the floor, pushed his chair out of the way, and gestured to his friends to do the same. Then he saluted Mordaunt and said with perfect French grace, "At your command, if you please, Sir – for unless you object I claim the honour of challenging you. My sword is shorter than yours but never mind – hopefully my arm will make up for it."

"Stop right there!" said Porthos, stepping forward. "I'm going first, and without any more talk."

"No, Porthos, allow me," said Aramis.

Athos stayed motionless, like a statue – even his breathing seemed to have stopped. "Gentlemen, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, "rest assured, you'll each have your turn. Observe this gentleman's eyes and see the passionate hatred we inspire in him. Notice how nimbly he draws his sword; admire with what care he inspects the ground for objects that might trip him. Well, then! Doesn't all this indicate that Sir Mordaunt is a worthy opponent, and will survive long enough to face you – provided I let him? Be patient, like Athos, whose calm I can't recommend enough, and allow me this initiative I've taken. Besides," he continued, drawing his sword with terrible resolve, "I have particular business with sir, and I *will* be first. I want it, and will have it." It was the first time d'Artagnan had ever spoken so imperatively to his friends – until then, he'd been content to merely think that way. In response, Porthos stepped back, and Aramis tucked his sword under his arm. Athos remained motionless in his dark corner, not calm, as d'Artagnan had said but suffocated and barely breathing. D'Artagnan said to Aramis, "Return your sword to its sheath, Knight or sir might think you harbour intentions you do not." Then, turning to Mordaunt, he said, "Sir, I await you."

"And I, Gentlemen, listen and wonder. You discuss who will be first to fight me but you don't consult me on the matter, a business which concerns me, I think, more than a little. It's true, I do hate all four of you – but not to the same degree. And though I hope to kill all four of you, I have more chance of killing the first than the second, the second than the third, and the third than the fourth. Therefore, I claim the right to choose my first adversary. If you deny me this right, just kill me outright – I'll refuse to fight you."

The four friends looked at each other. "That's fair," said Porthos and Aramis both of whom hoped the choice would fall on them.

Athos and d'Artagnan said nothing but their silence was taken as assent. "Well!" said Mordaunt into the midst of the profound and solemn silence that reigned in that mysterious house. "In that case, I choose for my first adversary the one who, believing himself no longer worthy of the name Count La Fère, calls himself ... Athos!"

Athos rose from his corner as if a spring had thrust him – but to his friends' surprise after a moment of silence, he shook his head and said, "Sir Mordaunt, a duel between the two of us is impossible. That honour must be offered to another."

And he sat back down. "Ah!" said Mordaunt. "There's one who fears me already."

"A thousand thunders!" cried d'Artagnan, advancing a step toward the younger man. "Who calls Athos afraid?"

"Let him say what he will, d'Artagnan," said Athos with a smile mixing sadness and contempt.

"Is your decision final, Athos?" replied the Gascon.

"Irrevocable."

"All right, we'll say no more about it." Then, turning to Mordaunt, he said, "You've heard, Sir, that the Count La Fère will not do you the honour to duel with you. Choose someone else to replace him."

"If I don't fight him first, I don't care whom I fight," said Mordaunt. "Put your names in a hat, and I'll draw one by chance."

"There's an idea," said d'Artagnan.

"Indeed, that solves it," said Aramis.

"It never occurred to me," said Porthos, "and yet, it's so simple."

"Come, Aramis," said d'Artagnan, "write our names in that pretty little hand with which you wrote to Marie Michon to warn that sir's mother wanted to assassinate Milord Buckingham." Mordaunt reacted to this new gibe without so much as blinking; he stood, arms crossed, appearing about as calm as a man can be in such a circumstance. If it wasn't courage, it was at least pride that strongly resembles it. Aramis went to Cromwell's desk, tore off three slips of paper of equal size, wrote his name on one and his comrades' on the other two, and showed them to Mordaunt, who, without reading them, nodded to indicate they were fine with him. Aramis rolled them up, put them in a hat, and presented it to the young man. Mordaunt plunged his hand into the hat and drew out one of the three slips that he disdainfully dropped on the desk without reading it. "Ah, you young serpent!" murmured d'Artagnan. "I'd give up my chances of promotion to Captain of the Musketeers to ensure that slip bore my name!"

Aramis unrolled the slip, and no matter how calm and cool he hoped to be, his hands trembled with hatred and longing. "D'Artagnan!" he said loudly.

D'Artagnan uttered a cry of joy. "Ha!" he said. "There *is* justice in heaven!" Then, turning to Mordaunt, he added, "I hope, Sir, you have no objection to make?"

"None, Sir," said Mordaunt, flourishing his blade and trying its point on his boot.

As soon as d'Artagnan was sure his wish was granted, and this man wouldn't escape him, a calm, even tranquillity settled upon him, and he began the ritual of preparations for that grave affair known as a duel. He turned back his cuffs and scraped the sole of his right boot on the floor, none of which stopped him from noticing, for the second time, the care with which Mordaunt looked around the room, assessing locations and distances. "Are you ready, Sir?" he said at last.

"It's I who await you, Sir," replied Mordaunt, raising his head and giving d'Artagnan a strange look impossible to describe.

"Then take care, Sir," said the Gascon, "for I've some skill with the sword."

"As do I," said Mordaunt.

"All the better – it sets my conscience to rest. *On guard!*"

"One moment," said the young man. "Give me your word, Gentlemen, that you will engage me only one at a time."

"Is it for the pleasure of insulting us that you ask this, little serpent?" said Porthos.

"No, it's as sir here said, to set my conscience to rest."

"It must be for another reason than that," murmured d'Artagnan, shaking his head and looking around anxiously.



"Faith of a gentleman!" said Aramis and Porthos together.

"In that case, *Gentlemen*," said Mordaunt, "put yourselves in a corner like Sir Count La Fère who seems at least to know the rules of combat while he may not wish to fight. Give us space; we'll need it."

"So be it," said Aramis.

"So many complications!" said Porthos.

"Do as he asks, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan. "We mustn't leave sir the slightest pretext for misconduct, although it seems to me that's what he's looking for."

This new jape had no more effect on Mordaunt than the last. Porthos and Aramis went into the corner opposite to that of Athos, so that the two adversaries found themselves in command of the centre of the chamber, lit like a stage from the side by the two lamps standing on Cromwell's desk. Needless to say, the parts of the room farthest from the lamps were the least well lit. "Come," said d'Artagnan, "are you ready at last, Sir?"

"I am," said Mordaunt.

Each took a step forward at the same time, and their blades crossed. D'Artagnan was too accomplished a fencer to amuse himself, as they say in the academy of arms, by feeling out his adversary. He went right into a brilliant and rapid feint that was parried by Mordaunt. "Oh ho!" he said with a satisfied smile. And without wasting any time, thinking he saw an opening, he made a straight lunge, quick as lightning. Mordaunt parried in *fourth* so tightly that the point of his sword traced a circle no larger than a girl's finger ring. "I begin to think we're going to amuse ourselves," said d'Artagnan.

"Yes," murmured Aramis. "Amuse yourself but be alert."

"*God*, my friend! Take care," said Porthos.

Mordaunt smiled in his turn. "You have a nasty smile, Sir," said d'Artagnan. "Was it Satan who taught you to smile like that?" Mordaunt's only reply was an attempt to bind d'Artagnan's sword with a strength the Gascon hadn't expected from an opponent so slight in the body – but, thanks to a parry no less skilful than his adversary's, he diverted Mordaunt's steel that slid past rather than into his chest. Mordaunt took a quick step backward. "Ah! You break?" said d'Artagnan. "You turn? As you please, for I gain by not having to look at your horrid smile. Now we move into the shadows – all the better! You have no idea how terrible you look, Sir, especially when you're afraid. Turn and look me in the eyes and you'll see an honest face, something your mirror will never show you." To these words that were perhaps a bit rude but which served d'Artagnan in his practice of trying to distract his adversary, Mordaunt said nothing at all, meanwhile continuing to dance back and around, until he and d'Artagnan had completely changed places. His feral smile grew ever broader that made the Gascon suspicious. "Come, come, time to end this," murmured d'Artagnan. "This scoundrel has limbs of iron, and he hits hard!" And he pressed even harder on Mordaunt, who continued to back away, evidently as a deliberate tactic, keeping his blade firmly in line, and without making any mistakes of which d'Artagnan could take advantage. However, as the duel was taking place in a room with limited space, Mordaunt's heel soon touched the wall behind him, and he leaned back on the wall with his left hand. "Ha!" said d'Artagnan. "You'll retreat no further, my pretty friend! Gentlemen," he continued, narrowing his eyes and frowning, "have you ever seen a scorpion nailed to a wall? No? Well, watch this..." And in a single second, d'Artagnan made three terrific lunges at Mordaunt who parried desperately. All three struck but delivered only light wounds. D'Artagnan was astounded; his three friends gasped, mouths gaping. D'Artagnan was now too close to thrust again and took a half step back to commence a fourth lunge, all these moves blending into each other seamlessly. But just as, after a light and rapid feint, he began a lightning thrust, the wall before him seemed to split open, and Mordaunt disappeared into the gap. D'Artagnan's point probed after him but the wall shut as quickly as it had opened, and his blade was caught and broken off. D'Artagnan took a step back. The wall was closed and solid. Mordaunt had manoeuvred, while defending himself, until he was in front of the secret door by which he'd seen Cromwell leave. Reaching it, he'd found the hidden lever with his left hand and pushed it – and then he'd disappeared, like an evil genie who has the power to pass through walls. The Gascon uttered a furious oath that was echoed, from beyond the iron panel, by wild laughter, a laugh so devilish that even the sceptical Aramis shivered at the sound. "To me, Gentlemen!" shouted d'Artagnan. "We'll break this door down."

"He's the Devil himself!" said Aramis, running to help his friend.

"God, *he got away!*" howled Porthos, hurling himself shoulder-first against the panel that, held fast by its mechanism, didn't even budge.

"No. It's for the best," murmured Athos.

"I suspected something, *God be with you!*" said d'Artagnan, exhausting himself in useless blows against the wall. "I suspected something when the wretch kept turning around the room, I *knew* he was up to something with his damned dancing but who could have expected this?"

"It's the Devil looking out for his own," cried Aramis.

"No, it's a benevolent God protecting us from sin!" said Athos.

"Really, Athos," said d'Artagnan, shrugging his shoulders and turning his back on the door that stubbornly refused to open. "You're losing it. How can you say such things to people like us? *God be with you!* Don't you understand the situation?"

"Situation? What situation?" asked Porthos.

"In this game, it's either kill or be killed," d'Artagnan replied. "Is it essential to your program of expiation, Athos that Sir Mordaunt should be allowed to sacrifice us on the altar of his filial piety? If so, please tell us now."

"Oh, d'Artagnan! My friend!"

"Come on now, this is just too pathetic. That wretch is about to call down on us a hundred of Cromwell's Ironsides, who will grind us into powder. Let's go! Move it! Five more minutes here, and we're done for."

"Yes, you're right!" said Athos.

"Let's go!" said Aramis.

"But where are we going *to*?" asked Porthos.

"To our inn, old friend, to grab our gear and our horses, and from there, if God allows it, back to France, where the houses have honest walls. Our sloop awaits us – my faith, let's use it." And d'Artagnan, matching the deed to the word, sheathed his sword, picked up his hat, opened the door and ran down the staircase, followed closely by his three companions. Outside the door the fugitives asked their lackeys for news of Mordaunt but they'd seen no one else come out.

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The Sloop Lighting

D'Artagnan had guessed right: Mordaunt knew he hadn't much time and didn't waste a moment of it. He knew how decisive and quick his enemies were and resolved to act accordingly. This time the musketeers faced an adversary worthy of them. After carefully making sure the door was solidly shut behind him, Mordaunt slipped down into the underground passage, sheathed his now-useless sword and then, emerging in the garden of the neighbouring house, paused to catch his breath. "Good!" he said. "These wounds are nothing, or nearly nothing: two scratches on the arm, and another on the chest. I deliver better wounds than these – just ask the Executioner of Bethune, Uncle Winter, and King Charles! Now there's not a second to lose, for even a second might save them, and they must all die together, destroyed by the thunder of men, since we can't rely on God. They shall disappear, annihilated, and disintegrated. Now I must run till my legs can no longer carry me, until my heart bursts in my chest, so long as I arrive before them."

And Mordaunt began to sprint toward the nearest cavalry barracks that was about a quarter of a league away. He covered that quarter of a league in five minutes. Arriving at the barracks, he made himself known, demanded the stable's best horse, jumped into the saddle, and took to the road. A quarter of an hour later he was in Greenwich. "Here's the port," he said to himself. "That dark blot over there is the Isle of Dogs. Good! I must be half an hour ahead of them, maybe even an hour. Fool that I was – in my haste I damned near gave myself a heart attack. Now," he added, standing in his stirrups the better to see through the masts and cordage of the ships lining the docks, "the *Lightning*, where is the *Lightning*?"

As he said this to himself, as if to answer his thoughts a sailor sitting on a coil of ropes rose and took a few steps toward Mordaunt, who drew a handkerchief from his pocket and waved it for a moment in the air. The man seemed attentive but remained where he was. Mordaunt quickly tied a knot in each corner of his handkerchief, showed it again, and the man came up to him. (This was, it will be recalled, the agreed-upon signal.) The sailor was wrapped in a large hooded cloak that hid his figure and his face. "Sir," the sailor said, "have you by chance come from London for a jaunt on the sea?"

"Yes, most particularly to the Isle of Dogs," replied Mordaunt.

"There it is. And would the gentleman have a particular preference? One vessel over another? A steady ship, perhaps, or a ship that's fast...?"

"As lightning," Mordaunt replied.

"Well, then, it's my ship the gentleman is looking for, and I'm the skipper."

"I begin to believe it," said Mordaunt, "especially if you haven't forgotten the recognition sign."

"Here it is, Sir," said the sailor, drawing from inside his cloak a handkerchief with a knot at each corner.

"Good!" cried Mordaunt, leaping down from his horse. "Now, there's no time to lose. Have my horse led to the nearest stable and take me to your vessel."

"But your companions?" asked the sailor. "I was told to expect four, plus some lackeys."

"Listen," said Mordaunt, stepping up to the sailor, "I'm not the one you're waiting for just as you're not the one they expect to find. You took the place of Captain Rogers, didn't you? You're here by order of General Cromwell, and I come from him."

"I know," said the skipper, "because I recognise you – you're Captain Mordaunt."

Mordaunt started. "There's nothing to fear," said the skipper, lowering his hood. "I'm a friend."

"Captain Groslow!" cried Mordaunt.

"In person. The general remembered that I'd formerly been a naval officer and charged me with this mission. Has something changed?"

"No, nothing. On the contrary, everything is going according to plan."

"I thought that the death of the king..."

"The king's death has only hurried their flight – in a quarter of an hour, maybe only ten minutes, they'll be here."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Embark along with you."

"Oh? Does the general doubt my zeal?"

"No – but I want to attend to my own vengeance. Is there anyone who can take care of my horse?"

Groslow whistled, and another sailor appeared. "Patrick," said Groslow, "take this horse to the stable of the nearest inn. If you're asked to whom it belongs, tell them it's to an Irish lord."

The sailor led the horse away without saying anything. "Now you," said Mordaunt, "aren't you afraid that they'll recognise you?"

"No fear of that in this outfit, wrapped in both this cloak and the dark night. Even you didn't recognise me, so there's little chance they will."

"True enough," said Mordaunt. "Besides, they'd hardly be expecting to encounter you. Is everything ready?"

"Yes."

"Is the ... *cargo* loaded?"

"Yes."

"Five barrels full?"

"And fifty empty."

"That's right."

"We claim we're shipping a cargo of port to Antwerp."

"Perfect. Now get me aboard and then return to your post, for they'll be arriving soon."

"I'm ready."

"Oh – it's important that none of your people see me board."

"There's only one man aboard at the moment, and I'm as sure of him as I am of myself. Besides, he doesn't know you. The crew, though ready to follow orders, has been told nothing."

“Good. Let’s go.” They went down to the bank of the Thames. A longboat was moored to the shore by a chain tied to a bollard. Groslow assured Mordaunt that everything was fine, loosed the boat from its chain, and jumped in, quickly proving by his rowing prowess that he hadn’t forgotten his trade as a sailor. Within five minutes they were clear of the sprawl of buildings that, even at that time, already encumbered the approaches to London, and Mordaunt could see, as a shadow ahead, the small sloop swaying at anchor within four or five cable-lengths of the Isle of Dogs. As they approached the *Lightning*, Groslow gave a peculiar whistle, and a man’s head appeared above the rail. “Is that you, Captain?” the man asked.

“Yes, throw down the ladder.” And Groslow, swarming up the rope ladder like a squirrel, soon joined him at the rail. “Come on up,” Groslow said.

Mordaunt said nothing, just grabbed the ropes and climbed up the side of the ship with extraordinary grace and agility; driven by his desire for vengeance, he seemed capable of anything. As Groslow had foretold, the *Lightning*’s duty sailor didn’t seem to notice that his captain had returned with a companion. Mordaunt and Groslow went forward toward the captain’s cabin, a sort of shed on the foredeck pieced together out of planks. “And where will *they* stay?” asked Mordaunt.

“At the other end of the vessel,” Groslow replied. “Captain Rogers had given up the main cabin to his honourable passengers.”

“And they’ll have no reason to come to this end?”

“Absolutely none.”

“Perfect! I’ll hide in your cabin. Return to Greenwich and get them. Your ship has a longboat?”

“The one that brought us.”

“She seemed light and nimble.”

“As a canoe.”

“Tie her to the stern by a hempen line so it follows in our wake, and put the oars in it so it’s ready to depart at a cut of the rope. Pack it with rum and biscuits; if by chance the sea is bad, your men won’t be sorry to find supplies at hand to comfort themselves.”

“It’ll be done as you say. Do you want to see the powder kegs?”

“No, not till you return. Then I want to trim the fuse myself, to make sure it’s not too long. Take care to hide your face so they don’t recognise you.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Get going, I hear ten o’clock sounding from Greenwich.”

In fact, the tolling of a bell, repeated ten times, was sounding sadly across the water, while dark clouds began to roll across the night sky like silent waves. Groslow went out the door that Mordaunt closed tightly behind him. Then, having ordered the sailor on duty to keep watch with utmost alertness, he went down into his boat and rowed away rapidly with foam at either oar. The wind was cold and the jetty deserted when Groslow landed at Greenwich; several barks had just departed with the tide. As Groslow stepped ashore, he heard horses galloping on the gravel of the high road. “Oh ho!” he said to himself. “Mordaunt said there was no time to lose and here they are.”

In fact, it was the musketeers, or at least their vanguard that consisted of d’Artagnan and Athos. As they arrived in front of Groslow they pulled up, as if guessing that he was the one they were to deal with. Athos dismounted, unwrapped a handkerchief with a knot at each corner, and waved it in the wind, while d’Artagnan, ever cautious, leaned forward on his saddle, one hand near his holsters. Groslow, unsure if these cavaliers were the ones he awaited, had stepped back behind one of the bollards used to anchor ships’ cables but upon seeing the agreed-upon signal, he approached the gentlemen. His face was so deep in the hood of his cloak it was impossible to see his features, though the night was so dark that hardly mattered. However, Athos’s piercing eye divined, despite the gloom, that this wasn’t Rogers who stood before him. “What do you want?” he said to Groslow, taking a step back.

“I wish to inform you, Milord,” replied Groslow, affecting an Irish accent, “that if you’re looking for Captain Rogers, you won’t find him.”

“How’s that?” asked Athos.

“Because this morning he fell from a high mast and broke his leg. But I’m his cousin; he told me about the whole business, and asked me to take over for him, escorting wherever they wished the gentlemen who’d have a handkerchief knotted at all four corners, like this one I have in my pocket.”

And Groslow pulled out the same handkerchief he’d already shown Mordaunt. “Is that all?” asked Athos.

“No, Milord – there were also seventy-five livres promised if I brought you safe and sound to Boulogne or any other point in France you designated.”

“What do you think, d’Artagnan?” asked Athos in French.

“Tell me first what he said,” the latter replied.

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot you don’t understand English,” said Athos.

And he recounted to d’Artagnan the conversation he’d just had with the skipper. “That sounds reasonable enough,” said the Gascon.

“And to me as well,” replied Athos.

“Besides,” said d’Artagnan, “if this man is lying to us, we can always blow his brains out.”

“And then who would pilot us home?”

“You would, Athos – you know so many things, I’ve no doubt you know how to navigate a ship as well.”

“*My faith*,” said Athos with a smile, “my friend, you’ve found me out – my father intended me to serve in the navy, and I still have some vague notions of navigation.”

“You see?” said d’Artagnan.

“Go and fetch our friends, d’Artagnan, and hurry back; it’s already nearly eleven, and we’ve no time to lose.”

D’Artagnan rode back toward two riders who, pistols in hand, were posted *features* by a sort of long shed before the first houses of the town, watching the road in both directions; three other equestrians could be seen waiting beyond. The *features* were Porthos and Aramis, while the three riders were Mousqueton, Blaisois, and Grimaud – though the last, on closer inspection, was double, as he carried on his crupper Parry’s brother, who was to return with their horses to London and sell them to settle their accounts. Counting on this means to cover their expenses, the four friends had retained their cash that gave them a sum that, though not large, should be enough to deal with delays and contingencies. D’Artagnan beckoned to Porthos and Aramis to follow him, and the latter made signs to their lackeys to dismount and bring their baggage. Parry’s brother parted, not without regret, from his new friends; they’d proposed to bring him to France but he’d obstinately refused. “The reason is obvious: he has plans for Groslow,” said Mousqueton who recalled that it was Groslow who’d split open his head.

The little troop rejoined Athos. By then d’Artagnan had resumed his usual wariness; he found the quay too deserted, the night too dark, and the ship captain over-plausible. He’d told Aramis of the substitution for Rogers, and Aramis, no less wary than he, had echoed his suspicions. A slight clicking of his tongue against his teeth conveyed the Gascon’s anxieties to Athos. “We’ve no time for suspicions,” said Athos. “The sloop awaits us – let’s go.”

“Besides,” said Aramis, “we can go and still be careful about it. Just keep an eye on that skipper.”

“And if he plays us false, I’ll smash him flat,” said Porthos.

“Well said,” replied d’Artagnan. “Let’s go, then. Get in, Mousqueton.”

D’Artagnan raised a hand to signal his friends to wait, letting the lackeys make the first trip across the plank from the jetty to the longboat. The three servants got aboard without any trouble. Athos followed them, then Porthos, then Aramis. D’Artagnan came last, while continuing to shake his head. “What’re you worried about, friend?” said Porthos. “Upon my word, you’d put fear into a Caesar.”

“This is a port,” replied d’Artagnan, “but I don’t see a guard, or an inspector, or a customs agent.”

“And that’s a problem? Who wants them?” said Porthos. “Everything is going smooth as silk.”

“Too smoothly, Porthos. But never mind, we’ll trust in God’s grace.”

As soon as the plank was removed, the skipper sat down at the helm and motioned to a sailor who, armed with a gaff, kept the bow away from other vessels as they manoeuvrer their way out of the labyrinth of anchored ships. A second sailor stood on the port side, oars at the ready. When they were clear, his companion put down the gaff, the oars were deployed, and the boat began to pick up speed. “At last, we’re leaving!” said Porthos.

“But alas for us!” said the Count La Fère. “For we’re leaving alone.”

“Yes but at least we’re all together, and leaving without a scratch – that’s some consolation.”

“We’re not home yet,” said d’Artagnan. “I fear further trouble.”

“Dear friend,” said Porthos, “you croak like a raven! Trouble? Who will bother us on a night as dark as this, when you can’t see twenty paces?”

“Yes but tomorrow morning?” said d’Artagnan.

“Tomorrow morning we’ll be in Boulogne.”

“I hope so with all my heart,” said the Gascon, “and admit to my weakness. Here, Athos, you’ll laugh – but as long as we were within range of the jetty or the ships moored there, I expected a volley of musketry to break out at any moment.”

“But that’s impossible,” said Porthos sensibly, “because they’d also be firing on the skipper and his sailors.”

“Bah! Do you think that would stop Sir Mordaunt for a second?”

“Well,” said Porthos, “at least I lived long enough to hear d’Artagnan confess that he’s afraid.”

“I don’t just confess it, I’m proud of it. I’m not a rhinoceros like you. *Hey!* What’s that there?”

“The *Lightning*,” said the skipper.

“So, we’ve arrived?” asked Athos in English.

“We’ve arrived,” the captain said.

In fact, three strokes of the oars later, they hove to the side of the small vessel. The duty sailor was waiting and unrolled the ladder; he’d recognised the boat. Athos, with the agility of a mariner, mounted first; Aramis, with the skills gained by long experience with forbidden entrance by ropes and other means, went second; d’Artagnan, climbing like a Gascon mountaineer, was next; followed by Porthos, who hauled himself up with the brute force that, for him, took the place of skill. The lackeys had a harder time of it. Not Grimaud, who was slim and wiry as a gutter cat but for the portly Mousqueton and the awkward Blaisois, the sailors on the longboat had to lift them within range of the mighty arms of Porthos, who grabbed them by the collars and hoisted them onto the deck. The captain escorted his passengers to the cabin prepared for them, a single room which they were to occupy together, and then tried to leave under the pretext of having to go give orders to set sail. “A moment,” said d’Artagnan. “How many men do you have aboard, skipper?”

“I don’t understand,” the man replied in English.

“Ask him in his own language, Athos.”

Athos repeated d’Artagnan’s question. “Three,” Groslow replied, “not counting me, of course.”

D’Artagnan understood, as in responding the skipper had held up three fingers. “Ah!” said d’Artagnan. “Only three. That makes me feel better. Nonetheless, Athos, while you’re settling in, I’ll take a look around the ship.”

“And I,” said Porthos, “will see about getting us some supper.”

“A noble project and an act of charity, Porthos – I salute you! Athos, lend me Grimaud, because, having spent time with his friend Parry, he’s picked up a little English; he can serve as my interpreter.”

“Go, Grimaud,” said Athos.

A glowing lantern hung from the bridge; d’Artagnan took it in one hand, put a pistol in the other, and said to the skipper, “*Come*.” That was the only word he knew in English along with *Goddamn*. D’Artagnan opened the main hatch and descended into the tween-decks. The steerage was divided into three compartments: the one he entered stretched aft from the mizzenmast to the end of the poop deck, extending beneath the floor of the cabin where Athos, Porthos, and Aramis were preparing to spend the night; the second compartment, in the middle of the sloop, was offered to house the lackeys; while the third, toward the prow, extended under the improvised captain’s cabin wherein Mordaunt was hidden. “Ho!” said d’Artagnan, descending the ladder from the hatch while holding out the lantern, extending it forward. “So many barrels! It looks like Ali Baba’s cavern.”

(The *Thousand* and *One Nights* had just been translated and was very fashionable at the time.) “What’d you say?” asked the captain in English.

D’Artagnan understood him from his tone of voice. “I want to know what’s in these barrels,” d’Artagnan asked, resting the lantern on one of the kegs.

The skipper made a movement toward the ladder but restrained himself. “P-port,” he replied.

"Ah! Port honey?" said d'Artagnan. "Then at least we won't die of thirst." He turned back to Groslow, who was mopping his brow. "And are they all full?" he asked him. Grimaud translated the question. "These here are full, the rest are empty," Groslow replied in a voice that betrayed his anxiety despite himself. D'Artagnan tapped on the barrels, finding that five were full, while the rest sounded hollow. Then to the abject terror of the Englishman to see farther aft he passed the lantern right between two of the filled kegs – but seeing nothing, he said, "Let's move on." He turned toward the door to the second compartment. "Wait," said the Englishman, pausing to catch his breath. "I've the key."

And slipping past d'Artagnan and Grimaud with a trembling hand he inserted the key into the door and unlocked the second compartment where Mousqueton and Blaisois were already preparing their supper. They saw nothing of interest or concern, peering into every corner of the cabin by the light of the lamp that had been lit by their worthy companions. They passed quickly through the waist and went forward to visit the third compartment. This was the home of the sailors; three or four hammocks were hanging from the ceiling, as was a table hung upside-down by its legs, beside which two worm-eaten and shaky benches formed the whole of the furnishings. D'Artagnan looked behind two or three sails hanging from the walls but seeing nothing suspicious, went up a ladder and emerged onto the vessel's bow. "And this small cabin?" he asked.

Grimaud translated the musketeer's words into English. "That's my cabin," said the skipper. "Do you want to see it?"

"Open the door," said d'Artagnan. The Englishman obeyed. D'Artagnan extended his arm, holding the lamp, through the doorway, stuck his head in, and seeing the little room really was in use as a cabin, he said, "Good. If there's an army aboard, it isn't hiding here. Let's go see what Porthos has found for our supper."

He thanked the skipper with a nod and returned aft to the cabin of honour to rejoin his friends. Porthos hadn't found anything edible, it seemed, or if he had, fatigue had prevailed over hunger, for he was deeply asleep when d'Artagnan entered. Athos and Aramis, lulled by the first rollers of the sea, had begun to close their eyes but they reopened them when they heard their comrade enter. "Well?" said Aramis.

"All's well," said d'Artagnan, "and we can sleep in peace." At this assurance, Aramis allowed his head to drop back; Athos gave an affectionate nod; and d'Artagnan who had more need for sleep than food like Porthos, dismissed Grimaud, drew his sword, wrapped himself in a cloak, and lay down in front of the door in such a way that it was impossible to enter without the panel hitting him.

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The Port Honey

Within ten minutes the masters were asleep but not so the servants, who were quite hungry, and even worse, thirsty. Blaisois and Mousqueton were beginning to make their bed that consisted of a plank and a travel trunk, while nearby on a hanging table, swaying as the ship rolled, were balanced a jug of beer and three glasses. "This cursed rolling!" said Blaisois. "I feel like it'll make me as sick as I was on the way over."

"And we have nothing to stave off seasickness but some barley bread and this brew of hops!" said Mousqueton. "*Ugh!*"

"But what about your wicker-wrapped flask, Sir Mouston?" asked Blaisois, who'd finished making the bed, and stumbled over to the table where Mousqueton had just seated himself. Blaisois managed to get onto a chair, and said, "Your wicker-wrapped flask – did you lose it?"

"No, Parry's brother held onto it," said Mousqueton. "These devils of Scots are always thirsty. What about you, Grimaud?" asked Mousqueton of his companion, who'd just returned from escorting d'Artagnan on his tour. "Are you thirsty?"

"As a Scotsman," replied the laconic Grimaud.

And he sat down near Blaisois and Mousqueton, drew a notebook from his pocket and began to balance the accounts of their little society, of which he was the purser. "*Oh!*" said Blaisois. "My insides are turning over."

"For this symptom," said Mousqueton in a doctor's tone, "I prescribe some food."

"You call this food?" said Blaisois with a pitiful look, pointing at the bread and beer.

"Blaisois," said Mousqueton, "remember that bread is the true food of the French people – and not even the French can always get it. Ask Grimaud."

"Yes but beer?" replied Blaisois, with a rapidity that did honour to the French spirit of debate. "Beer, now – is that any kind of a true drink?"

"As to that," said Mousqueton, caught and somewhat embarrassed for an answer, "I must admit that beer is as abhorrent to the French as honey is to the English."

"Really, Sir Mouston?" said Blaisois, doubting, for once, the worldly wisdom of Mousqueton, for which he usually had the deepest admiration. "Really? The English don't like honey?"

"They hate it."

"But I've seen them drink it, though."

"Only as a penance. And the proof," continued Mousqueton, rising to his theme, "is that an English prince was drowned in a barrel of malmsey honey! I heard all about it from Sir Abbot d'Herblay."

"Drowned? The fool," said Blaisois. "I'd love to suffer such a fate."

"You could," said Grimaud, totalling his figures.

"What do you mean, *you could?*" said Blaisois.

"What I said," continued Grimaud, carrying the four and adding it to the top of the next column.

"I could? Explain yourself, Sir Grimaud."

Mousqueton remained silent during Blaisois's interrogation but it was clear that it had gotten his attention. Grimaud carried his calculation to the end and then said, "Port honey," extending his hand toward the first compartment he had visited with d'Artagnan and the skipper.

"What? In those barrels I saw when the door was opened?"

"Port honey," repeated Grimaud, starting a new computation.

"I've heard of this port," said Blaisois to Mousqueton. "It's an excellent honey from Spain."

"Excellent?" said Mousqueton, running his tongue over his lips. "I'll say it is! Sir Baron de Bracieux has some in his cellars."

"If we asked these Englishmen, do you suppose they'd sell us a bottle?" inquired the honest Blaisois.

"Sell!" said Mousqueton, succumbing to his old instincts for banditry. "It's easy to see, young man, that you've not yet had much experience of life. Why should one buy when one can take?"

"Take!" said Blaisois. "To covet our neighbour's goods? That's written down as forbidden, it seems to me."

"Oh? Where?" asked Mousqueton.

"In the Commandments of God or the Church somewhere, I'm sure of it. It's written, *Covet not thy neighbour's goods, nor his wife.*"

"That's a child's reasoning, Sir Blaisois," said Mousqueton in his most patronizing tone. "A child's! Where does it say in these scriptures you quote that an Englishman is your neighbour?"

"Nowhere, that's true," said Blaisois. "Or at least, I can't remember it."

"A child's reasoning, I repeat," said Mousqueton. "My dear Blaisois, if you'd spent ten years on campaign like Grimaud and me, you'd know how to distinguish between the goods of your neighbours and the goods of your enemies. Now, an Englishman is our enemy, I think, and this port honey belongs to the English. Therefore, since we're French, we're entitled to take it. Don't you know the proverb that what's taken by you is denied to the enemy?"

This pronouncement, spoken with all the authority of Mousqueton's long experience, overwhelmed Blaisois. He bowed his head as if to submit but suddenly raised it again like a man armed with an irresistible argument. "And our masters – will they share your opinion, Sir Mouston?" he said.

Mousqueton smiled with disdain. "Oh, maybe I should just go wake our illustrious lords from their well-deserved sleep and ask them! 'Gentlemen, your servant Mouston is thirsty, can he have a drink?' Do you suppose it matters to Sir Bracieux if I'm a little thirsty?"

"It's just so very expensive a honey," said Blaisois, shaking his head.

"If it were gold in liquid form, Sir Blaisois, our masters would still take it if they wanted it," said Mousqueton. "Why, Sir Baron de Bracieux alone is rich enough to drink a cellar-full of port, even at a pistole per swallow. I can't see why," continued Mousqueton, magnificent in his pride, "if our noble masters would partake of it, that we, their loyal servants, should be deprived of it."

And Mousqueton, rising, took the jug of beer, emptied it out a porthole to the last drop, and advanced majestically toward the door of the aft compartment. "But no! Locked!" he cried. "These English devils, how suspicious they are!"

"Locked!" said Blaisois, no less disappointed than Mousqueton. "Plague take it! What rotten luck! And now I feel my insides heaving more and more."

"Locked!" repeated Mousqueton with a face whose expression showed Blaisois he fully shared the younger man's disappointment.

"But didn't I hear you say, Sir Mouston," ventured Blaisois, "that once in your youth, at Chantilly I think it was, you fed both your master and yourself by taking partridges by snare, carp by fishing line, and bottles by lasso?"

"Yes, indeed," Mousqueton replied. "It's the honest truth, as Grimaud here can tell you. But that honey cellar had an air-vent, and the honey was in bottles. I can't throw a lasso through a solid bulkhead or use it to lift a keg that weighs twice what you do."

"No but you can pry two or three planks out of the wall," said Blaisois, "and make a hole with a hand-drill into a barrel."

Mousqueton stared wide-eyed at Blaisois, amazed to discover in the man unexpected qualities. "That's true," he said, "but I'd need a chisel to pry the planks, and a gimlet to drill the hole."

"Tool case," said Grimaud, drawing a line under his final balance.

"Oh, right! Our tool case," said Mousqueton. "I forgot about that."

Grimaud, in fact, was not just the purser of the troop but also its handyman, equipped with a tool bag as well as a ledger. Now, as Grimaud was a man of both foresight and caution, this canvas case that was rolled up in his baggage, contained an assortment of tools of the finest quality. In it Mousqueton quickly found a gimlet of suitable size that he appropriated. For a chisel, he drew from his belt his dagger that was stout and sharp. Mousqueton picked a section of the bulkhead where the planks were loose and went right to work. Blaisois watched him working with an admiration tinged by impatience, making recommendations from time to time about how to pull a nail or pry a plank, advice notable for its intelligence and clarity. After five minutes, Mousqueton had removed three boards.

"There," said Blaisois.

But Mousqueton was the opposite of the frog in the fable who thought himself larger than he was. Unfortunately, though he'd managed to decrease his name by a third, the same wasn't true of his body. He tried to pass through the opening but was dismayed to find that to do so he'd have to remove three or four additional boards. He sighed and picked up his tools to go back to work. But Grimaud, who'd finished his computations, had joined them, showing a great interest in the operations underway, and had noted Mousqueton's thwarted attempt to reach the Promised Land. "Let me," said Grimaud.

These two words were worth more from Grimaud than a whole sonnet from anyone else, so Mousqueton paused and turned around. "What, you?" he asked.

"I can get through."

"So you could," said Mousqueton, looking over his friend's long, slender body. "You could get through, and easily."

"That's right, and he knows which barrels are the full ones," said Blaisois, "since he was in the cellar already with Sir Knight d'Artagnan. Let Sir Grimaud pass, Sir Mouston."

"I could do it just as well as Grimaud," said Mousqueton, a little piqued.

"Yes but it'll take longer, and I'm thirsty. My inwards are getting worse and worse."

"Go ahead, Grimaud," said Mousqueton, giving the jug and the gimlet to the man assuming his place on the mission.

"Rinse out the glasses," said Grimaud.

Then he gave a little bow to Mousqueton, as if asking his pardon for finishing the expedition he'd so brilliantly begun, and then, lithe as a snake, he slipped through the opening and disappeared. Blaisois was thoroughly delighted. Of all the exploits accomplished in England by the extraordinary members of their little troop, this one seemed to him the most miraculous. "Now, Blaisois," said Mousqueton, with a look of superiority he didn't even try to conceal, "now you'll see how old soldiers can find drink when they're thirsty."

"The cloak," said Grimaud, from within the cellar.

"Ah, right," said Mousqueton.

"What does he want?" asked Blaisois.

"To have the opening concealed with a cloak."

"Why do that?" asked Blaisois.

"Oh, innocent one!" said Mousqueton. "What if someone comes in?"

"Ah! That is right," said Blaisois, in even greater admiration. "But he won't be able to see in there."

"Grimaud will be fine," replied Mousqueton. "He has eyes like a cat."

"Lucky for him," said Blaisois. "If I don't have a candle, I can't take two steps without barking my shins."

"You were never in the service," said Mousqueton, "or you'd have learned how to find a needle in a dark closet. But hush! I think I hear someone coming."

Mousqueton gave out a low whistle of alarm, familiar to all the lackeys from their younger days, sat back down at the table and gestured to Blaisois to do the same. Blaisois obeyed. The door opened. Two men came in, both wrapped in cloaks. "Oh ho!" said one of them. "A quarter past eleven, and not yet asleep? That's against the rules. Make sure that in another quarter of an hour everyone's in bed and snoring."

The two men crossed to the doorway to the compartment Grimaud had gone into, opened the door, entered, and closed it behind them. "Woe!" whispered Blaisois, trembling. "Grimaud is doomed!"

"He's a canny fox, that Grimaud," murmured Mousqueton.

And they waited, holding their breath with heads cocked to listen. Ten minutes passed, during which no noise was heard that indicated Grimaud was discovered. Then Mousqueton and Blaisois saw the door open again, the two cloaked men came out, locked the door with the same care they'd taken to unlock it, and went out, renewing the order to go to bed and put out the lights. "Should we obey?" asked Blaisois. "There's something strange about all this."

"They said in a quarter of an hour, so we still have five minutes," replied Mousqueton.

"Should we warn our masters?"

"Let's wait for Grimaud."

"What if they killed him?"

"Grimaud would have cried out."

"You know he's practically a mute."

"We'd have heard the blow."

"What if he doesn't come back?"

"Here he comes now."

In fact, at that moment Grimaud drew back the cloak that concealed the opening and his face appeared, pale, his eyes wide with fright, and their pupils like pinpoints in dishes of white milk. He crawled in, carefully holding the beer jug in one hand. It was filled with some substance that he brought near the smoky lamp to see well. Then he murmured a single syllable – "*Oh!*" –

With an expression of such profound terror that Mousqueton recoiled in fear and Blaisois nearly fainted. Nevertheless, they both glanced curiously into the beer jug. It was full of black powder. Now convinced that the vessel's cargo was gunpowder rather than honey, Grimaud leapt up and out the hatch and rushed to the cabin wherein slept the four friends. He gently pushed open the door that immediately awakened d'Artagnan, who was sleeping against it. Seeing Grimaud's dismayed expression he began to cry out but Grimaud quickly raised a finger to his lips, and then, with a puff of breath one wouldn't have thought could issue from such a slim body, from a distance of three feet he blew out the night-lamp. D'Artagnan raised himself on one elbow, Grimaud knelt next to him, and then, quivering, Grimaud whispered into d'Artagnan's ear a story so dramatic it needed neither gesture nor expression to emphasise it. During this account, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis continued sleeping like men who hadn't slept for a week while in the tween-decks, Mousqueton did up his doublet as a precaution, as Blaisois, gripped by terror, the hair standing up on his head, tried to do the same. Here is what had happened: scarcely had Grimaud disappeared through the opening into the aft compartment before, searching, he encountered a barrel. He knocked, and it echoed, empty. He tried another, also empty but the third that he thumped twice to make sure he wasn't mistaken, gave back a sound so dull that Grimaud recognised it had to be full. Feeling the keg for a good place to set the gimlet, his hand struck a spigot. "Good!" said Grimaud. "That saves me the trouble."

He positioned his beer jug, opened the tap on the keg, and felt the contents flow from one to the other. Having first closed the spigot as a precaution, Grimaud was lifting the jug to his lips, so as not to bring his companions a brew he couldn't answer for, when he heard Mousqueton's low alarm whistle. He expected some watchman on a night round, so he slipped between two barrels and hid himself behind a crate. A moment later the door opened, then closed again after admitting the two cloaked men we saw passing Blaisois and Mousqueton and giving the order for lights out. One of them had a dark-lantern, its glass sides carefully closed, and tall enough that the flame burned well below its top. In addition, the glass was wrapped in thick paper that absorbed most of the light. This man was Groslow. The other, his face shaded by a broad-brimmed hat, had in his hand something long, flexible, and coiled like a whitish rope. Grimaud, thinking they'd come to the cellar following the same urge as he, to sample the port honey, nestled further back behind his crate, while thinking that if he was discovered, his crime was no worse than theirs. Arriving at the barrel in front of Grimaud's crate, the two men stopped. "Do you have the fuse?" asked the one carrying the lamp, speaking English.

"Right here," said the other.

At the voice of the latter, Grimaud felt a cold shiver shake him to the marrow of his bones. He slowly raised his head above the edge of the crate until he could see, under the broad brim of the hat, the pale features of Mordaunt. "How long will it take to burn down?" asked Mordaunt.

"Five minutes, more or less," said the skipper.

This was another voice that was no stranger to Grimaud. He glanced from one to the other and recognised Mordaunt's companion as Groslow. "All right, then," said Mordaunt. "Warn your men to be ready to go, without telling them why. The longboat is trailing the sloop?"

"Like a dog on the end of a leash."

"Then, when the clock shows a quarter past midnight, gather your men and go quietly down into the longboat..."

"After first having lit the fuse?"

"I'll handle that. I want to be certain of my vengeance. The oars are in the boat?"

"Everything is ready."

"Good."

"That's it, then."

Mordaunt knelt down and inserted one end of the fuse into the spigot, so he'd only have to light the other end. Then he drew out his watch. "You understand? At a quarter past midnight, in other words..." He rose and looked at his watch. "In twenty minutes."

"Yes, Sir," replied Groslow. "Only, I must point out that the part of this mission you've reserved for yourself is dangerous, and it would be safer to have one of the men set off the fireworks."

"My dear Groslow," said Mordaunt, "you know the French proverb: *If you want something done right, do it yourself.* I intend to put that into practice."

Grimaud had heard everything, and understood most of it, while what he saw made the situation quite clear: for there was Mordaunt, laying the fuse, and uttering that proverb that for fidelity he'd spoken in French. In final confirmation, Grimaud carefully reached into the jug that Mousqueton and Blaisois were waiting so impatiently for, rubbed its contents between his fingers, and felt the grains of a coarse powder. Mordaunt and the skipper moved away. At the door they paused, listening. Mordaunt said, "Listen to how soundly they sleep!"

Through the ceiling could be heard the snores of Porthos. Groslow said, "They've been placed in our hands like a gift from God."

"And this time," said Mordaunt, "not even the Devil could save them!"

Smiling, the pair went out. Grimaud waited until he had heard the key turn in the lock and when he was sure he was alone, he slowly rose against the wall. "Oh!" he said, wiping huge beads of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. "How lucky it was that Mousqueton was thirsty!"

He scurried back through the opening in the bulkhead, hoping it had just been a dream – but when he saw the black powder in the jug, he knew it was no dream but instead a deadly nightmare. D'Artagnan as one might imagine, listened to this story with increasing attention and without even waiting for Grimaud to finish, he got swiftly up, put his mouth near the ear of Aramis who slept on his left, put a hand on his shoulder to prevent sudden movement, and whispered, "Get up, Knight but quietly." Aramis awoke. D'Artagnan repeated his warning and lifted his hand. Aramis got up. "You have Athos to your left," d'Artagnan said. "Warn him as I warned you." Aramis easily awoke Athos, who was a light sleeper, as is usually the case with those of a refined nature. They had a more difficult time awakening Porthos, who was inclined to resist being drawn from sleep and ready to protest aloud, until d'Artagnan placed a firm hand over his mouth. When all were up, our Gascon extended his arms around them and drew their heads close together, nearly touching. "Comrades," he said, "we must get off this vessel immediately, or we're all dead."

"Bah!" said Athos. "Now what?"

"Do you know who the skipper of this ship is?"

"No."

"Captain Groslow."

The shudder that ran through the three musketeers told d'Artagnan he was beginning to get their attention. "Groslow!" said Aramis. "The devil!"

"Who is this Groslow?" asked Porthos. "I don't remember him."

"The one who broke open Parry's head and is about to take our own."

"Oh ho!"

"And his lieutenant, can you guess who *he* is?"

"His lieutenant? He has none," said Athos. "There's no lieutenant on a sloop with a crew of four."

"Yes but our Sir Groslow is no ordinary captain. He has a lieutenant, and his lieutenant is Sir Mordaunt."

This time it was more than a shudder that passed through the musketeers, it was a spasm. These invincible men were nonetheless subject to a single mysterious and fatal influence, a terror which only that name could produce in them. "What do we do?" said Athos.

"Take over the sloop," said Aramis.

"And kill him," said Porthos.

"The sloop is mined," said d'Artagnan. "Those barrels I took for barrels of port are kegs of powder. When Mordaunt is confronted, he'll blow everything up, friends and enemies together, and by my faith as a gentleman, he's such bad company that I have no desire to go anywhere with him, especially to heaven or hell."

"Do you have a plan?" asked Athos.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Do you have confidence in me?"

"Command us," said the three musketeers together.

"Then, let's go!" D'Artagnan went to the stern window that was low but broad enough to allow passage, and opened it gently on its hinges. "This is our road," he said.

"*Devil!*" said Aramis. "That's a cold road, *dear friend.*"

"Stay here if you like – it will be hot soon enough!"

"But we can't swim to land."

"The longboat trails in our wake on a rope – see it there? When we're all in the boat, we'll cut the rope. That's the whole plan. Let's go, Gentlemen."

"One moment," said Athos. "The lackeys?"

"Here we are," said Mousqueton and Blaisois whom Grimaud had brought up quietly through the hatch to concentrate all their forces in the cabin.

Meanwhile the three friends stood motionless, contemplating the grim spectacle d'Artagnan had revealed by opening the window. It was a daunting scene indeed, and anyone who's seen it knows there's nothing more striking than a stormy night sea, dark waves rolling and crashing under the flickering light of a midwinter moon. "*God!*" said d'Artagnan. "Are we hesitating? If we're afraid to go, how will the lackeys manage it?"

"I won't hesitate," said Grimaud.

“Sir,” said Blaisois, “I must warn you, I can swim only in rivers.”

“And I, I don’t swim at all,” said Mousqueton.

Meanwhile d’Artagnan was slipping over the sill. “You’re decided, then, friend?” said Athos.

“Yes,” replied the Gascon. “Come, Athos, you who are the superior man, put your mind over matter. You, Aramis, command the lackeys. You, Porthos, kill anyone who tries to stop us.”

And d’Artagnan, after shaking hands with Athos, chose a moment when the sloop’s bow pitched up so its stern sank down, and slipped into the water that was already up to his waist. Athos followed immediately before the sloop could pitch down again; when the stern came up, the tow-rope rose out of the water, and they could see where it led to the longboat. D’Artagnan swam toward the rope and grabbed it. He clung to the rope by one hand, just his head out of the water, until a second later Athos joined him. Two more bodies plunged into the water behind the sloop. They saw the heads of Aramis and Grimaud. “Blaisois worries me,” said Athos. “Did you hear what he said, d’Artagnan, about swimming only in rivers?”

“If you can swim at all, you can swim anywhere,” said d’Artagnan. “To the boat! To the boat!”

“But Porthos? I don’t see him yet.”

“Oh, Porthos will come, don’t worry – he swims like Leviathan himself.”

In fact, Porthos was delayed, as a scene, half drama, half comedy, played out between him, Mousqueton, and Blaisois. The latter two, frightened by the roaring wind, alarmed by the sound of the waves, and terrified of the roiling black water, were backing away rather than advancing. “*Come on!*” said Porthos. “Into the water!”

“But, Sir, I can’t swim,” said Mousqueton. “Leave me here.”

“And me too, Sir,” said Blaisois.

“I’d just be an embarrassment, taking up room in the boat,” said Mousqueton.

“And I’d just drown before I even got to it,” said Blaisois.

“Why, I’ll strangle you both if you don’t get going,” said Porthos, grabbing them by their throats. “Forward, Blaisois!” Blaisois’s only answer was a groan stifled by Porthos’s mighty hand, as the giant, taking him by the neck and the ankles, slid him like a plank out the window and into the sea face-first. “Now, Mouston,” said Porthos, “I hope you won’t abandon your master.”

“Ah, Sir!” said Mousqueton with tears in his eyes. “Why did you have to return to the service? We were doing so well at the Château de Pierrefonds!”

And without further reproach, having turned philosophical and obedient, thanks to the example of Blaisois’s fate, Mousqueton jumped headlong into the sea – an act of supreme loyalty, as he considered himself already drowned. But Porthos wasn’t a man to abandon a faithful companion. The master followed his servant so closely that their double impact made a single great splash – and when Mousqueton returned to the surface, blind and blinking, he found himself borne up by Porthos’s great hand, effortlessly advancing toward the rope with the majesty of a sea god. At the same time Porthos felt something thrashing near his other arm and seized it by the hair: it was Blaisois, for whom Athos was already coming. “Don’t bother, Count,” said Porthos. “I don’t need you.”

And indeed, with a vigorous kick of his mighty legs, Porthos rose like the giant Adamastor above the waves, and three seconds later found himself among his companions. D’Artagnan, Aramis, and Grimaud helped Mousqueton and Blaisois to climb into the boat. Then it was the turn of Porthos, who, throwing himself across the bow, managed to avoid causing the craft to capsize. “And Athos?” asked d’Artagnan.

“Here I am!” said Athos, who, like a general commanding the rear guard, had waited until everyone else was aboard the longboat. “Are we all together?”

“All,” said d’Artagnan. “And you, Athos, do you have your poniard?”

“Yes.”

“Then sever the rope and get in.” Athos drew his poniard from his belt and cut the tow-rope, and the sloop sailed onward, while the longboat stayed where it was, with no motion but that given it by the waves. “Come aboard, Athos!” said d’Artagnan. And he offered his hand to the Count La Fère who found a place on a thwart in the middle. “Just in time,” said the Gascon, “as I think we’re about to see something interesting.”

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In fact, d’Artagnan had scarcely spoken when a low whistle was heard from the sloop that was beginning to disappear into the mist and gloom. “That must mean something,” said the Gascon.

Just then a lantern appeared on deck, making shadows dance at the stern. Suddenly a terrible cry, a cry of despair, echoed over the water – and as if this cry had chased away the clouds, the veil that had wreathed the moon slid away, and in the pale, silver moonlight the sloop was silhouetted against the horizon. On the ship shadows ran back and forth, crying out seemingly at random. From the midst of this chaos Mordaunt appeared on the after deck with a torch in his hand. The shadows flitting to and fro across the ship were Groslow and his men who’d gathered at the time appointed by Mordaunt, who, after listening at the cabin door to make sure the musketeers were asleep, had been reassured by the silence. *Indeed, how could he have suspected what had happened?* Mordaunt had then opened the aft hatch and hurried down, where, burning with vengeance and blinded by God, he’d set fire to the fuse. Meanwhile, Groslow and his sailors had gathered at the stern. “Grab the rope,” Groslow ordered, “and pull in the longboat.”

One of the sailors put a leg over the rail, seized the rope and pulled – and it came right up without resistance. “The tow-rope is cut!” the sailor cried. “The boat’s gone!”

“What! The boat’s gone!” said Groslow, rushing to the rail. “That’s impossible!”

“Maybe so,” said the sailor, “but see for yourself – there’s nothing in our wake, and here’s the end of the rope.”

It was then that Groslow uttered that cry of despair heard by the musketeers. “What is it?” demanded Mordaunt, coming up from the hatch, torch in hand, and darting toward the stern.

“Our enemies have escaped – they’ve cut the rope and fled in the longboat!”

Mordaunt leapt to the cabin door and kicked it open. “Empty!” he cried. “Oh, the demons!”

“We’ll go after them,” said Groslow. “They can’t have gotten far, and we can ram and sink them.”

“But no, the fire!” said Mordaunt. “I set the fire!”

“To what?”

“To the fuse!”

“A hundred hells!” Groslow shouted, racing toward the hatch. “Maybe there’s still time!”

Mordaunt’s only reply was a horrific laugh. Then, his face twisted by hatred more than by terror, raising his eyes to the sky to howl a final blasphemy, he threw the torch into the sea and followed it, hurling himself into the waves. Just as Groslow set foot on the ladder into the hold, the ship erupted like the mouth of a volcano. A jet of fire exploded into the sky like a hundred cannon firing at once; the air was alight with flaming debris, and then the sloop *Lightning* was gone, blown to burning splinters that flew and fell and went out as they touched the sea. Except for a fading hiss, it was as if nothing had been there at all. The sloop had disappeared beneath the surface, and Groslow and his men were annihilated. The four friends had seen every detail of the drama. For an instant the sea had been lit up for at least a league, and they could have been glimpsed each frozen in a different attitude, showing the terror they couldn’t help but feel, despite their hearts of bronze. Next the rain of fire fell all around them but the volcano was quickly extinguished, and darkness rushed back to swallow them, a small boat tossing on a stormy sea. For a moment they remained stunned and silent. Porthos and d’Artagnan, each of whom had taken an oar, held them out mechanically over the water, leaning heavily on them, hands clenched. “*My faith,*” said Aramis, the first to break the deathly silence, “this time I think it’s finally over.”

“Help me, Milords! Help! Save me!” came a lamenting voice that seemed to the four friends to rise from the waves like some spirit of the seas.

They looked at each other. Athos trembled. “It’s him!” he said. “It’s his voice!”

They all remained silent, for they all, like Athos, had recognised that voice. They only stared, eyes wide, toward where the sloop had disappeared, trying to peer through the darkness. After a moment they could distinguish a man swimming vigorously toward them. Athos extended his arm, pointing him out to his companions. “Yes, yes,” said d’Artagnan, “we see him all right.”

“Him again!” said Porthos, breathing like a bellows. “What! Is he made of iron?”

“My God!” murmured Athos.

Aramis and d’Artagnan were whispering to each other. Mordaunt made a few more strokes, and then, raising a hand from the water in distress, he called, “Have pity, Gentlemen, in the name of heaven! I feel my strength ebbing away – I’m going to die!”

That voice pleading for help was so vibrant, so penetrating, that it awakened compassion in Athos’s heart. “How pitiful,” he murmured.

“Great!” said d’Artagnan. “And you’re falling for it! Look, he’s swimming toward us again. Does he think we’re going to take him aboard? Row, Porthos, row!”

And setting the example, d’Artagnan plunged his oar into the water. Two long strokes sent the boat another twenty paces. “Oh! You can’t abandon me like that! You can’t leave me to drown! You can’t be so cruel!” Mordaunt wailed.

“Oh?” said Porthos to Mordaunt. “I think we’ve got you at last, my lad, and there’s no way out for you but through the gates of hell!”

“Oh, Porthos,” murmured the Count La Fère.

“Leave me alone, Athos – you’re becoming ridiculous with your misplaced charity! If he gets within ten feet of the boat, I swear I’ll break his head open with this oar.”

“Have mercy! Oh, don’t leave me, Gentlemen – have mercy, have pity on me!” cried the young man, panting and blowing out water whenever a wave passed over his head.

D’Artagnan who had completed his colloquy with Aramis, rose and said without taking his eye off Mordaunt for a second, “Mordaunt, be gone if you please. Your repentance’s too recent for us to have any confidence in it. Allow me to point out that the ship in which you intended to fry us all still steams just below the surface, and your current situation is a bed of roses compared to what you had in mind for us, and actually brought upon Groslow and his men.”

“Gentlemen!” pleaded Mordaunt, even more despairingly. “I swear to you my repentance is real. Gentlemen, I’m so young, I’m barely twenty-three! I was carried away by a natural resentment, I just wanted to avenge my mother! You, oh, surely you would have done no differently.”

“*Pfah!*” said d’Artagnan, seeing that Athos was weakening. “That’s as may be.”

Mordaunt was only three or four strokes from the boat and the approach of death seemed to grant him supernatural strength. “Alas!” he cried. “I’m doomed to die! You’ll murder the son as you murdered the mother! But think, by all laws human and divine, a son *must* avenge his mother. Besides,” he added, joining his hands in prayer, “if it’s a crime since I repent of it and I ask to be pardoned, I must be forgiven.”

Then as if his strength was failing, he sank until a wave passed over his head, silencing his pleas. “Oh! It tears me apart!” said Athos.

Mordaunt reappeared, blinking and blowing. “And I say that now we finish this,” replied d’Artagnan. “Sir the assassin of your uncle; Sir the executioner of King Charles; Sir the incendiary saboteur, I urge you to allow yourself to sink quietly – because if you come a single stroke closer, I’ll break your head with my oar.”

Mordaunt, as if in despair, swam a stroke nearer. D’Artagnan took his oar in both hands and Athos rose. “D’Artagnan! D’Artagnan!” he cried. “My son, I beg of you. This unhappy man’s about to die, it’s abominable to let a man die when you can extend your hand, and by doing so save him. Oh, my heart revolts against such cruelty, I can’t resist it – he must live!”

“*Mordieu!*” swore d’Artagnan. “Why not just turn yourself over to this wretch with your hands and feet already tied? It would at least be quicker. Ah, Count La Fère, do you want to die by his hand? Well! I, *your son*, as you call me, I *don’t* want it.”

It was the first time d’Artagnan had ever resisted a plea when Athos had called him his son. Aramis coldly drew his sword and gripped it between his teeth. “If the regicide puts his hand on the gunwale,” he gritted, “I’ll cut it off.”

“And I,” said Porthos, “listen...”

“What are you going to do?” asked Aramis.

“I’m going to jump in the water and strangle him.”

“Oh, Gentlemen!” cried Athos feelingly. “Be men, be Christians!” D’Artagnan uttered a sigh that ended in a groan, Aramis laid down his sword, and Porthos sat down. “Look,” continue Athos, “see how death is painted on his face. His strength is at its end, and in a minute more, he’ll sink to the bottom of the abyss. Ah, do not inflict this terrible remorse upon me, don’t force me to die of shame in my turn. My friends, grant me the life of this unhappy man, and I’ll bless you, I’ll...”

“I’m dying,” gasped Mordaunt. “Help me! Help...”

“Hold on a minute,” said Aramis, addressing d’Artagnan. Then, turning to Porthos, “One more pull at the oars,” he said.

D'Artagnan didn't reply by word or gesture – he was beginning to feel overwhelmed, half by the appeals of Athos, half by the scene playing out before him. So Porthos plied his oar alone, and since it had no counterweight, the boat pivoted in place, a motion that brought Athos closer to the dying man. “Count La Fère!” wheezed Mordaunt. “Sir Count! It's you I implore, you I beg, have pity on me .... Are you there, Sir? Everything grows dark .... I'm dying! Oh, help me!”

“Here I am, Sir,” said Athos, leaning forward and extending his arms toward Mordaunt with his innate air of nobility and dignity. “Here I am. Take my hand and enter our vessel.”

“I can't watch this,” said d'Artagnan. “I'm nauseated.”

He turned toward his two friends, who were leaning away from his side of the boat, as if they feared the man to whom Athos extended his hand. Mordaunt made a supreme effort, lifted himself, seized the hand stretched out to him and clung to it as if it was his last hope. “Good!” said Athos. “Put your other hand here.” And he offered his shoulder as another point of support, so that his head nearly touched that of Mordaunt, and the two mortal enemies embraced like two brothers. Mordaunt grabbed Athos by the collar. “Easy, Sir,” said the count. “You're saved now, rest easy.”

“*See, Mother!*” shrieked Mordaunt with flaring eyes and an accent of hatred impossible to convey. “I can offer you only one victim but at least it's the one you'd have chosen!”

And as d'Artagnan shouted, Porthos raised his oar and Aramis sought an opening for a thrust, the boat tipped alarmingly and dumped Athos into the water. Then Mordaunt wrapped his arms around his victim's neck with a cry of triumph and his legs around his arms, paralysing him like a serpent constricting its prey. Struggling for a moment, without crying out or calling for aid, Athos tried to stay on the surface but jerk by jerk he disappeared, until all they could see was his long floating hair. And then there was only a bubbling whirlpool to show where the sea had swallowed them both. Mute with horror, frozen, paralysed by outrage and fear, the three friends gaped helplessly, eyes dilated, arms outstretched. They were like statues, yet despite their immobility, the pounding of their hearts was audible, almost visible. Porthos was the first to come to himself, and tearing his hair out with his hands, he cried with a sob, “Oh, Athos! Athos! Noble heart! Woe! Woe to us who let you die!”

“Ah! Woe!” repeated d'Artagnan.

“Woe,” murmured Aramis.

At that moment, in the middle of a vast circle of sea lit by the light of the moon, four or five strokes from the longboat, a whirlpool like that which had formed at the sinking appeared and enlarged, and they saw reappear first a swirl of hair, then a pale face with staring but dead eyes, then a body that having risen chest-high from the sea, settled on its back and tossed limply at the whim of the waves. A poniard was embedded in the cadaver's chest, its pommel glinting with gold. “Mordaunt! Mordaunt!” cried the three friends. “It's Mordaunt!”

“But Athos?” said d'Artagnan. All at once the boat leaned to port under a new and unexpected weight, and Grimaud gave a cry of joy. All turned to where Athos, pale, eyes dull and hand trembling, clung to the gunwale. Eight eager arms immediately drew him up and into the boat, where Athos was warmed, reanimated, and reborn beneath the attentions and embraces of his friends, drunk with joy. “You're not hurt, I hope?” asked d'Artagnan.

“No,” said Athos. “What about ... him?”

“Oh! This time, thank God, he's dead. Look!”

And d'Artagnan, forcing Athos to gaze in the direction he pointed, showed him the corpse of Mordaunt tossing on the waves, a body that, sometimes floating, sometimes submerged, still seemed to pursue the four friends with a look of fury and mortal hatred. Finally, the body rolled over and sank. Athos followed it with a gaze filled with pity and melancholy. “Well done, Athos. Bravo!” said Aramis with an effusion that was rare for him.

“A mighty blow!” said Porthos.

“I have a son,” said Athos. “I wanted to live.”

“At last,” said d'Artagnan, “God has spoken!”

“It wasn't I who killed him,” murmured Athos. “It's destiny.”

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Mousqueton escapes being eaten, having avoided being roasted

A deep and lengthy silence reigned in the longboat after the terrible scene just recounted. The moon that had revealed itself for a moment as if God willed that no detail of this event should escape the sight of the viewers, disappeared again behind the clouds. Everything returned to that darkness which is so frightful in desert areas, especially so on that liquid desert called the ocean, and nothing could be heard but the whistle of the west wind as it crested the waves. Porthos was the first to break the silence. “I've seen many things,” he said, “but nothing has disturbed me as much as what I just saw. And yet, though I'm troubled, I must confess I'm also very, very happy. I feel like a hundred pounds has been removed from my chest, and I can breathe again at last.”

And Porthos breathed in and out with a sound that did honour to the power of his mighty lungs. “As for me,” said Aramis, “I can't yet join you in that feeling, Porthos – I'm still appalled. It's as if I can't believe my own eyes, I must doubt what I've seen, and I keep looking around the boat, expecting every minute to see that wretch rising up, the poniard in his hand that he's drawn from his heart.”

“Oh, no fear of that!” replied Porthos. “The blade went in just under the sixth rib and was buried to the hilt. That's not a reproach, Athos, there's no shame in that blow. That was a proper stab, and no mistake. And so, I'm alive, and I'm breathing, and I'm happy.”

“Not so quick to the victory parade, Porthos!” said d'Artagnan. “We've never been in more danger than we are now – for while a man can kill another man, he can't fight the elements. Now we're lost at sea, at night, without a pilot, in a frail boat; if we're capsize by wind or wave, we're done for.”

Mousqueton sighed sadly. “You, d'Artagnan, are ungrateful,” said Athos. “Yes, ungrateful to doubt Providence at the very moment when it's saved us all so miraculously. Do you think we would be guided by His hand through so many perils only to be abandoned? Not so. We were sailing on a west wind, and that wind still blows.” Athos looked up and found the North Star. “There's the Plough, and therefore east, and France, are to starboard. We'll sail before the wind, and if it doesn't change it will bring us near either Calais or Boulogne. If the boat capsizes, we're strong enough and good enough swimmers, five of us anyway, to right it again, or at least to hang on to it if that's beyond our strength. Plus, we are in the shipping lane of all the vessels that sail from Dover to Calais and from Portsmouth to Boulogne; if the water retained ruts like the land, we'd be in a valley carved by their keels. It's impossible for us not to be picked up by some fishing boat.”

“But what if we aren't picked up, and the wind turns to blow from the north?”

“Ah. In that case,” said Athos, “we wouldn't reach land until we'd crossed the Atlantic.”

“Before that happened, we'd die of hunger,” said Aramis.

“Yes, that's very probable,” said the Count La Fère.

Mousqueton uttered a second sigh more doleful than the first. “*Oh that*, Mouston,” said Porthos, “why must you sigh like that? I'm getting tired of it.”

“I'm just cold, Sir,” said Mousqueton.

“That's impossible,” said Porthos.

“Impossible?” said Mousqueton, astonished.

“Certainly. You're coated with so many layers of fat it's impossible for the air to penetrate it. It's something else – speak up, tell me.”

“Well, yes, it is, Sir. It's these very layers of fat that you admire that frighten me so.”

“And why's that, Mouston? Speak freely, these gentlemen will permit it.”

“Because, Sir, I remember that in the library at the Château de Bracieux there are a number of travel books, including the accounts of Jean Mocquet, the famous explorer for King Henry IV.”

“Well?”

“Well, Sir,” said Mousqueton, “in those books are many stories of nautical misadventures much like the one that threatens us now!”

“Go on, Mouston,” said Porthos, “you interest me.”

“Well, Sir, in such cases, Jean Mocquet says that the starving travellers have the frightful habit of eating each other, starting with...”

“With the fattest!” cried d'Artagnan, unable to contain his laughter, despite the gravity of the situation.

“Yes, Sir,” replied Mousqueton, somewhat abashed by this hilarity, “and allow me to say I don't see what's so funny about it.”

“Here you see devotion personified by my brave Mouston!” replied Porthos. “In your imagination, did you already see yourself dismembered and eaten by your master?”

“Yes, though my joy at the thought of thus saving Sir is not unmixed with some sadness. But I wouldn't regret my death too much, Sir, so long as I could be sure it would be useful to you.”

“Mouston,” said Porthos, touched, “if we ever again see my estate of Pierrefonds, you shall have, for yourself and all your descendants, the vineyard on top of the hill.”

“And you'll name it the Vineyard of Devotion,” said Aramis, “Mouston, to pass down through the years the memory of your near-sacrifice.”

“Knight,” said d'Artagnan, still laughing, “you'd join in partaking of Mouston, wouldn't you, after fasting for two or three days?”

“My faith, no,” replied Aramis. “I'd much rather eat Blaisois; we haven't known him nearly as long as Mouston.”

It must be assumed that this exchange of pleasantries, though mainly aimed at lifting Athos's spirit after what had just happened, made the lackeys more than a little uncomfortable, with the exception of Grimaud, who knew that in the event of famine he'd be the last chicken plucked. So Grimaud, silent as usual, was taking no part in the conversation, and was rowing as best he could, an oar in each hand. “Are you rowing, then?” said Athos.

Grimaud nodded. “Why are you rowing?”

“To keep warm.”

In fact, though the other castaways shivered with cold, the silent Grimaud was sweating from exertion. Suddenly Mousqueton uttered a cry of joy and raised a bottle over his head. “Oh!” he said, passing the bottle to Porthos. “Oh, Sir, we're saved! The boat is stocked with provisions.”

And rummaging under the bench from which he'd already drawn that precious specimen, he brought out a dozen such bottles, followed by bread loaves and salted beef. Needless to say, this discovery cheered everyone, except for Athos. “*Mordieu!*” said Porthos who it will be remembered, had been already hungry when he boarded the sloop. “It's amazing how hungry one gets after such an emotional episode!”

And he emptied a bottle without pausing and then ate a third of the bread and beef himself. “Now sleep, Gentlemen” said Athos, “or at least try. I'll take the first watch.”

To men other than our hardy adventurers such a proposal would have been absurd. They were wet to the bone, there was an icy wind, and the emotional storm they'd passed through should have been more than enough to deprive them of rest – but for these swashbucklers, with iron nerves and exhausted bodies, sleep was easily found despite the circumstances, coming almost as soon as it was called. Each of them, confident in their pilot, found what comfort he could and tried to profit from the advice of Athos, who, sitting at the tiller with his eyes fixed on the stars, sought not only the path toward France but perhaps also the face of God. Through the night he sat and watched alone, as he'd promised, thoughtful and alert, steering the small boat on its proper route home. After some hours of sleep, the travellers were awakened by Athos. The first glimmers of dawn were lightening the blue sea, and about ten musket-shots off the bow they could see a black mass on the waves beneath a tall triangular sail, long and slim like a swallow's tail. “A ship!” said the four friends in one voice, followed by those of their lackeys. In fact, it was a Dunkirk flute sailing toward Boulogne. The four musketeers, Blaisois, and Mousqueton all raised their voices in a single cry that rang out across the heaving waves, while Grimaud, without saying a word, put his hat on the end of an oar and waved it to attract the attention of anyone who might not have heard the shouts. A quarter of an hour later, the flute's boat took them in tow, and shortly after that they set foot on the ship's deck. On the behalf of his master, Grimaud offered twenty guineas to the skipper for passage, and with a favourable wind, by nine o'clock that morning our Frenchmen set foot on the soil of their native land.

“*Mordieu!* How strong one is on his own ground!” said Porthos, pushing his large feet deep into the sand. “Let them come at me now, whoever they may be, and they'll see who they're dealing with! *Morbleu!* I could defy a whole kingdom!”

“And I say, Porthos,” said d'Artagnan, “be careful what you ask for. It seems to me we're attracting attention here.”

“Of course!” said Porthos. “They admire us!”

“That doesn't comfort me, Porthos,” replied d'Artagnan. “I see men in outfits of official black, and I must confess that in our situation the sight of officials worries me.”

“They're the port's customs agents,” said Aramis.

“Under the old cardinal, the great one,” said Athos, “they'd have paid more attention to us than to cargo and merchandise. But under the current regime, rest assured, friends, they're more interested in duties and tariffs than in passengers.”

“I don't trust them,” said d'Artagnan. “I'm heading into the dunes.”

“Why not the town?” said Porthos. “I'd rather rest in a comfortable inn than in these godforsaken sandy wastes that are no use to anyone but rabbits. Besides, I'm hungry.”

“Suit yourself, Porthos!” said d'Artagnan. “But as for me, I think people in our situation are safest in the open country.”



And d'Artagnan, certain he'd be followed by the others, plunged into the dunes without waiting for a response from Porthos. The little troop followed him and soon slipped behind the dunes without attracting any further attention. "And now," said Aramis, after they'd gone about a quarter of a league, "let's talk."

"No," said d'Artagnan, "let's flee. We've escaped from Cromwell, from Mordaunt, and from the sea, three abysses that nearly swallowed us – but there's no escaping from Sir Mazarin."

"You're right, d'Artagnan," said Aramis, "and my advice is that, for safety, we should split up."

"Indeed, Aramis, we must separate," said d'Artagnan.

Porthos wanted to speak in opposition to this idea but d'Artagnan persuaded him by a hand gesture to remain silent. Porthos was usually obedient to these signals from his comrade, whom he good-naturedly recognised as his intellectual superior. So he swallowed his words before speaking them. "But why should we separate?" said Athos.

"Because Porthos and I were sent to by Sir Mazarin to serve Cromwell," said d'Artagnan, "and instead of serving Cromwell we served King Charles I that is not at all the same thing. If we return as companions of Gentlemen de La Fère and d'Herblay, our guilt is proven – whereas if we return by ourselves, our guilt remains in doubt, and doubt is something we can work with. I hope to lead Mazarin up the garden path."

"He's right, so he is!" said Porthos.

"You forget that we're your prisoners," said Athos. "We've given you our parole, and as prisoners we could go with you to Paris ...."

"Really, Athos," interrupted d'Artagnan, "it's shameful for a man of sense like you to reason like a third-grade schoolboy. Knight," he continued, addressing Aramis, who, hand proudly on his sword, seemed to have been won over to Athos's opinion at his first words, "Knight, please understand that in this situation, my wary nature is fully aroused. By ourselves, Porthos and I risk nothing at the end of the day – but if they tried to stop the four of us to arrest you two, well! Seven swords would come out, and this business, already bad enough, would be made infinitely worse for all of us. Look, if one pair of us gets into trouble, isn't it better to have the other pair at liberty to get them out of it, by bribery, ruse, or force? Besides, we might be able to obtain separately – you from the queen, we from Mazarin – the pardon we'd be refused as a group. Come, Athos and Aramis, you take the road to the right, and Porthos and I will take the road to the left. You gentlemen can make your way through Normandy, while we take the direct route to Paris."

"But if one pair gets taken along the way, how can they warn the other of the disaster?" asked Aramis.

"That's easy enough," d'Artagnan replied. "Let's agree on itineraries from which we won't deviate. You go by Saint-Valery, then Dieppe, then follow the direct route from Dieppe to Paris; we'll go by way of Abbeville, Amiens, Péronne, Compiègne, and Senlis, and at each inn or tavern where we stop, we'll write on the wall with a dagger point, or scratch on a window with a diamond, directions that will guide any comrade who comes looking for us."

"Ah, my friend," said Athos, "how I would admire the resources of your head if I weren't so occupied with adoring your heart."

And he offered his hand to d'Artagnan. "Does the fox have genius, Athos?" said the Gascon, shrugging. "No, he just knows a few tricks, like how to steal chickens, evade hunters, and find his way by day or night, that's all. So, is the matter settled?"

"It's settled."

"Then let's divide the money," said d'Artagnan. "We must have around two hundred pistoles left. What's the tally, Grimaud?"

"One hundred and eighty half-louis, Sir."

"That'll do. Ah, *cheers!* Here comes the sun! Welcome, friend sun! Though you're not as bright as you are in Gascony, at least here I can recognise you. Hello! You make me blink."

"Come, come, d'Artagnan," said Athos, "don't pretend to be such an iron man, we see those tears in your eyes. Be honest with us, as we all are – it's one of our greatest strengths."

"I guess," said d'Artagnan, "that it just isn't possible, Athos, to take leave of such friends as you and Aramis without feeling it when you're riding into danger."

"Of course not," said Athos, "so come into my arms, my son!"

"*Mordieu!*" said Porthos, sobbing. "I think I'm weeping. How foolish!"

And the four friends wrapped themselves in a circle of their arms. At that moment these four men, united in a fraternal embrace, had but a single soul. Blaisois and Grimaud were to follow Athos and Aramis; Mousqueton would suffice for both Porthos and d'Artagnan. They divided the money equally, as they always had; then, after each had clasped hands with all the others, the four gentlemen separated and set off on the agreed-upon routes, though not without turning back to call out final farewells that echoed across the dunes. At length they lost sight of each other. "*Damn it, d'Artagnan!*" said Porthos. "I must get this off my chest right now, because I can't stay angry with you in my heart – I have to say I think, for once, you've made a mistake!"

"How so?" asked d'Artagnan with his sly smile.

"Because if, as you say, Athos and Aramis are in real danger, this is no time to abandon them. I confess I was about ready to go with them, and may yet despite all the Mazarins in the world."

"And you'd be right to do so, Porthos, if that were the case," said d'Artagnan. "But consider this small fact which is nonetheless large enough to change everything: it's not our friends who are in the greatest danger, it's us – and it's not to abandon them that we separate but to protect them."

"Really?" said Porthos, eyes wide in astonishment.

"No doubt about it. If they're taken, they just spend some time in the Bastille – whereas if we fail to make our case and are imprisoned, we lose our heads on the Place de Grève."

"Oh!" said Porthos. "That's not exactly the barony you promised me, d'Artagnan!"

"Bah! That may not be as out of reach as you think, Porthos. Remember the proverb: all roads lead to Rome."

"But why are we in greater danger than Athos and Aramis?" asked Porthos.

"Because all they did was try to carry out the rescue mission given them by Queen Henriette, while we betrayed the assignment Mazarin gave us. Sent as envoys to serve Cromwell, instead we served King Charles; instead of helping to bring down that crowned head, condemned as he was by all those villains, Mazarin, Cromwell, Joyce, Pride, Fairfax, and so forth, we nearly saved him."

"Faith, that's true," said Porthos. "But do you really think, my friend, that in the midst of all these great events that Cromwell has had time to think of notifying..."

"Cromwell thinks of everything; Cromwell has time for everything; and believe me, dear friend, we'd better lose no time ourselves, for every minute is precious. We won't be safe until we've had a chance to talk to Mazarin, and even then..."

"The devil!" said Porthos. "What *are* we going to tell Mazarin?"

"Let me handle it – I have a plan. He who laughs last laughs best, after all. Sir Cromwell is powerful, and Sir Mazarin is cunning but I'd rather bandy words with those two than juggle fire with the late Sir Mordaunt."

"Ah!" said Porthos. "How pleasant it is to *say the late Sir Mordaunt.*" And the two set off on the road to Paris without wasting a moment, followed by Mousqueton who was too hot inside a quarter of an hour after having been too cold all night long.

## 249 The Return

Athos and Aramis followed the route outlined for them by d'Artagnan, travelling as rapidly as they could. It seemed to them that if they might be arrested, they'd be better off if it happened near Paris. Every evening, afraid of being taken during the night, they traced the agreed recognition sign on a wall or a window – but every morning they awoke still free, to their continuing surprise. As they approached Paris, the great events they'd witnessed in England, culminating in the execution of her king, began to fade like last night's dreams, while the events that had taken place in Paris and the provinces in their absence began to seem real and urgent. During their six weeks' absence, so many little things had happened that together they almost constituted a single great event. The Parisians, when they awoke to find themselves without queen regent or king, had been dismayed by their departure, and the absence of Mazarin, so long desired, didn't make up for the loss of the royal fugitives. The first emotion the Parisians felt when they learned of the flight to Saint-Germain, an escape we allowed our readers to witness, was like the terror felt by a child when he awakens in the night to find himself alone. Even the Parliament was moved, and it decided to send a deputation to the queen to ask her not to deprive Paris of her royal presence. But the queen was still under the double influence of the triumph at Lens and the pride of having so well executed their escape. The deputation was not only denied the honour of seeing her, they were kept waiting in the street, where the chancellor – that same Chancellor Séguier whom we saw in the first book in this series stubbornly pursuing a letter right into the queen's corset – presented the deputies with the Court's ultimatum that stated that if parliament didn't humble itself by repealing all the resolutions to which the throne objected, then on the following day Paris would find itself besieged. At that very moment, in preparation for this siege, Gaston, the Duke of Orléans, had occupied the bridge to Saint-Cloud, while Sir Prince, emboldened by his victory at Lens, garrisoned Charenton and Saint-Denis. Unfortunately for the Court that could have won considerable support with a moderate response, this threatening reply produced an effect opposite to what was intended. It wounded parliament in their pride, and, feeling themselves supported by the citizenry after the release of Broussel had shown their strength, they replied to this ultimatum with a statement that since Cardinal Mazarin was the notorious source of all these conflicts, he was therefore declared an Enemy of the State, and commanded to leave the Court that very day and all of France within a week – after which, if he didn't obey, he was fair game for attack by every subject of the crown. This aggressive response that the Court never expected, put both the Parisians and Mazarin beyond what could be resolved by the law. It only remained to be seen which side would prevail by force, the Parliament or the Court. The Court began preparations for attack, and Paris for defence. The citizens had begun undertaking the work that's always theirs in times of unrest that is, erecting barricades and tearing up the streets, when they saw aid arrive in the persons of the Prince de Conti, brother of the Prince de Condé, and of the Duke Longueville, Condé's brother-in-law, both escorted by the coadjutor. The citizens were encouraged by both the leadership of two Princes of the Blood and by the strength of their numbers. By this time, it was January 10, 1649. After a heated debate among the rebel princes, the Prince de Conti was named generalissimo of the King's Armies of Paris, with the Dukes of Elbeuf and Bouillon and Marshall de La Mothe as his lieutenant generals. The Duke Longueville, without office or title, had to content himself with assisting his brother-in-law the Prince de Conti. As for Sir Beaufort, he arrived from the Vendômois, bringing his haughty demeanour, his long, shining hair, and that popularity with the common Parisians that earned him the title of King of the Markets. The Parisian army quickly organised itself with that speed the bourgeois could show when some strong feeling prompted them to adopt the guise of soldiers. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, this improvised army had attempted a sortie beyond the walls, more to announce their existence rather than for any serious purpose. They marched beneath a flag bearing this singular motto:

We Seek our King

The last few days of January were occupied in petty raids outside the city that had no result but the theft of some livestock and the burning of a few houses. It was on February 1 that our four companions disembarked at Boulogne and began their journey toward Paris in two pairs, each taking its own route. Athos and Aramis, toward the end of the fourth day, found themselves skirting Nanterre to avoid encountering anyone from the queen's faction. Athos was impatient with such ignoble precautions but Aramis had tactfully pointed out to him that they had no right to be reckless given the mission they were charged with by King Charles on his scaffold, a mission supreme and sacred that could only be discharged at the feet of Queen Henriette. Athos conceded the point. The travellers found the capital's outer *Faubourg* guarded and under arms. At the city gate the sentry refused to let the two gentlemen proceed further and called for his sergeant. The sergeant came out right away, puffed up with the officious pride of the citizen playing soldier. "Who might you be, Gentlemen?" he demanded.

"Two gentlemen," Athos replied.

"Where do you come from?"

"From London," said Aramis.

"What are you doing coming to Paris?"

"Completing a mission for Her Majesty the Queen of England."

"Oh! Today everyone is the Queen of England's friend!" replied the sergeant. "I've got three other gentlemen inside with passes to enter to visit Her Majesty. Where are your passes?"

"We don't have any."

"What? You don't have any!"

"No, we've just arrived from England, as we told you. We know nothing of the current state of political affairs, having left Paris before the king's departure."

"Ha!" said the sergeant, with a knowing look. "You're Mazarinists who want to sneak in to spy on us."

"My good man," said Athos, who till now had been letting Aramis do the talking, "if we were Mazarinists, we'd have every pass possible, all stamped and correct. In your situation, believe me, it's those whose papers are perfectly in order of whom you should be most suspicious."

"Go into the guardhouse," said the sergeant. "You can tell your story to the post commander."

He gestured to the sentry who stepped aside; the sergeant entered first, and the two gentlemen followed him into the guardhouse. The guardhouse was packed with bourgeois and labourers; some played cards, others drank and danced. In one corner, almost out of sight, were the three gentlemen the sergeant had said had already entered, and who were waiting while the commander reviewed their passes. That officer occupied the next room, his high rank and importance earning him a chamber to himself. The first activity upon the entry of the newcomers was, from opposite sides of the

guardroom, a quick and inquiring look at each other from both groups of gentlemen. Those first to enter were wrapped in long cloaks and hidden by collars and cowls; one of them, the shortest of the three, kept himself behind the other two. At the sergeant's announcement that the men he escorted in were probably Mazarinists, the three earlier gentlemen turned their heads and paid closer attention. The shortest of the three took a step backward further into the shadows. Hearing the declaration that the newcomers had no passes, the unanimous opinion of the guards on hand seemed to be that they should be denied entry. "On the contrary," said Athos, "since I can see we're dealing with reasonable people, I think it quite likely we will be allowed to enter. It will be easy enough to send our names in to Her Majesty the Queen of England, and if she deigns to recognise us, it won't inconvenience you in the least to let us pass."

At that these words the short gentleman in the shadows started with surprise. He pulled his collar up even higher but this knocked off his hat; he bent down, grabbed it, and quickly replaced it on his head. "Good God!" said Aramis, nudging Athos with his elbow. "Did you see that?"

"What?" asked Athos.

"The face of the shortest of those three gentlemen?"

"No."

"It looked to me like – but that's impossible ...!"

At that moment the sergeant, who had gone into the officer's chamber to consult with his commander, came out, beckoned to the three gentlemen, and gave them some papers. "These passes are in order," he said, "and you may enter, Gentlemen."

The trio nodded, and hastened to take advantage of the opening that, upon the order of the sergeant, appeared before them. Aramis followed them with his eyes, and when the shortest of them went by, he gripped Athos's hand. "What is it, old friend?" the latter asked.

"I ... I could almost swear..." Then, addressing the sergeant, he said, "Tell me, Sir, do you know the three gentlemen who just passed through?"

"Only by the names on their passes, of Gentlemen Flamarens, Châtillon, and Bruy, three gentleman Frondeurs on their way to rejoin the Duke Longueville."

"How strange," said Aramis, speaking mainly to himself. "I thought I recognised the short one as Mazarin himself."

The sergeant burst out laughing. "Him, to come in here at the risk of being hanged? Not likely!"

"Ah!" said Aramis. "I may have been mistaken; I don't have the infallible eye of d'Artagnan."

"Who speaks the name of d'Artagnan?" demanded the commanding officer who just then appeared on the threshold of his chamber.

"Oh!" blurted Grimaud, his eyes widening.

"What?" asked Aramis and Athos at the same time.

"Planchet!" replied Grimaud. "Planchet in an officer's collar!"

"Gentlemen de La Fère and d'Herblay, returned to Paris!" cried the officer. "What joy! No doubt you've come to join the party of the princes!"

"As you see, my dear Planchet," said Aramis while Athos smiled to see how high the old comrade of Mousqueton, Bazin, and Grimaud had risen in the ranks of the citizen army.

"And Sir d'Artagnan, whom I just heard you mention, Sir d'Herblay, dare I ask if you have news of him?"

"We parted from him four days ago, *my dear friend*, and were under the impression he would precede us to Paris."

"No, Sir, I'm sure he hasn't returned to the capital. Perhaps he went instead to Saint-Germain."

"I don't think so, as we're supposed to meet him at the Hôtel de La Chevrete."

"I just passed by there today."

"And the lovely Madeleine had no news of him?" asked Aramis with a smile.

"No, Sir, and I don't mind telling you she seemed anxious about it."

"In fact, we moved quickly, and didn't lose any time getting here," said Aramis. "So, if you'll permit me, Athos, I'll forego further questions about our friend, and pay my compliments to Officer Planchet."

"Oh, Sir Knight!" said Planchet, bowing.

"Lieutenant?" said Aramis.

"Lieutenant, and with the promise to be a captain."

"And very handsome you look," said Aramis. "How did all these honours come about?"

"Well, Gentlemen, do you recall that it was me who rescued Sir Rochefort?"

"Yes, *for the love of God!* He told us himself."

"Thanks to that deed I was nearly hanged by Mazarin that naturally made me very popular with the people."

"And thanks to that popularity, you've become..."

"No, thanks to something even better. You know, Gentlemen that I served in the Piedmont Regiment, where I rose to the rank of sergeant."

"Yes."

"Well, one day, when no one could get the ranks of citizen militia to line up, some putting their left foot forward and the others their right, I succeeded in getting them to all march together. They made me a drill officer on the spot."

"That explains it," said Aramis.

"So," said Athos, "you have a crowd of nobles on your side now?"

"Indeed! To lead us as you've no doubt heard, we've Sir Prince de Conti, the Duke Longueville, Sir Duke Beaufort, the Duke Elbeuf, the Duke Bouillon, plus the Duke Chevreuse, Sir Brissac, the Marshall of La Mothe, Sir Luynes, the Marquis de Vitry, the Prince de Marcillac, Marquis de Noirmoutiers, Count Fiesque, Marquis de Laigues, Count Montresor, Marquis de Sevine, and others I think."

"And Sir Raoul de Bragelonne?" asked Athos, voice full of emotion. "D'Artagnan told me he'd commended him to your care upon parting, my good Planchet."

"He did, Sir Count, as if Raoul was his own son, so I haven't lost sight of him for a moment."

"Then," Athos said in a voice edged with joy, "he is well? No accident has befallen him?"

"None, Sir."

"And he's residing...?"

"At the Grand Charlemagne, as always."

"How does he pass the time?"

"Sometimes with the Queen of England, sometimes with Madam de Chevreuse. He and the Count Guiche never leave one another's sides."

"Thank you, Planchet, thank you!" said Athos, offering him his hand.

"Oh, Sir Count!" said Planchet, taking his hand and shaking it.

"Really, Count! Familiarity with an old lackey?" said Aramis in a low voice. "What are you thinking?"

"But, friend," said Athos, "he gives me news of Raoul."

"And now, Gentlemen," asked Planchet, who'd missed the exchange, "What are your intentions?"

"To re-enter Paris, if you give us your permission, my dear Sir Planchet," said Athos.

"I? Grant permission to you! You're mocking me, Sir Count, for I'm entirely at your service."

And he bowed. Then, turning to his men, "Let these gentlemen pass," he said. "I know them – they're friends of Sir Beaufort."

"Long live Sir Beaufort!" cried every voice in the post, and a way was opened for Athos and Aramis.

The sergeant approached Planchet and whispered, "What! Without a passport?"

"Even without a passport," said Planchet.

"Take care, Captain," continued the sergeant, addressing Planchet by the promised title, "take care – one of the three men who passed through just now warned me in a low voice to be wary of these gentlemen."

"But I," said Planchet majestically, "I know them personally, and will answer for them."

Having said this, he then shook hands with Grimaud, who seemed honoured by the attention. "Au revoir, Captain," said Aramis in his bantering tone. "If we run into trouble, we'll just drop your name to get us out of it."

"Sir," said Planchet, "in this as in all things, I am your servant."

"That fellow has wit, and plenty of it," said Aramis as he mounted his horse.

"And how could he not?" said Athos, mounting his own steed. "After years of brushing d'Artagnan's hat, some brains were bound to rub off on him."

## 250 The Ambassadors

The two friends immediately left the guardhouse, following the slope of the street down into Paris but upon arriving at the foot of the hill, they saw with astonishment that the streets had become rivers, and the squares were lakes. Following the endless rains of the month of January, the Seine had overflowed, and the river had invaded half of the capital. Athos and Aramis bravely entered the flood on their horses but soon the poor animals were in water up to their breasts, and the two gentlemen decided they'd be better off taking a boat. They hired one and ordered the lackeys to take the horses and wait for them in the markets of Les Halles. It was thus by boat that they made their way to the Louvre. By that time, it was full night, and with the light of a few pale lanterns flickering across the water from patrol boats and glittering from the steel of their crews' weapons, their challenges and replies echoing between them, Paris appeared in a new aspect that enthralled Aramis, who was always susceptible to the martial appeal of warlike scenes. They arrived at the queen's suite but were compelled to wait in the antechamber, as just then Her Majesty was giving an audience to some gentlemen who had news from England. "As do we," Athos said to the servant who'd made this announcement. "We not only have news from England, we've just come from there."

"What are your names, Gentlemen?" asked the servant.

"Sir Count La Fère and Sir Knight d'Herblay," said Aramis.

"Ah! In that case, Gentlemen," said the servant, hearing the names that the queen had so often hopefully uttered, "it's another matter entirely, and I think Her Majesty would be displeased if I delayed you even a moment. Follow me, if you will."

And he went on ahead, followed by Athos and Aramis. Arriving at the queen's chamber, he gestured to them to wait, and then opened the door. "Madam," he said, "I hope Your Majesty will pardon me for disobeying her orders when she hears I enter to announce Sir Count La Fère and the Knight d'Herblay."

At these names the queen let out a cry of joy that the two gentlemen could hear from where they waited. "Poor queen!" murmured Athos.

"Oh! Have them enter! Have them enter!" shouted the young princess as she dashed to the door. The poor child never left her mother the queen, trying by her filial attentions to help her forget the absence of her sister and two brothers. "Come in, come in, Gentlemen," she said, opening the door herself.

Athos and Aramis presented themselves. The queen was seated in an armchair, and before her stood two of the three gentlemen they'd encountered in the guard house. These were Sir Flamarens and Gaspard de Coligny, Duke Châtillon, brother of that Coligny who'd been killed seven or eight years earlier in a duel in the Place Royale – a duel over Madam de Longueville. At the announcement of the newcomers, they stepped back and anxiously exchanged a few words in low voices. "Well met, Gentlemen!" called the Queen of England, seeing that it really was Athos and Aramis. "Here you are, our faithful friends but state couriers travel even faster than you. The Court was informed of affairs in London before you reached the gates of Paris, and here are Gentlemen de Flamarens and de Châtillon come from Her Majesty Queen Anne of Austria to bring us the latest news."

Aramis and Athos looked at each other, the serenity and joy that shone from the queen's eyes filled them with surprise and dismay. "Please continue," she said, addressing Flamarens and Châtillon.

"You said that His Majesty Charles I, my august husband, was condemned to death despite the wishes of the majority of his English subjects?"

"Y-yes, Madam," stammered Châtillon.

Athos and Aramis looked at each other in even greater astonishment. “And that, led to the scaffold,” continued the queen, “at the very scaffold, my lord and king was saved by his outraged people?”

“Yes, Madam,” replied Châtillon in a voice so low the two gentlemen, though listening closely, could scarcely hear him.

The queen joined her hands in pious thanks, while her daughter wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck and embraced her, eyes overflowing with tears of joy. “Now, it only remains for us to present Your Majesty our humble respects, and withdraw,” said Châtillon who seemed abashed, and flushed when he met Athos’s fixed and piercing gaze.

“Not just yet, Gentlemen,” said the queen, detaining them with a gesture. “A moment, please! For here are Gentlemen de La Fère and d’Herblay, who, as you may have heard, have just come from London, and who might, as eyewitnesses, know details you haven’t yet heard. You could share these new details with my royal sister the queen. Speak, Gentlemen, speak – I’m listening. Don’t hide anything from me or spare me a single detail. So long as His Majesty still lives, and his royal honour is safe, nothing else can bother me.”

Athos turned pale and clutched at his heart. “What is it?” said the queen, who saw this movement and his pallor. “Tell me, Sir, I beg you.”

“Pardon me, Madam,” said Athos, “but I don’t wish to add anything to these gentlemen’s account before giving them the chance to acknowledge that perhaps they were mistaken.”

“Mistaken!” gasped the queen, nearly choking. “Mistaken! What’s happened? Oh, my God!”

“Sir,” said Flamarens to Athos, “if we are mistaken, the error comes from Queen Anne of Austria, and you wouldn’t presume, I suppose, to contradict her. You wouldn’t be so bold as to give Her Majesty the lie.”

“From the queen, sir?” replied Athos in his calm and sonorous voice.

“Yes,” murmured Flamarens, dropping his gaze.

Athos sighed sadly. “Would it not come instead from the man who accompanied you, and whom we saw with you at the guardhouse of the Barrière du Roule?” said Aramis, with his mocking politeness.

“For, unless we’re mistaken, the Count La Fère and I, there were three of you when you entered Paris.”

Châtillon and Flamarens winced. “Oh, explain yourself, Count!” cried the queen, her anguish growing from moment to moment. “On your forehead I read despair, your hands tremble, your mouth hesitates to announce some terrible news .... Oh, *my God, my God!* What’s happened?”

“Dear Lord, have pity on us!” said the young princess, falling on her knees beside her mother.

“Sir,” said Châtillon, “if you bear deathly news, no true man would have the cruelty to announce such news to the queen.”

Aramis approached Châtillon almost near enough to touch him. “Sir,” he said, lips tight and eyes glinting, “I’m sure you wouldn’t presume to try to tell Sir Count La Fère and myself what we can and cannot say here. Or would you?”

During this brief altercation, Athos, still with his head bowed and his hand on his heart, approached the queen and said, in a voice choked with emotion, “Madam, those of royal blood, who by their nature are superior to other men, have been granted hearts able to bear greater misfortunes than those of common people, for their hearts partake of their superiority. Therefore, it seems to me we must not act toward a great queen like Your Majesty as we would toward a woman of our own lesser state. O Queen, fated to join the martyrs of the earth, these tokens are the result of the mission with which you honoured us.”

And Athos, kneeling before the trembling, paralysed queen, drew from within his doublet, in its original case, the Order set in diamonds the queen had given to Lord Winter upon his departure, and the wedding ring which, before his death, Charles had entrusted to Aramis; since Athos had received them, these objects had never left his side. He opened the case and handed it to the queen with a mute and profound sorrow. The queen reached out her hand, took up the ring, brought it convulsively to her lips, and then without even a sigh or a sob, she turned pale, half rose, and fell unconscious into the arms of her daughter and her ladies. Athos kissed the hem of the dress of the unlucky widow, and then stood tall with a majesty that impressed all who saw him. “I, the Count La Fère,” he said, “a gentleman who has never lied, swear before God first, and this poor queen second, that all that it was possible to do to save the king we did, on the soil of England. Now, Knight,” he added, turning to Aramis, “let us go – our duty here is finished.”

“Not just yet,” said Aramis. “We have a message to give these two gentlemen.” And turning back to Châtillon, he said, “Sir, would you care to step out, if only for a moment, to receive the message I can’t convey in front of the queen?”

Châtillon bowed without a word as a sign of assent. Athos and Aramis went out first, followed by Châtillon and Flamarens; they crossed the antechamber silently but beyond, in the gallery, Aramis led them all to a window embrasure at the far end. Before the window he stopped, turned to the Duke Châtillon, and said, “Sir, you have permitted yourself, it seems to me, to treat us with some disrespect. This was not at all proper, especially in men who came to deliver to the queen the message of a liar.”

“Sir!” cried Châtillon.

“What *have* you done with Sir Bruy?” asked Aramis mockingly. “Has he gone to change his face that too closely resembled that of Sir Mazarin? We know there are a selection of Italian comedy masks in the wardrobes of the Royal Palace from Harlequin to Pantaloon.”

“I think you’re deliberately provoking us!” said Flamarens.

“Do you? Well, you’re smarter than your reputation, then.”

“Knight! Knight!” said Athos.

“Let me do this,” said Aramis, peeved. “You know very well I don’t like leaving unfinished business behind me.”

“Be it so, then, Sir,” said Châtillon, no less haughty than Aramis.

Aramis bowed. “Gentlemen,” he said, “another man than I or Sir Count La Fère would have you arrested, for we have some friends here in Paris – but we offer you a way out that avoids such concerns. Come out into the garden with us for five minutes.”

“Willingly,” said Châtillon.

“Hold on, Gentlemen,” said Flamarens. “Your offer is tempting but at the moment it’s impossible for us to accept it.”

“And why is that?” said Aramis, sarcastically. “Has spending time with Mazarin made you too cautious?”

“Oh! Listen to him, Flamarens,” said Châtillon. “Not to reply would be a stain on my honour and my name.”

“On that we agree,” said Aramis.

“But you won’t reply, nonetheless,” said Flamarens, “and I think these gentlemen will support me on this.”

Aramis shook his head in a gesture of incredible insolence. Châtillon’s eyes widened and he put his hand to his sword. “Duke,” said Flamarens, “you forget that tomorrow you’re commanding an expedition of the highest importance, one appointed by Sir Prince and approved by the queen. Until tomorrow evening you belong to them.”

“Very well – on the morning of the day after tomorrow,” said Aramis.

“The day after tomorrow,” said Châtillon. “That’s a long way off, Gentlemen.”

“I’m not the one asking for a delay,” said Aramis, “though it seems to me it might not be as long you think, if we happen to meet you on this ‘expedition.’”

“Indeed, Sir, we might meet then, and with great pleasure,” said Châtillon, “if you will take the trouble to look for us at the gates of Charenton.”

“So near, Sir? To have the honour of meeting you I’d go, not just a league or two but to the end of the world.”

“Very well! Until tomorrow, Sir.”

“I count upon it. Go, then, and rejoin your cardinal. But first swear on your honour that you won’t inform him of our return.”

“You make conditions?”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s the right of the victors, and you’ve not yet won, Gentlemen.”

“Then let’s draw and finish this now. It doesn’t matter to us who does or doesn’t command this expedition tomorrow.”

Châtillon and Flamarens looked at each other; there was so much mockery in Aramis’s words and attitude that Châtillon could barely maintain control but after a word from Flamarens he restrained himself. “All right, so be it,” he said. “Our companion, whoever he was, will be told nothing of these events. But you promise you’ll find me at Charenton tomorrow, won’t you, Sir?”

“Count on it,” said Aramis.

The four gentlemen then bowed, and this time it was Châtillon and Flamarens who led the way out of the Louvre, followed by Athos and Aramis. “Who’s all this anger for, Aramis?” asked Athos.

“By God! For those who’ve earned it.”

“What did they do to you?”

“What did they ... you mean you didn’t see it?”

“No.”

“They sneered when you swore we’d done our duty in England. Sneered! Now, either they believed it, or they didn’t; if they believed it, then they did it to insult us; and if they didn’t believe it, that’s an even worse insult, so it’s important to show them that we’re good at something. Anyway, I’m not sorry they’ve postponed our meeting until tomorrow, as I think we have an even tastier task for tonight than drawing swords.”

“What would that be?”

“What, by God? We have to detain Mazarin.”

Athos curled his lip in disdain. “Aramis, you know that sort of thing doesn’t suit me.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too much like a surprise attack or ambush.”

“Really, Athos, you’d make a pretty strange army commander; you’d insist on fighting only in broad daylight, you’d warn your adversary of the hour when you planned to attack him, and you’d be careful not to let any combat occur at night, lest you be accused of taking advantage of the darkness.”

Athos smiled. “Everyone must be true to his nature,” he said. “Besides, you don’t know the current situation, and whether arresting Mazarin would be good or bad, a travesty or a triumph.”

“Just say right out, Athos that you disapprove of my proposal.”

“No, on the contrary it sounds like good strategy, however...”

“However, what?”

“I think you shouldn’t have made those gentlemen swear to say nothing about us to Mazarin, because by doing so, you essentially commit us to doing nothing against him.”

“I’ve committed nothing to anyone, I swear. I regard myself as completely free to act. Come on, Athos, let’s go!”

“Where?”

“To find Sir Beaufort or Sir Bouillon; we’ll inform them of the matter.”

“All right but on one condition: that we start with the coadjutor. He’s a priest, an expert in matters of conscience, so we can share our secret with him.”

“Him?” said Aramis. “He’ll spoil everything, do it himself and take all the credit. Let’s go to him last.”

Athos smiled. There seemed to be something behind his smile that he was thinking but didn’t say. “Well, so be it!” he said. “Who shall we start with, then?”

“With Sir Bouillon, if you please; he’s the closest.”

“Very well but may we make another visit first?”

“What?”

“I’d like to stop by the Hôtel du Grand Charlemagne to embrace Raoul.”

“Of course! I’ll go in with you and we’ll embrace him together.” They returned to their hired boat and were rowed back to Les Halles. There they found Grimaud and Blaisois, who’d held their horses for them, and all four made their way to Rue Guénégaud. But Raoul wasn’t at his hôtel – during the day he’d received a message from Sir Prince and had departed with Olivain shortly thereafter.

### The 3 Lieutenants of the Generalissimo

As they'd agreed, upon leaving the Grand Charlemagne, Athos and Aramis made their way toward the hôtel of Sir Duke Bouillon. The sky was dark, and though it was approaching the usually quiet hours of the depths of the night, the town buzzed with the myriad sounds of a city under siege. There were barricades every few yards, chains stretched from borne to borne, and a bivouac in every square; patrols met and exchanged passwords, couriers rode between the headquarters of the different commanders, while the more peaceful citizens, at their windows, had animated and anxious conversations with their more militant neighbours in the streets, who loitered with halberds on their shoulders or arquebuses on their arms. Athos and Aramis hadn't gone a hundred paces before they were stopped by the sentries at a barricade, who demanded the evening's password but they replied that they were on their way to Sir Bouillon's to bring him important news, and the militia were contented with giving them a guide who, under the pretext of accompanying them and opening the way, could keep an eye on them. This guide went before them, singing:

*The brave Sir Bouillon's afflicted by the gout*

This was one of the latest trio-lets, or satirical street songs, popular tracker-el with innumerable verses that mocked everyone of importance on all sides. As they neared the Hôtel de Bouillon, they passed a little troop of three equestrians who must have known all the passwords, since they rode without guide or escort. Upon reaching the next barricade they just whispered a few words that enabled them to pass, with the deference due to their apparent rank. When Athos and Aramis noticed the trio, they pulled up short. "Oh ho!" said Aramis. "Do you see that, Count?"

"Yes," said Athos.

"What do you think of those riders?"

"What do you think, Aramis?"

"I think those are our three shadows."

"Yes, I definitely recognise Sir Flamarens."

"And I, Sir Châtillon."

"Which makes the cavalier in the brown cloak..."

"None other than the cardinal."

"In person."

"But how the devil do we happen to encounter them in the neighbourhood of the Hôtel de Bouillon?" asked Aramis.

Athos smiled but said nothing. Five minutes later they were knocking on the duke's gate. The door was guarded by a sentry, as was appropriate for a superior of high rank, and a courier was posted in the courtyard, waiting to carry any orders that might be issued by the lieutenant general of Sir Prince de Conti. As the trio-let had said, the Duke Bouillon was a martyr to the gout, and was laid up in bed but despite this grave condition that had kept him out of the saddle for a month – in other words, since Paris had been under siege – he nonetheless sent word he was ready to receive Gentlemen le Count La Fère and Knight d'Herblay. The two friends were admitted into the chambers of the Duke Bouillon. The invalid was in bed in his room, surrounded by an array of the most martial décor imaginable. All around, hanging on the walls, were swords, pistols, cuirasses, and arquebuses, and one might easily think that, once he was no longer crippled by gout, Sir Bouillon would be eager to take the battle to the enemies of parliament. Meanwhile, to his great regret, he said, he was forced to keep to his bed. "Ah, Gentlemen!" he exclaimed upon seeing his two visitors and making an effort to half-rise from his bed that caused him to wince in pain. "You are fortunate men! You can go forth, ride, and fight for the cause of the people. But I, as you see, am nailed to my bed. Ah, the devil take this gout!" he said, grimacing anew. "Devil take it!"

"My Lord, we've just arrived from England," said Athos, "and our first concern upon reaching Paris was to come and get news of your health."

"Many thanks, Gentlemen, many thanks!" replied the duke. "It's bad, my health, as you can see ... devil take this gout! But you say you've come from England? And King Charles is well, from what I've just heard?"

"He is dead, My Lord," said Aramis.

"What?" said the duke, astonished.

"He died on the scaffold, condemned by the Parliament."

"Impossible!"

"We were present at his execution."

"Then what of this story from Sir Flamarens?"

"Sir Flamarens?" said Aramis.

"Yes, he was just here."

Athos smiled. "With two companions?" said he.

"Yes, with two companions," the duke replied. Then, with some anxiety, he asked, "Did you encounter them?"

"Yes, I think we passed them in the street," said Athos.

And he smiled at Aramis, who looked back in some surprise. "Devil take this gout!" hissed Sir Bouillon, apparently rather ill at ease.

"My Lord," said Athos, "it must call on all your devotion to the Parisian cause for you to continue, suffering as you're, at the head of their armies, and we greatly admire your perseverance, Sir d'Herblay and I."

"What would you have, Gentlemen? One does what one must, as you show by your own examples, so brave and devoted. It's thanks to you that my dear colleague the Duke Beaufort has his liberty and perhaps his life but one must sacrifice oneself to public affairs. And so, as you see, I do sacrifice myself – but I swear, I'm nearly at the end of my strength. My heart and my head are fine but this devilish gout is killing me, and I confess that if the Court complied with my demands – which are quite justified, since I'm only asking for an indemnity promised me by the old cardinal himself when he confiscated my principality of Sedan – yes, if I were compensated by domains of equal value, along with a back payment for the non-enjoyment of my property during the period since it was taken from me, that is, for eight years – and if the title of prince was accorded to my house, and if my brother Turenne was reinstated to his command, why, I'd retire immediately to my estates and leave the Court and the Parliament to settle things between them however they may."

"And you would be quite right, My Lord," said Athos.

"Is that your true opinion, Sir Count La Fère?"

"Absolutely."

"And you as well, Sir Knight d'Herblay?"

"Indeed."

"Well! I assure you then, Gentlemen, that in all probability that's the course I'll adopt," replied the duke. "Right now, the Court is making overtures to me, and I must decide whether to accept them. Heretofore I've rejected them but if men like you tell me I've been wrong, and moreover since this devilish gout makes it impossible for me to render any service to the Parisian cause, then by my faith, I believe I'll follow your advice and accept the proposition made to me by Sir Châtillon."

"Accept, Prince, accept," said Aramis.

"*My faith*, yes. I'm even sorry I didn't take it tonight ... but there's a conference tomorrow, so we'll see."

The two friends saluted the duke. "Go, Gentlemen," said the latter, "you must be very tired from your journey. Poor King Charles! But in the end, it was partly his own fault, and at least we can console ourselves that France has nothing to reproach itself for in this, and that we did everything we could to save him."

"We can bear witness to that," said Aramis, "as I'm sure Sir Mazarin will be happy to hear."

"Well, there it is! I'm glad you can provide him such a testimony. He has a good heart, the cardinal, and if he weren't a foreigner, well! The people would do him justice. *Aiee!* Devil take this gout!" Athos and Aramis went out, followed down the corridors by Sir Bouillon's cries; it was evident the poor duke was suffering like the damned. Arriving at the door, Aramis asked Athos, "Well! What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About Sir Bouillon, *for the love of God!*"

"My friend, I think I agree with that trio-let sung by our guide: *the brave Sir Bouillon's afflicted by the gout.*"

"Quite so," said Aramis. "And that's why I didn't say a word to him about the object of our visit."

"Very prudent – it just would have given him a fresh attack. Let's go see Sir Beaufort."

And the two friends set out for the Hôtel de Vendôme. Ten o'clock was sounding as they arrived. The Hôtel de Vendôme was guarded as well as that of de Bouillon and presented just as warlike an appearance. There were sentries, couriers posted in the courtyard, stands of weapons, and horses saddled and holstered. Two riders were coming out of the gate as Athos and Aramis entered, obliging them to step their horses back to let them pass. "Oh ho, Gentlemen," said Aramis, "what a night this is for meetings. I confess that, having met so much tonight, I'll be truly dismayed if we fail to meet tomorrow."

"Oh, as to that, Sir," replied Châtillon, for it was indeed he and Flamarens who were coming out of the Duke Beaufort's gate, "I think you can rest easy on that score – for if we meet so often when we're not looking for each other, I'm sure we'll find each other when we are."

"I hope so, Sir," said Aramis.

"Me, I don't hope, I'm sure of it," said the duke.

Flamarens and Châtillon continued on their way, while Athos and Aramis entered and dismounted. They had scarcely handed their bridles to their lackeys and removed their cloaks when a man approached, peered at them by the flickering light of the lantern hung above the middle of the courtyard, gave a cry of surprise, and leaped into their arms. "Count La Fère!" said the man. "Knight d'Herblay! How do you happen to be in Paris?"

"Rochefort!" said the two friends together.

"The same! As you probably know, we just arrived from the Vendômois four or five days ago and are preparing some trouble for Mazarin. You're still with us, I presume?"

"More than ever. And the duke?"

"He's furious with the cardinal. You know our dear duke! And he's riding high – he's practically the King of Paris and can't go anywhere without being mobbed."

"Ah, good for him!" said Aramis. "But tell me, wasn't that Gentlemen de Flamarens and de Châtillon who left just now?"

"Yes, they came for an audience with the duke, coming from Mazarin, no doubt but I'm sure they found out exactly who they're dealing with here."

"I'm sure they did!" said Athos. "Could one have the honour of calling on His Highness?"

"This very moment! You know that for you he'll always be in. Follow me – I claim the honour of presenting you."

Rochefort marched ahead, and all doors were opened for him and the two friends. They found Sir Beaufort about to sit down to the table; the thousand interruptions of the evening had delayed his supper until just then but despite the gravity of that circumstance, the moment the prince heard the names Rochefort announced, he slid back his chair, rose, and eagerly advanced toward the pair.

"Ah, *for the love of God!*" he said. "You're always welcome, Gentlemen. You'll join me for supper, won't you? Boisjoli, notify Noirmont that I have two guests. You know Noirmont, don't you Gentlemen? He's my maître d'hôtel, the successor to Father Marteau, who baked those excellent pies you remember. Boisjoli, have him send one in, though not like the one he made for La Ramée. Thank God, we've no use tonight for rope ladders, daggers, or choke-pears!"

"My Lord," said Athos, "though we're well aware of his talents, don't bother your illustrious maître d'hôtel on our account. Tonight, with the permission of Your Highness, we just desire the honour of asking news of his health and seeing if he has orders for us."

"Oh, as to my health, it's as you see, Gentlemen, excellent. A constitution that can resist five years in Vincennes under the hospitality of Sir Chavigny can withstand anything. As for giving you orders, my faith, I swear I don't know what orders I'd give you, since there are so many others giving orders in their own names that, soon enough, I doubt I'll be giving any at all."

"Really?" said Athos. "I thought the Parliament was counting on the unity between the people's commanders."

“Ah, yes, our unity – there’s a thing of beauty. There’s no conflict with the Duke Bouillon, since he has the gout and can’t get out of bed that is one way of getting along but with Sir d’Elbeuf and his ox-like sons ... Have you heard the trio-let about the Duke d’Elbeuf, Gentlemen?”

“No, My Lord.”

“Really!” The duke began to sing:

*Sir d'Elbeuf and his beefy sons  
Are awfully fierce in the Place Royale  
They stomp their feet and shake their fists  
Sir d'Elbeuf and his beefy sons  
But comes the call to the battlefield  
Their warlike bluster disappears  
Sir d'Elbeuf and his beefy sons  
Are awfully fierce in the Place Royale*

“But that’s not the case with the coadjutor, I hope,” said Athos.

“It’s the opposite with the coadjutor that is even worse. Lord protect us from pugnacious prelates who wear armour under their vestments! Instead of biding in his archbishopric chanting *Te Deums* for victories we haven’t won yet, or praying for us in our defeats, do you know what he’s done?”

“No.”

“He’s raised a regiment he’s named the Corinthian after his archbishopric and he’s appointing lieutenants and captains like a Marshal of France, and colonels like a king.”

“Yes,” said Aramis, “but when it comes to fighting, surely he stays in his episcopal palace?”

“Not in the least, my dear d’Herblay! When it’s time for battle, he fights. Now, since the death of his uncle has given him a seat in parliament, he’s everywhere at once: in parliament, in council, in battle. Of course, the Prince de Conti is the general in appearance but what an appearance that is – a hunchbacked general! Everything’s going wrong, Gentlemen, everything’s going wrong.”

“And therefore, My Lord, Your Highness is discontented?” said Athos, exchanging a look with Aramis.

“Discontented, Count? Say instead that My Highness is furious. We’ve reached the point, I don’t mind telling you, though I wouldn’t say it to others, the point where if the queen acknowledged the wrongs she’s done me, revoked my mother’s exile, and restored me to the Admiralty that belonged to my father and was promised me upon his death, well! I’d be just about ready to train some dogs to say that in France there are some thieves even greater than Sir Mazarin.”

This time it was more than a glance Athos and Aramis exchanged, it was a significant look and a smile. Now even if they hadn’t met them outside, they’d have known that Gentlemen de Châtillon and de Flamarens had been there – so they didn’t breathe a word about Mazarin’s presence in Paris. “My Lord, we are satisfied,” said Athos. “We came to visit Your Highness at this late hour with no other object than to prove our devotion, and to tell him we are at his disposal as his most loyal servants.”

“And you have proven to be my most faithful friends, Gentlemen! If I’m ever reconciled with the Court, I’ll show you, I hope, that I’ll still be a friend to you and to those gentlemen, what the devil are they called – d’Artagnan and Porthos?”

“Yes, d’Artagnan and Porthos.”

“Yes, that’s it! But most of all, you understand, to you, Count La Fère and Knight d’Herblay.”

Athos and Aramis bowed and withdrew. “My dear Athos,” said Aramis, “I do believe you consented to accompany me, God be thanked, just to teach me a lesson.”

“We’re not done, though,” said Athos. “The evening isn’t complete until we’ve seen the coadjutor.”

“Then let’s go see our archbishop,” said Aramis. And they turned toward the Île de la Cité.

As they once more approached the centre of Paris, Athos and Aramis were again blocked by the flood and had to hire a boat. It was now after eleven o’clock but everyone knew there was no wrong time to visit the coadjutor; his inexhaustible energy turned night into day and day into night. The episcopal palace rose before them out of the water, and one would have said, from the number of boats swarming around the mansion, that this wasn’t Paris but Venice. The skiffs came and went in every direction, poling into the labyrinth of the streets of the Cité, or pulling away toward the Arsenal or over to Quai Saint-Victor, as if skimming across a lake. Some of these boats were mute and mysterious but others were noisy and gleaming with lanterns. The two friends glided through this aquatic traffic and joined those approaching their destination. The ground floor of the episcopal palace was inundated but ladders had been placed against the walls, so that the chief result of the flood was that, instead of entering by the doors, they went in through the windows. In this way Athos and Aramis ended up in the prelate’s antechamber, a hall crowded with lords and lackeys, for a dozen lords were on hand awaiting their turn. “My God, Athos!” said Aramis. “Are we going to give this fop of a coadjutor the pleasure of making us wait in his antechamber?”

Athos smiled. “My friend,” he said, “we must be patient with the inconveniences of dealing with the important. Since the coadjutor’s one of the seven or eight kings reigning in Paris, naturally he’s a court.”

“Maybe so,” said Aramis, “but we’re no mere courtiers.”

“Then we’ll send in our names, and if he won’t receive us, well! We’ll leave him to his affairs and the affairs of France. It’s just a matter of finding the right lackey and slipping a half-pistole into his hand.”

“You’re right,” said Aramis, “but if I’m not mistaken ... yes, it’s him. Bazin! Over here, you clown!”

Bazin, who, resplendent in his church vestments, was just then majestically crossing the antechamber, stopped and turned, frowning, to see who was so insolent as to address him in such a manner. But as soon as he recognised Aramis the tiger became a lamb, and approaching the two gentlemen, he said, “What! It’s you, Sir Knight! You arrive just when we were most anxious about you! Oh, I’m so happy to see you again!”

“Fine, fine, Master Bazin but a truce to compliments,” said Aramis. “We’ve come to see Sir Coadjuteur, and as we’re pressed for time, we need to see him at once.”

“Of course!” said Bazin. “Right away – the waiting room is no place for lords of your standing. Only he’s locked in a secret conference right now with a Sir Bruy.”

“De Bruy!” said Athos and Aramis together.

“Yes! I’m the one who announced him, so I remember the name perfectly. Do you know him, Sir?” added Bazin, turning to Aramis.

“I believe so.”

“That’s more than I could say,” said Bazin. “He was so wrapped up in his cloak and hat that I couldn’t see his face no matter how I tried. But I’ll go in to announce you, and maybe this time I’ll get a glimpse.”

“Never mind that,” said Aramis. “We’ll give up on seeing Sir Coadjuteur tonight – isn’t that so, Athos?”

“As you like,” said the count.

“Yes, his business with Sir Bruy is far too important for us to interrupt.”

“Shall I inform the archbishop that Gentlemen had stopped by?”

“No, it isn’t worth the trouble,” said Aramis. “Let’s go, Athos.”

And the two friends marched out through the crowd of lackeys, followed by Bazin, who emphasised their importance with the effusiveness of his farewells. “Well, then?” asked Athos when he and Aramis were once more in their boat. “Do you begin to see that we would have been doing our good friends no favour by calling out the guards to arrest Sir Mazarin?”

“You are wisdom incarnate, Athos,” replied Aramis.

Discussing the matter, what particularly struck the two friends was of how little importance to the Court of France were those terrible events in England that seemed to occupy the attention of the rest of Europe. In fact, in all of Paris, except for a poor widow and a royal orphan who wept in a dark corner of the Louvre, no one seemed aware that a king called Charles I had ever existed, and that this king had just died on the scaffold. The two friends arranged to meet again at ten the next morning, for, though the night was well along, when they arrived at the door of their lodgings Aramis announced that he still had several important visits to make, and left Athos to enter alone. As ten was sounding the next morning they were reunited. For his part, Athos had been out and about since six. “Any news?” he asked.

“None – no one has seen d’Artagnan anywhere, and Porthos has yet to show himself. You?”

“Nothing.”

“The devil!” said Aramis.

“This delay isn’t natural,” said Athos. “They took the most direct route, and should have arrived before us.”

“Plus, we both know how quickly d’Artagnan travels,” added Aramis. “He’s not the man to lose any time, knowing we’re waiting for him ....”

“He was figuring, you remember, on being here by the fifth.”

“And here it is the ninth. The agreed-upon waiting period expires tonight.”

“What do you intend to do,” asked Athos, “if we have no news by tonight?”

“*For the love of God!* We should head out looking for them.”

“Very well,” said Athos.

“What about Raoul?” asked Aramis.

A cloud passed over the count’s expression. “I admit I’m anxious about Raoul,” he said. “He’d a message yesterday from the Prince de Condé, went to rejoin him at Saint-Cloud, and hasn’t been back.”

“Have you seen Madam de Chevreuse?”

“She wasn’t at home. And you, Aramis – I imagine you must have gone by Madam Longueville’s?”

“I did indeed.”

“Well?”

“She wasn’t at home either but at least she left the address of her new lodgings.”

“Where is that?”

“You’d never guess in a thousand tries.”

“How can I guess where she’d be at midnight? For I presume you went straight there after you left me last night. How am I supposed to guess the nighttime abode of the most lovely and energetic of all the lady Frondeurs?”

“At the Hôtel de Ville, *my dear!*”

“The Hotel de Ville? Has she been appointed the new Merchants’ Provost?”

“No, she’s appointed herself the Acting Queen of Paris – and since she didn’t dare establish her court in the Royal Palace or the Tuileries, she’s installed herself in the Hôtel de Ville, where at any moment she’s due to present an heir to our dear Duke Longueville.”

“You didn’t inform me she was in that condition, Aramis,” said Athos.

“Oh, really? It must have slipped my mind – I beg your pardon.”

“Now what are we going to do until tonight?” asked Athos. “It sounds like we have some time on our hands.”

“Not at all, *my friend*, we have our work cut out for us.”

“Really? Where?”

“Just outside Charenton, *Morbleu!* I hope, as promised, to meet there a certain Sir Châtillon whom I’ve long detested.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he’s the brother of a certain Sir Coligny.”

“Ah, right, I forgot – that Coligny who presumed to be your rival. He was cruelly punished for his audacity, you know and ought to be satisfied with that.”

"Yes but what would you have? It's not enough for me. I'm hot-blooded by nature; it's the only thing that's holding me back from advancement in the Church. Of course, you know, Athos that you don't have to go with me."

"Come, now," said Athos, "you're joking!"

"In that case, *my dear*, if you're going with me, we've no time to lose. The drums are beating, the cannons are rolling, and I saw the militia lining up for battle in front of the Hôtel de Ville. There's certainly going to be a battle beyond Charenton, as the Duke Châtillon told us yesterday."

"I would have thought," said Athos, "that last night's conferences would have changed those warlike plans."

"It will change what follows but they have to fight regardless, if only to cover for the conferences."

"Those poor people!" said Athos. "Going out to get themselves killed so Sedan can be returned to Sir Bouillon, Sir Beaufort can enjoy the Admiralty, and the coadjutor can be made a cardinal!"

"Come, now, *my dear*," said Aramis. "Admit you wouldn't be so concerned about this battle if it didn't look like Raoul will be mixed up in it."

"You may be right, Aramis."

"Well, then, let's go to where the fighting is – it's the best way to find d'Artagnan, Porthos, and maybe even Raoul."

"Alas!" said Athos.

"My good friend," said Aramis, "now that we're in Paris, you really must lose this habit of sighing ruefully. When it's wartime, Athos, *Morbleu*, go to war! Are you a man of the sword, or are you turning priest? Here, look how gloriously the militia marches by. It stirs the blood! And their captain, look there – what could be more warlike?"

"They're coming out of the Rue du Mouton – sadly appropriate for such sheep."

"But with a drummer leading the way, just like real soldiers! Look at that officer, the way he struts and swaggers!"

"Hey!" said Grimaud.

"What?" asked Athos.

"Planchet, Sir."

"Ha! Lieutenant yesterday, captain today, and doubtless a colonel tomorrow," said Aramis. "Within a week the fellow will be a Marshal of France."

"Let's ask him what's going on," said Athos.

And the two friends approached Planchet, who, prouder than ever of his new rank, deigned to explain to the gentlemen that he was ordered to take up position in the Place Royale with two hundred men, there to act as a reserve and rear guard for the Parisian army until ordered to advance on Charenton. Since Athos and Aramis were on his side, they escorted Planchet to his position. Planchet manoeuvred his men on the Place Royale very skilfully, arranging them in echelon behind a long column of militia that stretched to the Rue Saint-Antoine, awaiting the signal for battle. "This day will be a hot one," said Planchet in an aggressive tone.

"Yes, no doubt," said Aramis, "but you're a long way from the enemy."

"Oh, you'll see, Sir – we'll decrease that distance," replied a citizen soldier.

Aramis bowed, then turned toward Athos. "I don't care to park myself all day in the Place Royale with these people," he said. "What do you say to going to the front? We'll get a better view from there."

"And Sir Châtillon isn't going to come looking for you in the Place Royale, is he? Let's go forward, my friend."

"And don't you also have a couple of words to say to Sir Flamarens?"

"Friend," said Athos, "I've resolved not to draw my sword again unless it's absolutely necessary."

"And since when have you decided that?"

"Since I last drew my poniard."

"Oh, fine! Another souvenir of Sir Mordaunt. *My dear*, the last thing you need is to feel remorse for having killed that devil."

"Hush!" said Athos, putting a finger to his mouth with that sad smile that was unique to him. "Let us speak no more of Mordaunt – it will bring only misfortune." And Athos spurred his horse toward Charenton, skirting the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, then the valley of Fécamp that teemed with armed bourgeois. It goes without saying that Aramis was less than an arm's-length behind.

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The Battle of Charenton

As Athos and Aramis rode forward, passing various units formed in columns on the road, they saw men in shining cuirasses bearing rusty weapons, and bright new muskets next to ancient halberds. "I think we've found the actual battlefield," said Aramis. "Do you see that cavalry unit standing there at the foot of the bridge, pistols at the ready? ... Ah, take care – horse artillery coming toward us!"

*"Ah çà!"* said Athos. "Where have you taken us? It looks to me like we're now in the middle of the royal army. Isn't that Sir Châtillon himself riding forward with his staff?"

And Athos put his hand on his sword, while Aramis, thinking that perhaps they had ridden beyond the Parisian lines, reached for his pistols. "Hello, Gentlemen," said the duke, pulling up. "I can see you don't know the current situation, so allow me to enlighten you. We're under truce during negotiations; Sir Prince is talking things over with the coadjutor, Sir Beaufort, and Sir Bouillon. Now, either affairs will be settled, and we'll meet another day, Knight, or they won't be settled, and we'll meet on the battlefield."

"Sir, you get right to the point," said Aramis. "Permit me to ask you one question."

"Do so, Sir."

"Where is this diplomacy taking place?"

"In Charenton itself in the second house on the right, as you go in toward Paris."

"And this conference comes as a surprise?"

"Not exactly, Gentlemen. It seems to stem from the new proposals made to the Parisians by Sir Mazarin last night."

Athos and Aramis looked at each other and laughed. They knew better than anyone what those proposals were, to whom they'd been made, and who had made them. "And this house where the diplomats are meeting," asked Athos, "it belongs to...?"

"To Sir Clanleu who commands your troops at Charenton. I say your troops, because I presume you gentlemen are Frondeurs."

"More or less," said Aramis.

"What do you mean, more or less?"

"It's hard for anyone to say what they are nowadays, as you should know better than anyone, Sir."

"We are for the king and the princes," said Athos.

"That doesn't tell me much," said Châtillon. "I mean, the king is with us, and his generals are Prince Gaston and the Prince de Condé."

"Perhaps," said Athos, "but His Majesty's true place is with us and the Princes de Conti, de Beaufort, d'Elbeuf, and de Bouillon."

"That's as may be," said Châtillon. "It's no secret that I have little sympathy for Sir Mazarin, and all my interests are in Paris; I'm in the middle of a litigation there that all my fortunes depend upon. I was just consulting with my lawyer ...."

"In Paris?"

"No, in Charenton, with Sir Viole. You may have heard his name, as he's an excellent lawyer – a bit stubborn perhaps but he's not a Member of Parliament for nothing. I'd hoped to meet him last night but our business prevented me from attending to my own affairs. But affairs must be attended to, so I took advantage of the truce, and that's how you come to see me here now."

"Sir Viole conducts his consultations in the open air?" asked Aramis, laughing.

"Indeed, Sir, and on horseback, as today he's commanding a hundred gunners for the Parliament. I paid him a visit and to do him honour, I brought with me these two small cannon at the head of which you seemed so astonished to see me. I must admit I didn't recognise him at first, wearing a long sword over his lawyer's robe and with two pistols thrust through his belt. It gives him a warlike air that would amuse you should you happen to meet him."

"If he's that curious a sight, we might take the time to go look for him," said Aramis.

"You'll have to hurry, Sir, for the conference can't go on much longer."

"And if it ends without agreement," said Athos, "are you going to try to take Charenton?"

"Those are my orders; I command the attacking troops and will do my best to succeed."

"Then, Sir," said Athos, "since you command the cavalry..."

"Pardon me! I'm the commander in chief."

"Better still! You must know all your officers, I mean all those who are of good extraction."

"I do, or nearly so."

"Be good enough to tell me whether you have under your command the Knight d'Artagnan, Lieutenant of the Musketeers."

"No, Sir, he's not among us. It's been six weeks since he departed Paris and is said to be on a mission to England."

"I knew that but I thought he was back."

"No, Sir, and as far as I know no one has seen him return. I can speak with authority on this subject as the King's Musketeers are one of our units, commanded by Sir Cambon in the absence of Sir d'Artagnan."

The two friends looked at each other. "As I feared," said Athos.

"It's strange," said Aramis.

"They must have run into trouble on the way."

"It's been eight days, and tonight the deadline expires. If no news comes tonight, then tomorrow we go looking for them."

Athos nodded, then turned back to the duke. "And Sir Bragelonne, a young man of fifteen attached to Sir Prince?" asked Athos, almost embarrassed to expose his paternal feelings before the cynical Aramis. "Has he the honour to be known to you, Sir Duke?"

"Yes, certainly," replied Châtillon. "He arrived this morning with Sir Prince – a charming young man! Is he a friend of yours, Sir Count?"

"Yes, Sir," said Athos, warmly. "So much so, that I wonder if I might see him. Is that possible?"

"Entirely possible, Sir. Just follow me and I'll escort you to headquarters."

*"Whoa!"* said Aramis, turning. "There's some new commotion behind us, I think."

"In fact, I see a large troop of riders approaching!" said Châtillon.

"I recognise Sir Coadjuteur under his Frondeur's hat."

"And I, Sir Beaufort with his white plumes."

"They're coming at the gallop. Sir Prince is with them. Ah! Now he's separated from them."

"They're sounding the tattoo!" cried Châtillon. "Do you hear? We must find out what's happening."

Indeed, the soldiers were running to their arms, the cavalymen were getting back into their saddles, the trumpets sounded, and the drums beat as Sir Beaufort drew his sword. On his side, Sir Prince gave the signal for recall, and those officers of the royal army who'd been visiting the Parisian troops rode toward him. "Gentlemen," said Châtillon, "the truce is over, it seems. We're going to fight. Withdraw into Charenton, as I'll be attacking shortly. Look, there's the signal from Sir Prince."

In fact, a cornet waved the standard of the prince back and forth three times. "Au revoir, Sir Knight!" cried Châtillon.

And he departed at a gallop to rejoin his escort. Athos and Aramis turned toward their side and saluted the coadjutor and Sir Beaufort as they approached. As for Sir Bouillon, at the end of the conference he'd had a terrible attack of gout and had to be carried back into Paris on a litter. In exchange the Duke d'Elbeuf, accompanied by his four sons as a staff, was roaming the ranks of the Parisian army as a marshal-at-large. Meanwhile, between Charenton and the royal army there opened a broad gap, a region emptied out as if to prepare it to receive an imminent carpet of corpses. "Truly, this



Mazarin is the shame of France,” said the coadjutor as he tightened the sword belt he wore, in the fashion of the old military prelates, atop his episcopal robes. “He’s nothing but a farmer who wants to harvest all France like a crop. The realm has no hope for peace and happiness until he’s gone from it.”

“Apparently they couldn’t agree on a new colour for the coadjutor’s hat,” Aramis said behind his hand.

Sir Beaufort approached, sword waving. “Gentlemen,” he said, “diplomacy has proven useless. We proposed exile for this coward of a Mazarini but the queen was quite emblematic in her refusal. She absolutely stands by her minister, so we have but one reservoir, and that’s to congruously defeat him!”

“Hear, hear!” said the coadjutor. “Sir Beaufort speaks with all his usual eloquence.”

“Fortunately,” said Aramis, “he corrects the defects of his speech with the effects of his sword.”

“*Pfah!*” said the coadjutor with contempt. “He’s done precious little so far in this war, I swear.” And he drew his own sword. “Gentlemen,” he cried, “there’s the enemy coming on hard – now let’s show him he can’t have our half of this road!”

And without seeming to care whether he was supported or not, he charged off to lead the advance. His regiment that was named the Corinthian after his archbishopric, followed close behind him – and the battle was joined. For his part, Sir Beaufort sent the cavalry, under the command of Sir Noirmoutiers, toward Étampes, where they were to meet and escort in a convoy of supplies desperately needed by the Parisians. Sir Beaufort intended, as always, to support the citizens. Sir Clanleu, in command of Charenton, stood waiting with the best of his troops, prepared to resist any assault, and even, in the event the enemy was repulsed, to attempt a sortie. Within half an hour the combat was raging on all sides. The coadjutor, envious of Beaufort’s reputation for bravery, had hurled himself into the fray, and had performed marvels of courage. His true vocation, as we know, was for the sword, and he was happy whenever he could draw it from its sheath, whatever the reason. But on this occasion, if he performed well as a soldier, he did a terrible job as a commander. With seven or eight hundred men he’d launched an attack on three thousand, who maintained a disciplined formation and smashed the coadjutor’s attacking soldiers, who fell back in disorder onto the town’s ramparts. There a barrage from Clanleu’s artillery checked the advance of the royal troops, shaking them but they quickly regrouped behind a cluster of houses and a small stand of trees. Clanleu thought to seize the moment and charged the royal army at the head of two regiments – but as we said, the royalists had regrouped, and counter-charged, led by Sir Châtillon himself. This charge was so fierce and well-disciplined that Clanleu and his men were thrown back and almost enveloped. Clanleu sounded the retreat, and his troops were regaining their order as they fell back, step by step, when suddenly Clanleu fell, mortally wounded. Châtillon saw him fall and announced far and wide that he was killed that heartened the royal army, while the two regiments who’d been led out by Clanleu were completely demoralized. As a result, Clanleu’s soldiers thought only of saving themselves and regaining Charenton’s ramparts, where the coadjutor was trying to reform his own broken regiment. Suddenly a squadron of Parisian cavalry bore in on the flank of the victors, who were pursuing the fugitives’ right into the town’s entrenchments. Athos and Aramis charged at their head, Aramis with sword and pistol in his hand, Athos with his sword in its scabbard and his pistol in its holster. Athos was as calm and cool as if on parade, though his handsome and noble face was saddened at the sight of so many men slaughtering each other, sacrificed on the one hand to royal obstinacy, and on the other to the resentment of the princes. Aramis, on the other hand, was a killing machine, inflamed by fury. His eyes blazed, his lips, so finely drawn, curved in a grim smile, and his nostrils flared at the smell of blood. Every one of his sword thrusts went home, and every blow with his pistol’s pommel hit hard, dropping a wounded man trying to rejoin the fight. On the opposing side, in the ranks of the royal army, two cavaliers, one wearing a gilded cuirass, the other a simple buff coat over a blue velvet doublet, charged to the fore. The cavalier in the gilded cuirass collided with Aramis and aimed a sword-thrust at him that Aramis parried with his usual skill. “Ah, it’s you, Sir Châtillon!” cried the knight. “Greetings, I was waiting for you!”

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long, Sir,” said the duke. “In any case, here I am.”

“Sir Châtillon,” said Aramis, drawing from his saddle holster a second pistol which he’d reserved for this contingency, “if you’ve already emptied your pistol, I think you might be a dead man.”

“But I haven’t, thank God!” said Châtillon.

And the duke, raising his pistol at Aramis, cocked it and fired. But Aramis tilted his head just as he saw the duke pull the trigger, and the ball passed over him. Aramis shook his head. “You missed me. But by God, I won’t miss you.”

“If I give you the chance!” roared Châtillon, spurring his horse into Aramis’s and raising his sword high.

Aramis awaited his moment with the terrible smile that was peculiar to him at such times. Athos, seeing Châtillon closing with Aramis like lightning, opened his mouth to cry, “Shoot!” just as the pistol was fired. Châtillon threw his arms wide and fell back on his horse’s crupper. The ball had entered his chest just above the edge of his cuirass. “I’m dead!” murmured the duke.

And he slid from his horse to the ground. “Ah, Sir, I warned you, and now I’m sorry I kept my word so well!” said Aramis. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Châtillon beckoned him with a gesture, and Aramis was preparing to dismount, when suddenly he was struck hard in the side. It was a sword thrust but his own cuirass turned the blade. He swiftly turned and seized his attacker by the wrist, and then cried out, at the same time as Athos: “Raoul!”

The young man simultaneously recognised the face of the Knight d’Herblay and the voice of his father and dropped his sword. Several Parisian cavalrymen closed in on Raoul but Aramis covered him with his rapier. “This man is my prisoner! Ride on!” he cried.

Athos, meanwhile, grabbed his son’s horse by the bridle and drew it out of the mêlée. At the same time Sir Prince, supporting Sir Châtillon’s advance, appeared in the fray, easily recognisable by his shining eagle’s eye and shrewd and skilful attacks. Seeing him, the regiment of the Archbishop of Corinth that despite his efforts he hadn’t been able to regroup, turned and routed, fleeing through the Parisian cavalry into Charenton that they ran through without stopping. The coadjutor, carried on by the general retreat, passed near Athos, Aramis, and Raoul. “Alas!” said the jealous Aramis who couldn’t resist enjoying the embarrassment of the coadjutor. “But in your capacity as archbishop, My Lord, you must recognise the aptness of the Scriptures.”

“And what the devil do the Scriptures have to do with what’s happening here?” asked the coadjutor.

“Why, Sir Prince is treating you today as Saint Paul did the first of the Corinthians.”

“Say, now!” said Athos. “That’s not a bad joke but we have no time for such witticisms. Onward, onward – or rather backward, for it looks to me like the Frondeurs have lost the battle.”

“It’s all the same to me!” said Aramis. “I just came here to meet Sir Châtillon. And meet him I did, so I’m content – a duel with a Châtillon, now, that’s something!”

“Plus, you took a prisoner,” said Athos, indicating Raoul.

And the three cavaliers went on their way at a gallop. The young man had been overcome by joy when he’d found his father. They rode as close as they could, the young man’s left hand in Athos’s right. Once they were clear of the battlefield, Athos asked the young man, “What’re you doing in the midst of that mêlée? That’s not where you belonged, it seems to me and you’re not armed for it.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be in the fight today, Sir. I was sent as a courier to the cardinal, and was heading toward Rueil, when I saw Sir Châtillon ride to the charge, and was moved to charge along with him. On the way he told me that two cavaliers of the Parisian army were looking for me, and one was named the Count La Fère.”

“What? You knew we were there but still tried to kill your friend the knight?”

“I didn’t recognise the knight all armoured for war,” said Raoul, colouring, “though I should have known him by his coolness and skill.”

“Thanks for the compliment, my young friend,” said Aramis, “and it’s clear where you learned your manners. But you say you were going to Rueil?”

“Yes.”

“To the cardinal?”

“Yes, Sir. I have a dispatch from Sir Prince for His Eminence.”

“Then you must take it to him,” said Athos.

“Not so fast with the chivalry, Count. What the devil! Our fate, and more importantly the fate of our friends, may be in this dispatch.”

“But this young man must not fail in his duty,” said Athos.

“First of all, Count, this young man is a prisoner, don’t forget. This is all in accord with the rules of war. The loser doesn’t get to dictate terms to the victor. Give me this dispatch, Raoul.”

Raoul hesitated, looking toward Athos for guidance. “Give him the dispatch, Raoul,” said Athos. “You are the prisoner of the Knight d’Herblay.”

Raoul gave up the dispatch with some reluctance. Aramis, less scrupulous than the Count La Fère, took the dispatch and opened it, looked it over, and handed it to Athos, saying, “You’re a believer, Athos – read this letter, and you’ll see in it something that Providence thought we should know.” Athos frowned but the idea that the letter might have something to say about d’Artagnan persuaded him to overcome his distaste and read it. What he read was as follows:

*My Lord, in order to reinforce Sir Comminges’s guards, I send to you this evening the ten men you requested. They are picked men, soldiers quite capable of restraining that dangerous duo now in Your Eminence’s custody.*

“Oh ho!” said Athos.

“Well?” said Aramis. “And what dangerous duo might this be, that needs ten men added to those of Comminges to restrain them? Who could that be but d’Artagnan and Porthos?”

“We’ll spend the rest of the day searching Paris for them,” said Athos, “but if we have no news by nightfall we take the road to Picardy, and I’ll answer for it that, given d’Artagnan’s quick mind, we’ll soon know if we’re on the right track.”

“Search Paris we shall then, starting with Planchet, who ought to know if his old master is in town.”

“Ah, poor Planchet! You speak of him so lightly, Aramis, when he was probably massacred in today’s fiasco. All these belligerent bourgeois were probably cut down like wheat.”

As this was all too likely, the two friends were anxious as they re-entered Paris through the Porte du Temple and made their way to the Place Royale to learn the fate of that poor militia. But to their surprise they found the whole unit, soldiers and captain, still drinking and dicing in the Place Royale, while their families, who’d heard the sound of cannon toward Charenton, probably despaired of their lives. Athos and Aramis inquired once again with Planchet but he’d heard nothing of d’Artagnan, and told them he couldn’t leave his post without orders from his superiors. At five o’clock they were released to go home, where they told everyone they were returning from the battle, though they’d never been out of sight of the bronze equestrian statue of Louis XIII in the Place Royale. “A thousand thunders!” said Planchet, returning to his shop in the Rue des Lombards. “We got our arses kicked today! I’ll never get over it.”

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**The Road to Picardy**

Athos and Aramis were safe in Paris, and knew very well that as soon as they set foot outside the city walls they were in great danger – but what was danger to such men as these? Instinctively, they felt that the climax of this second Odyssey was drawing near, and this was no time to hang back and give less than their all. Besides, Paris was by no means a tranquil refuge. Provisions were beginning to run short, riots were breaking out, and when one of the Prince de Conti’s generals felt the need to assert himself, putting down a small riot gave him the opportunity. Sir Beaufort had taken advantage of one of these riots to plunder the personal library of Sir Mazarin – for money, he said, to buy food for the suffering people. Athos and Aramis left Paris during this disturbance that took place on the evening of the same day the Parisians were beaten at Charenton. They left behind a Paris in misery, stalked by famine, plagued by fear, and divided into rival factions. As Parisians and Frondeurs, they expected to find the same misery, fears, and intrigues in the enemy camp. But on their way to Saint-Denis, they were surprised to hear that in Saint-Germain the Court was laughing, singing, and carrying on happily. The two gentlemen took the back roads, at first to avoid the Cardinalists while they were in the Île-de-France, and later to avoid the provincial Frondeurs once they passed into Normandy, where they would have been brought before Sir Longueville, who would then decide whether they should be treated as friends or enemies. Once they’d avoided these two perils, they rejoined the main road from Boulogne to Abbeville, following it step by step, trace by trace. For a while they were empty-handed; several innkeepers had been interrogated without yielding so much as a clue, when in Montreuil Athos’s sensitive fingers detected something rough on a tavern table. Lifting the tablecloth, he found beneath it the following letters deeply incised with the edge of a blade:

*Port ... d’Art ... 2 February.*

“Good news,” said Athos, showing the inscription to Aramis. “We’d planned to stay here tonight but now that we have some evidence, let’s continue.”

They remounted their horses and rode to Abbeville. There they were stymied by the city’s large number of inns. They could hardly visit them all – how could they guess in which one their friends had stayed?

“Believe me, Athos,” said Aramis, “we’re not going to find anything at Abbeville. If we’re stumped by which inn to choose, our friends would have been the same. If it was only Porthos we were after, well, Porthos would have picked the most magnificent hôtel, and we’d be sure to find traces of his passage. But d’Artagnan has no such weakness, and though Porthos would plead that he was dying of hunger, d’Artagnan would press on, inexorable as fate. We’ll have to seek for him elsewhere.”

They continued on their way but found nothing more. This was the most distressing and tedious task ever undertaken by Athos and Aramis, and without the triple motivation of honour, friendship, and gratitude to drive them, our two travellers would soon have given up looking for tracks, questioning passers-by, searching for signs, and examining every face. Their search brought them to Péronne. Athos was beginning to despair; his noble and sensitive nature blamed himself for the dilemma in which he and Aramis found themselves. He must have missed something obvious – no doubt they hadn’t pressed their questions persistently enough, or pursued their investigations cleverly enough. They were ready to leave the town and turn back the way they had come, when, just inside the city

gates, on a white wall at a street corner near the ramparts, Athos spotted something. It was a drawing in black as if made with a clinker, a childish sketch depicting two cavaliers galloping in a frenzy, one of whom held up a sign on which was written in Spanish, "They're after us."

"Ah ha!" said Athos. "That's as clear as day. Pursued though he was, d'Artagnan paused here for five minutes and put his time to good use. This shows that their pursuers couldn't have been too close behind them; maybe they got away."

Aramis shook his head. "If they'd escaped, we would have caught up with them by now, or at least heard of them."

"You're right, Aramis. Onward!"

The anxiety and impatience of the two gentlemen was now beyond description. The anxiety was in the tender and generous heart of Athos, the impatience in the nervous spirit of Aramis, so easily distraught. They galloped for three or four hours with the frenzy of the two cavaliers on the mural. Suddenly, in a narrow gorge between two steep cliffs, they found the road half blocked by an enormous boulder. Its point of origin could be seen halfway up the slope, where a fresh hole in the cliff face showed where it had been pried out. The size and mass of the thing proved that it would have taken the arm of a giant like Enceladus or Briareus to move it. Aramis stopped. "This is clear enough!" he said, looking at the boulder. "If Ajax of Telamon hasn't passed here, then it must have been Porthos. Count, let's examine this prodigious rock."

They dismounted and went to look. The boulder had clearly been placed to bar the road to equestrians but there had evidently been enough riders in pursuit to shift it partway to the side. The two travellers examined every inch of the boulder they could see but found nothing of interest. They called Blaisois and Grimaud to help, and between the four of them, they were able to roll it enough to expose its underside. There they found inscribed, "We're pursued by eight light horse. If we reach Compiegne, we'll stop at the Peacock and Crown; the host is a friend."

"Positive news at last, and now we have a course to follow," said Athos. "On to the Peacock and Crown!"

"Yes," said Aramis, "but if we actually intend to arrive there, we'd better rest the horses first – they're nearly done in."

Aramis was right. They stopped at the next *hostel*; each horse was given a double ration of oats soaked in honey, allowed three hours to rest, and then they set out again. The men themselves were staggering with fatigue but hope sustained them. Six hours later, Athos and Aramis entered Compiegne and asked directions to the Peacock and Crown. They were shown to an inn with a sign representing the god Pan with a crown on his head. The two friends dismounted from the horses without pausing to puzzle out the meaning of the sign that at any other time Aramis would have criticized. They found the inn's honest host, a man as broad and bald as a Chinese Buddha, and asked if recently he'd had two gentlemen lodgers who'd been pursued by light horse. The host opened a chest and drew out a broken rapier without saying a word. "Do you recognise this?" he said.

Athos knew it at a glance. "That's d'Artagnan's sword," he said.

"The larger man or the smaller?" asked the host.

"The smaller," Athos replied.

"I see you are friends of those gentlemen."

"Well! What happened to them?"

"They came into my courtyard on dying horses but before they had time to shut the gate eight light horse cavalrymen came in after them."

"Eight!" said Aramis. "I'm astounded that men of the stature and ability of d'Artagnan and Porthos could be arrested by only eight men."

"No doubt, Sir, and these eight men would have failed if they hadn't been reinforced by twenty soldiers from the Royal Italian Regiment that is garrisoned in this town. Your friends were literally overwhelmed by numbers."

"Arrested!" said Athos. "Do you know on what grounds?"

"No, Sir, they're taken away at once, and had time to say nothing. Only once they were gone, I found this broken sword on the battlefield while helping to pick up the two dead and five or six wounded."

"And the two captives," asked Aramis, "were they injured at all?"

"No, Sir, I don't think so."

"Well, that's some consolation," Aramis said.

"And do you know where they were taken?" asked Athos.

"Toward Louvres."

"Let's leave Blaisois and Grimaud here," said Athos. "They can return tomorrow to Paris with the horses that in any event have had it for today. We can continue by post-horse."

"Post-horse it is," said Aramis.

They sent for the hired horses. While they were waiting, the two friends took a quick meal; they hoped, if they learned anything at Louvres, to be able to follow it up immediately. They arrived at Louvres, where there was only one inn that served Ratafia, that famous local liqueur whose reputation survives even today. "Let's look around," said Athos. "D'Artagnan won't have missed the opportunity to ask to be allowed a glass of Ratafia, and in the process leave us a clue."

They entered, stepped up to the counter, and asked for two glasses of the local liqueur, hoping that d'Artagnan and Porthos had done the same. The counter of the bar was covered with tinplate, one part of which was marred by scratches made by the prong of a buckle: "Rueil. D."

"They're at Rueil!" said Aramis who was the first to spot the inscription.

"Then let's go to Rueil," said Athos.

"That's stepping into the jaws of the wolf," said Aramis. "Rueil is the cardinal's headquarters."

"If I were as much Jonah's friend as I'm D'Artagnan's," said Athos, "I'd have followed him into the belly of the whale – and you would too, Aramis."

"Decidedly, my dear Count, I think you make me better than I am. If I were alone, I'm not at all sure I'd go to Rueil without first taking a number of precautions – but where you go, I go as well."

They got fresh horses and set out for Rueil. Athos, without knowing it, had given Aramis the best advice they could follow. The deputies of parliament had just arrived at Rueil for those famous conferences that were to last for three weeks, resulting in the *Lame Peace* that was later broken when Sir Prince was arrested. So, the town of Rueil was crowded with Parisians: advocates, presidents, councillors, and parliamentarians of all sorts, jostling against, from the Court, any number of gentlemen, officers, and guards; it was easy, in all that confusion, to remain as anonymous as one liked. Besides, the conferences were occurring under truce, and arresting two gentlemen at that moment, even if they were prominent Frondeurs, would have violated the laws of diplomacy. The two friends thought that everyone would be as concerned with their problems as they were, so they mingled with both sides, expecting to hear something about d'Artagnan and Porthos but all they heard was talk about articles and amendments. Athos was in favour of going straight to the prime minister. "*My friend*," said Aramis, "that's a fine idea, except for the fact that our safety lies in our obscurity. If we draw attention to ourselves, we'll immediately join our friends in the depths of some dark dungeon where not even the Devil could get us out. Let's find them, by all means but on purpose, not by accident. They were arrested at Compiegne, and certainly brought to Rueil, as we confirmed at Louvres; once at Rueil, they would have been interrogated by the cardinal, who would then either hold them nearby under guard or send them on to Saint-Germain. They're not in the Bastille, because that's in the hands of the Frondeurs with Broussel's son as its governor. And they didn't execute them, as the death of d'Artagnan would make a big noise. As to Porthos, I think he's as immortal as God, though less patient. So let's not despair, be patient ourselves, and wait here at Rueil, for I'm convinced they're being held somewhere nearby. But what's wrong? You've turned pale!"

"I just remembered," said Athos, in a voice that almost trembled, "that when this château was the country headquarters of Sir Richelieu he equipped it with some frightful oubliettes, some prison-pits..."

"Not to worry," said Aramis. "Sir Richelieu was a nobleman, our equal in birth and our superior in position. He could, like the king, tap the head of even the greatest *grands*, and shake those heads on their shoulders. But Sir Mazarin is a peasant who at best can have us taken by the collar like a policeman. Believe me, d'Artagnan and Porthos are here at Rueil somewhere, alive and well kept."

"In that case," said Athos, "we should go to the coadjutor and get official credentials for the conference, so we can enter the château itself."

"And mingle with all those frightful Men of the Robe? What are you thinking, *my dear*? Do you believe we'd hear a single word about where d'Artagnan and Porthos are being held? No, I think we need to find some other means."

"Well!" said Athos. "In that case I return to my first thought that is that the best means is to be open and direct. I'll go not to Mazarin but to the queen, and I'll say, 'Madam, release to us your two good servants and our two good friends.'"

Aramis shook his head. "As a last resort that's always there, Athos but believe me, don't try it unless you have to. It will still be available if needed. In the meantime, let's continue our investigations."

Thus, they continued their search, and learned many things under a thousand pretexts, each more ingenious than the last, and spoke to so many people, that at last they found a light horse cavalryman who admitted he was one of the troop who'd escorted d'Artagnan and Porthos from Compiegne to Rueil. With the testimony of this light horseman, they were finally certain that they were in the right town. Athos kept coming back to his idea of an audience with the queen. "To see the queen," said Aramis, "you must first see the cardinal, and as soon as you see the cardinal, mark what I say to you, Athos, *we will* be reunited with our friends but not in a way we'll enjoy. And I confess, that's a method of reunion I'd prefer to avoid. Let's keep our liberty so we have freedom to act."

"I'm determined to see the queen," said Athos.

"Very well, *my friend* but if you're set on this madness, warn me, I beg you, a day in advance."

"Why is that?"

"So, I can take advantage of the warning to make a trip to Paris."

"To see who?"

"*Dame!* How do I know? Probably Madam de Longueville; she's all-powerful there, and will help me. Just make sure you find a way to inform me that you've been arrested, and I'll do my best to return."

"Why not risk the arrest with me, Aramis?" said Athos.

"No, thank you."

"Once arrested the four of us will be reunited, and then I think we'll be fine. Within twenty-four hours all four of us will be free."

"*My dear*, since I killed Châtilion, who was the darling of the ladies of Saint-Germain, I'm too notorious to risk being put in prison. The queen would listen to Mazarin's advice about me, and Mazarin's advice would be to put me on trial."

"Do you really think, Aramis, that she loves this Italian as much as they say?"

"She once loved an Englishman a great deal."

"Ah, my friend, she truly is a woman!"

"Not at all, Athos, and don't fool yourself: she's a queen."

"Dear friend, I'm going to pay my respects and ask for an audience with Anne of Austria."

"Then goodbye, Athos – I'm going to go raise an army."

"To do what?"

"To come back and besiege Rueil."

"Where shall we meet again?"

"At the foot of the cardinal's gallows." And the two friends separated, Aramis to return to Paris, and Athos to take the first steps necessary to be granted an audience with the queen.

Athos found it easier than he expected to see Anne of Austria – at the first request he was granted an audience, for the following day after her morning *lever*, to which he was entitled to attend by right of birth. The halls of the château at Saint-Germain were thronged with courtiers; never at the Louvre or the Royal Palace had Anne of Austria had more. But this crowd mainly consisted of the secondary nobility, as all the highest-ranking gentlemen of France were aligned with Sir Conti, Sir Beaufort, and the coadjutor. Nonetheless, gaiety ruled the day at this Court. A peculiarity of this civil war was that more couplets were fired off than cannon. The Court wrote verses mocking the Parisians, who replied with trio-lets mocking the Court, and the wounds inflicted, though not mortal, were still deeply felt, for they were the burning wounds of ridicule. But in the midst of this general hilarity and frivolous futility, one question preoccupied every mind: would Mazarin remain the minister and favourite, or would Mazarin, who seemed to have blown in from the south like a cloud, be blown away again now that the winds were against him? Everyone hoped for and wanted that – so much so that the minister came to feel that all the flattery and homage paid to him by the courtiers were mere lies covering hatred disguised by fear and self-interest. He was anxious, not knowing what to expect or whom he

could rely upon. Sir Prince himself, who commanded for him, never missed a chance to mock or humiliate him. After two or three occasions when Mazarin had tried to exert his authority in the presence of the victor of Rocroi, and the prince had looked away coldly, that made it clear that, if he defended the minister, it was with neither conviction nor enthusiasm. So, the cardinal fell back on his relationship with the queen, who was his only reliable support. But there had been several minor incidents that made him feel like even this support was wavering. When the hour for his audience arrived, the Count La Fère was told that though it would take place, he would have to wait a few minutes, as the queen was consulting with her minister. This was true: Paris had just sent a new deputation which was intended at last to move negotiations forward, and the queen was consulting with Mazarin as to how she should receive these deputies. Matters of State were at a fever pitch among the high and mighty, and Athos could hardly have chosen a worse time to inquire after his friends, tiny atoms lost in the whirlwind of great affairs. But Athos was unyielding once his mind was made up, especially when his decision derived from his conscience and was dictated by his duty. He insisted on being introduced, saying that, though he was no deputy of Sir Conti, de Beaufort, de Bouillon, d'Elbeuf, or the coadjutor, nor of Madam de Longueville, Broussel, or parliament, and came on his own account, he nonetheless had matters of importance to speak of to Her Majesty. Her consultation completed, the queen summoned Athos to her study. The audience-controller introduced and named him. His was a name that had been too often heard in the ears of Her Majesty and too often felt in her heart for Anne of Austria not to recognise it; yet she remained impassive, regarding this gentleman with that direct and challenging gaze that is accepted only from those women who are queens, by beauty or by blood. "Do you come to offer to render us a service, Count?" asked Anne of Austria after a moment of silence.

"Yes, Madam, a service yet again," said Athos, shocked that the queen appeared not to recognise him.

Athos had a great and generous heart, and thus made a very poor courtier. Anne furrowed her brow. Mazarin, seated at a side table and leafing through a stack of papers like a simple secretary, raised his head. "Speak," said the queen.

Mazarin resumed leafing through his papers. "Madam," replied Athos, "two of our friends, two of the most intrepid servants of Your Majesty, Sir d'Artagnan and Sir du Vallon, who were sent to England by Sir Cardinal, suddenly disappeared the moment they set foot back in France, and no one knows what has become of them."

"Well?" said the queen.

"Well!" said Athos. "I request Your Majesty in her benevolence to discover what has happened to these gentlemen – reserving the option, if need be, to appeal to her for justice."

"Sir," replied Anne of Austria, with that haughtiness that, toward the undeserving, became arrogance, "this is the matter with which you choose to disturb us in the midst of our consideration of great affairs? A matter for the police? Well, Sir, as you know, or should know, since we are no longer in Paris, we have no involvement with the police."

"I think that Your Majesty," said Athos, bowing with frosty respect, "would have no need to inquire of the police to discover what has become of Gentlemen d'Artagnan and du Vallon; she has only to question the cardinal about these two gentlemen, as Sir Cardinal could inform her without having to consult anything other than his recollections."

"Why, God be my witness!" said Anne of Austria, with that disdainful curl of the lips unique to her. "I believe you are *questioning* me."

"Yes, Madam, and I have nearly the right to do so, for it involves Sir d'Artagnan – Sir d'*Artagnan*, if you understand me, Madam," he said, hoping to reach the conscience of the woman behind the mask of the queen.

Mazarin saw that it was time to come to Anne of Austria's aid. "Sir Count," he said, "I will inform you of something Her Majesty is unaware of that is what has become of those two gentlemen. They disobeyed orders and have been arrested."

"I implore Your Majesty," said Athos, firmly and without replying to Mazarin, "to rescind these judgements regarding Gentlemen d'Artagnan and du Vallon."

"What you request is a matter of discipline and does not concern me, Sir," the queen said.

"Sir d'Artagnan never made such a reply when acting in the service of Your Majesty," said Athos, bowing with dignity.

He backed two steps toward the door, when Mazarin stopped him. "You have also come from England, Sir?" he said while gesturing to calm the queen who had visibly paled and was about to issue a stern order.

"Where I attended the final moments of King Charles I," said Athos. "Poor king! Guilty at most of weakness, for which his subjects punished him severely. But thrones are trembling at the moment, and it's a difficult time for those with devoted hearts who serve the interests of princes. That was the second time that Sir d'Artagnan had travelled to England; the first time was for the honour of a great queen, the second for the life of a great king."

"Sir," said Anne of Austria to Mazarin, in a tone that couldn't conceal her true feelings, "see if anything can be done for these gentlemen."

"Madam," said Mazarin, "I'll do what I can to please Your Majesty."

"Do as Sir Count La Fère asks. Isn't that how you name yourself, Sir?"

"I have had another name, Madam, and am also known as Athos."

"Madam," said Mazarin, with a smile that indicated he understood her true desires, "you can rest assured that your wishes shall be fulfilled."

"Do you hear, Sir?" said the queen.

"Yes, Madam, and I expected nothing less from Your Majesty's justice. Then I'll soon see my friends again, isn't that so, Madam? That is what Your Majesty intends?"

"Yes, Sir, you shall see them again. These days, you're with the Fronde, aren't you?"

"Madam, I serve the king."

"Yes but in your own way."

"My own way is that of all true gentlemen, and I know no other," said Athos haughtily.

"Go then, Sir," said the queen, dismissing Athos with a gesture. "You've obtained what you wanted, and we've learned all we needed to know."

Then, once the door had closed behind Athos, she said to Mazarin, "Cardinal, have this insolent gentleman arrested before he leaves the Court."

"That had already occurred to me," said Mazarin, "and I'm glad Your Majesty has given the order before I could even ask for it. These hard-heads who persist in our time with the high-handed practices of the previous reign are a nuisance, and since we already have two of them under lock and key, let's add the third."

Athos had not been entirely taken in by the queen. There was something in her tone that had seemed to threaten even while promising. But he was not a man to act upon mere suspicion, especially since he'd been told straight out that he would see his friends again. He waited, therefore, in the antechamber adjacent to the study, thinking that d'Artagnan and Porthos might be brought to him, or he might be escorted to where they were. While waiting, he strolled to the window and gazed mechanically down into the courtyard. There he saw a deputation of Parisians entering, coming to set the final agenda of the conferences and to pay their respects to the queen. It was a crowd of councillors and presidents of parliament, advocates and attorneys, with a few Men of the Sword mixed in with the Men of the Robe. An imposing escort awaited them outside the gates. Athos was looking more closely, as he thought he saw someone he recognised when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and said, "Ah, Sir Comminges!"

"Yes, Sir Count, in person, and charged with a mission for which I hope you will accept my apologies."

"What's that, Sir?" asked Athos.

"To ask you to please give me your sword, Count."

Athos smiled and opening the window, he shouted, "Aramis!"

A gentleman turned around – the man Athos thought he'd recognised was, in fact, Aramis. He made the count a friendly salute. "Aramis," called Athos, "I'm arrested."

"Indeed," Aramis replied coolly.

Athos turned back to Comminges, politely presented him the hilt of his sword, and said, "Here is my sword; please keep it with care and return it to me when I'm released from prison. It was given to my grandfather by King Francois I. In his time, they armed gentlemen, rather than disarming them. Now, where are you taking me?"

"Well ... to my room, first," said Comminges. "The queen will designate your destination later." Athos followed Comminges out without saying another word.

## 255 The Royalty of Sir Mazarin

The arrest had made no noise, caused no scandal, and gone virtually unnoticed. It had in no way hindered the course of events, and the deputation sent by the City of Paris was solemnly informed that they would be duly admitted to an audience with the queen. The queen received them, silent and superb as always, and she heard the grievances and pleas of the deputies; however, when the speeches were finished, no one would have been able to say, based on Anne of Austria's impassive expression, whether she had listened to them. On the other hand, Mazarin, who was also present at the audience, understood very well what the deputies wanted: it was, clearly and simply, his dismissal. With the speeches completed, since the queen remained mute, Mazarin said, "Gentlemen, I join you in imploring the queen to put an end to the troubles of her subjects. I've done all I can to help them, and yet you say the people believe that I'm responsible for their ills – I, a poor foreigner who has failed to please the French. Alas! I'm misunderstood by all, and the reason is clear: as prime minister I followed in the footsteps of the greatest man ever to support the sceptre of the Kings of France. The memory of Sir Richelieu overwhelms me. If I were ambitious, I'd fight the weight of that memory but I'm not, and I'll prove it to you. I surrender. I'll do what the people ask. If the Parisians have done wrong – as who has not, Gentlemen? – Well, Paris has been punished. Enough blood has flowed, enough misery has stricken a capital deprived of both king and justice. It's not for me, a private citizen, to be so audacious as to come between a queen and her realm. Since you demand that I retire, well, then! I'll retire."

"In that case," Aramis said into the ear of his neighbour, "peace is declared and further conferences are needless. All we have to do is send Sir Mazarini under guard across the nearest foreign border, and make sure he doesn't return there or elsewhere."

"Not so fast, Sir, not so fast," said the Man of the Robe to whom Aramis had spoken. "*Plague!* Such haste! It's clear you're a Man of the Sword. First there's a whole list of compensations and indemnities to be settled."

"Sir Chancellor," said the queen, turning to our old acquaintance Séguier, "you will chair the conferences, to be held at Rueil. Sir Cardinal has said things that have deeply moved me that is why I will not address the deputation here. As to who is to stay and who is to go, I owe the cardinal too much to constrain him in any way. Sir Cardinal shall do as he sees fit."

A fleeting pallor crossed the intelligent visage of the prime minister, and he looked at the queen anxiously. Her face was so impassive that, like the others, he couldn't read what was passing in her heart. "But while awaiting Sir Mazarin's decision," the queen added, "I ask you to think only of the interests of the king."

The deputies bowed and withdrew. "What was that?" said the queen, when the last of them had left the hall. "Would you yield to these councilmen and lawyers?"

"For Your Majesty's happiness, Madam," said Mazarin, fixing the queen with his piercing gaze, "there is no sacrifice I wouldn't make."

Anne lowered her head and fell into one of those reveries increasingly common with her. The memory of Athos arose in her mind. His brave demeanour, his tone at once so firm and dignified, the ghosts he conjured with a word, reminded her of a past intoxicating and poetic: of youth, of beauty, of love at the age of twenty; of the brutal battles of those who'd fought for her, of the heroism of those obscure defenders who'd saved her from the double hatred of Richelieu and the king – and of the bloody death of Buckingham, the only man she'd ever truly loved. Mazarin watched her, and now that she thought she was alone and no longer had a world of enemies spying upon her, he easily followed her thoughts as they passed across her face, as one sees in a clear lake the reflections of clouds passing in the heavens. "Must we yield to the storm," murmured Anne of Austria, "bargain for peace, and wait patiently and religiously for better times?"

Mazarin smiled bitterly at these words that indicated that she'd taken her minister's proposal seriously. Anne's head was bowed, and she didn't see his smile but hearing no answer, she looked up.

"Well! You say nothing, Cardinal; what are you thinking?"

"I think, Madam, that this insolent gentleman we had Comminges arrest for us alluded to Sir Buckingham, whom you allowed to be assassinated, to Madam de Chevreuse, whom you allowed to be exiled, and to Sir Beaufort, whom you had imprisoned. But if he alluded to me, it was because he doesn't really know what I am to you."

Anne of Austria trembled as she did when struck in her pride; she blushed and, to suppress a reply, ground her sharp nails into her beautiful hands. "He's a man of sound advice, of honour and of spirit, and a man of great resolve," Mazarin continued. "But you're aware of that, aren't you, Madam? Well, I wish to show him, as a personal favour, the extent to which he is mistaken about me. Because what his allies just proposed to me is close to an abdication, and an abdication requires careful consideration."

"An abdication!" said Anne. "I thought, Sir, that it was only kings who abdicated."

"And I'm not almost a king and King of France at that?" replied Mazarin. "Thrown over the foot of the royal bed at night, Madam, my minister's robe looks no different than a monarch's mantle, I assure you."

This was one of the humiliations to which Mazarin most often subjected her, and before which she always bowed her head. Only Elizabeth and Catherine II were able to be both mistresses and queens for their lovers. Anne of Austria looked with a touch of terror at the menacing presence of the cardinal who at times like these could exert a domineering bravado. “Sir,” she said, “didn’t I say and you heard me tell those people that you’ll do as you please?”

“Ah! In that case,” said Mazarin, “I think it shall please me to remain. It may be in my interest but even more than that, I dare say it will be your salvation.”

“Stay then, Sir, I desire nothing else – but preserve me from insults.”

“You mean the pretensions of those rebels and the tone in which they express them? Patience! They’ve chosen to fight upon my own ground: the conference. We will defeat them with delay. Already they grow hungry; it will be worse a week from now.”

“Oh, *my God*, yes, Sir, I know how that will turn out. But it’s not them I refer to; they’re not the ones who inflict the deepest injuries.”

“Ah, now I understand you! You speak of the memories perpetually evoked by those three or four gentlemen. But now they’re our prisoners, and they’re just guilty enough that we can hold them as long as is convenient. Only one is still beyond our power and defies us. But what the devil! He’ll join his companions soon enough. We’ve done harder things than that, it seems to me. I already have the most intractable pair locked up at Rueil, where I can keep an eye on them, and today they’ll be joined by the third.”

“So long as they remain prisoners, all will be well,” said Anne of Austria, “but some day they must be free.”

“Yes ... if Your Majesty sets them free.”

“Ah!” continued Queen Anne, half to herself. “This is where I regret Paris.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because the Bastille, Sir, is so strong and so discreet.”

“Madam, with the conferences we’ll have peace, with peace we’ll have Paris, and with Paris we’ll have the Bastille! And there our four myrmidons will rot.”

Anne of Austria frowned lightly, while Mazarin kissed her hand to take his leave of her. With this act, half humble, half gallant, Mazarin departed. Anne followed him with her eyes, and as he walked away one might have seen a disdainful smile curl her lips. “In my time,” she murmured, “I once rejected the love of a cardinal who never said, ‘I will do,’ but rather ‘I have done.’ That one knew retreats safer than Rueil, darker and more silent than the Bastille. Ah! Everything decays!”

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**Precautions**

After leaving Anne of Austria, the cardinal took the road to his estate at Rueil. Mazarin always travelled well accompanied in those times of trouble, often in disguise. The cardinal, as we’ve said, looked very well in the outfit of a Man of the Sword. In the courtyard of the old château at Saint-Germain, he entered a carriage that followed the road that crossed the Seine at Chatou. Sir Prince has furnished him with an escort of fifty light horse, not so much to protect him as to show the deputies that Condé had troops to spare, and could deploy them however he thought best. Athos, on horseback but unarmed and guarded by Comminges, followed the cardinal’s carriage without saying a word. Grimaud, who’d been left at the gate of the château by his master, had realised he’d been arrested when Athos called out to Aramis, and at a gesture from the count he’d followed Aramis when he’d left, silently and as if nothing had happened. For a fact, Grimaud, who’d served his master for twenty-two years, had seen him survive so many adventures that nothing worried him anymore. The deputies, immediately after their audience, had taken the road that returned to Paris, preceding the cardinal’s party by about five hundred paces. Athos, therefore, could see ahead of him the back of Aramis, whose gilded baldric and proud demeanour drew his eye quite as much as the habits of long friendship and the hopes of deliverance he placed in him. Aramis, for his part, didn’t seem the least bit interested in whether he was being followed by Athos, and turned to look only when they arrived at Chatou. He thought Mazarin might leave his prisoner in the little fort that guarded the bridge that an officer commanded for the queen. But no: Athos continued past Chatou in the cardinal’s entourage. Where the road forked toward Paris or Rueil, Aramis turned again. This time his expectations were fulfilled, as Mazarin turned toward Rueil, and Aramis could see his prisoner, following, as he disappeared into the wood. At just that moment Athos, as if moved by an identical thought, also turned to look back. The two friends exchanged a slight nod, and Aramis raised a finger to his head as if in salute. Athos understood that his friend was telling him that he had an idea. Ten minutes later Mazarin entered the courtyard of the Château de Rueil that had been bequeathed to him by the cardinal his predecessor. As he was stepping down from his carriage at the foot of the main staircase, Comminges approached him and asked, “Where would it please your Eminence for the Count La Fère to be lodged?”

“In the pavilion of the orangery, facing the guards’ post. I want the Count La Fère treated with honour while he’s a prisoner of Her Majesty the queen.”

“My Lord,” ventured Comminges, “he requests the favour of being allowed to join Sir d’Artagnan, who occupies, as Your Eminence has ordered, the hunting pavilion across from the orangery.” Mazarin thought for a moment; Comminges could see that he was calculating. “It’s a strong post,” the officer said, “forty reliable men, veteran soldiers all, mostly German mercenaries who have no connections to the Frondeurs and no interest in the Fronde.”

“If we put those three men together, Sir Comminges,” said Mazarin, “we’d have to double that guard, and we don’t have enough men for such prodigality.”

Comminges smiled; Mazarin saw his expression and understood it. “You don’t know them, Sir Comminges – but I do know them, both directly and by tradition. I sent them to aid King Charles, and by performing miracles they very nearly saved him; it’s only due to an accident of fate that dear King Charles is not amongst us today.”

“But if they served Your Eminence so well, why’s Your Eminence had them imprisoned?”

“In prison?” said Mazarin. “Since when is Rueil a prison?”

“Since it holds prisoners,” said Comminges.

“These gentlemen aren’t my prisoners, Comminges, they’re my guests,” said Mazarin, smiling his sly smile. “Guests so precious I keep their windows barred and their doors locked for fear that they’ll tire of keeping me company. But though they seem like prisoners, I esteem them nonetheless, and the proof is that I’d like to visit Sir La Fère for a little private talk. To make sure our conversation will remain undisturbed, you will escort him, as I’ve already requested, to the pavilion of the orangery. You know that’s along the route of my usual evening walk; well, on my walk, I’ll stop in and have a talk with him. As much as he seems my enemy, I have a good deal of sympathy for him, and if he’s disposed to be reasonable, we may get somewhere.”

Comminges bowed and returned to where Athos was waiting, apparently calmly but anxious underneath. “And so?” he asked the Lieutenant of the Guards.

“Sir,” replied Comminges, “it seems it can’t be done.”

“Sir Comminges,” said Athos, “I’ve been a soldier all my life, so I know what it means to follow orders – but beyond your orders, there might still be a favour you could do me.”

“With all my heart, Sir,” replied Comminges, “since I know who you are, and what services you formerly rendered Her Majesty, and since I know how close you are to that young man who so bravely came to my rescue the day Broussel was arrested. I’m your man, so far as I can be within the limits of my orders.”

“Thank you, Sir, I desire nothing more, and will ask for nothing of you that will compromise you in any way.”

“If it’s only a small compromise, Sir,” said Comminges, smiling, “ask anyway. I don’t much care for Sir Mazarini; I serve the queen, and it’s only that that leads me to serve the cardinal. I serve the one with joy but the other only reluctantly – so speak, and I’ll listen.”

“If it isn’t inconvenient that I know Sir d’Artagnan is here,” said Athos, “then can I presume it wouldn’t be inconvenient to let him know that I’m here?”

“I have received no orders regarding that, Sir.”

“*Well!* In that case, do me the favour of giving him my regards, and informing him that I’m now his neighbour. You can tell him at the same time what I overheard just now, that Sir Mazarin has placed me in the pavilion of the orangery so he can visit me, and that I intend to profit from this honour he grants me to seek to mitigate our captivity.”

“It can’t last long,” said Comminges. “The cardinal himself told me this place is no prison.”

“There are those notorious oubliettes,” Athos said with a smile.

“Oh, that’s out of the question!” said Comminges. “Yes, I’ve heard the stories but a man of low birth, like the cardinal, an Italian who’s come to find his fortune in France, wouldn’t dare to commit such an outrage against men like you. Things were different in the time of the old cardinal, who was a great lord but Sir Mazarin? Come, now! Such dungeons are only for enemies of the crown, and a coward like him wouldn’t dare call you such. Your arrest is known, Sir, and that of your friends will soon be known, and all France would hold him accountable if he contrived for you to disappear. No, rest easy, for years the oubliettes of Rueil have been no more than a story to frighten children. Abide here without fear. For my part, I’ll inform Sir d’Artagnan of your arrival. Why, a fortnight from now you might be doing a similar favour for me!”

“I, Sir?”

“No doubt about it! Couldn’t I just as easily end up a prisoner of Sir Coadjuteur?”

“Believe me, Sir, in that case I should do my best to oblige you,” said Athos, bowing.

“Will you do me the honour of dining with me, Sir Count?” asked Comminges.

“Thank you, Sir but I’m in a dark mood, and would be a sad guest this evening. But the invitation is appreciated.”

Comminges then led the count to a chamber on the ground floor of the pavilion adjacent to the orangery, the approach to which was a grand courtyard crowded with soldiers and courtiers. This courtyard was surrounded by halls in the shape of a horseshoe; at its centre were the apartments of Sir Mazarin, one of its wings ended in the hunting pavilion, where d’Artagnan was held, and the other ended in the pavilion of the orangery, where Athos was lodged. Beyond these two wings stretched the park. Athos, arriving in the room he was to occupy, saw through its single barred window other walls and a roof across the way. “What is that building?” he said.

“That’s the back of the hunting pavilion where your friends are detained,” said Comminges. “Unfortunately, its windows on this side were blocked up in the time of the old cardinal, as these buildings have been used to hold prisoners more than once, so Sir Mazarin is really just restoring them to their old uses. If those windows weren’t blocked up, you’d have the consolation of being able to communicate with your friends by gestures.”

“Are you sure, Sir Comminges,” said Athos, “that the cardinal will do me the honour of visiting me?”

“At least that’s what he said, sir.”

Athos sighed, looking at his barred window. “In fact, it might as well be a prison,” said Comminges. “It even has bars on the window. But really, what came over you, a flower of the nobility, to commit your courage and loyalty to those toadstools of the Fronde! If there was any gentleman I expected to see on the staff of the royal army, Count, it was you. But you, the Count La Fère, a Frondeur of the party of Broussel, Blancmesnil, Viole! *Pooh, so!* You don’t belong with those Men of the Robe. You, of all people!”

“*My faith*, Sir, one must be either a Frondeur or a Mazarinist,” said Athos. “I considered both names and chose the former – it at least has a French ring to it. Besides, I’m not a Frondeur with Broussel, Blancmesnil, and Viole but with Sir Beaufort, Sir Bouillon, and Sir d’Elbeuf – with princes, not with presidents, councillors, and attorneys. And you, just look at that blank wall over there and see for yourself the pleasant result of serving the cardinal! That, Sir Comminges, should tell you something about the gratitude of a Mazarin.”

“Yes,” replied Comminges with a smile, “especially if I repeat what Sir d’Artagnan has been saying about him for the last week.”

“Poor d’Artagnan!” said Athos, with that charming melancholy that was one of the features of his character. “A man so brave, so good, and so terrible to anyone who threatens those he loves. You have two difficult prisoners there, Sir, and I pity you if you’re responsible for holding those indomitable men.”

“Indomitable!” said Comminges, still smiling. “Now, sir, you’re just trying to frighten me. It’s true that on the first day of his incarceration, Sir d’Artagnan issued challenges to all the soldiers and lower officers, doubtless in hopes of getting a sword in his hand. He kept it up for another day but then became as calm and as sweet as a lamb. Now he sings Gascon ditties that have us doubled over with laughter.”

“And Sir du Vallon?” asked Athos.

“Ah! Now that’s different. I admit I find him a fearsome gentleman. On the first day he forced open the door with a single thrust of his shoulder, and I half expected to see him break out of Rueil the way Samson came out of Gaza. But his mood changed along with Sir d’Artagnan’s, and now he seems so accustomed to his captivity, he makes jokes about it.”

“So much the better,” said Athos.

“Were you expecting something else?” asked Comminges suddenly recalling what Mazarin had said about these prisoners in light of what the Count La Fère had said and beginning to feel anxious. For his part, Athos was thinking that this cooperative behaviour on the part of his friends was certainly due to some plan of d’Artagnan’s and thought it best not to continue calling them dangerous.

“What? From them?” he said. “They’re just a pair of hotheads – one’s a Gascon, the other a Picard. They catch fire easily but burn out quickly. The proof is in the story you just told me.” That matched Comminges’s own opinion and he withdrew somewhat reassured, leaving Athos alone in that broad chamber where he was to be treated with the consideration due to a gentleman according the cardinal’s orders. Athos expected to get a better idea of his real situation after the promised visit from Mazarin.

## Brains &amp; Brawn

Now let's pass from the orangery to the hunting pavilion. At the end of the courtyard, past a portico of Ionic columns that led to the dog kennels, an oblong building capped the end of the wing opposite the orangery that ended the other wing of the half-circle. It was on the ground floor of this pavilion that Porthos and d'Artagnan were confined, sharing the long hours of a captivity abhorrent to both their temperaments. D'Artagnan paced like a captive tiger, eyes narrowed, growling when he passed the bars of a window that looked out onto a back courtyard. Porthos lay quietly digesting an excellent dinner, the remains of which had just been taken away. The one seemed to have lost his mind but was thinking; the other seemed to be thinking but was asleep – though his sleep was a nightmare, if his broken and incoherent snores were any indication. “See there?” said d'Artagnan. “The light is failing. It must be nearly four o'clock. We've been here for a hundred and eighty-three hours.”

“Hum!” said Porthos, pretending to answer.

“Do you hear me, Enchanted Sleeper?” said d'Artagnan, annoyed that anyone could sleep in the daytime when he could barely sleep at night.

“What?” said Porthos.

“Did you hear me?”

“Did you say something?”

“I said,” resumed d'Artagnan, “that we've been in here a hundred and eighty-three hours.”

“It's your own fault,” said Porthos.

“How is it my fault?”

“I offered to get us out.”

“By bending the bars or smashing the door?”

“That's right.”

“Porthos, people like us don't just purely and simply walk away.”

“My faith,” said Porthos, “*I'm* pure and simple enough to just walk away.”

D'Artagnan shrugged. “There's more to the matter than just getting out of this pavilion.”

“Dear friend,” said Porthos, “since your mood seems a little better today, explain to me why there's more to the matter than getting out of this pavilion.”

“Because we don't have weapons or the password, that's why, and won't get fifty paces across the courtyard before we're stopped by a sentry.”

“*Well!*” said Porthos. “We'll knock out the sentry, and then we'll have weapons.”

“Yes but they're tough nuts, these Germans, and before we knock him out he'll give a shout, and then the hounds will be after us. We'll be taken like foxes, we who are lions, and then we'll be thrown into the oubliettes, where we won't even have the consolation of seeing the frightful grey sky over Rueil that no more resembles the sky of Tarbes than the moon resembles the sun. *God be with you!* If we had an ally outside, someone who could give us information on the moral and physical layout of the château, what Caesar called the *mores locaque*, or so I've been told, at least ... bah! To think that I had time on my hands for twenty years, and yet never thought to study the defences of the Château de Rueil.”

“So what?” said Porthos. “Let's go anyway.”

“Old friend,” said d'Artagnan, “do you know why master pastry chefs never work with their own hands?”

“No,” said Porthos, “but I'd be flattered to have you tell me.”

“They're afraid that, in front of their students, they might make cakes that are over-baked or fallen soufflés.”

“Because?”

“Because then they'd be laughed at, and no master pastry chef should be an object of mockery.”

“And what do master pastry chefs have to do with us?”

“Because we, in our adventurous exploits, must never fail so badly that it's laughable. In England we failed, we were beaten, and that's enough of a blot on our reputation.”

“By whom were we beaten?” asked Porthos.

“By Mordaunt.”

“Oh, yes, by Sir Mordaunt. But then we drowned him.”

“So we did, and that will restore us somewhat in the eyes of posterity, assuming posterity pays any attention to us. But listen to me, Porthos – though Sir Mordaunt was no one to take lightly, Sir Mazarin is of a very different order than Mordaunt and isn't someone we can just drown. Therefore, let's just keep our eyes open and await our chances, because,” d'Artagnan added with a sigh, “while we two may be the equal of eight, we'd be better off if we were four. You know what I mean.”

“Isn't that the truth,” said Porthos, adding his sigh to that of d'Artagnan.

“Well, then, Porthos, do as I do, and march back and forth until our friends come to us or, failing that, we get a good idea. Just don't go on sleeping all the time – nothing addles the mind like too much sleep. As for what awaits us, I think it's not as bad as I feared at first. I don't think Sir Mazarin is considering removing our heads, because our heads can't be removed without a trial, a trial would make a lot of noise that noise would attract our friends, and they wouldn't let Sir Mazarin do it.”

“You sure can think a thing through,” said Porthos, admiringly.

“Yes, I'm not bad,” said d'Artagnan. “And then, you see, if we're not tried, and hold onto our heads, they have to either keep us here or transport us elsewhere.”

“Yes, that's so,” said Porthos.

“Well! Either way, it's impossible that neither Aramis, that shrewd schemer, nor Athos, that wise sage, will figure out where we are. And then, *my faith*, it will be time!”

“True, and we're pretty well off here, all things considered – except for one.”

“What's that?”

“Didn't you notice, d'Artagnan, that they've fed us braised mutton three days in a row?”

“I hadn't but if they do it a fourth time, rest assured that I shall personally lodge a complaint!”

“And sometimes I miss my home; it's been a long time since I've seen my châteaux.”

“Bah! No need to worry about those, you'll see them again. Do you think Sir Mazarin is going to have them knocked down?”

“You don't suppose he's capable of such an outrage, do you?” asked Porthos anxiously.

“No, though it wouldn't have been beyond the old cardinal. This one's too small to take big risks.”

“You reassure me, d'Artagnan.”

“Then put the best face on things that you can: make jokes with the guards; befriend them since we can't bribe them; speak pleasantly to them when they go past our window. So far, you've only shown them your fist, and the more you show it, Porthos, the less they'll respect it. Ah, what I wouldn't give to have just five hundred Louis.”

“Me, too,” said Porthos, determined not to be less generous than d'Artagnan. “Why, for that I'd give a hundred pistoles.” The two prisoners had just reached this point in their conversation when Comminges came in, preceded by a sergeant and two men who brought supper in a basket full of bowls and plates. “Oh, great!” said Porthos. “Mutton again!”

“My dear Sir Comminges,” said d'Artagnan, “I warn you that my friend, Sir du Vallon's been driven to extremity by the torment of Sir Mazarin feeding him the same meal every day and is capable of anything.”

“I'll eat only half of this unless the rest is taken away immediately!” declared Porthos.

“Away with the mutton,” said Comminges. “Bring something Sir du Vallon will find appetizing, especially since the good news I'm about to share is bound to give him an appetite.”

“Has Sir Mazarin died?” asked Porthos.

“No, I'm sorry to say he's in good health.”

“Too bad,” said Porthos.

“Then what's your news?” asked d'Artagnan. “It's a meal so rare in prison that I hope you'll excuse my impatience, Sir Comminges. Especially since you say the news is good.”

“Would you be pleased to hear that the Count La Fère is also in good health?” replied Comminges.

D'Artagnan's eyes widened. “I'd be delighted to hear that!” he said. “More than delighted.”

“Well! I'm charged by him to give you his best compliments and report that he's in fine fettle.”

D'Artagnan nearly jumped for joy. A quick glance at Porthos shared his thought: *If Athos knows where we are, and sends us word of it, he's about to act on it.*

Porthos wasn't usually very good at reading such glances but he knew Athos, and was struck by the same idea as d'Artagnan, so this time he got it. “But,” asked the Gascon tentatively, “did the Count La Fère tell you personally to convey his compliments to myself and Sir du Vallon?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then you saw him?”

“Certainly.”

“Where was that? If it's not too much to ask.”

“Right nearby,” replied Comminges, smiling.

“Right nearby!” repeated d'Artagnan, eyes sparkling.

“So near that if the windows that face the orangery weren't bricked up, you could see where he is from here.”

*He's scouting out the environment of the château*, thought d'Artagnan, and then said aloud, “You met him in the park, perhaps, while hunting?”

“Oh, much closer than that – there, beyond that wall,” said Comminges, knocking on the plaster.

“Beyond that wall? What's beyond that wall? They brought me here by night, so devil take me if I have any idea where I am.”

“Then imagine this,” said Comminges.

“I'll imagine whatever you like.”

“Imagine there was a window in this wall.”

“All right. And?”

“And then you could see the Count La Fère at his own window!”

“Sir La Fère is staying at the château?”

“Yes.”

“In what capacity?”

“In the same capacity as you.”

“Athos is a prisoner?”

“You know very well,” said Comminges, laughing, “that there are no prisoners at Rueil, since it isn't a prison.”

“Enough wordplay, Sir: Athos was arrested?”

“Yesterday, at Saint-Germain, after leaving an audience with the queen.”

D'Artagnan's arms dropped limp to his sides. He looked like he'd been struck by lightning. Pallor slowly drained his sun-browned complexion. “Prisoner!” he repeated.

“Prisoner!” Porthos repeated after him, crushed.

Suddenly d'Artagnan raised his head but only Porthos saw the brief light in his eyes. Then he lowered it again in apparent dejection. "Come, come," said Comminges, who had a real affection for d'Artagnan, after he'd rescued him from the Parisians on the day of Broussel's arrest. "Don't be upset, it's not sad news I bring you, I promise. These are just the chances of war. Be pleased at the chance that brings your friend closer to you and Sir du Vallon, and don't be cast down."

But this exhortation did nothing to cheer up d'Artagnan, who continued apparently stricken with gloom. "And how did he look?" asked Porthos who put in a word of his own, seeing that d'Artagnan was letting the conversation drop.

"He looked well," said Comminges. "At first, like you, he took it hard but when he heard that the cardinal was planning to visit him this evening..."

"Oh?" said d'Artagnan. "Sir Cardinal is going to pay a visit to the Count La Fère?"

"Yes, so he said, and the Count La Fère, hearing that, charged me to tell you that he would take advantage of this favour to plead your cause, and his."

"Ah, our dear count!" said d'Artagnan.

"Some cause," growled Porthos, "some favour! *For the love of God!* The Count La Fère, whose family ranks with the Montmorencys and the Rohans, is to plead with Sir Mazarin."

"No matter," said d'Artagnan, in a soothing tone. "When you think about it, my dear du Vallon, it's quite an honour for the count. It's a hopeful sign, such an honour for a prisoner – so great in fact that Sir Comminges must be mistaken about it."

"What? Me, mistaken?"

"Surely it isn't Sir Mazarin who will visit the Count La Fère but the Count La Fère who will visit Sir Mazarin."

"No, not at all," said Comminges, who insisted on the accuracy of his statements. "I just repeat what the cardinal told me: it is he who will visit the Count La Fère."

D'Artagnan tried to catch Porthos's eye to convey to him the importance of this but failed. "Is it then the habit of the cardinal to take an evening walk through the orangery?" he asked.

"Every night," said Comminges. "It seems that's where he goes to meditate on affairs of state."

"Then I begin to believe that Sir La Fère will receive a visit from His Eminence," said d'Artagnan. "He'll be accompanied, of course."

"Yes, by two soldiers."

"And he conducts business in front of soldiers?"

"The soldiers are Swiss from those cantons where they speak only German. Besides, they'll probably wait outside the door."

D'Artagnan ground his fingernails into the palms of his hands so his face would show only what he wanted it to show. "Sir Mazarin should take care not to visit the Count La Fère alone," said d'Artagnan, "as the count is liable to be furious."

Comminges laughed. "*Oh that!* What is it with you? Are you all cannibals? Sir La Fère is a perfect gentleman – besides, he has no weapons. And at the first cry from His Eminence, the two soldiers would come running."

"Two soldiers," said d'Artagnan, seemingly consulting his memory. "Two soldiers – yes, that's why I hear two men called every evening, and why I see them pacing back and forth for a half an hour sometimes outside my window."

"That's when they're waiting on the cardinal, or rather Bernouin, who summons them when the cardinal comes out."

"They look like good men," said d'Artagnan.

"They're from a regiment that was at Lens, and which Sir Prince has given to the cardinal to do him honour."

"Ah, Sir," said d'Artagnan, as if to sum up this whole conversation, "perhaps His Eminence will be lenient, and grant our liberty to Sir La Fère."

"I desire it with all my heart," said Comminges.

"Then, if he forgot to make this visit, you wouldn't find it inconvenient to remind him of it?"

"Not at all."

"Ah! That makes me feel a bit better." Anyone who'd have read the Gascon's soul would've seen how much of an understatement this was. "Now," he continued, "if I'd ask a final favour, Sir Comminges."

"I'm at your service, Sir."

"When will you see the Count La Fère again?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Will you wish him good day for us, and ask him to request from the cardinal the same favour he's obtained?"

"You'd like the cardinal to visit you here?"

"No, I'm not so bold or as demanding as that. If His Eminence would just do me the honour to listen to me, that's all I ask."

"Oh!" murmured Porthos, shaking his head. "I would never have believed d'Artagnan could sink so low! How far we have fallen."

"I'll see to it," said Comminges.

"And also assure the count that you've seen I'm in good health, and that though sad, I'm resigned."

"It pleases me, Sir, to hear you say that."

"And say the same thing about Sir du Vallon."

"What, me? Not at all!" cried Porthos. "I'm not resigned at all."

"But you will be resigned, my friend."

"Never!"

"Oh, he will be resigned, Sir Comminges," said d'Artagnan. "I know him better than he knows himself, and I know he has a thousand excellent qualities he doesn't even suspect – including resignation. Now shut up, my dear du Vallon, and resign yourself."

"Goodbye, Gentlemen," said Comminges, "and have a good night!"

"We'll try."

Comminges bowed and went out. D'Artagnan watched him with downcast eyes and a resigned expression – but as soon as the door was shut behind the guard officer, he leapt toward Porthos and hugged him with such joy that no one could doubt it. "Oh ho!" said Porthos. "What now? Are you losing your mind, my poor friend?"

"I am," said d'Artagnan, "because we're saved!"

"And how can you say that?" said Porthos. "On the contrary, it looks to me like we're all taken, except for Aramis, and that our chances of getting out are diminished by one-half now that Athos is in Mazarin's mousetrap."

"Not at all, Porthos, old friend. That mousetrap was strong enough for two but it's too weak for three."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Porthos.

"No matter," said d'Artagnan. "Let's sit down to supper and fortify ourselves – we're going to need all our strength tonight."

"We are? What are we doing tonight?" said Porthos, intrigued in spite of himself.

"Travelling, most likely."

"But..."

"Let's sit down and eat, my friend – ideas come to me when I'm eating. After supper, when my ideas are complete, I'll share them with you." However impatient Porthos was to hear d'Artagnan's plan, he knew his friend's methods, so he sat down to supper without another word, and ate with an appetite that showed the confidence he had in d'Artagnan's imagination.

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Their supper was silent but by no means sad, for from time to time d'Artagnan's face was illuminated by one of those shrewd smiles that lit his expression when he was in good humour. Porthos didn't miss a single one of these smiles, and to each one he laughed or made some remark to show his friend that, while he had no idea what d'Artagnan was thinking, he could at least acknowledge the process. At dessert d'Artagnan sat back in his chair with his legs crossed with the look of a man well satisfied with himself. Porthos placed his elbows on the table, his chin on his hands, and looked at d'Artagnan with an admiring gaze that was the perfect expression of his unflinching good nature. "Well?" said d'Artagnan after a moment.

"Well?" repeated Porthos.

"You were saying, old friend?"

"Me! I said nothing."

"You did. You said you wanted to get out of here."

"Oh, that! Yes, I'd love to do that."

"And you added that it was only a matter of breaking down a door or a wall."

"It's true, I did say that, and I'd even say it again."

"And I answered you, Porthos that it's a bad idea, and we wouldn't get a hundred paces before we were taken again, without clothes to disguise ourselves and weapons to defend ourselves."

"It's true, we'd need clothing and weapons."

"*Well!*" said d'Artagnan, rising. "In that case we must get them, friend Porthos, and something else as well."

"Where?" said Porthos, looking around.

"Don't bother searching, it's too soon; everything will come to us at its proper time. When was it we saw those two Swiss guards last night?"

"An hour after sunset, I think."

"Then if they return when they did last night, we won't have more than another quarter of an hour to wait before we have the pleasure of seeing them."

"Yes, a quarter of an hour at the most."

"Your arm is in pretty good shape, isn't it, Porthos?"

Porthos unbuttoned his cuffs, rolled up his sleeves, and looked complacently at his brawny arms, as big around as most men's thighs. "But yes," he said, "pretty good."

"Strong enough to twist, without too much trouble, these fire tongs into a hoop and this ash shovel into a corkscrew?"

"Certainly," said Porthos.

"Show me," said d'Artagnan.

The giant took the two indicated objects and, with the greatest ease and without apparent effort, performed the feats his companion had requested. "You see?" he said.

"Magnificent!" said d'Artagnan. "You are truly gifted, Porthos."

"I once heard," said Porthos, "of a certain Milo of Croton who did some extraordinary things, such as breaking a rope that was tightened around his brow by flexing his head muscles, killing an ox with his fist and carrying it home on his shoulders, stopping a horse by grabbing its hind feet, and so forth. When I was at Pierrefonds I made them read to me about all these feats, and I did everything he did, except for bursting a rope by swelling my temples."

"Your strength has never been in your head," said d'Artagnan.

"No, it's in my arms and shoulders," replied Porthos naively.

"Well, my friend! Let's see you go to the window and take out one of the bars. Wait a moment until I put out the lamp."

Porthos approached the window, took a central bar in both hands, gripped it tightly, pulled it toward him, and bent it in the middle like a bow, so that both ends came out of the stone sill where for thirty years they'd been sealed in cement. "And there, my friend," said d'Artagnan, "is something even the old cardinal could never have done, man of genius though he was."

"Should I yank the others?" asked Porthos.



"No, I think that will do it; a man should be able to pass through that gap."  
Porthos thrust his shoulders and chest through the opening. "Yes," he said.  
"Indeed, a very pretty opening, just what we need. Now stick out your arms."  
"Where?"  
"Through the gap in the window."  
"What for?"  
"You'll see when the time comes. Try it."  
Porthos obeyed, as obedient as a soldier, thrusting his arms out between the bars. "Perfect!" said d'Artagnan.  
"Our plan goes forward?"  
"On wheels, old friend."  
"Good. Now what do I do?"  
"Nothing."  
"Then we're done?"  
"Not yet."  
"I'd like to understand," said Porthos.  
"All right, old friend, I'll catch you up. The door of the guardroom over there opens out, as you see."

"Yes, I see."  
"They're going to send out into our courtyard that Sir Mazarin crosses to get to the orangery, the two guards who will accompany him."  
"They're coming out now."  
"Hopefully they'll close the door behind them ... good, they did!"  
"And now?"  
"Hush! They might hear us."  
"But how will I know what to do?"  
"I'll tell you each step as the time comes."  
"All right but I'd rather..."  
"What, and lose the pleasure of surprise?"  
"Good point," said Porthos.  
"Hush!"

Porthos stood mute and motionless. In fact, the two soldiers were approaching the window, rubbing their hands, because it was February and cold. Just then the door to the guardhouse reopened and one of the soldiers was called back. He left his companion and went back through the door. "Is the plan still on?" whispered Porthos.  
"Better than ever," replied d'Artagnan in the same tone. "Now, listen: I'll call this soldier over and chat with him, as I did last night with one of his comrades, remember?"  
"Yes, though I didn't catch a word of what he said."  
"He did have a pretty thick accent. But don't miss a word of what I'm about to tell you, Porthos: it's all in the execution."  
"Good. Execution is my strong suit."  
"Don't I know it; I'm counting on that."  
"Tell me."  
"So, I'll call the soldier over to chat with him."  
"You already said that."  
"I'll lean to the left, so as he steps up on that bench under the window to talk to me, he'll be on your right."

"What if he doesn't step up?"  
"He will, don't worry. When he steps up on the bench, you reach your mighty arm through the gap and grab him by the neck. Then like Tobias grabbing the great fish by the gills, you'll drag him into our room, squeezing him tightly so he can't scream."  
"Got it," said Porthos. "But what if I strangle him?"  
"At worst, it'll mean one less Swiss but I doubt you'll strangle him. Just lay him down gently on the floor so we can tie and gag him. Then we'll have one uniform and a sword."  
"Wonderful!" said Porthos, regarding d'Artagnan with deep admiration.  
"Eh!" shrugged the Gascon.  
"Fine – but a single uniform and sword aren't enough."  
"Well! Doesn't he have a comrade?"  
"Good point," said Porthos.  
"Now, when I cough, you reach out for him."  
"All right!"

The two friends took their appointed positions, with Porthos out of sight around the edge of the window. "Good evening, comrade," said d'Artagnan in his friendliest voice, not too loudly.  
"Gut evening, Sir," replied the soldier.  
"It's not too warm for a walk," said d'Artagnan.  
"Brrr," said the soldier.  
"Then I imagine a glass of honey would sound good to you?"  
"A glass of vine would be welcome."  
"The fish bites!" d'Artagnan murmured to Porthos.  
"I understand," said Porthos.  
"How about a whole bottle?" said d'Artagnan.  
"A pottle!"  
"Yes."

"A whole pottle?"  
"I've an extra and it's all yours if you'll drink to my health."  
"Ja," said the soldier, drawing nearer.  
"Here, come and get it, my friend," said the Gascon.  
"Villingly! Ah, *gut*, here is a bench."  
"Now, isn't that convenient?"

"I'll just step up ... now here I am, my friend." And d'Artagnan coughed. At the same moment Porthos reached out, fast as lightning. His fingers closed like steel pincers around the soldier's neck, and he dragged him suddenly through the opening, despite the risk of skinning him on the bars, and laid him down on the floor. There d'Artagnan, giving the Swiss just enough time to take a breath, gagged him with his own scarf, and immediately began to strip him of his clothes with the speed and dexterity of a man who'd learned his trade on the battlefield. Then the soldier, bound and gagged, was stuffed into the fireplace that our friends hadn't yet lit that evening. "And now we have a sword and a uniform," said Porthos.  
"I'll take these," said d'Artagnan. "If we're going to get you a set, we'll have to do that again. Watch out! The other soldier is coming from the guardhouse."  
"I don't think we should try the same thing again," said Porthos. "They always say lightning doesn't strike twice. If I missed my grab, all would be lost. I'll slip out, jump him when he goes by, and pass him in already bound and gagged."  
"Even better," replied the Gascon.  
"Get ready," said Porthos, sliding out through the opening.

It worked out just as Porthos had promised. The giant crouched behind a topiary, and when the soldier passed, he grabbed him by the neck, gagged him, shoved him like a mummy between the window bars, and then followed him inside. The second prisoner was stripped as they had the first. He was laid down on the bed and bound to it with belts, and as the bed was solid oak, and the belts were doubled, he was as firmly restrained as the other. "There," said d'Artagnan, "that's perfect. Now, try on his coat, Porthos, and see if it fits; if it doesn't, the baldric will be enough, along with this hat with its red feather." By chance the second Swiss was a large fellow, so Porthos split only a few seams when he donned the man's coat, and everything else was fine. For several minutes nothing was heard but the rustling of cloth as Porthos and d'Artagnan hastily donned their disguises. "Ready," both said at the same time. "As for you, comrades," added d'Artagnan, turning toward the two soldiers, "so long as you lie there gently, nothing will happen to you – but if you make a fuss, you're dead." The soldiers didn't budge. They were still feeling the effects of Porthos's grip, and knew this was a serious matter, and no joke. "Now," said d'Artagnan, "are you ready to understand the rest, Porthos?"  
"Yes," said Porthos. "I am alert."  
"Well, we go down into the courtyard."  
"Yes."  
"We take the place of these two fellows."  
"Good."  
"We patrol back and forth."  
"That's fine, it will keep us warm."  
"When the valet calls, like last night and the night before, we obey."  
"What do we say?"  
"We don't say anything, if possible."  
"Fine. I like that better."  
"We say nothing, we just pull our hats down and escort His Eminence."  
"To where?"  
"To his meeting with Athos. Do you think he'll be happy to see us?"  
"Oh ho!" cried Porthos. "I get it now!"  
"Be careful how loud you say so, Porthos, because we haven't done it yet," said the Gascon cheerfully.  
"What happens when we've done it?" said Porthos.  
"Follow me," replied d'Artagnan. "Time will tell."

And passing through the opening in the bars, he slipped into the courtyard. Porthos followed him, though with more difficulty. The two bound soldiers in the room could be heard shivering in fear. Scarcely had d'Artagnan and Porthos touched the ground before a door opened across the courtyard and the voice of the valet cried, "Attention!"

The next moment the door to the guardroom opened and a voice called, “La Bruyère and Barthois, on duty!”

“It seems my name is La Bruyère,” said d’Artagnan.

“And mine is Barthois,” said Porthos.

“Where are you?” called the valet whose eyes hadn’t yet adjusted to the darkness, so he couldn’t make out our two heroes in the gloom.

“Here we are,” said d’Artagnan. Then turning to Porthos, he whispered, “How goes it, Sir du Vallon?”

“*My faith*, it goes well! I just hope it lasts.”

The two soldier-impostors fell in gravely behind the valet. He led them into a vestibule, then into an antechamber that seemed to be a waiting room, and indicating two stools, he said, “Your orders are simple: let no one enter here but one – and that one you must obey in everything. Do you hear me? And stay here until I relieve you.”

D’Artagnan was well known to this valet who was none other than Bernouin who had admitted him to the cardinal’s presence a dozen times over six or eight months. Instead of replying, he looked down and muttered something that he hoped sounded German rather than Gascon. As for Porthos, d’Artagnan had made him promise that under no conditions would he speak. If pushed to extremities, he was allowed to solemnly swear, “*The Devil*.”

Bernouin went out, shutting the door behind him. “Uh-oh,” said Porthos, hearing a key turn in the lock. “It appears to be the fashion here to lock people up. It looks to me like we’ve just traded one prison for another, the orangery. I’m not sure we’re any better off.”

“Porthos, my friend,” said d’Artagnan in a low voice, “trust in Providence, and let me think this through.”

“Think all you want,” said Porthos, soured by the way things were going.

“We came about eighty paces, and climbed six steps,” murmured d’Artagnan. “And now, as the illustrious Sir du Vallon says, we must be in the pavilion of the orangery. The Count La Fère can’t be far but the doors are all closed.”

“That’s no problem!” said Porthos. “With a shove of my shoulder…”

“Good God, Porthos, settle down,” said d’Artagnan. “Save your strength until we need it. Didn’t you hear him say someone will be coming here?”

“I did.”

“Well, that someone will open the doors *for* us.”

“But listen,” said Porthos, “if that someone recognises us, and starts shouting, all is lost. Because I don’t imagine you want me to strangle a man of the Church like I would a German or Englishman.”

“God save us, no!” said d’Artagnan. “While the young king might be grateful, the queen would never forgive us, and we really should spare her feelings. Besides, to spill blood unnecessarily? Never! I have my plan – let’s stick to it, and later we’ll laugh.”

“Fine by me,” said Porthos. “I could use a laugh.”

“*Hush!*” said d’Artagnan. “Here comes the: *someone*.”

The sound of a light step was heard from the vestibule. The hinges of the door squealed, and a man appeared dressed in a cavalier’s outfit beneath a large brown cloak, with a wide felt hat over his eyes and a lantern in his hand. Porthos backed against the wall but he couldn’t make himself so small the man in the cloak couldn’t see him. He held out his lantern and said, “Light this from the ceiling lamp.”

Then addressing d’Artagnan, he said, “You have your orders.”

“Yes,” replied the Gascon, determined to confine himself to that specimen of the German language.

“*German*,” said the cavalier, “*all right*.”

And advancing to the door opposite to the one from which he’d entered, he opened it and passed through, closing it behind him. “And now what do we do?” asked Porthos.

“Now, friend Porthos, if that inner door is locked, we’re going to put your shoulder to use. But everything in its time, when all is prepared. First let’s barricade the outer door before we follow the cavalier.”

The two friends then went to work using all the room’s furniture to blockade the outer door that fortunately opened inward, making the effort worthwhile. “There,” said d’Artagnan. “That will make sure we can’t be surprised from behind. And now, forward!”

## 259 The Oubliette of Sir Mazarin

Upon trying the door through which Mazarin had disappeared, d’Artagnan found that it was locked. “Here’s where we put your shoulder to work,” said d’Artagnan. “Push, friend Porthos but gently, quietly – don’t break anything, just pry it open.”

Porthos pressed his broad shoulder against the door panel that bent enough that d’Artagnan could get the point of his sword between the bolt and the lock’s faceplate. The bolt gave way, and the door opened. “As I’ve always said, friend Porthos, doors, like women, yield best to sweet persuasion.”

“You, Sir,” said Porthos, “are a philosopher.”

“In we go,” said d’Artagnan.

In they went, to a small chamber. Beyond, through a glass door, glowed the cardinal’s lantern that rested on the ground outside. By its light they could see the potted orange trees of the Château de Rueil extending off in two double lines, with a wide path down the centre and a small alley to each side. “But no cardinal,” said d’Artagnan, “only his lantern. Where the devil did he go?”

He went out to explore one side of the path, pointing Porthos toward the other, then suddenly saw that one of the tree-tubs on the left was out of line, and in its former place was a gaping hole. Ten men would have had difficulty lifting that great ceramic pot but by some mechanism it had rotated away from the slab it stood upon. D’Artagnan, as we’ve said, saw the cavity the tree had concealed, and in this hole the steps of a narrow spiral staircase. He called Porthos over with a gesture and showed him the pit and the stairs. The two looked at each other in astonishment. “If all we wanted was gold,” said d’Artagnan, “we’d have just made our fortune, and would be rich for the rest of our lives.”

“How’s that?”

“Don’t you understand, Porthos? In all probability at the foot of these stairs is the famous treasure trove of the old cardinal that everyone talks about. All we’d have to do is go down, tie up the cardinal, fill a box, drag it up the stairs, and put the orange tree back in its place. No one in the world would know where our fortune had come from – and the cardinal would be in no position to tell.”

“That would be quite a coup for a mercenary or rogue,” said Porthos, “but unworthy, it seems to me, of two gentlemen.”

“Agreed,” said d’Artagnan. “That’s why I said, ‘if all we wanted was gold’ – but we’re after something else.”

At that moment there was a noise from the pit. D’Artagnan started, and then leaned forward to listen, hearing a hard and metallic sound, like the clanking of a sack of gold. A door closed below, and the first glimmers of a light shone up the stairs. Mazarin had left his lantern in the orangery to make it look like he’d gone for a walk, then had lit a wax taper to carry into his underground vault. “Say hey!” he said in Italian as he mounted the stairs, hefting a bulging sack of Spanish *reals*. “This is enough to buy off five Councillors of Parliament and two Parisian generals. I, too, am a great general, though I make war in my own way…”

D’Artagnan and Porthos crouched in the side aisles of the orangery, each behind a potted tree, and waited. Mazarin emerged within three steps of d’Artagnan and pressed a lever hidden in the wall. The slab rotated, and the orange tree atop it returned to its original location. Then the cardinal snuffed out his candle and replaced it in his pocket, picked up his lantern, and said to himself, “Now to go see Sir La Fère.”

*Good, that’s our destination as well*, thought d’Artagnan. *We’ll all go together*.

All three began to march, Sir Mazarin down the middle aisle, and Porthos and d’Artagnan, quietly, along the side alleys. The two hung back just enough to avoid the bars of light that shone from the cardinal’s lantern between the rows of trees. Mazarin reached a second glass door without noticing he was followed, the soft sand of the paths deadening the footsteps of his unseen companions. He turned left, into a corridor Porthos and d’Artagnan hadn’t noticed before, then stopped, thoughtfully, before a door. “Ah! *Diavolo!* I forgot Comminges’s advice that I should bring the soldiers and place them outside the door in case of trouble with this devil. Back we go.”

And, with an impatient gesture, he turned to retrace his steps. “Don’t trouble yourself, My Lord,” said d’Artagnan, smiling, with a courtly bow and his hat in his hand. “We followed Your Eminence each step of the way, and here we are now.”

“Yes, here we are,” said Porthos, with the same polite gestures.

Mazarin darted bewildered looks from one to the other, recognised them both, and dropped his lantern with a moan of terror. D’Artagnan picked it up; luckily it hadn’t been extinguished by its fall. “Oh! Such imprudence, My Lord,” he said. “We can’t go about without a light! Your Eminence might bump into some crate or fall down a hole.”

“Sir d’Artagnan!” murmured Mazarin, paralysed with astonishment.

“Yes, My Lord, in person, and I also have the honour to present Sir du Vallon, my dear friend, whom Your Eminence has been so kind as to take such an interest in.”

And d’Artagnan shone the lamp onto the delighted face of Porthos, who was beginning to understand everything, and was quite proud of it. “You were on your way to see Sir La Fère,” said d’Artagnan. “Far be it from us to interfere with that, My Lord. Please lead on, and we’ll follow.”

Mazarin began to get hold of himself. “Have you been in the orangery for long, Gentlemen?” he asked in a trembling voice as he thought of the visit he’d just made to his treasure vault.

Porthos opened his mouth to reply but d’Artagnan silenced him with a gesture, and Porthos’s mouth slowly closed. “We arrived just moments ago, My Lord,” said d’Artagnan.

Mazarin sighed in relief: he no longer feared for his treasure, merely his own life. A kind of smile passed over his lips. “Come,” he said, “I’m in the snare, Gentlemen, and admit defeat. You want your freedom, no? I give it to you.”

“Oh, My Lord!” said d’Artagnan. “You’re very good to us – but as we already have our freedom, we prefer to ask for something else.”

“You have your freedom?” said Mazarin, suddenly frightened.

“No doubt about it – while on the other hand, you, My Lord, have lost yours. That’s the way of war, My Lord; now there’s just the matter of your ransom.”

Mazarin shuddered from head to toe. His piercing gaze tried in vain to read the mocking visage of the Gascon and the impassive features of Porthos but both their faces were hidden in the shadows, and the Cumaeen Sibyl herself couldn’t have divined anything from them. “Ransom my freedom! *Ransom*,” repeated Mazarin.

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And how much will it cost me, Sir d’Artagnan?”

“*Dame*, my Lord, I don’t know yet. We’ll go ask the Count La Fère if Your Eminence will permit. If Your Eminence would deign to open the door that leads to him, we’ll have everything settled within ten minutes.”

Mazarin trembled. “My Lord,” said d’Artagnan, “Your Eminence will recognise that so far we have shown all due respect and asked politely – but we’re obliged to warn you that we have no time to lose. Open up, My Lord, if you please, and remember, above all, that at the first move you make to attempt to escape or cry out, we, who are in a very difficult situation, may be forced to go to extremes.”

“Don’t worry, Gentlemen,” said Mazarin, “I won’t try anything. I give you my word of honour.”

D’Artagnan made a sign to Porthos not to take his eye off Mazarin for a moment, and then said, “Now, my Lord, let’s all go in together.”

## 260 Negotiations

Mazarin unlocked the bolts and opened the double door, where just inside Athos was waiting to receive the illustrious visitor Comminges had told him to expect. Seeing Mazarin on his threshold, he bowed and said, “Your Eminence could have come without the escort; the honour of your visit is too great for me to forget myself.”

“But my dear Count,” said d’Artagnan, “it wasn’t His Eminence who wanted us along, it was du Vallon and I who insisted on it – perhaps somewhat improperly but we had a great desire to see you.”

At this voice, this mocking accent, and the familiar figure that went with that voice and accent, Athos started in surprise. “D’Artagnan! Porthos!” he cried.

“In person, dear friend.”

“In person!” repeated Porthos.

“What does this mean?” asked the count.

"What it means," replied Mazarin, trying to recover some of his self-possession by forcing a smile, "is that the roles have reversed, and that instead of these gentlemen being my prisoners, I am now theirs, so that you see me obliged to submit to the situation rather than to command it. But, Gentlemen, I warn you that unless you cut my throat, your triumph won't last long. My turn will come, and when it does..."

"Ah, My Lord, don't make threats – it's unbecoming," said d'Artagnan. "We intend to be nothing but sweet and gentle with Your Eminence! Let's set aside anger and ill-humour and try to keep it friendly, shall we?"

"I ask no better, Gentlemen," said Mazarin. "But if we're negotiating my ransom, I don't want you to think your situation is better than it is. By taking me in the snare, you took yourselves with me. How will you get out of it? You can see the bars and the locked gates, see, or rather guess at, how many sentries guard these bars and gates, how many soldiers throng the courtyards, and take stock of your true position. As you can see, I'm being frank with you."

Good! D'Artagnan thought. *He's bargaining. Now hold on, for here comes the tricky part.*

"I offered you your freedom," continued the minister. "I offer it to you again. If you don't take it, within the hour you'll be discovered, attacked, and probably forced to kill me that would be a horrible crime, unworthy of loyal gentlemen like yourselves."

*He's right*, thought Athos.

And like every noble idea that passed through his elevated mind, his thought could be read in his eyes. "And therefore," said d'Artagnan, to counter the hope that Athos's silent agreement had given Mazarin, "we recognise that we turn to violence only as an absolute last resort."

"On the other hand," continued Mazarin, "if you accept your freedom from me and let me go..."

"What?" interrupted d'Artagnan. "You want us to accept our freedom from you, even though, as you said yourself, you can take it back again five minutes later? And knowing you, My Lord," added d'Artagnan, "that's exactly what you'd do."

"No, really, faith of a cardinal! ... You don't believe me?"

"My Lord, I don't believe cardinals who were never ordained as priests."

"All right, then – faith of a minister!"

"But you're not a minister now, My Lord, you're a prisoner."

"Then, faith of a Mazarin! I'm still that, I hope."

"Hmm!" said d'Artagnan. "I once heard of a Mazarin who didn't keep his promises, and I fear he might have been one of Your Eminence's ancestors."

"Sir d'Artagnan," said Mazarin, "you have no shortage of wits, and I regret ever quarrelling with you."

"Then, My Lord, let's make up our differences. I ask nothing better."

"Well," said Mazarin, "what if I set you free with a guaranteed security, something visible and tangible...?"

"Ah! That's another thing," said Porthos.

"Let's hear it," said Athos.

"Let's see it," said d'Artagnan.

"But first of all, do you accept?" asked the cardinal.

"Explain your proposal, My Lord, and then we'll see."

"Take note of the fact that you're locked up here."

"But you're well aware, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "that we have, in extremity, a last resort."

"What's that?"

"We can all die together."

Mazarin shuddered. "There," he said, "at the end of that corridor, is a door to which I have the key. That door opens onto the park. Take this key and go; you're armed, alert, and quick. After a hundred paces, on your left you'll find the wall surrounding the park; go over it, and a few steps beyond it you'll be on the road and free. And as I have reason to know, if you're attacked, that won't be much of an obstacle to your escape."

"Ah! *For the love of God*, My Lord, that's tangible indeed!" said d'Artagnan. "Where is this key you'd like to offer us?"

"Here it is."

"Then, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "Please lead us to this door."

"Willingly," said the minister, "if that will make you feel better."

Mazarin, who had never hoped to get off so cheaply, led them cheerfully up the corridor and unlocked the door. It opened onto the park, and the three fugitives immediately felt the chill night wind that swept down the corridor and blew snow in their faces. "The devil!" said d'Artagnan. "It's a wretched dark night, My Lord, and we don't know the way. Since Your Eminence has come so far, perhaps My Lord would go a bit further and lead us to the wall."

"So be it," said the cardinal.

And setting off without hesitation in a straight line, he led them quickly toward the wall, and in less than a minute all four were at its foot. "Are you satisfied, Gentlemen?" asked Mazarin.

"I'd say so! *Plague*, we're not that hard to please! What an honour – three poor gentlemen escorted by a Prince of the Church! By the way, my Lord, you noted just now that we're quick, alert, and armed?"

"Yes..."

"That's not entirely true – only I and Sir du Vallon have weapons. The count has none, and if we meet a patrol, we'll need to defend ourselves."

"That's true, I suppose."

"Then do you suppose you could find us another sword?" asked Porthos.

"My Lord will lend the count his own," said d'Artagnan, "since it's of no use to him."

"Happily," said the cardinal. "I even invite Sir Count to keep it in memory of me."

"He's very gallant, isn't he, Count?" said d'Artagnan.

"Indeed," replied Athos, "and I promise My Lord to keep it near me always."

"What an exchange of compliments!" said d'Artagnan. "It's deeply moving. Doesn't it bring tears to your eyes, Porthos?"

"Yes," said Porthos, "that, or the wind. I think it might be the wind."

"Now up you go, Athos," said d'Artagnan, "and quickly."

Athos, aided by Porthos, who lifted him like a feather, clambered onto the top of the wall. "Now jump, Athos."

Athos jumped and disappeared down the other side of the wall. "Are you on the ground?" called d'Artagnan.

"Yes."

"Safely?"

"Perfectly so."

"Porthos, keep an eye on Sir Cardinal while I go up – no, I can manage without help. Just watch the cardinal, that's all."

"I'm watching," said Porthos. "...Well?"

"You're right, it's higher than I thought; just lend me your back but without letting go of the cardinal."

"I won't let go."

Porthos lent his back to d'Artagnan, who, thanks to his support, was on top of the wall in an instant. Mazarin looked aside, concealing a smile. "Are you there?" asked Porthos.

"Yes, my friend, and now..."

"Now, what?"

"Now, pass Sir Cardinal up to me – and if he starts to shout, muffle him."

Mazarin wanted to cry out but Porthos enveloped him in both hands and lifted him up to d'Artagnan, who, in his turn, hoisted the cardinal by the collar and sat him down beside him atop the wall. "Sir," d'Artagnan said, "drop down at once, next to Sir La Fère, or I'll kill you out of hand – faith of a gentleman!"

"Sir, Sir!" cried Mazarin. "You're breaking your promise!"

"Me? And just when did I promise you anything, My Lord?"

Mazarin groaned. "I gave you your freedom, Sir," he said. "Your liberty was my ransom."

"To be sure. But what of the ransom for that great treasure buried beneath the orangery where one pushes a lever hidden in the wall that pivots a stone slab that reveals a certain staircase – what of that, my Lord?"

*"God!"* said Mazarin, clasping his hands together. *"My God! I'm ... ruined."*

Ignoring these laments, d'Artagnan gripped him under the arms and lowered him gently into the hands of Athos, who stood solid and impassive at the base of the wall. Then, turning to Porthos, d'Artagnan said, "Take my hand and come on up."

Porthos clambered up with an effort that made the whole wall shake, gaining the top. "I didn't quite understand before," he said, "but I understand now. It's pretty funny."

"Do you think so?" said d'Artagnan. "All the better! But let's go quickly, and hope it stays funny to the end."

And he leaped to the ground outside the wall. Porthos followed him. "Keep the cardinal between you, Gentlemen," said d'Artagnan, "while I take the vanguard."

And drawing his sword, he led them into the dark. After a moment he paused and said, "My Lord that way is the high road? Think carefully before replying, for if Your Eminence made a mistake, it could have serious consequences, not least for yourself."

"Follow the wall, Sir," said Mazarin, "and you can't go astray."

The three friends hastened forward but soon had to slow their pace, for the cardinal, though he tried to keep up, couldn't manage it. Suddenly d'Artagnan collided with something warm that trembled slightly. "Hey, a horse!" he said. "I just ran into a horse, Gentlemen!"

"So did I!" said Athos.

"Me, too!" said Porthos who still had the cardinal by the arm, faithful to his orders.

"Now that's what I call a stroke of luck, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "just when Your Eminence was complaining about having to walk ...."

But as he said these words he felt the barrel of a pistol prod his chest, and heard a grave voice say, "Hands up!"

"Grimaud!" he cried. "Grimaud! What are you doing here? Has heaven sent you to us?"

"No, Sir," said the loyal old servant. "It's Sir Aramis. He posted me here to guard the horses."

"Aramis is here, then?"

"Yes, Sir, since yesterday."

"And what are you doing?"

"We're watching."

"What! Aramis is here?" repeated Athos.

"At the rear gate of the château. That was his post."

"How many men does he have?"

“Sixty.”  
“Send to warn him.”  
“Right away, Sir.” And thinking that no one could do a better job of it than he, Grimaud took off at full speed, while the three friends gathered themselves and waited. The only unhappy member of the group was Sir Mazarin.

**We finally begin to believe that Porthos will become a Baron & D'Artagnan a Captain**

Ten minutes later Aramis arrived, accompanied by Grimaud and eight or ten gentlemen. He was radiant and threw his arms around his friends' necks. "You're free then, Brothers! Free without my help! You didn't need a thing from me despite my best efforts!"  
"Don't worry about that, dear friend," said d'Artagnan. "Your efforts weren't unneeded, just deferred – because this business is far from over."  
"I'd laid my plans well, though," said Aramis. "I got sixty men from the coadjutor, and posted twenty around the walls of the park, twenty on the road from Rueil to Saint-Germain, and twenty scattered through the woods. Thanks to this strategy, I've intercepted two letters from Mazarin to the queen."  
Mazarin perked up his ears. "Letters which you've honestly, I hope, returned to the cardinal," said d'Artagnan.  
"If only I thought treating him with such forthright chivalry would shame him!" said Aramis. "In one of these dispatches the cardinal complains that the coffers are empty and that Her Majesty has no more money, while the other announces his plan to transport his prisoners to Melun, since Rueil didn't seem safe enough to him. You'll understand, *dear friend*, what hope I derived from the second letter! I planted my ambuscades around the château, placed my men, kept a supply of horses at hand, overseen by the intelligent Grimaud, and waited for them to bring you out. I hoped to be able to do it without even a skirmish but hadn't really expected to see any action before tomorrow morning. And now tonight you're free, with all combat avoided, and so much the better! How did you manage to escape that weasel of a Mazarin? You must have plenty to complain about his treatment of you."  
"Not too much," said d'Artagnan.  
"Really!"  
"More than that, I'll actually praise him."  
"Impossible!"  
"Not at all, for it's thanks to him that we're free."  
"Thanks to him?"  
"Yes, he had us led to the orangery by Sir Bernouin, his valet, and then he himself escorted us to the Count La Fère. Then he offered to grant us our freedom that we accepted, and more than that he was so kind as to lead us to the wall of the park that we climbed over, and outside of which we had the great good fortune to encounter Grimaud."  
"*Bien*," said Aramis, "you're the only one who could reconcile me to him, and I just wish he were here so I could tell him I hadn't thought him capable of such fine behaviour."  
"My Lord," said d'Artagnan, unable to contain himself any longer, "permit me to introduce you to Sir Knight d'Herblay, who wishes to offer, as you've heard, his respectful compliments to Your Eminence." And he stepped aside, revealing Mazarin, looking confused and apprehensive, to the bewildered gaze of Aramis. Then Aramis grinned. "Oh ho! What've we here? The cardinal himself – a fine catch indeed! *Whoa!* Comrades! Bring the horses!" Several cavaliers came running. "*For the love of God!*" said Aramis. "I think I'll be useful after all. My Lord, I hope Your Eminence will deign to receive my respects. I'll wager it was this Saint Christopher of a Porthos who transported you! By the way, I forgot..."  
And he gave an order in a low voice to one of the cavaliers. "I think it would be a good idea to get moving," said d'Artagnan.  
"Yes, I'm just waiting for someone ... a friend of Athos."  
"A friend of mine?" said the count.  
"And here he comes, galloping through the underbrush."  
"Sir Count! Sir Count!" called a young voice that made Athos tremble.  
"Raoul!" the count cried.  
The young man momentarily forgot his usual respect and threw his arms around the count. "You see, Sir Cardinal, what a shame it was to keep separated folk who love each other like we do?" said Aramis. "Gentlemen," he continued, addressing the gathering cavaliers, "surround yourselves carefully around His Eminence to make sure we do him appropriate honour, since he deigns to grant us the favour of his company. I'm sure he'll be grateful. Porthos, never lose sight of His Eminence."  
Then Aramis put his head together with those of d'Artagnan and Athos for a brief conference. "Come," said d'Artagnan, after five minutes' discussion. "We're off!"  
"But where are we going?" asked Porthos.  
"To your place, old friend – to Pierrefonds! Your lovely château is quite worthy enough to offer its noble hospitality to His Eminence. Besides, it's perfectly situated, neither too near nor too far from Paris, enabling easy communication with the capital. Come, My Lord, you'll be treated there like the prince that you are."  
"A fallen prince," said Mazarin piteously.  
"We all take risks in war, My Lord," replied Athos, "but rest assured we won't abuse our advantage."  
"No but we'll certainly use it," said d'Artagnan.  
For the rest of the night, the victors rode with the untiring speed of old, with Mazarin, gloomy and pensive, bouncing along in the middle of that troop of racing phantoms. By dawn they had made twelve leagues with barely a pause; half the escort was exhausted, and some of the horses fell to their knees. "The horses of today are not like those of the old days," said Porthos. "Everything decays."  
"I've sent Grimaud over to Dammartin," said Aramis. "He's to return with five fresh horses: one for His Eminence and four for us. The critical thing is to keep My Lord close to us; the rest of the escort can rejoin us later. Once we get past Saint-Denis, we've nothing more to fear."  
Grimaud in fact returned with five good horses; the local lord he'd gotten them from, being a friend of Porthos, had refused to sell them and had given them as a gift. Ten minutes later they reached Ermenonville, where most of the escort stopped. But the four friends, with renewed spirits, continued on with Sir Mazarin. At noon they entered the broad drive that led to Porthos's Château de Pierrefonds, where they were met by Mousqueton. "Ah!" he said. "Believe me, Sir, this is the first time I've breathed easily since your departure from Pierrefonds."  
And he ran off to announce to the other servants the arrival of Sir du Vallon and his friends. "We are four," said d'Artagnan, "so we'll watch My Lord in relays, each three hours long. Athos will inspect the château's defences, with an eye to making them impregnable in the event of a siege, Porthos will attend to the provisions, and Aramis to the barracking of the garrison. In other words, Athos will be chief military engineer, Porthos the quartermaster general, and Aramis personnel officer."  
Meanwhile, Mazarin was installed in the most elegant suite in the château. "Gentlemen," he said, once he was settled in his quarters, "you don't expect, I imagine, to keep me here incognito for long?"  
"No, My Lord," d'Artagnan replied, "on the contrary, we'll soon publicize the fact that we're holding you."  
"Then you'll be besieged."  
"We're counting on it."  
"And what will you do?"  
"We'll defend ourselves. If the late Cardinal Richelieu was still among us, he'd tell you the story of the bastion of Saint-Gervais, where the four of us, with one lackey and twelve dead bodies, held out against an army."  
"Such feats may occur once, Sir, and then never recur again."  
"But today we have no need to repeat such heroics – for tomorrow the Parisian army will be alerted, and the next day it will be here. The decisive battle will take place, not at Saint-Denis or Charenton but at Compiègne or Villers-Cotterêts."  
"Sir Prince will beat you, as he always has."  
"It's possible, my Lord – but before the battle we'll send Your Eminence on to another of our friend du Vallon's châteaux, as he has three like this one. We don't want to expose Your Eminence to the hazards of war."  
"Come," said Mazarin, "I see that I must capitulate."  
"What, before the siege?"  
"Yes, the conditions will probably be better."  
"My Lord, as far as conditions are concerned, you'll see how reasonable we can be."  
"What, then, are your conditions?"  
"Let's sleep on it, My Lord, to give us all time to reflect."  
"I need no rest, Gentlemen – I need to know whether I'm in the hands of enemies or friends."  
"Friends, My Lord, friends!"  
"Well, then, tell me right now what you want, so I can see if we can find an agreement. Speak, Sir Count La Fère."  
"My Lord," said Athos, "I have nothing to ask for myself, and too much to ask for France. I will therefore defer to Sir Knight d'Herblay."  
And Athos bowed, took a step back, and leaned against the mantel, clearly determined to be no more than a spectator at this negotiation. "Speak, then, Sir d'Herblay," said the cardinal. "No evasions or ambiguities, please: be brief, clear, and precise."  
"Very well, My Lord, I'll lay my cards on the table."  
"Let's see them."  
"I have in my saddlebag," said Aramis, "the list of concessions proposed to you the day before yesterday at Saint-Germain, by the deputation of which I was a part. Let's first address the restoration of ancient rights – the articles on this list shall be accepted."  
"We were close to agreeing to those anyway," said Mazarin. "Let's pass on to the ... special conditions."  
"Do you think we have some?" said Aramis, smiling.  
"I think you're not all as selfless as the Count La Fère," said Mazarin, turning toward Athos and saluting him.  
"Really? Well, My Lord, you're right," said Aramis, "though I'm glad to see you recognising the count's true worth. Sir La Fère's spirit is a cut above, beyond vulgar desires and human passions; his is an ancient soul, and proud. You're quite right, My Lord, that the rest of us are not of his quality, as we're the first to admit."  
"Aramis," said Athos, "is this mockery?"  
"No, *my dear* Count, no, I only say what all of us think, and all who truly know you. But you're right, it wasn't of you we were talking but of My Lord and his unworthy servant the Knight d'Herblay."  
"Well! What do you desire, Sir, beyond those general conditions which we'll get back to later?"  
"I desire, My Lord that Normandy be officially granted to Madam de Longueville, with full amnesty and five hundred thousand livres. I desire His Majesty the King to stand as godfather to the son to which she's just given birth – and that My Lord, after attending his baptism, shall go and pay his respects to our Holy Father the Pope."  
"That is to say, you wish me to relinquish my office as minister, to leave France in self-imposed exile?"  
"I wish My Lord to assume the office of pope at the first available vacancy, upon which I reserve the right to ask him for plenary indulgences for myself and my friends."  
Mazarin made an indescribable grimace. "And you, Sir?" he asked d'Artagnan.  
"I, My Lord," said the Gascon, "am in every respect of the same opinion as Sir Knight d'Herblay – except for the final article, on which I entirely differ. Far from wishing that My Lord should leave France, I want him to continue as prime minister, for My Lord is a great politician. I'll even do my best, as much as it depends upon me, to help him settle his differences with the Frondeurs but only on condition that he remember the king's faithful servants, and that he will give command of the first company of the musketeers to someone I shall designate. And you, du Vallon?"  
"Yes, Sir, speak on your own account," said Mazarin.  
"I wish," said Porthos, "that Sir Cardinal, to honour the house which has given him asylum, shall, in remembrance of this adventure, elevate my estate to a barony. I also wish the promise of a Knightly Order for one of my friends at Her Majesty's next bestowal."

"You know, Sir, that only those who've proven themselves are eligible for such an Order."

"This friend has been so proven. Besides, if it came to it, My Lord would know how to avoid such formalities."

Mazarin bit his lip; the blow was direct, and he drily replied, "It seems to me these things are hard to reconcile, Gentlemen – if I satisfy some of them, I dissatisfy others. If I stay in Paris I can't go to Rome, and if I become pope I can't remain prime minister – and if I'm not a minister, I can't make Sir d'Artagnan a captain and Sir du Vallon a baron."

"That's true," said Aramis. "Therefore, since I'm in the minority, I hereby withdraw my proposals regarding the trip to Rome and My Lord's resignation."

"I can remain a minister?" said Mazarin.

"You remain a minister; that's agreed, My Lord," said d'Artagnan. "France has need of you."

"Those proposals are withdrawn," said Aramis. "His Eminence will remain prime minister, and even the favourite of Her Majesty, if he deigns to grant me and my friends what we ask for France ... and for ourselves."

"Attend to yourselves, Gentlemen, and let France settle with me as she thinks best," said Mazarin.

"No, that won't do," replied Aramis. "There must be a treaty with the Frondeurs, and Your Eminence will sign it in front of us, while also committing to obtain the queen's ratification of it in every detail."

"I can answer only for myself, I can't answer for the queen," said Mazarin. "What if Her Majesty refuses?"

"Oh," said d'Artagnan, "My Lord knows very well that Her Majesty can refuse him nothing."

"Here, My Lord," said Aramis. "This is the treaty proposed by the deputation of the Fronde; Your Eminence may read and examine it."

"I already know it," said Mazarin.

"Then it only remains to sign it."

"You must realise, Gentlemen, that a signature obtained under these circumstances will be regarded as given under duress."

"My Lord will be available to attest that it was given voluntarily."

"But what, then, if I refuse?"

"Then, My Lord," said d'Artagnan, "Your Eminence will have no one to blame but himself for the consequences of that refusal."

"You would dare to lay hands on a cardinal?"

"You've done no less against His Majesty's Musketeers!"

"The queen will avenge me, Gentlemen!"

"I doubt that she could, though she might have the will to try. But we'll take Your Eminence to Paris, and the Parisians will rally to our defence."

"How worried they must be right now in Rueil and at Saint-Germain!" said Aramis, "Everyone must be asking where the cardinal has gone, what's become of the minister, what's happened to the favourite! They must be seeking My Lord in every nook and cranny! And if the Fronde is aware of My Lord's disappearance, how they must be rejoicing!"

"It's appalling," murmured Mazarin.

"Then sign the treaty, My Lord," said Aramis.

"But what if I sign it and the queen refuses to ratify it?"

"I'll undertake to go see Her Majesty and obtain her signature," said d'Artagnan.

"Take care," said Mazarin. "You might not get the reception at Saint-Germain that you hope for."

"Ah, bah!" said d'Artagnan. "I can arrange things to make sure I'm welcomed; I have a means to do that."

"What?"

"I'll bring Her Majesty that letter in which My Lord announces the complete depletion of the treasury."

"And then?" said Mazarin, turning pale.

"And then, when Her Majesty is at the height of her dismay, I'll escort her to Rueil, lead her to the orangery, and show her a certain lever that moves a certain slab."

"Enough, Sir, enough!" murmured the cardinal. "Where is that treaty?"

"Here it is," said Aramis.

"You see how generous we are," said d'Artagnan, "for we could do many things with such a secret."

"Sign here," said Aramis, handing the cardinal a pen.

Mazarin stood and paced back and forth for a minute, more in distraction than dejection. Then suddenly he stopped and said, "And when I've signed, Gentlemen, what will be my guarantee?"

"My word of honour, Sir," said Athos.

Mazarin trembled, examining for a moment that noble and loyal face, and then taking the pen, he said, "That's good enough for me, Sir Count."

And he signed. "And now, Sir d'Artagnan," he added, "prepare to leave at once for Saint-Germain to carry a letter from me to the queen."

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More is accomplished with a Pen & a Threat than a Sword & Devotion

D'Artagnan knew at least this much of mythology, that Opportunity has only a tuft of hair to seize it by, and he wasn't a man to let it go by without seizing it. He arranged a means of quick and reliable travel by sending relay horses to Chantilly in advance, so that he could be in Paris in five or six hours. But before leaving he thought about the fact that he, though a man of wit and experience, was about to charge into uncertainty, leaving certainty behind. But was it certainty? "In fact," he said to himself before mounting his horse, "Athos is a hero from romance blinded by his own generosity, Porthos is good-natured but easy to influence, and Aramis is a complete hieroglyphic, impossible to read, capable of anything. What will these three elements produce when I'm not there to regulate them? The release of the cardinal, perhaps. Now, the release of the cardinal would be the ruin of our hopes, and so far, hopes are all we have to show for twenty years of labours compared to which those of Hercules were the work of a pygmy."

He went and found Aramis. "You, my dear Knight d'Herblay," he said, "are the Fronde incarnate. Beware of Athos, who won't stoop to soil his hands with business, not even his own. Be even more wary of Porthos, who, to impress the count, whom he regards as a divinity on earth, would even help Mazarin to escape, if Mazarin cries tears of distress or thinks to appeal to his chivalry."

Aramis smiled a smile that was both shrewd and resolute. "Never fear," he said, "I have my conditions to protect – though I'm working less for myself than for others. For the sake of everyone's rights, I'll make sure that those who are entitled to it reap the profit of this affair."

Good, thought d'Artagnan. *I'm not worried about this flank.*

He shook hands with Aramis and went to seek Porthos. "Old friend," he said, "you and I have worked hard to build our fortunes, and it would be ridiculous if, just when we're about to reap our rewards, you were tricked out of them by Aramis, who is not without cunning, and who, just between the two of us, sometimes plays his own game. Or to have them slip through our fingers because Athos, though noble and unselfish, can also be careless, because as one who desires nothing for himself, he doesn't weigh the desires of others. What would you say if one of our two friends proposed liberating Mazarin?"

"I'd say we had too much trouble getting him to think of letting him go."

"Bravo, Porthos! And you would be right, my friend, for with him would go your barony that is practically in your hands – not to mention the fact that once free, Mazarin would turn around and sentence you to hang."

"Really! You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Then I'll see him dead before I allow him to escape."

"Good thinking. After all, when we made our original bargain, we weren't beholden to the Frondeurs, who anyway are a bunch of politicians who don't see things like we old soldiers do."

"Don't worry, dear friend," said Porthos. "I'll watch you from the window as you ride away until you've disappeared, and then go and station myself outside the cardinal's door that has a glass pane so I can see everything inside. One false move, and I'll exterminate him."

Bravo! D'Artagnan thought. *On this flank, at least, the cardinal is well guarded.*

And he shook hands with the master of Pierrefonds and went looking for Athos. When he found him, he said, "My dear Athos, I'm leaving. I have only one thing to say to you: you know Anne of Austria, and you know the continued captivity of Sir Mazarin is my only guarantee of survival. If you let him get away, I'm a dead man."

"It is only that consideration, my dear d'Artagnan that induces me to stoop to the job of jailer. I give you my word that upon your return, you'll find the cardinal where you left him."

*That reassures me more than any number of royal signatures*, thought d'Artagnan. *Now that I have the oath of Athos, I can go.*

D'Artagnan rode off alone, with no escort but his sword, and with nothing but a pass from Mazarin ordering his admittance to the presence of the queen. Six hours after leaving Pierrefonds, he arrived at Saint-Germain. Mazarin's disappearance was still unknown to anyone but Anne of Austria, who hid her anxiety from even her most intimate friends. The two Swiss had been discovered bound and gagged in the quarters of d'Artagnan and Porthos but after the use of their limbs and tongues had been restored to them, they could tell only what they knew that was that they'd been jumped, stripped, and tied up. But as to what Porthos and d'Artagnan had done after they'd gotten out, they had no more idea than the other inhabitants of the château. Except for Bernouin, who knew a bit more than the others. Bernouin, not seeing his master return by the time midnight was striking, had taken it upon himself to search the orangery. The furniture barricading the outer door had filled him with suspicions but he kept them to himself and instead undertook patiently to clear the passage. Once he'd reached the inner corridor, he found a whole series of doors standing open. Passing through them and out into the park, it was easy to follow the footprints in the snow to the outer wall. They continued on the other side until they mingled with a trampling of horses' hooves, indicating practically a whole troop of cavalry had ridden off in the direction of Enghien. From that moment he had no doubt but that the cardinal had been abducted by the three prisoners, since they had disappeared with him, and he had ridden to Saint-Germain at once to warn the queen of the cardinal's capture. Anne of Austria had commanded Bernouin to tell no one, and he'd obeyed her scrupulously. She informed only Sir Prince, to whom she told everything, and the Prince had immediately put five or six hundred riders into the environs of Rueil, ordered to detain any suspicious group riding away from the château and bring them at once to Saint-Germain. Now, d'Artagnan wasn't a group, as he was alone, and since he wasn't riding away from Rueil but rather toward Saint-Germain, no one paid any attention to him, so he didn't run into any trouble. Upon entering the courtyard of the Château de Saint-Germain, the first person our ambassador saw was Bernouin himself, who was loitering at the gates, waiting for word of his missing master. At the sight of d'Artagnan riding into the *courtyard*, Bernouin rubbed his eyes, thinking he must be mistaken. But d'Artagnan gave him a friendly salute, dismounted, and, tossing the bridle into the hands of a footman, advanced smiling toward the minister's valet. "Sir d'Artagnan!" cried Bernouin, like a man having a nightmare and calling out in his sleep. "Sir d'Artagnan!"

"Himself, Sir Bernouin."

"But what are you doing here?"

"Bringing you news of Sir Mazarin, news piping hot."

"And what has become of him?"

"He's as well as you or me."

"He's come to no harm, then?"

"None whatsoever. He just felt the need to take a tour of the Île-de-France, and begged Sir Count La Fère, Sir du Vallon, and myself to accompany him. We're too much his humble servants to refuse such a request. We left last night, and here we are."

"... And here you are?"

"His Eminence had something to convey to Her Majesty, something private and intimate, a mission that could be entrusted only to a proven man, so he sent me to Saint-Germain. So, my dear Sir Bernouin, if you wish to serve your master well, please inform Her Majesty that I'm coming to see her, and for what purpose."

Whether he was speaking seriously or whether these remarks were some sort of jest, it was nonetheless clear that under the circumstances d'Artagnan was the only man able to put Anne of Austria's mind at rest, so Bernouin didn't hesitate about going to inform her of his unusual request. And as he'd foreseen, the queen ordered him to admit d'Artagnan at once. D'Artagnan approached his

sovereign with all the signs of deepest respect. Arriving three paces in front of her, he went down on one knee and presented his letter. This, as we’ve said, was a simple note, half of introduction, half a request for an audience. The queen, reading it, recognised the cardinal’s handwriting, though her own hand trembled slightly. But as the note said nothing of what had happened, she asked for details. D’Artagnan told her everything with that simple, forthright air he could employ so well in the right circumstances. The queen, as he spoke, regarded him with increasing astonishment; she couldn’t understand how a man could dare to conceive such an undertaking, let alone have the audacity to recount it to one who had almost a duty to punish him for it. “What, Sir!” the queen cried, red with indignation, when he’d finished his account. “You dare to confess such a crime to me! To tell me of your treason!”

“Your pardon, Madam but I must have explained things poorly, or Your Majesty has misunderstood, for there’s neither crime nor treason in this. Sir Mazarin put Sir du Vallon and myself in prison because we couldn’t believe he’d sent us to England to stand quietly aside while they cut off the head of King Charles I, the brother-in-law of your husband the late king and the spouse of Madam Henriette your sister, so we did all we could to save the life of the royal martyr. We were therefore certain, my friend and I, that there’d been some sort of mistake, and an explanation of some sort was needed between ourselves and His Eminence. Now, an explanation touching on such matters must be conducted in security and privacy, away from the eyes and ears of meddling subordinates. And so, we escorted the cardinal to my friend’s château, where we had our explanation. And, well, Madam! As we’d foreseen, there *had* been a mistake. Sir Mazarin had been under the impression we’d served General Cromwell instead of King Charles, a thing that would have been a disgrace that stained us, the cardinal, and even Your Majesty, an act of cowardice that might have cast a shadow even upon the royalty of our illustrious son. Now that we’ve provided him with proof to the contrary, we’re ready to give it as well to Your Majesty herself, by appealing to the august widow who weeps in the Louvre, where your royal munificence has granted her hospitality. This proof has so thoroughly satisfied the cardinal that, as evidence of his satisfaction, he’s sent me, as Your Majesty can see, to talk with Madam about what reparations are due to gentlemen so poorly appreciated and wrongly persecuted.”

“I hear you and must say I admire you, Sir,” said Anne of Austria. “In truth, I’ve rarely seen such boundless impudence.”

“Come,” said d’Artagnan. “I see that Her Majesty is, in her turn, as deceived about our intentions as Sir Mazarin was.”

“You are mistaken, Sir,” said the queen. “In fact, I am so little deceived that, within ten minutes, you will be under arrest, and in an hour I’ll leave at the head of my army to go rescue my minister.”

“I’m sure Your Majesty will commit no such imprudence,” said d’Artagnan, “because it would be useless and would result in serious consequences. Before he could be rescued Sir Cardinal would be dead, and His Eminence is so entirely convinced of the truth of what I say that on the contrary he asked me, in case Your Majesty should be inclined to make such a decision, to do everything I could to get her to reconsider.”

“Well! I can at least be satisfied by having you arrested.”

“Not really, Madam, for precautions have also been taken for that contingency, as well as for attempts to rescue the cardinal. If I haven’t returned by a certain time tomorrow, the following day the cardinal will be taken to Paris.”

“You will find, Sir, that in your situation you’ve been out of touch with people and events, or you’d know that the cardinal has already visited Paris five or six times since we left it, and that he saw Sir Beaufort, Sir Bouillon, Sir Coadjuteur, and Sir d’Elbeuf, and that not one of them even considered having him arrested.”

“Your pardon, Madam but I know all that, so it’s not to Sir Beaufort, Sir Bouillon, Sir Coadjuteur, or Sir d’Elbeuf that the cardinal would be brought, because those gentlemen make war on their own accounts, and can therefore be bought cheaply. Instead he’d be taken to parliament that can be purchased piecemeal but not even Sir Mazarin himself is wealthy enough to buy it en masse.”

“I believe,” said Anne of Austria, glaring at him, a look that would have been contemptuous in a woman but was terrible in a queen, “that you are threatening the mother of your king.”

“Madam,” said d’Artagnan, “I threaten only because I must. I speak above my station only because I must place myself on the level of people and events. But believe one thing above all, Madam, the truth that the heart in my breast beats for you, and that you have been the constant idol of our lives that we have, as you well know, risked many times for Your Majesty. Come, Madam, won’t Your Majesty have pity on her servants, who’ve been labouring for twenty years in the shade, without uttering a single syllable about the solemn and sacred secrets they had the honour to learn on your behalf? Look at me, who is speaking to you now, Madam, and whom you accuse of raising my voice and taking a threatening tone. Who am I? A poor officer without fortune, without family, and without a future if the regard of my queen that I’ve sought for so long, doesn’t fall on me for a moment. Look at Sir Count La Fère, a paragon of the nobility, who took sides with those opposing his queen – or rather, her minister – and yet makes no demands. Look, at last, at Sir du Vallon, that loyal soul, that iron arm, who’s been waiting twenty years for the word from your lips that will make him, by a coat of arms, what he is already in courage and in heart. And consider your people, who are certainly the care of a queen – your people, who love you but are starving, who ask no better than to bless you but who ... no, I’m wrong, your people will never curse you, Madam. Well! Say the word, and all is over: war gives way to peace, tears to joy, and calamity to happiness.”

Anne of Austria looked with some astonishment at the martial face of d’Artagnan that showed an unexpected look of tenderness. “Why didn’t you say all this before acting?” she said.

“Because action, it seems to me, was needed to prove to Your Majesty something which she doubted: that we still have courage and worth, and that those qualities should be valued.”

“And that courage will face any threat, from what I’ve seen,” said Anne of Austria.

“It’s never retreated from anything in the past,” said d’Artagnan. “Why should it do less in the future?”

“And this courage in the event of a refusal and consequently a struggle, would it go so far as to take me from the midst of my Court and give me up to the Fronde as you threaten to do with my minister?”

“That thought never occurred to us, Madam,” said d’Artagnan with the Gascon bombast that in him was mere candour. “But if the four of us resolved to do it, we’d certainly succeed.”

“I ought to have known that,” murmured Anne of Austria. “They are men of iron.”

“Alas, Madam!” said d’Artagnan. “That proves my point for it’s only now that Your Majesty sees us as we truly are.”

“But now,” said Anne, “If I see it at last...”

“Your Majesty will do us justice. When she does us justice, she will no longer treat us as common men – she’ll see me as an ambassador worthy to discuss the high matters he’s been entrusted with.”

“Where is the treaty?”

“Here.”

Anne of Austria cast her eyes over the treaty d’Artagnan had presented to her. “I see nothing but general conditions,” she said. “The interests of Gentlemen de Conti, de Beaufort, de Bouillon, d’Elbeuf, and the coadjutor are all addressed. But yours?”

“We render ourselves justice, Madam, without presuming to undue status. Our names aren’t worthy of appearing next to these.”

“But you’ve not, I presume, renounced your pretensions in person?”

“I believe you’re a great and powerful queen, Madam, and it would be beneath your greatness and your power not to reward properly those arms that will bring back His Eminence to Saint-Germain.”

“Such is my intention,” said the queen. “Come, speak.”

“Forgive me if I begin with myself but I must assume a priority, not that I’ve taken but was given to me: he who has negotiated the redemption of the cardinal ought to be, for the reward to be worthy of Your Majesty, appointed a chief of the royal guards, probably the Captain of the King’s Musketeers.”

“You’re asking me for Sir Tréville’s position!”

“That position is vacant, Madam, since Sir Tréville’s retirement last year, and hasn’t been filled.”

“But that’s one of the premier military offices in the king’s household!”

“Sir Tréville was a simple cadet from Gascony like me, Madam, and he held that office for twenty years.”

“You have an answer for everything, Sir,” said Anne of Austria.

And she took from a desk an order of brevet, filled it out, and signed it. “Certainly, Madam,” said d’Artagnan, taking the order and bowing, “this is a fine and noble reward – but the world is full of uncertainty, and a man who fell from Your Majesty’s favour one day would lose this office the next.”

“What do you want, then?” said the queen, blushing at the way this man’s subtle mind had read her own.

“A payment of a hundred thousand livres to the poor Captain of the Musketeers on the day when his services are no longer agreeable to Your Majesty.”

Anne hesitated. “I must point out that the Parisians, just the other day,” continued d’Artagnan, “offered, by decree of parliament, six hundred thousand livres to anyone who would deliver them the cardinal, dead or alive – to hang him if alive, and drag him through the streets if dead.”

“I suppose, then,” said Anne of Austria, “that your request is reasonable, since you ask for only one-sixth what the Parliament proposed to pay.”

And she signed a note promising a hundred thousand livres. “What next?” she said.

“Madam, my friend du Vallon is rich, and therefore seeks no monetary reward but I seem to recall that there was a discussion between him and Sir Mazarin about elevating his domain to the status of a barony. In fact, it was a promise.”

“A country bumpkin!” said Anne of Austria. “People will laugh.”

“Let them,” said d’Artagnan. “But there’s one thing I’m sure of: no one who laughs at him will do so more than once.”

“Approval for the barony,” said Anne of Austria.

She signed. “Now there just remains the Knight, or the Abbot d’Herblay, as Your Majesty prefers.”

“He wants to be a bishop?”

“No, Madam, he requests nothing so high or so difficult.”

“What, then?”

“For the king to stand as godfather to the son of Madam Longueville.” The queen smiled mockingly. “Sir Longueville is of royal blood, Madam,” said d’Artagnan.

“Yes,” said the queen, “but is his son?”

“His son should be, Madam, since his mother’s husband is.”

“And your friend has nothing more to ask for ... Madam de Longueville?”

“No, Madam – for he presumes that His Majesty the King, deigning to stand as the child’s godfather, can’t possibly present his mother a gift of less than five hundred thousand livres, as well as preserving his father’s status as governor of Normandy.”

“I think I can commit to the government of Normandy,” said the queen, “but as to the five hundred thousand livres, the cardinal never ceases to tell me that the coffers of State are empty.”

“We shall search the coffers ourselves, Madam, if Your Majesty will allow it, and I’m sure we’ll find it.”

“What else?”

“Else, Madam?”

“Yes.”

“That’s everything.”

“Don’t you have a fourth companion?”

“True, Madam, the Count La Fère.”

“What does he ask for?”

“He asks for nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a man in the world who, when in a position to ask, asks for nothing?”

“There is the Count La Fère, Madam – but the Count La Fère isn’t a man.”

“What is he, then?”

“The Count La Fère is a demigod.”

“Has he not a son or a nephew, a young man whom Comminges spoke of as a brave lad, who brought the battle flags from Lens with Sir Châtillon?”

“He has, as Your Majesty says, a ward called the Viscount of Bragelonne.”

“If we offered this young man a regiment, what would his guardian say?”

“He might, perhaps, accept it.”



"Perhaps!"

"Yes, if Your Majesty asked him to do so."

"He's an unusual man, Sir, as you yourself said. Well, we'll think about it, and we may perhaps ask him to take it. Are you satisfied, Sir?"

"Yes, your Majesty. But there is one thing the queen hasn't yet signed."

"What's that?"

"The most important thing of all."

"My acceptance of the treaty?"

"Yes."

"No hurry. I'll sign the treaty tomorrow."

"The one thing I can definitely say to Your Majesty," said d'Artagnan, "is that if Your Majesty doesn't sign the treaty today, she'll never find the time to sign it later. Be so good, I beg of you, as to write at the bottom of this summary that as you can see is entirely in the handwriting of Sir Mazarin, 'I consent to ratify the treaty proposed by the Parisians.'"

Anne was caught; there was no way to back down, she had to sign it. But scarcely had she put down the plume before pride burst forth in her like a tempest, and she began to weep helplessly – for at that time queens wept like ordinary women. D'Artagnan was taken aback by these tears. The Gascon shook his head – for these royal tears burned his heart. "Madam," he said, kneeling, "behold this unhappy gentleman prostrate at your feet. He begs you to believe that at a single gesture from Your Majesty, he would be capable of anything. He has faith in himself, he has faith in his friends, all he wants is to have faith in his queen. And as proof that he fears nothing, that he threatens nothing, he will bring back Sir Mazarin without conditions. Here, Madam, take back Your Majesty's sacred signatures; if you think I should have them back again, that's up to you. But from this moment on, you're committed to nothing."

And d'Artagnan, still on his knees, his eyes flashing with pride and courage, returned to Anne of Austria that stack of papers which he had won from her one by one, and with such effort. There are moments – for if all is not good in this world, neither is all bad – when in the hardest and coldest heart there springs, watered by the tears of great emotion, a generous upwelling of feeling that calculation and pride would stifle if there was nothing noble to counter them. Anne was caught in one of those moments. D'Artagnan, by yielding to the urging of his own heart that beat in harmony with that of the queen, accomplished a great feat of diplomacy. And he was immediately rewarded for his devotion – or his wisdom, depending on whether one wishes to honour his heart or his mind. "You were right, Sir," said Anne. "I had misjudged you. Here are the signed orders that I freely return to you. Go, and as soon as you can, bring the cardinal back to me."

"Madam," said d'Artagnan, "twenty years ago – for I have a good memory – I had the honour, from behind a tapestry at the Hôtel de Ville, to kiss one of your beautiful hands."

"Here's the other," said the queen, "and that the left should be no less generous than the right" – she drew from her finger a diamond nearly as fine as the original – "take and keep this ring in memory of me."

"Madam," said d'Artagnan, rising, "I have but one desire that is that the first thing you'll ask of me is my life."

And then, with that stride that belonged to him alone, he turned and went out. "I've badly misjudged those men," said Anne of Austria, following d'Artagnan with her eyes, "and now it's too late for me to use them, for in a year the king will be old enough to rule!"

Fifteen hours later, d'Artagnan and Porthos brought Mazarin back to the queen, and received, the one his promotion to the rank of Captain-Lieutenant of the Musketeers, and the other, his elevation to the baronetcy. "Well! Are you satisfied?" asked Anne of Austria.

D'Artagnan bowed. But Porthos turned his letter patent over and over in his hands, and looked at Mazarin. "What is it, then?" asked the minister.

"It's just that, My Lord, there was talk of the promise of a knightly order at the first promotion."

"But you know, Sir Baron," said Mazarin, "that one can't become a Knight of the Order without proof of valour."

"Oh!" said Porthos. "It wasn't for me, My Lord, that I requested the cordon bleu."

"For who, then?" asked Mazarin.

"For my friend, Sir Count La Fère."

"Oh!" said the queen. "That's another thing entirely. His valour is proven."

"He'll have it?"

"It's done." That very day the Treaty of Paris was signed and it was proclaimed everywhere that the cardinal had sequestered himself for three days while he worked out the details. Here's what was gained by this famous treaty: Sir Conti got Damvilliers, and, having proven himself as a general, obtained the right to remain a Man of the Sword and not have to become a cardinal. Furthermore, there was some talk of his marrying one of Mazarin's nieces, talk that was heard with favour by the prince, since, after all, he had to marry someone. Sir Duke Beaufort returned to Court with reparations for all the injuries he'd suffered, and with all the honours due to his rank. He was granted full amnesty for all those who'd helped him to escape, the return of the admiralty once held by his father the Duke Vendôme, and an indemnity for those houses and châteaux which had been demolished by the Parliament of Brittany. The Duke Bouillon received domains equal in value to his lost principality of Sedan, an indemnity for eight years of his non-enjoyment of said principality, and the title of *prince* thereafter accorded to him and the descendants of his house. The Duke Longueville was made governor of Pont-de-l'Arche in Normandy, received five hundred thousand livres for his wife, and the honour of seeing his son held at the baptismal font by the young king and young Henrietta of England. (Aramis had stipulated that Bazin would officiate at this rite, and Planchet would cater the reception.) The Duke d'Elbeuf obtained the payment of certain sums due to his wife, one hundred thousand livres for his eldest son, and twenty-five thousand for each of his other three. Only the coadjutor had been given nothing. It was promised that negotiations would be opened with the pope to get him a cardinal's hat but he knew not to depend on such promises from the queen and Mazarin. Unlike Sir Conti, who had won the right not to become a cardinal, he was obliged to remain a Man of the Sword. So, while all Paris rejoiced in anticipation of the return of the king, set for the following day, Gondy alone, left out of the general joy, sent for the two men he usually called upon when in a dark frame of mind. These two men were the Count Rochefort and the beggar of Saint-Eustache. Both arrived with their usual punctuality, and the coadjutor spent most of the night talking with them.

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It can be Harder for a King to Return to his Capital than Leaving it

While d'Artagnan and Porthos were returning the cardinal to Saint-Germain, Athos and Aramis, who had parted from them at Saint-Denis, had returned to Paris, where each of them had a visit to make. Aramis went without delay straight to the Hôtel de Ville, where Madam de Longueville held court. When she was first told of the peace the lovely duchess responded with anger and dismay. War had made her a queen, and peace would mean an abdication; she declared she'd never accept the treaty and vowed eternal conflict. But when Aramis painted this peace in its true light, pointing out its advantages, such as trading a precarious royalty in war-torn Paris for the secure vicereignty of Pont-de-l'Arche – in other words, all of Normandy – when she thought of what she could do with the five hundred thousand livres promised by the cardinal, and when she considered the honour the king would do her child by holding him at the baptismal font, she stopped being serious in her complaints, though she continued her protests in that way that pretty women have, defending herself only to make her surrender worthwhile. Aramis pretended to believe in her protests, not wanting to deny himself the merit of having won her over. "Madam," he said to her, "you're seeking a way to defeat your brother, Sir Prince, that is, the greatest commander of our age and when women of genius want something, they always succeed. And you've succeeded: Sir Prince's beaten since he can no longer wage war. Now begin to draw him to our party. Gently detach him from the queen whom he dislikes and Sir Mazarin whom he despises. The Fronde is a comedy of which we've played only the first act. We'll have our reckoning with Sir Mazarin in the finale on that day when Sir Prince turns against the Court, thanks to you."

Madam de Longueville was persuaded. The duchess had so much faith in the power of her beautiful eyes that she had no doubt they could influence even Sir Condé – and rightfully so, according to the scandalous accounts of the time. Athos, on leaving Aramis at the Place Royale, had gone to see Madam de Chevreuse. Here was another leading Frondeuse to win over but she was more difficult to convince than her younger rival, as no conditions had been stipulated in her favour. Sir Chevreuse was not to be appointed any province's governor, and if the queen agreed to be a godmother it could be only to a grandchild. Thus, at the first words of peace, Madam de Chevreuse frowned fiercely, and despite all Athos's logical arguments that to continue the war was impossible, she insisted on further hostilities. "My lovely friend," said Athos, "please hear me when I tell you everyone is sick of the war, that everyone, except perhaps you and the coadjutor, are ready for peace. You will get yourself exiled as in the time of King Louis XIII. Believe me, we're beyond the age of cabals and intrigues, and your beautiful eyes weren't made to be reddened by weeping for Paris, where there will always be two queens so long as you are here."

"Oh!" said the duchess. "I can't make war by myself but I can avenge myself on this ingrate of a queen and this upstart of a favourite ... and, faith of a duchess, I will be avenged!"

"Madam," said Athos, "I implore you, do nothing to endanger Sir Bragelonne's future. His career is launched, Sir Prince is fond of him, and he is young – let him find his footing alongside his young king. *Alas!* Excuse my weakness, Madam, there comes a time when a man sees himself born again in his children."

The duchess smiled, half tenderly, half ironically. "Count," she said, "you've been won over, I fear, to the party of the Court. Is that the cordon bleu of a knightly order I see there in your pocket?"

"Yes, Madam," said Athos, "I have the Order of the Garter that King Charles presented to me a few days before his death."

The count spoke the truth: he was unaware of Porthos's request on his behalf and knew of no other order. "*Let's go!* Then I suppose I must become an old woman," said the duchess, rueful.

Athos took up her hand and kissed it. She looked at him and sighed. "Count," she said, "it must be a charming locale, your Bragelonne. You're a man of exquisite taste: you must have water, woods, and gardens."

She sighed anew and rested her lovely head on her coquettishly curved hand, admirable as ever in contour and colour. "Madam," replied the count, "I was lost – what did you say just now? Never have you been more youthful and more beautiful."

The duchess shook her head. "Will Sir Bragelonne stay in Paris?" she said.

"Do you think he should?" asked Athos.

"Leave him to me," replied the duchess.

"No, Madam – perhaps you've forgotten the story of Oedipus but I haven't."

"How charming you are, Count. In truth, I believe I'd like to spend a month at this Bragelonne of yours."

"But wouldn't that make me too great an object of envy, Duchess?" Athos replied gallantly.

"No, I'd go incognito, under the name of Marie Michon."

"You are adorable, Madam."

"But as to Raoul, don't let him stay there."

"Why not?"

"Because he's in love."

"He, a child!"

"But it's a child whom he loves."

That made Athos thoughtful. "You're right, Duchess – this intense love for a child of seven will break his heart someday. There will be fighting in Flanders; he shall go."

"Then, when the time comes, you'll send him to me, and I'll armour him against love."

"Alas, Madam!" said Athos. "These days love is like war, and armour has become useless."

At that moment Raoul entered; he'd come to announce to the count and the duchess that he'd heard from his friend, the Count Guiche, that the solemn return to Paris of the king, the queen, and her minister was to take place the following day. The next day, at dawn, the Court made its preparations to leave Saint-Germain. The queen, on the previous evening, had sent for d'Artagnan. "Sir," she had said to him, "I've been told that Paris is still unsettled, and I fear for the king. Stay near the carriage's right door, where he will sit."

"Your Majesty can rest easy," said d'Artagnan. "I'll answer for the king."

And saluting the queen, he went out. Upon leaving the queen's quarters, Bernouin informed d'Artagnan that the cardinal awaited him on a matter of importance. He went straight to the cardinal's study.

"Sir," said the cardinal, "there's talk there may be a riot in Paris. I shall be sitting to the left of the king, and as I'm the main one who's threatened, prepare to guard the carriage's left door."

"Your Eminence can rest easy," said d'Artagnan. "They won't touch a hair of your head. The devil!" he said, once outside in the antechamber. "How do I get out of this one? I can't be at both doors of the carriage at the same time. Ah, bah! I'll guard the king and Porthos will guard the cardinal."

This arrangement suited everyone, a thing almost unprecedented. The queen had confidence in the courage of d'Artagnan, whom she knew, and the cardinal in the strength of Porthos that he'd felt personally. The procession set out for Paris in a prearranged order: Guitaut and Comminges marched in advance at the head of the guards, then came the royal carriage, with d'Artagnan at one door and Porthos at the other, and then the King's Musketeers, for twenty-two years the comrades of d'Artagnan, who'd been their lieutenant for twenty, and their captain since yesterday. On arriving at the city gate, the carriage was greeted by loud cries of "*Long live the king!*" and "*Long live the queen!*"

There were even a few lone cries of "*Long live Mazarin!*" But no one else took them up. They were headed for Notre-Dame, where a *Te Deum* was to be sung. The entire population of Paris was in the streets; the Swiss Guards lined both sides of the route but as the route was long, the line was only one man deep, with a soldier every six or eight paces. This barrier was quite insufficient; from time to time the dyke broke under the flood of people, and it took forever to reform it. At every rupture, however benevolent, since the Parisians just wanted to see their king and their queen, of whom they'd been deprived for a year, Anne of Austria glanced anxiously at d'Artagnan, who reassured her with a smile. Mazarin who'd spent a thousand Louis for the cries of "*Long live Mazarin!*"

And not thought the shouts he had heard worth 20 *pistoles* was also looking anxiously at Porthos. But his gigantic bodyguard replied to these looks in his sonorous bass voice with, "Never fear, my Lord,"

So Mazarin was less and less worried. When they reached the Royal Palace, the crowd was even thicker; it flowed toward that spot from every adjacent street, and one could see, like a cresting river, the flood of the populace surging toward the carriage, and roaring loudly down the Rue Saint-Honoré. When they reached the palace square, it resounded with loud cries of "Long live Their Majesties!" Mazarin leaned out his door, and two or three shouts of "Long live the cardinal!" greeted his appearance.

But they were followed by a storm of whistles and boos. Mazarin turned pale and fell back inside. "Rabble!" muttered Porthos.

D'Artagnan said nothing but twisted his moustache with a gesture that indicated his Gascon good humour was giving way to irritation. Anne of Austria leaned toward the ear of the young king and said in a low voice, "Salute Sir d'Artagnan graciously, my son, and say a few words to him."

The young king leaned out the window of his door. "I've not yet wished you hello today, Sir d'Artagnan," he said, "but you'd know that I recognise you – it was you behind the curtains of my bed, that night when the Parisians wanted to see me sleeping."

"And if the king will permit it," said d'Artagnan, "it will always be me who's near him whenever danger threatens."

"Sir," said Mazarin to Porthos, "what would you do if the entire mob rushed us?"

"I'd kill as many of them as I could, My Lord," said Porthos.

"Hmm!" said Mazarin. "No matter how brave and strong you are, you couldn't kill them all."

"You may be right," said Porthos, standing in his stirrups to survey the immense crowd. "It's true, there are a lot of them."

"I think I'd rather have the other bodyguard," muttered Mazarin.

And he sat farther back in the carriage. The queen and her minister were right to be worried, or at least the latter was. The crowd, while continuing to show respect and even affection for the king and the queen regent, began to grow more agitated. The procession heard a rising sound that, when heard above the sea's waves, indicated the onslaught of a tempest, and when heard above a multitude, indicated an oncoming riot. D'Artagnan turned toward the musketeers and made a small but significant nod toward the crowd, a gesture understood by his brave elite guards. The ranks of the riders tightened up, and a shudder ran through the men. At the Barrière des Sergents the procession ground to a halt. Comminges left the head of the escort and came back to the royal carriage. The queen questioned d'Artagnan with a look, and he replied the same way. "Onward. Push forward," said the queen.

Comminges returned to his post. With an effort, the vanguard pushed through the human wall, though not without some violence. Ugly shouts rose from the crowd, this time aimed not just at the minister but at the king. "Forward!" D'Artagnan loudly cried.

"Forward!" repeated Porthos.

But, as if the multitude had only waited for a single incident to change its nature, all the hostility that had formerly been restrained suddenly burst forth. "Down with Mazarin! Death to the cardinal!" Shouts came from all sides. At the same time, from the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Honoré and the Rue du Coq came a double surge that broke though the thin line of Swiss Guards, two fierce currents that swirled right up to the sides of the horses of d'Artagnan and Porthos. This new irruption was more dangerous than anything before, for it consisted of armed men, with weapons better than those the common people usually bore. It was easy to see that this was no random movement of malcontents but rather a deliberate attack, organised by someone with a grasp of command. Each attacking column was led by a chief, one of whom seemed to be, not one of the common people but instead a ragged beggar, whereas the other, though dressed as a bourgeois, couldn't conceal the demeanour of a gentleman. The two were evidently allies. As the streams converged the royal carriage felt a tremendous jolt. Then thousands of cries were heard, the genuine clamour of a riot, punctuated by two or three gunshots. "Musketeers, to me!" cried d'Artagnan.

The troop of musketeers advanced in two lines, one to the right of the carriage, the other to the left: one to the aid of d'Artagnan, the other to the aid of Porthos. Then a pitched mêlée ensued, all the more terrible as it seemed to have no purpose, all the more desperate as it seemed no one knew whom they were fighting or why. Like all such mad movements of crowds, the shock of this savage charge was terrible. The musketeers, badly outnumbered, unable in the press to move or turn their mounts, began to get separated. D'Artagnan moved to lower the carriage's shutters but the young king waved him away, saying, "No, Sir d'Artagnan, I want to see."

"If Your Majesty wants to see, then let him look!" said d'Artagnan. And turning around with that fury that made him so terrible in battle, he spurred toward the leader of the rioters, who, with a pistol in one hand and a long sword in the other, was fighting his way toward the carriage, engaging two musketeers at once. "Give way, *God be with you!*" shouted d'Artagnan. "Give way!" At this voice, the man with the pistol and the long sword looked up but too late: d'Artagnan's rapier thrust took him through the chest. "Ah! *By the belly of the Grey Saint!*" cried d'Artagnan, withdrawing his sword too late. "Why the devil did it have to be you, Count?"

"To fulfil my destiny," said Rochefort, falling to one knee. "Ah! I've recovered from three of your sword-thrusts – but I won't recover from the fourth."

"Count," said d'Artagnan, voice choking, "I struck without knowing it's you. I'd be forever sorry if I sent you to your death and you died hating me for it." Rochefort extended a hand to d'Artagnan and d'Artagnan took it. The count tried to speak but a gush of blood filled his mouth, he stiffened in a final convulsion and died. "Back, you rabble!" snarled d'Artagnan. "Your chief is dead, and you have no more business here." In fact, as if the Count Rochefort had been the soul of the attack on the king's side of the carriage, the mob that had followed and obeyed him turned and ran when they saw him fall. D'Artagnan led a charge of twenty musketeers up the Rue du Coq and that side of the riot blew away like smoke, scattering across the Place de Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois and toward the quays. D'Artagnan turned back to assist Porthos, in case he needed it but Porthos, on his side, had done his work with the same thoroughness as d'Artagnan. The left side of the coach was cleared, and its shutter was slowly raising, as Mazarin, less bellicose than the king, tentatively took a look outside. Porthos seemed melancholy. "Why the devil do you look so glum, Porthos?" said d'Artagnan. "That's a strange attitude for a victor."

"But you yourself seem more than a little upset," said Porthos.

"And I have cause. *God be with you!* I just killed an old friend."

"Really?" said Porthos. "Who?"

"That poor Count Rochefort ...."

"Well, I'm in the same boat! I just killed someone whose face I thought I recognised. Unfortunately, I struck him in the head, and in a moment his face was covered with blood."

"Did he say anything as he fell?"

"He did! He said, 'Oaf!'"

"I see," said d'Artagnan, unable to contain a laugh. "If that's all he said, that didn't tell you much about him."

"*Well*, Sir?" asked the queen.

"Madam," said d'Artagnan, "the road is perfectly free, and Your Majesty can continue on her way."

In fact, the entire procession arrived without accident at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, on the steps of which all the clergy, the coadjutor at their head, awaited the king, the queen, and the minister, for whose blessed return they were to sing the *Te Deum*. During the service, as it was approaching its end, a frightened young gamin entered the church, ran to the sacristy, quickly donned the robe of a choirboy, and, slipping through the crowded church thanks to the sacred vestments he wore, approached Bazin where the beadle, clothed in his blue robe and holding his silver-crowned staff, stood gravely across from the Swiss Guard at the entrance to the choir. Bazin felt a furtive tug at his sleeve. His eyes, beatifically raised toward heaven, slowly descended toward earth until he recognised Friquet. "What is it, little clown?" asked the beadle. "How dare you disturb me in the exercise of my holy duties?"

"Do you remember, Sir Bazin," said Friquet, "that Sir Maillard, the holy water dispenser at Saint-Eustache?"

"Yes. What of him?"

"Well, in the riot he got hit in the head by a big sword, swung by a great giant wearing gold lace on every seam."

"Indeed?" said Bazin. "In that case, he must be badly injured."

"So badly injured that he's dying, and says he wants to confess to Sir Coadjuteur, who has the power, he says, to forgive even the greatest sins."

"And does he imagine that Sir Coadjuteur will take the trouble to see him?"

"Yes, because it seems Sir Coadjuteur promised to do just that."

"And who told you that?"

"Sir Maillard himself."

"Then you've seen him?"

"Certainly, I was there when he was struck down."

"And what were you doing there?"

"Doing? I was shouting, 'Down with Mazarin! Death to the cardinal! Hang the Italian! Isn't that what you told me to shout?'"

"Not so loud, little clown!" said Bazin, looking anxiously around him.

"So, he said to me, this poor Sir Maillard, 'Go and fetch Sir Coadjuteur, Friquet – and if you do, I'll make you my heir.' He said that, Père Bazin, the heir of Sir Maillard, holy water dispenser of Saint-Eustache! I'll be set for life! I'd really like to do this for him, what do you say?"

"I'll go and inform Sir Coadjuteur," said Bazin. In fact, he slowly and respectfully approached the prelate, whispered a few words in his ear, received as reply an affirmative gesture, and then backed away with the same care and respect. "Go and tell the dying man to be patient," he said to Friquet. "My Lord will be there within the hour."

"Good," said Friquet. "My fortune is made."

"By the way," said Bazin, "where did they take him?"

"To the tower of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie."

And, enchanted with the success of his diplomatic mission, Friquet, without removing his choirboy robes that after all made his journey that much easier, left the basilica and ran off, as quickly as he could, to the tower of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie. In the same manner, as soon as the *Te Deum* was finished, the coadjutor, as he'd promised, and also without removing his priestly vestments, made his own way toward the old tower he knew so well. He arrived in time: though fading fast, the wounded man wasn't yet dead. They entered the room where the dying beggar lay. A moment later Friquet came back out, holding in his hands a bulging leather sack that he opened as soon as he was out of sight, and found to his astonishment was filled with gold coins. The beggar had kept his word and made him his heir. "Oh, Mother Nanette!" Friquet cried, and then choked up, unable to say another word. But his strength otherwise hadn't left him, and he ran desperately through the streets. Then, like the Greek from Marathon falling down in the market of Athens with the laurel in his hand, Friquet tripped as he arrived at Councillor Broussel's door and fell into the foyer, scattering gold everywhere as it poured from the sack. Mother Nanette started by picking up the coins and ended by picking up and hugging Friquet. Meanwhile, the procession returned to the Royal Palace. "*My Mom*, he's a very valiant man, that Sir d'Artagnan," said the young king.

"Yes, my son, and he did great service for your father. Manage him well and he'll do the same for you."

"Sir Captain," said the young king as he was descending from the carriage, "Madam the queen has desired me to invite you to dine with us this evening, you and your friend the Baron du Vallon."

This was a great honour for d'Artagnan and for Porthos, who lit up with delight. However, throughout the meal, the worthy baron seemed preoccupied. "What's eating you, Baron?" d'Artagnan asked him as they descended the Royal Palace's grand staircase. "You seemed anxious during dinner."

"I was racking my brains," said Porthos, "trying to remember when it was that I'd seen that beggar chief I must have killed."

“And could you recall?”  
“No.”  
“Ah, well! Keep at it, my friend. And when you remember, you'll tell me about it, won't you?”  
“*For the love of God!* I should say so,” said Porthos.

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Conclusion

Upon returning home, the two friends found a letter from Athos inviting them to meet him at the Grand Charlemagne the next morning. They both went to bed at an early hour but though tired, neither slept. One doesn't achieve all one's earthly desires and then simply fall asleep – at least not the first night. The next day, at the appointed hour, they went to visit Athos. They found the count and Aramis dressed in travelling clothes. “Oh ho!” said Porthos. “Then we're all leaving? I also made my preparations to go this morning.”  
“My God, yes,” said Aramis. “With the Fronde over, there's nothing left to do in Paris. Madam de Longueville has invited me to go and spend a few days in Normandy, and has charged me, while her son is getting baptized, to go and find suitable lodgings for them in Rouen. I shall fulfil this commission, and then, if nothing else comes up, I'll go back and bury myself in my monastery at Noisy-le-Sec.”  
“And I shall take myself back to Bragelonne,” said Athos. “You know, my dear d'Artagnan that I'm really nothing more these days than a provincial country gentleman. Raoul has no other fortune than my own, poor lad, so I must husband it as well as I can, as I'm really little more than its trustee.”  
“And Raoul, what will he do?”  
“I leave him to you, my friend. You'll be off to make war in Flanders, so take him with you; I fear a prolonged stay in Blois will only ruin him. Take him with you and teach him to be brave and forthright, as you are.”  
“And I,” said d'Artagnan, “though I won't have you, Athos, at least I'll have Raoul's sweet blond head around. He may be just a child but your entire soul is reborn in him, dear Athos, and when he's with me, I can almost believe I have you yourself by my side.”  
The four friends embraced each other with tears in their eyes. Then they parted, not knowing whether they would ever meet again. D'Artagnan returned to Rue Tiquetonne with Porthos, who was still preoccupied with trying to place the features of the man he'd killed. On arriving in front of the Hôtel de La Chevette, they found the baron's equipage ready to go, with Mousqueton already in the saddle. “See here, d'Artagnan,” said Porthos, “put away the sword and come with me to Pierrefonds, or Bracieux, or Vallon, and we'll grow old together talking about our adventures with our comrades.”  
“Not !” said d'Artagnan. “*Plague!* They're about to open a new campaign, and I want to get in on it – I still have some ambitions!”  
“What more could you possibly want?”  
“To be a Marshal of France, *for the love of God!*”  
“Really?” said Porthos who was never sure when to take d'Artagnan's Gasconades seriously.  
“Come with me, Porthos, and we'll make a duke of you yet,” said d'Artagnan.  
“No,” said Porthos. “Mouston has lost his taste for war. Besides, they've arranged for me a solemn and triumphal entry to my château that will make my neighbours die of envy.”  
“I can't offer anything better than that,” said d'Artagnan, who well understood the vanity of the new baron. “Au revoir, then, my friend.”  
“Au revoir, friend Captain,” said Porthos. “You know that whenever you want to see me, you'll always be welcome in my barony.”  
“Yes,” said d'Artagnan. “When I return from the campaign, I'll come visit you.”  
“Sir Baron's equipages are waiting,” said Mousqueton.  
And the two friends parted after shaking hands. D'Artagnan remained at the gate, watching with a melancholy eye as Porthos rode away. But after about twenty paces, Porthos stopped short, smacked his forehead with his great hand, and returned. “I remembered,” he said.  
“What?” asked d'Artagnan.  
“Who that beggar was that I killed.”  
“Really? Who was it?”  
“It was that scoundrel Bonacieux!”  
And Porthos, delighted at having his mind empty again, caught up with Mousqueton and disappeared around the corner of the street. D'Artagnan stood motionless for a minute, thinking to himself, then, turning, he saw the beautiful Madeleine who stood worried on the threshold, uncertain at seeing d'Artagnan in his new grandeur. “Madeleine,” said the Gascon, “I shall be moving into your best apartments on the first floor; I'm obliged to maintain a certain dignity now that I'm Captain of the Musketeers. But,” he added, “Just keep that room on the fifth floor for me as well. One never knows what might happen.”

BOOK V  
THE VISCOUNT OF BRAGELONNE  
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The Letter

Toward the middle of May in the year 1660, at 9<sup>am</sup> when the already hot sun was drying the dew on the ramparts of the Château de Blois, a little cavalcade, composed of three men and two junior pages, was returning into the city across the Loire Bridge. This produced no effect on the loiterers on the span other than a movement of the hand to the head in salute, and a movement of the mouth to say, in the purest French spoken in France: “Here comes *Sir* returning from the hunt.”  
And that was all. However, as the horses climbed the steep slope that ascends from the river to the château, several shop boys approached the last horse that bore, hanging from its saddle-tree, several bird carcasses hung by their beaks. Seeing this, the curious lads showed with rustic candour their disdain for such meagre game, and after loudly announcing that hawking was a poor sort of sport, they went back to their work. Only one of these onlookers, a chubby lad in the mood for a jest, lingered long enough to ask why Monsieur, who thanks to his vast revenues had his choice of amusements, would choose such a pathetic entertainment, and was answered, “Don't you know that Monsieur's main diversion is to be bored?”  
The cheerful shop boy shrugged his shoulders in a gesture that said, plain as day, *In that case, I'd rather be plain Pierre than a prince.*  
And everyone went about their business. Meanwhile, Monsieur continued on his way with an air at once so melancholy and so majestic that onlookers would surely have admired it, if there'd been any onlookers. But the citizens of Blois couldn't forgive Monsieur for having chosen their merry city to be bored in, and whenever they saw the royal sourpuss coming they slipped away, yawning, or withdrew inside, to escape the dour influence of that long, pale visage, those half-lidded eyes, and that slouching physique. Thus, the worthy prince was greeted by deserted streets nearly every time he ventured out. Now, this irreverence on the part of the citizens of Blois was, in truth, very improper, for Monsieur, after the young king – and maybe even before the king – was the foremost noble in the realm. In fact, God, who had granted the reigning king, Louis XIV, the happiness of being the son of Louis XIII, had granted Monsieur the honour of being the son of the great Henri IV. So, it should have been an object of pride for the city of Blois that Gaston d'Orléans\* chose to hold his Court in the ancient hall of the Estates General. But it was the destiny of this exalted prince to excite indifference rather than admiration on the part of the populace. Monsieur had grown used to it. Perhaps it was even responsible for his unfailing air of ennui. It wasn't as if his early life hadn't been considerably busier; a man can't be responsible for the executioner taking the heads of a dozen of his friends without feeling some excitement. However, since the rise of Cardinal Mazarin\* there had been no more decapitations, Monsieur had had to put aside his hobby of rebellion, and his morale had suffered for it. The life of the poor prince was thereafter very sad. After a morning hunt along the banks of the Beuvron or in the woods of Cheverny, Monsieur would ride across the Loire for lunch at Chambord whether he had an appetite for it or not, and the town of Blois would hear no more from its sovereign and master until he rode out for his next hunt.  
So much for his boredom outside the city walls; as for his ennui inside them, let's follow his cavalcade up to the Château de Blois and the famous hall of the Estates. Monsieur was riding a smallish horse with a large saddle of red Flemish velvet and half-boot stirrups. The horse was a bay; Monsieur's doublet was of crimson velvet, the horse wore a matching blanket, and it was only by this colourful ensemble that the prince could be distinguished from his two companions, whose ensembles were purple for the one and green for the other. The one on his left, dressed in purple, was his equerry, and the one on the right, all in green, was his royal huntsman. A pair of pages followed, one carrying a perch bearing two gyrfalcons, the other a hunting horn that he winded casually as they arrived at the château. (Everyone around this indifferent prince behaved with a casual nonchalance.) At this signal, eight guards who'd been dozing in the sun in the inner courtyard hurried to grab their halberds and take their positions as Monsieur made his solemn entry into the château. When he had disappeared under the shadows of the gate, three or four busybodies, who'd followed the cavalcade to the château, commenting on the hanging birds, turned and ambled off – and once they were gone, the street outside the courtyard was deserted. Monsieur dismounted without saying a word and went into his apartments, where his valet helped him change his clothes; and as *Madam* had not yet sent word it was time for breakfast, Monsieur stretched out on a chaise longue and fell as fast asleep as if it had been 11<sup>pm</sup>. The 8 guards who understood that their work was done for the day, reclined on stone benches in the sun, the grooms disappeared into the stables with the horses, and except for a few birds, chasing and chirping merrily in the flowering shrubs, one would have thought that everyone in the château was sleeping as soundly as Monsieur. Suddenly, into the midst of this soft silence, a bright peal of laughter rang out that caused the dozing halberdiers to half open their eyes. This burst of laughter came from a window of the château that was now bathed by the sun that struck it at an oblique angle for a while before giving way at midday to the shadows of the chimneys on the opposite wing. The small wrought iron balcony in front of this window sported a pot of red wallflowers, another of primroses, and an early rose, whose lush green foliage was already dappled with the red that portends blossoms. In the chamber lit by this window was a square table covered by an old Haarlem floral tapestry, in the middle of that table was a long-necked sandstone vase holding irises and lilies of the valley, and at each end of the table was a young lady. These two lasses looked somewhat out of place, as they could easily be taken for two young maidens who'd escaped from a convent. One, with both elbows on the table and a plume in her hand, traced letters on a sheet of fine Dutch paper, while the other kneeled on a backward chair, a position that enabled her to lean over the table and watch her companion write. From this latter came a thousand jests, jeers, and laughs, the loudest of which had frightened the birds in the shrubberies and half-roused Monsieur's halberdiers. Since we are sketching portraits, we will present the last two of this chapter. The lass who was leaning on the chair, that is, the loud and laughing one, was a beautiful young woman of nineteen or twenty, tawny of complexion, brown of hair, and resplendent, with eyes that sparkled beneath strong arched brows and glorious white teeth that shone like pearls behind coral lips. Her every movement was a theatrical flourish, her life a vivid performance. The other, the one who was writing, regarded her energetic companion with blue eyes as limpid and pure as that day's sky. Her ash-blond hair, arranged with exquisite taste, fell in silky curls to caress her ivory cheeks; she held down the paper with a fine, slender hand that bespoke her youthfulness. At each laugh from her friend she shrugged her white shoulders that topped a slim and poetic form that lacked her companion's robust vigour.  
“Montalais! Montalais!” she said at last, in a voice soft as a song. “You laugh too loudly, as loudly as a man! You'll rouse gentlemen the guards, and you won't even hear Madam's bell when she calls.” The young woman she called Montalais\* without ceasing to laugh and sway, replied, “Louise,\* you know better than that, *my dear*; when gentlemen the guards, as you call them, are taking their nap, not even a cannon could wake them. And you know that Madam's bell can be heard halfway across the river bridge, so I can hardly fail to hear it when she summons me. What really annoys you is that I laugh while you write, and what you really fear is that your worthy mother, Madam de Saint-Rémy,\* will come up here as she sometimes does when we laugh too much. And then she'll see this enormous sheet of paper on which, after a quarter of an hour, you've written only two words: *Monsieur Raoul*.\* And you're right, my dear Louise, because after those two words, *Monsieur Raoul*, we could add so many others, so moving and so incendiary that Madam de Saint-Rémy, your saintly mother, would burst into flame if she read them. Eh? Isn't that so?”  
And Montalais redoubled her laughter and teasing provocations. The blond girl was furious; she tore up the sheet on which, in fact, *Monsieur Raoul* had been written in a beautiful hand, crumpled the paper in trembling fingers and threw it out the window. “Look, now!” said Miss Montalais. “Look at our little lamb, our baby Jesus, our cooing dove so very angry! Don't worry, Louise, Madam de Saint-Rémy isn't coming, and if she was, you know I'd hear her. Besides, what could be more proper than writing to a friend you've known a dozen years, especially when the letter starts so formally with *Monsieur Raoul?*”  
“Fine, then – I won't write to him,” said the blond girl.  
“Well, there's Montalais told off, and no mistake!” laughed the brunette jester. “Come on, take another sheet of paper, quickly now, and finish up our correspondence. Ah! And there's the sound of the bell! Well, too bad. This morning Madam must wait, or even manage without her first maid of honour.”  
A bell was indeed ringing, a sound that signalled that Madam had finished dressing and awaited Monsieur, who was to take her hand in the salon and lead her to the refectory. Once this formality was accomplished, always with great ceremony, the couple would eat breakfast and then separate until dinner that was invariably served at two o'clock. At the sound of the bell a door opened in the wing to the left of the courtyard, out of which came two waiters, followed by eight scullions bearing a table-top laden with covered silver dishes. The first of these waiters, the *premier maître d'hôtel*, silently tapped with his cane on one of the guards who was snoring on a bench; he was even kind enough to hand the groggy guard his halberd that had been leaning against the nearby wall, after which the

blinking soldier escorted Monsieur’s breakfast to the refectory, preceded by a page and the pair of waiters. As Monsieur’s meal passed, the door guards presented arms. Miss Montalais and her companion watched these ceremonies attentively from their window, though they must have been quite familiar with them. They were just waiting for them to be finished so they could resume undisturbed. Once the waiters, scullions, pages, and guards had all passed, they sat back down at their table, and the sun that for a moment had gilded those two charming faces, shone only on the flowers and the rosebush. “Fah!” said Montalais, resuming her position. “Madam doesn’t need my help to have her breakfast.”

“Oh but Montalais, you’ll be punished!” replied the younger girl, sitting down again.

“Punished? Oh, right, I’ll be deprived of our morning ride, going down the old steps to the big old coach that will then bounce left and right along paths so riddled with ruts that it takes a full two hours to go a league. Then we’ll return along the wall of the château under the window that once was Marie de Médicis’s, where Madam will inevitably say, ‘Can you believe that Queen Marie escaped through that, climbing down a forty-seven-foot drop! She, the mother of two princes and three princesses!’ If that’s to be my entertainment, I’d rather be punished by missing it every day, especially when my punishment is to stay with you and write such fascinating letters.”

“But, Montalais! We can’t ignore our duties.”

“That’s easy for you to say, sweetheart, when you’re largely free of them. You have all the benefits of attending Court with none of the burdens and are more truly a maid of honour to Madam than I am, since you’re here because Madam likes your father-in-law. You came into this sad château like a bird landing in a tower, sniffing the air, enjoying the flowers and pecking at the seeds, without the slightest duty to fulfil and no problems to solve. And you tell me we can’t ignore our duties! In truth, my lazy lovely, what duties do *you* have other than to write to the handsome Raoul? And since you’re not even doing that, it seems to me that you’re the one who’s being neglectful.”

Louise took this seriously. She rested her chin on her hand and said earnestly, “Do you really have the heart to reproach me and accuse me of being the lucky one? You’re the one with a future, since you’re officially a member of this court. The king, if he marries, will summon Monsieur to attend him in Paris; you’ll go to all the splendid festivals, and you’ll see the king himself, who’s said to be so handsome and charming.”

“Moreover, I’ll see Raoul, who attends on ‘Monsieur le Prince,.’” Montalais added maliciously.

“Poor Raoul!” Louise sighed.

“Then now is the moment to write to him, *beautiful dear*. Come, start again with the famous *Monsieur Raoul* that so prettily decorated the sheet you tore up.”

Then she handed Louise the plume, and with a charming smile, nudged her hand that quickly traced out the designated words. “And now?” asked the younger girl.

“Now write what’s on your mind, Louise,” replied Montalais.

“How do you know something is on my mind?”

“I know somebody is, and that’s even better – or rather, worse.”

“You think so, Montalais?”

“Louise, Louise, your blue eyes are as deep as the sea I saw at Boulogne last year. No, I’m wrong, for the sea is treacherous; your eyes are as deep as the azure sky above our heads.”

“Well! Since you see so deeply into me through my eyes, tell me what I’m thinking, Montalais.”

“First of all, you’re not thinking *Monsieur Raoul*, you’re thinking *My Dear Raoul* ... Oh, don’t blush over so little a thing! *My Dear Raoul*, you’d like to say, *You beg me to write to you in Paris, where you are retained in the service of Monsieur le Prince. There you must be bored indeed to have to seek distraction by remembering a provincial girl....*”

Louise rose and stopped her. “No, Montalais,” she said, smiling. “That’s not at all what I was thinking. Here, this is what I think.” And she boldly took the plume and wrote with a firm hand the following words: “*I would have been very unhappy if your request for a remembrance from me hadn’t been so warm. Everything here reminds me of our first years of friendship, so quickly passed and so sweetly spent that nothing could replace their charming memory in my heart.*”

Montalais, who was watching the pen dance across the page, reading upside-down as it wrote, interrupted her with applause. “Now, that’s more like it! Here is candour, here is style and true heart! Show those Parisians, my dear, that Blois is still the capital of our language.”

“He knows that, to me, Blois has been heaven,” said the younger woman.

“That’s what I meant, and you write like an angel.”

“I’ll finish now, Montalais.” And she continued: “*You say you think of me, Monsieur Raoul, and I thank you but I’m not surprised. I know every beat of your heart, for our hearts beat together.*”

“Whoa, there!” said Montalais. “Watch how you scatter your wool, my lamb, for there are wolves about.”

Louise was about to reply when a horse’s galloping hoof beats resounded from under the château’s gate. “What’s that?” said Montalais, rushing to the window. “A handsome cavalier, my faith!”

“Oh! It’s Raoul!” cried Louise who had followed her friend, and then, turning pale, fell back beside her unfinished letter.

“Now there’s an attentive lover, upon my word,” said Montalais, “to arrive the moment he’s beckoned.”

“Come away from there, please!” whispered Louise urgently.

“Fah! He doesn’t even know me. Let me go see what he’s doing here.”

## 266 The Messenger

Miss de Montalais was right: the young cavalier was quite handsome. He was a young man of twenty-four or twenty-five, tall and slender, graceful and comfortable in the charming military costume of the period. His tall cavalry boots enclosed a pair of feet that Miss de Montalais wouldn’t have been ashamed of if she’d been a man. With one of his fine and sensitive hands he drew his horse to a halt in the centre of the courtyard, and with the other he doffed the long-plumed hat that shaded his features, at once serious and naïve. The guards, at the sound of the horse, awoke and quickly stood at attention. The young man let one of them approach his saddle-bow, bowed to him, and said, in a clear and precise voice easily heard at the window where the two young ladies were hiding, “A messenger for His Royal Highness.”

“Ah ha!” the guard said, and called out, “Officer, a messenger!” However, this brave soldier knew quite well that no officer would respond, since the only one they had was in his rooms on the far, garden side of the château, so he hastened to add, “*Mon Gentilhomme*, the officer is on his rounds but in his absence we’ll inform Sir de Saint-Rémy,\* the major-domo.”

“Sir de Saint-Rémy!” repeated the cavalier, blushing.

“You know him?”

“But yes. Please request of him that my visit be announced to His Highness as soon as possible.”

“The matter seems urgent,” said the guard as if to himself but in hopes of obtaining an answer.

The messenger nodded.

“In that case,” replied the guard, “I’ll go find the major-domo myself.”

Meanwhile, the young man dismounted, while the other soldiers admired the fine horse that had brought him. The first guard came back and asked, “Your pardon, Sir but your name, if you please?”

“The Viscount of Bragelonne, on the behalf of His Highness Sir le Prince de Condé.”\*

The soldier bowed respectfully, and as if the name of the victor of Rocroi and Lens had given him wings, leapt back up the steps to the antechamber. Sir de Bragelonne scarcely had time to tie his horse to the banister of the staircase before Sir de Saint-Rémy came running, out of breath, one hand supporting his bulging belly while the other pawed the air like a angler cleaving the waves with his oar. “What, Sir Viscount, you at Blois?” he cried. “How marvellous! Hello, Sir Raoul, hello!”

“A thousand regards, Sir de Saint-Rémy.”

“How happy Miss de La Vall – I mean, how happy Madam de Saint-Rémy will be to see you. But come, His Royal Highness’s breakfast, must it really be interrupted? Is the news serious?”

“Yes and no, Sir de Saint-Rémy. However, any delay might be an inconvenience to His Royal Highness.”

“If that is so, we must make do, Sir Viscount. Come. Besides, Sir is in a charming mood today. So, then, you bring us news?”

“Big news, Sir de Saint-Rémy.”

“And the news is good, I presume?”

“Very good.”

“Then quickly, quickly!” said the worthy major-domo, straightening his clothing as he went along.

Raoul followed, hat in hand, a little nervous about the sound his spurs made as he marched through the solemn halls of the grand château. As soon as he vanished into the palace, the window across the courtyard was reoccupied, and an animated whispering betrayed the emotions of the two young ladies. Soon they came to a decision, and one of the heads, the brunette, disappeared from the window, leaving the other on the balcony, half-concealed by the shrubbery, attentively watching, between the boughs, the porch where Sir de Bragelonne had entered the palace. Meanwhile, the object of all this curiosity continued to follow in the footsteps of the major-domo. From ahead, the sound of servants’ quick steps, the aroma of honey and meat, and a rattling of crystal and crockery informed him that they were nearing their destination. The pages, valets, and officers gathered in the refectory’s antechamber welcomed the newcomer with the region’s proverbial politeness; some of them knew Raoul, and all guessed that he came from Paris. Indeed, his arrival momentarily suspended the service of breakfast, as a page who was pouring a drink for His Highness, hearing the jingle of spurs in the next room, turned like a distracted child, still pouring, not into the prince’s glass but onto the tablecloth. Madam, less preoccupied than her glorious spouse, noticed the page’s distraction.

“Well!” she said.

Sir de Saint-Rémy took advantage of the interruption to poke his head around the door. “Why are you disturbing us?” said Gaston, drawing toward himself a thick slice of one of the largest salmon ever to ascend the Loire and be caught between Paimbœuf and Saint-Nazaire.

“It’s because a messenger has arrived from Paris. But I’m sure it can wait until after Sir’s breakfast.”

“From Paris!” the prince exclaimed, dropping his fork. “A messenger from Paris, you say? And who does this messenger come from?”

“From Sir le Prince,” said the major-domo, using the common appellation for Sir de Condé.

“A messenger from Sir Prince?” said Gaston anxiously, a tone that didn’t escape the notice of his servants, redoubling their curiosity.

Sir might almost have thought himself back in the days of thrilling conspiracies, when the noise of a gate unlocking made one start, when every letter opened might betray a state secret, and every message introduce a dark and complicated intrigue. Perhaps the grand name of Sir le Prince roused in the halls of Blois a spectre of this past. Sir pushed back his plate. “Shall I ask the envoy to wait?” said Sir de Saint-Rémy.

A glance from Madam stiffened Gaston’s resolve, and he replied, “No, on the contrary, have him enter at once. By the way, who is it?”

“A local gentleman, Sir Viscount of Bragelonne.”

“Ah, yes, very good! Show him in, Saint-Rémy, show him in.”

And once he had uttered these words with his usual gravity, Sir gave his servants a certain look, and all the pages, servers, and squires left their napkins, knives, and goblets and retreated rapidly into a side chamber. This little army marched off in two files as Raoul de Bragelonne, preceded by Sir de Saint-Rémy, entered the refectory. The brief moment of solitude afforded him by the servants’ retreat had given my Lord Gaston time to assume an appropriately diplomatic expression. Rather than turn around, he waited for the major-domo to bring the messenger to a position in front of him. Raoul stopped in the middle of the far side of the table, midway between Sir and Madam, where he bowed profoundly to Sir, bowed humbly to Madam, and then stood and waited for Sir to speak to him first. The prince, for his part, waited until the outer doors were closed tightly, not turning to look that would have been beneath him but listening with both ears until he heard the click of the lock that promised at least the appearance of privacy. Once the doors were closed, Gaston raised his eyes to the Viscount of Bragelonne and said, “It seems you come from Paris, Sir?”

“This very moment, my Lord.”

“How is the king doing?”

“His Majesty is in perfect health, my Lord.”

“And my sister-in-law?”

“Her Majesty the Queen Mother still suffers from the complaint in her chest but has been somewhat better for the past month.”

“They tell me you come on the behalf of Sir Prince? Surely they were mistaken.”

“No, My Lord. Sir Prince has charged me with bringing Your Royal Highness this letter, and I am to await a reply.”

His voice trailed off in this final phrase; Raoul had been a little put off by his cold and formal reception. The prince forgot that he was responsible for the messenger’s confusion and bit his lip anxiously. He took the Prince de Condé’s letter with a haggard look, opened it as he might a suspicious package, and then, to read it without anyone seeing his expression as he did so, turned away. Madam observed all these manoeuvres on the part of her august husband with an anxiety almost the equal of his own. Raoul, impassive and seemingly forgotten by his hosts, looked through the open window at the château garden and its crowded population of statues. “Ah!” Sir said suddenly, with a radiant smile. “A charming letter from Sir le Prince, with a pleasant surprise! Here, Madam.” The table was too long for the prince’s arm to reach the princess’s hand, so Raoul hastened to act as intermediary, passing the letter along with a grace that charmed the princess and won the viscount a flattering thanks. “You know the contents of this letter, do you not?” said Gaston to Raoul. “Yes, my Lord; Sir le Prince gave me the message verbally at first, then upon reflection His Highness took up the plume.” “It’s beautiful handwriting,” said Madam, “but I can’t make it out.” “Will you read it to Madam, Sir de Bragelonne?” said the prince. “Yes, Sir, please read it.” Raoul began to read, with Sir giving him his full attention. The letter read as follows:

*My Lord,*  
*The king is travelling to the Spanish frontier; from this you will understand that His Majesty’s marriage is to be finalised. The king has done me the honour to appoint me Royal Quartermaster for this journey, and as I know how happy His Majesty would be to spend a day at Blois, I dare to ask Your Royal Highness for permission to include his château on the itinerary. However, in the unforeseen event that this request might cause Your Royal Highness any inconvenience, I beg you to report it to me by the messenger I have sent, one of my gentlemen named the Viscount of Bragelonne. My itinerary will depend upon the decision of Your Royal Highness, as we could choose instead to travel by way of Vendôme or Romorantin. I hope that Your Royal Highness will take my request in good part as an expression of my boundless devotion and my desire to please him.*

“Why, nothing could be more gracious,” said Madam, after carefully watching her husband’s expression during the reading of this letter. “The king, here!” she exclaimed, perhaps a bit louder than was consistent with the demands of secrecy. “Sir,” said His Highness, “you will thank Sir le Prince de Condé and convey my gratitude for the pleasure he gives me.” Raoul bowed. “On what day will His Majesty arrive?” the prince continued. “The king, My Lord, will in all probability arrive tonight.” “Tonight! But how would he have known it if my answer had been other than positive?” “I’d been assigned, My Lord, to hasten back to Beaugency and give a courier an order to countermand the march that he would bear to Sir le Prince.” “His Majesty is at Orléans, then?” “Closer than that, My Lord; His Majesty must even now be arriving at Meung.” “The Court accompanies him?” “Yes, My Lord.” “By the way, I forgot to ask for news of Sir Cardinal.” “His Eminence appears to be in good health, My Lord.” “His nieces accompany him, no doubt?” “No, My Lord; His Eminence ordered Mesdemoiselles de Mancini to depart for Brouage. They are following the left bank of the Loire while the Court proceeds along the right bank.” “What? Miss Marie de Mancini has left the Court?” asked Sir, whose reserve was beginning to fray. “Especially Miss Marie de Mancini,” replied Raoul discreetly. A fugitive smile, a brief vestige of his old spirit of intrigue, briefly lit the prince’s pale cheeks. “Thank you, Sir de Bragelonne,” said Gaston. “If you do not wish to render the prince the commission with which I charge you that is to tell him that I am very pleased with his messenger, I will do so myself.” Raoul bowed to thank Sir for the honour the prince did him. Sir gestured to Madam, who rang a bell placed to her right. Instantly Sir de Saint-Rémy came in and the refectory was suddenly filled with people. “Gentlemen,” said the prince, “His Majesty does me the honour to spend a day at Blois. I trust that my nephew the king will have no cause to regret the favour he shows to this house.” “Long live the king!” cried every member of Sir’s household, Sir de Saint-Rémy louder than anyone. Gaston’s head drooped in sudden sadness; all his life he’d heard, or rather suffered through, shouts of “Long live the king!” cried out for another. For a while he’d been spared that cry but now a younger, more dynamic, and more brilliant reign had begun, and the painful provocation was renewed. Madam understood the pain in his sad and fearful heart; she rose from the table and Sir imitated her mechanically, while all the servants, like bees buzzing around a hive, surrounded Raoul and plied him with questions. Madam saw this activity and beckoned to Sir de Saint-Rémy. “Now is not the time to talk but to work,” she said in the tone of an angry housewife. Saint-Rémy hastened to break up the circle of servants around Raoul so that he could escape to the antechamber. “You will attend to this gentleman’s needs, I hope,” said Madam to Sir de Saint-Rémy. The worthy man immediately ran to catch up with Raoul. “Madam has charged me with seeing to your refreshment,” he said. “I’ll assign a room for you here in the château.” “Thank you, Sir de Saint-Rémy,” replied Bragelonne, “but you know how eagerly I wish to go pay my respects to Sir Count of La Fère, my father.” “Quite so, quite so, Sir Raoul, and give him at the same time my most humble regards, I beg you.” Raoul reassured the old gentleman and went on his way. As he was passing out the gate, leading his horse by the bridle, a soft voice called from the gloom of a shaded path, “Sir Raoul!” The young man turned in surprise and saw a brown-haired young woman who was pressing a finger to her lips and holding out her other hand. This young lady was completely unknown to him.

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The Interview

Raoul took a step toward the young woman who beckoned to him, and then said, “But my horse, Madam.” “True, you can’t bring the horse. There’s a shed just outside the courtyard; tie your horse in there and hurry back.” “I obey, Madam.” It took scarcely a minute for Raoul to follow her recommendation and return to her. In the shadows under the vines he saw his mysterious guide waiting in a doorway that opened onto the foot of a winding staircase. “Are you brave enough to follow me, Sir Knight Errant?” asked the young woman, laughing at Raoul’s momentary hesitation. He replied by darting into the shadows to follow her up the stairs. They climbed three flights, he right behind her, brushing with outstretched hands, as he searched for a banister, a wide silk dress that grazed both sides of the staircase. When Raoul made a false step at a landing his guide whispered, “Hush!” and held out a soft and perfumed hand to him. “One could climb this way to the château’s tallest tower without feeling fatigue,” said Raoul. “Which means, Sir, that though weary from your ride, you are much intrigued but a bit uneasy. Never mind that, we’ve arrived.” The young woman pushed open a door, the darkened staircase was flooded with light, and Raoul saw that he stood at the top of the stairs. His guide continued, so he followed her; she entered a room, and he went in right behind her. As soon as he was fairly in the trap, he heard a loud cry, turned and saw near him, hands clasped, eyes closed, the beautiful blond young woman with blue eyes and ivory shoulders, who’d just called out “Raoul!” He saw her and read in her eyes so much love and so much happiness that he fell to his knees in the centre of the room, murmuring “Louise.” “Ah, Montalais, Montalais!” she sighed. “It’s a great sin to deceive me so.” “I? Have I deceived you?” “Yes, you told me you’d go down to learn the news, and then here you bring Sir back up with you.” “It had to be done. How else could he receive the letter you wrote to him?” And she pointed to the letter that was still on the table. Raoul took a step toward it; Louise, though her first step was strangely hesitant, was faster, and reached out a hand to stop him. Raoul met this hand, warm and trembling, took it in his own, and brought it so respectfully to his lips, it was as if he placed a sigh upon it rather than a kiss. Meanwhile, Miss de Montalais took up the letter, folded it carefully, as women do, with three folds, and slipped it between her breasts. “Don’t worry, Louise,” she said. “Sir would no more take it from here than the late King Louis XIII would take her billet-doux from the bodice of Miss de Hautefort.” Raoul blushed so at the sight of the young ladies’ smiles, he didn’t even notice that Louise’s hand was still in his. “There!” said Montalais. “You’ve forgiven me, Louise, for having brought Sir to you, and Sir forgives me for leading him to see Miss. Now that peace is concluded, let’s talk like old friends. Present me, Louise, to Sir de Bragelonne.” “Sir le Viscount,” said Louise, with her serious grace and frank smile, “I have the honour to introduce you to Miss Aure de Montalais, Maid of Honour to Her Highness Madam, and moreover, my friend – my *excellent* friend.” Raoul bowed ceremoniously. “And me, Louise,” he said. “Won’t you introduce me to Miss as well?” “Oh, she knows you! She knows everything!” This last word made Montalais laugh and Raoul sigh with happiness as he’d interpreted it to mean: *She knows all about our love.* “The courtesies are complete, Sir le Viscount,” said Montalais. “Here’s an armchair; sit and quickly bring us up to date with your news.” “Miss, it’s no longer a secret: the king, on his way to Poitiers, will stop at Blois to visit His Royal Highness.” “The king, here!” cried Montalais, clapping her hands. “We’ll see the Court! Can you imagine it, Louise? The real Court of Paris! But, *my God* – when will they arrive, Sir?” “Perhaps as soon as tonight, Miss; certainly, no later than tomorrow.” Montalais made an angry gesture. “No time to get ready! No time to update a single dress! We live here in the past like Poles! We’ll look like we stepped out of portraits from King Henri’s reign. Ah, Sir, what terrible news you bring!” “Mesdemoiselles, you will still be beautiful.” “Cold comfort! Yes, we’ll still be beautiful, because Nature has made us passable but we’ll also be ridiculous, because fashion has left us behind. *Alas!* Ridiculous! To think that I’ll be mocked!” “By who?” said Louise, naïvely. “By who? Are you kidding, *my dear*? What kind of a question is that? By everyone! By the courtiers, by the nobles, and above all – by the king!” “Pardon me, dear friend but as everyone here is used to seeing us as we are...” “True but that won’t last, and then we’ll be ridiculous, even for Blois. Because we’re going to see the Parisian fashions while wearing the clothes of Blois, and then we’ll find *ourselves* ridiculous. It’s hopeless!” “Take comfort in who you are, Miss.” “There’s truth. Fah! If they find me not to their taste, that’s their loss!” said Montalais philosophically. “Small chance of that,” said Raoul, faithful to his system of general gallantry. “Thank you, Sir le Viscount. So, you say the king comes to Blois?” “With all his Court.” “Including Mesdemoiselles de Mancini, of course.” “No, decidedly not.” “But isn’t it said that the king can’t bear to be apart from Miss Marie?” “The king will have to bear it, Miss. The cardinal has decided to exile his nieces to Brouage.” “Him! That hypocrite!” “Hush!” said Louise, putting a finger to her rosy lips. “Fah! No one can hear me. I say that old Mazarino Mazarini is a hypocrite who’s out to make his niece the Queen of France.” “On the contrary, Miss, the cardinal has negotiated for His Majesty to marry the Infanta Maria Theresa.”

Montalais looked Raoul in the eye and said, “Do you Parisians really believe in such fables? Come, we know better than that in Blois.”

“Miss, once the marriage contract is finalized between Don Luis de Haro and His Eminence, and the king goes beyond Poitiers to the Spanish frontier, you’ll see that the childhood games are done.”

“*Ah çà!* But the king is still the king, isn’t he?”

“No doubt about it, Miss – but the cardinal is the cardinal.”

“Is he not a man, then, the king? Doesn’t he love Marie de Mancini?”

“He adores her.”

“Well, then – he’ll marry her. We’ll have a war with Spain, Sir Mazarin will spend some of the millions he’s hidden away, our gentlemen will perform feats of heroism against the proud Castilians, many of them will return to us to be crowned with laurels, and we shall re-crown them with myrtles. And that’s politics as I understand it.”

“You’re a madwoman, Montalais,” said Louise, “as drawn to hyperbole as a moth is to flames.”

“Louise, you are so restrained you’ll never really fall in love.”

“Oh, Montalais!” said Louise in tender reproach. “Consider this: the queen mother wishes her son to marry the Infanta. Do you want the king to disobey his mother? Could one with a heart as royal as his set a bad example? When parents forbid love, love must be banished!”

And Louise sighed, while Raoul looked down sadly. But Montalais laughed. “As for me, I have no parents!”

After her sigh that revealed so much pain, Louise said, “You’ve no doubt already inquired after the health of Sir le Count of La Fère.”

“No, Miss,” Raoul replied, “I’ve not yet seen my father; I was on my way to his house when Miss de Montalais was so good as to stop me. I hope the count is doing well – you haven’t heard otherwise, have you?”

“Not at all, Sir Raoul, not at all, thank God!”

Then a silence ensued, while two souls in perfect harmony thought the same thoughts without even exchanging a glance. Montalais suddenly said, “My God! Somebody’s coming up the stairs.”

“Who can it be?” said Louise, rising anxiously.

“*Ladies*, I’m at fault here, my presence is bound to get you in trouble,” stammered Raoul, flustered.

“It’s a heavy footstep,” said Louise.

“Ah!” said Montalais. “If it’s only Sir Malicorne, we’ve nothing to fear.”

Louise and Raoul looked at each other, as if asking who Sir Malicorne could be. “Don’t worry,” continued Montalais. “He’s not the jealous type.”

“But, Miss...” said Raoul.

“Oh, I know. But he’s just as discreet as I am.”

“*My God!*” cried Louise, who’d pressed her ear to the half-open door. “Those are my mother’s footsteps!”

“Madam de Saint-Rémy! Where can I hide?” exclaimed Raoul, tugging at the sleeve of Montalais who seemed stunned.

“You’re right, Louise,” she said, shaking her head, “I recognise the sound of those barges – it’s your worthy mother! Sir Viscount, it’s a shame that the window opens on a sheer drop of fifty feet.”

Raoul glanced at the window as if he might try it anyway but Louise grabbed his arm and stopped him. “*Oh that!* Am I crazy?” said Montalais. “Don’t I have a big armoire to hold my ceremonial dresses? It’s made to order for this kind of emergency!”

It was time, as Madam de Saint-Rémy was climbing more quickly than usual. She arrived on the landing just as Montalais, in a scene right out of the theatre, shut the armoire door on Raoul and leaned against it. “Ah!” said Madam de Saint-Rémy. “Are you here too, Louise?”

“Yes, Madam,” she replied, as pale as if accused of a heinous crime.

“Good! Just as well!”

“Have a seat, Madam,” said Montalais, offering Madam de Saint-Rémy an armchair, while facing it away from the armoire.

“Thank you, Miss Aure.” Then, to Louise, “Now go, my child, and be quick.”

“Where do you want me to go, Madam?”

“Why, home – don’t you want to prepare?”

“Prepare? For what?” said Montalais, pretending surprise, and hoping to prevent Louise from saying something foolish.

“You haven’t heard the news?” said Madam de Saint-Rémy.

“What news, Madam, could two girls hear up in this pigeon coop?”

“What? You haven’t spoken to anyone?”

“Madam, you’re speaking in riddles, and it’s killing us,” said Montalais, desperate to distract the lady from Louise who was white as a sheet.

At last Montalais caught a wide-eyed glance from her friend, one of those looks that would awaken a stone, as Louise pointed a trembling figure at where Raoul’s treacherous hat sat upon the table. Montalais darted forward, seized the hat with her left hand and passed it behind her to her right, holding it behind her back. “Well!” said Madam de Saint-Rémy. “A courier has come, announcing the imminent arrival of the king. So, ladies, it’s all about looking your best!”

“Quickly! Quickly!” said Montalais. “Follow Madam your mother, Louise, while I see to my dress.”

Louise arose, her mother took her by the hand and hurried her to the landing. “Come,” she said, and then added in a lower voice, “and when I forbid you to visit Montalais, why do I find you here?”

“Madam, she’s my friend. Besides, I’d only just arrived.”

“You didn’t catch her concealing someone?”

“Madam!”

“I saw that man’s hat, yes I did, and I say to you, she’s a hussy and a scamp!”

“Really, Madam!” cried Louise.

“It’s that rascal Malicorne! A maid of honour to consort with such as he ... fie!”

And their voices faded into the depths of the staircase. Montalais hadn’t lost a word of this exchange that had been projected up the stairs as if by a trumpet. She shrugged her shoulders, and seeing that Raoul, who’d come out of hiding, had heard it as well, she said, “Poor Montalais, the victim of friendship! And poor Malicorne, the victim of love!”

She paused when she saw the tragicomic face of Raoul, who was bewildered by encountering so many secrets in a single day. “Miss,” he said, “how can I repay you for your kindness?”

“We’ll settle our accounts another day, Sir de Bragelonne,” she replied. “For the moment, you’d better get moving, as Madam de Saint-Rémy is far from lenient, and a word from her in the wrong place could send us an inconvenient visitor. Farewell!”

“But Louise ... how will I know...?”

“Go! Go! King Louis XI knew what he was doing when he invented the postal service.”

“*Alas!*” said Raoul.

“And aren’t I here, who are better than any postman in the realm? Return to your horse, so that if Madam de Saint-Rémy comes back up to lecture me, she won’t find you here.”

“She’d tell my father, wouldn’t she?” murmured Raoul.

“And then you’d be scolded. Ah, Viscount, it’s clear you come from Court; you’re as timid as the king. *Plague!* At Blois, we know better than to ask for a father’s consent to follow our passions. Ask Malicorne.” And with these words, the brash young woman pushed Raoul out the door by the shoulders. The latter rushed down to the shed, found his horse, jumped into the saddle and set off as if all 8 of Sir’s guards were on his heels.

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Father & Son

Raoul followed the familiar road, so dear to his memory, that led from Blois to the estate of the Count of La Fère. The reader needs no new description of this dwelling, having visited it with us before. But since our last visit the walls had assumed a greyer hue and the bricks a more harmonious copper tone, while the trees had grown, those that had formerly stretched slender arms over the hedges now towering above them, rounded, bushy, luxuriant, and bearing a lush crop of flowers or fruit for the passer-by. Raoul saw in the distance the high roof with its two small turrets, the dovecote among the elms, and around that cone of bricks the flocks of pigeons ever circling without being able to leave it, like the sweet memories that soar around a serene soul. As he approached, he heard the sound of pulleys groaning under the weight of heavy buckets, and seemed as well to hear the melancholy echoing of water pouring back into the well, a sad and solemn noise that attracts the ear of the child and the dreamy poet alike, a sound the English call *splash*, the Arab poets call *gagachau* but which the French who think themselves poets, describe only with the phrase “the sound of water falling into water.”

It was more than a year since Raoul had been to see his father, having spent that time as a retainer of Sir le Prince. In fact, after the turmoil of the Fronde, of which we formerly attempted to recount the first phases, Louis de Condé had made a frank and solemn reconciliation with the Court. During the entire time the prince had been at odds with the king, the prince, who had long been fond of Bragelonne, had offered him every inducement to join him that might dazzle a young man. But the Count of La Fère, ever faithful to his principles of loyalty to the monarchy, as he’d expounded one day to his son in the vaults of Saint-Denis, had refused on behalf of his son all the prince’s offers. Moreover, instead of following Sir de Condé into rebellion, the viscount had attached himself to Sir de Turenne who fought for the king. Then when Sir de Turenne, in his turn, had seemed to abandon the king’s cause, he had left Turenne as he had left Condé. The result of this consistent line of conduct was that, though Turenne and Condé had never been victorious except when commanding under the king’s colours, Raoul, young as he was, had ten victorious royal battles to his credit, and not a single rebellious defeat to tarnish his courage and weigh on his conscience. Thus Raoul, by following his father’s wishes, had stubbornly followed the fortunes of King Louis XIV, despite all the factional infighting that was endemic and, one might almost say, inevitable to the period. Sir de Condé, upon being returned to favour, had taken advantage of the royal amnesty to ask for the restoration of the many rights and privileges he’d previously enjoyed, including the service of Raoul. The Count of La Fère, showing his usual good sense and wisdom, had immediately sent Raoul back to the Prince de Condé. A year had passed since the last meeting of the father and son, during which a few letters had consoled, though not cured, the pain of separation. As we’ve seen, Raoul had also left in Blois an attachment other than his filial love. But to be fair, without the intervention of chance and of Miss de Montalais, those two demons of temptation, Raoul, his mission accomplished, would have immediately galloped toward his father’s house – not without turning his head to look behind, however, though he wouldn’t have stopped even if he’d seen Louise holding out her arms. The first part of the ride Raoul spent missing the lover he had just left, while the second half was spent looking forward to the father’s love he’d find when he arrived that couldn’t come soon enough for him. Raoul found the garden gate open and rode right up the path, without paying any attention to the outraged gestures of an old man wearing a purple wool jerkin and a large hat of faded velvet. This old servant, who’d been weeding a bed of daisies and dwarf roses, was indignant at seeing a horse plough up his freshly raked path, growling out a surly “Hrm!” that made the rider turn his head. Then came a sudden change, for the man, having seen Raoul’s face, straightened up and began to run toward the house, shouting for joy. Raoul stopped at the stable, handed his horse to a young lackey, and dashed up the steps with an ardour that would have delighted his father’s heart. He crossed the foyer, the dining room, and the parlour without meeting anyone; at last, arriving at the Count of La Fère’s door, he knocked impatiently and then went in almost without waiting for the word, “Enter!” spoken in a resonant voice both soft and serious.

The count was seated at a table covered with papers and books. He was still the noble and handsome gentleman of old but time had given his nobility and features a more solemn and distinguished character. A brow broad and smooth below long hair now more white than black; a piercing yet gentle eye beneath the lashes of a much younger man; a slender, scarcely salted moustache framing lips strong but delicate, as if they’d never been strained by mortal passions; a straight and supple figure; and an irreproachable hand – he was still that illustrious gentlemen whom so many eminent men had praised under the name of Athos. He was occupied in correcting the pages of a manuscript in a notebook, entirely filled with his handwriting. Raoul gripped his father by the shoulders and kissed him so quickly and tenderly that the count had neither the strength nor the speed to avoid it, nor to control his upwelling of paternal emotion. “You, here, Raoul?” he said. “How is it possible?”

“Oh, Sir, what joy it is to see you again!”

“You didn’t answer me, Viscount. Has a holiday brought you to Blois, or has something gone wrong in Paris?”

“No, Sir, thank God!” said Raoul, his natural calm returning. “Nothing has happened but happy events; the king is getting married, as I had the honour to tell you in my last letter, and is on his way to Spain. His Majesty will stop at Blois.”

“To visit Sir?”



"Yes, Sir le Count. And to make sure His Highness wasn't taken by surprise, and to do him honour, Sir le Prince sent me on ahead to warn him to prepare lodgings."

"You saw Sir?" the count asked eagerly.

"I had that honour."

"At his château?"

"Yes, Sir," replied Raoul, lowering his eyes as he began to suspect the count's interrogation had another end than curiosity.

"Ah, really, Viscount! My congratulations."

Raoul bowed. "But did you see anyone else at Blois?"

"Sir, I saw Her Royal Highness Madam."

"Excellent. But it's not of Madam that I speak."

Raoul blushed deeply but said nothing. "Didn't you hear my question, Sir le Viscount?" continued Sir de La Fère without hardening his voice but with a sharper look in his eye.

"I understood you perfectly, Sir," Raoul replied, "and if I pause to form my answer, it's not because I'm looking for a lie – as you know, Sir."

"I know you never lie. But I'm surprised that it takes you this long to tell me yes or no."

"It's not that I don't understand you but that I understand you all too well ... and that you won't be pleased by what I have to tell you. I'm sure you won't like it, Sir le Count but I also saw..."

"Miss de La Vallière, yes?"

"And it's about her that you wish to speak, as well I know, Sir le Count," Raoul said, humbly and gently.

"And I'm asking if you've seen her."

"Sir, I was completely ignorant when I entered the château that Miss de La Vallière might be there; it was only upon returning toward you, after completing my mission, that chance brought us face to face. I then had the honour to pay her my respects."

"What name do you give the chance that brought you to meet Miss de La Vallière?"

"Miss de Montalais, Sir."

"Who is Miss de Montalais?"

"A young person I didn't know and had never seen before. She's a maid of honour to Madam."

"Sir Viscount, I will go no further in my interrogation, and I reproach myself for having gone so far. I asked you to avoid Miss de La Vallière and to see her only with my permission. Oh, I know that what you've said is true, and you didn't seek her out! Chance caused the injury, and I won't accuse you of it. I will just content myself with a reminder of what I've already said about this young lady. I have nothing to reproach her with, as God is my witness but it does not accord with my plans for you to permit you to visit her. I beg you once more, Raoul, to hear me on this."

It was clear from the expression of Raoul's eyes, usually so bright and clear, that he was troubled by this speech. "Now, my son," continued the count, with his sweet smile and in his usual tone, "let's talk about something else. Must you hurry back to your service?"

"No, Sir, I have nothing else to do today other than to spend it with you. The prince, fortunately, made that my only other mission, and I could wish nothing more."

"The king is doing well?"

"Perfectly so."

"And Sir le Prince also?"

"As always, Sir."

The count forgot to inquire after Mazarin – but that was an old habit. "Well, Raoul! Since you have no other duty but me, you shall have my entire day. Now, embrace me. And again! How fine to have you at home, Viscount. Ah, here is good old Grimaud! Come, Grimaud, Sir le Viscount wants to embrace you as well."

The old man didn't wait to make him repeat it; he ran to Raoul with open arms and Raoul met him halfway. "And now, Raoul, let's take a turn around the gardens. Then you'll see how I've improved your rooms for the holidays, and while I show you our preparations for fall, and introduce you to our two new horses, you can give me the news of our friends in Paris."

The count closed his notebook, took the young man by the arm, and led him to the gardens. Grimaud gazed sadly at Raoul, whose head now nearly grazed the top of the doorway, and, fingering his white pointed goatee, he blinked damply and muttered, "All grown up!"

Which Speaks of Cropoli & Cropole & a Great Unknown Painter

While the Count of La Fère showed Raoul his new outbuildings and the new horses in his stable, our readers will allow us to draw them back to the town of Blois to witness an unaccustomed flurry of activity in the city. The impact of the news brought by Raoul was especially felt in the town's inns. Indeed, the king of France and his Court coming to Blois, that is to say, a hundred cavaliers, ten carriages, two hundred horses, as many valets as masters – where would everyone stay, in addition to all the local gentry who would arrive in the next two to three hours as soon as the news rippled and spread, like the widening waves from a stone thrown into the waters of a quiet lake? Blois, so peaceful in the morning, as we've seen, the quietest pond in the world, at the news of the royal visit suddenly was abuzz with tumult and turmoil. All the château's servants, at the orders of their officers, went out into the city to fetch provisions, and ten couriers on horseback rode to the reserves of Chambord to seek game, to the fisheries of Beuvron for seafood, and to the gardens of Cheverny for flowers and fruit. Out from trunks and wardrobes came silken tapestries and chandeliers with gilded chains; an army of the poor swept the courtyards and washed the stone facings, while their wives stalked the meadows beyond the Loire to collect greenery and wildflowers. The city, to be as groomed as the château, scrubbed itself with brushes, brooms, and water. The gutters in the upper town, swollen by the runoff, became rivers in the lower town, and the pavement that it must be said was often quite muddy, was washed clean and gleamed in the sunlight. Then musical instruments were brought out, and drawers of décor were emptied; merchants did a brisk business in wax polish, ribbons, and sword-knots, while the housewives laid in provisions of bread, meat, and spices. Soon the citizens, their houses stuffed enough to survive a siege, were donning holiday garb and heading to the city gate, hoping to be the first to see and announce the royal procession. They knew the king wouldn't arrive before evening, or even the next morning – but what is anticipation but a kind of madness, and what is madness if not an ecstasy of hope? In the lower town, barely a hundred paces from the Hall of the Estates General, between the promenade and the château, in a rather pretty street that was then called Rue Vieille and was indeed very old, stood a venerable edifice, squat, broad, and with peaked gables, endowed with three windows at the street level, two on the next floor, and a small bull's-eye window on the top. On the side of this old triangle had recently been built a new parallelogram that in accord with the practices of the time bulged right out into the street. Though the street was narrowed by a quarter, the house was nearly doubled, and wasn't that sufficient excuse? Local tradition held that in the time of Henri III this gabled house had been the residence of a Councillor of State whom Queen Catherine had come to visit – some said for advice, and some said to strangle him. Whatever the reason, no one doubted the good lady had crossed the house's threshold with her royal foot. After the councillor's death, by natural causes or by strangulation, the house had been sold, then abandoned and isolated from the other houses on the street. It wasn't until the middle of the reign of Louis XIII that an Italian named Cropoli, escaped from the kitchens of Marshal d'Ancre, had taken the house. There he'd founded a small inn that served a macaroni so delicious that people came from leagues away to eat it or fetch it home. The fame of the inn was further spread by the fact that Queen Marie de Médicis, when a prisoner in the château, used to send for its cooking. On the very day that she escaped from the famous high window, she left behind on her table a plate of the celebrated macaroni, tasted only by the royal mouth. The double celebrity of this triangular house, for the strangulation and the macaroni, had given its owner Cropoli the idea of dubbing his inn with a pompous name. His own wouldn't do, as Italian names weren't well regarded at the time, and he didn't wish to draw attention to his hoarded wealth, so carefully hidden. In 1643, after the death of King Louis XIII, when he felt himself approaching the end of his own life, he sent for his son, a young man for whom he had high hopes. With tears in his eyes, he advised him to guard carefully the secret recipe of the famous macaroni, to make his name more French, to marry a Frenchwoman, and, when the political horizon had cleared of its former clouds, to have a neighbouring artisan carve out a fine sign, upon which a famous artist he would name would paint a portrait of the two queens above the words:

The Médicis

The worthy Cropoli, after delivering this advice, had only enough strength left to point his heir toward a brick in the chimney behind which he had hidden a thousand ten-franc coins, and then he expired. The younger Cropoli, a man of heart, bore his loss with resignation and his gain without arrogance. He began familiarizing his customers and neighbours with the practice of not pronouncing his name's final syllable until eventually he was known as Monsieur Cropole that as a name is tolerably French. In due time he married, giving his hand to a little French girl whom he loved, and whose parents provided a suitable dowry once he'd shown them what was behind the brick in the chimney. The first two points concluded, Monsieur Cropole sought for the artist who was to paint the promised sign. This painter was soon found: he was an Old Italian of the school of Raphael and the Caracci but it was a school he'd never graduated. He called himself a painter in the Venetian style, doubtless because he was so fond of colour. His works looked good at a hundred paces but not at close range, and had never pleased the bourgeois – in fact, he'd never sold a one. But he boasted of having painted a bathroom for Madam la Maréchal d'Ancre though it had burned during the disaster of the marshal's downfall, and he was bitter at the loss. The elder Cropoli, as a compatriot, had been indulgent toward this Pittrino that was the name of the artist. Perhaps he had seen the lost and lamented bathroom. He had so much esteem and even friendship for Pittrino that he'd taken him into his home. Pittrino, grateful for a roof over his head and macaroni in his belly, had helped to spread the reputation of the savoury noodles and was reckoned thereby to have done great service to the house of Cropoli. As he grew older, Pittrino became as attached to the son as he had been to the father, and became a sort of fixture in the house, thanks he believed to his honest integrity, his acknowledged sobriety, his proverbial chastity, and a thousand other virtues that he enumerated at length, and which gave him an eternal place in the home with rights of authority over the servants. Besides, he'd established himself as the arbiter of the macaroni, maintaining the pure devotion to the ancient tradition, and wouldn't allow one peppercorn too many or one atom of parmesan too little in the recipe. His joy was very great on the day when the younger Cropole told him of the promised sign. He was soon seen rummaging through an old box, from which he drew some brushes nibbled a bit by rodents but still passable, some dried-up colours in leather pouches, a bottle of linseed oil, and a palette that had once belonged to Bronzino that *god among painters* as the transalpine artist had called him in his once-youthful enthusiasm. Pittrino was excited and rejuvenated by his return to painting. As Raphael had done, he changed his style to suit the subject, and painted in the manner of Albani two partially clad goddesses rather than two queens. Thanks to Pittrino's effusive new style, these illustrious ladies so nobly graced the sign, where they posed as Anacreontic sirens among a riot of lilies and roses, that the town's principal alderman, when invited into Cropole's parlour to view the proposed emblem, immediately declared that the two beauties were entirely too provocative to hang in the public view of passers-by. "His Royal Highness Monsieur," said the alderman to Pittrino, "who does us the honour to reside in our town, would not be pleased to see his mother in such a state of undress and would clap you in the royal dungeons, for he's not always tender of heart, our glorious prince. Either remove these two sirens or change the title, or I must forbid the exhibition of this sign. This is for your own good, Maître Cropole, and yours as well, Signor Pittrino."

What could one say to that? Cropole thanked the alderman for his consideration and advice. But Pittrino was stricken with gloom and disappointment, for he saw which way things were going. The visitor was barely gone before Cropole, crossing his arms, said, "Well, Signor, what we shall do?"

"We'll have to change the title," said Pittrino sadly. "I have some deep charcoal black that will cover the old name completely, and we can replace 'The Médicis' with 'The Nymphs' or 'The Sirens,' whichever you like."

"But no," said Cropole. "That would go against my father's wishes. My father desired..."

"He desired the queens' portraits most of all," said Pittrino.

"He insisted on the title," said Cropole.

"The proof that the portraits were of prime importance was his insistence that they resemble their models, and they do," replied Pittrino.

"Maybe so but who would recognise them without the title? Nowadays the memory of the citizens of Blois is vague on their appearance. Who would know it was Catherine and Marie without the title of *the Médicis*?"

"But what about my portraits?" said Pittrino desperately, for deep down he knew Cropole was right. "What's to become of the fruit of my artistic labours?"

"I don't want to go to jail or see you thrown in the dungeons."

"Erase 'The Médicis,' I beg you," said Pittrino.

"No," said Cropole firmly. "But I have an idea, a sublime idea ... your artistry will appear, and so will my title. Doesn't *médicis* mean *doctor* in Italian?"

"Yes, in the plural."

"Then we'll get another signboard from our neighbour, you'll paint six doctors on it, and below you'll write 'The Médicis' – which will be an amusing play on words."

"Six doctors? Impossible! What about the composition?" cried Pittrino.

"That part's up to you but since that's what I want, that's what we'll have. Enough – my macaroni's burning." This was incontestable, so Pittrino obeyed. He composed the sign with the six doctors and the designated title, the alderman approved of it, and the sign was well received by the citizenry. It just proved, Pittrino said, that poetry was wasted on the bourgeois. Cropole, to console the painter and acknowledge the artistry of the original, hung the image of the nymphs in his bedroom that made Madam Cropole blush beneath them every night while undressing. That was where the gabled house got its sign, and how, making its fortune, the Inn of the Médicis was able to expand in the manner described. And that was how Blois happened to have a hostelry of that name, with a painter-in-residence named Pittrino.

## 270 The Stranger

Established thus on a firm foundation and advertised by a bold sign, the inn of Maître Cropole enjoyed a respectable prosperity. It's not that Cropole was likely to earn a vast fortune but he might in time hope to double the thousand Louis d'or bequeathed to him by his father, make another thousand by the sale of his house and goods, and retire as a free citizen of the town. Cropole was eager for profit and welcomed the news of the arrival of King Louis XIV. He, his wife, Pittrino, and two scullions immediately laid their hands on all the inhabitants of the dovecote, the coop, and the hutches, so that the kitchen yard of the Hôtellerie des Médicis resounded with as many cries and lamentations as Rama. At the time, Cropole had only one lodger. He was a man of scarcely thirty, handsome, tall, austere, or rather melancholy in attitude and appearance. He was dressed in a black velvet coat with buttons of jet; a white collar, as simple as that worn by the Puritans, brought out the fair and youthful tint of his neck; while a slight blond moustache barely covered a quivering and disdainful lip. When he spoke to people he looked them in the eye, not to intimidate but with brutal candour, so that the brilliance of his blue eyes became so hard to bear that the other's gaze often fell before his, as the weaker sword does in single combat. At that time when men, though created equal by God, were divided by prejudice into two castes, the gentleman and the commoner, as they really divide into two races, the black and the white – at that time, as we say, the man whose portrait we just sketched could not fail to be taken for a gentleman, and of the best breeding. One need only look at his hands, long, tapered, and pale, with every muscle and vein visible beneath the skin at the slightest movement, the fingers blushing at the slightest tension. This gentleman had arrived at Cropole's inn alone. He had taken without hesitation, without even thinking about it, the best rooms in the inn that the innkeeper had shown him right away, in the service of what some would call reprehensible greed and others just good business. It certainly showed that Cropole was a physiognomist who could size people up at first glance. These rooms occupied the upstairs front of the old triangular house: a large living room lit by two windows on the first floor up, a small room next to it, and another one above. Since his arrival, the gentleman had scarcely touched the meal that had been served to him the night before. He had said just a few words to his host to warn him that he awaited a traveller named Parry, and that when he arrived the host should show him up. Then he'd kept so quietly to himself that Cropole was almost offended, as he preferred guests who were good company. This gentleman had risen early on the morning of the day this story began and placed himself in the window of his drawing room, sitting on the sill and leaning on the banister of the balcony, watching both sides of the street sadly and stubbornly, doubtless awaiting the arrival of the traveller he had mentioned to his host. He had watched the passing of Monsieur's little cortege returning from the hunt, then had seemed to savour the town's sleepy tranquillity as he settled into his waiting. Suddenly there came the commotion of the poor folk hastening out to the meadows, of couriers departing, of washers scrubbing the pavement, of servants hurrying from the château, the rush of chattering school boys, the clatter of carts, of hairdressers on the run, and pages bearing packages; this tumult and din had surprised him but without affecting his air of impassive majesty that resembled that which gives the eagle and the lion their supremely contemptuous looks despite the clamour and scurry of hunters and hyenas. Soon the sounds from the street were joined by the cries of the victims in the kitchen yard, as well as the hurried footsteps of Madam Cropole, along with the bounding gait of Pittrino, who usually spent the morning smoking at the door with the phlegm of a Dutchman, a flurry of sounds that carried up the echoing wooden staircase. This all caused the lodger to start in surprise and agitation. As he was getting up to inquire into this commotion, the door to his chamber opened. The lodger thought that no doubt the traveller he awaited had arrived at last. In unaccustomed haste, he took three quick steps toward the opening door. But instead of the figure he hoped to see, that of Maître Cropole appeared, and behind him, in the shadows of the staircase, the rather graceful face of Madam Cropole, pointedly curious as she glanced at the stranger and then withdrew. Cropole advanced smiling, hat in hand, more bent than bowing. A silent gesture from the stranger asked him his intentions. "Monsieur," said Cropole, "I've come to ask – but how should I address Monsieur, as Your Lordship? Monsieur le Count? Monsieur le Marquis?"

"Just say *Monsieur*, and come to your business quickly," said the stranger in that haughty tone that admits neither discussion nor question.

"I came to find out how Monsieur had spent the night and ask if Monsieur intended to keep the apartment."

"Yes."

"Monsieur, I must say that an unforeseen event has occurred."

"What's that?"

"His Majesty Louis XIV is arriving in our city today and will spend a night here, or perhaps two."

The stranger appeared astonished by this news. "The King of France is coming to Blois?"

"He's on his way, Monsieur."

"Then, all the more reason for me to stay," said the stranger.

"Very good, Monsieur – but will Monsieur wish to retain the entire apartment?"

"I don't understand. Why would I want less today than I did yesterday?"

"Because, Monsieur, if Your Lordship will allow me to say so, when Your Lordship engaged the apartment yesterday, its price was that of ordinary times ... but now..."

The stranger flushed, perhaps thinking himself insulted by an implication that his means might be limited. "And now," he said coldly, "what of now?"

"Monsieur, I'm an honest man, thank God, and though I may be only an innkeeper, within me flows the blood of a gentleman – my father was a servant and officer of the late Marshal d'Ancre, God rest his soul!"

"I'll not dispute the point, Monsieur; but I want to know, and quickly, what you have to ask."

"You are, Monsieur, too wise not to understand that our town is small, that the Court is numerous, that all our houses will overflow with visitors, and that consequently the value of a room ... goes up."

The stranger flushed again. "State your conditions, Monsieur," he said.

"I say in all honesty, Monsieur that I seek only fair profit from the situation and seek to do business without incivility or rudeness. Now, the apartment you occupy is spacious, and you are alone..."

"That's my business."

"Of course, Monsieur! I'm not seeking to turn Monsieur out."

The stranger coloured red to his temples, and he flashed a look at poor Cropole that, descended though he was from an officer of Marshal d'Ancre, would have sent him crawling back under that famous brick in the chimney if he hadn't been fixed immovably by the interest of profit. "Do you want me to leave? Explain yourself and be quick about it."

"Monsieur, Monsieur, you misunderstand me. It's a delicate situation, difficult to address properly, and doubtless I express myself badly – or perhaps, since Monsieur is a foreigner, as I can tell from his accent..."

In fact, the stranger spoke with that brusqueness that was the principal hallmark of an English accent, even among those of his countrymen who speak the purest French. "As Monsieur is a foreigner, I say, perhaps it's he who misunderstands the nuances of my request. I propose that Monsieur give up one or two of the rooms he occupies, as that would reduce his rent quite a bit and relieve my conscience – for under the circumstances I see no alternative but to increase the price of these chambers that as Monsieur must see is only reasonable."

"What was the rent for the first day?"

"One *louis*, Monsieur, including meals plus fodder for the horse."

"Fine. And the rate now?"

"Ah, that's the difficulty! With the arrival of the king, the price of beds goes up, and three double rooms cost six Louis. Two louis, Monsieur, are nothing but six Louis, that's a lot."

The stranger, from red, had gone very pale. With heroic bravery, he drew from his pouch a coin purse embroidered with arms that he carefully concealed in the hollow of his hand. This purse had a flatness, a flaccidity that didn't escape Cropole's eye. The stranger emptied his purse into his hand. It contained three double Louis, six Louis altogether, as the innkeeper had asked. Except that it was seven that Cropole required, including the previous day. He looked at the stranger as if to say, "And?"

"It's a Louis short, is it not, Master Host?"

"Yes, Monsieur but..."

The stranger rummaged through his breeches pocket and drew out a little wallet, a golden key, and some small change. Combining these coins he had just enough to add up to another Louis. "Thank you, Monsieur," said Cropole. "Now I just have to ask if Monsieur intends to remain tomorrow as well. If so, fine – but if not, I'll let it out to His Majesty's people when they come."

"That's fair," said the stranger, after a long silence. "But as I have no more coins, as you've seen, to keep the apartment you must take this diamond and either sell it in the city or hold it as security."

Cropole looked at the diamond with such uncertainty that the stranger hastened to add, "I prefer that you sell it, Monsieur, for it's worth three hundred pistoles. A Jew – is there a Jew in Blois? – will give you two hundred for it, or even a hundred and fifty. Take whatever he offers you, so long as it covers the rent of your apartment. Be gone!"

"Oh, Monsieur!" cried Cropole, ashamed of the sudden inferiority reflected on him by this noble and disinterested disdain for money, and of having shown such ignoble suspicions. "Oh, Monsieur, I hope we're not such thieves in Blois as you seem to believe, and if the diamond is worth what you say..."

The stranger again pierced Cropole with a look from his azure eyes.

"I know nothing about diamonds, Monsieur but I believe it," Cropole said.

"But the jewellers will know, so ask them," said the stranger. "Now, does that conclude our business?"

"Yes, Monsieur, and I'm very sorry, for I believe Monsieur is offended."

"It's nothing," said the stranger, with the majesty of high rank.

"Oh but to be suspected of fleecing a noble traveller ... please pardon me, Monsieur, I act only out of necessity."

"Say no more about it, as I said, and leave me to myself."

Cropole bowed deeply and departed with an agitation that revealed he was a man of heart who felt genuine remorse. The stranger locked the door himself, and then looked into the bottom of his purse, from which he'd drawn the small silk bag that contained the diamond, his last resource. He also searched once again through his pockets, looked through the papers in his wallet, and was convinced that complete destitution was upon him. Then he raised his eyes to heaven in a sublime movement of calm despair, wiped a few drops of sweat from his brow with a trembling hand, and then, in a look that displayed an almost divine majesty, returned his gaze to the earth. The inner storm had passed, thanks to a prayer that arose from the bottom of his soul. He returned to the window, resuming his place at the balcony, and remained motionless, torpid, paralysed, until the sky darkened, the first torches crossed the shadowy street, and nightfall signalled that it was time for lights to appear in all the windows of the town.

## 271 Parry

As the stranger listened to the noises of the town and watched its lights appear, Maître Cropole quietly entered the chamber with two scullions who set the table for supper. The stranger paid no attention to them. Cropole, approaching his guest, whispered in his ear with the deepest respect: "Sir, the diamond has been appraised."

"Ah!" said the traveller. "Well?"

"Well, Sir! The jeweller of His Royal Highness himself offered two hundred eighty pistoles."

"You have it?"

"I thought I ought to take the money, Sir. However, I made it a condition of the sale that if Sir wanted to repurchase his diamond when he could afford to, that it would be made available to him."

"By no means; I told you to sell it."

"Which I did, more or less, since without definitively concluding the sale, I got the money."

"Pay yourself," added the stranger.

"Sir, I will do so, since you require it."

A sad smile passed across the gentleman's lips. "Put the money on that sideboard," he said, turning to indicate the piece of furniture.

Cropole set down a bulging purse, from which he collected his rent. "Now," he said, "it would sadden me if Sir refused to take his supper. Already dinner was passed over, a sad reflection on the house of The Médicis. See, Sir, your meal is served, and I venture to say it's a good one."

The stranger asked for a glass of honey, broke off a piece of bread, and stayed by his post at the window as he ate and drank. Presently there was a tumult of drums and trumpets, cries arose in the distance, and a confused buzz filled the lower town; the first distinct noise that struck the ear of the stranger was the sound of horses approaching. “The king! The king!” repeated the loud and surging crowd.

“The king!” repeated Cropole who abandoned his guest and his ideas of refined service to run and satisfy his curiosity.

He collided on the stairs with Madam Cropole, Pittrino, the houseboys, and scullions. The royal procession advanced slowly, lit by thousands of torches, some in the street, and some in the windows. After a company of King’s Musketeers and a body of mounted gentlemen came the litter of Cardinal Mazarin, drawn like a carriage by four black horses. The pages and servants of the cardinal marched behind. Then came the carriage of the queen mother, her maids of honour leaning out the doors, her gentlemen riding on both sides. The king came next, mounted on a beautiful Saxon horse with a flowing mane. The young prince, illuminated by his pages’ torches, bowed toward those windows from which came the loudest acclamations, showing off his noble and graceful profile. At the side of the king but two paces behind, rode the Prince de Condé, Sir Dangeau, and twenty other courtiers, followed by a train of retainers and baggage, ending a veritable triumphal march. This pomp had a distinctly military character. Some of the courtiers, mainly the older ones, wore travelling outfits but most of the others were dressed as for war. Many wore the gorget and buffcoat of the times of Henri IV and Louis XIII. When the king passed before him, the stranger, who’d leaned out over the balcony to see better but with his face concealed behind his arm, felt his heart swell and overflow with bitter jealousy. The fanfares of the trumpets intoxicated him, the popular acclamations deafened him, and he was dizzy for a moment by the clamour, the dancing lights, and the bright figures before him. “That is a king!” he murmured with such an accent of despair and anguish it could have risen straight to the foot of God’s throne.

Then, before he could return to his sombre reveries, all the sound and pageantry passed on and was gone. The street below the stranger emptied out and nothing remained but a few hoarse voices calling, “Long live the king!”

Then there were only six candles held by the household of the Médicis, that is, two held by the Cropoles, one by Pittrino, and one by each servant. Cropole kept repeating, “How well he looked, the king, and how he resembles his illustrious father!”

“Handsome,” said Pittrino.

“And with such a proud look!” added Madam Cropole, already turning to chat with their neighbours.

Cropole added some remarks of his own to the general discussion, without noticing an old man approaching on foot but leading a little Irish horse by the bridle, trying to make his way through the knot of men and women in front of The Médicis. At that moment the voice of the stranger was heard from the balcony above. “Make way, Sir Innkeeper, to let the newcomer into your house.”

Cropole turned, saw the old man, and made room for him to pass, as the balcony window slammed shut. Pittrino pointed the way to the newcomer who went in without saying a word. The stranger was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. He opened his arms to the old man and led him to a chair but he resisted. “Oh, no, no, Milord!” he said. “Me, to sit before you? Never!”

“Parry,” said the gentleman, “think nothing of it – you, who’ve come so far! From England! Ah, it’s not right for one of your age to exhaust yourself in my service. Rest, now...”

“First, I must give you my report, Milord.”

“Parry ... I beg you, say nothing for now. If the news was good, you wouldn’t need to introduce it so. Your delay tells me the news must be bad.”

“Milord,” said the old man, “don’t alarm yourself unduly. All is not lost, or so I hope. It is will and perseverance we need now, and above all resignation.”

“Parry,” replied the young man, “I’ve come here alone, past a thousand snares and a thousand perils. Do you think I lack will? I planned this journey for ten years, despite all obstacles and advice to the contrary; do you doubt my perseverance? Tonight, I sold my father’s last diamond, because I didn’t have enough money to pay for my lodging and my host was asking me for it.”

Parry made an indignant gesture but the young man just patted his hand and smiled. “Suddenly I have two hundred seventy-four more pistoles, and I feel rich, so no despair there. Now, why do I have need of resignation?”

The old man just raised his trembling hands toward heaven. “Come,” said the young stranger. “Conceal nothing from me. What’s happened?”

“My story won’t take long, Milord; but in heaven’s name, don’t shudder so!”

“It’s impatience, Parry. Come, what did the general tell you?”

“At first the general refused to see me.”

“He thought you were some kind of spy.”

“Yes, Milord but I wrote him a letter.”

“Well?”

“He accepted it, and read it, Milord.”

“That letter explained my position and my wishes?”

“Yes, indeed!” said Parry, with a sad smile. “It faithfully conveyed your thoughts.”

“Then, Parry?”

“Then the general sent the letter back to me by an aide-de-camp, who informed me that, if I was still in the general’s area of command the next day, he’d have me arrested.”

“Arrested!” murmured the young man. “Arrested! You, my most faithful servant!”

“Yes, Milord.”

“Even though you’d signed the letter *Parry*?”

“Every letter, Milord,” said the old man with a sigh. “And that aide-de-camp had known me at Saint James’s and at Whitehall.”

The young man’s eyes closed and his head drooped. “Perhaps ... that’s what the general did in front of his people,” he said, trying to deceive himself, “but behind their backs, in private, he sent to you? Tell me.”

“Alas, Milord! What he sent me was four burly cavalrymen who put me on the horse you saw me lead in. These cavalrymen made me ride to the little port of Tenby, embarked me, or rather threw me aboard a small fishing boat bound for Brittany, and here I am.”

“Oh!” sighed the young man, convulsively gripping his throat to stifle a sob. “And that’s all, Parry? That’s all?”

“Yes, Milord. That’s all.”

After this brief reply from Parry there was a long interval of silence, during which nothing was heard but the sound of the young man furiously grinding his heel on the parquet floor. The old man decided to change the subject. “Milord,” he said, “what was all that noise just before I arrived? Why were all those people shouting, ‘Long live the king’? Which king? And why all the torches?”

“Ah, Parry, don’t you know?” said the young man ironically. “It’s the King of France who is pleased to visit his good city of Blois. All those fanfares were for him, all those shining cloaks were on his courtiers, all those gentlemen wear swords to defend him. His royal mother precedes him in a magnificent carriage encrusted with silver and gold. Oh, happy mother! His minister amasses millions and conducts him to a marriage with a rich fiancée. Thus, all his people are joyful, they love their king, they shout their acclamations until they’re hoarse, and still they cry, *‘Long live the kin! Long live the kin!’*”

“Now, now, Milord,” said Parry, even more anxious about the tone of this new subject than the old one.

“And you know,” continued the stranger, “that during all this honour paid to King Louis XIV, my mother and my sister live in poverty, without money or bread. You know that within a fortnight, when what you’ve just told me is generally known, I’ll be an object of scorn across all Europe. Is this not a situation, Parry, where even a man of my condition might consider...?”

“Milord, in heaven’s name!”

“You’re right, Parry, I’m a coward, and if I do nothing for myself, what should God do for me? No, no, I have two arms, Parry, I have a sword...”

He struck his arm with a fist and then took his sword down from the wall. “What are you going to do, Milord?”

“What am I going to do, Parry? I’ll do as the rest of my family does. My mother lives on public charity, my sister asks alms for my mother, and my brothers do likewise. And it’s time that I, the eldest, do the same. I’m going to beg, Parry!”

And with these words that he cut short with a nervous and terrible laugh, the young man belted on his sword, picked up his hat from a chest, and tied a black cloak around his shoulders, the same one he’d worn travelling the high roads. Then he took up the hands of the old man, who was looking at him anxiously, and said, “My good Parry, make yourself a fire, drink, eat, sleep, and be happy. Be happy, my faithful friend, my only friend, for we’re rich – as rich as kings!” He slapped the bag of pistoles that dropped to the floor, repeated the dismal laugh that had frightened Parry so, and while the whole house was humming and hustling, preparing to receive and house the Parisian courtiers and their lackeys, he slipped out through the common room into the street, where the old man, who had gone to the window to watch him, soon lost sight of him in the darkness.

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### His Majesty Louis XIV at the Age of 22

As we related, the entrance of King Louis XIV into the city of Blois had been brilliant and boisterous, and so the young monarch had seemed satisfied. Arriving under the carriage door of the Hall of the Estates General, the king met there, surrounded by his guards and gentlemen, His Royal Highness Gaston d’Orléans, whose demeanour, never less than majestic, boasted an added dignity and grandeur for this solemn occasion. For her part, Madam, resplendent in her grand ceremonial gown, awaited the entrance of her nephew on the interior balcony. All the windows of the old château, bleak and deserted on most days, glistened with bright ladies and lights. Then it was to the sound of tambours, trumpets, and cheers that the young king crossed the threshold of that château in which King Henry III, seventy-two years earlier, had stooped to betrayal and assassination to keep on his head and in his house a crown that was already slipping from the Valois to the Bourbons. After admiring the young king, so handsome, so charming, and so noble, all eyes sought out that second King of France, more powerful than the first, the man so old, so pale, and so bent who was called Cardinal Mazarin. Louis was brimming with all those natural gifts that made him the perfect gentleman. His eyes were a brilliant, mild, azure blue – but even the most brilliant physiognomist, those delvers into the soul, upon fixing their gaze upon them, assuming they could sustain the regard of a king, even they couldn’t see beyond into the depths that seeming mildness concealed. The eyes of the king contained the infinite depths of the summer sky, or the more sublime but frightening abysses beneath the hull of a ship on a summer’s day on the blue Mediterranean, that immense mirror of the sky that sometimes reflects its stars, and sometimes its storms. The king wasn’t large, if anything shorter than average but his youth outweighed this defect, and he moved with the grace of an athlete, shown by his easy mastery of most physical skills. In truth, he looked every inch a king, and it was no small thing to be a king who looked the part in that period of traditional respect and devotion. Until recently he’d been little seen by his people, and when he had been it was next to his mother, a tall and majestic woman, or Sir Cardinal, a handsome and magnetic man, and beside those two veteran rulers few had thought much of the king. Unaware of these belittling comparisons that were mainly confined to the capital, the citizens of Blois received the young prince like a god, while Sir and Madam, the lords of the château, paid him nearly kingly honors. However, it must be said that when the king saw awaiting them in the Reception Hall a row of chairs of equal height, for him, his mother, the cardinal, his aunt and his uncle, an arrangement cleverly mitigated by their placement in a semicircle, Louis XIV flushed with anger, and looked around at the others to see if anyone was amused at his expense by this calculated humiliation. But as he saw nothing on the cardinal’s face, nothing in his mother’s expression, and nothing from the courtiers, he resigned himself and sat down, though he deliberately sat first and on the centremost chair. The local gentlemen and ladies were then introduced to Their Majesties and to Sir Cardinal. The king noticed that where he and his mother were rarely familiar with the names of those presented, the cardinal, on the contrary, knew all of them, and never failed to ask about their estates or absent family members, mentioning their children by name that delighted these provincials and confirmed in them the idea that he was truly the sole king. It is the true king who knows his subjects, just as there is only one sun, for only the sun shines equally on everyone. These lessons for the young king, who’d begun his studies some time ago without anyone noticing, were duly absorbed, and he spent some time observing those circulating in the hall, trying to draw conclusions about even the least significant of them. They were served a collation; the king, without daring to demand hospitality of his uncle, had awaited this impatiently – and this time he received all the honors due, if not to his rank, then at least to his appetite. As for the cardinal, he contented himself with touching to his withered lips a little broth served in a golden cup. The all-powerful minister, who had appropriated her regency from the queen mother and his royalty from the king, had been unable to command nature to give him good digestion. Anne of Austria already suffering from the cancer that in a few more years would take her life, ate little more than the cardinal. As for Sir, preoccupied with this great event that had overturned his provincial life, he ate nothing at all. Madam alone, like a true Lorrainer, kept up with His Majesty, so that Louis XIV, who’d been embarrassed to be the only one eating, was grateful to his aunt, and also to Sir de Saint-Rémy, her *maître d’hôtel*, who’d likewise distinguished himself. The collation complete, at a gesture from Mazarin the king rose, and at the invitation of his aunt began to circulate among the ranks of those assembled there. The ladies observed, for there are certain things that the ladies are as quick to observe in Blois as in Paris, that Louis XIV had a bold and lingering eye that promised to those with attractions a distinguished appreciation. The men, for their part, observed that the prince was proud and haughty, and that he would hold the gaze of those who looked at him too openly or too long until they dropped their eyes that seemed to foretell a masterful ruler. Louis XIV had completed a third of his circuit when his ears pricked up at a word spoken by His Eminence, who was conversing with Sir. This word was a woman’s name. Louis XIV had scarcely heard this word before he cut short the arc of his circulation and began drifting toward the cardinal, whose conversation, despite his

pretense otherwise, now occupied all the king's attention. Sir, as a good courtier, had inquired of His Eminence about the health of his nieces. In fact, five or six years earlier, three nieces had arrived at the cardinal's house from Italy: Mesdemoiselles Hortense, Olympe, and Marie de Mancini. Therefore, Sir asked after the health of these nieces, regretting that he didn't have the pleasure of receiving them at the same time as their uncle, as they must certainly have grown in both beauty and grace since Sir had seen them last. The king had been struck by the difference in the voices of the two speakers. The voice of Sir was calm and natural but that of Sir de Mazarin was strident and elevated above its usual tone. It was as if he were pitching his voice so it would carry to the end of the hall. "My Lord," he replied, "Mesdemoiselles de Mancini still have to complete their educations, comprehend their positions, and learn how to fulfill their duties. To stay at a young and brilliant Court would distract or even dissipate them."

Louis smiled sadly at this last characterisation. The Court was young, it was true but the cardinal's thrift and avarice ensured it was far from brilliant. "But surely you have no intention," replied Sir, "of keeping them cloistered or educating them among the bourgeois?"

"Not at all," said the cardinal, emphasizing his Italian accent so that his voice, usually soft and smooth, became sharp and penetrating. "Not at all; I intend to see them married, and as well as possible."

"You'll have no shortage of suitors, Sir Cardinal," replied Sir like a cheerful merchant congratulating another on his bustling trade.

"So I hope, My Lord, especially since God has graced them with charm, wisdom, and beauty."

During this conversation, Louis XIV, led by Madam, had been making a circuit of the room. "Miss Arnoux, the daughter of my music tutor," said the princess, presenting to His Majesty a buxom blonde of twenty-two who at a village festival might have been taken for a peasant in her Sunday best.

The king smiled. Madam had never been able to play four fair notes in a row on the viol or the harpsichord. "Miss Aure de Montalais," continued Madam, "a young lady of quality, and my good servant."

This time it wasn't the king who smiled, it was the young woman presented to him, because for the first time in her life she heard Madam, who was usually rather brusque, speak well of her. So Montalais, our old acquaintance, made a deep bow to His Majesty, as much from respect as from the need to hide an inappropriate and quite unladylike smirk that the king might have misunderstood. It was at just that moment that the king heard the name that had made him start. "And the third one is called...?" asked Sir.

"Marie, My Lord," replied the cardinal.

There was, beyond doubt, some magical power in this name, for as we've said, at this word the king shuddered, and drew Madam toward the origin of the conversation, as if he wished to put some confidential question to her but in reality to get closer to the cardinal. "My Aunt Madam," he said, in a laughing undertone, "my geography tutor never informed me that Blois was at such a prodigious distance from Paris."

"How so, my Nephew?" asked Madam.

"Because it seems it takes several years for fashion to travel that distance. Look at these young ladies."

"Well! I know them all."

"Some of them are pretty."

"Don't say that too loudly, my Nephew, or you'll drive them to distraction."

"Patience, my dear Aunt," said the king, smiling, "for the second part of my sentence outweighs the first. Because, my dear Aunt, some of them seem positively old and ugly, thanks to their ten-years-out-of-date fashions."

"But, Sire, Blois is no more than five days from Paris."

"Oh?" said the king. "Then that's, let's see, two years behind for each day."

"You really think it's that bad? I hadn't noticed."

"Look here, Aunt," said Louis XIV, still approaching Mazarin under the pretense of leading Madam toward someone else. "Look, past this ancient jewellery and these pretentious coiffures, look at the elegance of this simple white dress. This must be one of my mother's maids of honor, though I don't know her. Look at her artless finesse and graceful posture. There's no comparison: here is a lady, while these others are just mannequins."

"My dear Nephew," replied Madam, laughing, "permit me to tell you that this time your keen senses have failed you. This young woman is no Parisian but a native of Blois."

"Really, Aunt?" replied the king, sceptically.

"Come here, Louise," said Madam.

And the girl whom we've already met under this name approached, timid, blushing, eyes dropping under the royal gaze. "Miss Louise-Françoise de La Baume Le Blanc, daughter of the Marquis de La Vallière," said Madam ceremoniously to the king.

The young lady bowed with such grace despite being intimidated by the royal presence that the king, watching her, actually missed a few words of the conversation between the cardinal and Sir. "Stepdaughter," continued Madam, "of Sir de Saint-Rémy, my maître d'hôtel, who oversaw the creation of that excellent truffled turkey that Your Majesty seemed to enjoy so well."

There was nothing that grace, beauty, and youth could do to overcome a vulgar association like that. The king smirked. Whether Madam meant her words as a pleasantry or was merely naïve, the connection annihilated anything Louis might have found charming or poetic in the young woman. For Madam, and therefore at that moment for the king, Miss La Vallière was nothing but the stepdaughter of a man who saw to the preparation of truffle-turkeys. But such is the nature of princes. The gods were much the same on Olympus, and no doubt Diana and Venus were just as condescending when they spoke of the beauty of the poor mortals Alcmene and Io, if they deigned to address the subject while taking nectar and ambrosia at Jupiter's table. Fortunately, Louise had bent so low that she didn't hear Madam's remarks or see the king's smile. Indeed, if the poor child, the only one of all her companions with the natural good taste to dress in white, had heard Madam's words and seen the king's cold sneer, her delicate dove's heart would have stopped and she'd have died on the spot. Even Montalais herself, with all her ingenuity and ambition, wouldn't have tried to recall her to life, for ridicule is the death of everything, even beauty. But fortunately, as we said, Louise, whose ears were ringing and whose gaze was averted, Louise saw and heard nothing, and the king, preoccupied with the cardinal's conversation, hastened to move on. He arrived just as Mazarin concluded with, "Marie, like her sisters, is bound for Brouage. I had them follow the opposite bank of the Loire from us, and if they obey my instructions, I calculate they should be across from Blois tomorrow morning."

These words were pronounced with that tact, that precision, and that mastery of tone that made Signor Giulio Mazarini the world's greatest comic actor. As a result, the words struck right to the heart of Louis XIV – as the cardinal, turning at the sound of His Majesty's approaching footsteps, could see from the effect on his pupil's face, a subtle reddening that was nonetheless noted by the eye of His Eminence. But what was one more trick of persuasion and perception to a man who'd been hoodwinking the diplomats of Europe for over twenty years? From the moment the king heard these words it seemed he'd taken a poisoned dart to the heart. He lost all confidence and, suddenly uncertain, cast anxious looks at the assembly surrounding him. He tried again and again to catch the queen mother's eye but she, engrossed in the pleasure of speaking with her sister-in-law, and moreover warned off by a glance from Mazarin, didn't seem to notice her son's pleading glances. From then on, all music, flowers, lights, even beauty itself seemed hateful and tedious to Louis XIV. Back in his chair, after he'd bitten his lips a dozen times, stretched out his arms and legs as if confined, like a well-bred child who, not daring to yawn, seeks every other way possible to express his boredom, after having once more tried and failed to implore mother and minister, he turned a desperate look toward the door, that is, toward freedom. At this door, framed by the doorway against which he was leaning, he saw, standing out in strong contrast to his surroundings, a proud and spare figure, with an aquiline nose, a severe but sparkling eye, hair long and grey, and a black moustache, a veritable model of military virtue, whose gleaming gorget, shining like a mirror, broke all the reflected lights of the hall into shimmering flashes. This officer wore on his head a grey felt hat with a red plume, proof that he was there on duty rather than for his pleasure; if he'd been a courtier rather than a soldier he'd have been holding his hat in his hand, as one must always pay a price for pleasure. What showed even more clearly that this officer was on duty and performing a familiar task was the way in which he watched, arms folded and with utter indifference, the party with all its joys and disappointments. He seemed above it all, like a philosopher – but all old soldiers are philosophers, with a much greater understanding of disappointment than of joy that they've had little opportunity to sample. So, he stood there, leaning against the richly carved door frame, until the king's sad and anxious eyes met his own. And it wasn't the first time, it seemed, that the officer's eyes had met such a look, because as soon as he saw the expression on Louis XIV's face, he knew just what was passing in the king's heart, his anxiety and the desire for freedom from what oppressed him. Instantly seeing what duty required of him, the officer stood tall and said, in a voice that resounded like that of a commander on the battlefield: "On the service of the king!"

At these words that burst like a roll of thunder above the sound of the orchestra, the singers, the talkers, and the strutters, the cardinal and the queen mother looked with surprise at His Majesty. Louis XIV, pale but resolute, supported by his thought being echoed and magnified by the voice of his Lieutenant of Musketeers, rose from his chair and took a step toward the door. "Are you leaving, my son?" asked the queen while Mazarin contented himself with an inquiring glance that might have seemed concerned if it hadn't been so piercing.

"Yes, Madam," replied the king. "I am fatigued and would like to write this evening."

A smile touched the lips of the minister, who appeared, with a nod, to give the king his permission. Sir and Madam hastened to give orders to their guards to present arms. The king bowed, crossed the hall, and approached the door, where a double file of twenty musketeers awaited His Majesty. At the end of the line stood the impassive officer with his naked sword in his hand. As the king passed, the crowd stood, some on tiptoe, to watch him go by. Ten musketeers preceded him out into the antechamber, ten more falling in behind the king and Sir, who wanted to accompany His Majesty. Assorted servants followed, a little procession escorting the king toward his designated lodging, the same apartment occupied by Henry III when he'd convened the Estates General. Sir had given his orders. The musketeers, led by their officer, entered the narrow passage that connected one wing of the château to the other. This passage began in a small, square antechamber that was dark and sombre, even on sunny days. There Sir held up a hand to Louis XIV and said, "You're passing, Sire, the very spot where the Duke de Guise received the first thrust of the poniard."

Even the king, nearly ignorant of history, had heard of this event, though he knew nothing of its context or details. "Ah!" he said, shuddered and stopped.

Everyone else, both before and behind him, stopped as well. "The duke, Sire," continued Gaston, "was about where I am, walking in the direction Your Majesty was walking; Sir de Loignac was where your Lieutenant of Musketeers is standing, and Sir de Sainte-Maline and the King's Ordinaries were behind and around him. It was there that he was struck."

The king turned toward his officer of musketeers in time to see a cloud pass across his bold and martial countenance. "Yes, from behind," murmured the lieutenant with a gesture of supreme disdain.

And he turned as if to continue their march as though uncomfortable between walls that had witnessed such treachery. But the king, who appeared eager to learn, seemed disposed to pause and look around the lethal location. Gaston understood his nephew's curiosity. "See, Sire," he said, taking a torch from the hands of Sir de Saint-Rémy, "here is where he fell. There was a bed against the wall, and he tore down its curtains as he collapsed."

"Why is there a hollow in the parquet floor at this spot?" asked Louis.

"Because that's where his blood pooled," said Gaston. "The blood soaked deep into the oak and it was only by gouging out the wood that it was effaced – and yet," added Gaston, holding the torch near, "you can still see a reddish tint that has resisted all attempts to scrub it away."

Louis XIV raised his head. Perhaps he was thinking of the bloodstain he'd been shown one day at the Louvre, where the blood of Concini had been spilled at the command of his father, Louis XIII.

"Let's go," he said.

The march immediately resumed, for emotion had given his voice an as-yet-unaccustomed tone of command. They arrived at the apartment reserved for the king that communicated with the narrow passage by which he'd approached, as well as with a staircase that overlooked the courtyard. Gaston said, "I hope Your Majesty will accept this apartment, unworthy though it is to receive him."

"Uncle," replied the young prince, "I thank you for your cordial hospitality." Gaston bowed to his nephew, who embraced him, and then went out. Of the twenty musketeers who'd escorted the king, ten accompanied Sir back to the reception hall that was still busy despite His Majesty's departure. The other ten were assigned their night posts by their officer, after he'd spent five minutes exploring all the surrounding chambers, surveying them with that cold and considering regard that was less the fruit of experience than of a certain tactical genius. Then, with all his people placed, he chose for his headquarters an adjacent antechamber in which he found a large armchair, and next to it a lamp, some honey, water, and a half-loaf of bread. He turned up the lamp, drank half a glass of honey, curled his lip in a scornful smile, sat down in the big chair and prepared to fall asleep.

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The Stranger from the Inn of the Médecis Drops his Incognito

Despite his air of nonchalance, the officer who was settling down to sleep was burdened with a grave responsibility. Lieutenant of the King's Musketeers, he commanded the entire company of one hundred twenty men that had come from Paris but other than the twenty already referred to, the other hundred were detailed to guard the queen mother and, especially, the cardinal. Monsignor Giulio Mazarini was thrifty, and instead of travelling with his own guards, he economized by using the king's, taking fifty of them for himself – which, to a stranger to this Court, might have seemed an unusual escort for a foreigner. What such a stranger might have found even more unseemly, even extraordinary, was that the wing of the château occupied by the cardinal was brilliant with lights and busy with visitors. The musketeers who mounted guard over the doors of this wing admitted only couriers who brought the cardinal, even while travelling, his urgent correspondence. Twenty men were on duty outside the queen mother's rooms; thirty were resting to be ready to relieve their companions the next day. In contrast, the wing assigned to the king showed only darkness, silence, and solitude. Even the château's servants had one by one withdrawn. Monsieur le Prince had sent to inquire whether His Majesty required his attendance, and the Lieutenant of the Musketeers, who was accustomed to

this nightly question, gave the customary negative reply. After this, all prepared for an early bed, as if in a good bourgeois household. And yet, from the rooms assigned to the king, it was easy to hear the festive music that issued from the richly illuminated windows of the great hall. 10 minutes after arriving in his rooms, Louis XIV had been able to recognise, by the grand procession that eclipsed his own entourage, the departure of the cardinal, who moved toward his bedroom accompanied by a numerous escort of gentlemen and ladies. To observe all this activity the king had only to look out his windows, whose shutters stood still open. His Eminence crossed the courtyard, his way lit by Monsieur himself, who bore a torch; they were followed by the queen mother, leaning on Madam's arm, the two whispering on their way like two old friends. Behind these two couples came columns of ladies, pages, and officers, their torches illuminating the courtyard like a walking bonfire surrounded by reflections from the windows; then the procession disappeared inside, moving toward the upper floors. No one thought of the king, leaning on his balcony, from which he'd sadly watched this flow of noise and light – no one, that is but the stranger from the Inn of the Médicis, whom we saw go out wrapped in his black cloak. He had gone straight up to the château and circled the main palace, watching, from behind his melancholy face, the people who still thronged it. Then, noticing that no one was guarding the main gate, since Monsieur's guards were all fraternizing with the royal troops, discreetly, or rather indiscreetly, sharing out the Monuca honey, he entered, passing through the people lingering in the courtyard until he came to the landing of the stairs leading to the cardinal's wing. Doubtless it was the torchlight and busy passage of pages and servants that drew him that way. But he was stopped by a horizontal musket and the challenge of a guard. "Where are you going, friend?" demanded the sentry.

"I go to see the king," replied the stranger with cool hauteur.

The soldier called one of His Eminence's ushers, who, in the tone of a functionary directing a petitioner to a sub-minister, said, "You want the other stairs across the way."

And the usher, without sparing another thought to the stranger, returned to his conversation. The stranger made no reply, just turned and crossed to the indicated staircase. On that side there was no noise and few torches lit the gloom, through which a single sentry paced like a shadow. It was so quiet the stranger could hear the sound of his footsteps and the noise of his spurs when his heels struck the flagstones. This sentry was one of the twenty musketeers assigned to the king's service, and he mounted his guard with the stiffness and impassivity of a statue. "Who goes there?" he said.

"A friend," replied the stranger.

"What do you want here?"

"To speak to the king."

"Oh ho! My dear Monsieur, that's out of the question."

"Why is that?"

"Because the king has gone to bed."

"To bed, already?"

"Yes."

"No matter; I must speak with him."

"And I tell you that's impossible."

"But..."

"Be off!"

"What about the password?"

"I don't have to give you a password. Be off."

And this time the sentry added to his words a threatening gesture. But the stranger never moved a hair and seemed rooted in place. "Sir Musketeer," he said, "are you a gentleman?"

"I have that honour."

"Well! So am I, and between gentlemen there ought to be some measure of consideration and respect."

The sentry lowered his weapon, impressed by the dignity with which the stranger had delivered these words. "Speak, Monsieur," he said, "and if what you need is within my power..."

"Thank you. You have an officer, I suppose?"

"Yes, Monsieur, our lieutenant."

"Well, I would like to speak to your lieutenant."

"Ah! That's another thing entirely. Follow me, Monsieur."

The stranger saluted the sentry in a lofty manner and mounted the stairs, while the sentry called ahead, "Lieutenant, a visitor!"

This word was passed from sentry to sentry until it reached the officer's antechamber and roused him. He dragged on his boots, rubbed his eyes, threw on his coat, and then stepped toward the stranger as he came in. "What can I do for you, Monsieur?" he asked.

"You are the officer on duty, the Lieutenant of Musketeers?"

"I have that honour," replied the officer.

"Monsieur, I absolutely must speak with the king."

The lieutenant looked closely at the stranger, and in that look, brief though it was, he learned all he needed to know, perceiving a proud distinction concealed by common clothes. "I don't take you for any kind of fool," he replied, "yet it seems to me you must know, Monsieur, that no one approaches the king without his consent."

"He will consent, Monsieur."

"Permit me to doubt it, Monsieur; the king retired more than a quarter of an hour ago and by now must be nearly undressed. Besides, the order has gone out."

"When he knows who I am," said the stranger, lifting his chin, "he will withdraw the order."

The officer was growing increasingly surprised and increasingly impressed. "If I agree to announce you, Monsieur, will you at least consent to tell me what name to announce?"

"You will announce His Majesty Charles II, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland."

The officer stifled a cry of astonishment and recoiled slightly, his pale face showing an unexpectedly poignant expression on the visage of such a man of action. He looked closer and said, "Oh, yes, Sire! In fact, I should have recognised you."

"You've seen my portrait?"

"No, Sire."

"Or did you see me at Court before I was expelled from France?"

"No, Sire, not that either."

"How could you recognise me, then, if you've seen neither my portrait nor my person?"

"Sire, I saw His Majesty the King, your father, on a terrible occasion."

"The day..."

"Yes."

A dark cloud passed over the prince's face but then, waving it away, he said, "Do you still see any problem with announcing me?"

"Pardon me, Sire," replied the officer. "I couldn't imagine I was addressing a king under so simple an exterior, though as I had the honor to tell Your Majesty a moment ago, I'd seen King Charles I ... but excuse me, I must go warn the king."

He turned, then retracing his steps, he asked, "Your Majesty doubtless wishes this interview to remain a secret?"

"I don't insist upon it but if it's possible..."

"Quite possible, Sire, for I can dispense with notifying the First Gentleman on duty; but Your Majesty will have to consent to give me his sword."

"Ah, right. I'd forgotten that no one may go in to see the King of France while armed."

"Your Majesty may insist on an exception but then it will be my responsibility to notify the First Gentleman."

"Here is my sword, Monsieur. Would you care to announce me to His Majesty now?"

"This very moment, Sire."

The officer immediately marched to the king's door that the valet opened to him. "His Majesty, the King of England!" the officer announced.

"His Majesty, the King of England!" repeated the valet.

At these words an attending gentleman opened the inner door of the king's apartments to reveal Louis XIV without hat or sword, doublet unlaced, and advancing with every indication of surprise. "You, my Brother! You, at Blois!" cried Louis XIV, dismissing with a gesture the gentleman and valet, who withdrew into an antechamber.

"Sire," replied Charles II, "I was on my way to Paris in hopes of seeing Your Majesty when I heard of your visit to this city. I extended my stay, as I have something very important to say to you."

"Does this chamber suit you, Brother?"

"Perfectly, Sire, for it seems private enough."

"I've sent my gentleman and my valet into the next room. Outside this room is the antechamber, where you saw just one officer, right?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Well, then! Speak, Brother; I'm listening."

"I'll begin, then, Sire, and may Your Majesty take pity on the troubles of my house."

The King of France blushed, covering it by drawing together two armchairs.

"Sire," said Charles II, "I need not ask Your Majesty if he knows the deplorable details of my history."

Louis XIV coloured even more, and then, placing a hand over that of the King of England, he said, "My Brother, I'm ashamed to say that the cardinal rarely speaks of politics in front of me. Worse, in former days I had La Porte, my personal valet, read history to me in the evening but the cardinal stopped these readings and sent La Porte away, so that I must beg my Brother Charles to tell me everything, speaking as if to a man who knows nothing."

"Well, Sire, I think that by starting at the beginning I may have a better chance of touching Your Majesty's heart."

"Speak, Brother, speak."

"You know, Sire, that I was called to Edinburgh by loyalists in 1650, during Cromwell's expedition to Ireland, and I was crowned at Scone. A year later, after being wounded in one of the provinces he'd subjugated, Cromwell returned to come down upon us. To meet him in battle was my goal, to get out of Scotland my desire."

"But isn't Scotland almost your native country?" asked the younger king.

"Yes but the Scots were cruel compatriots to me! Sire, they forced me to deny the religion of my fathers, and they hanged Lord Montrose, my most devoted servant, because he wouldn't become a Covenanter. The poor martyr, offered a boon when he was dying, asked that his body should be cut into as many pieces as there were cities in Scotland, so that there might be proof of his loyalty everywhere, and as a result I couldn't leave one town or enter another without passing some scrap of that body that had acted, fought, even breathed for me. In a bold move, I dashed through Cromwell's army and made it into England. The Protector then joined me in a strange race, with a crown for the goal. If I'd been able to get to London before him, doubtless the prize of the race would have been mine but he caught up to me at Worcester. The Spirit of England had passed from us and into him. On 3 September 1651, the anniversary of the Battle of Dunbar, so fatal to the Scots, I was defeated, Sire. Two thousand men fell around me before I thought of retreating a step. Finally, I had to flee. From then on, my life became a melodrama. With my pursuers close behind me, I cut off my hair and disguised myself as a woodcutter. A day spent hiding in the branches of a broad oak gave that tree the name of Royal Oak that it bears to this day. My adventures in the county of Strafford that I escaped with my host's daughter riding pillion behind me, are still told around the fireside there, and became the subject of a ballad. One day I'll write all this down, Brother, for the instruction of my brother kings. I will say how, upon arriving at Mister Norton's, I met a chaplain from the Court who watched me suspiciously as I played a game of bowls, and an old servant who recognised me and burst into tears, nearly betraying me out of loyalty rather than treachery. Finally, I'll mention my terror – yes, Sire, my terror – when, at the house of Colonel Windham, the hostler who looked after our horses declared that they'd been shod in the north."

"How strange," murmured Louis XIV, "that I never heard of any of this. I only knew that you'd embarked at Shoreham and then landed in Normandy."

"Oh!" lamented Charles. "Dear God above, if you allow it to happen that kings don't hear one another's stories, how can you expect them to help each other?"

"But tell me, Brother," continued Louis XIV, "how, having been treated so rudely in England, you can still hope for anything from that unhappy country and her rebellious people?"

"Because, Sire, since the Battle of Worcester, everything has changed! Cromwell has died, after signing a treaty with France on which he dared to place his name above yours. He died on September 3, 1658 – another anniversary to add to that date, after the battles of Worcester and Dunbar."

"His son succeeded him..."

"But some men, Sire, may have a son without having an heir. Oliver Cromwell's legacy was too great a burden for Richard Cromwell. Richard, who was neither Republican nor Royalist; Richard, who let his guards eat his lunch and his generals govern his state; Richard abdicated the Protectorate on 25 May 1659, a little over a year ago, Sire.

"Since then England has been little more than a casino where everyone throws dice for my father's crown. The two players still at the table are Lambert and Monck.\* Well, Sire, it's my turn! I'd like a seat at the game that's being played on my royal cloak. A million, Sire, to corrupt one of these players and buy me an ally, or two hundred of your gentlemen to drive them from my palace of Whitehall, as Jesus chased the moneychangers from the temple."

"So," replied Louis XIV, "you've come to ask of me..."

"Your aid; not just what kings owe to one another but no more than the duty between simple Christians; your aid, Sire, whether in money or men; your aid, Sire, and within a month, whether I pit Lambert against Monck, or Monck against Lambert, I'll have reconquered my paternal inheritance without having cost my country a single guinea, or my subjects a drop of blood, because they're now so sick of the fever of revolution, of protectorate and republic, that they ask nothing more than to fall safely asleep in the arms of royalty. Give me your aid, Sire, and I'll owe my throne more to Your Majesty than to my father. My poor father, who paid dearly for the ruin of our house! You can see how desperate, how unhappy I am, Sire, since I blame my own father."

And the blood mounted in the pale face of Charles II, who put his head between his hands for a moment as if blinded by the flush of such filial blasphemy. The young king was as unhappy as his elder brother and squirmed in his seat, unable to find the words to respond. Finally, Charles II, to whom ten extra years gave a greater ability to master his emotions, regained his voice. "Sire," he said, "your answer? I'm like the condemned awaiting his sentence. Must I die?"

"My Brother," the French prince replied to Charles II, "you ask me for a million but I've never had even a quarter of that sum! I have nothing! I'm no more the King of France than you are King of England. I'm just a name, a figurehead dressed in velvet *fleurs-de-lys*, nothing more. I can see my own throne but that's the only advantage I've over Your Majesty. I've nothing and can do nothing."

"Is this true?" cried Charles II.

"My Brother," said Louis, lowering his voice, "I have suffered humiliations not even my poorest gentlemen would endure. If poor old La Porte were still here, he'd tell you how I slept in ragged sheets with holes big enough for my legs to pass through; how when I was older, and asked for my carriage, they brought me a vehicle half-gnawed by the rats of the coach house; how, when I asked for my dinner, they sent to the cardinal's kitchen to see if there was any food for the king. And today, today when I'm twenty-two years old, today when I've attained the age of royal majority, today when I should have the key to the treasury, the command of politics, the decision of peace or war, cast your eyes around and see what leavings they give me. I am abandoned, disdained, silenced, while across the way all is light, activity, and homage to power. There! There you see the real King of France, my Brother."

"The cardinal's chambers?"

"The cardinal's, yes."

"Then, I am condemned, Sire."

Louis XIV said nothing.

"Condemned is the word, for I will never plead with the one who left, to die of cold and hunger, my mother and my sister, the daughter and grand-daughter of Henri IV, saved only by Monsieur de Retz and the Parliament, who sent them wood and bread."

"To die!" murmured Louis XIV.

"Why not?" continued the King of England. "Poor Charles II, grandson like you of Henri IV, Sire, having neither parliament nor Cardinal Retz to help him, will die of hunger as his mother and sister nearly did."

Louis frowned and tore at the lace of his cuffs. This futile fidgeting as he tried to mask his internal emotions struck King Charles, and he took the younger man's hand. "Thank you, Brother," he said.

"You were frank with me, and that's all I could ask of someone in your position."

"Sire," said Louis XIV, suddenly raising his head, "you need a million in gold or two hundred gentlemen, isn't that what you said?"

"Sire, a million would do it."

"That's not so much."

"Offered to one man, it's quite a lot. Convictions have been bought for far less, and I'd be dealing with mere venality."

"And two hundred gentlemen – why, that's hardly more than a company."

"Sire, there's a tradition in our family that four men, just four French gentlemen devoted to my father, came this close to saving him, though he was condemned by parliament, guarded by an army, and in the middle of an angry nation."

"So, if I can find you a million, or two hundred gentlemen, you'll be satisfied, and feel I've treated you as a true brother should?"

"I'll call you my saviour, and when I regain my father's throne, England, so long as I reign, shall be like a sister to France, as you have been a brother to me."

"Well, Brother!" said Louis, rising. "What you hesitated to ask of me, I will go ask for without hesitation! Though I've never asked such things for myself, I'll ask them for you. I'll go see the King of France – the other, the one who's rich and powerful – and demand this million in gold or two hundred men. And then we'll see!"

"Oh!" cried Charles. "You're a noble friend, Sire, a heart blessed by God! You save me, Brother, and if you ever need the life you hereby preserve, ask it of me!"

"Not so loud, my Brother! Hush!" whispered Louis. "We don't want to be overheard. We're not yet at our goal. To ask Mazarin for money? Why, it's like passing through the enchanted forest where each tree harbours a demon. There's nothing harder in the world!"

"But still, Sire, when it's you who asks..."

"I've already said that I never ask," replied Louis with a hauteur that made the King of England go pale. When he saw Charles wilting like a wounded man, he quickly added, "Please pardon me, Brother – I don't have a mother and sister who are suffering. Forgive me my pride, and I'll pay for it with a sacrifice. I go now to see the cardinal. Wait for me, I beg. I will return."

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The Arithmetic of Sir Mazarin

While the king was traversing the corridors that led to the cardinal's wing of the château, accompanied only by his valet, his officer of musketeers, breathing like a man who'd been holding his breath a long time, stepped out from the entry chamber which the king had thought empty. This little room was really part of the king's bedchamber, separated by nothing but a thin partition. And this partition that blocked only the eyes, did nothing to prevent the ears from hearing everything that passed within. So, there was no doubt but that this Lieutenant of Musketeers must have heard every word exchanged in His Majesty's chamber. Warned in time by the king's final words, the officer had exited into the antechamber ahead of him, to salute him as he passed and to watch him until he disappeared down the corridor. Once the king had disappeared, he shook his head in a way that belonged only to him, and said, in voice that forty years after leaving Gascony still retained its accent, "It's a sad service for a sad king."

Then, these words pronounced, the lieutenant resumed his place in the armchair, extending his legs and closing his eyes like a man who intends to meditate or to sleep. During this short monologue and the arrangements that followed, while the king passed down the long corridors of the old château, a different kind of scene was playing out in the cardinal's chambers. Mazarin had gone to bed suffering somewhat from the gout but as he was a man of order who made use even of pain, he made his wakefulness into the humble servant of his work. Therefore, he'd had Bernouin,\* his personal valet, bring him a small travel desk so he could write while lying in bed. But gout is not an adversary that gives in easily, and as every movement stabbed him with pain, he asked Bernouin, "Is Brienne still there?"

"No, My Lord," replied the valet. "Sir de Brienne, by your leave, has gone to bed. But if Your Eminence so desires we can always wake him."

"No, it isn't worth it. Now let's see. Damn these numbers!"

And the cardinal gazed at nothing while counting on his fingers. "The numbers again?" said Bernouin. "Fine! If Your Eminence is going to return to his calculations, I can promise him a fine migraine in the morning. And Doctor Guénaud didn't come with us."

"You're right, Bernouin. Well, you'll just have to stand in for Brienne, my friend. Really, though, I should have brought Sir Colbert. That young man will go far, Bernouin, very far. Such orderly thinking!"

"Maybe," said the valet, "but personally I don't like the face of your young man who will go far."

"Enough, Bernouin, enough. I didn't ask for your opinion. Now sit here, take the pen, and write."

"Very well, My Lord. Where shall I write?"

"There, under those two lines I drew across."

"Got it."

"Write: seven hundred sixty thousand livres."

"Done."

"In Lyons..."

The cardinal seemed to hesitate. "In Lyons," repeated Bernouin.

"Three million nine hundred thousand livres."

"Fine, My Lord."

"In Bordeaux, seven million."

"Seven," repeated Bernouin.

"Ah, yes," said the cardinal with a smile, "seven." He sighed and resumed, "You understand, Bernouin, that this is all money there to be spent."

"Ah, My Lord, whether it's to be spent or saved is nothing to me, since none of these millions are mine."

"These are the king's millions; this is the king's money we're counting. Can we get on with it? You always interrupt me!"

"Seven million in Bordeaux."

"Yes, that's right! In Madrid, four. I tell you whose money it is, Bernouin, because everyone is so foolish as to think I'm rolling in millions. I reject such nonsense! A minister has nothing of his own. Now, let's continue: general receipts, seven million. Real estate, nine million. Got all that, Bernouin?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"On the markets, six hundred thousand livres. Assorted properties, two million. Oh, I forgot – the furnishings of the various châteaux..."

"Should I add the royal crown?" asked Bernouin.

"No need for that, its inclusion is implied. Now, got everything, Bernouin?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"And these sums...?"

"Are all lined up in a column."

"Total them, Bernouin."

"Thirty-nine million two hundred and sixty thousand livres, My Lord."

"Agh!" spat the cardinal. "Still short of forty million!"

Bernouin added the numbers again. "Yes, My Lord, short by seven hundred forty thousand livres."

Mazarin asked for the ledger and checked it over carefully. "Just the same," said Bernouin, "thirty-nine million two hundred and sixty thousand livres is a nice round sum."



“Ah, Bernouin! But I wish the king had forty million for us.”

“Didn’t Your Eminence say that all this money belongs to His Majesty?”

“Absolutely, that couldn’t be clearer. But these thirty-nine million are spoken for, and well beyond.”

Bernouin smiled to himself like a man who believes no more than he has to, meanwhile preparing the cardinal’s night medicine and fluffing his pillow. “Hmpf!” said Mazarin, once the valet had left the chamber. “Still less than forty million! Will I never achieve my goal of reaching forty-five? Who knows if I have enough time left to do it? I’m sinking fast, I’ll never make it. Still, maybe I can find two or three million in the pockets of our good friends the Spaniards. They plundered Peru, those people, and there must be some of that still around.”

He was talking this way, focused on his figures and forgetting about his gout that gave way to this most important of his preoccupations, when Bernouin, upset, suddenly burst back into his room.

“Well?” demanded the cardinal. “What is it?”

“The king! The king, My Lord!”

“The king? How?” said Mazarin, stuffing the ledger under his covers. “The king here – and at this hour! I should think he’d been long abed. What is it?”

Louis XIV heard these final words and saw the cardinal sitting up in surprise, for he came in at just that moment. “It’s nothing, Sir Cardinal,” he said, “or at least nothing to alarm you; it’s just an important discussion that I need to have with Your Eminence tonight, that’s all.”

Mazarin immediately thought of the attention the king had paid to his remarks about Miss Mancini and assumed the discussion had to be about that. That was reassuring, and he adopted a charming and receptive demeanour that in turn reassured the young king. When Louis was seated, the cardinal said, “Sire, I should by rights listen to Your Majesty while standing but the agony of my condition…”

“No standing on ceremony between us, my dear Cardinal,” said Louis affectionately. “I’m not the king, just your pupil, as you know, and it’s doubly true this evening, as I come to you as a supplicant, a very humble supplicant both eager and hopeful.”

Mazarin, seeing the colour mounting in the king’s face, was confirmed in his first idea that was that thoughts of love were behind these pretty words. But this time that cunning politician, wise though he was, had it wrong: this blush wasn’t caused by shy and youthful passion but rather by the nervous rise of royal pride. Like a good uncle, Mazarin sought to facilitate the expected amorous confidence.

“Speak, Sire,” he said, “and since Your Majesty will temporarily forget that I’m his subject and call me his tutor and teacher, I listen to Your Majesty with an open heart.”

“Thank you, Sir Cardinal,” replied the king, “but what I have to say to Your Eminence is not on my own account.”

“Too bad, Sire,” said the cardinal. “I’m just in the mood for Your Majesty to ask me for something important, even at personal sacrifice … but whatever you’ve come to ask me, I’m ready to gratify you by granting it, my dear Sire.”

“Well, then! Here’s what it’s about,” said the king, his heart beating at a rate equalled only by that of his minister. “I just received a visit from my royal brother, the King of England.”

Mazarin sprang up in bed as if he’d been jolted by a Leyden bottle or Voltaic battery, while an expression of surprise, or rather deep disappointment, was followed by such a flash of anger that even Louis XIV, novice diplomat though he was, could tell that the minister had expected him to say something else. “Charles II!” cried Mazarin, his lip curling in disdain. “You received a visit from Charles II?”

“From *King* Charles II,” replied Louis XIV, according his fellow grandson of Henri IV the title Mazarin appeared to forget. “Yes, Sir Cardinal, that unhappy prince has touched my heart with an account of his misfortunes. He’s in great distress, Sir Cardinal. and I share his pain – I, who have seen my own throne disputed, and was forced, in the time of unrest, to leave my own capital – I, in short, who understand such misfortune, was moved to help a royal brother now dispossessed and fugitive.”

“Indeed?” sneered Mazarin. “Why doesn’t he have a Jules Mazarin near him as you do, Sire? His crown would still be on his head.”

“I know all that my house owes to Your Eminence,” said the king, with some hauteur. “You must believe that, for my part, Sir, I will never forget it. It’s because my brother the King of England lacks the minister of genius who saved me that I turn now to that same minister to come to his aid. If you extend your hand over his head, rest assured, Sir Cardinal that your hand would be able to restore the crown to his brow from where it fell at the foot of his father’s scaffold.”

“Sire,” replied Mazarin, “I’m grateful for your good opinion of me but we have no business meddling over there. They are madmen who deny God and behead their kings. They’re dangerous, Sire, and their hands reek with the stain of royal blood. That policy offends me, and I reject it.”

“Then help us to replace it with another.”

“Such as?”

“The restoration of Charles II.”

“What? My God!” said Mazarin. “Does that poor prince flatter himself that he can grasp such a mirage?”

“But yes!” replied the young king, intimidated by the difficulties his minister seemed to foresee in the project. “He’s only asking for a million.”

“Is that all? One little million, if you please?” said the cardinal ironically, his Italian accent creeping out. “One little million, if you please, my brother? Bah! A family of beggars.”

“Cardinal,” said Louis XIV, lifting his chin, “this family of beggars is a branch of my own family.”

“And are you rich enough to give others millions, Sire? Do you have such millions?”

“Oh!” said Louis XIV with an agony in his heart that he struggled not to show on his face. “Yes, Sir Cardinal, I know how poor I am. But I’m sure the Crown of France must be worth a million, and for this good deed, I’m even willing to pledge my crown. There must be a Jewish moneylender who will give me a million for it.”

“So, Sire, you say you need a million?” asked Mazarin.

“Yes, Sir, that’s what I’m saying.”

“You’re badly mistaken, Sire, you’d need much more than that. I will show you, Sire, how much you really need. Bernouin! Where are you?”

“What, Cardinal?” said the king, “Are you going to consult a lackey about my royal business?”

“Bernouin!” the cardinal called again, appearing not to notice the young king’s feeling of humiliation. “Come here and repeat to me that sum we were discussing just now.”

“Cardinal, didn’t you hear me?” said Louis, pale with indignation.

“Don’t be angry, Sire; I manage Your Majesty’s affairs in an open and above-board fashion; everyone in France knows I keep an open book. What was I having you do just now, Bernouin?”

“Your Eminence had me adding up sums, My Lord.”

“Which you did, didn’t you?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“To figure the sum that His Majesty needs at the moment, right? Isn’t that what I said? Speak frankly, my friend.”

“As Your Eminence says.”

“Well, then! How much did I say I wanted?”

“Forty-five million, I believe.”

“And how much do we have if we combine all our resources?”

“Thirty-nine million two hundred sixty thousand livres.”

“Very well, Bernouin, that’s all I needed to know. You may leave us now,” said the cardinal, turning his sharp eyes on the young king, who was dumb with stupefaction.

“But … that is…” stammered the king.

“Ah, Sire! You still doubt?” said the cardinal. “Well! Here’s the proof of what you just heard.”

And Mazarin drew from under his covers the number-filled ledger and presented it to the king, who averted his eyes, so deep was his grief and shame. “So, if you want a million, Sire, that’s a million not accounted for here, and it’s actually forty-six million Your Majesty needs. Well, I fear there aren’t enough Jews in the world to lend you such a sum, even if you did pledge the Crown of France.”

The king, clenching his trembling fists, pushed back his chair. “Then it seems,” he said, “my brother the King of England must die of hunger.”

“Sire,” replied Mazarin, in a softer tone, “remember this proverb that I offer you as a basis of sound policy: ‘Rejoice in being poor when your neighbour is poor as well.’”

Louis thought for a few moments, while glancing curiously at the ledger peeking out from under the cardinal’s bolster. “So,” he said, “it’s impossible to fulfil my request for money, Sir Cardinal?”

“Absolutely, Sire.”

“Remember that this will make an enemy of him if he regains the throne without my help.”

“If that’s Your Majesty’s only concern, then he should rest easy,” said the cardinal eagerly.

“All right, I don’t insist,” said Louis XIV.

“Have I convinced you, at least, Sire?” said the cardinal, placing his hand on the king’s.

“Completely.”

“If there’s anything else, ask for it, Sire, and I’ll be happy to see that you get it, having refused you this.”

“Anything else, Sir?”

“Why, yes! Am I not in service, body and soul, to Your Majesty? Hey, Bernouin! Torches and guards for His Majesty! His Majesty is returning to his apartments.”

“Not yet, Sir. Since I find your good will at my disposal, I’ll take advantage of it.”

“Something personal, Sire?” asked the cardinal, hoping that the subject would finally turn to his niece.

“No, Sir, nothing for me,” replied Louis, “but once more for my brother Charles.” Mazarin’s expression darkened, and he muttered something that Louis couldn’t hear.

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The Politics of Sir Mazarin

Instead of the hesitation with which he’d approached the cardinal a quarter of an hour before, now there could be read in the eyes of the young king a will to win, an urge that, though it might fail because it wasn’t backed by true power, showed that he would at least keep the memory of a defeat deep in his heart. “This time, Sir Cardinal, it’s for something easier to find than a million in gold.”

“You think so, Sire?” said Mazarin, regarding the king with that gaze that read what was written on men’s hearts.

“Yes, I think so, and when you hear what I’m asking for…”

“Do you think I don’t already know, Sire?”

“You know what I’m going to ask for?”

“Listen, Sire, and I’ll tell you what King Charles said.”

“But you couldn’t!”

“Listen. He said, ‘And if that stingy Italian peasant …’”

“Sir Cardinal …!”

“If not his exact words, that’s the sense of them. *My God*, I can hardly blame him; everyone is driven by their passions. He said, ‘If that Italian peasant refuses you the million we ask, Sire, and we’re forced, for lack of money, to renounce diplomacy, well! We’ll ask him for five hundred gentlemen.’”

The king shuddered, for the cardinal was right in everything but the number. “Isn’t that how it went, Sire?” cried the minister with a note of triumph. “And then he added some lovely, encouraging words, saying, ‘I have friends on the other side of the Channel, friends who need only a leader and a flag to follow. When they see me, and they see the banner of France, they’ll rally to my side, for they’ll know I have your support. The French flag and uniform are worth more to me than the million that Sir de Mazarin has refused us.’

“For he knew very well that I’d refuse it. ‘With these five hundred gentlemen, Sire, I will conquer but the honour of the victory will be yours.’ That’s what he said, isn’t it? That or something very similar, embroidering his words with brilliant metaphors and proud imagery, because they’re fine orators in that family. Why, the father even gave a speech on the scaffold.”

The sweat of shame beaded Louis’s brow. He felt that this insult to his royal brother was an attack on his dignity but he didn’t know how to respond, especially to the man to whom he’d always seen everyone bow, even his mother. Finally, he made an effort. “But, Sir Cardinal,” he said, “he didn’t ask for five hundred men, only two hundred.”

“You see that I guessed what he was after.”

"I have never denied, Sir, that you see deeper and farther than others, that's why I thought you'd not refuse my brother Charles something so simple and easy to grant as what I ask in his name, Sir Cardinal – or rather in mine."

"Sire," said Mazarin, "I've laboured in politics for thirty years, first under Cardinal Richelieu, then on my own. My policies have not always been entirely forthright, I admit but they have never been inept. Now, the idea that's been proposed to Your Majesty is both dishonest *and* inept."

"Dishonest, Sir!"

"Sire, you signed a treaty with Sir Cromwell."

"Yes, a treaty on which Sir Cromwell signed his name above mine!"

"Why did you sign it down so low, Sire? Sir Cromwell found a good place for his signature, and he took it; that was his way. The point is you signed a treaty with Cromwell – or in other words, England, since when you signed that treaty Sir Cromwell was England."

"Sir Cromwell is dead."

"Do you think so, Sire?"

"Beyond a doubt, since his son Richard succeeded him, and then abdicated."

"So he did! Richard inherited from Cromwell upon his death, and England inherited when he resigned. The treaty was part of that inheritance, whether it was in Richard's hands or in England's. That treaty is as legal and as valid as ever. Why would you abandon it, Sire? What has changed? What Charles II wants today we didn't want to give him ten years ago, and don't want to now. You are allied with England, Sire, and not Charles II. It might have been unseemly, from the family point of view, to sign a treaty with the man who beheaded your father's brother-in-law, and to have contracted an alliance with the body they call the Rump Parliament; that might be unseemly, as I say but politically it was far from inept, since, thanks to that treaty, I saved Your Majesty, who was then still a minor, from the danger of a foreign war during the Fronde ... you remember the Fronde, don't you, Sire?"

The young king lowered his head. "A war that would have fatally complicated settling the uprisings of the Fronde. And I say to Your Majesty that to change course now without warning our allies would be both dishonest and inept. We'd be going to war without right on our side, and it would justify the same being done to us, for an attack by five hundred men, or two hundred men, or fifty or even ten, is still an act of aggression. A Frenchman is the nation; the uniform is our army. Suppose, for example, Sire, that you were at war with Holland that sooner or later is bound to happen, or with Spain that could occur if somehow your marriage fell through" – Mazarin looked closely at the king – "and there are a thousand reasons why that might happen ... anyway! In that case, would you approve of England sending the United Provinces or the Infanta a regiment, a company, or even a squad of English gentlemen? Would you think that comports with the elements of your treaty of alliance?"

Louis listened, and thought it strange to hear Mazarin invoking good faith, when he was the originator of so much political chicanery that such tricks were known as *mazarinades*. "However," said the king, "unless I directly forbade it, I couldn't prevent gentlemen of our state from going to England on their own account."

"You would have to order them to return, Sire, or at least protest their presence as enemies in an allied country."

"But see here, Sir Cardinal, surely a political genius like you could find a way to help this poor king without compromising ourselves."

"But that's exactly what I don't *want* to do, my dear Sire," said Mazarin. "For my purposes, events in England couldn't be unfolding better if I'd planned them myself. Governed the way it's governed, England is a magnet of trouble for all of Europe. Holland wants to protect Charles II? Let Holland do it; the only two maritime powers will clash, we'll watch as they sink one another's fleets, and we'll use the debris to build our own ships, if we can ever afford the nails to do so."

"Oh! This all sounds so miserable and petty, Sir Cardinal!"

"Yes, quite true, Sire, I admit it. More than that: if I admit for a moment the possibility of your evading the terms of your treaty that happens sometimes when there is a great interest at stake, or the terms bind one too closely; well! You'd authorise the engagement you request, France, or its flag that is the same thing, would cross the Channel to fight – and France would be defeated."

"Why is that?"

"*My faith!* We know what manner of general His Majesty Charles II is, as we saw at Worcester!"

"He no longer has to deal with Cromwell, Sir."

"That's right: now he has to deal with General Monck, who is far more dangerous. Cromwell was a visionary, a man with moments of exaltation, of expansiveness during which he, that former brewer, overflowed like an overfilled barrel. Then we might taste a drop of his thoughts that gave us the savour of his intentions, a flaw that enabled us repeatedly to penetrate to Cromwell's soul, though they claimed that soul was armoured in triple brass, as Horace says. But Monck! Ah, Sire, God forbid that you must come to grips with Sir Monck! He's the one who in the last year has given me all these grey hairs! Monck is no visionary, no, not he; alas, Monck is a *politician*. He keeps close, and never overflows. For the last ten years he's had his eyes fixed on a goal but no one can figure out what it is. Like Louis XI, to prevent anyone from guessing his thoughts of the night before, every morning he burns his nightcap. On the day his plans, slowly and solemnly matured, finally burst forth, they will explode with the certain success of the unexpected. It's this Monck, Sire, of whom you may never have heard, whose name you may not even know, who stands against your brother Charles II. Charles, believe me, knows that name well, though he doubtless didn't mention it to you. When you say Monck, you say a marvel of depth and tenacity, the only two things against which spirit and ardour are no use. Sire, I was ardent when I was young, and I always had my wits. I can boast about them, since I'm criticized for them. I got pretty far with those two qualities, the son of a angler in Piscina who became prime minister to the King of France, and in that capacity, if Your Majesty will recognise it, I've rendered a few services to Your Majesty's throne. Well, Sire! If I'd encountered Monck along my way instead of Sir de Beaufort, Sir de Retz, or Sir le Prince, I'd have been lost. Keep your distance, Sire, or you'll fall into the clutches of this political soldier. Monck's helmet, Sire, is an iron coffer in which he locks away his thoughts, and no one has the key to it. I wear only a biretta of velvet, Sire, so to him I bow and defer."

"What do you think Monck wants then?"

"Heh! If I knew that, Sire, I wouldn't tell you to be wary of him, because then I'd be stronger than he is. But with Monck, I'm afraid to even guess – to even guess, do you understand? For if I think I've guessed what he wants, I'll stop thinking, and despite myself, I'll follow my guess. Since that man came to power over there, I'm like those damned souls in Dante whose necks have been twisted by Satan so they walk forward but look backward: I march toward Madrid but look back toward London. To guess, with this devil of a man, is to fool yourself, and if you fool yourself, you're lost. God forbid I should try to guess what he wants; I limit myself to spying on what he does, and that's going far enough. Now, I believe – you understand the scope of the word *believe*? – I *believe* that Monck, though he doesn't want to commit himself to anything, is nonetheless eager to succeed Cromwell. Your Charles II has already sent ten envoys with proposals to him, and he's contented himself with chasing them away, saying nothing more than, 'Be gone, or I'll have you hanged.' He's as silent as a sepulchre, that man! Right now, Monck supports the Rump Parliament but this support doesn't fool me: Monck just wants to avoid being assassinated. An assassination would foil him before his goal can be reached, and his goal *must* be reached; or so I believe. Again, don't believe that just because I say I believe it, Sire – I only do that out of habit. I think Monck just supports the Parliament until the time comes to dismiss it. You've been sent to ask for swords but those swords are to fight against Monck. God forbid we ever fight against Monck, Sire, for Monck will defeat us, and I could never console myself for being beaten by Monck. That victory would be something that Monck would have been planning for a decade. By God! Sire, out of friendship for you, if not out of consideration for himself, let Charles II retire and keep a low profile. Your Majesty can give him one of your châteaux and a little income. But no! That infamous treaty we were just talking about prohibits Your Majesty from even giving him a château!"

"How's that?"

"Yes, Your Majesty is committed to denying hospitality to King Charles, to deny him France itself. That's why you must make your royal brother understand that he can't stay with us, we can't allow him to compromise us, or I myself..."

"Enough, Sir!" said Louis XIV, rising. "To refuse me a million is your prerogative; those millions are yours to manage. To refuse me two hundred gentlemen is likewise your right, for you are prime minister, and you have, in the eyes of France, the responsibility for peace and war. But to presume to prevent me, the king, from granting hospitality to the grandson of Henri IV, to my cousin, my childhood companion! That's where your power ends and my will begins."

"Sire," said Mazarin, delighted to get off so cheaply, the more so because that's why he'd fought so hard in the first place, "I will always bow before the will of my king. My king can keep the King of England near at hand or in one of his châteaux; you can inform Sir Mazarin of it, just don't tell the prime minister."

"Good night, Sir," said Louis XIV. "I leave in despair."

"But convinced that is all that I need, Sire," replied Mazarin.

The king made no response but withdrew thoughtfully, convinced, not of all that Mazarin had told him but on the contrary of something he was careful not to mention that was of the necessity to make a serious study of his place in the affairs of Europe, because those matters seemed complex and obscure to him. Louis found the King of England sitting in the same chair where he'd left him. On seeing him, the English prince rose but saw at first glance the discouraging expression on his cousin's face. He spoke first, to help Louis in the painful confession he had to make. "No matter what," he said, "I will never forget the kindness and friendship you've shown me."

"*Alas,*" replied Louis XIV mournfully. "Only empty friendship, Brother."

Charles II went very pale, drew a cold hand across his forehead, and was staggered by momentary dizziness. "I understand," he said at last. "No hope!"

Louis took Charles II by the hand. "Wait, Brother," he said, "don't do anything rash, all might change. It's only reckless acts that ruin a cause. I beg of you, add just one more year's trial to your time of suffering. There's no more reason to take drastic action now than at any other time, neither occasion nor opportunity. Stay near me, Brother, I'll give you one of my houses for a residence, and together we'll keep an eye on events and prepare for what may come; Brother, take courage!"

Charles II withdrew his hand from the king's and stood tall before him. "With all my heart, I thank you, Sire," he said. "But I have pleaded for aid from the greatest king in the world without result, and now I must seek a miracle from God."

And he went out before Louis could say anything more, his head high but hands shaking, with an expression of weary sadness on his face, and a distant gaze that, finding nothing to rest upon in the world of men, seemed to look beyond into unknown lands. The officer of the musketeers, seeing him pass like a phantom, bowed nearly to the ground before him. He then took a torch, called two of his troopers, and went down the deserted stairs with the unhappy king, holding in his left hand his hat, its plume brushing the steps. At the gate, the officer asked the king which direction he was going so he could send the musketeers as escort. "Sir, you who once knew my father," replied Charles II quietly, "did you ever pray for him, perchance? If so, remember me in your prayers now. Where I go I travel alone, and I beg you to give me neither company nor escort any further."

The officer bowed and sent his musketeers back inside. But he remained for a moment under the portico to watch Charles II walk away until he disappeared into the shadows of the street. "To him, as before to his father," he murmured, "as Athos would say, and with good reason: 'Hail to His Fallen Majesty!'"

Then, climbing the stairs, "How wretched his service is!" he murmured at every step. "What a pitiful master I serve! To go on with this life is intolerable. It's time I acted for myself! No more giving my all for nothing!" he continued. "The master may yet rise and achieve but the servant is done. *God be with you!* I'll put it off no longer. Come, you two," he said, entering the antechamber. "Why are you waiting around here? Put out your torches and return to your posts. Oh, you were watching out for me? Keeping an eye on me, my men? You geese! I'm no Duke Guise, and they won't assassinate me in the narrow hall. Besides," he added to himself, "someone would have to decide to do that, and no one makes decisions since Cardinal Richelieu died. Ah, now there was a man, back in the day! No, it's decided: tomorrow I hang up my hat for good!"

Then, after a thought, he said, "No, not yet! I have one last great challenge before me but this one, I swear, will be the last, *God be with you!*"

He had scarcely finished when a voice came from the king's chamber. "Sir Lieutenant!" it called.

"I'm here," he replied.

"The king would like to speak to you."

"Come now," said the lieutenant. "Perhaps this is the challenge I was thinking of." And he went in to see the king.

## 276 The King & the Lieutenant

When the king saw the officer come in, he dismissed his valet and his attending gentleman. "Who's on duty tomorrow, Sir?" he asked.

The lieutenant bowed with military precision and replied, "I am, Sire."

"What, you again?"

"Always me."

"How can that be, Sir?"

"Sire, the musketeers, when travelling, assume all the duties of guarding Your Majesty's household, that is to say, yourself, the queen mother, and Sir Cardinal, who borrows from the king the best part of the royal guard, or at least the most numerous."

"But in between watches?"

"There is no in-between, Sire, just twenty or thirty men of your hundred and twenty who are off duty to rest. At the Louvre it's different, and if we were at the Louvre, I'd rely on my adjutant; but when travelling, Sire, anything can happen, and I prefer to manage things myself."

"So, you're on duty every day?"

"And every night, yes, Sire."

"Sir, we can't have that. You must find time to rest."

"Perhaps, Sire but I'd rather not."

"You'd ... rather not?" said the king, perplexed by this unusual response.

"I'm saying, Sire, that I'd rather not expose myself to being at fault. If the devil wanted to play a trick on me, Sire, you'll understand that since he knows the man he's dealing with, he'd do it at a moment when I was absent. My duty, and the peace of my conscience, comes before all."

"But that way of life, Sir – it will kill you."

"Oh, Sire! I've followed this way of life for thirty-five years and I'm the healthiest man in France and Navarre. Besides, Sire, don't worry about me, I beg you; it's unexpected and I'm not used to it."

The king cut short the conversation with a new question. "Then, you'll be here tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"Like now, like always, yes, Sire."

The king paced back and forth across the room. It was easy to see that he was burning with the need to speak but some fear restrained him. The lieutenant, erect, immobile, his hat in his hand, his fist on his hip, watched this activity, while grumbling into his moustache, "He hasn't got a half-pistole's worth of resolution in him, upon my honour! I'd wager he won't speak on his own."

The king continued to pace, occasionally glancing toward the lieutenant. "He's the spit and image of his father," the officer told himself. "He's simultaneously proud, ambitious, and timid. Plague take such a master!"

Louis stopped. "Lieutenant?" he said.

"Right here, Sire."

"This evening, down in the hall, why did you cry out, 'The king's service, His Majesty's Musketeers?'"

"I was obeying your orders, Sire."

"Me?"

"Yourself."

"But I didn't say a word, Sir."

"Sire, an order may be given by a sign, by a gesture, or by a look, as clearly as by speech. A servant who had only ears would be but half a servant."

"Your eyes are pretty sharp, then, Sir."

"Why do you say that, Sire?"

"Because they see what isn't there."

"My eyes are indeed sharp, Sire, though they've served their master a long time. But when there's something to be seen, they rarely miss the opportunity. Tonight they saw Your Majesty blushing with the effort not to yawn; that Your Majesty looked with eloquent supplication first at His Eminence, and then at Her Majesty the queen mother, and finally at the door that led out of the hall; and they saw all that so well, they practically read the words on Your Majesty's lips that said, 'Who will get me out of here?'"

"Sir!"

"Or words to that effect, Sire. Thus, I didn't hesitate; that look was for me, and as good as an order, so I cried, 'His Majesty's Musketeers!' And I was right, Sire, as Your Majesty proved on the spot."

The king turned away to conceal a smile, and then, after a few seconds, turned his gaze back on that countenance so intelligent, so bold and firm, that it looked like the dynamic and proud profile of an eagle facing the sun. "Well done," he said after a short silence, during which he tried, and failed, to stare his officer into dropping his gaze.

But seeing him say nothing more, the officer turned on his heels and took three steps toward the door, murmuring, "He won't speak, *God be with you!* He won't speak."

"Thank you, Sir," the king said then.

"Really, that was the only thing missing," continued the lieutenant to himself, "to be thanked for doing my duty as if I might have failed to do it." And he marched to the door in a military jingle of spurs.

But when he arrived on the threshold, he sensed the king's desire calling him back and he turned. "Has Your Majesty told me everything?"

He asked this in a tone impossible to describe but which, without seeming to actually solicit a confidence, was so persuasively frank that the king replied at once, "Approach me, Sir."

"Here, now!" murmured the officer. "It's coming at last."

"Listen to me."

"Every word, Sire."

"You'll mount your horse tomorrow at four in the morning, Sir, and you'll have one saddled for me."

"From Your Majesty's stable?"

"No, from the musketeers."

"Very good, Sire. Is that all?"

"Then you will accompany me."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Will I come to get Your Majesty, or shall I await him?"

"You'll await me."

"Where shall I do that, Sire?"

"At the park's back gate."

The lieutenant bowed, understanding that the king had said all that he would at that time. In fact, the king then dismissed him with a friendly gesture. The officer left the king's chamber and returned philosophically to his armchair where instead of falling asleep as one might expect at such an advanced hour of the night, he began to think more deeply than he ever had. The result of these reflections was less sad than previously. "Come, he's started at last," he said. "Love drives him, and he moves, he moves! This king is nothing in his Court but he may amount to something as a man. Anyway, we'll see come morning ... But, oh!" he said suddenly, sitting up very straight. "Now there's an idea, a gigantic idea, *God be with you!* And maybe that idea will make my fortune!"

With this exclamation, the officer rose and paced the broad antechamber, hands in the pockets of his coat. The candle guttered furiously in the path of a cool breeze that entered through the slightly opened window and crossed the room diagonally, projecting a reddish flickering glow, sometimes bright, sometimes diminished, and casting on the wall a great shadow of the lieutenant, drawn in silhouette like a figure from Callot, with the plumed felt hat and the sword at his belt. "Of course," he murmured, "unless I'm very much mistaken, Mazarin is laying a trap for the young lover; Mazarin set up a time and place for a rendezvous this evening as smoothly as if he were Sir Dangeau himself. I heard it all clearly enough: 'Tomorrow morning,' he said, 'they'll be passing the bridge from Blois.' God! That's clear enough – especially to a lover! And that explains his embarrassment, his hesitation, and this order: 'Sir my Lieutenant of Musketeers, a horse tomorrow, at four in the morning.' Which is as clear as if he'd said, 'Sir my Lieutenant of Musketeers, tomorrow at four in the morning, on the bridge from Blois, do you hear?'"

"And thus, I'm in possession of a state secret, insignificant though I am. And how did I get it? Because I have sharp eyes, as I just told His Majesty. They say he loves this little Italian doll to distraction!"

They even say he cast himself at his mother's feet for permission to marry her. Moreover, they say the queen consulted the Holy See of Rome to find out if such a marriage, made against her will, would be valid. Oh, to be twenty-five again! If only those I once had by my side were with me once more! I'd pit Mazarin against the queen mother, France against Spain, and set up a new queen all on my own! But now? Bah!"

And the lieutenant snapped his fingers in disdain. "This miserable Italian, this coward, this peasant who dared refuse a million in gold to the King of England, how quickly would he give me a thousand pistoles if I brought him this news? No, *God be with you!* I'm being childish. I must be drunk! Him, Mazarin, give something to someone? Haha ha!"

With an effort, the officer swallowed his laughter. "To sleep," he said. "To sleep, and without delay. This night's work has dulled my edge, and I'll see things more clearly on the morrow."

And having made himself this recommendation, he wrapped himself in his cloak, and sniffed in disdain at his royal neighbour. Five minutes later, he was sleeping with his hands clenched and his lips slightly apart, from which escaped, not his state secret but a sonorous snore that echoed from the vault of the majestic antechamber.

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### Marie de Mancini

The first rays of the sun were barely topping the great trees of the park and gilding the high wind-vanes of the château when the young king, already awake for over two hours, burning with the insomnia of love, opened his shutters to the dawn, and cast a curious glance across the courtyards of the sleeping palace. He saw that it was the appointed hour; the big clock above the courtyard showed a quarter past four. He didn't call his valet, still deeply asleep on the other side of the room but dressed himself. The sound awoke the valet, who awakened quite frightened, afraid he'd overslept and missed his duty but Louis sent him back to bed, warning him to remain silent. Then he went down the staircase to the courtyard, passed out through a side gate, and saw along the wall of the park a rider who was holding a spare horse by the bridle. This rider was unrecognisable under his cloak and broad hat. As to the horse, saddled like that of a wealthy bourgeois, it showed nothing remarkable to even the most inquisitive eye. Louis went and took the horse's bridle; without leaving his saddle, the officer bent down and held the king's stirrup as he mounted, then asked in a low voice for orders from His Majesty. "Follow me," replied Louis XIV.

The officer put his horse into a trot behind that of his master, and they rode down toward the bridge. When they were on the other side of the Loire, the king said, "Sir, be so good as to ride on until you see a carriage, and then return to warn me; I'll wait here."

"Would Your Majesty deign to give me some details, so I'll recognise the right carriage when I see it?"

"The carriage will bear two ladies and will probably be followed by servants."

"Sire, I don't wish to make a mistake; is there some other sign by which I'd recognise this carriage?"

"It will probably display the arms of Sir Cardinal."

"Very good, Sire," replied the officer, now completely clear on the object of his quest. He spurred his horse into a trot in the direction indicated by the king. But he'd gone scarcely five hundred paces before he saw a carriage drawn by four matched mules coming over the crest of a rise. Behind that carriage came another. At a glance he knew that these were the vehicles he was looking for. He turned on the spot, rode back to the king, and said, "Sire, here come the carriages. The first, in fact, contains two ladies and their maids, while the second carries footmen, supplies, and luggage."

"Ah, very good," replied the king in a voice full of emotion. "Go, please, and tell these ladies that a cavalier of the Court wishes to pay them his private respects."

The officer went off at a gallop. "God!" he said as he rode. "Here's a new and honourable position! I complained of being insignificant, and now I'm the confidant of the king. It's enough to make a musketeer burst with pride!"

He approached the carriage and delivered his message with wit and gallantry. There were indeed two ladies in the coach, one a great beauty, though perhaps over-slender, and a second, less favoured by nature but lively and graceful, her face alight with wilful intelligence. Her keen and piercing eyes, in particular, spoke more eloquently than all the amorous phrases current in that time of gallantry. The officer addressed himself to this second lady without hesitation, though as we've said, the first was perhaps more beautiful. "Mesdames," he said, "I'm the Lieutenant of the Musketeers, here to announce that a cavalier who wishes to pay you his respects awaits you on the road just ahead."

At these words, whose effects he awaited with curiosity, the dark-eyed lady gave a gasp of joy, leaned out the door, and, seeing the rider approaching, extended her arms, calling, "Ah! My dear Sire!"

And her eyes brimmed with tears. The coachman abruptly reined in the mules, the maids tumbled to the carriage floor, and the prettier lady bowed humbly, while her mouth curved in the most ironic smile ever sketched on feminine lips by jealousy. "Marie! Dear Marie!" said the king, taking the hands of the dark-eyed lady between his own. And then, opening the carriage's heavy door himself, he drew her out with such ardour that she was in his arms before touching the ground. The lieutenant, taking a position on the other side of the carriage, watched and listened without being noticed. The king offered his arm to Miss de Mancini and gestured to the coachmen and servants to continue on their way. It was almost six in the morning; the road was still fresh and pleasant; the tall trees lining the highway, with flowers just bursting from their buds, were bedizened with dewdrops that coated their branches with liquid diamonds. The grasses clustered at the foot of the hedges, and the sparrows, who had returned only a few days before, swooped in their graceful curves between sky and water; a breeze perfumed by the flowering forest whispered along the road and wrinkled the surface of the river. All these beauties of the morning, the aromas of the plants, the scent of the earth rising toward the sky, intoxicated the two lovers, walking side by side, leaning against each other, hand in hand, eyes seeking eyes, neither daring to speak, they had so much to say to each other. The officer saw that the abandoned horse was wandering here and there, distracting Miss de Mancini, and used this as an excuse to approach and take charge of the royal mount. Then, walking nearby but between the horses, he observed the lovers' every word and gesture. It was Miss de Mancini who spoke first.

"Ah, my dear Sire!" she said. "So, you're not abandoning me then?"

"No," the king replied, "As you can see, Marie."

"Everyone told me that once we were separated, you'd think no more of me!"

"Dear Marie, is it only today that you've realised we're surrounded by people eager to deceive us?"

"But, Sire, this journey, this alliance with Spain? They're marrying you off!"

Louis lowered his head. At the same time the officer saw the sun glint from Marie de Mancini's eyes, flashing like daggers drawn from their sheaths. "And you've done nothing on behalf of our love?" asked the young woman after a moment of silence. "Ah, Miss! How can you believe that? I threw myself at my mother's feet, I begged, I pleaded. I said that my entire happiness depended on you. I even threatened..."

"Well?" Marie asked eagerly.

"Well! The queen mother wrote to the See of Rome, and they told her that an unapproved marriage between us would be invalid and would be nullified by the Holy Father. Finally, seeing there was no hope for us, I asked at least for a delay of my marriage with the Infanta."

"That doesn't seem to have kept you from travelling to meet her."

"What would you have? All my prayers, my pleadings, and my tears, have been dismissed, negated by reasons of state."

"And so?"

"So, what, then? What would you have me do, Miss, with the will of all the powerful leagued against me?"

This time Marie lowered her head. "Then I must say goodbye and forever," she said. "You know they're exiling me, almost burying me alive. More than that, you know they're planning to marry me off too!"

Louis turned pale and clutched at his heart. "If it were only a matter of my life, persecuted as I was, I would have yielded – but I thought your life was at stake as well, my dear Sire, so I fought for your future."

"Oh, yes! My love, my treasure," murmured the king, more gallantly perhaps than passionately.

"The cardinal would have given in," said Marie, "if you'd gone to him, if you'd insisted. For the cardinal to call the King of France his nephew! Think of it, Sire! He'd risk anything for that, even a war; the cardinal, assured of his sole rule under the double pretext that he'd raised the king and had given him his niece, oh, the cardinal would have fought everybody, overcome all obstacles! Oh, Sire! I can answer for that. I'm a woman, and I see clearly where love is concerned."

These words produced a singular impression on the king. Instead of inflaming his passion, they cooled it. He stopped their progress and said, suddenly, "There's nothing more I can say, Miss. Everything has failed."

"Except your own will in the matter, dear Sire, isn't that so?"

"Alas!" said the king, blushing. "Do I even have a will of my own?"

"Oh!" cried Miss de Mancini, as if struck a physical blow.

"The king has no will but that which politics dictates, no will but reasons of state."

"It's not will you lack but love!" cried Marie. "If you loved me, Sire, you'd find the will."

And pronouncing these words, Marie raised her eyes to meet those of her lover, whom she saw more pallid and crushed than an exile who is about to leave his native land forever. "Accuse me of anything," murmured the king, "but don't say I don't love you."

A long silence followed these words that the king had spoken with an undeniable sincerity. "I can't bear to think, Sire," continued Marie, making a final effort, "that tomorrow, or the day after, I'll never see you again. I can't bear to think that I'll spend the rest of my days away from Paris, that the lips of an old man, a stranger, will kiss the hand you hold in yours; no, truly, I can't bear to think this, Sire, without my poor heart breaking in despair."

And indeed, Marie de Mancini burst into tears. For his part, the king brought his handkerchief to his lips and stifled a sob. "See," she said, "the carriages have stopped; my sister is waiting, and the time is now. What you decide here will bind us for life! Oh, Sire – do you want me to lose you? Is what you want, Louis that the one to whom you said, 'I love you,' should belong to someone other than her king, her master, and her beloved? Oh, have courage, Louis! Just say the word, a single phrase, just say, 'I want you!' And all my life will be yours, all my heart will be yours forever."

The king said nothing. Marie then looked at him as Dido looked at Aeneas in the Elysian Fields, with fierce disdain. "Goodbye, then," she said. "Goodbye to life. Goodbye to love. Goodbye to heaven!"

And she turned to leave but the king restrained her, seizing her hand that he carried to his lips. Then, despair prevailing over the resolution that he seemed to have taken internally, he let fall on that beautiful hand a burning tear of regret that made Marie shudder, as though it really had burned her. She saw the king's wet eyes, his pale brow, his trembling lips, and she exclaimed in a tone impossible to describe, "Oh, Sire! You're the king, so you may weep but still I must go!"

The king's only reply was to hide his face in his handkerchief. The horses shied as something like a muffled roar came from the officer who held them. And then Miss de Mancini, indignation incarnate, left the king and hastened back to her carriage, calling to the coachman, "Drive, and quickly!" The coachman obeyed, whipping up the mules, and the heavy carriage squealed on its straining axles while the King of France, alone, cast down, annihilated, and dared not turn to watch it go.

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The King & the Lieutenant exchange Proofs of Memory

The king, looking like every lover since time began, stood staring blankly at the horizon over which his mistress's carriage had disappeared. When he'd turned away and looked back again a dozen times and had at last succeeded in restoring some calm to his mind and his heart, he remembered that he wasn't alone. The officer was still holding their horses by the bridles and hadn't yet lost all hope of seeing the king's resolve return: *He could still mount up and go after the carriage*, he thought. *We've lost nothing but a little time.*

But the imagination of the lieutenant of Musketeers was more optimistic than the reality, an indulgence the king was careful to avoid. He contented himself with approaching the officer and saying, in a sad voice, "Come, we're done here. To horse."

The king slowly mounted, in weariness and sorrow, and the officer did the same. The king spurred on, and the lieutenant followed. At the bridge, Louis turned one last time. The officer, patient as a god who has eternity before and after him, still hoped for a return of willpower. But to no avail. Louis rode up the street that led to the château and entered the gate as seven o'clock sounded. Once the king had returned to his chamber, and the musketeer had seen, as he saw everything, a corner of the curtain twitch in the cardinal's window, he uttered a great sigh, like a man freed from heavy shackles, and said quietly to himself, "Now then, old soldier, it's finally over!"

After a few minutes of silence, the king called his attending gentleman. "I'm not at home to anyone until two o'clock," he said. "Do you understand, Sir?"

"Sire," replied the gentleman, "someone has already asked to see you."

"Who?"

"Your Lieutenant of Musketeers."

"The one who accompanied me?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Ah!" said the king. "Very well, show him in."

The officer entered. The king gestured to dismiss his gentleman and his valet. Louis watched until they'd closed the door behind them, and when the tapestry had fallen back into place, he said, "Your presence reminds me, Sir, that I'd forgotten to warn you to maintain absolute discretion about this morning's events."

"Oh, Sire! Why should Your Majesty bother to give me such a warning? It seems he doesn't know me."

"Yes, Sir, that's true. I know that you're discreet but as I hadn't been specific..."

The officer bowed. "Your Majesty has nothing more to tell me?" he asked.

"No, Sir. You may withdraw."

"May I request permission not to do so until I've spoken with the king, Sire?"

"What do you have to say to me? Explain yourself, Sir."

"Sire, it's a matter of little importance to you but of great importance to me. Forgive me for bringing it up but if it's not urgent and necessary I'd not bother, I'd just disappear, silent and meek as always."

"Disappear? What are you talking about?"

"To be brief, Sire," said the officer, "I come to ask for my discharge from Your Majesty's service."

The king started but the officer was as stolid as a statue. "Your discharge from me, Sir?" said the king. "And for how long, if you please?"

"For good, Sire."

"You would quit my service, Sir?" said Louis, unable to conceal his surprise.

"I'm afraid so, Sire."

"Impossible."

"And yet there it is, Sire. I'm getting old; I've been in harness for thirty-five years, and my shoulders are stooping. It's time to give way to younger men. I'm not suited to this new reign, I still have one foot in the old one. Everything nowadays is strange to me, it takes me by surprise and makes me dizzy. In short, I have the honour to ask Your Majesty for my discharge."

"Sir," said the king, looking at the officer, who was wearing his soldier's buff coat with an ease that would have been the envy of a younger man, "you've got more strength and stamina than I have."

"Oh!" shrugged the officer, smiling in false modesty. "Your Majesty says that because I have a pretty good eye, my moustache is still black, I stand straight and sit my horse well but Sire, that's all vanity, mere illusion, smoke and mirrors! I may look young but inside I'm old, and within six months I'm sure I'll be a broken down, gouty invalid. And so, Sire..."

"Sir," interrupted the king, "don't you remember what you told me yesterday? You stood right there and told me you were the healthiest man in France, a stranger to fatigue who could stand at your post night and day. Did you say that, or didn't you? Recall your words, Sir."

The officer sighed. "Sire," he said, "old age is vain, and old men must be forgiven for boasting beyond their abilities. I may very well have said that, Sire but the fact is that I'm exhausted and ask to be retired."

"Sir," said the king, with a majestic gesture toward the officer, "you're not giving me your real reasons. You want to leave my service, I see that but you're hiding your true motives."

"Sire, believe me..."

"I believe what I see, Sir, and what I see is an energetic and vigorous man, sharp and quick-minded, possibly the best soldier in France, a man who can in no way persuade me that he's in need of a change."

"Ah, Sire!" said the lieutenant, with an edge of bitterness. "Such praise! Truly, Your Majesty confounds me. Energetic, vigorous, sharp, and quick, the best soldier in the army! Your Majesty exaggerates what merit I have to the point where I hardly recognise myself. If I were vain enough to believe even half of Your Majesty's words, I'd think I was a vital, even indispensable man. I'd say that such a

servant, endowed with such shining qualities, must be a treasure beyond price. However, I must say, Sire, that for all my life until today, I've been appreciated, in my opinion, at well below my value. So, I repeat, Your Majesty must be exaggerating."

The king frowned, for he felt the officer's bitter speech verged on insolence. "Come, Sir," he said, "let's get to the point. If you're dissatisfied with my service, say so. No evasions, now – answer me boldly and frankly. I want to hear you."

The officer, who had been turning his hat in his hands in agitation, looked up at these words. "Oh, Sire!" he said. "That puts me more at ease. Since the question is put so frankly, I'll respond with the same frankness. To speak the truth is a good thing, because it relieves the burden on one's heart, and because it happens so rarely. I will therefore tell my king the truth, while begging him to excuse the bluntness of an old soldier."

Louis now looked at his officer with unconcealed anxiety and made an agitated gesture. "Well, then, speak," he said, "for I'm impatient to hear these truths you have to tell me."

The officer tossed his hat on a table, and his expression, always martial and intelligent, took on a strange new character of solemnity and even grandeur. "Sire," he said, "I resign the service of the king because I'm dissatisfied. The valet, at his work, can respectfully approach his master as I do, give him a report on his labours, turn in his tools, account for any funds expended, and say, 'Master, my day is done, please pay me and send me on my way.'"

"Sir!" cried the king, purple with anger.

"Oh, Sire," replied the officer, bowing and bending his knee, "never was a servant more respectful than I am now before Your Majesty; only, you ordered me to tell the truth. Now that I've begun, it must all come out, even if you command me to silence."

And such resolution was displayed in the lines on the officer's face that Louis XIV had no need to urge him to continue, he continued on his own, while the king regarded him with curiosity mixed with admiration. "Sire, for nearly thirty-five years, as I said, I've served the royal house of France. Few people have worn out as many swords in this service as I have, Sire, and they were good swords too.

At first, I was a child, ignorant of anything but courage but the king your father thought he saw in me a man. I was a man, Sire, when Cardinal Richelieu, who never doubted it, thought he saw in me an enemy. Sire, you could read the story of that battle between the ant and the lion, from first to last, in your family's secret archives. If you ever feel so inclined, Sire, you should do so; the story is worth the trouble, if I dare say so myself. You'll read how the lion, harassed, worn out, panting, finally called for quarter, and to do him justice, he gave as well as he got. Oh, those were brave times, Sire, of glorious battles, like an epic of Tasso or Ariosto! The heroic works of that age that no one now would believe, were to us a daily routine. For five years running I was a hero every day, or so some worthy folk have told me, and believe me, Sire, five years of heroism is no small thing! But I believe what I was told by those worthy folk, for they knew whereof they spoke; they were Gentlemen de Richelieu, de Buckingham, de Beaufort, and de Retz, the latter a past master of street fighting! As did King Louis XIII, and even the queen, your august mother, who said to me one day, 'Thank you,' though I dare not think of the service I had the honour to render her. Excuse me, Sire, for speaking so boldly but what I've had the honour to recount to Your Majesty is, as I said, history."

The king gnawed at his lip and threw himself angrily into an armchair. "I've upset Your Majesty," said the lieutenant. "Well, Sire, that's how the truth is! It's a harsh bedfellow, bristling with iron, hurtful to those who hear it, and sometimes to those who speak it."

"No, Sir," the king said. "I invited you to speak, so speak."

"After the service of the king and the cardinal, Sire, came the service of the regency. I fought well in the unrest of the Fronde, though perhaps less well than formerly. But people were growing smaller, and my opponents were lesser men than before. Nevertheless, I led Your Majesty's Musketeers on some dangerous missions in my time with the company. "They were good times while they lasted! I was Sir de Mazarin's favourite: lieutenant, here! Lieutenant, there! Lieutenant, to the right! Lieutenant, to the left! There was hardly a conflict in France in which your humble servant wasn't involved – but soon France wasn't enough for Sir Cardinal, and he sent me to England as an envoy to Sir Cromwell. Now there was a man of stone and iron, let me tell you, Sire. I had the honour to get to know him, and to take his measure. A great deal had been promised me if I accomplished that mission, and as I exceeded all expectations, I was generously rewarded: I was promoted to Captain of the Musketeers, that is to say, the most envied military rank at Court that gives precedence over even the Marshals of France; and that's only fair, for when you say Captain of Musketeers, you say the flower of chivalry and foremost of the brave!"

"Captain, Sir?" said the king. "Surely you mean lieutenant."

"Not at all, Sire, I make no such mistake; Your Majesty may rely on me in that regard. Sir de Mazarin gave me the promotion."

"Well, then?"

"Well, Sir de Mazarin, as you know better than anyone, rarely gives anything away, and what he gives he sometimes takes back. He revoked the rank once peace was made and he no longer needed me. I don't say I was worthy to fill the shoes of Sir de Tréville, of illustrious memory but still, they promised it to me, they'd given it to me, and they should have left it with me."

"Is that why you're dissatisfied, Sir? Well, I'll look into it! I love justice, and your claim, though made with military brusqueness, doesn't displease me."

"No, Sire!" said the officer. "Your Majesty has misunderstood me; I no longer press any such claim."

"Don't overdo the modesty, Sir. I will look into your affair, and later..."

"Oh, Sire, Sire! That word, *later*. For thirty years I've been dining on the bounty of that word that I've heard spoken by all the high and mighty, and which now I hear from your mouth. *Later!* Meanwhile, I've taken twenty wounds and have reached the age of fifty-four without a Louis in my pocket and without ever having found a master who would protect me – me, who has protected so many masters! As of today, that's changed, Sire, and when I'm told *later*, my reply is *now*. That's the change I ask for, Sire. And it might as well be granted me, as it will cost no one anything."

"I didn't expect to hear such language, Sir, especially from one who is accustomed to dealing with the *grands*. You forget you're speaking to a king, to a gentleman whose word, I should think, must be accounted as good as your own. When I say *later*, I'm speaking of a certainty."

"I don't doubt it, Sire but here is the gist of the terrible truth I have to tell you: even if I saw on the table in front of me the baton of a marshal, the Sword of the Constable, and the Crown of Poland, instead of *later*, I swear to you, Sire, I would still say *now*. Please excuse me, Sire – I'm from the country of your grandfather, Henri IV, and there we don't say much but when we do, we say it all."

"I am just coming into my reign. That future doesn't appeal to you, Sir?" said Louis haughtily.

"It seems everything is forgotten," the officer said with nobility. "The master has forgotten the servant, and now the servant is accused of forgetting the master. I live in unhappy times, Sire! I see youth ruled by discouragement and fear, timid and exploited, when it ought to be rich and powerful. Last night, for example, I opened the door of the King of France to admit the King of England, whose father, humble though I am, I very nearly saved, if God hadn't been against me, for the Lord had inspired his enemy Cromwell. I opened, as I said, that door, to the palace of one brother to another, and I see – alas, Sire, this is a blow to my heart! I see the king's minister turn away the exile and humiliate his master into condemning to misery another king, his equal. I witness my prince, who is young, handsome, and brave, who has courage in his heart and fire in his eyes, I see him tremble before a priest who laughs from behind the curtain of his ministry, where he lies on his bed counting all the gold in France that he then hides away in secret vaults. Yes, I can see it in your expression, Sire: I'm bold to the point of madness. But what would you have? I'm an old soldier, and I say here, to you, my King, things I would cram down the throat of anyone else who dared to say them in front of me. But you commanded me to open the depths of my heart to you, Sire, and I place at Your Majesty's feet all the bitter gall I've amassed over thirty years of service, just as I would spill every drop of my blood for Your Majesty if you ordered me to do so."

The king, without saying a word, wiped away the drops of cold sweat trickling from his temples. The moments of silence that followed this vehement outburst seemed like centuries of suffering to both of them. "Sir," the king said at last, "you spoke the word *forgotten*, the only word I will admit to hearing, and the one to which I'll reply. Others may have been forgetful but not me, and the proof is that I remember one day during the riots, when the people were furious, and like an angry and roaring sea, they invaded the Royal Palace. On that day, while I pretended to be sleeping, one man, with a naked sword, hid behind my curtained bed to watch over my life, ready to risk his own for me, as he'd already twenty times risked it for my family. Was not this gentleman, whose name I asked – was he not called Sir d'Artagnan?" Tell me, Sir."

"Your Majesty has a good memory," replied the officer coldly.

"You see, then, Sir," continued the king, "if I have such a good memory of my childhood, how much better it must be since I've reached the age of reason."

"Your Majesty has been richly endowed by God," said the officer in the same tone.

"Come, Sir d'Artagnan," continued Louis in desperate appeal, "can't you be as patient as I am? Can't you do as I do? Come, now."

"And what is it you're doing, Sire?"

"I'm waiting."

"Your Majesty can wait because he's young but I, Sire, have no more time to wait. Old age knocks at my door, and death is beyond him, peering into the depths of my house. Your Majesty is at the beginning of life, and full of hope for fortune to come but I'm at the other end of the horizon, Sire, so far from Your Majesty that I don't have time enough to wait for him to reach me."

Louis took a turn around the room, continually wiping away that cold sweat that would have put his doctors into a fright. "Very well, Sir," said Louis XIV curtly. "You desire your discharge? You shall have it. You offer me your resignation from the rank of Lieutenant of the King's Musketeers?"

"I place it humbly at Your Majesty's feet, Sire."

"Fine. I will arrange your pension."

"I shall have a thousand obligations to Your Majesty."

"Sir," said the king, making an effort at self-control, "I think you'll be losing a good master."

"I am sure of that, Sire."

"And where will you find another like him?"

"Oh, Sire! I know well that Your Majesty is one of a kind, so I am resolved to never serve another king on this earth and will have no master other than myself."

"You mean it?"

"Your Majesty, I swear it."

"I'll hold you to your word, Sir."

D'Artagnan bowed.

"And you know I have a good memory," continued the king.

"Yes, Sire, and yet I wish Your Majesty's memory of this last hour should dim and forget the miseries that I brought before his eyes. His Majesty is so far above the poor and the lowly, that I hope..."

"My Majesty, Sir, will shine like the sun that sees everyone, great and small, rich and poor, giving lustre to some, warmth to others, and life to all. Farewell, Sir D'Artagnan, farewell. You're free." And the king, choking off a hoarse sob, hurried away into the next chamber. D'Artagnan took his hat from the table where he'd tossed it and went out.

## 279 The Exile

D'Artagnan had scarcely gone down the stairs before the king called in his gentleman of the day. "I have a task for you, Sir," he said.

"I am at Your Majesty's command."

"Wait, then." And the young king wrote the following letter that cost him more than one sigh, though at times his eyes flashed with triumph.

*Sir Cardinal,*

*Thanks to your wise counsel, and most particularly to your firm persistence, I've been able to conquer a weakness unworthy of a king. You have too skilfully arranged my future for me to allow an ungrateful impulse to destroy all your work. I have come to understand that I was wrong to want to deviate from the road you've paved for my life. Beyond doubt, it would have been a tragedy for France and for my family for me to allow a misunderstanding between me and my minister. That is certainly what would have happened if I'd made your niece my wife. I understand that now, and henceforth will do nothing to oppose the achievement of my destiny. I'm ready to marry the Infanta Marie-Thérèse.\* You can proceed with arranging the conference of negotiation.*

*Your affectionate,*

LOUIS

The king read over his letter, and then sealed it himself. "Take this letter to Sir Cardinal," he said.

The gentleman went out. At the door of Mazarin's suite, he met Bernouin, who was awaiting him anxiously. "Well?" asked the minister's confidential valet.

"A letter for His Eminence, Sir," said the gentleman.

"A letter! Ah! We've been expecting one, after that little trip this morning."

"Oh? You knew that His Majesty..."

"In our capacity as prime minister, it's the duty of our office to know everything. His Majesty begs and pleads, I presume?"

"I don't know about that but he sighed quite a bit while writing it."

"Yes, yes, we know what that means. We sigh from happiness as well as from sorrow, Sir."

"Maybe so but the king didn't look very happy when he came back, Sir."

"You must not have looked closely. Besides, you saw only His Majesty when he returned, with just his guard lieutenant. But I held His Eminence's telescope for him and looked through it once he got tired. The lovers both cried, I'm sure of it."

"And you think they cried from happiness?"

"No, from love, and they swore a thousand tender oaths that the king intends to fulfil. This letter is the beginning of that fulfilment."

"And what does His Eminence think of this love that, by the way, is no secret to anyone?"

Climbing the stairs, Bernouin took the arm of Louis's messenger and said, in an undertone, "Confidentially, His Eminence is counting on its success. I know it means we'll have war with Spain but bah! The nobility love a good war. The cardinal, moreover, will dower his niece royally, and more than royally. Money will flow, there will be festivals and fireworks, and everyone will be satisfied."

"Well," replied the gentleman, "it seems to me this is a pretty light letter to contain all that."

"Friend," said Bernouin, "I'm sure of what I say; Sir d'Artagnan told me everything."

"Really! And what did he say?"

"I approached him to ask if he had any news for the cardinal, without showing our hand, of course, for Sir d'Artagnan is a very sharp player. 'My dear Sir Bernouin,' he replied, 'the king is madly in love with Miss de Mancini, and that's all I have to say.' 'Indeed,' I said, 'do you think he's reached the point of opposing His Eminence's plans for him?' 'Ah, don't ask me that; I think the king is capable of anything. He has a soul of iron, and when he wants something, he wants it. If he's resolved in his mind to marry Miss de Mancini, he'll marry her.' And with that he left me, went to the stables, took a horse that he'd saddled himself, jumped astride and rode off as if the devil were after him."

"What do you think?"

"I think Sir Lieutenant knew more than he wanted to say."

"Then, in your opinion, Sir d'Artagnan..."

"Has gone, in all probability, after the exiles, to do whatever he can to help the king's love affair to success."

And speaking thus, the two confidants arrived at the door to His Eminence's study. His Eminence had shaken the gout and was pacing anxiously in his chamber, listening at the doors and peering out the windows. Bernouin came in, followed by the gentleman whom the king had ordered to deliver his letter into His Eminence's hands. Mazarin took the letter but before opening it he composed his features into a bland smile, a useful mask to conceal his emotions, whatever they might be. That way, no matter what impression the letter made upon him, that impression couldn't be read on his face. "Very good!" he said, after reading the letter over twice. "Excellent, Sir. Inform the king that I thank him for his obedience to the queen mother's wishes, and that I will do everything I can to enact his will."

The gentleman went out. As soon as the door closed behind him, the cardinal, who wore no masks for Bernouin, dropped the expression that had cloaked his countenance and said, in his darkest tone, "Call Sir de Brienne."

The secretary arrived five minutes later. "Sir," Mazarin told him, "I've just done a great service for the monarchy, the greatest I've ever rendered. You will bear this letter that is proof of it, to Her Majesty the queen mother, and when she's returned it to you, you will file it in Box B that contains similar documents related to my service."

Brienne went out, and as this momentous letter had already been opened, he didn't fail to read it on his way. It goes without saying that Bernouin, who followed at his elbow, also read it over his shoulder. Thereafter the news spread through the château so quickly that Mazarin had reason to fear it might reach the queen's ears before Sir de Brienne handed her Louis's letter. Shortly thereafter all the orders were given for departure, and Sir de Condé, after attending the king's pretence of a morning *lever*, inscribed on his tablets the city of Poitiers as the next destination of Their Majesties. And thus was unravelled in a few minutes an intrigue that had been the secret fascination of half the diplomats of Europe. It had, however, nothing very clear as an immediate result other than the poor Lieutenant of Musketeers' loss of his post and his income – though it's true that in exchange he had won his freedom. We shall soon see how Sir d'Artagnan took advantage of this. For the moment, we hope the reader will be so kind as to allow us to return to the Inn of The Médicis, and a window that had just opened there at the very moment when the orders were given up at the château for the king's departure. This window opened out from one of the rooms of Charles II. The unhappy prince had spent the night in bitter musing, his head in his hands and his elbows on a table, while Parry, old and weary, slept slumped in a corner, exhausted in mind and body. It was a strange destiny for that faithful servant, now witnessing a second generation suffering a frightful series of misfortunes like those that had burdened the first. When Charles II considered this new defeat he'd just suffered, when he fully comprehended the dreadful isolation that awaited him now that this last hope had failed him, he was seized by a sort of dizziness and had fallen back into an armchair. Then God took pity on the unfortunate prince and sent to him sleep, the innocent brother of death. He didn't awaken until half past six, when the sun was already shining into his room, and Parry, afraid to move lest he wake the prince, was looking with profound sadness at the young man, whose eyes were still red from the day before, and whose cheeks were pale from suffering and privation. Finally, the sound of some heavy wagons rumbling down toward the Loire had awakened Charles. He rose, looked around like a man at a loss for where he was, saw Parry, took his hand between his own, and told him to go and settle their account with Master Cropole. Master Cropole, when totalling the bill with Parry, acquitted himself, it must be said, like an honest man. He made only his usual complaint, that the two travellers had eaten nothing that was doubly embarrassing for his kitchen and because he had to charge them for something they hadn't consumed but was nonetheless wasted. Parry couldn't argue with this, and paid. "I hope," said the king, "that it wasn't the same with our horses. I didn't see their food listed on the bill, and it would be a shame for travellers like us to get down the road and find our horses collapsing from hunger."

Master Cropole, hearing this, assumed an air of majesty and replied that the feeding troughs of The Médicis were no less hospitable than its kitchen. The king mounted his horse, as did his servant, and the two took the road to Paris, encountering almost no one on the way, in the streets or outskirts of the town. The blow was most severe for the prince, as this was a new exile. Unfortunate people cling to their slightest hopes, as the fortunate do to their bounties, and when forced to leave the places where hope has tempted their hearts, they feel the deadly grief of the banished when they embark on their ships of deportation. A heart already wounded many times over suffers at every new sting, and good becomes no more than the brief absence of ill, a mere cessation of pain. In such misfortunes God seems to offer hope as a torment, like the drop of water the rich sinners in Hell asked of Lazarus. For a moment, when he'd been welcomed by his brother Louis, hope for Charles II had been more than just a fleeting joy. Then reality had intervened, and the blow of Mazarin's refusal had revealed that hope to be nothing more than a dream. Louis XIV's promise had been nothing more than a mockery, a farce – like Charles's crown, like his sceptre, like his so-called friends, like everything promised in his royal infancy and lost in his proscribed youth. Mockery! All promises were mockery for Charles II, all but the cold, dark repose promised by death. Such were the thoughts of this unhappy prince as, slumped in the saddle, almost dropping the reins, he rode into the gentle warm sunlight of May that in his sombre misanthropy the exile saw only as the final insult to his grief.

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**Remember! Again**

About half an hour after the two travellers left Blois, a rider rapidly approached them, raising his hat as he hurried past. The king paid little attention to the young man, who was in his early twenties, and who turned in the saddle to give a friendly wave back along the road toward a man standing in front of a gate, beyond which was a handsome house of red brick and white stone with a slate roof, off to the left of the road the prince was following. The man by the gate was tall and spare, with the white hair of the elderly, and responded to the young man's wave with gestures of farewell as tender as that of a father toward a son. The young man finally disappeared around a turn behind the tall trees that lined the road, and the old man was turning toward the house, when the two travellers, arriving in front of the gate, attracted his attention. The king, as we said, was riding with head bowed, arms loose, almost allowing the horse to choose his own way, while Parry, just behind him, had removed his hat to enjoy the warmth of the sun, and was looking left and right as they rode along. His eyes met those of the old man leaning against the gate, who suddenly gasped and took a step toward the two travellers, as if struck by an unexpected sight. From Parry, his eyes turned to the king, where his gaze paused for a moment. This scrutiny, brief though it was, caused an immediate change to come over the old man, for scarcely had he recognised the youngest of the two travellers – we say recognised, for only positive recognition could explain his behaviour – scarcely had he recognised the youngest of the two travellers when he clasped his hands together in surprise, then raised his hat and bowed so low he was almost kneeling. Distracted though the king was by his dark reflections, this nonetheless caught his attention. He stopped his horse, turned to Parry and said, "Lord above, Parry, who is this man who salutes me thus? Do you suppose, by any chance, that he knows me?" Parry, pale and agitated, had already turned his horse toward the gate. "Oh, Sire!" he said suddenly, stopping five or six paces from the old man. "Sire, I'm stunned and amazed, for I think I know this good man. Yes, it's he, himself! Would Your Majesty permit me to speak with him?"

"Of course."

"Is it really you, Sir Grimaud?" asked Parry.

"Yes, it's me," said the tall old man, straightening up but retaining his attitude of respect.

"I was right, Sire," said Parry. "This man is the servant of the Count of La Fère, that worthy gentlemen whom I've spoken of so often with Your Majesty that the memory of him must be engraved on both your mind and your heart."

"He who assisted the king my father in his final moments?" asked Charles. And the king visibly shuddered at the memory.

"Exactly, Sire."

"Alas!" said Charles. Then, addressing Grimaud, whose bright, intelligent eyes seemed to encourage him to speak, he said, "Your master, Sir le Count of La Fère, does he live nearby?"

"There," replied Grimaud, pointing to the red and white house beyond the gate.

"And is the Count of La Fère home at present?"

"Around back, under the chestnut trees."

"Parry," said the king, "I don't want to miss this unexpected chance to thank the gentleman who's shown our house such generosity and devotion. Please hold my horse, *my dear*."

And tossing his bridle to Grimaud, the king went alone toward Athos's house, like an equal to meet an equal. Charles, informed by the laconic Grimaud of where the count would be found, went around the house to the left and then straight to a tree-lined lane. It was easy to find; the tops of those tall trees, already covered with blossoms, towered above their neighbours. Stepping into the pattern of light and shadow cast by the variegated foliage above, the young prince saw a gentleman strolling with his arms behind his back, apparently plunged into a deep reverie. Without any doubt but that this was the gentleman so often described to him, Charles II marched right up to him without hesitation. At the sound of his footsteps the Count of La Fère turned, and seeing a stranger of elegant and noble aspect approaching him, he drew his hat from his head and waited. A few paces short of him Charles II stopped, took his own hat in his hand, and in response to the count's mute interrogation, said, "Sir le Count, I have come because I have a duty to perform. I have for a long time wished to express a deep gratitude to you. I am Charles II, son of Charles Stuart, who reigned over England and died on the scaffold."

At this illustrious name, Athos shivered with frisson, and at the sight of the young prince standing before him and holding out his hand, two tears momentarily stood in his beautiful eyes. He bowed respectfully but the prince took his hand and said, "See how unfortunate I am, Sir le Count. It's only by chance that I find myself here. Alas! I ought to have people around me whom I love and honour but I'm reduced to honouring their services in my heart and holding their names in my memory. If it wasn't for your servant, who recognised mine as we rode by your gate, I would have passed your house as if it were that of a stranger."

"All too true," said Athos, answering with his voice to the first part of the prince's speech, and with a bow to the second. "Indeed, Your Majesty has seen some dark days."

"And alas, there may be worse yet to come!" replied Charles.

"We must have hope, Sire!"

"Count, Count!" said Charles, shaking his head. "I hoped until last night, like a good Christian, I swear it."

Athos looked at the king as if to ask him to continue. "Oh, the story is easily told!" said Charles II. "Exiled, despoiled, and scorned, I resolved, despite my reluctance, to tempt fortune one more time. Is it not written on high that, for our family, all good and ill eternally derive from France? You know something about that, Sir, you who were one of those Frenchmen whom my unhappy father found at the foot of his scaffold on the day of his death, as he'd found them at his right hand on the day of battle."

"Sire," said Athos modestly, "I wasn't alone, and my companions and I did, under the circumstances, only what our honour as gentlemen compelled us to do, that's all. But Your Majesty was about to do me the honour to tell me..."



"Of course. I was under the protection – pardon my hesitation, Count but for a Stuart, as I know you understand, it's difficult to say that word – under the protection of my cousin the Stadtholder of Holland but he wouldn't undertake to do more than that without the intervention, or at least the authorisation, of France. So, I came to ask for the support of the King of France but he refused me."

"The king refused you, Sire!"

"Oh, not him! I must be fair to my younger brother Louis. It was Sir de Mazarin."

Athos bit his lips.

"You think perhaps I should have expected such a refusal," said the king, seeing the count's expression.

"That was indeed my thought, Sire," the count replied respectfully. "I know that Italian of old."

"I'd resolved to push this thing to its end and know once and for all the outcome of my destiny; I told my brother Louis that, to compromise neither France nor Holland, I'd pursue my throne personally, and just needed two hundred gentlemen, if he'd give them to me, or a million in gold, if he'd lend it to me."

"Well, Sire?"

"Well, Sir! I'm now experiencing something strange, the grim satisfaction of despair. There is in some souls, and now I find that I'm one of them, a sort of serenity in the realisation that all is lost and it's time, at last, to give in."

"Oh!" said Athos. "I hope that Your Majesty has not yet arrived at that extremity."

"To say that to me, Sir le Count, to try to revive hope in my heart, shows that you don't understand what I've told you. I came to Blois, Count, to beg of my brother Louis the alms of a million that I needed to resolve my troubles, and my brother Louis has refused me. So, you see that all is lost."

"Would Your Majesty permit me to voice a contrary opinion?"

"Count, do you think me so ill-informed that I don't understand my own situation?"

"Sire, I have always noted that it's when things seem darkest that there come the greatest turns of fortune."

"Thank you, Count, and it is indeed a thing of beauty to encounter hearts like yours with enough confidence in God and in monarchy not to despair of royal fortune, no matter how low it falls. Unfortunately, your words, dear Count, are like those remedies they call 'sovereign,' which might heal curable wounds but have no power over death. Thanks for your perseverance in attempting to console me, and for your past devotions but I know what to expect.

"Nothing will save me now. You see, my friend, I'm so convinced of it that I'm taking the road to final exile with ancient Parry, and will go savour my poignant sorrow in the hermitage Holland has offered me. There, believe me, Count, all will soon come to an ending and death will quickly find me, the way it's summoned by a soul that tires of its body and aspires only to heaven!"

"Your Majesty has a mother, a sister, and brothers; he is the head of a family and should ask a long life of God rather than a quick death. Your Majesty may be exiled, even hunted but you have the right on your side, and should aspire to the dangers of combat and affairs of state rather than the repose of heaven."

"Count," said Charles II with a smile of indescribable sadness, "have you ever heard of a king who's reconquered his realm with no more than a single servant the age of Parry and the three hundred crowns he carries in his purse?"

"No, Sire. But I've heard, more than once, of a dethroned king who's regained his realm with a firm will, perseverance, some friends, and a million in gold carefully deployed."

"But didn't you hear what I said? I asked for that million from my brother Louis and was refused."

"Sire," said Athos, "will Your Majesty grant me a few more minutes and listen closely to what I have to tell him?"

Charles II looked searchingly at Athos. "Willingly, Sir," he said.

"I hope Your Majesty will allow me to lead the way," the count said, going toward the house.

And he led the king into his study and gave him a chair. "Sire," he said, "Your Majesty has just informed me that, given the state of affairs in England, a million would suffice to reconquer his realm, isn't that so?"

"Enough to attempt it, at least, and to die like a king if it failed."

"Well, Sire! Will Your Majesty, as promised, deign to listen to what I have to say?"

Charles nodded his head in assent. Athos went to the door, looked out to make sure no one was near, closed and locked it, and returned. "Sire," he said, "Your Majesty knows well that I assisted the most noble and unfortunate Charles I when his executioners brought him from St. James to Whitehall."

"Yes, indeed, I recall and will always remember it."

"Sire, it's a mournful story for a son to hear, especially when he's already heard it countless times but I must repeat it to Your Majesty without leaving out a single detail."

"Speak, Sir."

"When the king your father mounted the scaffold, or rather passed from his room onto the scaffold built outside his window, everything had been prepared for his escape. The executioner had been abducted, a hole had been excavated beneath the floor of his apartment, and I myself was concealed below the planks when I suddenly heard them creak above my head."

"Parry has informed me of all these details, Sir."

Athos bowed and continued, "Then I will tell you what he could not, Sire, for the following passed only between God, your father, and me, and has been shared with no one, not even my dearest friends. 'Step away,' the august victim said to the masked executioner, 'but only for a moment, for I know I belong to you but strike only at my signal. I want to be free to utter my final prayer.'"

"Your pardon," said Charles II, his features pale, "but you, Count, who know so many details of that fatal event, even some, as you said just now, that you've never before revealed – do you know the name of that infernal executioner, of that coward who hid his face so he could assassinate a king with impunity?"

Athos also paled slightly. "His name?" he said. "Yes, I know it but I will not speak it."

"And what has become of him? No one in England knows his fate."

"He is dead."

"But he didn't die in bed, not a calm and gentle death, the death of an honest man?"

"He died a violent death on a terrible night, caught between the wrath of men and the gales of God. His body was pierced to the heart by a dagger and sank into the depths of the ocean. May God forgive his murderer!"

"Very well, then," said King Charles II, who saw that the count wished to say no more.

"The King of England, after having, as I said, spoken to the masked executioner, added, 'Don't strike me, understand, until I extend my arms and say, *Remember!*'"

"In fact," said Charles in a hollow voice, "I know that was the final word spoken by my unhappy father. But for what purpose, and to whom?"

"To the French gentleman hidden just beneath the scaffold."

"To you, Sir?"

"Yes, Sire, and every word he said, through those planks covered in black fabric, still resounds in my ears. The king got down on one knee. 'Count of La Fère,' he said, 'can you hear me?' 'Yes, Sire,' I replied. Then the king bent down closer." Charles II, heart beating with grief like a hammer, also leaned toward Athos to catch every word that escaped the count's lips. His head bent till it touched Athos's head. "As I said," continued the count, "the king leaned closer. 'Count of La Fère,' he said, 'you were unable to save me. It wasn't meant to be. Now, having spoken to men, and having spoken to God, though I commit a sacrilege, I say my final words to you. On behalf of a cause that I held sacred, I have lost the throne of my fathers and imperilled my children's inheritance.'"

Charles II hid his face between his hands, and a burning tear escaped from between his slender white fingers. "'A million in gold still remains,' continued the king. 'I buried it in the dungeon beneath the abbey keep in Newcastle just before I left that city.'"

Charles raised his head with an expression mixing sadness and joy that would have brought tears to the eyes of anyone who knew of his terrible trials. "A million!" he murmured. "Oh, Count!"

"Only you know of this money's existence. Use it when the time is right for the greatest benefit to my eldest son. And now, Count of La Fère, give me your final farewell. 'Farewell, Sire, farewell!' I whispered."

Charles II rose and went to lean his burning forehead against the cool glass of the window. "It was then," continued Athos, "that the king spoke the word *Remember!* – addressed to me. And as you see, Sire, I have remembered."

The king couldn't resist a flood of emotion. Athos saw his shoulders convulsively shaking, heard sobs escaping from deep in his chest. But Athos was silent, overwhelmed by the bitter memories he'd cascaded onto that royal head. Charles II, with a violent effort, left the window, swallowed his tears, and returned to his seat near the count. "Sire," Athos said, "I thought till today that it was not yet time to employ this final resource but I have kept my eyes fixed on England and I felt the time was approaching. Tomorrow I had planned to begin seeking Your Majesty's whereabouts and then go to him. Since he has come to me, it's clear that God intended us to find each other."

"Sir," said Charles, in a voice still choked with emotion, "you are to me as an angel sent by God, a saviour sent from beyond the grave by my father himself. But believe me, for ten years civil war has ravaged my country, slaughtering men and ploughing up the ground. We're as unlikely to find gold still buried in the earth as we are to find love in the hearts of my subjects."

"Sire, the place where His Majesty buried his million is well known to me, and I'm sure no one has disturbed it. Has Newcastle Abbey been demolished, torn down stone by stone? That's what it'd take."

"No, the abbey still stands but at the moment General Monck occupies Newcastle and is encamped there. The only place where I can still find aid, my last resource, is in the hands of my enemies."

"General Monck, Sire, can't have discovered the treasure of which I speak."

"Yes but must I go through Monck to recover this treasure? You can see, Count, that I must yield to destiny, as it strikes me down every time I get up. How could I do it with no servants but Parry, whom Monck has already chased off once? No, no, Count, we must accept this final blow."

"But where Your Majesty cannot go, what Parry cannot do, don't you think that I might succeed?"

"You, Count! You would go?"

"If it pleases Your Majesty, yes, Sire," said Athos, saluting the king, "I will go."

"But you're happy and settled here, Count!"

"I am never happy, Sire, when I have a duty unfulfilled, and the king your father charged me with the supreme duty to watch over your fortune and employ it when the time came. Your Majesty has but to give me the sign and I will go with him."

"Ah, Sir!" said the king, forgetting all royal etiquette and throwing his arms around Athos's neck. "You prove to me there's still a God in heaven, a God who sometimes sends his messengers to we who suffer on this earth."

Athos, deeply moved by the young man's emotional display, thanked him with profound respect and then went to the window. "Grimaud!" he called. "Our horses."

"What? You'd go right away?" said the king. "Truly, Sir, you're a man of wonder."

"Sire!" said Athos. "I can think of nothing more urgent than Your Majesty's service. Besides," he added with a smile, "it's a habit developed while in the service of the queen your aunt and the king your uncle. How could I do otherwise in the service of Your Majesty now?"

"What a man this is," murmured the king. Then, after a moment's reflection, "But no, Count, I can't expose you to such dangers. I have no way to reward such services."

"Bah!" said Athos, laughing. "Your Majesty must be jesting, as he has a million in gold! If only I had even half that sum, I'd already have raised a regiment. But, thanks be to God, I still have a few rolls of coins and some family jewellery that Your Majesty, I hope, will deign to let his devoted servant share with him."

"No but I'll share it with a friend – on the condition that my friend allows me to repay him later and share with him thereafter."

"Sire," said Athos, opening a coffer and drawing out gold and gems, "here's more than we need. Fortunately, there are four of us in case we encounter thieves."

Joy brought a rosy flush to the pale cheeks of Charles II. He saw two horses being led up to the portico by Grimaud, who was already booted for the road.

At the gate, the count said to a servant, "Blaisois, give this letter to the Viscount of Bragelonne. For everyone else, we've gone to Paris. I entrust the house to you, Blaisois." His servant bowed, embraced Grimaud, and shut the gate behind them.

### Aramis is sought but Only Bazin is found

Two hours had scarcely passed since the departure of the master of the house, whom Blaisois had watched until he'd disappeared on the road toward Paris, when a cavalier mounted on a sturdy piebald stopped in front of the gate and called, "*Whoa!*" to the stable boys.

They were gathered in a circle with the gardeners around Blaisois who was giving the estate's servants their orders, having been left in charge. The accent of this *Whoa!* Sounded familiar to Blaisois, who turned to look and then cried, "Sir d'Artagnan! ... You there, hurry, run and open the gate!"

A swarm of eight lively lads ran to the gate and quickly dragged it open, bowing and scraping, for everyone knew the welcome their master always gave this visitor even if the valet's remarks hadn't spurred them on. "Ah!" said Sir d'Artagnan with a pleasant smile, balancing on one stirrup before dropping to the ground. "And where is my dear count?"

"Your luck is out, Sir," said Blaisois, "and so is that of our master the count, for what will he say when he finds that he's missed you? Sir le Count, by a stroke of fate, departed less than two hours ago." D'Artagnan didn't seem very concerned. "All right, Blaisois," he said. "Since you speak the purest French of anyone, you can give me a lesson in grammar and proper speech while I await your master's return."

"That's impossible, Sir; it would be far too long a wait," said Blaisois.

"You don't expect him back today?"

"Nor tomorrow, Sir, nor the day after that. Sir le Count has gone on a journey."

"A journey!" said d'Artagnan. "Nonsense! Admit you're telling me a fable."

"Sir, it's the absolute truth. Sir le Count did me the honour of placing the house in my care, and he added in that voice of his, so full of authority and affection, 'Tell anyone who asks that I've gone to Paris.'"

"Well, then!" said d'Artagnan. "If he's off to Paris, that's all I needed to know. You should have told me that right away, you clown. You say he has a two-hour lead?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I'll catch up with him in no time. Is he alone?"

"No, Sir."

"Who's with him?"

"A gentleman I don't know, an old man, and Sir Grimaud."

"They won't ride as fast as I do ... I'm off!"

"Sir, if you will only listen to me for a moment," said Blaisois, putting a hand to the horse's reins.

"All right but be quick and don't make a speech out of it."

"Well, Sir! I believe this mention of Paris was nothing but a decoy."

"Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan. "A decoy, eh?"

"Indeed, Sir. I would swear that Sir le Count's destination isn't Paris."

"Why do you think that?"

"Why? Because Sir Grimaud knows where our master is headed, and he promised me that, the next time he went to Paris, he'd take some money along for delivery to my wife."

"Oh, so you have a wife?"

"I have one, a local girl but Sir thought her a chatterbox, so I sent her to live in Paris. Sometimes that's inconvenient but at other times it's quite pleasant."

"I understand but to the point: you don't think the count has gone to Paris?"

"No, Sir, for then Grimaud would have broken his word that is quite impossible."

"That is impossible," repeated d'Artagnan, suddenly thoughtful, because he was quite convinced. "Well done, good Blaisois, and thank you."

Blaisois bowed. "Now, see here, you know I'm not just curious. I've genuine business to conduct with your master. So think of anything he might've said if you can. A single word, even a syllable, you understand, could put me on the trail."

"Upon my word, Sir, I heard nothing. I'm completely ignorant of Sir le Count's destination. And I never eavesdrop at doors, as such things just aren't done in this house, it's quite forbidden."

"*Dame*, that is going to make it difficult," said d'Artagnan. "But you must, at least, know when he's planning to return?"

"No more, Sir, than I know where he's gone."

"Come, Blaisois, are you holding out on me?"

"Sir doubts my sincerity! Oh, Sir, I'm stricken with grief!"

"The devil take his golden tongue! A fool with a loose word would be worth a dozen of him," muttered d'Artagnan. Then, aloud, "Farewell, then!"

"Sir, please depart knowing I tender you all my respects."

"Pompous ass," d'Artagnan said to himself. "He's insufferable!"

He gave the house a final glance, turned his horse and rode off with the nonchalance of a man who hasn't a worry in the world. But once he was around the wall and out of sight, he took a deep breath and said, "Could Athos actually be at home? No, all those idlers loitering around Blaisois would have been hard at work if their master was around. Athos, on a journey? It's incomprehensible."

He shook his head. "Ah, bah! This is all damned mysterious. But, anyway, he's not the man I need right now. That man's in Melun, in a certain presbytery I know of. And that's forty-five leagues from here that means four days. On, then – the weather is fine, and I'm free to go where I will! Never mind the distance."

Then he put his horse into a trot, on the road toward Paris. On the fourth day he arrived in Melun, as predicted. D'Artagnan rarely paused to ask for directions or other common information unless he was seriously off course, preferring to rely on his own wits and perceptions, his thirty years of experience, and his habit of reading the faces of both men and their houses. At Melun, d'Artagnan quickly found his presbytery, a charming old building with plastered red brick walls, vines climbing up to the gutters, and a stone cross atop the gable of the roof. From the ground floor of this house came a noise, or rather a clamour of voices, like the cheeping of chicks when the chattering brood has just hatched. The deepest of these voices was reciting the alphabet in fat, fruity tones, pausing to correct his followers and lecture them on their mistakes. D'Artagnan recognised this voice, and as the ground floor window was open, he leaned down over his horse and called out under the vines that grew above the window, "Bazin! Hello, my dear Bazin!"

A short, fat man, with a flat face, a skull crowned with grey hair cut in an imitation tonsure, and an old black velvet cap, rose when he heard d'Artagnan. Though instead of *rose*, it would be more accurate to say *leapt up*. Bazin jumped to his feet, upending his little school chair that the children scrambled to grab in a scrum that resembled the Greeks trying to wrest the body of Patroclus from the Trojans. Bazin not only jumped, he also dropped his chalk board and stick. "You!" he said. "*You*, Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Yes, me. Where is Aramis ... I mean the Sir d'Herblay ... or do I mean the Vicar General?"

"Why, Sir," Bazin said with dignity, "*My Lord* is at his diocese."

"You say what?" said d'Artagnan.

Bazin repeated his statement. "*Oh that!* So, Aramis has a diocese?"

"Yes, Sir. Why not?"

"He's a bishop, then?"

"Where have you been keeping yourself?" said Bazin cheekily. "How did you not know that?"

"My dear Bazin, we men of the sword, being pagans, know very well when a man is made a colonel or a marshal of France but devil take me if I'd know if he were promoted to bishop, archbishop, or even pope! We don't hear such news until everyone else is already over it."

"Hush! Such talk!" said Bazin, glaring. "You'll ruin these children, whom I've tried so hard to teach proper behaviour."

In fact, the children seemed quite taken with d'Artagnan, admiring his horse, his long sword, his spurs, and martial air. They particularly admired his commanding voice and all began swearing, "Devil take me! Devil take me!" amid gales of laughter that amused the old musketeer but made the pedagogue lose his head.

"There!" he said. "You see? Shush, you brats! Whenever you show up, Sir d'Artagnan, all my best efforts are undone! Disorder rides in with you, and Babel is revived! Good God, you rascals, *shush!*" And the worthy Bazin rained blows right and left that didn't silence the students but certainly changed the nature of their cries. "At least," he panted, "you won't lead anyone astray this time."

"Is that what you think?" said d'Artagnan with a smile that made Bazin's shoulders shudder.

"Oh, yes he could," Bazin muttered.

"Where is your master's new diocese?"

"My Lord René is Bishop of Vannes."

"Who appointed him?"

"Who but the Superintendent of Finances, our neighbour?"

"What! Sir Fouquet?"

"Exactly."

"Aramis is in favour with him?"

"My Lord preaches every Sunday in the superintendent's chapel at Vaux, and then they go hunting together."

"Ah!"

"And My Lord often composed his homilies, or rather, his sermons, with the advice of Sir le Surintendant."

"Oh? And does he preach in verse, our worthy bishop?"

"Sir, do not mock at sacred matters, for the love of God!"

"Settle down, Bazin! Then Aramis is at Vannes?"

"At Vannes, in Brittany."

"Now I think, Bazin that you're bearing false witness."

"No, just look, Sir, the apartments in the presbytery are empty."

"He's right," d'Artagnan said to himself as a glance told him the place had the air of an empty house.

"But My Lord must have written to inform you of his promotion."

"When did this happen?"

"A month ago."

"Oh, that's no time at all! Aramis must not have needed me for anything yet. But see here, Bazin, why didn't you go with your master?"

"I can't, Sir, I have my duties here."

"Your lessons?"

"And my little penitents."

"What, you confess them? Have you been ordained a priest?"

"I'm going to be. It's my calling!"

"When do you take orders?"

"Oh," Bazin said complacently, "now that my Lord is a bishop, I'll have my orders in no time, or at least my dispensations."

And he rubbed his hands together. *Deluded or not, he certainly believes it*, d'Artagnan thought. "Some dinner, Bazin."

“At once, Sir.”

“A chicken, some soup, and a bottle of honey.”

“It’s Saturday, a day of fasting,” said Bazin.

“I have a dispensation,” said d’Artagnan.

Bazin looked at him sceptically. “Don’t look at me like that, you cockroach!” said the musketeer. “If you, the servant, are counting on receiving dispensations, then I, the bishop’s comrade, am certainly entitled to some myself, so don’t tell my stomach it can’t have meat. Now be good to me, Bazin, or by God, I’ll complain to the king, and then you’ll never confess anyone. You know very well that the nomination of bishops is the king’s prerogative, and the king’s on my side, so I’ll have my way.”

Bazin smiled smugly. “You may have the king but we have the Superintendent of Finances,” he said.

“Are you mocking the king?”

Bazin said nothing but his smile was eloquent. “My supper,” said d’Artagnan. “It’s going on seven o’clock.”

Bazin turned and ordered the eldest of his students to go warn the cook. Meanwhile d’Artagnan was looking over the presbytery. “Huh,” he said. “I doubt My Lord finds this worthy of his new grandeur.”

“Oh, we have the Château de Vaux,” said Bazin.

“How’s that compared to the Louvre?” d’Artagnan replied archly.

“It’s rather better,” replied Bazin with the greatest complacence.

“Is it?” said d’Artagnan. He might have prolonged the discussion to assert the superiority of the Louvre but the lieutenant noticed that his horse was still tied to the door handle. “The devil!” he said.

“Have my horse attended to! Your master the bishop hasn’t its equal anywhere in his stables.”

Bazin looked askance at his horse and said, “Sir le Surintendant has given us two pair from his stables, any one of which is worth four of yours.”

D’Artagnan flushed, and his hand twitched as he considered where to bring it down on Bazin’s head. But the impulse passed, he reflected a moment, and contented himself with muttering, “The devil! I was right to leave the king’s service.” He added aloud, “Tell me, worthy Bazin, how many musketeers serve Sir le Surintendant?”

“With his wealth, he could hire every musketeer in the realm,” replied Bazin, setting down his chalkboard and chasing the children away with his stick.

“The devil!” d’Artagnan repeated.

Just then it was announced that his supper was served and he followed the cook into the dining room, where his meal awaited him. D’Artagnan sat at the table and boldly attacked his chicken. “It looks to me,” said d’Artagnan, gnawing at the tough flesh of his poultry, a fowl they’d apparently forgotten to fatten, “like I made a mistake in not seeking to serve this new master. It seems this Superintendent of Finances is a mighty lord indeed. Really, we know very little at Court, blinded as we are by the rays of the royal sun. It prevents us from seeing the light of other stars that are different suns just a bit farther away.”

Since d’Artagnan, from pleasure and purpose, liked to get people to talk about things that might interest him, he did his best to bandy words with Master Bazin but it was a waste of effort. Other than continual and hyperbolic praise of Sir le Surintendant, Bazin, who was on his guard, would say little. He replied to d’Artagnan’s sallies with bland platitudes that did nothing to satisfy his curiosity, and as soon as he’d finished eating the lieutenant went off to bed in a bad temper. D’Artagnan was shown by Bazin to a rather mediocre room that contained a decidedly bad bed but d’Artagnan could sleep anywhere. He’d been told that Aramis had gone off with the keys to his private apartment that didn’t surprise him, as Aramis was a careful and orderly man, and moreover usually had plenty to hide in his private rooms. He had therefore attacked the bad bed as boldly as he had the tough chicken, and since he had an ability to sleep as healthy as his appetite, he took no more time to drop off than it had taken him to strip his chicken’s bones. As he was no longer in anyone else’s service, d’Artagnan had promised himself that he would sleep as long and deeply as he liked but despite the good faith in which he’d made that vow, and no matter how badly he wished to stick to it, he was awakened in the middle of the night by a great clatter of passing carriages and mounted servants. A sudden flare of lights set the walls of his room aglow, and he jumped out of bed in his nightshirt and ran to the window. *Is it the king going by?* He thought, rubbing his eyes. *A commotion like this can only belong to royalty.*

“Long live Sir le Surintendant!” called or rather acclaimed a voice from the ground floor that he recognised as that of Bazin who was waving a handkerchief in one hand and holding high a candelabra in the other.

D’Artagnan saw something like a brilliant human form lean out and bow from the window of the principal carriage, while loud bursts of laughter, no doubt evoked by the comical figure of Bazin, echoed from the same carriage, leaving a hearty wake of joy in the train of the passing procession. “I should have known it wasn’t the king,” said d’Artagnan. “No one laughs so loudly when the king passes by. Hey! Bazin!” he cried to his neighbour, who was leaning three-quarters of the way out his window so he could watch the carriages drive off. “Hey! Who was that?”

“That,” said Bazin smugly, “was Sir Fouquet.”

“And who were all those people?”

“That was Sir Fouquet’s court.”

“Oh ho!” said d’Artagnan. “Now what would Sir de Mazarin think of that?” And he went thoughtfully back to bed, wondering how it was that Aramis always seemed to be in favour with the great powers of the realm. “Is he luckier than I am, or just smarter? Bah!” This was the word with which d’Artagnan, having grown wise, now concluded every internal monologue. Formerly he had said, “*God be with you!*” which was a spur to action but now that he was older, he said a philosophical, “Bah!” and that reminded him to rein in his passions.

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D’Artagnan seeks Porthos but finds Only Mousqueton

Once d’Artagnan was convinced that the “Vicar General” d’Herblay was really absent, and that his friend was nowhere to be found in Melun or environs, he rode away from Bazin without regret, casting a sour look over the magnificent Château de Vaux as he passed that was even then beginning to shine with the splendour that would be its ruin. Then, setting his jaw in defiance and determination, he pricked up his horse and said, “Come, come, there’s still Pierrefonds, where I’ll find the finest of fellows with the deepest of pockets. And funds are all I need, since I already have a plan.”

We’ll spare our readers the mundane events of d’Artagnan’s travels that, going by way of Nanteuil-le-Haudouin and Crépy, reached Pierrefonds on the morning of the third day. From a distance, he saw the old castle of King Louis XII, a domain of the Crown looked after by an old concierge. It was one of those marvellous fortified manors of the Middle Ages surrounded by walls twenty feet thick and a hundred feet tall. D’Artagnan surveyed those walls, measured the towers with his eyes, and then rode down into the valley beyond. In the distance loomed Porthos’s château, situated on the banks of a broad pond and in front of a magnificent forest. It was Pierrefonds, the same estate we’ve already had the honour to describe to our readers elsewhere, so we’ll just content ourselves here with naming it. After the beautiful trees, with the May sun gilding the green hillsides sloping away toward Compiègne, the first thing d’Artagnan saw was a sort of rolling wooden box drawn by two lackeys and pushed by two others. Within this rolling box was some huge green and gold thing being pushed and pulled through the park’s smiling glades. From a distance, this thing was unidentifiable; when he got closer, it appeared to be a great barrel wrapped in gold-trimmed green fabric; and then at last he could make out that it was a man, or rather a man-sized wobble toy, whose wide lower half expanded to fill the rolling box. This man, in fact, was Mousqueton but a Mousqueton grown immense, with grey hair and a face as red as Punchinello’s. “By God!” cried d’Artagnan. “It’s that dear Sir Mousqueton!”

“What?” cried the fat man, “Oh, what happiness! What joy! It’s Sir d’Artagnan! Stop, you rascals!”

These last words were addressed to the lackeys pushing and pulling him. The vehicle came to a halt and the four lackeys, with military precision, doffed their braided hats and lined up behind the box.

“Oh, Sir d’Artagnan!” said Mousqueton. “I’d embrace you on my knees but I’ve become sadly immobile, as you see.”

*“Dame, dear Mousqueton, age strikes us all.”*

“No, Sir, it isn’t age, it’s infirmity and affliction.”

“Infirm, Mousqueton? You?” said d’Artagnan, looking him over as he took a turn around the box. “Are you crazy, old friend? You’re as strong as a three-hundred-year-old oak tree, thank God!”

“Ah but my legs, Sir, my legs!” said the faithful servant.

“What about your legs?”

“They don’t want to carry me anymore.”

“What ingrates! And you’ve always fed them so well, Mousqueton.”

“Yes, they have nothing to complain about in that regard,” said Mousqueton with a sigh. “I’ve always given my body everything it asked for; I’m not selfish.” And Mousqueton sighed anew.

*Does Mousqueton sigh this way because he wishes he too were a baron?* D’Artagnan thought.

“My God, Sir!” said Mousqueton, recovering from his sad reverie. “How glad my Lord will be that you’ve thought of him.”

“Good old Porthos!” said d’Artagnan. “I’m eager to embrace him.”

“Oh!” said Mousqueton, clearly moved. “I’ll be sure to tell him that when I write to him, Sir.”

“What?” cried d’Artagnan. “Why write to him?”

“Because I must. This very day, without delay.”

“Isn’t he here?”

*“But no, Sir.”*

“Is he nearby? Has he gone far?”

“I wish I knew, Sir,” said Mousqueton.

“God!” cried the musketeer, stamping his foot. “Must I lose every hand? But Porthos is such a homebody!”

“No one more so than my Lord. However…”

“However, what?”

“When a friend beckons…”

“A friend?”

“But yes! The worthy Sir d’Herblay.”

“It was Aramis who called for Porthos?”

“This was how it happened, Sir d’Artagnan. Sir d’Herblay wrote to my Lord…”

“He did?”

“Indeed, Sir, a letter so urgent it knocked everything for a loop!”

“Tell me about that, dear friend,” said d’Artagnan, “but first, send these fellows out of earshot.”

Mousqueton thundered, “Be gone, rascals!” so powerfully that without the words, the breath alone would have been enough to blow the 4 lackeys away.

D’Artagnan sat down on the shaft of Mousqueton’s chariot and opened his ears. “Sir,” said Mousqueton, “my Lord received a letter from Bishop d’Herblay eight or nine days ago; it was on our day of rustic diversions that makes it the Wednesday before last.”

“What’s that?” said d’Artagnan. “The day of rustic diversions?”

“Yes, Sir; we have so many diversions out here in the country that it overwhelmed us, so we were forced to organise them into a schedule.”

“Now there I recognise the style of Porthos! Such a thing would never have occurred to me. Though it’s true I’ve never been overwhelmed by too many diversions.”

“Well, we were,” said Mousqueton.

“So, how did you organise them?” asked d’Artagnan.

“That’s rather complicated, Sir.”

“No matter, we have plenty of time, and you speak so well, dear Mousqueton, that it’s a pleasure to listen to you.”

“It’s quite true,” said Mousqueton, gratified at having his virtues recognised, “that I’ve learned a lot in my time with my Lord.”

“I await the schedule of diversions, Mousqueton, and with impatience, for I want to know if I’ve come on a good day.”

“Alas, Sir d’Artagnan,” said Mousqueton sadly, “but since my Lord’s departure, the diversions have been suspended.”

“Well, then, Mousqueton, tell me how it used to be.”

“What day should I start with?”

*“For the love of God, what do I care? Start with Sunday, that’s the Lord’s Day.”*

“With Sunday, Sir?”

“Yes.”

“Sunday is devoted to religion: my Lord goes to Mass, offers the blessed bread, hears sermons and has discussions with our household almoner. This isn’t very diverting but we’re expecting a Carmelite from Paris to take over our almonry, an eloquent speaker, or so we’ve heard. Hopefully that will wake us up because our current chaplain puts us to sleep. So that’s Sunday, religious diversions. On Monday, worldly diversions.”

“Oh ho!” said d’Artagnan. “And what do you place in that category, Mousqueton? Let’s hear about the worldly diversions!”

“Sir, on Monday we socialize; we receive and pay visits, we play the lute and dance, we make rhymes, and burn a little incense in honour of the ladies.”

*“Plague! That is the height of gallantry,”* said the musketeer, summoning all the strength in his jaw muscles to keep from smiling.

“On Tuesday, diversions of learning.”

“Oh, good!” said d’Artagnan. “Such as? Give us some details, my dear Mousqueton.”

“My Lord has bought a globe that I’ll show you: it fills the whole tower room, except for a gallery he had built around the top, and has a small sun and moon hanging from strings and brass wires. It rotates and is very beautiful. My Lord points out distant seas and countries to me; we have no plans to go to them but it’s very interesting.”

“Interesting – yes, that’s the word,” repeated d’Artagnan. “And on Wednesday?”

“Rustic diversions, as I’ve already had the honour to tell you, Sir le Sir. We review my Lord’s sheep and goats, and we have the shepherdesses play pipes and dance with torches, as is described in a book in my Lord’s library called *Bergeries*. I think the author died just last month.”

“Sir Racan maybe?” said d’Artagnan.

“That’s right, Sir Racan. But that’s not all: we go fishing in the little canal and then we dine wearing crowns of flowers. And that’s Wednesday.”

“Plague take me, Wednesday doesn’t sound bad at all,” said d’Artagnan. “And Thursday? What diversions are left for poor Thursday?”

“Plenty, Sir,” said Mousqueton, smiling. “Thursday we have Olympic diversions. Ah, Sir, it’s superb! We have all my Lord’s young vassals come and race, wrestle, and throw the discus. Nobody throws the discus like my Lord, and when he delivers a punch, oh, what a shame!”

“A shame? Really?”

“Yes, Sir – I’m afraid we had to give up punching with the cestus. He broke too many heads, jaws, and ribs. It’s a lovely sport but nobody wanted to play anymore.”

“So, his wrist...”

“Is as strong as ever, Sir! These days my Lord is a little weaker in the legs, as he himself admits but his strength has all gone into his arms, so that...”

“So that he’s still strong enough to knock out an ox.”

“Better than that, Sir, he knocks down walls. Recently, after having dined with one of his farmers – he’s so popular with his people – after dinner as a joke he punched the wall, the wall collapsed, the roof fell in, and three men and an old woman were crushed.”

“Good lord, Mousqueton! And your master?”

“Oh, my Lord just got a few scratches on his head. We bathed his wounds in some honey the nuns gave us. But there was nothing wrong with his hand.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Devil take the Olympic diversions! They must cost him dearly, because the poor widows and orphans...”

“They get their pensions, Sir. A tenth of my Lord’s fortune has gone that way.”

“Let’s move on to Friday,” said d’Artagnan.

“Friday’s diversions are noble and warlike. We hunt, make weapons, train falcons, and tame horses. Then Saturday is for intellectual pursuits: we test our wits, admire my Lord’s pictures and statues, even write a little and draw up plans – and then fire my Lord’s cannon.”

“You draw plans and then fire cannons...”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Truly, *my friend*,” said d’Artagnan, “Sir du Vallon possesses the most subtle and flexible mind I know. There’s only one kind of diversion he’s overlooked, it seems to me.”

“What’s that, Sir?” asked Mousqueton anxiously.

“The fleshly diversions.”

Mousqueton blushed. “What do you mean by that, Sir?” he said, looking down in embarrassment.

“I mean the delights of the table, of good honey and an evening spent emptying the bottle.”

“Oh, Sir, those diversions don’t count because we pursue them every day.”

“My brave Mousqueton,” replied d’Artagnan, “forgive me but I’ve been so absorbed in your account of diversions, I forgot the main point of our conversation that was to learn what our Vicar General d’Herblay had written to your master.”

“That’s true, Sir, we got distracted by the diversions,” said Mousqueton. “Well, Sir, I’ll tell you the whole thing.”

“I’m listening, my dear Mousqueton.”

“Wednesday...”

“The day of rustic diversions?”

“Yes. A letter came, and I brought it to him with my own hands, for I recognised the writing.”

“Well?”

“My Lord read it and cried, ‘Quick, my horses! My arms!’”

“My God!” said d’Artagnan. “It must have been a duel!”

“No, Sir, it contained just these words: ‘Dear Porthos, depart now if you want to get here before the Equinox. I await you.’”

*“God be with you!”* said d’Artagnan thoughtfully. “That does sound urgent.”

“That’s what I thought. Anyway,” continued Mousqueton, “my Lord left the same day, with his steward, hoping to arrive in time.”

“And did he arrive in time?”

“I hope so. My Lord, who can be excitable, as you know, Sir, kept saying, ‘Thunder of God! Who is this Equinox? No matter, he’ll have to have some mighty fine horses to arrive before I do!’”

“So, do you think Porthos got there first?” asked d’Artagnan.

“I’m sure of it. This Equinox, no matter how rich he is, can’t have horses to compare to my Lord’s!”

D’Artagnan suppressed the urge to laugh because the brevity of Aramis’s letter provoked some serious thought. He followed Mousqueton, or rather Mousqueton’s chariot, up to the château where they sat him down to a sumptuous meal and he was honoured like a king but he could get nothing more out of Mousqueton but worry and tears. D’Artagnan, after a night spent on an excellent bed, continued to ponder Aramis’s letter, wondering what the approach of the equinox had to do with Porthos’s affairs but came to no conclusion, unless it had something to do with some love affair of the amorous bishop in which, for some reason, the day had to be equal in length to the night. Shortly thereafter, d’Artagnan left Pierrefonds as he had left Melun and as he’d left the château of the Count of La Fère, with a touch of that melancholy that was the darkest of d’Artagnan’s moods. Riding head bowed, eyes unfocused, legs hanging limp at his horse’s sides, he said to himself, in that vague reverie that sometimes amounts to true eloquence, “No friends, no future, no nothing! With the loss of my old comrades goes the last of my strength! Old age creeps up on us, cold and inexorable, wrapping in its funereal crepe all that was brilliant and capable in youth, then throws that burden over its shoulder and carries it to the bottomless abyss of death.” A shudder shook the Gascon to his heart, usually so stalwart and brave against life’s misfortunes, and for a few moments the clouds looked black to him and the earth seemed nothing but cemetery dirt about to be shovelled on a grave. “Where am I going?” he said to himself. “What do I think I’m doing? Alone ... all alone without family or friends ... Bah!” he suddenly cried. And he put his spurs into his horse, who’d found nothing to be sad about in the abundant oats of Pierrefonds, and took advantage of this permission to let himself out and show his good humour by galloping for a full league. “To Paris!” d’Artagnan said to himself. And the next day he arrived in Paris. His travels had taken him 10 days.

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D’Artagnan brings his Business to Paris

The lieutenant dismounted in front of a shop in the Rue des Lombards at the sign of the Golden Pestle. A good-looking man wearing a white apron and stroking his grey moustache with a plump hand gave a cry of joy at the sight of the piebald horse and its rider. “Sir le Sir!” he said. “It’s you!”

“Hello, Planchet!” replied d’Artagnan, stooping slightly to enter the shop.

“Quick, someone,” cried Planchet, “take Sir d’Artagnan’s horse, make up his room, and prepare his supper!”

“Thanks, Planchet! Hello, my children,” said d’Artagnan to the hurrying shop boys.

“Will you just give me a moment to send off this order of coffee, molasses, and raisins?” said Planchet. “It’s going to the kitchens of Sir le Surintendant.”

“Send it, send it.”

“It won’t take but a moment, and then we’ll have supper.”

“Arrange for us to dine in private,” said d’Artagnan. “I want to talk with you.” Planchet gave his old master a wary look. “Oh, don’t worry! It’s nothing disagreeable,” said d’Artagnan.

“Good! All the better!” And Planchet breathed freely again, as d’Artagnan sat himself down on a basket of corks and absorbed the ambience. The shop was well stocked and pervaded with an aroma of ginger, cinnamon, and cracked pepper that made d’Artagnan sneeze. The shop boys, happy to be in the presence of a warrior as renowned as a Lieutenant of Musketeers who personally served the king, worked with conspicuous diligence while serving their customers with a snotty disdain that more than one took notice of. Planchet counted the day’s money and closed his ledgers while making polite asides to his old master. He had with his customers the brusque manner and high-handed familiarity of the successful merchant who serves everyone on an equal footing. D’Artagnan observed these nuances with a pleasure we shall analyse later. He watched as night came on, and finally Planchet led him up to a room on the first floor, where, among the crates and bales, a very well-furnished table was set for 2 guests. D’Artagnan took advantage of a moment of respite to consider the appearance of Planchet, whom he hadn’t seen for a year. The intelligent Planchet might be a little softer in the middle but his wits were still sharp. His shining eyes still gazed keenly out of their sunken orbits, and fat that softens all the features of the human face, had yet to swallow his prominent cheekbones, indicators of shrewdness and avarice, or his pointed chin that showed finesse and perseverance. Planchet reigned in his dining room with as much majesty as in his shop. He offered his old master a meal that was frugal but entirely Parisian: a roast chicken from the baker’s oven, with vegetables, salad, and dessert from the shop itself. D’Artagnan was pleased when the grocer drew from his private stock a bottle of that Anjou honey that, throughout d’Artagnan’s life, had always been his favourite drink. “Formerly, Sir,” said Planchet, with a smile brimming with good nature, “I was the one who drank your honey, so it’s only fitting that now you drink mine.”

“And with God’s grace, friend Planchet, I’ll continue to drink it for a while to come, I hope, for now at last I’m free.”

“Free! You’ve gone on leave, Sir?”

“Forever!”

“You’ve quit the service?” said Planchet, stupefied.

“Yes, I’ve retired.”

“And the king?” cried Planchet who couldn’t imagine how the king could manage without d’Artagnan.

"The king will have to try his luck with others. ... But now that we've eaten, and you're in an expansive mood, it encourages me to share secrets, so open your ears."

"They're open."

And Planchet uncorked another bottle of the white honey with a laugh that was honest rather than knowing. "No, let me keep my wits about me," said d'Artagnan.

"What, you, to lose your head, Sir...?"

"Well, now that my head is my own, I intend to take good care of it. First, let's talk about finances; how are we doing for money?"

"Quite well, Sir. The twenty thousand livres I had from you are invested in my business that earns nine percent; I give you seven, with two remaining for me."

"And you're happy with that?"

"Delighted. Are you bringing me more?"

"Better than that ... but do you need more?"

"Oh, not at all. I can get credit from anyone now. I'm expanding my business."

"That was your plan."

"I play the banker a bit. I buy the goods of my peers when they're overextended and lend money to those who are struggling to pay debts."

"Without usury?"

"Oh, Sir! In just the last week I've had two encounters on the boulevard over the word you just pronounced."

"What!"

"It was a straight loan, you understand – the borrower gave me a deposit of brown sugar as security on condition I could sell it if he didn't repay me by a certain date. I lent him a thousand livres; when he didn't repay me, I sold the sugar for thirteen hundred livres. When he heard that, he demanded three hundred livres. I refused, pretending I'd sold the sugar for only nine hundred. He called me a usurer. I asked him to repeat that word at night on the boulevard. He's a former guardsman, so he came, and I passed your old sword through his left thigh."

"*Tudieu!* You're some kind of a banker, you are!" said d'Artagnan.

"Above thirteen percent, I fight," replied Planchet. "Those are my principles."

"Take only twelve," said d'Artagnan, "and call the rest premium and brokerage fees."

"That's good advice, Sir. Now, your business?"

"Ah, Planchet! It's a long story, and hard to explain."

"Tell me anyway." D'Artagnan scratched at his moustache like a man unsure of where to start and how much he dared say. "Is it an investment?" asked Planchet.

"In a way."

"With a decent return?"

"A beautiful return: four hundred percent, Planchet."

Planchet smacked the table so hard the bottles jumped and clattered. "Good God! Is it possible?"

"It will probably be higher," said d'Artagnan coolly, "but I'd rather be conservative."

"The devil!" said Planchet, leaning closer. "That ... Sir, that's incredible. How much can we put in?"

"Twenty thousand livres each, Planchet."

"That's your entire stake, Sir. For how long?"

"For one month."

"And that gets us?"

"A profit of fifty thousand livres each."

"It's monstrous ...! To win a pot like that, there must be fighting involved."

"I do believe there will be a fair amount of fighting," said d'Artagnan, just as coolly. "But this time, Planchet, it's just the two of us, and I'll risk the fighting."

"Sir, I won't let you risk it alone."

"Planchet, it's out of the question. You'd have to leave your business."

"The affair isn't in Paris then?"

"No."

"Ah! Abroad?"

"In England."

"A country wide open for trade, indeed," said Planchet. "A country I know well. Just out of curiosity, Sir, what sort of affair is this?"

"Planchet, it's a restoration."

"Of monuments?"

"Yes, or a monument. We're going to restore Whitehall."

"That *does* sound important. And you think in a month...?"

"I can manage it."

"That's your specialty, Sir, and once you get going..."

"Yes, I know my business – but I'll consult with you and listen to what you have to say."

"That's quite an honour ... but I don't know much about these monuments."

"Planchet, you're quite wrong, and are as able an architect as I am."

"Thank you."

"I had, I confess, been tempted to offer the partnership to my old comrades but none of them were home. Which is a shame, because I know no one more daring or skilful."

"*Ah that!* So, you think there will be opposition and the business will have competition?"

"Oh, yes, Planchet, I do."

"I'm keen to hear the details, Sir."

"Very well, then, Planchet: lock all the doors."

"Yes, Sir."

And Planchet locked them up tight. "Good. Now, come over here." Planchet obeyed. "And open the window, so the sound of passers-by and wagons will drown out what we have to say." Planchet opened the window as he'd been ordered, and the clamour of the street engulfed the room: voices calling, wheels clattering, dogs barking, it was just as deafening as d'Artagnan had hoped. He took a sip of the white honey, leaned forward and said, "Planchet, I have a plan."

"Ah, Sir! That's just like you," replied the grocer, trembling in anticipation.

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### The Company formed in the *Rue des Lombards* under the Sign of the Golden Pestle to execute the Plan of d'Artagnan

After a moment of silence, during which d'Artagnan seemed to gather a great many thoughts, he said, "Of course, you know all about His Majesty Charles I, King of England?"

"Alas, yes, Sir! You left France to go help him, and despite that help he fell and almost took you down with him."

"Exactly. I see you still have a good memory, Planchet."

"*Plague*, Sir! What would be astounding is if I'd forgotten any part of that story. When you've heard Grimaud, who, as you know, speaks but rarely, tell the tale of the beheading of King Charles, of how you sailed through the night in a gunpowder-mined sloop, and beheld that awful Sir Mordaunt tossing in the sea with a golden-handled dagger buried in his chest, you're not likely to forget it."

"But there are people who forget such things, Planchet."

"Yes, those who never saw them, or heard Grimaud tell of them."

"Well! Since you remember all that, I need remind you of only one thing, that King Charles had a son."

"Not to correct you, Sir but he had two," said Planchet. "I saw the second, the Duke of York, here in Paris one day when he was on his way to the Royal Palace, and was told he was the second son of King Charles I. As to the eldest, I have the honour to know his name but I've never seen him."

"Quite so, Planchet, and it's him we must speak of, that eldest son once known as the Prince of Wales, and now called Charles II, King of England."

"A king without a kingdom, Sir," replied Planchet sententially.

"Yes, Planchet, a most unfortunate prince, less happy than the lowest beggar in the most miserable quarter of Paris."

Planchet made a gesture full of that bland compassion accorded to distant strangers one never expects to meet. Besides, he heard nothing in this sentimental eulogy that seemed to bear on his main interest, Sir d'Artagnan's plan of business. D'Artagnan, from his habit of observing humanity, understood Planchet's thoughts. "We're coming to it," he said. "This former Prince of Wales, a king without a kingdom, as you so aptly put it, Planchet, caught my attention. I watched him beg the assistance of Mazarin, who is a low skinflint, and the help of King Louis, who is a child, and it seemed to me, who knows a thing or two, that in the intelligent gaze of this exiled king, in his essential nobility, a nobility that rises above all his suffering, I saw the stuff that makes a man, and the heart that makes a king."

Planchet tacitly approved of all this but in his eyes at least, it didn't cast any light on d'Artagnan's plan. The latter continued, "That's what I told myself, and it started me thinking. Now listen closely, Planchet, because we're coming to the point."

"I'm listening."

"Kings are not so thick on the ground that you can easily find one when you need one. Now, this king without a kingdom is in my opinion a rare resource, a precious seed that might burgeon and bloom if a capable hand, discreet and vigorous, sowed it well and truly, in the right soil, climate, and time."

Planchet nodded mechanically, showing that he didn't yet understand. "Poor little king seed! That's what I said to myself, and I was actually moved, Planchet that makes me think that perhaps I'm being moved to folly. That's why I wanted to consult with you, my friend."

Planchet blushed with pleasure and pride. "Poor little king seed, I said! I'll be the one who picks you up and plants you in good soil."

"Good God!" said Planchet, looking searchingly at his old master as if beginning to doubt his reason.

"What's that?" asked d'Artagnan. "Are you all right?"

"Me? Fine, Sir."

"You said, 'Good God!'"

"I did?"

"I'm sure of it. Are you starting to understand?"

"I confess, Sir d'Artagnan, that I'm a little afraid..."

"To understand?"

"Yes."

"To understand that I want to restore his throne to King Charles II, who has no throne? Is that it?"

Planchet almost leapt from his chair. "*Ah!*" he cried, frightened. "So that's what you mean by a *restoration!*"

"Yes, Planchet. Isn't that the right word for it?"

"No doubt, no doubt. But have you thought about this?"

"About what?"

"About what's going on over there?"

"Where?"

"In England."

"And what's going on there, Planchet?"

"First of all, Sir, I beg your pardon for presuming to worry about these things that aren't my concern but since you're proposing a business venture to me ... you're proposing I join a venture, aren't you?"

"A superb one, Planchet."

"Then since you're proposing a joint venture, I have the right to discuss it."

"Discuss away, Planchet; from discourse comes wisdom."

"Well! Since I have Sir's permission, I'll tell him that in the first place, there's the Parliament."

"Very well. And after that?"

"After that, the army."

"Good. And then?"

"And then, the entire nation!"

"Is that everything?"

"... The entire nation that consented to the fall and execution of the last king, father of this one, and stands by that consent."

"Planchet, my friend," said d'Artagnan, "your reasons stink like old cheese. The nation? That nation is fed up with these trumped-up gentlemen who grant themselves barbaric titles while singing psalms. When it comes to singing, my dear Planchet, I've noticed that nations prefer drinking songs to plainchant. Remember the Fronde, and the songs we sang in those days? Say hey! Good times, eh?"

"Not so much; I was nearly hanged."

"But were you hanged?"

"No."

"And didn't you found your fortune while singing those songs?"

"Well ... yes."

"So, you can have nothing to say against them."

"All right! Then I return to the Parliament and the army."

"And I say that I'll borrow twenty thousand livres from Sir Planchet, and put in twenty thousand livres of my own, and with this forty thousand I'll raise my own army."

Planchet clasped his hands in woe, for he really thought d'Artagnan had lost his mind. "An army! Oh, Sir," he said, with a gentle smile, for fear of pushing the madman into a rage. "A ... large army?"

"About forty men," said d'Artagnan.

"Forty men against forty thousand isn't going to do it. Now, you alone are worth a thousand men, Sir d'Artagnan, I know that well but how will you find thirty-nine others who are worth as much as you? Even if you find them, how would you pay them?"

"Not bad, Planchet. *Devil*, you speak like a courtier."

"No, Sir, I say what I think, and what I think is that at the first pitched battle you fight with your forty men, I'm afraid..."

"So, I won't fight any pitched battles," said the Gascon, laughing. "From Antiquity on, we have plenty of examples of tactical retreats and strategic marches that achieve their goals by avoiding the enemy rather than meeting him. You should know that, Planchet, you who commanded Parisians on the day they were to fight musketeers, and manoeuvred to avoid them so skilfully that you never left the Place Royale."

Planchet laughed. "For a fact," he replied, "if your forty men stay hidden with any skill, they may hope never to have to fight. But then, how do you propose to achieve your goal?"

"I'll tell you. Here, then, is how I propose to speedily restore His Majesty Charles II to his throne."

"Great!" said Planchet, all attention. "But first, it seems to me we're forgetting something."

"What?"

"We've dismissed the nation, because they prefer drinking songs to psalms, and the army, because we won't fight them. But there's still the Parliament that doesn't sing at all."

"And which also doesn't fight. How you, Planchet, an intelligent man, can worry about a bunch of debaters who call themselves Rumps and Barebones is beyond me! I'm not worried about the Parliament, Planchet."

"All right, since Sir isn't worried about them, we'll move on."

"Yes, and now we're coming to the crux. Do you remember Cromwell, Planchet?"

"I certainly heard a lot about him, Sir."

"He was a tough old soldier."

"With a big appetite on top of it."

"What do you mean?"

"He swallowed England at a single gulp."

"Well, Planchet! What if, the day after he swallowed England, someone had swallowed Sir Cromwell?"

"Oh, Sir! It's one of the first axioms of mathematics that the container must be larger than the contained."

"Quite so! And that, right there, is our venture."

"But Sir Cromwell is dead, and his container is the tomb."

"My dear Planchet, I'm pleased to see that you've become not only a mathematician but also a philosopher."

"Sir, in my grocery, I use a lot of newspaper as wrapping, and I learn from it."

"Bravo! Then you're aware, since you learned not only mathematics and philosophy but also a little history, that the previous Cromwell, who was so great, was followed by another who was much smaller."

"Yes, the one called Richard – who did as you did, Sir d'Artagnan, and resigned his position."

"Good, very good! After the great one, who died, and the small one, who resigned, there has come a third. This one is called Sir Monck: he's a skilful general in that he's never fought a battle, a capable diplomat because he never says anything and before greeting someone in the morning, he thinks about it for twelve hours and then says good evening that people call miraculous, saying he's always right."

"Indeed, that's impressive," said Planchet, "but I know of another politician quite like him."

"Sir de Mazarin, am I right?"

"Himself."

"You're right, Planchet; except Sir de Mazarin doesn't aspire to the Throne of France, and that changes everything, you see. Well! This Sir Monck, who already has England roasted on a plate and opens his mouth to swallow it, this Sir Monck, who tells the envoys of Charles II and Charles II himself, '*Nescio vos...*'"

"I don't speak English," said Planchet.

"Yes, leave that to me," said d'Artagnan. "'*Nescio vos*' means 'I know you not.' This Sir Monck, the most important man in England, once he's swallowed her..."

"Well?" asked Planchet.

"Well, my friend! I go over there with my forty men, and I'll pack him up, carry him off, and bring him to France, where I see two bright possibilities."

"Ooh, I see one!" cried Planchet, carried away by enthusiasm. "We'll put him in a cage and folks will pay money to see him."

"Well, Planchet, that's a third possibility that hadn't occurred to me, I must say."

"Do you think it's a good one?"

"Yes, certainly – but I think mine are better."

"Let's hear yours, then."

"Number one is to hold him for ransom."

"For how much?"

"*Plague!* A fellow like that must be worth a hundred thousand crowns."

"Oh, yes!"

"So, my first idea is to ransom him for a hundred thousand crowns."

"And the other...?"

"The other that is even better, is to give him to King Charles, who, no longer having a general of the army to fear, and a diplomat to argue with, will restore himself, and once restored, will pay me the hundred thousand crowns in question. That's the venture I propose; what do you say to that, Planchet?"

"It's magnificent, Sir!" said Planchet, trembling with emotion. "And how did this wonderful idea come to you?"

"It came to me one morning on the banks of the Loire, when King Louis XIV, our beloved monarch, wept over the hand of Miss de Mancini."

"Sir, I grant you that your idea is sublime. But..."

"Ah! There's always a *but*."

"Permit me! But it's a bit like the skin of the bear the fools tried to sell, you know, before they'd caught the bear. Now, taking Sir Monck means a fight."

"No doubt; that's why I'm raising my army."

"Yes, yes, I understand that, *for God's sake!* A surprise attack. Oh, you'll succeed at that, Sir, because no one's your equal at that sort of thing."

"I have a knack for it, that's true," said d'Artagnan, with a proud simplicity. "You understand that if I had for this business my dear Athos, my brave Porthos, and my wily Aramis, it would be as good as done. But they're all lost and scattered, and it seems no one knows where to find them, so I'll do it on my own. Now, do you find this venture a good one, at a decent return on investment?"

"All too good."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just too good to come true."

"It can't fail, Planchet, and the proof is that I undertake it myself. There'll be a fine profit for you and a notable feat for me. They'll say, 'Such was the old age of Sir d'Artagnan,' Planchet, and I'll have a place in tales and maybe even history."

"Oh, Sir!" cried Planchet. "When I think that it's here, in my home, among my brown sugar, prunes, and cinnamon, that this colossal project was born, it makes my shop seem almost like a palace."

"Take care, Planchet, take care: if the least word of this gets out, it's the Bastille for both of us. Take care, my friend, for it's a conspiracy we're plotting here, and Sir Monck is an ally of Sir de Mazarin."

"Sir, when one has had the honour of calling you master, one knows no fear, and when one has the privilege of being your partner, he's a silent one."

"Very well, that's more your worry than mine, for in a week I'll be in England."

"Then go, Sir, go, and the sooner the better."

"So, the money is available?"



"It will be tomorrow, I'll get it for you personally. Would you prefer gold or silver?"

"Gold is more portable and convenient. But how shall we memorialize this? Let's see."

"*My God*, nothing could be simpler: you'll just write me a receipt."

"No, that's *too* simple," said d'Artagnan. "We must do this thing properly."

"Usually I'd agree but since it's you, Sir D'Artagnan..."

"And what if I'm killed over there, slain by a musket ball, or poisoned by their beer?"

"Sir, please believe that if that happened, I would be so upset by your death that I wouldn't care about money."

"Thank you, Planchet but the problem remains. We shall, like two attorneys' clerks, draw up an agreement, a sort of treaty that could be called a deed of partnership."

"Willingly, Sir."

"I know writing is hard work but we'll give it a try." Planchet went and got a pen, ink, and paper. D'Artagnan took the pen, dipped it in the ink, and wrote:

*Between Lord d'Artagnan, former Lieutenant of the King's Musketeers, resident at the Hôtel de la Chevette, Rue Tiquetonne, And Sieur Planchet, Grocer, resident at the Sign of the Golden Pestle, Rue des Lombards,*

*It is agreed that: A company with a capital of 40000 livres is formed around an idea brought by Sir d'Artagnan. Sieur Planchet who knows of this idea and approves of it in all respects, will pay 20000 livres into the hands of Sir d'Artagnan. He demands no repayment nor interest before Sir d'Artagnan returns from a trip to England. For his part, Sir d'Artagnan undertakes to contribute 20000 livres that he will add to the 20000 already invested by Sieur Planchet. He will expend the 40000 livres as he sees fit, committing himself to a goal as set forth below. The day that Sir d'Artagnan has by some means restored His Majesty King Charles II to the Throne of England, he'll pay into the hands of Sieur Planchet a sum of...*

Seeing d'Artagnan pause, Planchet said naively, "The sum of one hundred fifty thousand livres."

"Hang it! No," said d'Artagnan, "the division can't be by halves, that wouldn't be right."

"However, Sir, we each put half in," said Planchet timidly.

"Yes but listen to the full clause, Planchet, and if it doesn't sound equitable in every respect, well! We'll strike it out." And d'Artagnan wrote:

*However, as Sir d'Artagnan brings to the venture, besides his capital of 20000 livres, his idea, efforts, and moreover risks his life that he prefers not to lose, Sir d'Artagnan will keep, out of 300000 livres, 200000 for himself, making his share 2/3.*

"Very good," said Planchet.

"So, that sounds right?"

"Perfectly right, Sir."

"And you'll be content with a hundred thousand livres?"

"*Plague!* I should think so. A hundred thousand livres for twenty thousand!"

"And within one month, you understand."

"What, one month?"

"Yes, I'm asking for only one month."

"Sir," said Planchet generously, "I'll give you six weeks."

"*Thank you,*" replied the musketeer politely.

After which, the two partners read the agreement. "It's perfect, Sir," said Planchet, "and the late Sir Coquenard, the first husband of Madam Baron du Vallon, could have done no better."

"You think so? Well, then! Let's sign it."

And they added their signatures.

"This way," said d'Artagnan, "I'll be under no obligations to anyone."

"But I'll be under obligation to you," said Planchet.

"Not at all, because no matter how much I prefer not to, if I lose my life over there, Planchet, you lose your whole investment. *Plague* that reminds me of the most important clause of all that I'll add: 'In the event that Sir d'Artagnan is deceased in this venture, repayment is considered made, and Sieur Planchet forgives the ghost of Sir d'Artagnan the twenty thousand livres he loaned to the company.'"

This final clause made Planchet frown in fear and doubt but when he saw in his partner that eye so brilliant, that hand so steady, that spine so firm and supple, he took courage and without hesitation added his initials to the clause. D'Artagnan did the same. And thus was drawn up the first deed of partnership, a form of agreement that may occasionally have been abused since then. "And now, dear master" said Planchet, pouring a last glass of Anjou honey for d'Artagnan, "let's get some sleep."

"No," d'Artagnan replied, "the hardest task is still ahead of me, for I have to think things through."

"Bah!" said Planchet. "I have such confidence in you, Sir d'Artagnan, that I wouldn't trade my option on a hundred thousand livres for ninety thousand in cash."

"And, devil take me!" said d'Artagnan. "I think you're right." Upon which d'Artagnan took a candle, went up to his room, and went to bed.

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D'Artagnan prepares to Travel on the behalf of Planchet & Company

D'Artagnan thought so well over night that by morning his plan was fully formed. "There!" he said, sitting up on his bed, putting his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. "I'll seek out forty men, sure and solid, recruiting people who are somewhat compromised but with the habit of discipline. I'll promise each one five hundred livres for a month, if they survive, and nothing if they don't, or half for their dependents. As for food and lodging, that's on the English, who have cattle in the pasture, bacon in the smokehouse, chickens in the coop, and barley in the barn. I'll offer my troop to General Monck and he'll sign us up. I'll get into his confidence and abuse it at the first opportunity." But d'Artagnan paused there, shook his head, and interrupted himself. "No," he said, "If I did that, I'd never be able to tell Athos about it. It's too dishonourable. I can't resort to violence after committing myself to him," he continued. "With my forty men, I'll have to fight a guerrilla action. Yes but what if I run up against, not forty thousand English as Planchet said but even as few as four hundred? I'll be beaten, especially since, out of my forty, at least ten will get themselves killed out of stupidity. No, in fact, it would be impossible to find forty dependable men; there just aren't that many. I'll have to be satisfied with thirty. With ten fewer men I can justify avoiding an encounter, and if one happens anyway, I'll have thirty good soldiers rather than forty fools. Plus, I save five thousand livres, or an eighth of my capital that is all to the good. So, then: thirty men. I'll divide the troop into three squads, we'll separate, make our way through the country, and meet at a rendezvous point. That way, ten by ten, we'll raise no alarms, cause no suspicion, and pass unnoticed. Yes, thirty, that's the number, all right. Three tens; three, the divine number! And then, when we're reunited, we'll still be a pretty imposing company. But, oh! I'm an idiot!" continued d'Artagnan. "I'll need thirty horses. It's a disaster; how the devil did I forget about horses? You can't undertake a campaign like this without horses. Well, it has to be done; I can buy the horses once we're across, and besides, there's nothing wrong with English horses. But also, plague take it, three squads mean three commanders, and that's another problem. Of the three, I'm one, of course but hiring the other two will cost almost as much as the rest put together. No, I definitely must have no more than one lieutenant. Based on that, I'll reduce my troop to twenty men. That isn't very many, just twenty men but if I was determined to avoid encounters with thirty men, I'll be even more so with twenty. Twenty is a manageable number, and besides, it reduces the number of horses I'll need by ten that is a bonus. And then, with a good lieutenant ... *God be with you!* See where you get with patience and calculation? I started out with forty men, and now I'm going to do the same job with twenty. Ten thousand livres saved at one stroke, and with better results. The critical point now is the finding of this lieutenant. So, I'll find him, and then ... but it won't be that easy. I need someone brave and experienced, another me. Yes but a lieutenant would have to share my secret, a secret that's worth a million, and as I'm paying my man only ten thousand livres, or fifteen hundred at best, he'll sell that secret to Monck. No lieutenants, *God be with you!* Besides, even if the lieutenant was as mute as a disciple of Pythagoras, he'd be sure to have in his squad a favourite soldier whom he'd make his sergeant, and this sergeant would find out his secret even supposing the lieutenant is honest. And the sergeant, cheaper and less honest, will sell the whole thing for fifty thousand livres. Come, come, it's impossible! Decidedly, the lieutenant is impossible. But then we're done with fractions, because I can't divide my troop in two and be in two places at once, without another me who ... but why have two squads when I have only one captain? What's the point of weakening the troop by sending one squad left and the other right? A single troop, *God be with you!* But a band of twenty men riding cross country looks suspicious to everyone; if a troop of twenty riders is spotted, a company will be sent after them, they'll demand the password, we won't know it, and Sir d'Artagnan and his men will be shot like rabbits. I'll reduce my troop to ten men; I'll act simply and with a unified force; I'll have no choice but to be prudent that is already halfway to success in the kind of affair I'm undertaking. A larger troop would have tempted me into some recklessly fool. Ten horses can be brought from here or bought over there. An excellent idea! I'm happier already. No suspicions, no passwords, no encounters. A mere ten men, why, they're just taken for drovers or clerks. Ten men leading ten horses loaded with merchandise will be overlooked, or even well received, no matter where they go. Ten men travelling on behalf of the house of Planchet and Co., France. Nothing more need be said. These ten men, dressed like labourers, might carry hunting knives, carbines behind their saddles, even pistols in their holsters. They don't look suspicious because their business is open and above-board. Oh, they might look a bit like smugglers but so what? Smuggling's not a hanging offence like polygamy. The worst that can happen to us is that they confiscate our goods. Confiscated goods? No big deal. Come, come, this plan is superb. Just ten men, ten men I'll handpick, ten men who will be as good as forty, and cost me a quarter as much. And for greater security, I won't speak a word about our goal. I'll just say, 'my friends, there's a blow to strike.' Satan himself would have to get up extra early to play a trick on us. And fifteen thousand livres saved out of twenty – it's just superb!" Thus, comforted by his industrious calculations, d'Artagnan fixed his plan in place and resolved to make no further changes. He already had in mind, on a list furnished by his inexhaustible memory, ten veteran adventurers mistreated by fortune or harried by the law. Therefore, d'Artagnan got up and went right to work, telling Planchet not to expect him at breakfast and maybe not dinner. A day and a half spent haunting certain Parisian dives reaped him his harvest, a collection of swashbucklers all individually recruited without the knowledge of the others, so that within thirty hours he had a charming crew of ugly customers, most of them speaking a French less pure than the English they were about to attempt. They were former guardsmen for the most part, men whom d'Artagnan had taken the measure of in various encounters, and whom drunkenness, unlucky sword-wounds, unexpected windfalls at gambling, or thinning of the ranks by Sir de Mazarin had forced to seek darkness and solitude, the two great consolations of souls misunderstood and mistreated. They wore on their faces and their outfits the marks of their suffering; some of them were scarred, and all of their clothes were threadbare. D'Artagnan relieved the most urgent miseries of his brothers in arms with an early distribution of a few of the company's gold crowns; then, having made sure these crowns were employed in the physical rehabilitation of his troopers, he assigned his recruits a rendezvous in northern France, between Berghes and Saint-Omer. They were to meet at the end of six days, and d'Artagnan was sufficiently well acquainted with the goodwill and dependability of these men that he was certain none of them would fail to be waiting. These orders given, and the rendezvous appointed, d'Artagnan went to make his farewell to Planchet, who was waiting to hear news of his little army. D'Artagnan didn't think it was wise to inform Planchet about his reduction in personnel, as he thought it might diminish his partner's confidence in the venture. Planchet was delighted to hear that the army had been raised, and that he was now a sort of little king with a shop for a throne room, from which he was funding troops to wage war against perfidious Albion that enemy of all true French hearts. Planchet happily counted out twenty thousand livres worth of fine double-louis to d'Artagnan on his own account and an equal stack from the fund belonging to d'Artagnan. The Gascon poured the money into two equal purses, and then, weighing them in his hands, he said, "This much money is quite an encumbrance, don't you think, Planchet? It must weigh thirty pounds."

"Bah! To your horse it will be no more than a feather."

D'Artagnan shook his head. "I know what I'm talking about, Planchet. A horse carrying an extra thirty pounds above the weight of his rider and baggage no longer swims a river so easily, nor leaps lightly over a wall or ditch – and if the horse fails, the rider fails. Though of course, you wouldn't know that, Planchet, as you always served in the infantry."

"Then what should we do, Sir?" said Planchet, genuinely embarrassed.

"Listen," said d'Artagnan, "I'll pay my army upon their return to Paris. Keep my half of twenty thousand livres for me that you can put to use during that time."

"What about my half of the money?" said Planchet.

"I'll carry that with me."

"Your confidence does me honour," said Planchet, "but what if you don't come back?"

"I suppose that's possible, though it isn't likely. However, Planchet, in case I don't come back, give me a pen so I can write out my will." D'Artagnan took a pen and paper and wrote on a single sheet: *I, d'Artagnan, am in possession of twenty thousand livres saved sou by sou for thirty-three years in the service of His Majesty the King of France. I leave 5000 to Athos, 5000 to Porthos, and 5000 to Aramis, to be given, in my name and theirs, to my young friend Raoul, Viscount of Bragelonne. I leave the final 5000 to Planchet, that he may distribute the other 15000 to my friends without regret. To that end, I sign this present document,*

*D'ARTAGNAN*

Planchet appeared quite curious to know what d’Artagnan had written. “Here,” the musketeer said to him, “read it.” At the final lines, tears sprang from Planchet’s eyes. “You think I wouldn’t give them your money without this? Take it back – I don’t want your five thousand livres.” D’Artagnan smiled. “Accept it, Planchet, accept it, and then you’ll lose only fifteen thousand livres instead of twenty. And you won’t be tempted to ignore the signature of your master and friend in order not to lose everything.” How well d’Artagnan knew the hearts of men – especially grocers! Those who called Don Quixote crazy because he went to conquer an empire with no help but Sancho, his squire, and who called Sancho mad because he followed that master, would certainly not hesitate to pass the same judgement on d’Artagnan and Planchet. However, the first had one of the subtlest minds to be found among the razor-sharp wits of the Court of France. As to the second, he had rightly acquired the reputation of being one of the smartest grocers in the Rue des Lombards – and therefore all of Paris, and thus all of France. Now, if one considers these two men from the point of view of other men, and the means by which they intended to put a king on his throne compared to other means, those of average mind, an average that’s by no means high, would recoil from the mad arrogance of the lieutenant and the folly of his partner. Fortunately, d’Artagnan wasn’t the sort of man to take his opinions from those around him, especially opinions about himself. He had adopted as his motto, “Do the right thing and let others talk.” Planchet, for his part, had as his slogan, “Do it and say nothing.” And that was how these two flattered themselves that they were right and everyone else was wrong. (Such is the way of geniuses.) D’Artagnan set out on his journey, and at first he had the most beautiful weather possible, without a cloud in the sky and without a cloud on his spirit, joyful and strong, calm and resolved, and consequently brimming with that fluid energy that powers the human machine when shocks jolt it into action, something that future centuries will probably isolate and reproduce mechanically. As in previous adventures, he went back up the road to Boulogne, now for the fifth time. He could almost, on the way, pick out the footprints of his former travels and recognise the marks of his fist on the doors of roadside inns. His memory, sharp and ever present, brought back the days of his youth that, thirty years later, hadn’t weakened his steel wrist nor discouraged his brave heart. What a rich nature was that of this man! He had every passion, every fault, every weakness, and an intellectual spirit of contradiction that turned all these vices into virtues. D’Artagnan, thanks to his restless imagination, started at every shadow, and then, ashamed of that fear, marched bravely into the gloom and confronted it, if he found the danger was real. He reacted to everything with emotion that brought him enjoyment. He delighted in the company of others but was never bored with his own, and if one could have eavesdropped on him when he was alone, he’d have been heard laughing at the jokes he made for himself, or the imaginary mind games he played where one would expect only boredom. D’Artagnan was perhaps less cheerful than he would have been if he expected to find his good friends at Calais instead of his ten rogues but melancholy didn’t afflict him more than once a day, so he had only 5 visits from that dark deity before sighting the sea at Boulogne, and those visits were brief. Then, once d’Artagnan was nearing the theatre of action, every feeling but that of confidence disappeared, to be seen no more. From Boulogne, he followed the coast to Calais. For Calais was the site of the rendezvous, and in Calais he’d told each of his recruits to await him at the Grand Monarch Inn, where prices were moderate, where sailors took their meals, and where men of the sword, if they kept the blades in their leather scabbards, would find lodging, food, honey, and the other sweet things of life for thirty sous a day. He arrived at Calais at half past four in the evening. D’Artagnan intended to surprise his recruits in a relaxed state and take stock of them, to judge whether they’d be good and dependable companions.

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D’Artagnan Travels for the House of Planchet & Company

The Grand Monarch Inn was located on a small street that ran parallel to the docks without overlooking the harbour itself; a few alleys, like rungs between the parallel sides of a ladder, connected the dockside to the parallel street. By these alleys, one could cut through quickly from the harbour to the street or from the street to the harbour. D’Artagnan arrived at the harbour, turned up one of these alleys, and came out right in front of the Grand Monarch Inn. The moment was well chosen and reminiscent of his arrival at the Inn of the Jolly Miller in Meung. Some sailors who’d been playing at dice had quarrelled and were exchanging furious threats. The host, the hostess, and two pot boys anxiously watched these angry gamblers and the circle of sailors surrounding them, bristling with knives and axes and seemingly ready for war. However, though grumbling, the two quarrellers returned to their game. 2 other men were sitting on a stone bench near the door, while four tables placed near the far wall of the common room were occupied by eight more. The two men on the bench and the eight at the tables took no part in either the game or the quarrel. In these cold and indifferent spectators d’Artagnan recognised his ten recruits. The quarrel revived and intensified. Like the sea, every passion has a tide that rises and falls. At the height of his fury one sailor turned over the table, scattering the money that had been on it. Instantly, the inn’s staff and guests all pounced on the rolling coins, gathering what they could and slipping away while all the sailors tore into each other. Only the 2 men on the bench and the eight farther inside kept out of the fray, and though they didn’t seem to know each other or be coordinating their actions, all seemed determined to remain impassive despite the angry cries and clink of coins. The sole activity was from the two at the nearest table, who used their feet to firmly repel any fighters who rolled up to them. 2 others, while staying out of the fracas, did draw their fists from their pockets, while another pair, to avoid a wave of combatants, took to their table top, like people surprised by a flood. “Come, now,” said d’Artagnan to himself, who had missed nothing we’ve just recounted, “here’s a pretty troop: circumspect, calm, unruffled by noise but with a ready defence – *plague!* I could hardly ask for better.” Suddenly his attention was drawn to the middle of the common room. The two sailors who’d been pushed away by the feet of the men at the nearest table were reconciled by their shared outrage at this insult. One of them, half-drunk with anger and completely drunk on beer, started threatening the smaller of the two men at the table, asking him by what right he could put his feet on sailors, who were creatures of God and not dogs. And to make his inquiry more pointed, he shook his fist under the nose of d’Artagnan’s recruit. The recruit turned pale from what might have been either anger or fear, and the sailor, concluding it must be fear, raised his fist with the evident intention of bringing it down on the stranger’s head. However, though the threatened man scarcely seemed to move, he struck the sailor in the stomach so hard that the man reeled away across the room, crying out in pain. Immediately, rallied by esprit de corps, the comrades of the injured man fell as one on his conqueror. This latter, maintaining the sangfroid he’d previously shown, and without making the mistake of drawing his weapons, picked up a heavy beer stein and knocked down his first two or three assailants. Then, as he was about to be overwhelmed by numbers, the seven other silent men within, who’d previously stood aside, suddenly decided that this was their battle and rushed to his aid. Meanwhile, the two abstainers at the door turned toward the mêlée with frowns that seemed to indicate their intention to hit the sailors from behind if they didn’t stand down. The host, his potboys, and two bystanders had gotten embroiled in the fracas and were being soundly beaten. The Paris recruits, however, were striking like Cyclopes, placing their blows with a tactical skill it was a pleasure to behold. Finally, forced to retreat in the face of superior numbers, they entrenched themselves behind the largest table that 4 of them upended. Then the 2 from the doorway finally waded in swinging wooden benches that like the arms of siege engines laid out eight sailors in four blows. The floor was strewn with fallen men and the dusty air resounded with cries of pain as d’Artagnan, satisfied with this demonstration, marched into the room naked sword in hand, striking down with the pommel on every sailor’s head that raised itself. Standing in the middle of the room, he shouted, “*Whoa!*” which brought the fight to a sudden end. The wounded sailors surged away from the centre of the room to its edges, leaving d’Artagnan alone on the field and in sole possession. “What’s all this about?” he demanded of all and sundry in the majestic tone of Neptune pronouncing the *Quos ego*. Immediately, at the first sound of his voice (to continue the Virgilian metaphor), d’Artagnan’s recruits, who recognised their lord and master, dropped their aggressive attitudes and put down their tankards and trestles. The sailors, for their part, seeing the long sword, strong arm, and martial air of a man who appeared accustomed to command, picked up their wounded and their cracked mugs and went on their way. The Parisians straightened themselves and saluted their leader while d’Artagnan was being regaled with thanks and congratulations by the Grand Monarch’s innkeeper. He accepted these plaudits like a man who knew he deserved them and announced that, while the host was preparing his supper, he would go for a walk along the harbour. Immediately each of the recruits, who understood the summons, took his hat, straightened his buff coat, and followed d’Artagnan. But d’Artagnan, strolling along like a tourist, never paused for a moment and made straight for the dunes. Meanwhile the 10 men, surprised at finding themselves walking among a pack of strangers, all looked askance at one another. It was only when they were among the deepest dunes that d’Artagnan, smiling at seeing them so worried, turned and said with a reassuring gesture, “There, there, Gentlemen! Don’t be so suspicious of each other, for you’re going to be comrades, and must get along together.” Then their hesitation disappeared, the men breathed easily again, and began looking over their new companions with some satisfaction. After this mutual appraisal they turned back to their leader, who had long experience of dealing with men of this calibre and regaled them with the following improvised speech, delivered with typical Gascon energy: “Gentlemen, you all know who I am. I’ve engaged you, knowing you to be brave and ready to join a glorious expedition. Regard working for me just as if you were working for the king – but I warn you now that if you behave like that in public, I’ll crack your heads with whatever happens to be convenient. You’re well aware, Gentlemen, that state secrets are like lethal poison: as long as the poison is in its bottle and the bottle is corked, it’s harmless – but once it’s out of the bottle, it kills. Now, come closer, and I’ll share with you as much of the secret as I may.” Curious, the men gathered around him. “Come near,” continued d’Artagnan, “so close that not the birds over our heads, the rabbits in the dunes, nor the fishes in the waves can hear us. We’re going to investigate and report to Sir le Surintendant des Finances as to how much English smuggling is harming French trade. I intend to go everywhere and see everything. We shall be poor Picard anglers thrown up on the coast by a squall. It goes without saying that we’ll sell fish just as if we were real anglers. Of course, someone might guess who we really are and confront us, in which case we must be able to defend ourselves. That’s why I chose you, men of spirit and courage. But we’ll keep our heads down and stay out of trouble, confident because we’re backed by a powerful patron who can protect us from anything. Only one thing worries me but I’ll explain it in hopes you can put it to rest. I don’t want to have to bring along a stupid crew of actual anglers, who’d be a real nuisance but if there were, among you, some who’d followed the sea...”

“Oh, no problem there!” said one of d’Artagnan’s recruits. “I was a prisoner of the pirates of Tunis for three years and can navigate like an admiral.”

“See there?” said d’Artagnan. “Luck is on our side!”

The air of pleased surprise with which d’Artagnan said this was feigned, however, for he knew quite well that this *prisoner of the pirates* was himself an old corsair and had engaged him with that background in mind. But d’Artagnan never said more than he had to say, preferring to leave people in doubt. He therefore appeared to take the man’s explanation at face value, accepting the result without worrying about the cause. “And I, as it happens,” said a second man, “have an uncle who’s a foreman in the port at La Rochelle. As a child, I played on boats every day, and can handle rowing and sailing as well as any sailor of the Ponant.”

This man lied only a little more than his fellow, having spent six years rowing in His Majesty’s galleys at La Ciotat. 2 others were more honest, confessing that they’d spent a couple of years as soldiers on prison ships. Thus, of the ten men of war in d’Artagnan’s troop, four also qualified as sailors, so he was armed for both land and sea, a detail that would have made Planchet swell with pride had he known of it. Then it was just a matter of issuing the general orders that d’Artagnan did with precision. He commanded his men to make for The Hague, half following the coast to Breskens, the others taking the road to Antwerp. The rendezvous was set for a fortnight hence by calculating travel time to the central square of The Hague. D’Artagnan advised his men to pair up however they liked and travel by two. He himself chose two of the least disreputable figures, a couple of former guardsmen he’d known previously whose only faults were that they were gamblers and drunkards. These men weren’t entirely lost to civilization, and with clean clothes and good habits, their hearts would be steady again. D’Artagnan, to avoid jealousy among the men, made all the others go on ahead. He kept his two favourites back, gave them clothes from his own supply, and set off with them. It was to this pair, whom he seemed to honour with his complete confidence, that d’Artagnan made a false confession intended to guarantee the success of the expedition. He explained to them that it wasn’t a question of how much English smuggling harmed French trade but rather how much English trade could be harmed by French smuggling. The men appeared convinced by this, as indeed they were. D’Artagnan was certain, of course, that at the first carousal with the others, these two, once drink had loosened their tongues, would divulge his false confession to the entire band. He thought this gambit couldn’t fail. 2 weeks after their meeting in Calais, the entire company was reassembled in The Hague. Then d’Artagnan saw that all of them, showing remarkable intelligence, had already assumed the guise of sailors who’d been recently washed up from the sea. D’Artagnan found them quarters in a dive on Newkerke Street while he lodged comfortably on the Grand Canal. He learned that the King of England had returned to his ally William II of Nassau, Stadtholder of Holland, and moreover that the rejection by King Louis XIV had put a chill on the welcome he’d felt before. Consequently, Charles had been lodged in a small house in the village of Scheveningen, in the dunes on the seaside, about a league outside The Hague. There, it was said, the unfortunate exile consoled himself for his banishment by gazing, with that melancholy particular to the princes of his race, out into the immensity of the North Sea that separated him from England as it had formerly separated Mary Stuart from France. There, beyond the beautiful grove of Scheveningen, where golden heather grows on the dunes of fine sand, Charles II also vegetated, less happy than the heather because he, self-aware, lived a life of the mind, and went from despair to hope and back again. D’Artagnan made the short trip to Scheveningen to confirm for himself what was reported about the prince. And in fact, he saw Charles II, pensive and alone, come out of a small door facing the woods and roam along the shore at sunset, without even attracting the notice of the anglers who, returning in the evening, grounded their boats, like the Greeks of the islands, high on the sand of the beach. D’Artagnan recognised the king, saw him staring sombrely over the immense expanse of the waters, absorbing on his pale face the red rays of the sun already bisected by the horizon. Then Charles II returned to the house alone, slowly and sadly, amusing himself by making the sand creak beneath his footsteps. That same evening, d’Artagnan rented for a thousand livres a fishing boat, a tracker worth four thousand. He paid the thousand down and left the other three thousand as a deposit with the harbour burgomaster. After that he secretly embarked his six soldiers, unseen in the dark, and at three in the morning, at high tide, he boarded openly with his four sailors and set out, relying on the skill of his former galley slave as if he were the foremost pilot of the port.

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The Author Is Forced to Recount a Little History Despite himself

While kings and men were thus occupied with England that thought to govern itself – and which, to be fair, had never been governed so poorly – a man upon whom God had rested his gaze and laid his finger, a man destined to write his name in glowing letters in the book of history, worked on while presenting to the world a face both bold and mysterious. He was headed somewhere but no one could guess his destination, though England, France, and all Europe watched him march with a firm step and head held high. Monck had just declared his allegiance to the liberation of the Rump Parliament, that representative body that General Lambert in imitation of Cromwell, whose lieutenant he’d been, had locked up so closely, to force it to submit to his will, that no member had been able

to break the blockade to escape, and only one, Peter Wentworth, had been able to get in. Lambert and Monck: everything was summed up in these two men, one of whom represented military despotism and the other republicanism. These two men were the sole political survivors of the revolution in which Charles I had lost his crown and then his head. Lambert made no secret of his intentions: he sought to establish a military government and place himself at its head. Monck, known to be a staunch republican, was said by some to be in favour of supporting and retaining the Rump Parliament, the visible (though degenerate) representation of the republic; others said that Monck, adroit and ambitious, merely wanted to use this parliament that he seemed to protect, as a stepping-stone to the throne that Cromwell had made vacant but had never assumed himself. Thus, Lambert, by persecuting the Parliament, and Monck, by declaring in favour of it, had declared themselves one another's enemies. Monck and Lambert, therefore, had raised armies for themselves, Monck in Scotland, attracting the Presbyterians and the royalists, that is, the malcontents, and Lambert in London that always strongly opposed the most visible power – in this case, the Parliament. Monck had raised an army, pacified Scotland, and found there an asylum; from there he watched and was watched in turn. But Monck knew that the day had not yet come, that day marked by the Lord for a great change, and so his sword stayed in its sheath. Unassailable in his wild and mountainous Scotland, general and absolute king of an army of eleven thousand veterans whom he had more than once led to victory, informed of affairs in London as well as or even better than Lambert, who was garrisoned in the city, this was the position of Monck when, a hundred leagues from London, he declared for the Parliament. Lambert, on the other hand, occupied the capital. That was the centre of all his operations, and there he gathered around himself all his friends, as well as the discontented of the lower classes, eternally inclined to favour the enemies of constituted power. It was in London, then, that Lambert heard of Monck's declaration of support for Parliament from beyond the Scottish frontier. He decided there was no time to lose, for the Tweed was not so far from the Thames that an army couldn't leap from one to the other, especially if it was well commanded. He also knew that once it entered England, Monck's army would increase like a rolling snowball, a growing globe of fortune that would be, for one so ambitious, a stepping-stone to elevate him to his goal. Lambert therefore gathered his army, formidable both for its quality and its size, and moved to meet Monck, who, like a careful navigator sailing through reefs was advancing in short marches, nose to the wind, listening to every sound and sniffing the breeze blowing from London. The 2 armies arrived in close proximity at Newcastle. Lambert, the first to arrive, occupied the city itself; Monck, always circumspect, halted outside and established his headquarters at Coldstream, on the Tweed. The sight of Lambert's troops spread joy through the ranks of Monck's, while on the contrary the sight of Monck threw Lambert's army into disarray. One might have thought that these intrepid warriors, who'd made so much noise in the streets of London, had set off in the hope of avoiding an encounter and instead found themselves facing an army, one that followed not just a banner but a cause and a principle. It seemed to have occurred to these once-fearless battalions that maybe they weren't as good citizens as Monck's men, who supported the Parliament, while Lambert supported nothing but himself. As to Monck, if any thoughts occurred to him they must have been sad – or so says History, that modest lady who, it's said, never lies – because the story she recounts is that on the day of Monck's arrival in Coldstream not a sheep could be found in the entire town. If Monck had commanded an English army, that would have been enough to cause the entire army to desert. But the Scots, unlike the English, don't require meat on a daily basis; the Scots, a poor and sober race, can survive on a little barley crushed between two stones, mixed with some cold water and cooked on a flat rock. The Scots, having been issued their barley, didn't care then if there were no sheep to be found in Coldstream. However, Monck, unused to barley cakes, was hungry, and his staff officers, as hungry as he was, looked anxiously right and left to see where their supper would come from. Monck called for reports but his scouts, on arriving in the town, had found it deserted, its pantries empty, and as for butchers and bakers, there were none to be found in Coldstream. No one could find a single loaf of bread for the general's table. As report succeeded report, each one less encouraging than the last, Monck, seeing the fear and dismay on the faces around him, announced that he wasn't the least bit hungry – and in any event, they were bound to eat the following day as Lambert seemed likely to give battle, and if he lost they'd have his provisions, while if he won they'd be relieved of the problem of being hungry. This didn't seem to console very many of them but that didn't appear to bother Monck who was beneath it as rigid as a rock, though of mild demeanour. So, everyone had to be satisfied with that, or at least appear to be. Monck, just as hungry as his soldiers but pretending not to care about the absence of sheep, cut a half-inch of tobacco from the plug of a sergeant on his staff and began to chew it, assuring his lieutenants that hunger was an illusion, and besides, no one can feel hungry if he has something to chew on. This just mollified some of those who hadn't been reassured by the proximity of Lambert's provisions; the discontented dispersed, the guard took up its routine, and night patrols commenced, while the general continued chewing his frugal meal in the open door of his tent. Between his camp and that of his enemy was an old abbey, of which there are almost no signs today but which was standing at the time and was known as Newcastle Abbey. It was built on a broad meadow between the fields and the river, a marshy plain watered by springs and flooded in heavy rain. However, in the midst of this marshland of tall grass, rushes, and reeds, was some higher ground formerly occupied by the vegetable gardens, park, paddocks, and outbuildings that radiated from the abbey, like one of those big sea stars with a round body and legs splaying out all around its circumference. The vegetable garden, one of the abbey's long legs, extended almost to Monck's camp. Unfortunately, as we've said, it was early June, and the garden, long abandoned, had little to offer. Monck had set a guard on the spot to prevent surprise attacks; the campfires of the enemy forces were visible beyond the abbey but between the abbey and these fires stretched the Tweed, unrolling like a luminous serpent beneath the shade of some great green oaks. Monck was well acquainted with this position, as Newcastle and its environs had served as his headquarters more than once. He knew that by day his enemy could probably throw scouts into the ruins and provoke a skirmish but that at night they'd be careful not to risk it. He was safe enough. Thus, his soldiers were able to see him, after he'd had what he'd laughably called his supper of chewing tobacco, sitting like Napoleon on the eve of Austerlitz on his folding chair, half under the light of his lamp and half under the glow of the moon that was beginning to climb to the zenith. It was about nine-thirty at night. Suddenly Monck was drawn from his half-sleep, real or feigned, by a troop of soldiers who, approaching with joyous cries, kicked his tent poles and thrummed its ropes to awaken him. There was no need for such a commotion; the general opened his eyes and asked, "Well, my children, what's going on?"

"General," answered several voices, "you shall eat at last."

"I have eaten, Gentlemen," he calmly replied, "and was quietly digesting, as you see. But come in and tell me your news."

"It's good news, General."

"Oh? Has Lambert announced that he'll fight us tomorrow?"

"No but we've captured a tracker carrying fish to his camp at Newcastle."

"Then you've done wrong, my friends. These London gentlemen are delicate and must have their fish course. You'll put them into a bad mood and then tomorrow they'll be ruthless. It would be improper, I think, not to send Lambert this boat full of fish, unless..." The general thought for a moment. "Tell me, if you please" he continued, "just who are these anglers?"

"Picard sailors who fish along the coasts of France and Holland and were blown to ours by a gale."

"Do any of them speak our language?"

"Their captain has a few words of English."

The general's suspicions were aroused by this report. "Very well," he said. "I'd like to see these men; bring them to me."

An officer immediately went off to fetch them. "How many are there?" continued Monck. "And what sort of boat is it?"

"There are ten or twelve of them, General, manning a sort of tracker, as they call it, that looked Dutch-built to us."

"And you say they were carrying fish to Lambert's camp?"

"Yes, General. They seem to have made a pretty good catch."

"We'll see about that," said Monck. At that moment the officer returned, bringing with him the anglers' captain, a man about fifty to fifty-five years old but good-looking. He was of medium height and wore a jerkin of coarse wool with a hat pulled down over his eyes. A cutlass hung from his belt, and he walked with the hesitation of a sailor who, on a rocking deck, was never sure where his foot would come down, placing his feet solidly and deliberately. Monck looked him over for a long minute, while the angler smiled back at him with that expression, half cunning and half foolish, common to the French peasant. "Do you speak English?" Monck asked him in excellent French.

"A bit, and that badly, Milord," replied the angler.

This answer came less with the lively and terse accent of the folk of the mouth of the Loire than with the slight drawl of the counties of southwest France. "But you do speak it," continued Monck, to hear more of his accent.

"Oh! We seafarers speak a little of every language," replied the angler.

"So, you're a fishing sailor?"

"Today, at least, I'm a angler, Milord, and a fine angler too! I took a barbell that must weigh thirty pounds, and over fifty mullets. I also have a bucket full of little whiting that will be perfect for frying."

"You sound to me like one who's fished more often in the Bay of Biscay than in the Channel," said Monck, smiling.

"Indeed, I come from the South; does that keep me from being a good angler, Milord?"

"Not at all, and I'd like to buy your catch. But first tell me honestly, where were you taking it?"

"Milord, in all honesty I was making for Newcastle, following the coast, when a large party of horsemen, coming up in the opposite direction, signalled me to turn my boat toward Your Honour's camp or suffer a volley of musketry. Since I wasn't armed for war," added the anglers, smiling, "I thought it best to obey."

"And why were you going to Lambert's camp and not to mine?"

"Milord, I'll be frank, if Your Lordship gives me permission."

"I'll permit it, and if necessary even order it."

"Well, Milord! I was going to Lambert's camp because those city gentlemen pay well while your Scots – Puritans, Presbyterians, Covenanters, whatever you call them – don't eat very much and pay nothing."

Monck shrugged, though he couldn't keep from smiling at the same time. "And why, coming from the South, are you fishing along our shores?"

"Because I was stupid enough to get married in Picardy."

"Maybe so but Picardy isn't England."

"Milord, the man launches his boat to sea but God and the wind move the boat where they please."

"You didn't intend to approach our coast?"

"Not at all."

"What was your intended route?"

"We were returning from Ostend, chasing the mackerel, when a strong southerly wind took us, and seeing it was useless to fight it, we rode it out. Then it was necessary, so as not to lose our catch, to make for the nearest English port that happened to be Newcastle. We were told that was lucky because there were many people camped there, both inside and outside the city, gentlemen both wealthy and hungry, so we headed for Newcastle."

"And your crew, where are they?"

"Oh, my crew, they stayed on board; they're simple, uneducated sailors."

"While you...?" said Monck.

"Oh, me!" said the captain, laughing. "I used to sail with my father, trading, and I know how to say *penny*, *crown*, *pistole*, *Louis* and *double-louis* in every language of Europe, so my crew listens to me like an oracle and obeys me like an admiral."

"Then, you're the one who decided Lambert would be the better customer?"

"Yes, of course. And to be frank, Milord, was I wrong?"

"That's what you're going to find out."

"In any case, Milord, if there was a mistake, I'm the one responsible, and you mustn't blame my crew for it."

*He definitely has his wits about him*, thought Monck. Then, after a few moments of silence while he considered the angler more closely, the general asked, "You come from Ostend, isn't that what you told me?"

"Yes, Milord, straightaway."

"Then you must have heard what they're saying on the coast, as I've no doubt they're interested in French and Dutch affairs. What do they say about the King of England?"

"Ah, Milord!" said the angler, with an expression of honest pleasure. "You're in luck, because you couldn't find a better person to ask about that than me. Listen to this, Milord: after putting in at Ostend to sell the few mackerel we'd taken, I saw the ex-king walking along the dunes waiting for the horses that were to take him to The Hague. He's a tall, pale man, with black hair and a rather severe look. He seemed unwell, and I think the air of Holland might not be good for him."

Monck listened closely to the angler’s rapid and colourful speech that, though in a language not his own, still managed to get his ideas across clearly. The angler spoke a strange mélange of English, French, and some unknown words that were probably Gascon. Fortunately, his eyes spoke for him, and were so eloquent that one could miss a word from his mouth but still get the meaning from his expression. The general seemed increasingly satisfied with his interrogation. “You must have heard that this ex-king, as you call him, was travelling to The Hague for some purpose.”

“Oh, yes!” said the angler. “Indeed, I did.”

“What was this purpose?”

“What else?” said the angler, “Isn’t he consumed with the idea of returning to England?”

“So they say,” said Monck thoughtfully.

“Not to mention,” said the angler, “that the stadtholder ... you know, Milord? William II?”

“Well?”

“He intends to aid him with all his power.”

“Ah! You heard that?”

“No but I believe it.”

“So, you follow politics, then?” asked Monck.

“Oh, Milord, you know how it is! We sailors, who are used to studying the air and the water, that is, the two most changeable things in the world, are rarely mistaken about what else we must travel through.”

“Come,” said Monck, changing the subject, “I hear you’re able to feed us well.”

“I’ll do my best, Milord.”

“How much are you charging for your fish?”

“I’m not such a fool as to set a price, Milord.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because my fish are yours.”

“By what right?”

“By the right of might.”

“But I intend to pay you.”

“That’s very generous of you, Milord.”

“As much as it’s worth too.”

“I’d never ask that much.”

“What do you ask, then?”

“Just to be able to leave.”

“To go where? To General Lambert’s camp?”

“What!” cried the angler. “Why would I go to Newcastle if I no longer have any fish?”

“In any event, listen to me.”

“I’m listening.”

“I have some advice.”

“Really? Milord wants to pay me, and give me advice to boot? Milord overwhelms me.”

Monck looked closely at the angler, whom he seemed to suspect of sarcasm. “Yes, I want to pay you, *and* offer you some advice, because the two things are connected. If you go, then, to General Lambert’s camp...”

The angler shrugged, as if to say, *I won’t argue*.

Monck continued, “Don’t go by way of the marsh. You’ll be carrying money, and in the marsh you might encounter some Scottish ambushers I’ve posted there. They’re hard folk and won’t understand the language you speak, though it seems to me to be made of three languages. They might take what I will have given you, and then, when you’re back in your country, you’ll say that General Monck has two hands, one Scottish and one English, and that he takes back with the Scottish hand what he gave with the English.”

“Oh, General, I’ll go wherever you say, never fear,” said the angler, with an anxiety too sincere to be feigned. “But if we’re staying, I just want to stay near here.”

“I believe you,” said Monck, with the hint of a smile. “But I don’t have room for you in my tent.”

“I’d never presume so far, Milord, and only ask Your Lordship to point out where we should go. Anywhere will do, for a night is soon passed.”

“Then I’ll have you escorted back to your boat.”

“As Your Lordship pleases. Only, if Your Lordship included a carpenter in that escort, I’d be grateful.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the gentlemen of your army, Milord, in drawing my boat up the river by a horse-drawn cable, dragged it along the rocky shore, and now I have two feet of water in my hold.”

“All the more reason for you to spend the night on your boat, it seems to me.”

“Milord, I am at your service,” said the angler. “We’ll unload our baskets wherever you say, you’ll pay me whatever you like, and you’ll send me on my way when it suits you to do so. You see how easy I am to get along with.”

“Come, now, you’re not such a bad fellow,” said Monck, whose scrutiny hadn’t detected a single shade of duplicity in the angler’s eye. “Hey! Digby!”

An aide-de-camp appeared. “You will escort this worthy lad and his crew to the row of tents by the canteen, in front of the marsh; that way they’ll be within reach of their boat but won’t have to sleep on the water tonight. What is it, Spithead?” he asked a newcomer who came in suddenly. This Spithead was the sergeant from whom Monck had borrowed the tobacco for his supper.

“Milord,” he said, in English, of course, “a French gentleman has just presented himself at the guard post and is asking to speak with Your Honour.”

Though this report was made in English, the angler responded with a slight start that Monck, occupied with the sergeant, failed to notice. “And who is this gentleman?” asked Monck.

“He told me, Milord,” replied Spithead, “but these French names are so devilish hard for a Scot to say that it didn’t stick with me. However, this gentleman, from what the guards told me, is the same one who presented himself yesterday when Your Honour declined to receive him.”

“True enough; I was holding a staff meeting.”

“What would Milord care to do about this gentleman?”

“Have him brought to me.”

“Should we take any precautions?”

“Such as?”

“Such as blindfolding him, for example.”

“To what end? He can only see what I want him to see that is that I’m surrounded by eleven thousand brave men who ask nothing better than to cut their throats for the honour of the Parliament of England and Scotland.”

“And this man, Milord?” said Spithead, pointing at the angler who during this conversation had stood silently with a blank expression like a man who sees but doesn’t understand.

“Ah, right,” said Monck. Then, turning to the fish merchant, he said, “Farewell, my good man; I’ve selected your lodgings. Digby, take him away. Don’t worry, we’ll send you your money presently.”

“Thank you, Milord,” said the angler who bowed and left with Digby. About a hundred paces from the tent they came upon his crew, who were whispering volubly among themselves, betraying some anxiety but he made a gesture that seemed to reassure them. “Hoy, you lot,” he said, “come along. His Lordship General Monck has the generosity to pay for our fish and the goodness to offer us hospitality for the night.” The anglers fell in behind their captain, and, escorted by Digby, the little troop marched toward the canteen, where they’d been assigned their lodgings. As they walked through the gloom, the anglers passed the guard who was escorting the French gentleman to General Monck. This gentleman was on horseback and wrapped in a large cloak, so the captain couldn’t get a good look at him, despite his curiosity. As for the gentleman, unaware that he was passing fellow countrymen, he paid no attention to the little troop. The aide-de-camp installed his guests in a reasonably clean tent, dislodging an Irish cook-wife who went off with her 6 children to sleep wherever she could. A large fire was burning in front of this tent, casting its flickering light over the open pools in the marsh that were rippled by a cool breeze. Once the crew was settled, the aide-de-camp wished the sailors a good evening, pointing out that the swaying masts of their boat were visible from the tent door, proof that it was still afloat. This sight seemed to please the anglers’ captain.

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The French gentleman whom Spithead had announced to Monck, and who, enveloped in his cloak, had passed near the angler after he’d left the general’s tent five minutes before, passed through a series of guard posts without so much as glancing around him to avoid appearing too inquisitive. As ordered, he was escorted to the general’s tent. The gentleman was left alone in the sort of canvas antechamber at the tent’s entrance, where he awaited Monck, who was not long in appearing once he’d heard his man’s report. He paused at the gap in the canvas door to study the face of this man who’d requested an interview. The soldier who’d accompanied the French gentleman must have reported that he’d behaved with discretion, for the first impression the foreigner received from his reception by the general was more favourable than he might have expected from such a suspicious man. Nevertheless, as was his usual custom when meeting a stranger, Monck surveyed the man with a penetrating gaze that, for his part, the foreigner tolerated without showing embarrassment or anxiety. After a few moments, the general indicated with a nod and a gesture that he was ready to listen. “Milord,” said the gentleman in excellent English, “I’ve requested an interview with Your Honour on a matter of consequence.”

“Sir,” replied Monck in French, “you speak our language well for a son of the continent. I beg your pardon, because perhaps the question is indiscreet but do you speak French with the same purity?”

“It’s not surprising, Milord, that I speak English fluently, as I lived in England during my youth and since then have visited it twice.” These words were spoken in a French so pure that it not only revealed the speaker as a Frenchman but a native of the region of Tours. “And where in England did you live, Sir?”

“In my youth, in London, Milord. After that, in 1635, I took a pleasure trip to Scotland, and in 1648 I resided for a time in Newcastle, specifically in that abbey whose gardens are occupied by your army.”

“Your pardon, Sir but you understand why I must ask such questions, do you not?”

“I’d be astonished if you didn’t, Milord.”

“Now, Sir, how may I serve, and what do you ask of me?”

“Well, Milord – but first, are we alone?”

“Completely so, Sir, except for the guard outside at his post.”

And saying this, Monck lifted aside the tent door, showing the gentleman the sentry ten paces beyond, where he could be summoned at a single word. “In that case, Milord,” said the gentleman, in a tone as calm as if he were speaking with an old friend, “I’m determined to speak with Your Honour because I know you to be an honest man. Moreover, what I’m about to say will prove the esteem in which I hold you.”

Monck, astonished at the tone that claimed between the French gentleman and himself at least equality, raised his piercing gaze to the stranger’s face, and with the merest trace of irony in his voice, though his expression never changed, he said, “Thank you, Sir – but first, who are you, if you please?”

“I already gave my name to your sergeant, Milord.”

“Your pardon, Sir but he’s Scottish, and found your name difficult to retain.”

“I’m called the Count of La Fère, Sir,” said Athos with a bow.

“The Count of La Fère?” said Monck, searching his memory. “Pardon me, Sir but it seems to me this is the first time I’ve heard that name. Do you fill an office at the Court of France?”

“No. I am a simple gentleman.”

"Of what rank?"

"King Charles I made me a Knight of the Garter, and Queen Anne of Austria gave me the Cordon du Saint-Esprit. Those are my only dignities, Sir."

"The Garter! And the Saint-Esprit! You're a knight of both orders, Sir?"

"Yes."

"And on what occasions were such favours granted to you?"

"For services rendered to Their Majesties."

Monck looked with astonishment at this man, who appeared so simple and yet at the same time so grand; then, as if he'd renounced the intention to penetrate the mystery of this simplicity and grandeur, since the stranger didn't seem disposed to give him any information than what he'd already conveyed, he said, "So, it was you who presented yourself at the guard post yesterday?"

"And who was sent away; yes, Milord."

"Many commanders, Sir, wouldn't let any outsider enter their camp, especially on the eve of a probable battle; but I'm not like my colleagues, and I prefer to leave no loose ends behind me. To me, all advice has value; every danger was sent by God as a warning or test, and I weigh it in my hand and respond with the energy it deserves. Thus, you were turned away yesterday only because I was taking counsel of my staff. Today I am free, so speak."

"Milord, it was quite proper for you to receive me, as my business doesn't concern the battle you're about to have with General Lambert, nor with your camp, and the proof is that I turned my head as I passed through your men and closed my eyes so I couldn't count your tents. No, what I have to say to you, Milord, is on my own account."

"Speak, then, Sir," said Monck.

"Just now," continued Athos, "I had the honour to tell Your Lordship that I once resided in Newcastle; this was at the time when King Charles I was turned over to Cromwell by the Scots."

"I know," said Monck coldly.

"At that moment I had a large sum of gold, and on the eve of the battle, perhaps due to some presentiment as to what would happen the next day, I hid it in the main cellar of Newcastle Abbey, beneath that tower the top of which you can see by the moon's silvery light. My treasure was buried there, and I came to beg Your Honour to allow me to retrieve it before, perhaps, if the battle turned that way, a mine or some other engine of war might destroy the building and scatter my gold, exposing it to the soldiers."

Monck was a judge of men, and he saw in this one a model of energy, reason, and discretion. He could only attribute to magnanimous discernment the confidence the French gentleman showed in him, and he showed himself profoundly touched by it. "Sir," he said, "you have divined my character well. But is the sum worth taking the risk? Can you even believe it's still there?"

"It's there, Milord, I have no doubt of it."

"That answers one question but what of the other? I asked if the sum was so great that it's worth exposing yourself in this way."

"It is that great, Milord, for it's a million in gold that I packed into two barrels."

"A million!" Monck cried, and this time it was Athos who looked at him so long and searchingly that his distrust returned. *Here*, Monck thought, *is a man who's setting a trap for me*. ... Aloud, he said, "So, Sir, you would like to retrieve this sum, as I understand it?"

"If you please, Milord."

"Today?"

"This very evening, because of the circumstances that I explained to you."

"But, Sir," objected Monck, "General Lambert is as near to that abbey as I am. Why didn't you address yourself to him?"

"Because, Milord, when one acts on matters of importance, one must trust one's instincts over all. And General Lambert doesn't inspire in me the confidence that you do."

"So be it, Sir. I'll help you retrieve your money, assuming it's still there that it may not be. Since 1648 a dozen years have passed and many things have happened."

Monck offered this excuse to see if the French gentleman would grasp at it but Athos didn't deviate. "I assure you, Milord," he said firmly, "that I'm convinced those two barrels are still there and have changed neither position nor possessor."

This answer removed one suspicion from Monck but suggested another. What if this Frenchman was some agent sent to lead the protector of Parliament astray? The gold might be only a decoy, a lure meant to excite the general's avarice. A treasure like that couldn't really exist. It was up to Monck to expose the gentleman's ruse and turn the tables on his enemies, adding another triumph to his name.

Once Monck had decided what he had to do, "Sir," he said to Athos, "no doubt you will do me the honour of sharing my supper this evening."

"Yes, Milord," replied Athos with a bow, "for you do me an honour that is in accord with my esteem for you."

"It's all the more gracious of you to accept this offer under the circumstances that are that my cooks are few and poorly trained and my foragers have returned this evening with empty hands. In fact, if it wasn't for a angler of your own country who strayed into my camp, tonight General Monck would have no supper at all. I have fresh fish, however, thanks to this sailor."

"Milord, it is principally for the honour of spending a bit more time with you that I accept."

After this exchange of civilities that had done nothing to quell Monck's suspicions, the supper, or what stood in for one, was served before them on a wooden folding table. Monck invited the Count of La Fère to seat himself at the table and sat down across from him. The single platter, stacked with boiled fish that was offered to the illustrious guests, promised more to hungry stomachs than to sophisticated palates. While supping – that is, eating fish and washing it down with bad ale – Monck had Athos tell him of the concluding events of the Fronde, the reconciliation of Sir de Condé with the king, and the probable marriage of His Majesty to the Infanta Maria Teresa. But he avoided any allusion to the current political situation that united, or rather disunited, England, France, and Holland, and Athos did the same. During this conversation Monck became convinced of one thing, confirming his first impression that was that he was dealing with a man of great distinction. This man was no assassin, and Monck couldn't imagine him as a spy. But he showed enough resolve and finesse that he might be a conspirator. When they rose from the table, Monck asked, "You really believe in your treasure, Sir?"

"Yes, Milord."

"Seriously?"

"Quite seriously."

"And you're sure you can find where it was buried?"

"At a single glance."

"Well, Sir!" said Monck. "Out of curiosity, I will go with you. In fact, you need me or one of my lieutenants as your escort, or you wouldn't be allowed to move freely through the camp."

"General, I wouldn't allow you to trouble yourself with this if I didn't need your company – but as I recognise that your company is not only honourable but necessary, I accept."

"Do you think we ought to take any soldiers with us?" Monck asked Athos.

"No point to it, I think, General, unless you believe they're needed. Two men and a horse will suffice to carry the barrels to the sloop that brought me here."

"But surely you must dig, through earth, brick, and stone, and you don't intend to do that yourself, do you?"

"General, there's no need to pry or dig. The treasure is hidden beneath the abbey's burial vault, under a stone that's drawn up by a big iron ring. Beneath that, it's four steps down into a crypt. The barrels are there, placed end to end and covered with plaster to form the shape of a bier. The right stone has a certain inscription on it, and since this is a delicate matter that depends on trust, I'll share the secret with Your Honour. The inscription reads, *Hic jacet venerabilis Petrus Guillelmus Scott, Canon. Honourab. Conventus Novi Castellii. Obiit quarta et decima die. Feb. ann. Dom., MCCVIII. Requiescat in pace.*"

Monck didn't miss a word of this. He was astonished by either the amazing duplicity of this man and the superior manner in which he played his role, or at the candid good faith in which he presented his request in a situation where a million in gold could be lost at the stroke of a dagger, in the middle of an army that would regard the theft as rightful restitution. "All right," he said, "I'll accompany you, and the adventure is so intriguing I'll carry your torch personally." And saying this, he buckled on a short sword and thrust a pistol into his belt, in the act of which his doublet opened enough to reveal beneath it the rings of a mail coat intended to turn an assassin's blade. He took a Scottish dirk in his left hand, and said to Athos, "Are you ready, Sir? I am."

Athos, on the other hand, removed his dagger and put it on the table, unbuckled his sword belt that he placed next to the dagger, and, unbuttoning his doublet while affecting to look for his handkerchief, revealed nothing beneath it but a fine cambric shirt and no other arms or armour. *This is indeed a singular man*, thought Monck. *He's unarmed. Has he laid an ambush down there?*

"General," said Athos, as if he'd guessed Monck's thoughts, "you said we should go alone that would usually be right but a high commander should never expose himself to such risk. It's night and the marsh might conceal hidden dangers; bring someone with you."

"You're right," said Monck. And raising his voice, he called, "Digby!"

His aide-de-camp appeared. "Fifty men armed with sword and musket," Monck said, looking at Athos.

"Not enough, if there's real danger," said Athos, "and far too many if there isn't."

"I'll go alone," Monck said. "Digby, I don't need anyone after all. Let's go, Sir."

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The Marsh

In going from the camp to the Tweed, Athos and Monck crossed the same ground Digby had crossed bringing the anglers from the Tweed to the camp. The aspect of the place, and the appearance of the changes wrought upon it by the actions of men, made a deep impression on the imagination of a man as sensitive as Athos. Athos saw only desolation, while Monck looked only at Athos as he looked around at heaven and earth, and sought, and thought, and sighed. Digby, to whom the general's last order, and particularly the tone in which it was given, seemed unusual, had followed the two, staying about twenty paces behind. But the expression of the general, upon turning around and seeing that his final orders hadn't been executed, was such that the aide-de-camp realised he was out of line and returned to his tent. He supposed that the general wanted to make one of those incognito inspections of the camp that a veteran commander never fails to make on the eve of a battle, and then tried to explain to himself the presence of Athos, as a subordinate tries to figure out everything mysterious done by his superior. Digby decided that Athos must be a sort of spy who was reporting important information to the general. At the end of ten minutes' walk between the tents and supply posts that were thickest near headquarters, Monck arrived at a pathway that split into three directions. The branch on the left led to the river, the middle branch to Newcastle Abbey, while the path to the right crossed the outer lines of Monck's camp, that is, the lines closest to Lambert's army. Across the river was an advance post of Monck's army, one hundred and fifty Scots who were keeping an eye on the enemy. They had swum across the Tweed, and if attacked were to swim back, giving the alarm but as there was no bridge at this spot, and Lambert's soldiers seemed less eager to enter the water than Monck's, he wasn't much worried about that flank. This side of the river, about five hundred paces from the old abbey, the anglers were lodged in a busy anthill of small tents put up by the soldiers of the local clans to house their wives and children. This haphazard bivouac was visible by the glow of the half-moon that gleamed from stacked musket barrels and highlighted every white piece of linen and canvas. Monck arrived with Athos at this spot, a dark landscape lit only by the moon and a dying fire at the little crossroads of three paths. There Monck stopped and said to his companion, "Sir, do you know your way?"

"General, if I'm not mistaken, the middle road leads straight to the abbey."

"That's the way; but we're going to need a light to go down into the vaults." Monck turned around. "Ah ha! Digby followed us anyway, it appears. All the better; he can get us what we need."

"Yes, General, a man has been shadowing us for quite a while."

"Digby!" cried Monck. "Digby! Come here, please."

But, instead of obeying, the shadow started as if in surprise and then withdrew instead of advancing, crouching and making off to the left toward the riverbank and the little camp where the anglers were lodged. "It seems it wasn't Digby," said Monck.

The pair observed the shadow as it disappeared but it wasn't strange to see someone moving around at eleven o'clock at night in a camp of ten to twelve thousand men, and Athos and Monck weren't alarmed by this apparition. "Well, we're going to need some kind of light, a lantern or a torch, so we can see where we're putting our feet, so let's find one," said Monck.

"General, any soldier we meet can light our way."

"No," said Monck, thinking he saw a way to determine if there was any complicity between the Count of La Fère and the anglers. "No, I'd rather have one of those French sailors who came in tonight to sell me their fish. They leave in the morning and they'll take the secret with them. If the rumour spread through the Scottish army that there were treasures hidden in Newcastle Abbey, my Highlanders will think there's a million under every flagstone and they won't leave one brick standing on another."

"As you wish, General," replied Athos in a tone so natural it was clear that, soldier or sailor, it was all the same to him, and he had no preference.

Monck took the left causeway, beyond which the man he'd mistaken for Digby had disappeared, and encountered a patrol that, going around the bivouac, was returning toward headquarters. The soldiers stopped him and his companion, Monck gave the password, and they continued on their way. Another soldier, awakened by the exchange, rose draped in plaid to see what was going on. "Ask him where the anglers are," said Monck to Athos. "If I speak to him, he'll recognise me." Athos approached the soldier, who pointed out the right tent. Monck and Athos went toward it. It seemed to the general that as they approached a shadow like the one they'd seen before slipped into the tent but when he looked within he realised he must have been mistaken, for everyone there was asleep, lying pell-mell with legs and arms across each other. Athos, thinking he might be suspected of colluding with these other Frenchmen, stayed outside. "*Whoa!*" said Monck in French. "Wake up in there." Two or three sleepers sat up. "I need a man to light my way," continued Monck.

Everyone stirred at that, some rising and standing. The captain had risen first. "Your Honour can count on us," he said, in an accent that made Athos start. "Where do you want to go?"

"You'll find out. A lantern, who has one? Quickly, now!"

"Yes, your Honour. Would Your Honour like me to accompany him?"

"You or whoever, I don't care, so long as someone lights my way."

*Strange*, thought Athos. *What a distinctive voice that angler has.*

"A light, there," cried the captain. "Move it!" Then, whispering to one of his nearby companions, "Take the lantern, Menneville," he said, "And be ready for anything."

One of the anglers struck flint to steel, ignited a piece of tinder, and with this match lit a lantern. The whole tent was instantly illuminated. "Are you ready, Sir?" said Monck to Athos who had turned so his face wasn't exposed to the light.

"Yes, General," Athos replied.

"Ah! That French gentleman," whispered the anglers' captain. "*Plague!* It's a good thing I thought to give you the job, Menneville, as he might recognise me. Light their way!"

This was spoken at the far end of the tent, and so low that Monck didn't hear a syllable; in any event, he was talking with Athos. Menneville was gathering what he needed while listening to his chief's orders. "Well?" said Monck.

"Be right there, General," said the angler.

Monck, Athos, and the angler left the tent. *Impossible*, thought Athos. *What could I have been thinking?*

"Go ahead, and take the middle path," said Monck to the sailor. "Stretch those legs!" They hadn't gone 20 paces before the same shadow once more emerged from the tent, and, crawling along parallel to the causeway, behind a fence of hanging nets, kept a curious eye on the general's progress. All three disappeared into a rising mist. They were walking toward Newcastle Abbey, whose white stones appeared out of the gloom like sepulchres. After standing for a few seconds under the portico, they went through the gate. The door had been splintered by axes. Inside, a squad of four men was sleeping soundly in a corner of the court, so certain were they that there was no chance of attack on this flank. "The presence of these men doesn't bother you?" said Monck to Athos.

"On the contrary, Sir, they can help us roll out the barrels, if Your Honour will permit it."

"Very well."

These sentries, asleep though they were, awoke when they heard their visitors advancing through the brambles and grass that grew in the outer court. Monck gave the password and they went into the abbey's interior, led by the man with the lantern. Monck came last, watching Athos's every movement, his naked dirk in his sleeve, ready to plunge it to the hilt into the French gentleman at the first sign of betrayal. But Athos unhesitatingly marched on through the halls and corridors with a sure step. Not a single door or window was intact. The doors had been burned, some while still on their hinges, where they stood blackened by the fire but only partly consumed, the flames having burned out before they could devour the great oak slabs held together by iron hasps and nails. As for the windows, every inch of glass had been broken out, and night birds, frightened by the lantern light, fled out through the gaping frames. Meanwhile above great bats began to circle the intruders, the lantern light casting their shadows fitfully against the naked walls. Thinking about it, Monck found this spectacle reassuring, as the presence of the animals meant there were no men lurking deeper in the abbey. After traversing many rubble-strewn chambers and tearing down more than one vine that had grown across a doorway, Athos arrived at the great hall under the central tower, with its chapel built over the vaults below. There he stopped. "Here we are, General," he said.

"Have you found the right slab?"

"Yes."

"Indeed, I see this flagstone has a ring but it's mortared down flat."

"We need a lever."

"That's easily gotten." Looking around, Athos and Monck spotted an ash sapling three inches in diameter growing up in a corner, toward a window now filled by its branches. "Do you've a knife?" Monck asked the angler.

"Yes, Sir."

"Hack down this tree then."

The angler drew a cutlass and obeyed, though not without notching its blade. When the trunk was stripped, it served as a lever, and the three men opened the crypt. "Wait there," said Monck to the angler, pointing to a corner of the chapel. "We have black powder to dig up, and your lantern would be dangerous."

The man recoiled in fear and retreated to the spot assigned to him, while Monck and Athos turned back to the crypt, where luckily a beam of moonlight fell directly on the stone that the Count of La Fère had come so far to find. "There it is," said Athos, showing the general the slab with its Latin inscription.

"Indeed," said Monck. Then, offering the Frenchman one final opportunity to give up his pretence, he said, "Have you noticed, lining the chapel, the number of broken statues?"

"Milord, you have no doubt heard of the religious practice of the Scots whereby they erect statues of the deceased to protect the valuable objects they had in life. Some soldiers no doubt thought those statues might conceal treasure beneath them, so they overthrew the statues and cracked open their pedestals. But the tomb of the venerable canon before us was never distinguished by a monument, protected instead by your Puritans' superstitious fear of sacrilege; not an inch of this tomb has been chipped."

"That's true," said Monck.

Athos took up his makeshift lever. "Do you want any help?" asked Monck.

"Thank you, Milord but I don't want Your Honour to put your hand to work on any labour that you might not wish to take responsibility for later, once you knew the consequences."

Monck raised his head. "What do you mean by that, Sir?" he asked.

"What I mean is ... wait, that man."

"Right," said Monck. "I understand what you fear, so let's put him to the test."

Monck turned toward the angler, whose silhouette was outlined by the light of his lantern. "*Come here, friend,*" he ordered the man in English.

The angler didn't budge. "It's fine," he continued, "he doesn't understand English. Speak in English, if you please, Sir."

"Milord," replied Athos, "I have known men who, under certain circumstances, are able to pretend not to answer a question posed in a language they supposedly don't understand. The angler may be more cunning than we think. Please dismiss him, Milord."

*No doubt about it*, thought Monck, *he wants me alone in this vault with him. No matter, let's see this to the end; he's only one man, and I should be a match for him.*

"My friend," Monck said in French to the angler, "wait for us outside the entrance, and make sure no one comes in to disturb us."

The angler moved to obey. "Leave your lantern," said Monck. "It will just reveal your location and might attract a stray musket shot."

The angler seemed to appreciate this advice, set down his lantern, and disappeared under the arch of the entrance. Monck went and took up the lantern that he brought down into the crypt. "So!" he said. "There's a fortune hidden in this tomb?"

"Yes, Milord, and in five minutes you will cease to doubt it."

And saying this, Athos used the ash lever to strike a violent blow on the surface of the plaster that cracked and split. He inserted the lever into the crack and pried up whole slabs of plaster that split and fell aside. Then the Count of La Fère resorted to his hands, tearing off hunks of mortar with a strength one would never have suspected in such delicate fingers. "Milord," said Athos, "this is the concealing masonry of which I told Your Honour."

"Yes but I don't yet see any barrels," said Monck.

"If I had a dagger," said Athos, looking around, "you'd see them sooner. Unfortunately, I forgot mine in Your Honour's tent."

"I'd offer you mine," said Monck, "but the blade isn't strong enough for what you have in mind."

Athos seemed to hunt around for an object that would serve the purpose he desired. Monck watched every movement of his hands, every expression of his eyes. "Why don't you ask that angler for his blade?" said Monck. "He has a cutlass."

"Ah, quite so!" said Athos. "The one he used to cut down that tree." He went to the staircase. "My friend," he called to the angler, "toss me your cutlass, if you please, I need it."

The weapon clanged down the steps.

"Take it," said Monck. "It looks to me like a solid enough instrument, and a firm hand could make good use of it."

Athos seemed to accord to Monck's words only the natural and simple meaning in which they were couched. He also didn't notice, or didn't seem to notice, that when he returned toward Monck, Monck stepped back, putting his left hand on the butt of his pistol: the right hand already held his dirk. Athos set to work, turning his back toward Monck and putting his life in his hands. He made a few sharp and adroit blows on the connecting plaster that separated it into two parts, and Monck could then see two barrels placed end to end encased in a chalky shell. "Milord," said Athos, "you see that my presentiments are proven true."

"Yes, Sir," said Monck, "and I have every reason to believe you're satisfied, do I not?"

"Entirely. The loss of this money would have been a terrible blow to me but I was certain that God, who protects the good cause, would not have allowed us to lose the gold that could let us triumph."

"Upon my honour, you're as mysterious in your words as in your actions, Sir," said Monck. "Just now, I didn't understand what you meant when you said that I might not want to be responsible for the task you just accomplished."

"I had good reason to say that, Milord."

"And now you speak of the good cause. What do you mean by those words, *the good cause*? At present we're fighting for five or six causes here in England that doesn't keep anyone from regarding their own, not only as good but as the best. Which is yours, Sir? Speak frankly, and then we'll see if on this point, to which you attach such great importance, we are of the same opinion." Athos gave Monck one of those penetrating looks as if probing for deception; then, removing his hat, he began to speak in a solemn voice, while his listener, hand to his face, allowed his long, nervous fingers to ply his moustache and beard, while his vague and melancholy gaze wandered aimlessly around the crypt.

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Heart & Mind



to carry on the civil war. Alas, Milord, that is the fatal situation of that unhappy prince, that he must either corrupt or kill; for everything resists him, all are against him, yet he is marked with the divine seal of royalty, and to be true to his blood, he must retake the throne or die trying on the sacred soil of his fatherland. Milord, you have heard what I have to say. To anyone other than the illustrious man whom I address, I would have said, 'Milord, you are poor; Milord, the king offers you this million as down payment on a great bargain: take it and serve Charles II as I have served Charles I, and I am sure that God, who listens to us, who sees us, who reads in your heart what is hidden from all human eyes, I am sure that God will grant you a happy eternal life after death.' But to General Monck, to the illustrious man whose measure I believe I have taken, I say, 'Milord, there is a brilliant place for you in the history of nations and kings, an immortal and imperishable glory. With no motive but the good of your country and the interest of justice, you can become the prime supporter of your king. Many others have been conquerors or usurpers; you, Milord, will be satisfied to be the most virtuous, honest, and worthy of men; you will have held a crown in your hand and instead of fitting it to your brow, you will have placed it on the head for whom it was made. Oh, Milord! Act thus, and you will bequeath to posterity the most glorious name a mortal can bear."

Athos stopped. During the whole time the noble gentleman was speaking, Monck hadn't given the slightest sign of approval or disapproval. Despite this earnest speech, his eyes had scarcely shown even a glint of intelligence. The Count of La Fère looked at him sadly, and seeing that dull visage, felt discouragement enter his heart. Finally, Monck stirred, and breaking the silence, said in a soft and solemn voice, "Sir, I am going to use your own words to answer you. To anyone other than you, I would respond with expulsion, imprisonment, or worse. Because in fact, you tempt me and at the same time force my hand. But you are one of those men, Sir, to whom one can't refuse the attention and consideration they deserve. You're a brave gentleman, Sir, for I know one when I see one. You mentioned a fortune that the late king set aside for his son; are you not one of those Frenchmen who, as I've heard, attempted to rescue Charles from Whitehall?"

"Yes, Milord, in fact I was under the scaffold during his execution, where I, having been unable to redeem him, received on my forehead the blood of the martyred king. At the same time, I heard the last word of Charles I, for it was to me that he said, '*Remember!*' And in saying 'Remember,' Milord, he was referring to the gold now at your feet."

"I have heard a great deal about you, Sir," said Monck, "but I'm glad I had the opportunity to meet you for myself and not to judge you at second hand. I will give you explanations I've shared with no one else, so you'll appreciate the distinction I make between you and those who've been sent to me before." Athos bowed, eager to absorb the words about to fall from Monck's mouth as rare and precious as drops of dew in the desert. "You speak to me of King Charles II," said Monck. "But tell me, I pray you, Sir, what does that shadow of a king mean to me? I have grown old in war and in politics, two things that, today, are so closely bound together that every man of the sword must fight for his rights and ambition on his own behalf, rather than blindly follow the orders of an officer, as in ordinary wars. For myself, I desire nothing but I fear everything – for on the outcome of today's war depends the freedom of England, and perhaps of every Englishman. Why, given the situation of free action I've made for myself, should I shackle myself to a stranger? For that's all that Charles is to me. Insofar as Charles has fought battles here and lost them, he's a bad general; inasmuch as he's failed in every negotiation, he's a bad diplomat; and since he bemoans his misery in all the courts of Europe, he shows a character weak and cowardly. Nothing of nobility, nothing of leadership, nothing of strength has he shown, this genius who aspires to govern one of the greatest realms of the Earth. So, I know this Charles only by his weaknesses; and you want me, a man of good sense, to go and freely enslave myself to this creature who is my inferior militarily, politically, and personally? No, Sir. Once some great and noble action has taught me to appreciate this Charles, I may recognise his rights to a throne that we removed from his father, because he lacked all those virtues that so far are also lacked by the son. But when it comes to rights, I recognise only my own; the revolution made me a general, and if I desire it, my sword will make me the Protector. Let Charles show us what he's made of, let him present himself fairly, let him enter the competition that is open to genius, and most of all let him remember that he comes of a race of which we will ask more than of any other. Sir, we need speak no more of this; as for me, I neither refuse nor accept. I watch, and I wait."

Athos knew that Monck was so well informed about everything relating to Charles II that there was no point to further argument – this was neither the time nor place for it. "Milord," he said, "it's only left for me to thank you."

"For what, Sir? Because you judged my character well and were proven right? Is that worthy of thanks? That gold you take to King Charles will serve to test him for me; once I see what he does with it that may give me a new opinion."

"Isn't Your Honour concerned he might compromise himself by allowing such a sum to reach the hands of his enemy?"

"My enemy, you say? Why, Sir, I don't have any enemies. I am in service to Parliament that orders me to fight General Lambert and King Charles – their enemies, not mine – and so I fight them. If the Parliament, on the contrary, ordered me to fly my flag in the port of London, to assemble my soldiers on the riverbank to receive King Charles II..."

"You would obey?" Athos gasped.

"Forgive me," said Monck, smiling. "Here I am, with a head of grey hair, about to speak childish nonsense. Where is my mind?"

"So, you wouldn't obey?" said Athos.

"I didn't say that either, Sir. The good of my country comes before everything else. God, who had a reason for giving me strength, probably wanted me to use that strength for the good of all; at least I think so, for he also made me perceptive. If the Parliament ordered me to do that, I'd ... consider."

Athos frowned. "I see, then," he said, "that Your Honour definitely isn't disposed to favour King Charles II."

"Always you question me, Sir le Count. Now it's my turn, if you please."

"Do so, Sir, and may God inspire you to reply as honestly as I shall!"

"When you have brought this million back to your prince, what will you advise him to do?"

Athos fixed Monck with a look both proud and resolute. "Milord," he said, "while others might advise using that million as a lever in negotiations, I'd tell the king to raise two regiments with it, bring them into Scotland that you have just pacified, and give the people those freedoms that the revolution had promised but has not delivered. I would advise him to command this little army in person – and it would grow, believe me – and then to die, flag in hand and sword in its sheath, saying, 'Englishmen! Here is the third of my race whom you'd kill: beware of the justice of God!'"

Monck lowered his head and thought for a moment. "If he succeeded," he said, "which is unlikely, though not impossible, for everything is possible in this world, what would you counsel then?"

"To think that by the will of God he had lost his crown but by the goodwill of men he regained it."

An ironic smile touched Monck's lips. "Unfortunately, Sir," he said, "kings rarely listen to good advice."

"Ah but Milord, Charles II is no king," replied Athos, smiling in his turn, albeit with a different expression than Monck's.

"Come, let's end this, Sir le Count. We've said enough, haven't we?"

Athos bowed. "I'll give the order to have you and your two barrels taken wherever you like. Where are you staying, Sir?"

"In a little village at the mouth of the river, Your Honour."

"I know this village; it's composed of no more than five or six houses, is it not?"

"That's it; I've taken the largest that I'm sharing with a couple of fishnet knotters. It's their boat that brought me here."

"But you have a vessel of your own, Sir?"

"Mine is anchored a quarter of a mile offshore, where it awaits me."

"But you don't intend to leave immediately?"

"Milord, I hope to try one more time to convince Your Honour."

"You won't succeed," replied Monck, "but it's important for you to leave Newcastle without your passage raising the least suspicion toward either of us. My officers think that Lambert will attack me tomorrow. I, on the contrary, think he won't make a move; in my eyes it seems impossible. Lambert commands an army without a common cause, and that's no army at all. I have told my soldiers to consider my authority subordinate to a superior authority, so that after me, around me, or above me, they still have something to follow. The result is that, if I die, my army won't be immediately demoralized, and even if, for example, I decided to leave the camp for a while, as I sometimes do, there wouldn't be in my troops the least shadow of anxiety or disorder. Today I am the great magnet that draws together all the natural and sympathetic forces of the English. All this scattered iron that's sent against me, I will draw it together. At this moment Lambert's command consists of eighteen thousand deserters – though I didn't share that number with my officers, as you can well imagine. Nothing is more useful to an army than the feeling of imminent battle; everyone is careful, everyone is alert. I tell you this so you can rest assured that you can stay nearby safely. A week from now, there will be a new situation, either from battle or negotiation. At that time, because you've judged me to be an honest man, and confided to me your secret – and I must thank you for your confidence – I'll either visit you or send for you. I sincerely ask you not to leave until we've spoken again."

"I so swear, General!" cried Athos, so transported by joy that, despite his natural reserve, he couldn't suppress a sparkle in his eye. Monck spotted this flash, and immediately stifled one of those mute smiles that passed across his lips when he saw that someone believed they'd divined what he was thinking. "So, Milord," said Athos, "a week will be the extent of our delay?"

"One week, yes, Sir."

"And during this week, what shall I do?"

"If there's a battle, keep out of it, I pray you. I know you French are curious about these kinds of amusements, and you'd like to assess our manner of fighting but you'd just catch a stray bullet. Our Scots are terrible marksmen, and I'd hate to see a worthy gentleman like you return wounded to France. I don't want to have to be responsible for sending your million on to your prince for you, for that would look like I was paying the pretender to wage war on the Parliament, and with some justification. Go then, Sir, stay low, and keep to what's agreed between us."

"Ah, Milord!" said Athos. "What joy it would be to be the first to penetrate to that noble heart that beats beneath your cloak."

"So, you believe that I keep secrets," said Monck, without changing the half-wry expression on his face. "Why, Sir, what secrets do you think could be kept in the hollow head of a soldier? But it's getting late, and our lantern is burning down; time to call our man. *Whoa!*" cried Monck in French, approaching the foot of the stairs. "*Whoa!* Angler!" The angler, numbed by the night's chill, replied in a hoarse voice asking what was wanted. "Go to the sentry post," said Monck, "and order the sergeant there, on the behalf of General Monck, to come here at once." This was an easy commission to fulfil, for the sergeant, intrigued by the presence of the general in this deserted abbey, had slowly followed, coming little by little until he was only a few steps from the angler. Thus, the general's order reached him directly and he hurried to comply. "Get a horse and two men," said Monck.

"A horse and two men?" repeated the sergeant.

"Yes," Monck replied. "Can you get a packhorse with two paniers?"

"Sure, no more than a hundred paces from here in the Scottish camp."

"Good."

"What do I do with the horse, General?"

"Look here."

The sergeant came down the three or four steps that separated him from Monck and appeared in the vault. "Do you see, there by that gentleman?" Monck said to him.

"Yes, General."

"You see those two barrels?"

"Yes, Sir."

"These two barrels contain, one of them powder, the other musket balls. I want you to have these barrels taken to the little village at the mouth of the river that I intend to garrison with two hundred muskets. You understand that this mission is secret, because this is a flanking movement that could decide the battle."

"Oh! Yes, General," murmured the sergeant.

"Good! So, tie these two barrels on the horse, and then you and the two men are to escort this gentleman, who is my friend, to his house. But, you understand, without attracting attention."

"I'd go through the marsh if I only knew a way," said the sergeant.

"I know one," said Athos. "It's narrow but it's solid, as it's laid over piles. If we're careful, we can manage it."

"Do what this cavalier tells you to," said Monck.

"Whoa! These barrels are heavy," said the sergeant, trying to lift one.

"About four hundred pounds each, if they contain what they should, eh, Sir?"

"More or less," said Athos.

The sergeant went to find the two men and the horse. Monck, left alone with Athos, seemed inclined to make only small talk, while distractedly examining the vault. Then, hearing the hooves of the horse, he said, "I'll leave you with your men, Sir, and return to the camp. You should be safe."

"I can count on seeing you again, Milord?" asked Athos.

"So I've said, Sir, and it will be my great pleasure." Monck held out his hand to Athos.

“Oh, Milord, if only you would!” murmured Athos.

“Hush, Sir!” said Monck. “We agreed to say no more about it.”

And, saluting Athos, he went up, passing the men on the stairs who were coming down. He’d gone no more than twenty paces outside the abbey when he heard a long, low whistle. Monck cocked an ear but, seeing nothing, continued on his way. Then he remembered the angler and looked around for him but the angler had disappeared. However, if he’d looked a bit more closely, he’d have seen his man bent over double, slipping like a snake along the stones and losing himself in the mist, skimming along the surface of the marsh. And if he could have seen through the mist, he’d have seen something else that would have attracted his attention that was that the masts of the anglers’ boat showed it had moved closer in to the river bank. But Monck saw nothing and, thinking he had nothing to fear, took the deserted causeway that led to the camp. It was as he did so that the disappearance of the angler struck him as strange and he began to have serious suspicions. He had just placed at Athos’s orders the only soldiers who were near enough to protect him, and he had nearly a mile to cross to return to camp. The fog rose and thickened, so that one could barely distinguish objects at a distance of ten paces. Monck thought he heard a sound like the beat of an oar echoing from the swamp on his right. “Who’s there?” he shouted. But no one answered. Then he cocked his pistol, took his dirk in hand, and hurried on without another word. Calling for help, when there was no urgent reason to do so, seemed to him to be beneath him.

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The Next Day

It was 7<sub>AM</sub>: the first light of day glanced from the pools in the marsh, the sun reflected in them like a crimson ball, when Athos, getting up and opening his bedroom window that looked out on the riverbank, saw not fifteen paces away the sergeant and men who’d escorted him the day before, and who, after leaving the barrels at his house, had returned to the camp by the causeway. *Having returned to camp, why had the men come back again?*

That was the question that suddenly occupied Athos’s mind. The sergeant, head up and alert, seemed to have been waiting for the moment the gentleman would appear to question him. Athos, surprised to find before him those he’d seen departing the day before, was unable to conceal his astonishment. “There’s no reason for surprise, Sir,” said the sergeant. “Yesterday the general ordered me to watch over your safety, and I’m obeying that order.”

“The general is in camp?” asked Athos.

“Doubtless, Sir, since you left him yesterday going there.”

“Very well! Wait a moment and I’ll go there to give an account of your loyal service, and to recover my sword that I left yesterday on the table.”

“That suits us perfectly,” said the sergeant, “for we were going to ask you to do that.” Athos thought he noticed a sardonic edge to the sergeant’s expression but the adventure in the vault might have excited the man’s curiosity, in which case it was no surprise to read on his face the ideas disturbing his mind. Athos shut all the doors firmly and gave the keys to Grimaud, who had taken up residence in the shed over the locked door to the cellar where the barrels were stored. The sergeant escorted the Count of La Fère to the gates of the camp. There, a new guard squad awaited and took over for the four men who’d accompanied Athos thus far. This new guard was commanded by Aide-de-Camp Digby, who, during their walk, regarded Athos with such baleful looks that the Frenchman wondered what he’d done to deserve them, when the day before he’d been so perfectly respectful. He continued on his way toward headquarters while keeping to himself his observations about his escort and situation. Inside the general’s tent, where he’d been taken the day before, he found three superior officers, Monck’s lieutenant commander and two colonels. Athos saw that his sword was still on the general’s table, where he’d left it the day before. None of these officers had seen Athos before, and therefore didn’t know him. Monck’s lieutenant commander asked, indicating Athos, if this was the gentleman with whom Monck had left the tent. “Yes, Your Honour,” said the sergeant, “the very same.”

“I never denied it,” said Athos haughtily. “And now, it seems to me, Gentlemen, it’s my turn to ask you the point of all these questions, especially the tone in which they’re asked.”

“Sir,” said the lieutenant commander, “if we address these questions to you, it’s because we have the right to do so, and if we do so in such a tone, it’s because that tone, believe me, is appropriate to the situation.”

“Gentlemen,” said Athos, “you don’t know me but I must tell you that I recognise no one here as my equal except General Monck. Where is he? Let me be taken before him, and if he has any questions to ask me, I’ll answer them, and to his satisfaction, I hope. I repeat, Gentlemen: where is the general?”

“God! You’d know better than we where he is,” said the lieutenant.

“Me?”

“That’s right, you.”

“Sir, I don’t understand you,” said Athos.

“You *will* understand me – but first of all, for God’s sake, Sir, keep your voice down. Now, what did you talk about with the general yesterday?”

Athos smiled disdainfully. “We don’t want your smiles,” said one of the colonels angrily, “we want answers.”

“And I, Gentlemen, declare that you’ll get no response unless it’s in the presence of the general.”

“But you’re well aware that you’re asking the impossible,” said the same colonel.

“That’s the second time you’ve responded strangely to my request,” said Athos. “Is the general gone?”

Athos’s question was asked in such obvious good faith, and with such an air of naïve surprise, that the three officers exchanged glances. The lieutenant commander spoke by tacit agreement of the two other officers. “Sir,” he said, “the general left you yesterday on the outskirts of the abbey?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And you went…?”

“It’s not for me to answer that, it’s up to those who escorted me. They’re your soldiers, question them.”

“But if it pleases us to question you?”

“Then it will please me to answer you, Sir that I don’t know anyone here, I know only the general, and it’s to him that I’ll respond.”

“Perhaps, Sir but we are in charge, we’re set up as a council of war, and when you stand before judges, you must answer them.”

To this the face of Athos expressed only surprise and disdain, rather than the fear the officers expected their threat to evoke. “Scottish or Englishmen to judge me, a subject of the King of France – me, here under the safeguard and protection of British honour!” said Athos, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s madness, Gentlemen.”

The officers looked at him. “Then, Sir,” said the leader, “you pretend not to know where the general is?”

“As to that, Sir, I already said so.”

“Yes but that answer just isn’t believable.”

“It’s nonetheless true, Sir. People of my rank don’t usually lie. I’m a gentleman as I told you and when I wear at my side the sword that I left last night on that table where it still is today through an excess of delicacy, no one tells me anything I deem unworthy to hear, believe me. However, today I’m disarmed; if you claim to be my judges, then judge me. But if you’re merely executioners, then kill me.”

“Oh, really, Sir,” said the lieutenant in a more courteous voice, struck by Athos’s grandeur and self-possession.

“Sir, I came here to speak confidentially with your general on matters of importance. He received me with no ordinary welcome, as your soldiers can convincingly report. If your general gave me such a welcome, it’s because he knew I was worthy of his esteem. So, don’t suppose I’m going to reveal my secrets to you, let alone his.”

“But those barrels, what do they contain?”

“Haven’t you asked your soldiers that? What did they tell you?”

“That they contained powder and shot.”

“And where did they get that information? They must have told you.”

“From the general; but we’re not fools.”

“Take care, Sir, for it’s not me you’re calling a liar, it’s your commander.”

The officers looked at each other again. Athos continued, “In front of your soldiers, the general asked me to wait a week for him, that in one week he’d have an answer for what I’d asked him. Should I have left? No, I’m here and I wait.”

“He told you to wait for a week!” said the lieutenant.

“He said that, Sir, though he knew I had a sloop at anchor outside the river mouth and could have embarked on it yesterday and sailed away. Now, if I’m still here, it’s solely to conform to the general’s wishes. His Honour advised me not to leave until he’d given me a final audience at the end of a week. So, I tell you again, I’m waiting.”

The lieutenant commander turned to the other two officers and said, in a low voice, “If that gentleman is right, there’s reason to hope. The general has sometimes conducted negotiations so secret he thought it unwise to warn even us. If so, then the outside limit of his absence will be a week.”

Then, turning to Athos, “Sir,” he said, “your statement is of the gravest importance; will you repeat it under oath?”

“Sir,” replied Athos, “I have always lived in a world in which my word is regarded as a sacred oath already.”

“However, this time, Sir, the circumstances are more serious than any in which you’ve previously found yourself. This involves the security of an entire army. Consider: the general has disappeared, so we must search for him. Was the disappearance natural? Was some crime committed? Should we pursue our investigations, no matter what, or should we wait patiently? At this point, Sir, everything depends on what you have to say to us.”

“Asked in that way, Sir, I don’t hesitate to reply,” said Athos. “Yes, I had come to speak confidentially with General Monck to ask him for a response relating to certain interests. Yes, the general, being unable, no doubt, to provide an answer in advance of the expected battle, asked me to wait a week longer in the house where I was lodging, promising me that in a week he would see me again. Yes, all of the foregoing is true, as I swear by God, who is the absolute master of my life and yours.”

Athos pronounced these words with such solemnity and majesty that the three officers were nearly convinced. However, one of the colonels made a final attempt: “Sir,” he said, “though we’re now persuaded of the truth of what you say, there’s still a strange mystery in all this. The general is too prudent a man to abandon his army on the eve of battle without giving at least one of us a warning. As for me, I admit I can’t help but believe that some strange event is behind his disappearance. Yesterday, some foreign anglers came to sell us their fish, and were lodged with the Scots near the road used by the general to go to the abbey with Sir and then to return. It was one of those anglers who lit the general’s way with a lantern. In the morning, boat and anglers had both disappeared, carried away on the midnight tide.”

“I don’t see anything unnatural in that,” said the lieutenant. “After all, those people weren’t prisoners.”

“No but I repeat, it was one of them who lighted the way of the general and Sir to the abbey vault, and Digby assured us that the general was suspicious of them. Now, who can prove these anglers weren’t colluding with Sir here, and that once the blow was struck, Sir, who is certainly brave, didn’t stay to reassure us by his presence and turn aside an investigation?”

This argument made an impression on the other 2 officers. “Sir,” said Athos, “permit me to say that your reasoning, plausible though it sounds, falls apart where it concerns me. I stayed behind, you say, to allay your suspicions. But on the contrary, Gentlemen, I can have suspicions as well as you have, and I say it’s impossible for the general, on the eve of a battle, to go off without saying anything to anyone. Yes, there is some strange event involved in this, and rather than remain idle and waiting, you must exhibit all possible activity and vigilance. I am your prisoner, Gentlemen, on parole or otherwise. My honour is engaged in learning what has become of General Monck, so much so that if you said, ‘Depart!’ I’d say, ‘No, I remain.’ And if you asked for my opinion, I’d say, ‘Yes, the general is the victim of some plot or conspiracy, for if he were going to leave the camp, he’d have told me so. Seek, search everywhere, by land and by sea; the general hasn’t left, at least not of his own free will.’”

The lieutenant commander shared a significant look with the other officers. “No, Sir,” he said, “now you go too far. The general is unlikely to be a victim in these events, and in all likelihood he’s directed them. General Monck has done this kind of thing before. It would be a mistake for us to be alarmed; no doubt his absence will be short-lived, so we should be careful to avoid doing something out of fear to announce his absence, because if we demoralize his army that, to the general, would be the true crime. The general is giving us proof of his confidence in us, and to be worthy of his esteem we must wreath the whole affair in profound silence. We’re going to safeguard Sir, not out of distrust because he’s committed a crime but to better ensure the secret of the general’s absence by keeping him with us, so until further notice Sir will live here at headquarters.”

"Gentlemen," said Athos, "you forget that the general entrusted me with a charge over which I must keep watch. Give me whatever guard you please, shackle me if you must but use my house as my prison. Otherwise I swear the general, on his return, will reproach you for it, on my faith as a gentleman."

The officers consulted with one another for a moment, and then the lieutenant commander said, "So be it, Sir; return to your house." They gave Athos a guard of 50 men who surrounded his house, not losing sight of him for a moment. The secret was kept but hours passed, and then days, without the return of the general or any word of him.

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Contraband Merchandise

Two days after the events just related, while General Monck was expected to return to the camp at any instant – but did not – a small Dutch tracker, with a ten-man crew, dropped anchor offshore from Scheveningen, almost within cannon-shot of the port. It was the darkest hour of the night and the tide was rising in the gloom, an excellent time to disembark passengers and unload merchandise. The harbour of Scheveningen that curved in a broad crescent, was shallow and moreover unsafe; almost nothing anchored there but large Flemish hoys or local Dutch fishing boats that the sailors drew up on the sand on rollers, as Virgil says the ancients did in the Mediterranean. When the tide is rising it isn't safe to bring a vessel too close to shore, for if the wind is stiff its prow can be driven into the sand, and the sand of that coast is spongy: what it takes in it doesn't give up so easily. This was probably why a longboat detached from the tracker as soon as it dropped anchor and came in with eight of its sailors, who surrounded a long oblong object, some sort of basket or box. The shore was deserted; the few anglers who lived in the dunes were in bed. The sole watchman who guarded the coast – a coast very poorly guarded, since disembarking from large vessels was impossible – was imitating the sleeping anglers as far as possible, though he had to sleep in his sentry box instead of a bed. The only sound to be heard was the whistling of the night breeze as it hissed through the heather on the dunes. But the approaching sailors must have been suspicious men, for the apparent solitude didn't satisfy them, and their boat, barely visible as a dark blot on the ocean, slipped in without sound, eschewing the noisy use of oars, until the tide drove it onto the sand. The moment he felt the keel strike a single man jumped out of the longboat, after giving a brief order in a voice that indicated the habit of command. As a consequence of this order, several muskets immediately showed themselves by the faint light from the sea, that mirror of the sky, and the oblong bundle previously mentioned that doubtless contained some form of contraband, was carried ashore with infinite care. Immediately, the man who'd landed first ran diagonally past the village of Scheveningen, heading for the nearest grove of the wood. There he sought that house that we saw once before through the trees, and which we know was the temporary, and very humble, dwelling of he who was called by courtesy the King of England. Everyone was asleep there as elsewhere; only a big dog, of the breed the fishmongers of Scheveningen harness to their little carts to carry their fish into The Hague, began a wild barking as soon as he heard the stranger's footsteps outside the windows. But this reception, instead of frightening the newcomer, seemed on the contrary to delight him, for his voice might not have been enough to awaken the inhabitants of the house but with the dog's assistance his voice was hardly needed. The stranger therefore waited until the repeated barking had had its probable effect, and then ventured to call out. At that sound the mastiff began to roar with greater violence, and soon another voice was heard within, quieting the watchdog. Once the dog had settled down, a voice, weak, broken, and polite, said, "Wh-what do you want?"

"To call on His Majesty King Charles II," said the stranger.

"What do you want with him?"

"I want to speak with him."

"Who are you?"

"Ah, *God be with you!* Too many questions. I don't like talking through doors."

"Just tell me your name."

"I don't like to announce my name in the open air. Look, it's not like I'm going to eat your dog – I just hope to God he doesn't eat me."

"You bring news, maybe, Sir?" replied the voice, patient and hesitant like that of an old man.

"In fact, I do bring news, and news you'd never expect! So, open up, won't you?"

"Sir," continued the old man, "on your soul and conscience, do you believe your news is worth waking the king for?"

"For the love of God! My dear Sir, you won't be sorry, I swear to you, for putting him to the trouble. I'm worth my weight in gold, word of honour!"

"Sir, I simply cannot open this door until you tell me your name."

"Must I, then?"

"That's my master's order, Sir."

"All right! My name is ... but I warn you, my name won't tell you anything."

"Nevertheless, tell me anyway."

"Well! I'm the Sir d'Artagnan."

The voice gave a happy gasp. "My God!" said the old man on the other side of the door. "Sir d'Artagnan! What joy! I thought I recognised that voice."

"Well!" said d'Artagnan to himself. "They know my voice here. How flattering!"

"Oh, yes, we know it!" said the old man, throwing open the locks. "And here's the proof."

And with these words he admitted d'Artagnan who, by the light of the lantern in the old man's hand, recognised the stubborn guardian. "God!" he cried. "It's Parry! I should have known."

"Parry, yes, my dear Sir d'Artagnan, it is I. What joy to see you again!"

"Well said: what joy!" said d'Artagnan, squeezing the old man's hands. "*That!* Now you'll warn the king, won't you?"

"But the king is asleep, my dear Sir."

"God! Awaken him and he won't scold you for disturbing him, I promise you."

"Do you come on behalf of the count?"

"Which count?"

"The Count of La Fère."

"On the behalf of Athos? My faith, no – I come on behalf of me. Let's go to the king, Parry! I need to see the king!"

Parry didn't feel a duty to resist any longer; he'd known d'Artagnan a long time and knew that, Gascon though he was, his words never promised more than they could deliver. He led the way across a courtyard and a small garden, soothed the dog, who seriously wanted a taste of musketeer, and knocked on the shutter of a small chamber on the ground floor of a rear pavilion. Immediately a small dog within began imitating the big dog in the courtyard. "Poor king!" d'Artagnan said to himself. "These are his bodyguards. Though it's true they're not the worst sentries I've seen."

"What is it?" asked the king from within the chamber.

"Sire, it's the Sir d'Artagnan who's brought news."

No more noise from within, just the door quickly opened. Bright light flooded the corridor and the garden, for the king had been working by lamplight. Papers were scattered across his desk where he had begun the draft of a letter that, by its many erasures, showed the difficulty he was having in writing it. "Come in, Sir le Sir," he said. But upon turning he saw only a angler, and asked, "What were you talking about, Parry, and where is the Sir d'Artagnan?"

"He is before you, Sire," said d'Artagnan.

"In such an outfit?"

"Yes. Look closely at me, Sire; don't you recognise the man you saw at Blois in the antechambers of King Louis XIV?"

"I do, Sir, and I recall that I had much to thank you for."

D'Artagnan bowed. "It was my duty to behave as I did, once I knew I was dealing with Your Majesty."

"You bring me news, you say?"

"Yes, Sire."

"On the behalf of the King of France, no doubt?"

"*My faith*, no, Sire," replied d'Artagnan. "Your Majesty must have seen that the King of France is occupied only with his own majesty."

Charles rolled his eyes and sighed.

"No, Sire," continued d'Artagnan, "I bring news that I've made myself. However, I dare to hope that Your Majesty will hear this news with some favour."

"Speak, Sir."

"If I'm not mistaken, Sire, Your Majesty spoke forcefully at Blois about the frustration of his affairs in England."

Charles flushed. "Sir," he said, "I spoke of that only to the King of France."

"No, Your Majesty is mistaken," said the musketeer coolly. "When kings are in trouble, they also speak to me. In fact, that's the only time they speak to me; once the sun shines again, they speak to me no more. But I have for Your Majesty, not only the greatest respect but also absolute devotion – and when that comes from a d'Artagnan, Sire, it means something. Now, when I heard Your Majesty complain of the turns of fate, I found him noble, generous, and ill-served by fortune."

"In truth," said Charles, astonished, "I'm not sure which is greater, your respect or your liberties."

"You can decide that later, Sire," said d'Artagnan. "So, Your Majesty complained to his brother Louis XIV of the difficulties he was having in returning to England and regaining his throne without men or money." Charles struggled in a manner that betrayed some impatience. "And the principal obstacle he found blocking his way," continued d'Artagnan, "was a certain general commanding the armies of Parliament and who was acting like another Cromwell. Isn't that what Your Majesty said?"

"Yes; but I repeat to you, Sir, these words were spoken for the king alone."

"And you will find, Sire that you're glad they also fell into the ears of his Lieutenant of Musketeers. This man who was frustrating Your Majesty was called General Monck, I think. Did I hear his name rightly, Sire?"

"Yes, Sir – but once more, what is the point of these questions?"

"Oh, I'm well aware, Sire, that etiquette doesn't permit us to question kings. I hope that later Your Majesty will forgive me this discourtesy. Your Majesty added that if only he could come face to face to confer with him, then by force or persuasion he would remove this stubborn obstacle, the only real barrier he found in his path."

"That's all true, Sir; my destiny, my future, my obscurity or my glory depend on that man. But what did you gather from that?"

"Just one thing: that if this General Monck is as troublesome as you say, it would be worthwhile to rid Your Majesty of him or make him your ally."

"Sir, since you listened to my conversation with my royal brother, you know that a king who has neither men nor money has no way of dealing with a man like Monck."

"Yes, Sire, I know that was your opinion – but fortunately for Your Majesty, it wasn't mine."

"What are you saying?"

"That with neither an army nor a million, I've done what Your Majesty thought could be done only with a million or an army."

"What! What do you mean? What have you done?"

"What have I done? Well, Sire! I went across to get this man who was so frustrating Your Majesty."

"To England?"

"Exactly, Sire."

"You went to England to get General Monck?"

"Did I do something wrong, by chance?"

"Really, Sir, you must be mad!"

"Not in the least, Sire."

"You've taken Monck prisoner?"

"Yes, Sire."

"From where?"

"From the middle of his camp."

The king gaped and blinked. "And having plucked him from the causeway at Newcastle," said d'Artagnan simply, "I've brought him to Your Majesty."

"You've brought him to me!" cried the king indignantly, thinking this was a hoax.

"Yes, Sire," replied d'Artagnan without changing his tone. "I've brought him to you. He's just beyond, in a big box pierced with holes so he can breathe."

"Good Lord!"

"Oh, don't worry, Sire, we've taken good care of him. He arrives in good condition and perfect health. Is it Your Majesty's pleasure to meet and confer with him, or shall I dump him in the Channel?"

"Good Lord!" repeated Charles. "Good Lord! Sir, is this true? You're not insulting me with some low jest? You've pulled off such a bold and brilliant feat? Impossible!"

"Would Your Majesty permit me to open the window?" said d'Artagnan, opening it.

The king didn't even have time to say yes. D'Artagnan gave a long, high-pitched whistle that he repeated three times into the silence of the night. "There!" he said. "They'll bring him to Your Majesty."

D'Artagnan begins to fear the Investment of Planchet & Company might be Lost

The king couldn't contain his surprise, looking back and forth from the smiling musketeer to the dark window opened onto the night. Before he could arrange his thoughts, six of d'Artagnan's men – for two had remained to guard the boat – brought to the house, where Parry received them, that oblong object that contained at that moment the destinies of England. Before leaving Calais, d'Artagnan had had a carpenter in that town make a sort of special coffin, large and deep enough for a man to turn easily around in it. The bottom and the sides were densely padded, forming a bed soft enough that the roll of the waves didn't turn the box into a punishment cage. The little grating that d'Artagnan had mentioned to the king was like the visor of a helmet, installed at the height of a seated man's face. It had a solid shutter so that at the slightest cry it could stifle the sound, and even, if need be, smother the one who cried out. D'Artagnan was well acquainted with the character of his crew, as well as that of his prisoner, and during the crossing had been afraid of only two things: that the general would prefer death to this strange bondage and get smothered in trying to cry out, or that his crew would allow themselves to be tempted by the prisoner's offers and put d'Artagnan in the box in place of Monck. Therefore, d'Artagnan had spent the last two days and nights next to the trunk alone with the general, offering him honey and food which were refused, and repeatedly trying to reassure him about the eventual outcome of his singular captivity. Two pistols and his sword on the nearby table were his precautions against interference from outside. Once they arrived at Scheveningen, he stopped worrying. His men dreaded trouble with the authorities ashore, and he had enlisted as his second-in-command the man we've seen answer to the name Menneville, who acted as his lieutenant. The latter, being less vulgar a spirit than the others, had more at stake than they because he had more of a conscience. He believed he had a future in the service of d'Artagnan and would have been cut to pieces rather than violate his leader's orders. Therefore, it was to him that, once ashore, d'Artagnan had confided the box, and the life, of the general. It was also to him that d'Artagnan had given the order to bring the box when he heard the triple whistle. We've seen that the lieutenant obeyed. Once the trunk was in the king's house, d'Artagnan dismissed his men with a gracious smile, saying, "Gentlemen, you've rendered a great service to His Majesty King Charles II, who within six weeks will be King of England. Your reward will be doubled; return to wait for me at the boat." They departed with such joyful whoops and cries that they even frightened the big watchdog. D'Artagnan had had the trunk brought into the king's antechamber. He closed the outer doors of this chamber with great care, after which he opened the trunk, saying to the general, "*My General*, I have a thousand pardons to ask of you; my methods were unworthy of a man such as you, I'm well aware but I had to have you take me for a fishing boat captain. And transportation in England can be so awkward. But here, General," continued d'Artagnan, "You're free to get up and walk again." That said, he cut the bonds that tied the general's arms and legs. The latter got up, and then sat down with the expression of a man who expects imminent death. D'Artagnan then opened the door to Charles's study and said to him, "Sire, here is your enemy, General Monck; I had taken a personal vow that I would bring him to you. It is done, and now it's up to you. Sir Monck," he added, turning to the prisoner, "you're before His Majesty King Charles II, Sovereign Lord of England and Scotland."

Monck raised his coldly stoic gaze to the young prince, and replied, "I recognise no King of England and Scotland; I don't even know anyone here who is worthy to bear the title of gentleman, for it was in the name of King Charles II that an agent, whom I took for an honest man, came to take me in an infamous trap. I fell into this trap, the more fool me – but now you, the plotter," he said to the king, "and you, the executioner," he said to d'Artagnan, "hear every word I have to say to you: you have my body, and you can kill me, if you have the nerve to do it but you'll never have my mind or my soul. And now don't ask me for another word, because from this moment forward I will not open my mouth even to shout. I have spoken."

He pronounced these words with the fierce and invincible resolution of the most diehard Puritan. D'Artagnan saw that his prisoner was a man who knew the value of every word and who fixed that value by the tone with which he pronounced them. "The fact is," he whispered to the king, "that the general is just that implacable; he didn't take a mouthful of bread or a drop of honey for two days. But from this moment it's Your Majesty who decides his fate, and I wash my hands of him, as Pilate said."

Monck, standing pale and resigned, waited with eyes glowering and arms crossed. D'Artagnan turned to him and said, "You must understand that your speech, lovely as it was, is no use to anyone, not even you. His Majesty wanted to speak to you but you refused him an interview; now that you're here face to face, brought by a force independent of your own will, why would you force us to take measures that are ignoble and unworthy? Speak, devil take you! If only to say no."

Monck didn't open his lips; Monck didn't blink an eye; Monck just stroked his moustache with an air that announced he wasn't at all mollified. Meanwhile, Charles II was deep in thought. He was facing Monck for the first time, the man he'd wanted so long to see, and with that profound gaze that God gives to eagles and to kings, he had sounded the depths of his heart. He recognised Monck was sincere in his determination to die before he'd speak, entirely consistent with so grave and distinguished a man who had been humiliated so cruelly. Charles II suddenly made one of those fateful decisions upon which an ordinary man bets his life, a general his career, and a king his realm. "Sir," he said to Monck, "in certain respects, you are entirely justified. I don't ask you to answer me but I do ask you to listen."

There was a moment of silence during which the king gazed at Monck, who remained impassive. "Just now you directed a painful reproach to me, Sir," continued the king. "You said that one of my agents went to Newcastle to set a trap for you, and as an aside I must have it understood that that can't be said of Sir d'Artagnan here, whom I sincerely thank for his generous, even heroic devotion." D'Artagnan bowed respectfully. Monck just stroked his moustache. "But Sir d'Artagnan – and please note, Mister Monck, that I don't say this to excuse myself – Sir d'Artagnan went to England on his own initiative, without avarice, without orders, without hope, like the true gentleman he is, to render a service to an unfortunate king, and to add one more glorious exploit to the illustrious history of a life already full of them."

D'Artagnan, somewhat abashed, flushed and coughed a little. Monck didn't budge. "I see you don't believe that, Mister Monck," said the king. "That's understandable; such acts of devotion are so rare it's reasonable to doubt them."

"Sir would be badly mistaken not to believe you, Sire," said d'Artagnan anxiously, "for what Your Majesty has said is utterly true, so true that I now see that by going to bring back the general, I was completely in the wrong. And in truth, if that's the case, I'm in despair."

"Sir d'Artagnan," said the king, taking the musketeer's hand, "you have obliged me as much as if you'd actually helped my cause, for you have revealed to me an unknown friend to whom I'll be forever grateful and will always love."

And the king shook his hand warmly. "Plus," he continued, bowing to Monck, "you've introduced me to an enemy whom I now know to esteem at his proper value."

The Puritan's eyes flashed but only once, before his expression resumed its dark impassivity. "So, Sir d'Artagnan," continued Charles, "here is what's been interrupted: the Count of La Fère, whom you know, I believe, had gone to Newcastle..."

"Athos?" cried d'Artagnan.

"Yes, I believe that's his nom de guerre. The Count of La Fère had gone to Newcastle in hopes of arranging a conference with me or my representative when you somewhat violently abbreviated the negotiation."

"*God be with you!*" replied d'Artagnan. "That must have been him I saw coming into the camp the same night I entered with my anglers..."

A barely perceptible frowning of Monck's brow told d'Artagnan he was right. "Yes," he murmured, "I thought his figure and his voice seemed familiar. The devil! Oh, Sire, forgive me! I believed I'd steered my ship so carefully."

"There's nothing wrong, Sir," said the king, "except the general accuses me of having laid a trap for him that I did not. No, General, these are not the means I planned to use with you, as you'll soon see. Meanwhile, when I give you my word as a gentleman, Sir, you can take it, believe me. Now, Sir d'Artagnan, listen."

"On my knees, Sire!"

"You are mine, are you not?"

"As Your Majesty has seen. Too much so!"

"Good. From a man like you, one word is enough – and the acts count even more. General, please follow me. Come with us, Sir d'Artagnan."

D'Artagnan, surprised, was quick to obey. Charles II went out, Monck followed him, and d'Artagnan followed Monck. Charles took the path by which d'Artagnan had come to him; soon the fresh sea air struck the faces of the three night walkers, and, fifty paces beyond a little gate that Charles opened, they found themselves atop a low dune, facing the ocean that, having stopped its advance, pawed at the shore like a restless monster. Charles II, pensive, walked with his head down and his hand under his cloak. Monck followed him, his arms ready and his eyes alert. D'Artagnan came last, his fist on theommel of his sword. "Where is the boat that brought you, Gentlemen?" Charles said to the musketeer.

"Over there, Sire; I have seven men and an officer who await me at that small boat next to that little fire."

"Ah, yes! That boat drawn up on the sand, I see it. But you certainly didn't come from Newcastle in a longboat?"

"No, Sire, I have a hired tracker that's at anchor about a cannon shot from the dunes. It was in that tracker that we made the trip."

"Sir," said the king to Monck, "you are free."

Monck, despite himself, let out a murmur of surprise. The king nodded and continued, "We're going to wake up an angler from this village who will put his boat to sea this very night to take you back to wherever you would go. Sir d'Artagnan, here, will escort Your Honour. I place Sir d'Artagnan under the safeguard of your integrity, General Monck."

Monck muttered another syllable of surprise, and d'Artagnan let out a deep sigh. The king, without seeming to notice, knocked on the gate of a pine-wood fence that surrounded the first shack at the edge of the dunes. "Hey! Keyser!" he cried. "Wake up!"

"Who's calling me?" asked the angler.

"It's me, Charles, the king."

"Ah, Milord!" said Keyser, appearing at the door wrapped in the sail in which he slept like a hammock. "What can I do for you?"

"Captain Keyser," said Charles, "set sail at once. Here is a traveller who hires your boat and will pay you well; oblige him."

And the king stepped back a few paces to allow Monck to speak freely with the angler. "I wish to go over to England," said Monck who spoke enough Dutch to be able to make himself understood.

"This very moment, if you want," said the angler.

"How long before we can go?" said Monck.

"Not half an hour, Your Honour. My eldest son is already up and readying the boat, since we sail with the tide at three in the morning."

"Well! Is it settled?" asked Charles, approaching again.

"Yes, Sire, all but the price," said the angler.

"That's my affair," said Charles. "This gentleman is my friend."

At that word, Monck shivered all over and looked at Charles. "Good, Milord," replied Keyser.

And just then they heard his eldest son signalling from the shore with a blast on a bull's horn. "And now, Gentlemen, on your way," said the king.

"Sire," said d'Artagnan, "may it please Your Majesty to give me just a few minutes? I have hired men I'm leaving behind and must notify them."

"Whistle for them," said Charles, smiling.

D'Artagnan whistled loudly, and while Keyser went to warn his son, Menneville and four men came up at a run. "Here's payment as promised," said d'Artagnan, showing them a purse containing twenty-five hundred livres in gold. "Wait for me in Calais at the place you know of."

And d'Artagnan, uttering a deep sigh, dropped the purse into Menneville's hands. "What, are you leaving us?" the men said anxiously.

"For a short time," said d'Artagnan, "or a long one, who knows? But with these twenty-five hundred livres and the two thousand five hundred you've already received, you've been paid according to our agreement. So, go happily, my children."

"What about the tracker?"

"Don't worry about it. It's back in port."

"But our things are still aboard."

"Go get them and then be on your way."

"Yes, Commander."

D'Artagnan returned to Monck and said, "Sir, I await your orders, for it seems we're going together, unless my company is disagreeable to you."

"On the contrary, Sir," said Monck.

"Let's go, Milords! We're ready!" Keyser's son called.

Charles saluted the general with nobility and dignity, and told him, "You will forgive me for the violence and inconvenience you've suffered once you're convinced I didn't cause them."

Monck bowed deeply but said nothing. Charles spoke a final word to d'Artagnan but aloud rather than privately, saying, "Thank you for your services. They'll be repaid by the Lord God, who reserves for me alone, I hope, all trials and pain."

Monck followed Keyser and his son and went aboard with them. D'Artagnan came last, murmuring, "Ah, my poor Planchet! I'm afraid we've made a bad investment."

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The Stock of Planchet & Company Rebounds

During the passage, Monck spoke to d'Artagnan only when absolutely necessary. When the Frenchman hesitated to join him at supper, a poor meal of salt fish, biscuits, and gin, Monck called to him and said, "To table, Sir!"

That was all. D'Artagnan, precisely because he was himself extremely concise when engaged in important affairs, didn't think this curtness augured a favourable result for his situation. As he had plenty of time to himself, he used it in racking his brain to try to figure out how Athos had met Charles II, how they had conspired on his mission to England, and how he'd gotten into Monck's camp. The poor Lieutenant of Musketeers pulled a hair from his moustache every time he thought that Athos must have been the cavalier who'd accompanied Monck to the abbey on the night of the abduction. Finally, after a crossing of two days and two nights, the skipper landed at the spot designated by Monck, who'd given all the orders during the passage. It was at the village at the mouth of the river where Athos had taken lodgings. The day was fading; the beautiful sun, like a buckler of red steel, was dipping its lower edge into the sea's blue horizon. The fishing boat was making its way up the river that was wide enough at its mouth but Monck, in his impatience, ordered it to the shore, and Keyser landed him, along with d'Artagnan, on the muddy river bank among the reeds. D'Artagnan, resigned to obedience, followed his master Monck like a chained bear but the position was humiliating, and he grumbled under his breath that the service of kings, even the best of them, was a bitter calling. Monck set a quick pace. One might almost say he wouldn't really be certain he was back in England until he'd reached the few houses of sailors and anglers scattered around the little quay of this humble harbour. Suddenly d'Artagnan shouted, "Look! God love me, there's a house afire!"

Monck looked up. There was indeed a house beginning to be devoured by fire. It had begun at a little shack attached to its side, and flames were beginning to lick at the roof. The cool evening breeze was feeding it. The two travellers quickened their pace, hearing shouts and seeing, as they approached, a troop of soldiers waving their arms and surrounding the burning house. This was no doubt what had kept them from noticing the approach of the fishing boat. Monck stopped short for a moment, and for the first time expressed his thoughts in words. "Hmm!" he said. "What if they're not my soldiers but Lambert's?"

These words contained both concern and a reproach that d'Artagnan understood perfectly. In fact, during the general's absence, Lambert might have brought to battle, defeated, and dispersed the parliamentary troops, occupying the terrain once held by Monck's army, bereft of their greatest asset. To this possibility, passing from Monck's thoughts to his own, d'Artagnan reasoned, *There are two ways this could go: if Monck is right and only Lambert's men are left in this area, I should be well received, since it's to me they owe their victory; or nothing has changed and Monck, delighted to find his army still camped in the same place, will go easy on me.*

While thinking this through, the two travellers continued their advance and soon found themselves in a small crowd of sailors, who watched the burning of the house with dismay but dared not say anything, intimidated as they were by the soldiers. Monck addressed one of these sailors, asking, "What's going on?"

"Sir," the man replied, not recognising Monck as a senior officer under the thick cloak that enveloped him, "this house is inhabited by a foreigner, and the soldiers became suspicious of him. They wanted to enter his house under the pretext of escorting him to the camp but he, despite their numbers, threatened any man who crossed his threshold with death, and the first man who risked it, the Frenchman laid out with a pistol shot."

"Ah, so he's a Frenchman?" said d'Artagnan, rubbing his hands. "Good!"

"What do you mean, *good*?" asked the angler.

"No, I meant he *should* ... not, or something. Gah, this language!"

"He shouldn't have, all right. It made the other soldiers as angry as lions, and they fired at least a hundred musket shots at the house but the Frenchman was safe behind the wall, and anyone who approached the door was shot by his lackey, and can he shoot! Those who tried the window met the pistol of his master. Now seven men are down – count them!"

"Ah, my brave compatriot!" muttered d'Artagnan. "Just wait till I join you, and together we'll deal with this rabble!"

"A moment, Sir," said Monck. "Wait."

"For long?"

"No, just long enough for me to ask a question." Then, turning back to the sailor, "My friend," he asked, with an emotion that despite himself he couldn't quite suppress, "tell me whose soldiers these are, if you would?"

"And whose soldiers would they be but those of that madman Monck?"

"So, there hasn't been a battle yet?"

"Why would there be? What's the point? Lambert's army is melting away like snow in April. Most are coming over to Monck, both officers and soldiers. In another week Lambert won't have more than fifty men."

The angler was interrupted by a fresh volley of shots aimed at the house, and by a pistol fired in reply that felled the most reckless of the attackers. The fury of the soldiers was at its height. The flames were still rising, and a plume of fire and smoke swirled above the house top. D'Artagnan could no longer contain himself. "*God be with you!*" he said and looked accusingly at Monck. "You call yourself a general but you let your soldiers burn down houses and assassinate people while you watch happily, warming your hands at the fire! What kind of a man are you?"

"Patience, Sir, patience," said Monck, smiling.

"Patience! Until this brave gentleman is roasted, is that it?"

And d'Artagnan leapt forward. "Stay here, Sir," said Monck imperiously.

And he himself advanced toward the house. An officer stepped up and called out to the besieged, "The house is on fire, you'll be ashes inside an hour! Here, there's still time – tell us what you did with General Monck, and we'll let you come out safely. Answer me, or by Saint Patrick ...!"

The besieged didn't answer; no doubt he was reloading his pistol. "We sent for reinforcements," the officer continued. "In a quarter of an hour there will be a hundred men around this house."

"I'll answer you when everyone has withdrawn," said the Frenchman. "I will come out freely and go to the camp myself, or I'll die right here!"

"A thousand thunders!" cried d'Artagnan. "That's Athos's voice! Ah, you rabble!"

And d'Artagnan's sword flashed from its scabbard. Monck paused and gestured to him to stop. Then he said, in a resounding voice, "Halt! What are you doing here? Digby, what's this fire? Why all this commotion?"

"The general!" Digby gasped, his sword dropping.

"The general!" repeated the soldiers.

"Well? Is that so amazing?" said Monck in a calm voice. Then, into the resulting silence, he said, "Come, who set this fire?"

The soldiers lowered their heads. "What! I ask and am not answered?" said Monck. "What! I find fault, and no one repairs it? That fire is still burning, I think."

Immediately twenty men rushed forward, gathering buckets, jars, and pails, extinguishing the fire with the same ardour they'd shown in setting it. But ahead of them, first and foremost, d'Artagnan ran up to the house with a ladder, shouting, "Athos! It's me, d'Artagnan! Don't kill me, old friend."

And moments later he was holding the count in his arms. Grimaud, meanwhile, dismantled the ground floor fortifications while maintaining his air of calm. He started once upon hearing d'Artagnan's voice but otherwise, having opened the door, he stood serenely on the threshold, arms crossed. When the fire was out, the soldiers were unsure what to do next, Digby most of all. "Forgive us, General," he said. "What we did was out of love for Your Honour, whom we thought lost."

"You're mad, Gentlemen. Lost! Does a man like me get lost? Can I not leave when necessary at will, even without warning? Do you take me for some minor town burgess? Is a gentleman who's my friend and guest to be besieged, threatened, and burned on suspicion? What does this word mean, *suspicion*? God damn me, I should shoot everyone this brave gentleman left alive myself!"

"General," said Digby piteously, "we were twenty-eight, and now eight of us are fallen."

"I authorise the Count of La Fère to send the remaining twenty to join those eight," said Monck, extending a hand toward Athos. "Oh, just send them back to camp," said Monck, with a gesture of dismissal. "Mister Digby, place yourself under arrest for one month."

"But, General..."

"That will teach you, Sir, to act on your own without my orders."

"I was acting at the orders of the lieutenant commander."

"The lieutenant commander had no authority to give such an order, and he'll stand to arrest in your place if I find he ordered that this gentleman be burned."

"He didn't order that, General, he ordered us to bring him to camp but the count wouldn't go with us."

"I didn't want anyone to plunder my house," said Athos, with a significant look at Monck.

"And quite right too. The rest of you, to camp, I say!"

The soldiers marched off with their heads down. "Now that we're alone," said Monck to Athos, "Tell me, Sir, why you persisted in staying here, when you have a sloop..."

"I was waiting for you, General," said Athos. "Didn't Your Honour ask me to wait a week for another audience?"

An agonized look from d'Artagnan made it clear to Monck that these two men, so brave and honest, hadn't connived at his abduction. This just confirmed what he already knew. "Sir," he said to d'Artagnan, "you were entirely right. Just give me a moment to chat with the Count of La Fère."

D'Artagnan took advantage of the respite to go and greet Grimaud. Monck asked Athos to lead him to his living chamber. The room was still full of smoke and debris. More than fifty musket balls had passed through the window and peppered the walls. Monck found a table, an inkwell, and writing materials; he took pen and paper, wrote a single line, signed it, folded the sheet, sealed it with the signet on his ring, and handed the letter to Athos, saying, "Sir, if you would, take this letter to King Charles II, going at once if there's nothing to keep you here."

"And the barrels?" said Athos.

"The anglers who brought me will help you get them aboard. Be gone, if possible, within the hour."

"Yes, General," said Athos.

"Sir d'Artagnan!" called Monck out the window. D'Artagnan rushed in. "Embrace your friend and say farewell, Sir, for he's returning to Holland."

"To Holland!" said d'Artagnan. "And I?"

"You're at liberty to go with him, Sir but I'd prefer you to stay," said Monck. "Will you refuse me?"

"Oh, no, General! I'm at your service."

D'Artagnan embraced Athos and said a brief goodbye. Monck watched them both closely. Then he personally oversaw the preparations for departure, the loading of the barrels, the embarkation of Athos, and finally, taking the bemused d'Artagnan by the arm, led him toward Newcastle. Following Monck, d'Artagnan said to himself, "Well, well – it seems to me that shares in the firm of Planchet and Company are on the rise."

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Monck reveals himself

D'Artagnan, though he flattered himself that things were going well, didn't really have a firm grasp of the situation. He had a lot to think about: Athos's association with the king, his friend's journey to England, and the unexpected results of the collision of his own plot with the mission of the Count of La Fère. Best just to set it aside. He'd committed an indiscretion, and though he'd done what he set out to do, d'Artagnan found himself with none of the rewards of success. At least, with everything lost, there was nothing more to risk. D'Artagnan followed Monck through the camp to headquarters. The general's return had produced a remarkable effect, for everyone had thought him lost. But Monck, with his austere expression and upright bearing, seemed to question why his eager lieutenants and delighted soldiers should be so happy. To the lieutenant commander who hurried to meet him, and explained how anxious his sudden departure made them, he said, "Why is that? Am I obliged to report to you?"

"But, Your Honour, the sheep without the shepherd will tremble."

"Tremble!" replied Monck in his calm and resonant voice. "What a word! God damn me, Sir! If my sheep don't have teeth and claws, I give up being their shepherd. You trembled, Sir?"

"For you, General."

"Mind your own concerns and not mine. I may not have the wits that God gave Oliver Cromwell but I have what He gave to me, and I'm satisfied with them, few as they may be."

The officer had no reply, and thus Monck silenced all his people, who were convinced that he'd been on an important mission or had been testing them – which showed how little they understood this patient and scrupulous genius. Monck, if he still had the faith of his allies the Puritans, must have given thanks to his patron saint for getting him out of d'Artagnan's box. Meanwhile, our musketeer was telling himself, "*My God!* Sir Monck must have less pride than I have, for I declare, if someone had locked me in a trunk with a grate across its mouth and carried me like a boxed-in veal-calf across the sea, I would hold such a grudge for my time in the trunk, and such animosity for the one who locked me in, that if I saw as much as the shadow of a smile cross the face that man, or thought I saw him mocking my posture while in the box, *God be with you!* I'm afraid I'd carve my dagger across his throat in memory of the grate, and put him into a real coffin in memory of the fake casket he'd kept me in for two days."

And d'Artagnan was honest in saying this, for our Gascon did have a rather thin skin. Fortunately, Monck was thinking about other things. He didn't say a word about the past to his former conqueror, instead inviting him to be a close observer of his work. Monck took him along when he went on reconnaissance to achieve one of his goals, the rehabilitation of d'Artagnan's spirit. The latter behaved like the most flattering courtier, admiring Monck's troop dispositions and the organisation of his camp, and joking about the ramparts ringing Lambert's camp, saying that he'd built a camp large enough to house twenty thousand men when in the end an acre would be enough for the corporal and fifty guards who would be left loyal to him. Monck, as soon as he'd arrived, had accepted the proposal for a parley that Lambert had made the day before that Monck's lieutenants had refused on the pretext that Monck was unwell. This parley was neither long nor interesting: Lambert demanded the fealty of his rival, and Monck declared he owed fealty to no one but the majority party. Lambert then asked if it wouldn't be easier to end the quarrel by an alliance rather than a battle. Monck asked for a week in which to consider. Lambert could scarcely refuse, even though he'd come north with the stated intent of devouring Monck's army. After this interview Lambert's people grew impatient, as nothing had been decided upon, neither a treaty nor a battle. The rebel army began, as d'Artagnan had foreseen, to prefer the good cause over the bad, and the Parliament, *rump* though it was, over the empty composites of General Lambert. They began to recall the good food they'd had in London, the profusion of ale and sherry that the burghers of the City had lavished on their friends, the soldiers; they bit with disgust into the black bread of war, and tasted the brackish water of the Tweed, too salty for the glass, too bland for the pot, and they said to themselves, "Wouldn't we be better off on the other side? Aren't they preparing roasts in London for Monck?" From then on, the only news from Lambert's army was of desertion. The soldiers found that this war conflicted with their principles that, like discipline, is the motivation that gives a force its purpose. Monck defended the Parliament, and Lambert attacked it. Monck had no more respect for the Parliament than Lambert did but its name was embroidered on his flags, leaving nothing for the opposition to write on theirs but *Rebellion* that sounded bad in the ears of the Puritans. They went from Lambert to Monck like humble sinners from Baal to God. Monck figured that at a thousand desertions a day, Lambert could hold out for twenty days. But like a snowball gathering speed and mass as it rolls downhill, the desertion accelerated, so that a hundred left the first day, three hundred the second, and a thousand the third, at which point Monck thought they'd reached the anticipated rate. But a thousand desertions soon became two thousand, and then four thousand. By the end of the week, Lambert, feeling like he no longer had the means to accept a battle if it was offered, made the wise decision to escape in the night to return to London, hoping to head off Monck and arrive where he could consolidate his power with the remnants of the military party. But Monck, unconcerned and showing no haste, marched toward London as a conqueror, increasing his army by absorbing lesser parties as he passed. He went into camp at Barnet, about four leagues from the city, praised by the Parliament, who thought they saw in him a protector, and watched by the people, who waited to see him commit himself before they judged him. D'Artagnan himself couldn't tell from his tactics what to think. He watched, and he admired. Monck couldn't enter London before committing himself without getting embroiled in a prolongation of the civil war. He bided his time for some weeks. Suddenly, when no one expected it, Monck struck, driving the remnants of the military party out of London, installing himself in the City among the burghers by order of the Parliament; and then, when the burghers began to cry out against Monck, just when even the soldiers began to question their commander, Monck, sensing that the majority was ready for it, declared that the Rump Parliament must resign, step aside, and yield its place to a government that was more than just a joke. Monck made this declaration backed by fifty thousand swords, joined by the end of the day by five hundred thousand citizens of London, who acclaimed the move with shouts of joy. And then, just when the people, after their triumphal celebrations and parties in the street, were looking for a leader they could pledge to follow, word went out that a vessel had left The Hague bearing Charles II and his fortune. "Gentlemen," said Monck to his officers, "I go to welcome the legitimate king. Whoever loves me will follow me!"

A roar of acclamation followed these words that d'Artagnan couldn't hear without a shiver of pleasure. "*God be with you!*" he said to Monck. "You are bold, Sir."

"You'll go with me, won't you?" said Monck.

"Lord, yes, General! But, tell me, if you would, what was in the letter you wrote for Athos – I mean, the Count of La Fère – on the day we arrived?"

"I have no more secrets from you," replied Monck. "I wrote these words: 'Sire, I expect Your Majesty at Dover in six weeks.'"

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "Rather than bold, instead I say 'well played.' It was a fine stroke!"

"You know something of such matters," Monck replied. It was the only reference he ever made to his trip to Holland.

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How Athos & d'Artagnan met Once More at the Hartshorn Inn

The King of England made his entrance with great pomp at Dover, and then again at London. He had brought his mother and sister and summoned his brothers. England had for so long been left to herself, that is, to tyranny, anarchy, and unreason, that the return of King Charles II, whom the English knew only as the son of a man they'd beheaded, was celebrated throughout the three kingdoms. The warm reception and general acclamation that welcomed his return struck the young king so strongly that he said into the ear of James of York, his younger brother, "In truth, James, it seems we were mistaken to be so long absent from a country where we're so well loved."

The royal procession was magnificent. Beautiful weather framed the solemnities. Charles had regained all his youth, all his good humour, and seemed transfigured; all hearts seemed to smile on him like the sun. Among this noisy crowd of courtiers and admirers, who didn't seem to remember that they'd conducted the new king's father to his scaffold at Whitehall, was a man in the uniform of a Lieutenant of Musketeers, looking on with a smile on his thin, clever lips, sometimes at the people shouting their blessings, sometimes on the prince borne on this tide of emotion and who saluted above all the women who tossed bouquets beneath his horse's feet. "It's a fine thing to be a king!" said this man, lost in his contemplation, so absorbed that he stopped in the middle of the street, letting the crowd and procession pass by and around him. "Here indeed is a prince bedecked with gold and diamonds like a Solomon, covered with flowers like a spring meadow, on his way to plunge his hands into the immense treasury that his faithful subjects, formerly so unfaithful, have filled with cartloads of gold, in coins and ingots. They've thrown enough flowers at him to bury him twice, though if he'd appeared here less than two months ago, they'd have thrown bullets and musket balls rather than bouquets. Decidedly, it's something to be born of a certain rank, no offence to the lowborn who say they're not worse for being born low."

The procession went marching on, with the king and his adulation beginning to move off toward the palace, though this didn't mean our officer wasn't being considerably jostled. "*God be with you!*" continued the philosopher. "So many people treading on my feet with so little regard, or rather none at all, since they're English and I'm French. If one asked these people, 'Who is Sir d'Artagnan?' they'd reply, '*Nescio vos*' – I don't know you. But tell them, 'There goes the king, and there goes General Monck,' and they'd shout, '*Vive le roi! Vive General Monck!*' until their lungs wore out. However," he continued, regarding the crowd with that look so keen and so proud, "consider, good people, what your King Charles has done, and what General Monck has done, and then think of what that wretched foreigner called Sir d'Artagnan has done. Of course, you can't think about it because it's unknown but what does that matter? That doesn't keep Charles II from being a great king, though he was exiled for twelve years, nor Mister Monck from being a great general, though he took a trip to Holland in a box. So, since one must acknowledge that one is a great king and the other is a great commander, I say *Hurrah for King Charles III! Hurrah for General Monck!*" And his voice mingled with the voices of thousands of spectators, rising above them for a moment, and to show his true devotion, he even waved his hat in the air. But he was stopped by a hand on his arm in the middle of this show of loyalism (that is what in 1660 they called what we now call *royalism*). "Athos!" d'Artagnan cried. "You, here?" And the two friends embraced. "You are here! And being here," continued the musketeer, "why aren't you in the midst of that crowd of courtiers, my dear Count? What! You, the hero of the day, not riding at the left side of His restored Majesty, as General Monck rides on his right? Really, I can understand the character of neither you nor of the prince who owes you so much."

"Always mocking, my dear d'Artagnan," said Athos. "Will you never correct this unseemly fault?"

"But seriously, why aren't you part of the procession?"

"I'm not part of the procession because I don't wish to be."

"And why don't you wish to be?"

"Because I'm neither envoy, ambassador, nor representative of the King of France, and it doesn't suit me to associate myself so closely with another king whom God didn't make my master."

"*God be with you!* You were pretty close to the king his father."

"That's another thing, my friend; he was on his way to death."

"And yet what you did for this one..."

"I did because it was what I had to do. But I deplore all ostentation, as you know. May King Charles II who no longer needs me, leave me to retire back into the shadows. That's all I ask of him."

D'Artagnan sighed. "What would you have?" Athos said to him. "Anyway, my friend, it looks to me like this joyous return of the king to London saddens you, though you did at least as much for His Majesty as I did."

"Could it be," replied d'Artagnan, with his Gascon laugh, "that I did a great deal for His Majesty without his being aware of it?"

"Oh but the king knows it well, my friend!" said Athos.

"He knows it!" said the musketeer bitterly. "By my faith! You'd never suspect it, and up to a moment ago I almost forgot it myself."

"But he, my friend, will not forget – I'll answer for it."

"You tell me that to console me a little, Athos."

"For what?"

"*God be with you!* For all the expenses I've had. I've ruined myself, friend, for the restoration of this young prince who just cantered by, riding on his bay horse."

"The king doesn't know you've ruined yourself, *my friend* but he's aware that he owes you a great deal."

"Does that get me anywhere, Athos? Tell me! To be fair, I must say you performed your mission nobly and well. But I, who seemingly almost wrecked it, was the one who really made it succeed. Follow my thinking on this: you might not have been able to convince General Monck by persuasion or diplomacy but my rude means of conducting the dear general to our prince gave Charles the opportunity to be generous, a generosity inspired solely by my blessed blunder, and Charles sees himself repaid for it by this restoration engineered by Monck."

"All that, dear friend, is undeniably true," Athos replied.

"Well! As undeniably true as that is, it's just as true that I, though beloved of General Monck, who calls me his dear captain all day long, though I'm neither his dear nor his captain, and though appreciated by the king, though he's already forgotten my name – it's just as true, I say, that when I return to my native country, I'll be cursed by the soldiers whom I'd led to hope for a big payoff, and cursed by my brave Planchet, from whom I borrowed much of his fortune."

"How's that? What the devil does Planchet have to do with all this?"



"Why, everything, old friend! Here's the king, splendid, smiling, and adored, there's General Monck who thinks he's brought him back, you who believe you supported him, I who think I nudged them all together, the citizens who feel they've reconquered him, the king himself who thinks he's negotiated his restoration but none of this is true: in reality, Charles II, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, was replaced on his throne by a French grocer of the Rue des Lombards named Planchet. And such is grandeur! 'Vanity,' says Scripture, 'all is vanity!'"

Athos couldn't help but laugh at his friend's joke. "Dear d'Artagnan!" he said, taking his hand affectionately. "Have you turned philosopher? Wasn't it enough for you to have saved my life by your timely arrival with Monck when those damned parliamentarians wanted to broil me alive?"

"Well, you know," said d'Artagnan, "you just about deserved to be broiled, my dear Count."

"What? For protecting King Charles's million?"

"What million?"

"Ah, right! You never knew about that. But you mustn't be angry with me about it, my friend, for it wasn't my secret. That word *Remember* that King Charles pronounced on the scaffold..."

"The word that means *Souviens-toi*?"

"Exactly. That word meant *remember* that I have a million in gold buried in the vaults of Newcastle Abbey, and that million belongs to my son."

"Ah, very nice! Now I understand. But what I also understand, and it's frightful, is that every time he thinks of me, His Majesty Charles II will say, 'There was a certain man who nearly made me lose my crown. Fortunately, I was generous, noble, and clever enough to save the day.' That's what he'll say of me, that young gentleman who came to the Château de Blois in a shabby black doublet, hat in his hand, to ask me if I'd admit him to see the King of France."

"D'Artagnan, d'Artagnan, you're wrong," said Athos, placing a hand on the musketeer's shoulder.

"I'm in the right."

"No, because you don't know the future."

D'Artagnan looked his friend right between the eyes and began to laugh. "In truth, my dear Athos, you talk just like Cardinal Mazarin."

Athos flinched.

"Sorry!" continued d'Artagnan, laughing. "Pardon me if I offended you. But the future! Haha ha! Such pretty words that promise so much, words spoken from lips that have nothing else to offer! *God be with you!* After having met so many who promise, when will I meet someone who delivers? But never mind that," continued d'Artagnan. "What are you doing here, dear Athos? Are you the king's treasurer?"

"What! The king's treasurer?"

"Yes, if the king has a million, he must need a treasurer. The King of France, who hasn't a copper, has a Surintendant des Finances, Sir Fouquet. Though it's true that there it's Fouquet who has the millions."

"Oh, that million is long spent," laughed Athos in his turn.

"I see, it's become satin, gemstones, velvet, and plumes of all kinds and of every colour. All these princes and princesses were in urgent need of tailors and couturiers. Do you remember, Athos, what we spent to equip ourselves for the La Rochelle campaign, for clothes and horses? Two or three thousand livres each, by my faith! But a king is greater than we are and needs a million to outfit himself. But Athos, if you're not treasurer, at least tell me you're in well at Court?"

"Faith of a gentleman, I wouldn't know," replied Athos simply.

"Come now! You don't know?"

"No, I haven't seen the king since Dover."

"So, he's forgotten you as well. God! That's appalling."

"His Majesty has had many affairs to attend to!"

"Oh, right!" said d'Artagnan, with one of those sarcastic expressions unique to him. "It's almost enough to make me admire Monsignor Mazarini. Really, Athos? The king hasn't seen you?"

"No."

"And you're not furious?"

"Me? Why? Do you imagine, old friend that I did what I did for the king? That young man, I scarcely know him. I defended his father, who represented a sacred principle to me, and I allowed myself to be drawn to the son out of sympathy for that same principle. Besides, he's a worthy knight and a noble individual, like his father, whom you remember."

"That's true, he was a fine, brave man, who had a sad life but made a good death."

"Well, then, my dear d'Artagnan, understand this: to that king, that man of heart, that noble soul-mate, if I dare call him so, I swore at the supreme hour to faithfully preserve the secret of the fortune that was to help his son when the time was right; and that young man came to me, he told me of his misfortune, not knowing me for anything but a living memory of his father. And I accomplished for Charles II what I had promised to Charles I, that's all. What matter to me whether he's grateful or not? I did this service for myself, to fulfil my obligation and responsibility, not for him."

"I've always said," replied d'Artagnan with a sigh, "that selflessness is the finest thing in the world."

"As to that, dear friend," said Athos, "aren't you in the same position I am? As I understood it, you allowed yourself to be moved by that young man's misfortunes; you were more selfless than I, for I had a duty to fulfill, while you owed absolutely nothing to the martyr's son. You didn't have to repay the price of that precious drop of blood that fell on my brow beneath the scaffold. You acted solely from the heart, that noble and good heart you hide under your apparent scepticism and sarcastic irony. Perhaps it did cost a servant's fortune, and your own, you benevolent miser, and maybe no one knows of that sacrifice. No matter! Of course, you want to return Planchet's money, I understand that, for it isn't proper for a gentleman to borrow from his inferior without repaying him capital and interest. Well, then! If necessary, I'll sell La Fère or a small farm or two. You'll pay Planchet, and I'll still have enough grain in my barns for the two of us and Raoul. That way, my friend, you'll have no debts to anyone but yourself, and if I know you, it will be more than a little to be able to tell yourself, 'I made a king.' Am I right?"

"Ah, Athos!" murmured d'Artagnan thoughtfully. "I've told you more than once, on the day you take up preaching, I'll go to the sermon – and the day you tell me there really is a hell, *God be with you!* I'll fear the inferno and the pitchforks. You're better than I am, or rather better than anyone is, while I have only one virtue, that of not being jealous. But as to faults, *damn-me*, as the English say, if I don't have all the rest."

"I know of no one the equal of d'Artagnan," Athos replied, "but though we went slowly, we've still arrived at where I've taken lodgings. Won't you come in, my friend?"

"Eh? But isn't this the Hartshorn Inn?" said d'Artagnan.

"I confess, old friend that I chose it deliberately. I like old acquaintances and returning to the place where you found me collapsed from fatigue, in the depths of despair, on that night of thirtieth January."

"After I'd discovered the lair of that masked executioner? Yes, that was a terrible day!"

"Come in, then," said Athos, interrupting him.

They entered the former common room. The inn in general, and its common room in particular, had undergone great changes; the musketeers' former host who had become wealthy, at least for an innkeeper, had closed up the tavern and turned this chamber into a warehouse of colonial merchandise. As for the rest of the house, he rented the rooms out to foreigners. It was with an indescribable emotion that d'Artagnan recognised all the furnishings in Athos's room on the first floor: the woodwork, the tapestries, and even the framed map that Porthos had studied so lovingly in his spare time. "Eleven years ago!" he said. "*God be with you!* It seems like a century."

"And to me but a day," said Athos. "Imagine the joy I feel, my friend, in seeing you here, pressing your hand, tossing aside my sword and dagger, knowing I won't need them, and pouring us glasses of sherry without fearing poison. Oh, this joy could only be greater if our two friends were here, sitting at the corners of the table, with Raoul, my beloved Raoul, on the threshold regarding us with his eyes, so brilliant and so sweet!"

"Yes, it's true," said d'Artagnan, moved, "especially the first part of your thought. It's sweet to smile where we so legitimately shivered, thinking from one moment to the next that Sir Mordaunt might appear on the landing."

At that moment the door opened, and d'Artagnan, brave as he was, made a frightened start. But Athos understood and said, smiling, "It's our host, come to bring me some correspondence."

"Yes, Milord," said the hotelier, "I do have a letter for Your Honour."

"Thank you," said Athos, taking the letter without looking at it. "Tell me, my dear host, do you recognise Sir, here?"

The old man raised his head and looked attentively at d'Artagnan. "No," he said.

"He's one of those friends of mine I mentioned to you," said Athos, "who stayed with me here eleven years ago."

"Oh!" said the old man. "I've had so many strangers lodge with me!"

"But we were here on the date of January 30th, 1649," added Athos, hoping to jog the host's memory.

"It's possible," he replied, smiling blandly, "but that was long ago!"

He bowed and went out. "Oh, thanks," said d'Artagnan. "Perform brilliant exploits, instigate revolutions, inscribe your name in brass and stone with the point of your sword but you'll find nothing harder and less penetrable than the skull of an old landlord – he doesn't recognise me! Well, I'd certainly have recognised him."

Athos, smiling, opened the letter. "Ah!" he said. "It's from Parry."

"Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan. "Read it, my friend, it must be news." Athos shook his head, and read:

*Sir le Count,*

*The king much regretted not seeing you beside him today at his entrance; His Majesty commands me to say so, and to recall him to your memory. His Majesty expects you this evening at the palace of Saint James between nine and eleven o'clock. I am, with respect, Your Honour's most humble and obedient servant,*  
*Parry*

"You see, my dear d'Artagnan," said Athos, "we mustn't despair of the hearts of kings."

"You're right, and I shall despair no more," said d'Artagnan.

"Oh, my dear, dear friend," said Athos, who hadn't failed to catch the note of bitterness in d'Artagnan's reply, "please pardon me. I didn't mean to hurt my closest comrade, even unintentionally."

"You're quite mad, Athos, and the proof is I'm going to escort you all the way to the palace door. I need a walk, anyway."

"And you'll come in with me, my friend, for I want to tell His Majesty..."

"Not at all!" said d'Artagnan, with pride untainted by jealousy. "The only thing worse than begging for oneself is having others beg for you. *That!* Let's go, my friend, it's a charming night for a walk. I want, in passing, to show you the home of General Monck, who's lodging me with him; my faith, it's a lovely house! Being a general in England pays better than being a marshal in France, it seems." Athos allowed himself to be carried away, saddened though he was by d'Artagnan's attempts to be cheerful. The whole city was in the streets; the two friends were met at every corner by enthusiasts who demanded they shout, "Long live good King Charles!" D'Artagnan replied with a grunt, and Athos with a smile. They made their way thus toward Monck's house that was on the route to the Saint James's Palace. Athos and d'Artagnan spoke very little on their way because if they had spoken they would have had too much to say. Athos thought that if he spoke he would be too joyful that might hurt d'Artagnan, while the latter feared to express bitterness that might cause Athos discomfort. It was a strange silence that hovered between contentment and discontent. D'Artagnan yielded first to the itch to speak, saying, "Do you remember, Athos, that passage in the *Memoirs of d'Aubigné* in which that devoted servant, a Gascon like me, and poor like me, and I was almost going to say brave like me, recounts the stinginess of Henri IV? My father always told me, I remember, that d'Aubigné was a liar. And yet, take a look at all the princes descended from the Great Henry!"

"Come now, d'Artagnan," said Athos, "the kings of France, misers? You're mad, my friend."

"Oh, you never see others' faults, you're too perfect. But in reality, Henri IV was stingy, as was his son, Louis XIII. We know something about that, don't we? Gaston took that vice to extremes, and everyone around him hated him for it. Henriette, poor woman, had no choice but to be frugal, when she had nothing to eat some days and nothing to burn for heat in the winters, and that's the example she gave to her son Charles II, grandson of the great Henri IV, and as miserly as his mother and his grandfather. Come, isn't that a family tree of the tight-fisted?"

"D'Artagnan," said Athos, "how can you be so harsh on that race of eagles called the Bourbons?"

"And I forgot the finest example, that other grandson of the Béarnaise, Louis XIV, my ex-master. I believe we can fairly call him miserly since he wouldn't lend a million to his brother Charles! Oh, I see I'm starting to annoy you but fortunately we've arrived at my house, or rather the house of my friend Monck."

"Dear d'Artagnan, I'm not annoyed, just saddened. It's cruel, in fact, to see a man of your merit unrewarded by the position that his services should have brought him. It seems to me that your name, old friend, ought to rank up there with the greatest names of war and diplomacy, as worthy of fortune and honour as Luynes, Bellegarde, and Bassompierre. You are right, my friend, a hundred times over."

D'Artagnan sighed, and led his friend under the portico of Monck's house at the edge of town, saying, "Allow me to stop in and leave my purse here, for if, in the crowd, these clever London crooks, who are light-fingered even by Parisian standards, rob me of the rest of my poor crowns, I won't have enough to buy passage back to France. And I'm eager to get back to France and will be delighted to see it again, now that all my old prejudices against England have been reconfirmed, with new ones added."

Athos said nothing. "I'll just be a moment," d'Artagnan said to him. "I know you're in a hurry to get on to receive your reward but believe me, I'm no less eager than you to enjoy it, albeit from a distance. Wait for me."

D'Artagnan was halfway across the vestibule when a man, half footman and half soldier, who served Monck in the capacities of both doorman and guard, stopped our musketeer and said, in English, "Excuse me, Milord d'Artagnan!"

"Well, what is it?" replied the latter. "Is the general ready to dismiss me? All that was missing was for me to be sent away!"

These words, spoken in French, made no impression on the guard, as he spoke only English mixed with Scots. But Athos was sad because it was beginning to look like d'Artagnan was right. The Englishman gave a letter to d'Artagnan. "From the general," he said.

"Well, there it is: my dismissal," said the Gascon. "Should I read it, Athos?"

"You must be mistaken," said Athos, "or the only honest people left are you and me."

D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders and tore open the letter, while the Englishman held up a lantern to help him read it. "Well! What does it say?" said Athos, seeing the reader's expression change.

"Here, read it yourself," said the musketeer. Athos took the paper and read:

*Sir d'Artagnan, the king very much regretted that you didn't come to Saint Paul with his cortège. His Majesty says he missed you, and I missed you as well, dear Captain. There is only one way to repair this: His Majesty expects me at nine o'clock at the palace of Saint James; will you join me there? His Most Gracious Majesty appoints that hour for the audience he grants you.*

The letter was signed

*Monck.*

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**The Audience**

"Well?" said Athos in a voice of gentle reproach, when he'd read Monck's letter to d'Artagnan.

"Well!" said d'Artagnan, red with pleasure and a little shame at having been so quick to accuse the king and Monck. "It's a very polite gesture ... and amounts to nothing, of course ... but it is polite, nonetheless."

"I found it hard to believe the young prince would be ungrateful," said Athos.

"The fact is that his present is still very near his past," replied d'Artagnan. "After all, everything prior to this indicated I was right."

"I admit it, dear friend, I admit it. Ah! Now we'll see your well-earned recompense. You can't believe how happy this makes me."

"So, then," said d'Artagnan, "Charles II receives General Monck at nine o'clock, and will receive me at ten; and a fine audience it is, the kind they call at the Louvre the 'bestowal of Court Holy Water.' Let's go, old friend, and place ourselves under the spout."

Athos made no reply, so the two of them went on their way toward Saint James's Palace that was surrounded by a crowd there to see the silhouettes of the courtiers through the windows, and perhaps a glimpse of the royal personage. Eight o'clock was striking as the two took their places in a gallery full of courtiers and hopeful petitioners. Everyone noticed their modest foreign attire and proud profiles, so noble and full of character. For their part, Athos and d'Artagnan, having taken the measure of the assemblage at a glance, resumed chatting together. A great noise suddenly came from one end of the gallery: it was General Monck making his entrance, followed by more than twenty officers all hoping for one of his smiles, for the day before he'd been master of England, and they imagined a fine tomorrow for he who'd restored the family Stuart. "Gentlemen," said Monck, turning toward them, "I pray you, remember that now I am no one. Not long ago I commanded the principal army of the republic but now that army is the king's, into whose hands I commit, at his order, my power of yesterday."

Dismayed surprise showed on all the officers' faces, and the circle of admirers and supplicants that had ringed Monck a moment before gradually widened and dispersed itself into the general surge of the crowd. Monck simply waited in the antechamber like everyone else. D'Artagnan couldn't keep from remarking upon this to the Count of La Fère, who frowned. Suddenly the door to Charles's audience chamber opened and the young king appeared, preceded by two of his household officers. "Good evening, Gentlemen," he said. "Is General Monck here?"

"Here I am, Sir," the old general replied.

Charles strode up to him and took his hands in a friendly grip. "General," the king announced, "I have just signed the patent making you Duke of Albemarle, and my intention is that no one in this kingdom should equal you in power and in fortune, because, except for Montrose, no one has equalled you in loyalty, courage, and talent. Gentlemen, the duke is commander in chief of our armies on land and at sea, and in that capacity, honour him and pay him your respects."

While everyone hastened to gather around the general, who received their congratulations with his usual impassivity, d'Artagnan said to Athos, "To think that this duchy, this command of the armies on land and at sea, all these grandeurs, in short, were contained in a box six feet long by three feet wide!"

"Friend," said Athos, "greater grandeurs than those are enclosed in smaller boxes – forever."

Suddenly Monck noticed the two gentlemen where they stood apart, waiting for the crowd to thin out. He made his way to them through the throng, surprising them in the middle of their philosophical reflections. "You were talking about me," he said with a smile.

"Milord," replied Athos, "we were also talking of God."

Monck thought for a moment and then responded cheerfully, "Gentlemen, let us also speak of the king, if you will; for you have, I believe, an audience with His Majesty."

"At nine o'clock," said Athos.

"Or ten," said d'Artagnan.

"Let's go to his audience chamber right now," Monck replied, making a gesture for his two companions to precede him, to which neither of them would consent.

During this debate, conducted in French, the king had returned to the centre of the gallery. "Ah, my Frenchmen!" he said, in that tone of carefree cheer that he was still able to summon despite his many troubles and sorrows. "The Frenchmen, my consolation!"

Athos and d'Artagnan bowed. "Duke, bring these gentlemen into my chamber," said the king, adding in French, "I am all yours, Gentlemen."

And he promptly dismissed his Court so he could attend to *his Frenchmen*, as he called them. "Sir d'Artagnan," he said, entering his audience chamber, "I'm pleased to see you again."

"Sire, having the honour to salute Your Majesty in his own palace of Saint James's, my joy could not be greater."

"Sir, you have done me a great service, and I owe you a debt of gratitude. Though I don't want to encroach on the rights of our commander in chief, I wish to offer you a post worthy of you near to our person."

"Sire," replied d'Artagnan, "when I left the service of the King of France, I promised my prince it was not to serve another king."

"Come," said Charles, "that displeases me greatly, for I like you, and I'd hoped to do a lot for you."

"Sire..."

"Here, now," said Charles with a smile, "is there no way I can persuade you to set that aside? Duke, help me here. What if you were offered – if I offered you – the command of all my musketeers?"

D'Artagnan bowed even lower than before, and said, "I should always regret refusing what Your Gracious Majesty offers me but a gentleman has only his word, and that word, as I had the honour to tell Your Majesty, is pledged to the King of France."

"Then we'll say no more about it," said the king, turning to Athos – and leaving d'Artagnan plunged into the deepest pit of disappointment.

"Ah! It's just like I said," murmured the musketeer. "Words! Court Holy Water! Kings have the amazing talent of offering what they know can't be accepted and thus appear generous without risk. Fool! Oh, triple fool for hoping even for a moment!"

Meanwhile, Charles took Athos by the hand. "Count," he said, "you've been a second father to me, and the service you've rendered can never be repaid. You were made by my father a Knight of the Garter, an order to which not even the kings of Europe are invited, and by the queen regent you were made a Sir du Saint-Esprit, an order no less illustrious. Now I award you the ribbon of the Order of the Golden Fleece – it was sent to me by the King of France who had been given two by the King of Spain, his father-in-law, on the occasion of his recent marriage. But I, in return, have a further service to ask of you."

"Sire!" said Athos, flustered. "The Golden Fleece, for me! When the King of France is the only other person in my country who shares that distinction!"

"I want you to be, in your country and everywhere, the equal of all those whom sovereigns have honoured with their favour," said Charles, lifting the chain from around his neck. "And I am certain, Count that my father smiles on this from the depths of his tomb."

"How strange it is," said d'Artagnan to himself, as his friend received on his knees the eminent order conferred upon him by the king, "how incredible that I always see the rain of prosperity fall on those around me, while not a drop reaches me! If one were the jealous type, it would be enough to make him tear out his hair, word of honour!"

Athos rose, and Charles embraced him tenderly. "General," he said to Monck, then, stopping himself with a smile, "excuse me, I meant to say Duke. And if I made that mistake, it's because *duke* just seems too short to me. I need to find a longer title, one that brings you close enough to the throne that I could say to you, 'My Brother,' as I do to Louis XIV. But I have it! To make you almost my brother, my dear Duke, I name you Viceroy of Ireland and Scotland. That way I won't again call you by too short a title."

The duke took the king's hand, though without apparent joy or enthusiasm, as he did everything. Yet his heart had been stirred by this final favour. Charles, skilfully managing his generosity, had given the duke time to form a wish, though he might not have wished for as much as he was awarded. "*God be with you!*" grumbled d'Artagnan. "Here come the rains again. Oh! It's enough to drive one mad." And he turned aside with an air so sad and comically pitiful that the king couldn't restrain a smile. Monck was preparing to take his leave of Charles. "What's this, my brother?" said the king to the duke.

"Are you leaving?"

"If it please Your Majesty, for in truth, I'm very tired. The emotion of the day has been exhausting, and I need my rest."

"But you're not leaving without Sir d'Artagnan, I hope!" said the king.

"Why, Sire?" said the old warrior.

"You know perfectly well why," said the king.

Monck looked at Charles with astonishment. "I beg Your Majesty's pardon," he said, "but I don't know what he means."

"I suppose that's possible – but if you've forgotten, I'm sure Sir d'Artagnan has not."

Now it was the musketeer's turn to be astonished. "See here, Duke," said the king, "aren't you lodging with Sir d'Artagnan?"

"I have the honour to offer lodging to Sir d'Artagnan, yes, Sire."

"And this idea was yours and yours alone?"

"Mine and mine alone, yes, Sire."

Well, of course it had to be that way ... since the prisoner always lodges with his conqueror."

Monck flushed. "Ah, that's true! I am Sir d'Artagnan's prisoner."

"Quite so, Monck, since you have yet to ransom yourself – but don't worry, it was I who took you from Sir d'Artagnan, so I will pay your ransom."

D'Artagnan's eyes regained their cheerful sparkle, for the Gascon began to understand. Charles turned toward him. "The general," he said, "isn't wealthy and can't pay you what he's worth. I am certainly richer but now that he's a duke, and nearly a king, he's worth a sum that perhaps even I couldn't pay. Come, Sir d'Artagnan, be lenient: how much do I owe you?"

D'Artagnan, delighted by this turn of events but maintaining his self-possession, said, "Sire, Your Majesty has no cause to be alarmed. When I had the good luck to capture His Grace, Mister Monck was still a general, so only the ransom of a general is due to me. But if the general will give me his sword, I'll consider myself paid, for there is nothing in the world but a general's sword that's worth as much as he is."

“*Odds fish*, as my father used to say,” cried Charles II. “That’s a gallant speech from a gallant man – don’t you agree, Duke?”

“Upon my honour, Sire, I do!” replied the duke. And he drew his sword. “Sir,” he said to d’Artagnan, “here is that which you asked for. Many have owned better blades but, modest as mine is, I’ve never surrendered it to anyone.”

D’Artagnan took with pride this sword that had just made a king. “Here, now!” said Charles II. “What! Is a sword that placed me on the throne to go out of my kingdom rather than be added one day to the crown jewels? No, upon my soul, I think not! Captain d’Artagnan, I’ll give you two hundred thousand livres for this sword; if that’s not enough, tell me so.”

“It isn’t enough, Sire,” replied d’Artagnan with grave seriousness. “And moreover, I don’t want to sell it – but Your Majesty wishes it and that is an order. I obey, then – but the respect in which I hold the illustrious warrior listening to us commands me to estimate his worth at half again that assessment. I therefore ask three hundred thousand livres for the sword, or Your Majesty may have it for nothing.”

And, taking it by the point, he presented the sword to the king. Charles II burst out laughing. “Oh, gallant man and happy companion! Isn’t it so, Duke? Am I right, Count? Odds fish! How that pleases me. Here, Sir d’Artagnan,” he said, “take this.”

And, going to a table, he wrote a voucher on his treasury for three hundred thousand livres. D’Artagnan took it, and turning gravely to Monck, he said, “I still asked too little, I know but believe me, Duke, I would rather die than be ruled by avarice.”

The king laughed again like the jolliest Cockney in his kingdom. “You must come back and see me again before you go, Sir,” he said. “I need to lay by a supply of cheer before my Frenchmen leave me.”

“Ah, Sire! Unlike the duke’s sword, I’ll give you the cheer for free,” replied d’Artagnan, whose feet scarcely touched the ground.

“And you, Count,” added Charles, turning to Athos, “come back as well, for I have an important message to confide to you. Duke, your hand.” Monck shook hands with the king. “Farewell, Gentlemen,” said Charles, extending a hand to each of the Frenchmen who touched them to their lips.

“Well, then!” said Athos when they were outside. “Are you satisfied?”

“Hush!” said d’Artagnan, grinning with joy. “I haven’t been to see the treasurer yet, and the roof could still fall on my head.”

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**The Embarrassment of Riches**

D’Artagnan didn’t waste any time: as soon as it was convenient and opportune, he paid a visit to His Majesty’s Treasurer. There he had the great satisfaction of exchanging a bit of paper covered with an ugly scrawl for a prodigious quantity of crowns, all newly struck with the image of His Most Gracious Majesty Charles II. D’Artagnan had long ago learned to master his emotions but on this occasion he couldn’t help expressing a joy the readers may forgive, if they deign to be indulgent toward a man who, since his birth, had never seen so many coins and rolls of coins laid out before him in a pattern truly pleasing to the eye. The treasurer enclosed these rolls in sturdy sacks and sealed each bag with the arms of England, a favour that treasurers do not grant to everybody. Then, impassive and just as polite as he ought to be to a man honoured by the friendship of the king, he said to d’Artagnan, “Take your money, Sir.”

*Your money.* Those words made a thousand strings thrum in d’Artagnan’s heart where he’d never felt them before. He had the sacks loaded on a small cart and returned home, thinking deeply. A man who possesses three hundred thousand livres can no longer have an unlined brow; a wrinkle for every 100000 livres is the least he can expect. D’Artagnan locked himself in, refused to open the door to anyone, wouldn’t eat, just sat with the lamp burning, a pistol cocked on the table, watching his fortune all night, considering how to keep those lovely crowns that had passed from the royal coffers to his own, from somehow passing out of his coffers and into the pockets of a thief. The best means the Gascon could devise was to box his treasure up under locks so strong no tool could break them, and so clever no ordinary key could open them. D’Artagnan remembered that the English are masters of mechanisms of security, and resolved to go the next day to find a mechanic who could sell him a safe. He didn’t have to go far: Mister Will Jobson, residing in Piccadilly, listened to his propositions, understood his needs, and promised to construct a lock for him so secure he would be freed from all fear of the future. “I will make for you a mechanism totally new,” he said. “At the first serious attempt to crack your lock, a hidden aperture will open, and a miniature gun will shoot out a lovely copper bullet the weight of a mark that will discommode your thief while making a resounding report. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds ingenious!” said d’Artagnan. “I particularly like the lovely copper bullet. So, Mister Mechanic, your terms?”

“Two weeks to make it, and fifteen thousand livres payable on delivery,” replied the artisan.

D’Artagnan grimaced. Two weeks were enough time for every thief in London to have their way with his fortune, and then he wouldn’t need a safe. As for the fifteen thousand livres, it was a high price to pay for what his vigilance could do for nothing. “I’ll ... think about it,” he said. “Thank you, Sir.”

And he returned home at a run – but no one had disturbed his treasure. That same day, Athos came to visit his friend and found him so anxious he confessed to being surprised. “What! Here you are rich but not happy?” he said. “You who always wanted wealth...”

“My friend, the pleasures we aren’t used to are worse than the sorrows we’re familiar with. You’ve always had money; can you give me some advice? When one has money, what does one do with it?”

“That depends.”

“What did you do with yours so as not to end up either a miser or a spendthrift? ‘For greed withers the heart, and prodigality wastes it’ – isn’t that how it goes?”

“Even Fabricius couldn’t say it better. But, in truth, having money never troubled me.”

“Come, do you invest it in annuities?”

“No; you know I have a pretty good country house, and this house comprises the majority of my wealth.”

“Yes, so you’ve said.”

“Well, you can be as rich as I am, even richer if you like, by the same means.”

“But your income from rent – do you save it?”

“No.”

“What would you think of a hidden wall cache?”

“I’ve never used such a thing.”

“Then you have some confidential partner, some reliable businessman who manages your funds and pays a decent interest?”

“Not at all.”

“My God! What do you do, then?”

“I spend whatever I have and no more than that, my dear d’Artagnan.”

“Well, there! But you’re a sort of lesser prince, with fifteen or sixteen thousand livres of revenue to fritter away, plus expenses to keep up appearances.”

“But I don’t see that you’re much less noble than I am, my friend, and your fortune should be quite enough for you.”

“Three hundred thousand livres! It should be three times enough.”

“Your pardon but it seems to me you told me ... or I thought I understood ... that is, you also have a partner...”

“Ah, *God be with you!* That’s right!” cried d’Artagnan, colouring. “There’s Planchet! I forgot about Planchet, upon my life. Well! There’s my three hundred thousand broken into ... such a shame, it was a nice round figure. But it’s true, Athos, I’m not rich at all, really. What a memory you have!”

“Good enough, yes, God be praised.”

“The worthy Planchet,” groaned d’Artagnan. “His golden dreams come true. What an investment, *plague!* Well, what was said is said.”

“How much will you give him?”

“Oh, he’s not a bad lad,” said d’Artagnan. “I’ll do right by him. But I was put to considerable trouble, you see, had expenses, and all that must be taken into account.”

“I know you can be trusted, *my dear*,” said Athos serenely, “and I don’t worry about the good Planchet; his interests are better off in your hands than in his. But now that we’ve no more to do here, we can go whenever you’re ready. You just need to take your leave of His Majesty, ask him if he has any orders, and we can see the towers of Notre Dame within a week.”

“Frankly, my friend, I’m burning to leave, so I’ll go and pay my respects to the king.”

“While I’m just going to meet a few people in the city,” said Athos, “and then I’m yours.”

“Will you lend me Grimaud?”

“With all my heart. What do you need him for?”

“A simple task that won’t wear him out – I just need to ask him to sit by this table with my pistols and keep an eye on my coffers of coins.”

“Very well,” Athos replied imperturbably.

“He won’t go off on his own?”

“No more than the pistols would.”

“Then I’ll go to see His Majesty. See you shortly.”

D’Artagnan hastened to Saint James’s Palace, where Charles II, who was writing his correspondence, kept him in the antechamber a full hour. As d’Artagnan walked back and forth across the gallery, from the doors to the windows and the windows to the doors, he thought he saw someone with a cloak like Athos’s leaving through the outer vestibule but just as he was about to go see for himself the usher summoned him in to see His Majesty. Charles II rubbed his hands while receiving our musketeer’s thanks. “Sir,” he said, “you’re wrong to think you owe me any gratitude, because I haven’t paid even a quarter of the worth of the story of the box in which you encased our brave general ... or rather the excellent Duke of Albemarle.”

And the king burst out laughing. D’Artagnan thought it would be impolite to interrupt His Majesty and looked away modestly. “By the way,” continued Charles, “has my dear Monck really forgiven you?”

“Forgiven me! I certainly hope so, Sire.”

“Heh! It must have been a cruel passage. Odds fish! To jug the leading personage of the English Revolution like a herring! I wouldn’t trust him if I were in your place, Sir.”

“But, Sire...”

“Yes, I’m well aware that Monck calls you his friend ... but he has too calculating an eye not to have a sharp memory behind it, and a forehead that tall indicates great pride – you know, *grande supercilium*.”

“I really must learn some Latin,” d’Artagnan said to himself.

“Here, you must let me arrange your reconciliation,” said the king, enchanted with the idea. “I know just how to do it...”

D’Artagnan gnawed his moustache. “Would Your Majesty permit me to speak the truth?”

“Speak, Sir, speak.”

“Well, Sire, you’re starting to frighten me! If Your Majesty tries to manage my affairs, as he seems to wish, I’m a doomed man – the duke will have me assassinated.”

The king burst out laughing again that made d’Artagnan genuinely alarmed. “Sire, I beg, promise me you’ll let me handle this matter myself. And now, if you have no further need of my services...”

“Not yet, Sir. You don’t really want to leave?” laughed Charles with increasingly disturbing hilarity.

“If Your Majesty has nothing more to ask of me.”

Charles grew more serious. “One more thing. Go see my sister, Princess Henrietta. Does she know you?”

“No, Sire ... but an old soldier like me won’t find favour with a young and cheerful princess.”

“And I say to you that I wish my sister to know you. I want her to know that she can count on you at need.”

“Sire, everything dear to Your Majesty is sacred to me.”

“Quite so ... Parry! Come here, good Parry.”

The side door opened, and Parry came in, his face lighting up when he saw the Sir. “What’s Rochester\* doing?” asked the king.

“He’s on the canal with the ladies.”

“And Buckingham?”\*

“The same.”

"Perfect. Bring the Sir to Villiers – that's the Duke of Buckingham, Sir – and ask the duke to introduce Sir d'Artagnan to Milady Henrietta." Parry bowed and smiled at d'Artagnan. "Sir," continued the king, "this is your final audience, and you may take your leave whenever you please."

"Thank you, Sire!"

"But make your peace with Monck."

"Oh! Sire..."

"You know that one of my vessels is at your disposal?"

"Sire, you overwhelm me! I couldn't think of putting Your Majesty's officers to such trouble for me."

The king clapped d'Artagnan on the shoulder. "It's not just for you, Sir but also for an ambassador I'm sending to France – one you'll be happy to have for a companion, I think, for you know him."

D'Artagnan looked at the king in surprise. "It's a certain Count of La Fère, whom you call Athos," added the king, ending the conversation as he'd begun it, with a burst of laughter. "Farewell, Sir, farewell! Love me as I love you." And with that, making a gesture to Parry to inquire if anyone awaited him in the adjacent study, the king disappeared into that room, leaving the audience chamber to the Sir, still stunned by this unusual interview. The old man took him amicably by the arm and led him into the gardens.

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On the Canal

On the green waters of the canal, bordered by marble stonework that time had marred with black spots and grassy tufts, majestically glided a long, flat barge, blazoned with the arms of England, surmounted by a canopy and hung with long damask curtains that trailed golden fringe into the water. Eight rowers, loosely plying their oars, made her move along the canal with the languid grace of the swans, who, disturbed in their aquatic territory by the barge's wake, glared from a distance as it passed in its splendour and clamour. We say clamour because the barge contained four guitar and lute players, two singers, and several courtiers glittering with gold and precious stones, all showing their white teeth at each other in an effort to please Milady Stuart, granddaughter of Henri IV, daughter of Charles I, and sister of Charles II, who sat on the barge's dais in the place of honour. We know this young princess, having seen her in the Louvre with her mother, bereft of firewood, bereft of bread, kept alive by the Coadjutor and the Parliament of Paris. She'd had, like her brothers, a hard youth but now she'd suddenly awakened from that long, horrible dream to find herself seated at the foot of a throne, surrounded by courtiers and flatterers. And like Mary Stuart upon leaving her prison, she aspired to life and liberty, and moreover, to power and wealth. Princess Henrietta had grown up to become a remarkable beauty, and her prominence in the recent restoration had already made that beauty famous. Misfortune had humbled her pride but prosperity had restored it to her. She glowed with the joy of her youth, like those hothouse flowers that, wilted for a night by the first frost of autumn, recover in the warmth of the next day and bloom more splendidly than ever. George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, the son of he who played such a celebrated role in the first volume of this history – Villiers of Buckingham, a handsome cavalier, melancholy with women and merry with men, and Wilmot, Lord Rochester, merry with both sexes, were at that moment standing before Lady Henrietta, vying for the privilege of making her smile. As for that young and beautiful princess, lying back on a velvet cushion embroidered with gold, trailing a languid hand in the water, she listened nonchalantly to the musicians without really hearing them, and heard every word of the courtiers without appearing to listen to them. For Lady Henrietta, this charming creature who combined the feminine graces of France and England, had never yet loved, and thus was cruel in her coquetry. So, the smile, that naïve favour of young ladies, never lit up her face, and if she raised her eyes, it was to fasten them so directly upon one or the other of the cavaliers that their gallantry, usually so bold, was abashed and made timid. Meanwhile, the barge slid along, the musicians played frantically, and the courtiers, like the singers, began to run out of breath. It must have seemed all too monotonous to the princess, for she suddenly shook her head impatiently and said, "Come, that's quite enough, Gentlemen. Let's go ashore."

"Ah, Milady, how unfortunate we are," said Buckingham. "Our canal excursion has failed to please Your Highness."

"My mother's waiting for me," replied Lady Henrietta, "and I must tell you candidly, Gentlemen, that I'm bored."

But upon saying that cruel word, the princess tried with a glance at each to console the two young men, who seemed dismayed by such frankness. The looks produced their effects and the two faces brightened – but immediately, as if the royal coquette thought she might have offered too much to mere mortals, she turned her back on her two orators and fell into a reverie that evidently had nothing to do with them. Buckingham bit his lip in anger, for he was truly in love with Lady Henrietta, and as a result took everything seriously. Rochester bit his lip as well but his mind always dominated his heart, and he was merely suppressing a malicious laugh. The princess was allowing the eyes she'd turned away from the young men to gaze across the banks to the gardens and lawns when she saw Parry and d'Artagnan approaching in the distance. "Who's coming over there?" she asked.

The two young men instantly spun about. "It's Parry," replied Buckingham, "no one but Parry."

"Beg pardon," said Rochester, "but it seems to me he has a companion."

"Yes, I see," replied the princess languidly, then added more sharply, "but what did you mean by 'no one but Parry,' Milord?"

"I meant, Milady," replied Buckingham, piqued, "that the loyal Parry, the ubiquitous Parry, the wandering Parry, seems to me quite insignificant."

"You are mistaken, Your Grace: Parry, the wandering Parry, as you call him, has always wandered in service to my family, and so to see this old man is always a pleasure for me."

Lady Henrietta followed the usual routine of pretty women when toying with men of passing from capricious to contrary; her gallant had submitted to her caprice and now must suffer her contradiction. Buckingham bowed but said nothing. "It's true, Milady," said Rochester, bowing in his turn, "that Parry is a model servant – but he's no longer young, Milady, and we laugh only with the light-hearted. Is he light-hearted, this old man?"

"Enough, Milord," said Lady Henrietta drily. "The subject of this conversation irritates me." Then, as if speaking to herself, "It's truly incredible how little regard my brother's friends have for his servants!"

"Ah, Milady!" cried Buckingham. "Your Highness pierces my heart with a dagger forged by your own hands."

"What is the meaning of this speech, Duke? It has the sound of bad poetry."

"It means, Milady that you yourself, so good, so charming, so sensitive, have laughed sometimes, or at least smiled, at the random maunderings of the ancient Parry, for whom Your Highness today has such a marvellous fondness."

"Well, Milord!" said Lady Henrietta. "If I forgot my manners so far as to do that, it's ill-mannered of you to remind me of it." She made an impatient gesture. "The good Parry wants to speak to me, I think. Lord Rochester, have them put in to the bank, if you please."

Rochester hastened to repeat the princess's command. A few moments later, the barge touched the canal's bank. "Step ashore, Gentlemen," said Lady Henrietta, reaching for the arm offered by Rochester, though Buckingham was nearer to her and had presented his first.

Then Rochester, with an ill-concealed pride that smote the heart of the unhappy Buckingham, escorted the princess across the gangplank the crew had extended from the royal barge to the bank. "Where to, Your Highness?" asked Rochester.

"As you see, Milord, toward that good Parry, who wanders, as Lord Buckingham put it, searching for me with eyes weakened by the tears he's shed for our misfortunes."

"God's wounds but Your Highness is sad today," said Rochester, "in light of which, our chattering must make us seem like ridiculous fools."

"Speak for yourself, Milord," interrupted Buckingham bitterly. "As for me, I displease Her Highness so much I seem like nothing at all."

Neither Rochester nor the princess replied to this; Lady Henrietta only pressed her cavalier to walk faster. Buckingham was left behind and took advantage of his isolation to take his anger out on his handkerchief, tearing the batiste to pieces with his teeth. "Parry, good Parry," called the princess in a gentle voice, "come this way. I see you're looking for me, and I'm waiting."

"Indeed, Milady, let's wait," said Rochester, charitably coming to the aid of the duke, who was still behind them. "Even if Parry can't see Your Highness, the man with him would be guide enough for a blind man, for he has sharp, even fiery eyes. His gaze glows like a lantern."

"Lighting a strong face and a martial figure," said the princess, to sting the young nobles. Rochester bowed. "One of those vigorous and manly soldiers one sees only in France," she added, with the persistence of a woman certain of her impunity.

Rochester and Buckingham looked at each other as if to say, *What makes her do that?*

"Milord Buckingham, go see what Parry wants," said Lady Henrietta.

The young man, who regarded this command as a sign of favour, was encouraged and hurried to meet Parry, who, accompanied by d'Artagnan, was slowly making his way toward the trio of nobles. Parry walked slowly due to his age; beside him, d'Artagnan marched slowly but with dignity, ennobled by the consciousness that he was now worth a third of a million. Eager to follow the desires of the princess, who had sat down upon a marble bench as if fatigued by her brief walk, Buckingham approached Parry, and when he was within a few paces the old man recognised him. "Ah, Milord!" he said, wheezing. "Would Your Grace kindly oblige the king?"

"In what way, Mister Parry?" asked the young man, his usual hauteur tempered by his desire to please the princess.

"Well! His Majesty would like Your Grace to present Sir, here, to Her Highness Henrietta Stuart."

"And who is Sir, here?" asked the duke coldly.

D'Artagnan, as we know, was quick to take offence, and the Duke of Buckingham's tone irritated him. He looked the courtier in the eye, and his own eyes flashed beneath a frowning brow – but he mastered himself and said calmly, "Sir le Sir d'Artagnan, Milord."

"Pardon, Sir but that tells me your name, nothing more."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I don't know you."

"Then I have the advantage of you, Sir," d'Artagnan replied, "for your family is known to me, particularly the first Duke of Buckingham, your illustrious father."

"My father?" said Buckingham. "Now that you mention it, Sir ... the Sir d'Artagnan, you said?"

D'Artagnan bowed. "In person," he said.

"Beg pardon but aren't you one of those Frenchmen who was involved in some secret intrigue with my father?"

"Precisely, Your Grace – I'm one of those Frenchmen."

"Then, Sir, permit me to say that it's strange that my father, during his lifetime, never mentioned your name."

"No, Your Grace, though he heard it at the moment of his death; it was I who sent to him, by way of Queen Anne's valet the warning of the danger he was in. Unfortunately, the warning arrived too late."

"I see, Sir," said Buckingham. "I understand now that having hoped to render a service to the father, you come to make a claim upon the son."

"No, Milord – I make no claims upon anyone," d'Artagnan replied coolly. "His Majesty King Charles II, for whom I had the honour to perform some services – I've passed my life in such occupations, Your Grace – King Charles II, who wished to honour me with a favour, asked that I be introduced to Princess Henrietta, his sister, to whom I might have the privilege of being useful in the future. The king happened to know that you were at this moment with Her Highness and sent me with Parry to find you. No mystery and no intrigue. I have nothing else to ask of Your Grace, and if you don't wish to introduce me to Her Highness, I will have to do without you and be so bold as to introduce myself."

"At least, Sir," replied Buckingham, wanting to get the last word, "you won't back down from answering some questions about yourself."

"I never back down, Your Grace," said d'Artagnan.

"If you were involved in my father's private affairs, there must be some secret you can reveal that would prove it."

"Those affairs were long ago, well before your time, Your Grace, involving some diamond studs that I received from his hands and returned to France, a matter too private to bandy about now."

"Ah, Sir!" said Buckingham eagerly, approaching d'Artagnan and extending his hand. "It is you! You, whom my father sought everywhere, and who has the right to expect so much from us!"

"Expect, Your Grace? In truth, expectations are my forte, and have been all my life."

Meanwhile, the princess, tired of waiting for the stranger to come to her, had risen and was approaching. "At least, Sir," said Buckingham, "you can expect the introduction that you want from me."

Then, turning and bowing to Lady Henrietta, the young man said, "Milady, the king your brother desires me to have the honour of presenting to Your Highness Sir le Sir d'Artagnan."

"So that Your Highness shall have at need a strong defender and a reliable friend," added Parry.

D'Artagnan bowed. "You have something else to add, don't you, Parry?" replied Lady Henrietta, smiling at d'Artagnan while addressing her old servant.

"Yes, Milady," Parry said to her. "The king wishes Your Highness to inscribe that name in her memory so she will remember his worth, for it is to him, as much as to anyone, that His Majesty owes the recovery of his realm."

Buckingham, the princess, and Rochester looked at each other in astonishment. “That,” said d’Artagnan, “refers to another little secret, one that I probably won’t boast about to the son of His Majesty King Charles II as I just did to His Grace about his father’s diamond studs.”

“Your Highness,” said Buckingham, “Sir has just reminded me again of an episode that so excites my curiosity that I would dare to ask her permission to let me take him aside for a moment so I can ask him about it in private.”

“Do so, Milord,” said the princess, “but do so quickly so that you can return to the sister this friend so devoted to her brother.”

And she took Rochester’s arm while Buckingham took d’Artagnan’s. “Now, tell me, Sir,” said Buckingham, “all about that affair of the diamond studs that no one in England knows about, not even the son of its hero.”

“Milord, only one person in England had the right to recount that affair, and that was your father. Since he saw fit to keep quiet about it, I must ask you for permission to do the same.”

And d’Artagnan bowed like a man who clearly intended not to say another word. “If that’s the case, Sir, then pardon me for my indiscretion,” said Buckingham, “and if, someday, I travel to France…”

And he turned to glance at the princess, who was paying no attention to him, busy as she was, or seemed to be, in conversation with Rochester. Buckingham sighed. “Well?” asked d’Artagnan.

“I was saying that if someday I, too, should travel to France…”

“You will, Milord – I’ll answer for that,” said d’Artagnan, smiling.

“Really? Why?”

“Oh, I have strange powers of prediction … and when I predict something, I’m rarely wrong. So, if you come to France…”

“Well, Sir! To you, whom kings take in friendship because you restore them their crowns, I will dare to ask to know a bit more about this great intrigue you shared with my father.”

“Milord,” replied d’Artagnan, “believe me that I will be honoured to speak to you, if you’re still happy to remember that you saw me here. And now, if you’ll permit me…” He turned toward Lady Henrietta.

“Milady,” he said, “Your Highness is a Daughter of France, and in that capacity I hope to meet her again in Paris. My happiest day will be when Your Highness gives me a command that shows she remembers the recommendations of her august brother.”

And he bowed before the young princess, who gave him her hand to kiss with a becoming royal grace. “Ah, Milady,” said Buckingham quietly, “what could I possibly do to obtain from Your Highness the same favour?”

“By Our Lady, Milord,” replied Princess Henrietta, “ask Sir d’Artagnan, he can tell you.”

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How d’Artagnan Drew a Country Estate from a Wooden Box as if by Fairy Magic

The king’s words on the subject of Monck’s wounded pride had inspired more than a little anxiety in d’Artagnan. All his life the lieutenant had shown a talent for choosing his enemies, and when he had taken on those who were implacable and invincible it was because he couldn’t, under any pretext, do otherwise. But one’s point of view can change greatly over the course of a life; it’s a magic lantern lensed by a human eye that changes from year to year. One year in which we see things as white and the next year in which we see them as black are separated, on the last day of the year, by a single night. D’Artagnan, as he was when he left Calais with his ten rogues, was as ready to contend with a Goliath, a Nebuchadnezzar, or Holofernes as he was to spar with a recruit or chat with a barmaid. Then he was like a hawk that, starving, will attack a ram out of blind hunger. But d’Artagnan sated, d’Artagnan rich, d’Artagnan a conqueror, d’Artagnan proud of a difficult triumph, this d’Artagnan had too much to lose not to reckon, tally by tally, the odds of probable disaster. He was thinking, then, while returning from his royal introduction, of only one thing: how to handle a man as powerful as Monck, a man whom even Charles handled with great care. For, newly restored, the protégé might still need the protector, and if asked would scarcely refuse Monck the small favour of deporting Sir d’Artagnan, or throwing him in some dungeon in Middlesex, or arranging a small maritime tragedy in the crossing from Dover to Boulogne. These are the kinds of favours kings do for viceroys without a second thought. It wasn’t even necessary for the king to take an active role in the scenario of Monck’s revenge; all he need do was to pardon the Viceroy of Ireland for whatever action he took against d’Artagnan. Nothing more was needed to settle the conscience of the Duke of Albemarle than a *te absolvo* [*one who absolves*] said with a laugh or the scribbled signature of King Charles at the bottom of a document, and with these two or three words spoken or scrawled, poor d’Artagnan might just as well have never existed. And as a further circumstance worrisome to one with as much foresight as our musketeer, he was essentially on his own, with only the friendship of Athos as a slight reassurance. Of course, if it was just a matter of sword thrusts, the musketeer could count on his comrade; but in crossing privileges with a king, where the benefit of the doubt might serve to support the position of Monck or of Charles II, d’Artagnan knew Athos well enough to be sure that he’d find his duty most due to the noble survivor and content himself with shedding tears on the tomb of the deceased, composing, if the deceased was his friend, a eulogy of pompous superlatives. *Decidedly*, thought the Gascon, reaching the conclusion of those inner reflections we just revealed aloud, *decidedly I must be reconciled with Mister Monck, and with a proof that he holds no grudge. If, God forbid, he remains sullen and unforgiving, I’ll give my money to Athos to take to France while I stay in England just long enough to make Monck show his hand; then, at the first hostile sign, I’ll decamp, and as I have a keen eye and a light foot, I’ll go to ground with Milord de Buckingham, who seems a good devil at heart, and to whom, as recompense for his hospitality, I’ll recount the entire history of the diamond studs. At this point it can only compromise an aging queen who need not be ashamed, after being the secret wife of Sir de Mazarin, of having also been the mistress of a noble lord like the first Buckingham.* “God!” he said aloud, “this Monck won’t outplay me! And besides, I have an idea.”

As we know, a shortage of ideas was never d’Artagnan’s problem. During this monologue d’Artagnan had buttoned up his jerkin to his chin, and nothing excited his imagination like this preparation for combat that the Romans called *accinctio*. He was quite wound up by the time he arrived at the house of the new Duke of Albemarle, where he was escorted to the viceroy’s presence with a speed that showed he was still regarded as a member of the household. Monck was in his study. “Milord,” said d’Artagnan, wearing a convincing expression of frankness upon his cunning features, “I come to ask Your Grace for advice.”

Monck, as buttoned-up morally as his antagonist was physically, replied, “Ask, my friend.”

And his face presented an expression no less frank than d’Artagnan’s. “Milord, first of all, please promise me secrecy and forbearance.”

“I promise you whatever you ask. What is it? Speak!”

“It’s just, Milord, that I’m not quite confident of the king.”

“Oh, really? And in what way, if you please, my dear Lieutenant?”

“In the way that His Majesty sometimes makes jokes at the expense of his servants – and mockery, Milord, is a weapon that wounds men of the sword like us.”

Monck made every effort not to betray his thoughts but d’Artagnan watched with such close attention that he couldn’t miss the almost imperceptible flush on his cheeks. “But I’m no enemy of such pleasantries, my dear Sir d’Artagnan,” said Monck with the most natural air in the world. “My soldiers will even tell you that many times in camp I heard with indifference, and even appreciation, the satirical songs Lambert’s soldiers sang from their own camp, and which definitely would have scorched the ears of a general more susceptible to mockery than I am.”

“Oh, Milord!” said d’Artagnan. “I know that you are completely self-possessed and far above the insecurities of humankind – but there are jokes, and there are jokes. And some of them, I confess, have the ability to irritate me above all expression.”

“Of what kind are those, old boy?”

“The kind that foster disrespect for my friends and allies, Milord.”

Monck winced ever so slightly but d’Artagnan noticed it. “And in what way can the pin that pricks another affect you?” asked Monck. “Tell me that!”

“I’ll tell you, Milord: because the pin was intended to prick *you*.”

Monck took a step toward d’Artagnan. “Me?” he said.

“Yes, and that’s what I don’t understand; maybe it’s because I don’t know him well. How can the king have the heart to mock a man who’s served him so much and so well? Why would he amuse himself by setting a gnat like me at the ears of a lion like you?”

“I don’t understand what you’re telling me,” said Monck.

“Very well, consider this! Why didn’t the king, who owed me some recompense, reward me like a soldier instead of concocting that ransom story that reflects upon you, Milord?”

“But no,” said Monck, laughing, “that doesn’t reflect upon me at all, on my oath.”

“I know it’s not my place to talk, and you know me, Milord, I’m as quiet as the grave but – don’t you get it, Milord?”

“No,” Monck said stubbornly.

“If another knew the secret I know…”

“Which secret?”

“Why, Milord! The ugly secret of Newcastle.”

“Ah! You mean the Count of La Fère’s million?”

“No, Milord – the exploit that involved Your Grace.”

“It was a game well played, Sir, that’s all, and there’s nothing more to say about it. You are a man of war, brave and cunning that shows you combine the qualities of Fabius and Hannibal. You used force, wits, and the resources at hand, and there’s nothing to say against that; I should have taken better care to guard myself.”

“Thank you, Milord, I expected nothing less from your innate fairness, and if it was just a simple matter of your abduction, *God be with you!* I wouldn’t worry – and yet there’s the…”

“What?”

“The circumstances of that abduction.”

“What circumstances?”

“You’re well aware, Milord, of what I’m talking about.”

“I’m damned if I do!”

“It’s that … it’s hard to say this right out.”

“To say what?”

“Well! To speak of that cursed … box.”

Monck visibly flushed.

“The indignity of the box,” continued d’Artagnan, “the wooden coffin, you know?”

“That? Forget about it.”

“Made of wooden planks, with air holes and a speaking grate,” continued d’Artagnan. “In truth, Milord, the rest of the exploit is fine – but the box, the box! That was a bad joke.” Monck squirmed in his chair. “And yet, the fact that I did that,” said d’Artagnan, “I, a soldier of fortune, that’s understandable, because though it might have been somewhat unworthy, it could be excused by the gravity of the situation. But never mind, I’m circumspect and discreet.”

“Oh!” said Monck. “Rest assured that I know you well, Sir d’Artagnan, and appreciate your virtues.”

D’Artagnan kept a close eye on Monck, detecting all that was passing through the general’s mind as he spoke. “But this isn’t about me,” he said.

“Well, who’s it about, then?” asked Monck, beginning to be impatient.

“It’s about the king, who’s too merry to hold his tongue.”

“Well, if he tells all he knows, so what?” said Monck, nervously.

“Milord,” replied d’Artagnan, “don’t pretend, I beg, with one who speaks as honestly as I do. You have a right to be concerned, no matter how blameless you are. What the devil! It’s not proper for a serious man like you, a man who plays with thrones and sceptres like an acrobat juggles balls, to be displayed in a box like a curiosity of natural history; if you have enemies – and you’re so great, so noble, and so generous that you must have many – and they heard of this, they would make you a laughingstock. A picture circulated of you locked in that box would set half the human race to laughter. Now, it’s neither decent nor proper for others to laugh like that at the second personage of the realm.”

Monck was beside himself at the idea of being depicted inside the box. The idea of ridicule as d’Artagnan had wisely foreseen, had gotten to him in a way that neither the hazards of war, the desires of ambition, nor the fear of death could. *Good*, thought the Gascon, *he’s afraid, and I am saved.*

“Oh, as to the king,” said Monck, “don’t worry about him, dear Sir d’Artagnan – the king won’t make fun of Monck, I assure you!” But d’Artagnan saw how his eyes flashed. Monck softened his tone immediately. “The king,” he continued, “has too noble a nature, too generous a heart to wish to injure those who mean him well.”

“Absolutely!” said d’Artagnan. “I’m entirely of your opinion as regards his heart but not his head; he means well but lets his wit carry him away.”

“The king’s wit won’t carry him away from me, I assure you.”

“So, you’re not at all worried, Milord?”

“On that flank at least I’m unconcerned, yes.”

“Got it, I understand, you’re unconcerned about the king.”

“As I said.”

“But you’re not as unconcerned about me?”

“I thought I told you that I believe in your loyalty and discretion.”

“No doubt, no doubt but you’re overlooking one thing...”

“Which is?”

“That I wasn’t alone, that I had companions – and such companions!”

“Oh! Yes, I remember them.”

“Unfortunately, Milord, they remember you too.”

“Well?”

“Well! They’re over there at Boulogne, waiting for me.”

“And you fear...?”

“Yes, I fear that in my absence ... *for God’s sake!* If only I were near them, I could answer for their silence.”

“Then I was right to say that the danger, if there was any, would come not from His Majesty, despite his tendency to jest but from such as your companions, as you say. To be mocked by a king may be tolerated but by mercenary rabble ... *Goddamn!*”

“Yes, I understand, that would be unbearable – which is why, Milord, I came to you to say, “Don’t you think I ought to depart for France as soon as possible?””

“Certainly, if you believe your presence...”

“Would impose discipline on those rogues? I’m certain of it, Milord.”

“Your presence won’t prevent the rumour from spreading if it’s already begun.”

“Oh, it hasn’t yet begun, Milord, I can guarantee that. In any event, you can be sure I’m determined on one thing.”

“And that is?”

“To blow the head off the first one to spread such a rumour, and follow with whoever might have heard it. After which, I’ll return to England to seek asylum and perhaps employment with Your Grace.”

“What, return? Return?”

“Unfortunately, Milord, I know no one here but you, and if I find you again, you may have forgotten me in your new grandeurs.”

“Listen, Sir d’Artagnan,” Monck replied, “you’re a charming gentleman, full of wit and courage, and deserve all the rewards the world can offer. Come with me to Scotland and I swear to you, within my viceroyalty you’ll find a place that others will envy.”

“Ah, Milord, that’s impossible right now! At the moment I have a sacred duty to fulfil: I must guard your glory and make sure no mean-spirited jest tarnishes you in the eyes of your peers, and who knows? Perhaps dims the lustre of your name in posterity.”

“In posterity, Sir d’Artagnan?”

“Why, of course! For the sake of posterity all the details of this affair must remain hidden – because, if the ugly story of the wooden box were to spread, everyone would say that you didn’t restore the king out of loyalty and your own free will but because the two of you made a bargain at Scheveningen. Then it would be useless for me to say what had really happened, because people would say I was part of the deal and had gotten my piece of the pie.”

Monck frowned darkly. “Glory, honour, integrity,” he said, “nothing but empty words!”

“Mist and smoke,” d’Artagnan nodded, “through which no one can ever see clearly.”

“Well, then! Go to France, my dear Sir,” said Monck. “Go, and to make England more accessible and receptive to you, accept a gift from me.”

*What now?* D’Artagnan thought.

“On the banks of the Clyde, in a little grove,” continued Monck, “I own a house, a *cottage* as we say, and with this house go a hundred acres of land. Accept this from me.”

“Oh, Milord ...!”

“And by Our Lady, there you will have a secure home, that refuge of which you spoke to me just now.”

“I’m so very obliged to you, Milord! In truth, I’m unworthy!”

“Not at all, Sir,” replied Monck with a wry smile, “not at all, it’s I who am obliged to you.” He shook the musketeer’s hand and said, “I’ll go have the deed of transfer drawn up right now.” And he left.

D’Artagnan watched him leave the room, pensive and even moved. “At last,” he said to himself, “I’ve found a good man. It’s sad to feel that it’s out of fear that he does this rather than affection but never mind! I’ll just have to make sure the affection continues.”

Then, after a moment of further reflection, he said, “But why bother? He’s an Englishman!”

And he went out in his turn, a bit dazed by the effort of the contest. “So,” he said, “now I’m a landowner. But how the devil will I divide the cottage with Planchet? Unless I give him the land while I keep the house, or I give him the house while I ... Bah! Mister Monck would never approve of my sharing his house with a grocer! He’s far too proud for that. Besides, why mention it at all? I didn’t acquire this property with our company’s funds, I did it with my own wits, and thus it’s entirely mine. Let’s go find Athos.” And he made his way toward the lodgings of the Count of La Fère.

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#### How d’Artagnan settled the Liabilities of the Company before reckoning its Assets

“I’m on a winning streak and no doubt about it,” d’Artagnan said to himself. “That star that shines once in the life of every man, even for Job and Iruś, the most unfortunate of the Jews and the poorest of the Greeks, finally shines on me. But I won’t be reckless as I take advantage of it, because I’m mature enough to be sensible.”

He supped cheerfully that evening with his friend Athos, and though he didn’t mention Monck’s gift, as they ate he couldn’t help asking his friend about sowing, planting, and farm production. Athos replied agreeably, as always. He assumed d’Artagnan was considering becoming a landowner but more than once he missed his old companion’s lively mood and witty sallies. D’Artagnan, preoccupied, took advantage of the greasy remains on his plate to draw figures and make calculations that amounted to pleasantly round sums. The order, or rather permit, for their embarkation arrived later that evening. While the visa was being handed over to the count, another messenger arrived and gave d’Artagnan a bundle of parchment pages fluttering with all the colourful seals that adorn real estate deeds in England. Athos surprised him skimming through these documents that established the transfer of property. The prudent Monck, or one might say the generous Monck, had converted the gift into a sale with a receipt that acknowledged having been paid the sum of fifteen thousand livres for the transaction. D’Artagnan had begun reading the deeds before the messenger had even disappeared. Athos watched him and smiled. D’Artagnan, catching one of these smiles over his shoulder, folded up the parchments and thrust them back into their packet. “Pardon me,” said Athos.

“No problem, there are no secrets here, old friend,” replied the lieutenant. “I’d just like...”

“No, don’t tell me anything, I beg. Orders are sacred things, and the person charged with them shouldn’t reveal a single word even to his brother or father. Even I, who loves you more tenderly than a brother, a father, or anyone...”

“Outside of Raoul?”

“I will love Raoul even more when he is a man, fully formed in all phases of character and behaviour ... in other words, when he’s like you, my friend.”

“You said that you’d received orders as well; don’t you intend to share them with me?”

“No, friend d’Artagnan.”

The Gascon sighed. “There was a time,” he said, “when you would have laid that order open on the table and said, ‘D’Artagnan, read this gibberish to Porthos, Aramis, and myself and tell us what it means.’”

“You’re right. We shared the confidence of youth, that generous season when we’re ruled by the hot blood of passion!”

“Well, Athos, can I tell you something?”

“Speak, my friend.”

“That wonderful time, that generous season, that reign of hot blood, those are all beautiful things beyond doubt but I wouldn’t go back to them. It’s just like thinking about your school days – I’m always meeting some fool nostalgic for copying tasks, canings, and crusts of dry bread. It’s bizarre, because I never enjoyed that. The old days? No matter how serious and active I was (and you can confirm this, Athos), no matter how simple my everyday clothes, I still would have preferred Porthos’s embroidered finery to my threadbare doublet that was protection from neither the cold winds of winter nor the hot sun of summer. My friend, I can’t help but mistrust anyone who says he prefers bad over good. Now, in the good old days, when everything was terrible, every month saw another hole in my coat and my skin, and a gold crown less in my sagging purse; from that awful time of watered honey and constant worry I absolutely regret nothing, nothing, nothing but our friendship. For I still have within me a heart, and by some miracle, that heart wasn’t withered by the wind of misery that howled through the holes in my cloak or impaled by the swords of all sorts that made holes in my poor flesh.”

“Never regret our friendship,” said Athos. “It will die only when we do. Friendship is mainly made up of memories and shared habits, and if you had to make a small satire on mine because I wouldn’t reveal my mission to France...”

“Me? By heaven, my old and dear friend, if you only knew how little all the world’s missions will mean to me from here on out!” And he folded his packet of parchments and shoved it into his travel bag. Athos rose from the table and called over the host to settle the bill. “As long as I’ve been your friend,” said d’Artagnan, “I’ve never once paid the bill. Porthos did it often, Aramis occasionally, and you nearly always drew out your purse upon the arrival of dessert. Now that I’m rich, I’d like to see just how heroic it is to pay the bill.”

“Go ahead,” said Athos, returning his purse to his belt pouch.

The two friends then made their way to the port, not without d’Artagnan frequently looking behind him to check on the transport of his beloved money. Night had spread its thick veil over the muddy waters of the Thames; they could hear the sounds of rolling casks and creaking pulleys, the preliminaries to setting sail that had so often quickened the musketeers’ hearts when the dangers of the sea were the least of the perils they would face. This time they were to embark on a large vessel that awaited them at Gravesend, and Charles II, always thoughtful of the little things, had sent one of his river yachts with twelve of his Scots Guards to do honour to the ambassador he was sending to France. By midnight the yacht had seen its passengers onto the larger vessel, and at eight o’clock the next morning that vessel disembarked the ambassador and his friend onto the jetty at Boulogne. While the count, helped by Grimaud, went to hire some horses for the ride to Paris, d’Artagnan went to the inn where, according to his orders, his little army was to wait for him. These gentlemen were breakfasting on oysters, fish, and spiced eau-de-vie when d’Artagnan entered. They were all in a good mood, and none were yet drunk beyond the ability to reason. They raised a cheer when they saw their commander. “Here I am,” said d’Artagnan. “The campaign is over, and I’ve come to bring you your promised bonus.” Their eyes shone. “I’d wager there’s no more than a hundred livres left in the purse of the richest of you!”

“It’s true!” they cried in chorus.

“Gentlemen,” said d’Artagnan, “these are your final orders. Your mercenary contracts are fulfilled, thanks to that master stroke that made us the master of the England’s leading financier. Now I can reveal that the man we had to transport was none other than General Monck’s treasurer.”

The word *treasurer* was met with obvious approval by his army. D’Artagnan noted that only Menneville’s gaze conveyed a certain doubt. “This treasurer,” continued d’Artagnan, “I brought to the neutral territory of Holland, where I persuaded him to sign a certain declaration. Then I took him back to Newcastle, and as he must have been satisfied with our treatment of him, his wooden coffin having been padded so softly and carried so carefully, I asked him for a gratuity for you. Here it is.” He dropped a bulging and rather heavy bag onto the tablecloth. All hands reflexively reached for it. “Not so fast, my lambs,” said d’Artagnan. “If there are profits, there are also prices.”

“Oh?” murmured the assembled rogues.



"We now find ourselves, my friends, in a position that could be dangerous for those who lack brains. To be plain: we stand between the gallows and the Bastille."

"Uh-oh!" gasped the chorus.

"It's not hard to understand. I had to explain the disappearance of his treasurer to General Monck. I waited to do so until the moment of the unexpected restoration of King Charles II, who is one of my friends..."

The little army exchanged looks of satisfaction that were smug compared to d'Artagnan's that was rather proud. "Once the king was restored, I restored General Monck his man of business – slightly the worse for wear, perhaps but at least I returned him. Now, General Monck, when he pardoned me, for that was part of the bargain, couldn't refrain from telling me the words I'm about to repeat to you, and which I urge each of you to engrave into your memory: 'Sir, that was a good joke but I don't care much for jokes. If a single word of what you've done ever escapes your lips' – do you hear me, Sir Menneville? – 'or the lips of your companions, I have in my viceroyalty of Scotland 741 oaken gallows, with hooks of iron and trapdoors greased every week. I would present one of these gallows to each of you, and take note, Sir d'Artagnan' – take note as well, Sir Menneville – 'I would still have seven hundred and thirty gallows left for others. Moreover ...'"

"Oh!" said the mercenaries. "There's more?"

"One threat more: 'Sir d'Artagnan, I am writing to the King of France to report this bargain, with the request that a cell in the Bastille be prepared for each member of your troop who falls into his hands, the lot to be turned back over to me, a request he will certainly comply with."

A gasp of fear was heard all around the table. "Now, now," said d'Artagnan. "The noble Monck had forgotten one thing that is that he doesn't know any of your names; only I know you, and as you can well believe, I'm not about to betray you. Why would I? And as to you, none of you are foolish enough to betray yourselves, for then the king, to save himself the expense of keeping you in the Bastille, would send you to Scotland to grace one of the 741 gallows. So, there you have it, Gentlemen: I have not another word to add to what I've had the honour to tell you. I'm sure I was understood perfectly – was I not, Sir Menneville?"

"Perfectly," the latter replied.

"And now, the beautiful crowns!" said d'Artagnan. "Shut the doors."

And he emptied the shiny new gold coins on the table, a few rolling off the edge. Everyone grabbed at the floor. "How pretty!" said d'Artagnan. "Put the loose ones back in the pile so it doesn't throw off my count."

He then doled out fifty gleaming crowns to each of them, receiving nearly as many blessings as coins he allotted. "Now," he said, "if you could just clean yourselves up a bit and become good and honest citizens..."

"But that's so very difficult," said one of the rogues.

"Why would we do that, Captain?" said another.

"Because then I might be able to find you again, and who knows? By then you might need me."

D'Artagnan made a sign to Menneville, who'd been listening to all this coolly and calmly. "Menneville," he said, "come with me. Farewell, *my Braves!* I needn't warn you to be discreet."

Menneville followed him, while the sound of the mercenaries' farewells mingled with the sweet jingle of gold in their pouches. "Menneville," d'Artagnan said when they were in the street, "you're no fool, so take care not to act like one. You don't impress me as one who fears either the gallows of Monck or the Bastille of His Majesty King Louis XIV, so you will do me the favour to be afraid of me. Now, listen: you say a single word about what you know to anybody, and I'll find you and wring your neck like a chicken's. I already have in my pocket the permission and absolution of our Holy Father the Pope."

"I assure you I know absolutely nothing, Sir d'Artagnan, and your every word is to me an article of faith."

"I always knew you had brains," said the musketeer. "Knew it from the first time I met you. These fifty gold crowns I give you as a bonus should show you what I think of you. Take them."

"Thank you, Sir d'Artagnan," said Menneville.

"That ought to be enough to enable you to live as an honest man," replied d'Artagnan in a serious tone. "It would be a shame if a mind like yours and the name you no longer dare to use were to disappear into a wasted life. Wipe the slate clean, Menneville, and live for a year as an honest man – you can do it, I just gave you twice the pay of a ranking officer. After a year, come see me, and, *God be with you!* We'll make something of you yet."

Menneville swore, as his comrades had, to be as quiet as the grave. And yet, somebody must have talked eventually, and if it wasn't Menneville or one of the other nine mercenaries, it must have been d'Artagnan, who, as a Gascon, always had a tongue ready to wag. After all, if it wasn't him, who else could it have been? How else could the story of the wooden box bored with breathing-holes have come down to us complete in every detail? Details which, moreover, clear up an unexplained episode in the history of England, left until today out of the accounts of the historians.

## 302

### The French Grocer was already Well-Established in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

Once his accounts had been settled and his warnings communicated, d'Artagnan thought of nothing but getting back to Paris as soon as possible. Athos, for his part, was eager to return to the repose of his house. After the fatigues of a journey, whether a man feels well or exhausted, even if the day has been pleasant, he looks forward to its end, for the night will allow him to sleep. So, from Boulogne to Paris, riding side by side, the two friends, each preoccupied with his own thoughts, encountered nothing interesting enough to relate to the reader: the cavaliers, while considering the future each in his own way, devoted themselves to speed. On the evening of the fourth day after their departure from Boulogne, Athos and d'Artagnan arrived at the gates of Paris. "Where are you bound for, dear friend?" asked Athos. "I'm going straight to my town house."

"And I, straight to my partner."

"Planchet's place?"

"The Golden Pestle? *My God*, yes."

"Shall we find a way to meet again?"

"If you stay in Paris, yes, because the city is where I'm staying."

"No. After embracing Raoul, whom I expect to find at my house, I leave immediately for La Fère."

"Well, then! Farewell, my dear and perfect friend."

"Au revoir, rather, because I hope you will come and visit, or even live with me at Blois. You are free, you are rich, I can help you buy, if you like, a property near Cheverny or Bracieux. On one side you'd have the most beautiful woods in the world, backing up on Chambord, while on the other, a lovely marsh. You who love hunting, and who has the soul of a poet, though you won't admit it, will find pheasant, rail, and teal, not to mention long sunsets and such boating that you'll feel like Nimrod and Apollo themselves. While waiting for the sale to close, you'll live at La Fère, and we'll go fly our hawks among the vineyards, as King Louis XIII used to do. It's a suitable life for old soldiers like us."

D'Artagnan took hold of Athos's hands. "Dear Count," he said, "I won't say yes or no. Let me spend the time I need in Paris to order my affairs and little by little get used to the great and growing idea that's shining in my mind. I am rich, as you say but until I've taken enough time to get used to riches, I'm going to be an insufferable monster, I just know it. Now, at least I've got the sense not to behave like a lack-wit in front of a friend like you, Athos. My cloak of wealth is handsome, it's richly embroidered but it's new, it isn't broken in, and it itches."

Athos smiled. "So be it," he said. "But about this new cloak, dear d'Artagnan, would you like to hear some advice?"

"Indeed, I would!"

"You won't be upset?"

"Speak freely."

"When wealth comes to a person late, that person, to keep from changing, must become either a miser, that is, spend no more than he did before, or a spendthrift, going into debt so quickly that he becomes poor again."

"Hmph. That sounds like sophistry to me, O wise philosopher."

"I don't think so. Will you become a miser, then?"

"No, by God! I've already done that, and more than enough. We must change."

"Then, it's spendthrift?"

"Even less likely, *God be with you!* Debt terrifies me. Creditors remind me of those devils who roast the damned on spits, and as patience isn't my chief virtue, I'm always tempted to send them to hell early."

"You are the wisest man I know and need no advice from anyone. One would be a great fool to think he had anything to teach you. But isn't this Rue Saint-Honoré?"

"Yes, dear Athos."

"And here, on the left, this long, white house is the hôtel where I'm lodging. You'll notice it has only two floors; I occupy the lower, while the other is rented to an officer whose service keeps him far away eight or nine months of the year, so I have the house as much to myself as if I was at home but without the expense."

"You manage things so well, Athos, in both order and economy! That's what I want to copy. But what can I do? You were born to rank, while I just do the best I can."

"Such flattery! Come, say farewell, dear friend. By the way, give my regards to Planchet; he's a lad of wits, isn't he?"

"And of heart, Athos. Farewell!"

They separated. During this long conversation, d'Artagnan had never for a second lost sight of the packhorse carrying the paniers in which, under a layer of hay, the money sacks were hidden among the other luggage. Nine in the evening was sounding from the belfry of Saint-Merri, and Planchet's shop boys were shuttering the store. Under an awning on the corner of the Rue des Lombards d'Artagnan stopped the postilion who rode the packhorse, and, calling over one of Planchet's lads, told him to watch the horses as well as the postilion. Then he entered the house of the grocer, who'd just finished his supper, and who, on the landing, was anxiously consulting the calendar on which every evening he scratched off the day that had just passed. At that moment when, with a sigh, Planchet drew a line through another day, d'Artagnan kicked firmly at his open side door, the blows setting his iron spurs jingling. "Good Lord!" cried Planchet. Having taken one look at his partner, the worthy grocer could say no more. D'Artagnan, who couldn't resist the idea of stringing Planchet along, entered with his shoulders slumped and his eyes averted.

*My God!* The grocer thought, staring at the traveller. *He's destroyed.*

"My dear Sir d'Artagnan!" said Planchet, his heart skipping a beat. "You're back! Are you all right?"

"Well enough, Planchet, I suppose," said d'Artagnan with a sigh.

"You aren't wounded, are you?"

"Eh!"

"I see," continued Planchet, more and more alarmed. "The expedition was a rough one?"

"Yes," said d'Artagnan. A shiver shook Planchet from head to toe. "I need ... a drink," said the musketeer with a pitiful look.

Planchet ran to the sideboard and poured d'Artagnan a large glass of honey. D'Artagnan looked at the bottle. "What honey is this?" he asked.

"Why, it's your favourite, Sir," said Planchet, "that good old honey of Anjou that one day nearly cost us so dearly."

"Ah!" replied d'Artagnan with a melancholy smile. "And should I be drinking so expensive a honey, my poor Planchet?"

"Come, dear Master," said Planchet, making a superhuman effort, though his trembling and pallor revealed deep anguish. "I was a soldier, you know, so I'm brave enough to hear it. Don't keep me guessing, Sir d'Artagnan. Our money: it's all gone, isn't it?"

D'Artagnan hesitated before answering, a delay that seemed like a century to the poor grocer. Finally, he turned in his chair, head held low, and said slowly, "And if that were so, what would you say to me, my poor friend?"

Planchet, already pale, turned yellow. His eyes twitched, his throat swelled, and he felt as if he was going to swallow his tongue. "Twenty thousand livres!" he murmured. "Twenty ... thousand ...!"

D'Artagnan, his head slumping on his neck, his limbs lax, hands drooping, was the very image of discouragement. Planchet tore a heavy sigh from the very depths of his chest. "Come," he said. "I see how it is. Let's be men. It's over, isn't it? At least, Sir, you survived, and that's the important thing."

"No doubt, no doubt. Life is something, I suppose ... but in the meantime, I'm ruined."

"*Cordieu!*" said Planchet. "If that's so, Sir, there's no need to despair. You can be a grocer with me! I'll make you a partner in my business, we'll share the profits, and when there are no profits, well! We'll share the almonds, raisins, and prunes, and nibble on our last quarter of Dutch cheese."

D'Artagnan could sustain it no longer. "*God be with you!*" he brightly cried. "You're a brave lad, upon my honour, Planchet! Did you like my little comedy? Look, out there in the street, under that awning – do you see that horse with the paniers?"

"Awning? Horse? Paniers?" said Planchet, his heart sinking at the idea that d'Artagnan had gone mad.

"God, yes, those English paniers!" said d'Artagnan, radiant and transfigured.

"Good Lord!" cried Planchet, recoiling before his partner's burning gaze.

"Fool!" laughed d'Artagnan. "You think I'm crazy. *God be with you!* On the contrary, I've never had a sharper head and a happier heart. To the packhorse, Planchet – to the paniers!"

"But what paniers, where, for the love of God?"

D'Artagnan pushed Planchet toward the window. "Under the awning over there," he said, "do you see a horse?"

"Yes."

"Do you see how his back bends?"

"Yes, yes."

"Do you see one of your lads talking to the postilion?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

"Well, then! You know that lad's name, since he's one of yours. Call to him."

"Abdon! Abdon!" shouted Planchet from the window.

"Bring the horse," whispered d'Artagnan.

"Bring the horse!" shouted Planchet.

"Now, ten livres for the postilion," said d'Artagnan in the tone used to command a manoeuvre. "Two lads to bring up the first two bags, two more for the last two, and lively, now! Move it!"

Planchet threw himself down the stairs as if the devil was at his heels. A few moments later the shop boys came up the stairs, bent beneath their burdens. D'Artagnan sent them off to their garrets, shut the door carefully and turned to Planchet, who himself was looking a little wild. "Now," d'Artagnan said, "it's just us." And he spread a large blanket on the floor and emptied onto it the first bag. Planchet did the same with the second, then d'Artagnan, his hand trembling a bit, cut open the third with his knife. When Planchet heard the thrilling clink of silver and gold, when he saw the shining crowns that glittered like fish swept out of the sea, when he felt his arms plunge up to the elbows into this rising tide of silver and gold coins, the shock hit him all at once, and, as if struck by lightning, he fell down heavily on the enormous heap with a metallic crash. Planchet, overcome by joy, had passed out. D'Artagnan threw a glass of white honey into his face that brought Planchet back to life. "Ah! My God! My God!" he repeated as he wiped his moustache and beard. At that time, as now, a grocer wore a cavalier's moustache and a soldier's beard but bathing in silver and gold, already a rare thing then, is today almost unknown. "*God be with you!*" said d'Artagnan. "A hundred thousand livres of this is yours, Sir Partner. Count out your share, if you will, and then I'll take mine."

"Oh, the lovely silver, Sir d'Artagnan! The beautiful gold!"

"Half an hour ago I confess I was regretting the part that belongs to you," said d'Artagnan, "but now, I regret nothing. You're a fine grocer, Planchet, who keeps good accounts, and good accounts, they say, keep good friends."

"Oh! But first tell me the whole story," said Planchet. "It must be even prettier than the money."

"My faith," replied d'Artagnan, stroking his moustache, "I won't say you're wrong, and if ever a historian demands the whole tale, he'll hear more than he thought he would. Listen, then, Planchet, and I'll tell you."

"And I'll start counting this into stacks," said Planchet. "Please begin, my dear partner."

"It starts like this," said d'Artagnan, drawing a breath.

"And ends like this," said Planchet, picking up his first handful of coins.

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Sir Mazarin at his Games

On the evening of the arrival in Paris of our two Frenchmen, in a grand chamber of the Royal Palace, its walls draped in dark velvet that showed off the gilded frames of many handsome paintings, one could see the entire Court arrayed before the sleeping alcove of Sir Cardinal de Mazarin, who was hosting an evening at cards for the king and the queen. Low screens separated three tables placed around the chamber. The king and the two queens were seated at one of these tables; Louis XIV sat across from the young queen, his wife, whom he smiled upon with a genuine expression of happiness. Anne of Austria held the cards against the cardinal, and her daughter-in-law advised her when she wasn't smiling at her husband. Beyond the table, in his bed, lay the cardinal, an emaciated figure, always tired, the Countess de Soissons holding his cards for him that he scanned with a look of calculation and avarice. The cardinal wore makeup that had been applied by Bernouin but the rouge glistening on his cheekbones just emphasized the unhealthy pallor of the rest of his face and the sallow yellow flesh of his forehead. Only his eyes glowed brightly, and those feverish eyes, from time to time, attracted worried glances from the king, the queens, and the courtiers. The fact is that Signor Mazarin's gleaming eyes were the inconstant stars in which 17th-century France read its destiny every night and morning. My Lord was neither winning nor losing, so he was neither cheerful nor sour. It was a stagnant state in which Anne of Austria would not have left him, if she could help it but to engage the invalid's interest through some change of fortune she would have to either win or lose. To win was dangerous, as Mazarin might trade his disinterest for irritation but to lose she would have had to cheat, and the Infanta, who was watching her mother-in-law's game closely, might spot the misplay, and that would be the end of any chance of a good mood from Sir de Mazarin. Taking advantage of this calm, the courtiers were talking among themselves. Mazarin, when he wasn't in an ill temper, was a congenial lord, and he, who never prevented anyone from singing, providing they paid, wasn't tyrant enough to prohibit others' speech, provided they lost. So, everyone talked. At the first table, the king's younger brother, Philippe, Duke of Anjou,\* admired his handsome face with a mirror-topped box. His favourite, the Sir de Lorraine,\* though leaning on the prince's chair, was actually listening with secret envy to the Count de Guiche,\* another of Philippe's favourites, who was recounting the juicy details of the various turns of fortune of the royal adventurer Charles II. He told the fabulous tale of his dangerous journey across Scotland, and his terror with the enemy pursuers hot on his trail. He told of nights spent in trees, and days spent in hunger and combat. Gradually, the fate of this unfortunate king had interested the listeners to the point where the game languished, even at the royal table, where the young king, distracted and staring sightlessly at his cards, absorbed without seeming to every detail of the picturesque odyssey described by the Count de Guiche. The Countess de Soissons interrupted the narrator, saying, "Confess, Count that you're exaggerating."

"Madam, I repeat like a parrot the stories various Englishmen have told me. I will even admit, to my shame, that I recite an exact copy."

"Charles II would be dead if he'd gone through all that."

Louis XIV raised his proud and intelligent head. "Madam," he said, in a low voice that still harked back to the timid child, "Sir Cardinal will tell you that in my minority, the affairs of France were often unsettled, and if I had been older and obliged to take my sword in my hand, I might have had to do so just to get our evening meal."

"Thank God," replied the cardinal, speaking for the first time, "that Your Majesty exaggerates, and your supper was always prepared perfectly along with that of your servants."

The king blushed. "Oh!" interrupted Philippe, without ceasing to admire himself. "I remember one time at Melun when nobody had supper except the king. He had two-thirds of a heel of bread, leaving the final third to me."

The whole assembly, seeing Mazarin smile, began to laugh. One flatters kings with the reminder of past distress and the assurance of future fortune. "The fact is, that the Crown of France has always stayed firmly on the heads of its kings," added Anne of Austria hastily, "and though England's has fallen from their king, every time some chance event shook ours, for there are realm-quakes as well as earthquakes, each time, I say, that rebellion threatened, a timely victory restored us to peace."

"With a few more jewels added to the crown," said Mazarin.

The Count de Guiche was silent, and the king kept his expression neutral, while Mazarin exchanged a look with Anne of Austria that seemed to thank her for her intervention. "No matter," said Philippe, smoothing his hair. "My cousin Charles may not be good-looking but he's very brave and fights like a paladin, and if he continues to fight well, no doubt he'll end up winning a famous battle! Like Rocroi..."

"He has no troops," interrupted the Sir de Lorraine.

"The King of Holland, his ally, will give him some. I would certainly have given him some if I were the King of France." Louis XIV turned bright red. Mazarin affected to watch his game more closely than ever. "At this moment," continued the Count de Guiche, "the fate of that unhappy prince is being decided. If he's been deceived by Monck, he's lost. Prison, perhaps even death, will end what exile, war, and privations had begun."

Mazarin frowned. "Is it certain," said Louis XIV, "that His Majesty Charles II has left The Hague?"

"Quite certain, Your Majesty," replied the young man. "My father received a letter with all the details. It's even known that the king disembarked at Dover; anglers saw him enter the port. The rest is still a mystery."

"I wish I knew the rest," said Philippe impetuously. "Do you know, Brother?"

Louis XIV blushed again. It was the third time in an hour. "Ask Sir Cardinal," he replied, in a tone that made Mazarin, Queen Anne, and everyone else look at him. "That means, my son," laughed Anne of Austria to Philippe, "that the king doesn't like us to discuss affairs of state outside the council."

Philippe received this gentle reprimand with good grace and bowed, smiling, first to his brother and then to his mother. But Mazarin saw from the corner of his eye that a group of young nobles was gathering in the corner of the chamber, where the Duke of Anjou and his favourites the Count de Guiche and Sir de Lorraine, thwarted at discussing affairs aloud, could continue in low voices to say what they wanted. He began to glare at them with suspicion and anxiety in hopes that Anne of Austria would say something to disrupt their conclave, when suddenly Bernouin came in. Sidling up to the bed, he whispered in his master's ear, "My Lord, an Envoy from His Majesty the King of England."

Mazarin couldn't conceal a slight reaction that the king noticed, to the cardinal's annoyance. To avoid appearing indiscreet, not to mention irrelevant, Louis XIV rose, approached His Eminence, and wished him a good night. The whole assembly rose, with a great noise of chairs pushed back and tables scraping the floor. "Let everyone go, little by little," said Mazarin quietly to Louis XIV, "and give me a few minutes' privacy. I need to address an affair about which I'd like to inform Your Majesty this evening."

"Including the queens?" asked Louis XIV.

"And the Duke of Anjou," said His Eminence.

And he retired into his alcove, letting the bed curtains fall – but in such a way that he could still see the conspirators in the corner. "Sir le Count de Guiche!" he called in a quavering voice while behind the curtain he donned the dressing gown that Bernouin had brought him.

"Here I am, My Lord," said the young man, approaching.

"You're a lucky fellow; take my cards and win me a little money from these gentlemen."

"Yes, my Lord." The young man sat at the table from which the king had withdrawn to speak with the queens. A serious game began between the count and several wealthy courtiers. Meanwhile, Philippe was chatting with the Sir de Lorraine, as the swish of the cardinal's silk robe came no more from behind the curtain of the alcove. His Eminence had followed Bernouin into the study adjacent to the bedchamber.

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An Affair of the State

Upon entering his study, the cardinal found the Count of La Fère waiting there, admiring a beautiful Raphael hung above a gilded dresser. His Eminence came in slowly, light and silent as a shadow, hoping to surprise the count's unprepared expression; that was his custom, since he believed that he instantly could read from an envoy's face what direction a conversation would take. But this time, Mazarin's expectations were thwarted, for he could read absolutely nothing from Athos's expression, not even the respect he expected to see on all supplicants' faces. Athos was dressed in black accented with simple silver embroidery. He wore the Saint-Esprit, the Garter, and the Golden Fleece, three orders of such significance that only a king, or a stage-actor, could wear them all. Mazarin derved for a long moment in his capacious memory trying to remember the name of this man of ice without success. Finally, he said, "I knew that a message would be coming from England."

And he sat down, dismissing Bernouin and Brienne, the latter of whom was preparing, in his capacity as secretary, to take notes. "On the behalf of His Majesty the King of England, yes, Your Eminence," said Athos.

"You speak French very well, Sir, for an Englishman," said Mazarin graciously, still sneaking glances at the Saint-Esprit, the Garter, and the Fleece while trying to place the profile of the messenger. "I am not English, I am French, Sir Cardinal," replied Athos. "It's peculiar for the King of England to choose Frenchmen as ambassadors but I'll take it as a good omen. Your name, Sir, if you please?" "Count of La Fère," replied Athos, bowing a shade less deferentially than custom and the pride of the all-powerful minister required. Mazarin twitched his shoulders as if to say, *I do not know that name*. Athos showed no reaction. "And you come, Sir," continued Mazarin, "to tell me..." "I come on the behalf of His Majesty the King of England to announce to the King of France..." Mazarin frowned. "To announce to the King of France," Athos continued impassively, "the happy restoration of His Majesty Charles II to the throne of his fathers." The frosty tone didn't escape the notice of His Canny Eminence. Mazarin was too familiar with the ways of men not to see, in the cold and almost haughty politeness of Athos, a measure of hostility that didn't accord with the ordinary hothouse warmth of discourse at Court. "You have accreditation, no doubt?" asked Mazarin in a querulous tone. "Yes ... My Lord."

This words *my Lord* came painfully from Athos's lips, almost seeming to scorch them as it passed. "In that case, present it." Athos drew a dispatch from an embroidered velour packet inside his doublet. The cardinal extended his hand. "Your pardon, My Lord," said Athos, "but the dispatch is for the king." "Since you are French, Sir, you must know the powers of the prime minister at the Court of France." "There was a time," replied Athos, "when I took care to respect the powers of prime ministers – but I since formed, some years ago, the resolution to deal with no one but the king." "Then, Sir," said Mazarin, who was beginning to be annoyed, "you will deal with neither minister nor king." And Mazarin rose. Athos returned the dispatch to its packet, bowed gravely, and took a few steps toward the door. His sangfroid exasperated Mazarin. "What strange diplomacy is this!" he cried. "Are we still in the days when Sir Cromwell was sending us cutthroats as envoys? You lack only the round helmet on your head and the Bible at your belt!" "Sir," replied Athos drily, "unlike you I never had the experience of treating with Sir Cromwell, and I only met the envoy you mention sword in hand; I don't know how he dealt with prime ministers. As to the King of England, Charles II, I know that when he writes to His Majesty King Louis XIV, it isn't addressed to His Eminence Cardinal Mazarin; in that distinction, I don't see any diplomacy." "Ah ha!" cried Mazarin, lifting his emaciated head and striking his hand to his brow. "I remember now!" Athos looked at him, astonished. "Yes, that's it!" said the cardinal, continuing to stare at his visitor. "Yes, of course – I recognise you, Sir! Ah, *devil*, now I needn't wonder..." "Indeed, I was surprised, given Your Eminence's excellent memory, that Your Eminence didn't recognise me sooner," replied Athos with a smile. "Always so stiff and recalcitrant, Sir ... Sir ... what did they call you? Wait a moment ... the name of a river – Potamos! No, no ... the name of an island. Naxos? No, *per Giove*, the name of a mountain – Athos! That's it! How delightful to see you again, so long as we're not at Rueil, where you and your damned accomplices made me pay a ransom. Ah, the Fronde! The cursed Fronde! That stupid chaos! *Ah çà*, Sir, why has your enmity outlasted mine? If anyone had anything to complain about how that turned out, I don't think it was you, who got away with a whole skin and the sash of the Saint-Esprit around your neck."

"Sir Cardinal," replied Athos, "please be so kind as to leave me out of such tale-spinning, I merely have a mission to fulfil. Will you provide the means of facilitating this mission?" "I am astonished," said Mazarin, delighted to have recovered his memory and bristling with malice, "I say, I am astonished, Sir ... Athos ... that a Frondeur like you accepted a mission to the great scoundrel Mazarin, as they used to call me in those times."

And Mazarin began to laugh in spite of a painful cough that turned the laughter into sobs. "Sir Cardinal, I have only accepted a mission to the King of France," retorted the count with some asperity, though given the situation he felt he could moderate his hauteur.

"And yet, Sir le Frondeur," said Mazarin gleefully, "as to the king, this affair of which you've taken charge..." "With which I was charged, My Lord – I don't go running after affairs."

"As you like! I tell you this negotiation must pass through my hands, so let's not waste precious time. Tell me your conditions."

"I have had the honour to assure Your Eminence that only the letter from His Majesty King Charles II contains the essence of his wishes."

"Come! It's ridiculous to be so rigid, Sir Athos. One can see you picked up some of the Puritans' habits over there ... I know your secret message better than you do, and it might be a mistake to have so little regard for a suffering old man who has worked as hard in his life, and campaigned as bravely for his ideas, as you have for yours. So, you don't want to say anything to me? Fine. You don't want my hands to touch your letter? Come with me to my little alcove, where you may speak to the king, and in front of the king. Now, one last question: who gave you the Fleece? I remember how you got the Garter but as to the Fleece, I have no idea..."

"Recently, My Lord, Spain, upon the occasion of the marriage of His Majesty Louis XIV, sent to Charles II a blank brevet for the Golden Fleece; Charles II immediately presented it to me, filling in the blank with my name."

Mazarin rose, and, leaning on Bernouin's arm, returned to his alcove, just at the moment when the audiencer in the grand chamber announced, "Sir le Prince!" The Prince de Condé, First Prince of the Blood, the victor of Rocroi, Lens, and Nördlingen, was in fact entering My Lord de Mazarin's chambers, followed by his gentlemen, and he'd already saluted the king when the prime minister lifted his curtain. Athos had time to catch a glimpse of Raoul shaking hands with the Count de Guiche and exchanged a smile for his respectful bow. He also had time to see the cardinal's radiant face when Mazarin saw before him on the table the enormous pile of gold coins the Count de Guiche had won by a lucky run with the cards His Eminence had confided to him. Forgetting the ambassador, his embassy, and the prince, for a moment the cardinal's only thoughts were for the gold. "What!" cried the old man, "All this ... my winnings?" "Something around fifty thousand crowns, yes, My Lord," replied the Count de Guiche, rising. "Should I allow Your Eminence to resume or shall I continue?" "Resume? Resume? You're mad! We'd lose all you gained, *plague!*"

"My Lord," said the Prince de Condé, bowing. "Good evening, Sir le Prince," said the minister lightly. "It's very good of you to visit a sick friend."

"A friend ...!" murmured the Count of La Fère as he considered, stupefied, that word as somehow applied to Mazarin and Condé. Mazarin guessed the thoughts of the old Frondeur, for he smiled at him in triumph, and immediately said to the king, "Sire, I have the honour to present to Your Majesty Sir le Count of La Fère, ambassador of His Britannic Majesty. An affair of State, Gentlemen!" He added, dismissing with a wave of his hand all those who thronged the chamber, and who, with the Prince de Condé at their head, disappeared at a mere gesture from Mazarin. Raoul, after a final glance at the Count of La Fère, followed Sir de Condé. Philippe d'Anjou and the queen appeared to be asking each other if they should leave. "It's a family affair," Mazarin said quickly, keeping them in their seats. "Sir, here, brings the king a letter from Charles II, now completely restored to the throne, demanding an alliance between Sir, the king's brother, and Miss Henrietta, grand-daughter of Henri IV ... you might want to give the king your letter of accreditation, Sir Count."

Athos paused for a moment, stunned. How could the minister know the contents of a letter that had never left his side for a moment? However, always master of himself, he presented his dispatch to the young King Louis XIV, who took it and blushed. A solemn silence reigned throughout the cardinal's chamber while the king read the letter, disturbed only by the clink of gold as Mazarin, with his dry, yellow hands, piled his coins in a coffer.

### 305 The Report

The cardinal's malice hadn't left much for the king to say to the ambassador but that word *restoration* had struck him. Addressing the count, upon whom he'd had his eyes fixed since he'd entered, he said, "Sir, please give us some details of the state of affairs in England. You've just come from that country, you are French, and the orders that decorate your person announce a man of merit who is also a man of quality."

"Sir," said the cardinal, turning toward the queen mother, "is the Count of La Fère, an old servant of Your Majesty."

Anne of Austria was as forgetful as any queen whose life had been a mixture of days both stormy and serene. She glanced at Mazarin, whose wicked smile promised some nasty trick, then she sought, by a look, her own explanation from Athos. "Sir," continued the cardinal, "was one of Tréville's musketeers in the service of the old king. Sir is quite familiar with England, where he's travelled for various reasons at various times. He rightly considers himself a subject of the highest merit."

These words evoked all the memories that Anne of Austria most hesitated to reawaken. *England* meant her hatred for Richelieu and her love for Buckingham; *Tréville's musketeers* brought back the odyssey whose terrors and triumphs had agitated a young woman's heart and nearly cast her from a young queen's throne. These words had power, for they rendered mute and attentive all the royal persons who, with various reactions, began to think about the events of those mysterious years that the young hadn't seen and that the old had thought forever buried. "Speak, Sir," said Louis XIV, the first to emerge from wonder, suspicion, and memories.

"Yes, speak," added Mazarin, to whom the malicious prod he'd just given Anne of Austria had restored all his energy and glee.

"Sire," said the count, "a sort of miracle has utterly changed the destiny of King Charles II. Where men could not succeed, God resolved and accomplished." Mazarin coughed and fidgeted in his bed. "King Charles II," continued Athos, "left The Hague not as a fugitive nor a victim but as an absolute king, who, after a voyage away from his kingdom, returns amid universal benedictions."

"A great miracle indeed," said Mazarin, "for if what we heard was true, King Charles II, who returned amid benedictions, went away chased by musket balls."

The king remained impassive. Philippe, younger and more frivolous, couldn't repress a smile that applauded Mazarin for his joke. The king said, "In fact, it seems there was a miracle; but God, though He does much for kings, Sir le Count, nonetheless uses the hands of men to accomplish His plans. To what men does Charles II principally owe his restoration?"

"But," interrupted the cardinal, without concern for the king's pride or feelings, "doesn't Your Majesty know that credit belongs to Sir Monck?"

"I know that, of course," replied Louis XIV resolutely, "however, I'm asking Sir Ambassador the causes of this change in Sir Monck."

"And Your Majesty's question is to the point," replied Athos, "for, without the miracle that I had the honour to mention, Sir Monck would probably have remained an inveterate enemy of King Charles II. God arranged for a strange, bold, and ingenious idea to fall into the mind of a certain man, while a devoted and determined idea entered the mind of another. The combination of these two ideas brought about the change in Sir Monck's position, so that from a bitter enemy he became a friend of the fallen king."

"That's just the kind of detail I was asking for," said the king. "What kind of people are these two men you mentioned?"

"Two Frenchmen, Sire."

"In truth, that makes me happy."

"And the two ideas?" interrupted Mazarin. "I'm more curious about ideas than about men."

"Yes," murmured the king.

"The second idea, the devoted, determined, and least important, Sire, was to go dig up a million in gold buried by King Charles I at Newcastle and to use this gold to buy Monck's support."

"Oh ho!" said Mazarin, energized by the word *million*. "But wasn't Newcastle occupied by this self-same Monck?"

"Yes, Sir Cardinal that is why the idea had to be determined as well as devoted. It was necessary, if Sir Monck refused the negotiator's offers, to restore ownership of this million to King Charles II despite the disloyalty, or rather misplaced loyalty of General Monck. Despite some difficulties, the negotiator was able to work around the general's loyalties and remove the gold."

"It seems to me," said the timid and hopeful king, "that Charles II must not have been aware of this million during his visit to Blois and Paris."

"It seems to me," added the cardinal maliciously, "that His Majesty the King of England was quite aware of the existence of this million but preferred two million to one."

"Sire," Athos replied firmly, "when His Majesty King Charles II was in France, he was so poor he was unable to ride by post, and so hopeless that he several times contemplated death. He was entirely ignorant of the Newcastle million, and if a gentleman, one of Your Majesty's subjects and the appointed ward of the legacy, hadn't revealed the secret to Charles II, that prince would still languish in cruel oblivion."

"Let's return to the strange, bold, and ingenious idea," interrupted Mazarin, who intuitively saw where this was going. "What was that idea about?"

"This: that since Sir Monck formed the sole obstacle to the restoration of His Majesty the fallen king, a Frenchman resolved to remove this obstacle."

"Oh ho! Then this Frenchman was a scoundrel," said Mazarin, "and the idea is not so ingenious as to prevent its author from being sent to the Place de Grève by an act of our parliament."

"Your Eminence is mistaken," said Athos drily, "for I didn't say that the Frenchman in question had resolved to assassinate Monck but to remove him. For French gentlemen, the words of the French language have a precise meaning. Besides, it was an action of warfare, and when kings are served against their enemies, we are not judged by parliament, only by God. So, this French gentleman had the idea to seize the person of Sir Monck, and he executed his plan."

The king was thrilled by this exciting story. His Majesty's younger brother pounded the table with this fist, crying, "Ah! How lovely!"

"He carried Monck off?" said the king. "But Monck was in his camp..."

"And the gentleman was alone, Sire."

"It's wonderful!" said Philippe.

"Wonderful, indeed!" cried the king.

"Fine! Let the two young lions roar," murmured the cardinal. Then, with an air of contempt he didn't bother to hide, he said, "I was unaware of these details. Can you guarantee their authenticity, Sir?"

"All the more easily, Sir Cardinal, since I witnessed them myself."

"You?"

"Yes, My Lord."

The king had almost involuntarily drawn nearer to the count, while the Duke d'Anjou pressed Athos on the other side. "After that, Sir?" they shouted at the same time.

"Sire, Sir Monck, being taken by the Frenchman, was brought to King Charles II in Holland. The king restored Monck's liberty, and the general, in gratitude, gave Charles II in return the throne of England, for which so many valiant people had fought without success."

Philippe clapped enthusiastically. Louis XIV, more thoughtful, turned to the Count of La Fère and said, "Is it true, all these details?"

"Absolutely true, Sire."

"One of my gentlemen knew the secret of the million and safeguarded it?"

"Yes, Sire."

"The name of this gentleman?"

"It was your humble servant," said Athos simply.

The murmur of admiration that followed swelled Athos's heart. He had reason to be proud, at least. Even Mazarin had raised his arms – and rolled his eyes – toward heaven. "Sir," said the king, "somehow, I will find a way to reward you." Athos began to shake his head. "Oh, not for your honesty! To be paid for that would humiliate you. But I owe you a reward for assisting in the restoration of my brother Charles II."

"Certainly," said Mazarin.

"This triumph in a good cause fills the whole House of France with joy," said Anne of Austria.

"To continue," said Louis XIV, "is it also true that a lone man penetrated the defences of Monck's camp to carry him off?"

"The man was aided by ten auxiliaries of inferior rank."

"And nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Do you know his name?"

"Sir d'Artagnan, the former Lieutenant of Your Majesty's Musketeers."

Anne of Austria flushed, Mazarin went yellow with shame, while Louis XIV gasped and broke into a sudden cold sweat. "What men!" he murmured.

And, involuntarily, he shot at Mazarin such a glare that it would have terrified him if the minister hadn't had his face turned into his pillow. "Sir," cried the young Duke d'Anjou, laying his fine, white ladylike hand on Athos's arm, "tell that brave man, I beg, that Sir, the king's brother, will drink his health tomorrow before a hundred of the finest gentlemen of France!"

And having delivered this speech, the young man, noticing that in his enthusiasm he'd disarranged one of his lace cuffs, began to restore it with great care. "Let us talk business, Sire," interrupted Mazarin, who had neither enthusiasm nor lace cuffs.

"Indeed, Sir," replied Louis XIV, and turning to the count, he added, "Proceed with your presentation, Sir Count." Athos then commenced to solemnly offer the hand of Princess Henrietta Stuart to that of the young prince, the king's brother. The conference lasted an hour, after which the doors of the chamber were opened to the courtiers, who resumed their places as if nothing had disrupted their evening schedules. Athos then made his way to Raoul, and father and son shook hands and embraced.

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#### Sir Mazarin becomes Extravagant

While Mazarin was trying to recover from the shock of Athos's revelations, Athos and Raoul exchanged a few words in a corner of the chamber. "Are you back in Paris, then, Raoul?" said the count.

"Yes, Sir, since Sir le Prince has returned."

"I can't talk with you here, where we're being observed," said Athos, "but I'm going back to my house shortly and will wait to see you there as soon as your service allows."

Raoul bowed. The prince came straight to them. Condé had that penetrating and profound look that distinguishes the more noble species of birds of prey, with several traits that emphasized the resemblance. It's well known that the heir of the illustrious princes of the House of Condé had a low and retreating forehead, beneath which jutted out a long, sharp, aquiline nose that to the Court's mockers, people pitiless even toward the brilliant, looked more like an eagle's beak than a human nose. In the victor of Rocroi, this penetrating raptor's gaze and imperious expression intimidated those with whom he spoke more than majesty or ordinary good looks would have done. Besides, the flame of ire rose so rapidly to those prominent eyes that in Sir le Prince all animation resembled anger. Thanks to this quality, everyone at Court respected the prince, and some, knowing him only by appearance, even feared him. Now, Louis de Condé advanced on the Count of La Fère and Raoul with the decided intention of being greeted by one and introduced to the other. No one bowed with more reserved grace than the Count of La Fère, though he disdained to add to paying his respects all the nuances and flourishes a courtier employs to flatter and to please. Athos knew his personal worth and saluted the prince like a man, with a care and precision that somehow corrected any lack that might offend another's pride. The prince prepared to speak to Raoul but Athos forestalled him. "If the Viscount of Bragelonne's not one of the humblest servants of Your Highness, I'd beg to have him pronounce my name before you ... my Prince."

"I believe I have the honour to speak to Sir le Count of La Fère," Condé immediately said.

"My guardian," added Raoul, blushing.

"One of the most honourable men of the realm," continued the prince, "one of the first gentlemen of France, and one of whom I've heard so much, I've often desired to count him among my friends."

"An honour of which I would be worthy, My Lord," replied Athos, "only by my respect and admiration for Your Highness."

"Sir de Bragelonne is a fine officer," said the prince, "and it's because, as we see, he's been to a good school. Ah, Sir le Count! In your day, the generals had soldiers..."

"That's true, My Lord; but today, the soldiers have generals."

This compliment, stated without the accent of flattery, gave a thrill of pleasure to a man whom all Europe regarded as a war hero and who ought to have been sated with praise. "It's unfortunate for me that you're retired from the service, Sir le Count," replied the prince, "for soon enough the king must pursue a war with Holland or with England, and there will be plenty of opportunities for a man like you who knows England as well as France."

"I think I can tell you, My Lord, that I was wise to retire from the service," said Athos with a smile. "France and England will henceforth live as sisters, if I'm to believe my premonitions."

"Your premonitions?"

"Come, My Lord, and listen to what's being said at Sir Cardinal's table."

"Among the players?"

"Among the players, quite so, My Lord."

In fact, the cardinal had raised himself on one elbow and beckoned to the young brother of the king, who approached him. "My Lord," said the cardinal, "I beg you, gather up all these gold crowns."

And he designated the enormous pile of shining yellow coins that the Count de Guiche had gradually built before him, thanks to a run of luck. "For me?" cried the Duke d'Anjou.

"These fifty thousand crowns, yes, My Lord – they're for you."

"You're giving them to me?"

"That's my intention, my Lord," replied the cardinal, voice fading, as if the effort of giving money away had drained all his physical and emotional resources.

"Oh, *my God!*" murmured Philippe, overwhelmed with joy. "What a happy day!" He began raking coins into his pockets but when they were filled, more than a third of the gold remained on the table.

"Come here, Sir," said Philippe to his favourite, the Sir de Lorraine. The favourite came running. "Pocket the rest of this," said the young prince. This singular scene was regarded by no one nearby as anything more than a touching family moment. The cardinal often assumed the air of a father with the two Sons of France, and the young princes had grown up under his wing, so no one ascribed to pride or presumption, as we would today, this liberality of the prime minister. The courtiers contented themselves with envying the prince, and the king turned his head away. "I've never had so much money," said the young prince happily, crossing the chamber with his favourite to head for his carriage. "No, never! How heavy it is. It must be a hundred and fifty thousand livres!"

"But why would the cardinal give him so much money?" Sir le Prince asked the Count of La Fère in a whisper. "Is he so very sick, our dear cardinal?"

"Yes, My Lord, no doubt he's very ill, as Your Highness can see."

"Ill, yes but ... surely not dying? A hundred fifty thousand livres! Oh, that's beyond belief. Come, Count, why is this? Give me a reason."

"Patience a moment, if you will, My Lord – here comes the Duke d'Anjou chatting with the Sir de Lorraine. I wouldn't be surprised if they spared me the trouble of being indiscreet. Listen to them."

In fact, the Sir was saying to the prince in a low voice, "My Lord, it isn't natural for Sir de Mazarin to give money away – careful, you're dropping some coins. Why is the cardinal so generous with you?"

"As I said," Athos murmured in the ear of Sir le Prince, "here may be the answer to your question."

"Why is it, My Lord?" repeated the Sir impatiently, while weighing his pockets to calculate the amount that had fallen indirectly to him.

"My dear Sir, it's a wedding gift."

"What do you mean, a wedding gift?"

"Why, yes – I'm going to be married!" replied the Duke d'Anjou, without noticing that he was at that moment passing before Sir le Prince and Athos, who both bowed deeply.

The Sir gave Anjou a glare so strange and spiteful that the Count of La Fère shivered. "You! You, married!" the Sir repeated. "Oh, that's impossible. How could you be so foolish?"

"Fah, it's not my idea; they're making me do it," replied the Duke d'Anjou. "But come on – we've got money to spend."

Whereupon he disappeared with his companion, laughing and chatting, while all heads bowed at their passage. Then Sir le Prince whispered to Athos, "So, that's the secret?"

"It didn't come from me, My Lord."

"He'll marry the sister of Charles II?"

"I think so, yes."

The prince thought for a moment, and then his eye flashed. "In that case," he said slowly, as if talking to himself, "our swords will go back on the wall ... for a long time!"

And he sighed. All that this sigh contained of ambitions thwarted, of illusions crushed and hopes disappointed, only Athos guessed, for only he had heard the sigh. The prince immediately took his leave, after which the king departed. Athos, by a sign to Bragelonne, renewed the invitation he'd made at the beginning of the episode. Little by little the chamber emptied out until only Mazarin remained, alone with the suffering he no longer felt he had to conceal. "Bernouin! Bernouin!" he called in a broken voice.

"What does My Lord desire?"

"Guénaud\* ... call for Guénaud," said His Eminence. "It seems to me I'm dying." Bernouin, alarmed, ran to the study to give an order, and the messenger sent to find the doctor rode so swiftly, he passed the king's carriage in Rue Saint-Honoré.

The cardinal's summons was urgent, and Guénaud was quick to obey it. He found his patient sprawled on the bed, his legs swollen and livid and his stomach collapsed. Mazarin had undergone a severe attack of gout. He suffered cruelly and with the impatience of a man who wasn't used to not getting what he wished. At the arrival of Guénaud, he said, "Ah! Now I'm saved!"

Guénaud was a very learned and cautious man who had earned a reputation even before Boileau's satires about him. When he was faced by sickness, even in the person of a king, he treated the patient as a Turk treats a Moor. He did not reply to Mazarin as the minister expected, with, "The doctor is here now, sickness be gone!" On the contrary, after examining the patient he said gravely, "Uh-oh."

"Eh, Guénaud! What kind of tone is that?"

"The tone I take when I see a condition like yours, My Lord that is dangerous."

"The gout? Yes, the gout is awful."

"There are ... complications, My Lord."

Mazarin raised himself on one elbow and questioned him with a look and a gesture. "What are you telling me? Am I more ill than I thought I was?"

"My Lord," said Guénaud, sitting down by the bed, "Your Eminence has worked hard in this life, and suffered a great deal."

"But it seems to me I'm not that old. The late Sir de Richelieu was only seventeen months younger than I am when he died, and he had a fatal illness. Compared to him, I'm youthful, Guénaud; I'm barely fifty-two."

"Oh, My Lord, you're older than that. How long did the Fronde last?"

"Why do you ask that, Guénaud?"

"To make a medical calculation, My Lord."

"Well, around ten years, more or less."

"Very well. We must count each year of the Fronde as two years that makes twenty, and fifty-two plus twenty extra years makes seventy-two. You're really seventy-two years old, My Lord, an advanced age." As he said this, he felt the patient's pulse that conveyed such a negative prognosis that the doctor immediately continued, over the objections of his patient, "Actually, let's call each year of the Fronde three that puts you at age eighty-two."

Mazarin became deadly pale, and in a thin voice he said, "Are you speaking seriously, Guénaud?"

"Alas! Yes, My Lord."

"You took this roundabout way, then, to inform me that I'm extremely ill?"

"*My faith*, yes, My Lord, and with a man of wits and courage like Your Eminence, a roundabout way still leads to the truth."

The cardinal gasped, and had such trouble catching his breath that it inspired pity even in this pitiless doctor. "There is illness, and illness," Mazarin replied. "Some may be recovered from."

"That's true, My Lord."

"Isn't it?" cried Mazarin, almost with joy. "For in the end, don't we have power and force of will? And genius, *your* genius, Guénaud! What good are science and art if a patient who has access to all of it can't be saved from danger?"

Guénaud started to open his mouth but Mazarin continued, "Remember that I'm the most faithful of your patients, that I obey you blindly, and consequently..."

"I know all that," said Guénaud.

"Then, will I get better?"

"My Lord, there is no force of will, no power, no genius, no science that can resist a disease that doubtless comes from God that he released into the world at Creation with the final power to bring death to men. When a disease is mortal, it kills, and then nothing..."

"My disease ... is mortal?" asked Mazarin.

"Yes, My Lord."

His Eminence went limp for a moment, like a man who's been crushed by a falling column. But there was a well-tempered soul, or rather an iron-hard mind, in Sir de Mazarin. "Guénaud," he said, reviving a little, "you will allow me to take other opinions. I shall gather all the most learned men of Europe and consult them; I'm willing to try virtually any remedy."

"Surely My Lord doesn't suppose that I would presume to make a lone decision on an existence as precious as his. I have already assembled the finest doctors of France and all Europe – there were twelve of them."

"And they said...?"

"They said that Your Eminence has a fatal illness; I have their signed consultations here in my portfolio. If Your Eminence wishes to see the report, he will see the names of all the incurable diseases we discovered. First of all, there is..."

"No! No!" cried Mazarin, pushing away the portfolio. "No, Guénaud, I surrender! I surrender!"

This outburst was followed by a profound silence, during which the cardinal regained his senses and recouped his strength. "There's another option," murmured Mazarin. "There are still the charlatans and the mountebanks. In my country, those whom the doctors give up for lost turn to a quack, who out of a hundred might kill ten outright but still save ninety."

"Over the last month, did Your Eminence not notice that I changed his treatment ten times over?"

"Yes ... and so?"

"And so, I spent fifty thousand livres to buy – and try – all the secrets of those quacks. The list is exhausted, and so is my purse. You are not healed, and without my care you would be dead."

"It's the end," murmured the cardinal, "the end." He looked darkly around at his accumulated wealth. "I'm going to have to leave it all behind," he sighed. "I'm dead, Guénaud! Dead!"

"Oh, not quite yet, My Lord," said the doctor.

Mazarin seized his hand. "How long?" he asked, fixing wide, staring eyes on the doctor's face.

"My Lord, we never answer that question."

"To ordinary men, maybe but to me ... to me, for whom every minute is a treasure – tell me, Guénaud, tell me!"

"No, no, My Lord."

"Answer me, I tell you! Oh, give me another month, and for each of those thirty days I'll pay you a hundred thousand livres."

"My Lord," replied Guénaud in a firm voice, "it's God who gives you these days of grace and not I. And God gives to you two more weeks!"

The cardinal sighed deeply and fell back on his pillow, murmuring, "Thank you, Guénaud. Thank you."

The doctor got up to leave but the moribund man half rose and said, "Silence!" with eyes of flame. And he repeated, "Silence!"

"My Lord, I've known this secret for two months, and as you see, I've kept it well."

"Go, then, Guénaud; I'll see to the making of your fortune. Go but tell Brienne to send me a certain clerk, whose name is Sir Colbert."

Colbert wasn't far away. He'd spent the entire evening in a nearby corridor, chatting with Bernouin and Brienne, and commenting, with the insight of those who haunt the Court, on the news that rippled through the courtiers. And this seems the time to sketch, in a few words, a portrait of one of the most interesting men of his century, and to delineate it as truthfully as contemporary painters might have done. Colbert is a man to whom both the historian and the philosopher have an equal right. He was thirteen years older than Louis XIV, his future master. Of moderate size, more slender than stout, he had sunken eyes, a downward gaze, and hair black and thick except where it was thinning that made him take the skullcap early. His expression was severe, even stony, a stiffness that toward his inferiors was pride, and toward his superiors an affectation of worthy virtue. In short, he wore a dour visage at all times, even when looking at himself in a mirror. So much for his exterior. Professionally, he was admired for his skill and talent with accounts and ledgers, and his ingenuity at harvesting revenue from otherwise barren budgets. It was Colbert who'd come up with the idea of requiring the governors of border posts to feed their garrisons by dunning local sources. That kind of talent had given Cardinal Mazarin the idea of replacing his intendant Joubert, who'd recently died, with Sir Colbert, who shaved percentages even more closely. Colbert had gradually worked his way into the Court despite the liability of low birth, for he was the son of a honey-seller, like his father before him, who had also sold cloth and silk remnants. Colbert, destined by his family for commerce, had first worked for a merchant of Lyons, whom he had left to come to Paris to study bookkeeping with an auditor at the Châtelet named Biterne. There he'd learned the art of maintaining financial accounts, and the even more useful art of fudging them. His severity of manner became his greatest asset, for like Dame Fortune, or like those ladies of antiquity who cared only for their fancies, he seemed principled while actually allowing nothing to stand between him and his goal. In 1648 Colbert's cousin, the Lord de Saint-Pouange, found him a position in the office of Michel Le Tellier, the Secretary of State who favoured him one day by assigning him to bear a message to Cardinal Mazarin. At that time His Eminence was in good health, the stressful years of the Fronde not yet having counted double or triple against his age. He was at Sedan, on internal exile due to a Court intrigue in which Anne of Austria seemed inclined to desert him. Le Tellier held the threads to this intrigue. He had gotten hold of a letter from Anne of Austria as valuable to him as it was compromising to Mazarin. Using it, he undertook to play that double role he played so often, taking advantage of a conflict by either stoking the adversaries' differences, or by reconciling them. Le Tellier wanted to send Queen Anne's letter to Mazarin, so he would see how far he was exposed and be grateful for the service rendered. But then he wanted it back. To send the letter was easy but to recover it after lending it was far more difficult. Le Tellier looked around the office, and seeing the dark and scrawny clerk scribbling away, brows furrowed, he selected him over the most polished gendarme for the task. Colbert was assigned to go to Sedan with the order to share the letter with Mazarin and then bring it back to Le Tellier. He listened to his instructions with scrupulous attention, had them repeated twice, pointedly asked whether recovering the letter was as necessary as sharing it, and was told by Le Tellier, "Even more necessary."

Then he left, travelling like a courier without a care for his health or person. When he reached Mazarin, first he handed to him a note from Le Tellier announcing to the cardinal the sending of the precious letter, and then the letter itself. Mazarin blushed deeply while reading Anne of Austria's letter, gave Colbert a gracious smile, and dismissed him. "When will I have your response, My Lord?" asked the courier humbly.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, Sir."

The clerk made his most deferential bow and turned on his heel. The next morning, he was back again at 7 o'clock. Mazarin made him wait until ten. Colbert bided his time patiently in the antechamber, and when his turn came, he went in. Mazarin handed him a sealed packet, on the envelope of which was written, "To Sir Michel Le Tellier, Etc."

Colbert examined this packet with the closest attention, while the cardinal gave him a charming smile and pushed him toward the door. "And the letter from the queen mother, My Lord?" asked Colbert.

"It's in the packet with the rest," said Mazarin.

"Ah! Very good," replied Colbert.

And, placing his hat between his knees, he began tearing open the packet. Mazarin uttered a cry. "What are you doing?" he growled.

"Opening the packet, My Lord."

"Do you distrust me, you pen pusher? I've never seen such impertinence!"

"Oh, My Lord, please don't be angry with me! It's certainly not the word of Your Eminence I distrust, God forbid."

"What, then?"

"It's the thoroughness of your secretaries, My Lord. What is a letter? A mere scrap. And can't a scrap be overlooked? And look, My Lord, see if I was wrong! Your clerks have overlooked the scrap, for the letter isn't in the packet."

"You're as insolent as you are blind!" cried Mazarin, irritated. "Withdraw and await my summons." And saying these words, he made an Italian gesture of distraction with one hand and whisked the packet away from Colbert with the other, and then went back into his study. But his anger was soon replaced by thoughtfulness. Mazarin, upon opening the door of his study each morning, found

Colbert waiting on a bench, and this dowdy figure humbly but persistently asked for the queen mother's letter. Eventually, Mazarin ran out of excuses and had to return it. He accompanied this restitution with a severe reprimand, during which Colbert was content to examine, feel, and even smell the paper of the letter, scrutinizing the writing and signature as if he were dealing with the greatest forger in the realm. Mazarin added further rude remarks while Colbert, impassive, having proven to himself the authenticity of the letter, departed as if he were deaf. It was this conduct that won him the post of the late Joubert, for Mazarin, instead of holding a grudge, admired his tenacity and desired to have it in his own service. We see from this single story the entire character of Colbert. The events that followed gradually enabled his wit and talent to come to full flower. Colbert wasn't slow to insinuate himself into the cardinal's good graces, and before long he was indispensable. This clerk knew the details of all the cardinal's accounts before His Eminence ever spoke of them. The secrets shared between them were a powerful bond that is why, when he appeared on the verge of passing into the next world, Mazarin wanted solid advice on how to dispose of the wealth he would leave, so unwillingly, behind him. Thus, after Guénaud's visit the cardinal summoned Colbert, had him sit beside him, and said to him, "Let's have a talk, Sir Colbert, and a serious one, because I'm sick and may be about to die."

"Man is mortal," replied Colbert.

"I have never forgotten that, Sir Colbert, and have tried to prepare for it. You know that I've amassed a bit of a fortune..."

"I know, My Lord."

"And how much do you estimate that little fortune comes to, Sir Colbert?"

"To forty million five hundred sixty thousand two hundred livres, nine sous, and eight deniers," replied Colbert. The cardinal sighed deeply and regarded Colbert with admiration, then allowed himself a smile. "*Known* money," added Colbert in response to this smile.

The cardinal sat bolt upright. "What do you mean by that?" he said.

"I mean," said Colbert, "that besides these forty million five hundred sixty thousand two hundred livres, nine sous, and eight deniers there are thirteen other millions no one knows of."

"*Phew!*" sighed Mazarin. "What a man this is!"

At that moment Bernouin's head appeared in the doorway. "What is it," asked Mazarin, "and why are you disturbing me?"

"The Theatine father you sent for, Your Eminence's confessor, has arrived, and can't come back again to My Lord's until after tomorrow."

Mazarin looked at Colbert, who at once picked up his hat and said, "I'll return another time, My Lord."

Mazarin hesitated. "No, no," he said, "I have as much business with you as with him. Besides, you are my temporal confessor, and what I say to one can be heard by the other. Stay, Colbert."

"But, My Lord, if there is no privacy of penance, will the confessor agree to it?"

"Don't worry yourself about that. Go back into the alcove."

"I can wait outside, My Lord."

"No, no – better that you hear the confession of a man of means."

Colbert bowed and went into the alcove. "Admit the Theatine father," said Mazarin, closing the curtains.

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The Confession of a Man of Means

The Theatine entered deliberately, showing no astonishment at the noise and disturbance in the household raised by concern for the cardinal's health. "Come, Most Reverend," said Mazarin after a final glance at the curtained alcove. "Come and comfort me."

"Such is my duty, My Lord," replied the Theatine.

"Start by sitting comfortably, for I'll begin with a general confession; you'll quickly grant me a good absolution, and I'll feel calm again."

"My Lord," said the reverend, "surely you aren't so ill that a general confession is urgent. And it will be very tiring, so take care!"

"Do you suppose it would take long, Reverend?"

"How could it be otherwise when one has lived as complete a life as Your Eminence?"

"Ah, that's true! Yes, the story might be a long one."

"The mercy of God is great," intoned the Theatine.

"Here," said Mazarin, "I'm beginning to alarm myself by thinking of everything I've allowed to pass of which the Lord would disapprove."

"Of course; who would not?" said the Theatine naively, turning his narrow face and mole-like features from the light. "Sinners are like that: forgetful before, then scrupulous when it's too late."

"Sinners?" replied Mazarin. "Do you use the term ironically, or to reproach me with the background I've left behind? For as the son of an angler, I was certainly a ... seiner."

"Hmph!" said the Theatine.

"Family pride was my first sin, Reverend, because I allowed it to be said that I'd descended from ancient Consuls of Rome: Geganius Macerinus I, Macerinus II, and Proculus Macerinus III, all found in the Chronicle of Haolander. For *Macerinus* is temptingly close to *Mazarin*, though Macerinus, as a diminutive, means scrawny. Mazarini is also close to the augmentative, *macer* *that* means as thin as Lazarus. Look!"

And he showed his arms and legs, emaciated by fever. "That you are born of a family of anglers is no shame to you," replied the Theatine, "for indeed, Saint Peter was a angler, and you are a Prince of the Church, My Lord, as he was its supreme leader. Let's move on, if you please."

"However, I did threaten to put in the Bastille a certain Bounet, a priest of Avignon who wanted to publish a genealogy of the House of Mazarin that was entirely too exaggerated."

"To be believed, you mean?" replied the Theatine.

"Hmph! But if I'd acted on that threat, Reverend, it would have been the vice of pride – another sin."

"His was an abuse of wit but no one reproaches a person for that sort of crime. Let's move on."

"Mine was an abuse of pride, and I think, Reverend, I should categorize my errors by the mortal sins."

"I like proper categorisation."

"I do it by habit. You should know, then, that in 1630 – alas! Thirty-one years ago!"

"You were twenty-nine years old, my Lord."

"A hot-headed age. I fancied myself a soldier, and at Casale I joined the charge against the harquebusiers, just to show I could ride as well as any cavalier. It's true that I then negotiated the peace between the Spanish and French that somewhat redeems my sin."

"I don't see the slightest sin in displaying skill at riding," said the Theatine. "It's in perfect taste and does honour to our robes. In my capacity as a Christian, I approve of your halting bloodshed, and as a priest, I'm proud of the bravery of a colleague."

Mazarin bowed his head humbly. "Yes," he said, "but the results!"

"What results?"

"This damned sin of pride gets into everything! Since I'd thrown myself into battle between two armies, smelled the powder and charged lines of soldiers, I began to regard generals with disdain."

"Ah!"

"That's the result: since then, I haven't been able to stand them."

"Well, the fact is," said the Theatine, "that you haven't had many good generals."

"Oh, I certainly had Sir le Prince!" cried Mazarin. "And haven't I made him pay?"

"No point in feeling sorry for him, he's had plenty of glory and gain."

"True for Sir le Prince but what of Sir de Beaufort, whom I treated so harshly in the dungeons of Vincennes?"

"Yes but he was a rebel, and the security of the State required you to make that sacrifice. Let's move on."

"I think that's it for pride. There's another category of sin that I hesitate to name..."

"Tell me of it, and I'll figure out its category."

"It's a truly great sin, Reverend."

"We'll see, My Lord."

"You must have heard tell of ... certain relations I've had with Her Majesty the queen mother ... relations that the malicious..."

"The malicious, My Lord, are fools. Wasn't it necessary, for the good of the State and the best interests of the young king that you should act as a close adviser to the queen? Move on, move on."

"Believe me, that lifts a terrible burden from me," said Mazarin.

"Trivia and trifles! Find us something serious."

"I've been full of ambition, Reverend..."

"That's the price of doing great things, My Lord."

"But to covet the tiara of the pope..."

"The pope is first among Christians. Why shouldn't you desire that?"

"It's been said in print that, in order to get it, I sold Cambria to the Spanish."

"You've published pamphlets yourself, so one can't say you've been too harsh on pamphleteers."

"Ah, Reverend, you set my heart free. The rest are mere peccadilloes."

"Tell me."

"There's gambling."

"A worldly pursuit, to be sure but your position required you to keep a grand house and entertain your guests."

"I loved to win, though."

"No one plays to lose."

"I cheated. A little."

"You took your advantage. Move on."

"That's it, Reverend! I feel no other burden on my conscience. Give me my absolution, and my soul will be ready, when God calls it, to ascend unhindered to his throne."

The Theatine neither moved nor spoke. "What are you waiting for, Reverend?" said Mazarin.

"The final statement."

"Final statement of what?"

"Of the confession, My Lord."

"But I'm finished."

"Oh, no! Your Eminence is mistaken."

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Think hard."

"I've thought as hard as I could."

"Then I'll assist your memory."

"Let's see."

The Theatine coughed several times. "You have not spoken to me of avarice, another mortal sin, nor of the millions," he said.



“What millions, Reverend?”  
“Why, *your* millions, My Lord.”  
“*Mon père*, that money belongs to me; why should I speak of it?”  
“Because, you see, on that our opinions differ. You say that money is yours, and I think it belongs to others.”  
Mazarin raised a cold hand to his sweating forehead. “What do you m-mean?” he stammered.  
“This: Your Eminence has gained a great deal of wealth in the service of the king...”  
“Hmph. A great deal? It’s not that much.”  
“In any event, where did this wealth come from?”  
“From the State.”  
“Which means, from the king.”  
“But what do you conclude from that, Reverend?” said Mazarin, starting to tremble.  
“I can reach no conclusion without a list of your revenues. Let’s add it up: you have the Bishopric of Metz.”  
“Yes.”  
“The Abbacies of Saint-Clément, Saint-Arnoud, and Saint-Vincent, also in Metz.”  
“Yes.”  
“You have the Abbey of Saint-Denis, one of the loveliest properties in France.”  
“Yes, Reverend.”  
“You have the Abbey of Cluny, a rich living.”  
“I have that.”  
“And that of Saint-Médard, at Soissons, with income of a hundred thousand livres.”  
“I can’t deny it.”  
“Plus, that of Saint-Victor at Marseilles, one of the richest abbeys of the South.”  
“Yes, *mon Père*.”  
“Over a million a year. With the income of the cardinalate and the ministry, call it two million.”  
“But...”  
“Over ten years, that’s twenty million ... and twenty million at interest that compounds to fifty per cent gives, in ten years, another twenty million.”  
“For a Theatine father, you’re quite an accountant!”  
“Since 1644, when Your Eminence granted our order the monastery we occupy near Saint-Germain-des-Prés, I have reckoned the society’s accounts.”  
“And mine as well, I see, Reverend.”  
“One must know a little bit about everything, My Lord.”  
“Well, then! Your conclusion?”  
“I conclude that your baggage is too heavy to carry across the threshold of Paradise.”  
“So, I’m ... damned?”  
“Unless you make restitution, yes.”  
Mazarin uttered a pitiful cry. “Restitution! But, good Lord, to whom?”  
“To the master of this money – to the king!”  
“But it’s the king who gave it all to me!”  
“Not so! The king signed no such decrees.”  
Mazarin sighed and groaned. “Absolution,” he said. “Absolution!”  
“Impossible, My Lord. Restitution,” replied the Theatine. “Restitution!”  
“But you absolved me of the other sins before. Why not this one?”  
“Because,” replied the reverend, “to absolve you of this sin is a crime for which the king would never absolve *me*, My Lord.”  
Upon which, the confessor stood and, sighing with unease, left the same way he had come. “Oh, my God,” groaned the cardinal. “*Whoa!* Come here, Colbert – I’m sick, very sick!”

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The Bequest

Colbert emerged from behind the curtains. “Did you hear?” said Mazarin.  
“Alas! Yes, My Lord.”  
“Is he right? Is that money ill-gotten?”  
“A Theatine, My Lord, is a bad judge on matters of finance,” Colbert replied coldly. “However, it may be that, by his theological lights, Your Eminence has made some mistakes. We often find it so ... when we die.”  
“The first mistake is that of dying.”  
“True, My Lord. But on whose behalf does he think you’re mistaken? That of the king.”  
Mazarin shrugged his shoulders. “As if I hadn’t saved his State and its finances!”  
“That cannot be denied, My Lord.”  
“It can’t? Then, I’ve earned no more than a legitimate salary, despite what my confessor thinks?”  
“Beyond all doubt.”  
“And I can retain for my family, always so needy, the better part of what I’ve earned!”  
“I see no obstacle to that, My Lord.”  
“I was sure, Colbert, that if I consulted you, you’d give me good advice,” replied Mazarin with joy.  
Colbert made his sour miser’s grimace. “My Lord,” he interrupted, “we must consider whether the Theatine’s words are not some sort of snare.”  
“A snare? Why? The Theatine is an honest man.”  
“He believed Your Eminence was at death’s door, since Your Eminence summoned him for confession. Did I not hear him say to you, ‘Distinguish what the king has given you from what you’ve earned for yourself’? Recall, My Lord, if he said something like that to you, though in the terms of a Theatine father.”  
“He might have.”  
“In which case, My Lord, I’d say you’ve been required by the father to...”  
“To make restitution?” cried Mazarin in alarm.  
“I ... wouldn’t disagree.”  
“To make full restitution! You can’t mean it. You talk like the confessor!”  
“Restitution of a part – that is to say, His Majesty’s part – or else, My Lord, there could be trouble. Your Eminence is too able a politician to ignore the fact that at this moment the king doesn’t have even a hundred fifty thousand livres in his coffers.”  
“That is not my business,” said Mazarin triumphantly, “but rather that of Sir le Surintendant Fouquet, whose accounts you’re aware of, as I’ve shared them with you in recent months.”  
Colbert pinched his lips at the name of Fouquet. “His Majesty,” he said between his teeth, “has no money but that collected by Sir Fouquet; your fortune, My Lord, would look like food to the starving.”  
“Yes but I’m not the king’s superintendent of finances, I have my own sources. I’m sure I can find something to help His Majesty, some legacy but ... I can’t neglect my own family...”  
“A meagre legacy will dishonour and offend the king. Bequeathing a mere part to His Majesty is as much as admitting that what you’re keeping wasn’t legitimately acquired.”  
“Sir Colbert!”  
“I thought Your Eminence did me the honour to ask for my advice.”  
“Yes but you’re ignorant of the principal details of the issue.”  
“I’m ignorant of nothing, My Lord; for ten years I’ve reviewed every column of figures calculated in France and have engraved them so deeply on my memory that, from the disbursals of Sir Le Tellier, who is reliable, to the secret skimming of Sir Fouquet, who is fraudulent, I could recite, line by line, every expenditure from Marseilles to Cherbourg.”  
“I suppose you’d have me throw all my money into the king’s coffers!” cried Mazarin sardonically, from whom the gout then wrenched several painful groans. “Then the king would have nothing to blame me for but he’d amuse himself at my expense with my millions, and rightly so.”  
“Your Eminence has misunderstood me. I did not at all mean that the king should spend your money.”  
“To me it seems clearly otherwise, since you advise me to give it to him.”  
“Ah!” replied Colbert. “That’s because Your Eminence, preoccupied with the problem, completely overlooks the character of His Majesty Louis XIV.”  
“How so?”  
“I believe his character, if I may dare to say so, centres on the sin that My Lord confessed just now to the Theatine.”  
“You may so dare. What sin is that?”  
“It is pride. Pardon, My Lord, I mean majesty; kings don’t show pride, that’s a mere human emotion.”  
“Pride will do – and yes, you’re right. So?”  
“So, My Lord, if I’ve reasoned correctly, Your Eminence has only to offer all his fortune to the king, and without delay.”  
“Why is that?” asked Mazarin, intrigued.  
“Because the king won’t accept the entire amount.”  
“What? A young man without money who’s consumed by ambition?”  
“Indeed.”  
“A young man who wishes me dead.”  
“My Lord...”  
“To inherit, yes, Colbert – yes, he’d like me dead, so he can inherit. Triple fool that I am not to have seen it! But I’ll thwart him.”  
“You will. Because if the bequest is made in the right form, he’ll refuse it.”  
“Come, now!”  
“I’m certain of it. A young man who’s accomplished nothing, who yearns for recognition, who burns to be the sole ruler, won’t take anything just handed to him – he wants to achieve everything on his own. This prince, My Lord, won’t be content with the Royal Palace left to him by Richelieu, nor the magnificent Palais Mazarin that you’ve built, nor the Louvre of his ancestors, nor even with Saint-Germain where he was born. I predict that all that does not come from him, he will scorn.”  
“And you guarantee that if I give my forty million to the king...”

"If the bequest is couched in certain terms, I guarantee he'll refuse it."  
"What terms are these?"  
"I can write them out if My Lord wishes me to."  
"But what advantage will I gain from this?"  
"An enormous one. No one will be able to accuse Your Eminence of the rampant avarice of which the pamphleteers reproach the most brilliant mind of the century."  
"You're right, Colbert, you're right. Go to the king on my behalf and present him my will and testament."  
"Your *bequest*, My Lord."  
"But he might accept it! What if he accepts it?"  
"Even then, you'd still have thirteen million for your family, and that's no small sum."  
"But then you'd be a fool – or a traitor."

"And I'm neither one nor the other, My Lord. You seem very much afraid that the king will accept it but oh! Be more afraid if he doesn't."  
"If he doesn't agree, we must make sure he overlooks the thirteen million I have in reserve. But ... yes, I will do it. Yes. Ah but here comes the pain again! Weakness overcomes me – I'm very ill, Colbert; it's near the end." Colbert trembled. The cardinal was very ill indeed: he was sweating profusely in his bed of pain, and the frightening pallor of his face, streaming with perspiration, was a sight to touch the heart of the most hardened physician. It clearly touched Colbert, for he rushed from the room, calling Bernouin to come to the sick man's aid, and then exited into the corridor. There, walking back and forth, with a pensive expression that made his vulgar visage almost noble, shoulders hunched, neck extended, lips twitching to his tumbling thoughts, he nerved himself up for a risky endeavour. Meanwhile, no more than ten paces away, just the other side of a wall, his master writhed in anguish with pitiful cries, thinking no longer of the treasures of the earth, nor the joys of paradise but of the horrors of hell. While hot towels, topical ointments, and tonics were feverishly administered by Guénaud, who'd been recalled to the cardinal's side, Colbert, holding his big head in both hands to suppress his own fever of ideas, considered the wording of the bequest that he would submit to Mazarin at the first opportunity his illness allowed. The cries at the approach of death from the cardinal, that pillar of the past, seemed to stimulate the genius of this thick-browed thinker who was already turning toward the new sun that would regenerate the future. Colbert returned to Mazarin when reason also returned to the patient, and persuaded him to dictate a bequest in the following terms:  
*As I prepare to appear before God, the master of all men, I pray that the king, who was my master upon earth, will repossess the abundance which his kindness has granted me, and which my family will be happy to see pass into his illustrious hands. The details of my property have been prepared whenever His Majesty requests, or when the last breath passes from the lips of his devoted servant. Jules, Cardinal de Mazarin*  
The cardinal sighed as he signed this. Colbert sealed the packet and carried it immediately to the Louvre, where the king had just returned. Then he went home, rubbing his hands together with the satisfaction of a workman on a job well done.

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**How Anne of Austria Gave Louis XIV One Sort of Advice & Sir Fouquet Gave Him Another**

The news of the cardinal's condition had already spread, and it attracted at least as many people to the Louvre as the news of the marriage of Sir, the king's brother, once that had been officially announced. No sooner had Louis XIV returned home, still pondering the things he'd seen and heard that evening, when the audiencier announced that the same crowd of courtiers who, that morning, had attended his lever, had returned to attend his *coucher* – a favour that, during the reign of the cardinal at Court, had been rarely accorded to the king, who'd seen them flock instead to the cardinal despite the king's displeasure. But with the minister down, as we've seen, with a serious attack of gout, the flock of flatterers flew to the throne. Courtiers have an amazing instinct for sensing events in advance, a supreme science that makes them diplomats divining political difficulties, generals foretelling the outcomes of battles, and doctors diagnosing diseases. Louis XIV, who had learned this lesson from his mother, among others, understood from this turnout that His Eminence My Lord Cardinal Mazarin must be very ill indeed. Anne of Austria had scarcely finished escorting the young queen to her chambers, reclaiming the ceremonial tiara from her brow, when she returned to seek out her son in his study. There, alone, disturbed, and with an unquiet heart, he allowed himself, as if to exercise his will, to indulge in surging waves of terrible anger. His was a royal anger that forced events when it broke out but which, thanks to his burgeoning self-control, never erupted in more than brief outbursts. In fact, his confidant Saint-Simon later mentioned his astonishment when, fifty years later, he lost his temper at a little lie told by his son the Duke Maine, and the result was a hail of blows with a cane on a poor lackey who'd pilfered a biscuit. The young king was thus in the grip of a sad fury and said to himself when he saw his reflection in a mirror, "O King! King in name but not in fact. O Phantom, rather, vain image that you are! Lifeless statue that has no power beyond provoking a reflexive salute from courtiers, when will you raise your velvet-clad arm and tighten your silken-gloved fist? When will you be able to open your lips to do other than sigh or smile at the stupid immobility of the other statues in the gallery?" Smacking his forehead with his hand, suddenly desperate for air, he went to the window where he saw some cavaliers below, chatting in animated whispers. These gentlemen were just curious onlookers, eager subjects for whom a king is a wondrous curiosity, like a rhinoceros, crocodile, or serpent. He struck his forehead again and said, "King of France! Some title! People of France! What a mob of creatures! I've just returned to my royal palace of the Louvre, my horses are still steaming, and I caught the attention of barely twenty people who watched as I passed ... Twenty? What am I saying? No, not even twenty interested in the King of France, not even ten King's Archers to guard my house – archers, people, guards, everyone is at the Royal Palace. Why, dear God? Don't I, the king, have the right to ask that?" "Because," said a voice responding to his own, from the study doorway, "the Royal Palace is home to all the money – in other words, all the power – of he who would reign." Louis turned suddenly; the voice was that of Anne of Austria. The king shuddered, then advanced toward his mother and said, "I hope Your Majesty paid no attention to those vain remarks that just show how the solitude and sorrow of kings can affect even the happiest personality." "I paid attention to only one thing, my son: that you were complaining." "Me? Not at all," said Louis XIV. "No, really, you're mistaken, Madam." "Then what were you doing, Sire?" "I imagined I was under the eye of my tutor and was developing an argument for debate." "My son," replied Anne of Austria, shaking her head, "you're wrong to be ashamed of your words, and wrong not to take me into your confidence. The day will come, maybe as soon as tomorrow, when you'll need to remember this axiom: 'Gold is the only power, and those who have that power are the only true kings.'" "You don't mean to cast blame on those who've gained wealth under my rule, do you?" asked the king. "No," said Anne of Austria sharply. "No, Sire, those who became wealthy under your rule are rich because you willed it, and I have no envy or complaint against them. They have doubtless served Your Majesty well enough for Your Majesty to permit them to attend to their own recompense. That's not what I hear in your words that reproaches me." "God forbid, Madam, that I should ever reproach my mother for anything!" "Besides," continued Anne of Austria, "the Lord doesn't grant riches on this earth forever; the Lord, as a corrective for honours and wealth, gives us suffering and disease, and no one," added Anne of Austria with a painful smile that proved she didn't except herself from this funereal premise, "no one carries their grandeur and wealth into the grave. In that way, the young reap the fruitful harvest sowed by the old." Louis listened with increasing attention to these words, as Anne of Austria seemed to offer them as some sort of consolation. "Madam," said Louis XIV, looking his mother in the eye, "do you, in fact, have something else you wish to tell me?" "Absolutely nothing, my son – only, you must have noticed how ill Sir Cardinal was this evening." Louis looked at his mother, seeking some emotion in her voice, some sadness in her expression. Indeed, Queen Anne's face seemed somewhat altered but by a suffering of a personal character. Perhaps this change was due to the cancer that was even then gnawing at her breast. The king said, "Indeed, Madam, Sir de Mazarin is very ill." "And it would be a great loss to the realm if His Eminence was called to God. Don't you agree, my son?" asked Anne of Austria. "Yes, Madam, certainly, a great loss to the realm," said Louis, colouring. "But the danger can't be that great, it seems to me, as Sir Cardinal isn't that old." The king had just finished speaking when an usher stepped in under the door tapestry and stood with a roll of paper in his hand, waiting for the king to acknowledge him. "What's that?" asked the king. "A message from Sir de Mazarin," replied the usher. "Give it to me," said the king. And he took the paper. But just as he was about to unroll it, a great noise arose in the courtyard, the gallery, and the antechambers. "Ah ha!" said Louis XIV, who seemed to recognise this commotion. "Did I say there was only one king in France? I was wrong, there are two." At that moment the door opened, and Superintendent of Finance Fouquet appeared before Louis XIV. His horses had made the noise in the courtyard, his retainers had made the commotion in the gallery, and it was he the courtiers had loudly welcomed in the antechambers, an uproar that stirred as he passed and continued long after his passage. It was this clamour that Louis XIV regretted not hearing when he came through. "He's not the king you think he is," Anne of Austria said quietly to her son. "He's just a wealthy man, that's all." Nonetheless, her bitter feelings gave these words a hateful tone, though Louis's expression, on the contrary, remained calm, not a wrinkle showing on his forehead. He nodded politely to Fouquet and continued to unroll the paper he'd received from the usher. Fouquet saw this movement, and, with a manner both easy and respectful, approached Anne of Austria so as not to interrupt the king. Louis unrolled the paper but he didn't read it; he listened to Fouquet compliment his mother on the graceful turn of her hand and arm. The queen's frown relaxed a bit and she almost smiled. Fouquet noticed that the king, instead of reading, was watching and listening, and he made a half-turn so that, while continuing to speak to Anne of Austria, he was also facing the king. "Do you know, Sir Fouquet," said Louis XIV, "that His Eminence is ill?" "Yes, Sire, I know that," said Fouquet, "and very ill indeed. I was at my country estate of Vaux when I heard the news and dropped everything to come." "You left Vaux this evening, Sir?" "An hour and a half ago, yes, Your Majesty," said Fouquet, consulting a watch encrusted with diamonds. "An hour and a half!" said the king, who had enough control to restrain his anger but not to hide his surprise. "I understand Your Majesty is sceptical, and rightly so but I did come that quickly, wonderful as it sounds. I recently received from England three pairs of horses that I was assured were very lively; I had them posted at intervals of four leagues, and I tried them tonight. I rode them in relay from Vaux to the Louvre in an hour and a half, so Your Majesty can see it was money well spent." The queen mother's smile couldn't conceal her jealousy. Fouquet reacted before she could express it. "Indeed, Madam," he hastened to add, "such horses are made, not for subjects but for kings, for kings must never defer to their subjects in anything." Louis raised his head. "However, so far as I know," interrupted Anne of Austria, "you're not a king, are you, Sir Fouquet?" "Which is why, Madam, the horses await only a signal from His Majesty before entering the stables of the Louvre. If I allowed myself to try them, it was only to ensure that I didn't offer the king anything less than a marvel." The king flushed deep red. "You know, Sir Fouquet," said the queen, "that it isn't the custom at the Court of France for a subject to offer such a present to his king?" Louis started. "I had hoped, Madam," said Fouquet anxiously, "that my love for His Majesty, my unending desire to please him, would serve to mitigate my failure of etiquette. It was not a present that I presumed to offer him but rather a tribute I hoped to pay him." "Thank you, Sir Fouquet," said the king politely. "I appreciate your intention, as I do love good horses but I'm not wealthy enough to keep them – as you, my Surintendant des Finances, should know better than anyone. I am unable, however much I might like them, to purchase such an expensive set." The queen mother seemed to be enjoying the minister's awkward position but Fouquet gave her a haughty glance and replied, "Luxury is the virtue of kings, Sire; it is by luxury that they approach divinity, for by luxury they are elevated above other men. By luxury a king rewards his subjects and honours them. Under the golden sun of this royal luxury grows the luxury of individuals, the source of wealth for the people. His Majesty, by accepting the gift of six such incomparable horses, would pique the vanity of our domestic breeders of Limousin, Perche, and Normandy, and their subsequent efforts to excel would benefit everyone ... But the king is silent, and therefore I stand convicted." During this speech Louis XIV, to keep his temper, rolled and unrolled the letter from Mazarin, though without looking at it. His eyes lit upon it at last, and he gasped at its first line. "What is it, my son?" asked Anne of Austria, drawing nearer. "Can this be from the cardinal?" said the king, continuing to read. "Yes, it is from him." "Has his illness grown worse?" "Read it," said the king, handing the letter to his mother as if he thought that only by reading it could Anne of Austria believe the paper's astonishing contents.

Anne of Austria read it in her turn, and as she did her eyes sparkled with a joy that Fouquet noticed, though she tried to turn away. “It’s a bequest, a regular deed of gift,” she said. “A bequest?” repeated Fouquet.

“Yes,” said the king, speaking to his Surintendant des Finances. “Yes, on the eve of death, Sir Cardinal makes me a bequest of all his wealth.”

“Forty million!” cried the queen. “Ah, my son! This is a fine gesture on the cardinal’s part, one that will contradict a host of vile rumours. Forty million, slowly gathered and then returned in one fell swoop to the royal treasury, the act of a loyal subject and a true Christian.”

And after casting a final glance at the note, she returned it to Louis XIV, who was thrilled at the size of the sum mentioned. Fouquet had withdrawn a few steps and was silent. The king approached and handed him the letter. The superintendent gave it a brief, haughty look, then bowed and said, “Yes, Sire, it’s a bequest, as I see.”

“You must reply, my son,” cried Anne of Austria. “You must reply, and right away.”

“In what way, Madam?”

“By a visit to the cardinal.”

“But it’s scarcely an hour since I left His Eminence,” said the king.

“Then write, Sire.”

“Write!” said the young king with disgust.

“Indeed,” replied Anne of Austria. “It seems to me, my son, that a man who makes such a bequest has the right to expect a speedy show of gratitude.” And turning to the superintendent, she said, “Don’t you agree, Sir Fouquet?”

“The bequest is worth the trouble, yes, Madam,” replied the superintendent with a hauteur that didn’t escape the king’s notice.

“Accept it, then, and thank him,” insisted Anne of Austria.

“What says Sir Fouquet?” asked Louis XIV.

“His Majesty wants to know what I think?”

“Yes.”

“Thank him, Sire…”

“Ah!” said Anne of Austria.

“But don’t accept it,” continued Fouquet.

“And why is that?” demanded Anne of Austria.

“You said so yourself, Madam,” replied Fouquet. “Because kings must not and cannot receive gifts from their subjects.”

The king remained silent in the face of these two very different opinions. “But … forty million!” said Anne of Austria, in the same tone that Marie Antoinette much later said, “You tell me that much!”

“I know,” Fouquet said, laughing. “Forty million is a nice round sum, an amount that might tempt even a monarch’s conscience.”

“But, Sir,” said Anne of Austria, “instead of dissuading the king from receiving this present, point out to His Majesty, in your official capacity, that these forty million will make his fortune.”

“It is precisely, Madam, because this forty million is a subject’s fortune that I say to the king, ‘Sire, if it’s indecent for a king to accept from a subject six horses worth twenty thousand livres, it’s that much more dishonourable to owe his fortune to a subject who was less than scrupulous in the collection of that fortune.’”

“It’s not your place, Sir, to give the king such a lesson,” said Anne of Austria, “Unless you provide a replacement for the forty million you cause him to lose.”

“The king shall have it whenever he wishes,” said the Surintendant des Finances, bowing.

“Yes, by squeezing it out of the people,” said Anne of Austria.

“And weren’t they squeezed, Madam, when they sweated out the forty million offered in this bequest?” Fouquet replied. “In any event, His Majesty asked for my opinion, and he has it. If His Majesty asks for my assistance, it shall be the same.”

“Come, come, accept it, my son,” said Anne of Austria. “You are above such petty considerations.”

“Refuse it, Sire,” said Fouquet. “While a king lives, he has no other measure but his conscience, no other judge but his will – but when he is dead, posterity will applaud or accuse.”

“Thank you, Mother,” replied Louis, bowing respectfully to the queen. “And thank you, Sir Fouquet,” he said, politely dismissing the superintendent.

“Will you accept it?” Anne of Austria asked again.

“I’ll think about it,” replied the king, looking at Fouquet.

312  
Agonies

The same night the bequest was sent to the king, the cardinal had himself taken to Vincennes. The king and the Court followed him there. The last glimmers of this torch still cast enough light to outshine, in its radiance, the combined light of the rest of the Court. Moreover, as we saw, the young Louis XIV, a faithful satellite of his minister, still orbited in his gravitation until the final moments. Mazarin’s illness, following Guénaud’s prediction, had worsened; it was no longer an attack of gout, it was the grip of death. And there was one more thing that afflicted the dying man with an even greater agony: the anxiety of having made that bequest to the king, the gift that, according to Colbert, the king would return unaccepted to the cardinal. The cardinal had a lot of faith, as we’ve seen, in the predictions of his financial secretary – but the sum was a great one, and no matter how brilliant Colbert was, from time to time the cardinal had his doubts, thinking that it might have been the Theatine who was mistaken, and there was at least as great a chance that he wouldn’t be damned as that Louis XIV would reject his millions. Moreover, the longer the delay before the bequest was returned, the more Mazarin thought that forty million was enough to risk losing something as hypothetical as a soul. Mazarin, though a cardinal, was first and foremost a prime minister, and in that capacity committed to materialism almost as much as an atheist. Every time the door opened he turned to look, longing to see the return of his unhappy bequest but he was deceived by hope and lay back down again with a sigh, finding his sorrow all the deeper because for a moment he’d forgotten it. Anne of Austria, too, had followed the cardinal to Vincennes. Her heart, though age had made it selfish, couldn’t refuse to bear this dying man witness to a sadness she owed him in her quality as a wife, according to some, and in her capacity as sovereign, according to others. She had adopted, as it were, the face of mourning in advance, and all the Court followed her example. Louis, in order not to show on his face what was passing in his soul, confined himself to his apartment with his old governess as his only company. The more he thought that he was approaching the end when all restraint would be lifted from him, the humbler and more patient he became, gathering himself like all strong men who have secret plans, preparing to spring forward more effectively at the decisive moment. Last rites had been secretly administered to the cardinal, who, faithful to his habits of concealment, fought against the appearance, and even the reality, of his situation, pretending to keep to his bed as if merely afflicted by a passing malady. Guénaud, for his part, maintained absolute discretion, and when questioned, tired of being interrogated, he said nothing except, “His Eminence is still full of youth and strength but God wills what he wills, and when he decides to take a man, that man will be taken.” These words, though spoken with the greatest care and reserve, were really intended for an audience of two: the king and the cardinal. Mazarin, despite Guénaud’s predictions, continued to deceive himself, or rather, to play his part so well that even the most cunning courtiers, when saying he deceived himself, were actually his dupes. Louis, who hadn’t seen the cardinal for two days – his mind fixed on the bequest that also preoccupied the cardinal – didn’t know the cardinal’s real condition. The son of Louis XIII, following in the footsteps of his father, had been the king so little until then that, while longing for rule, his desire was coupled with the fear of the unknown. As to the bequest, having made up his mind, a resolution he’d shared with no one, he decided to ask Mazarin to receive his visit. It was Anne of Austria, in her constant attendance on the cardinal, who received the king’s proposal, and she passed it on to the dying man, who heard it and trembled. Why did Louis XIV wish this audience? Was it to refuse the bequest, as Colbert had predicted? Was it to accept it with gratitude, as Mazarin feared?

Nevertheless, despite his rising anxiety, the dying man didn’t hesitate for a moment. “His Majesty will be quite welcome, yes, very welcome indeed,” he said, dismissing Colbert with a gesture that he, sitting at the foot of the bed, understood very well. “Madam,” continued Mazarin, “would Your Majesty please assure the king of the truth of what I’ve just said?”

Anne of Austria rose; she, too, was eager to resolve the question of the forty million that was at the forefront of everyone’s minds. After Queen Anne left, Mazarin made a great effort and leaned toward Colbert, saying, “Well, Colbert! Two unhappy days have passed, two mortal days, and, as you see, the bequest has not been returned.”

“Patience, My Lord,” said Colbert.

“Patience! Are you mad, you wretch? You advise me to be patient! In truth, Colbert, you mock me – I’m dying, yet you tell me to be patient!”

“My Lord,” said Colbert with his usual coolness, “it’s impossible that things won’t turn out as I said. His Majesty comes to see you so that he can return the bequest personally.”

“You think so? Well, I, on the contrary, am quite sure His Majesty is coming to thank me for it.”

Anne of Austria returned at that moment; on her way to find her son, she’d encountered another charlatan with a miracle cure, a medicinal powder sure to save the cardinal. Anne brought a sample of this powder but that wasn’t what the cardinal was interested in and he wouldn’t even look at it, insisting that life wasn’t worth the trouble it took to continue it. But once he’d uttered this maxim of philosophy, his secret, so long concealed, finally burst forth. “That powder, Madam, has no bearing on the situation. I made a small bequest to the king two or three days ago, and until now, out of delicacy no doubt, His Majesty hasn’t spoken of it. But the moment has arrived for explanations, and I beg Your Majesty to tell me if the king has any ideas on the matter.”

Anne of Austria opened her mouth to reply but Mazarin stopped her. “The truth, Madam,” he said. “In the name of heaven, the truth! Don’t flatter a dying man by offering him vain hope.”

He stopped himself at a look from Colbert that told him he was going too far. “I know,” said Anne of Austria, taking the cardinal’s hand. “I know that you have offered, not a small bequest, as you modestly call it but a generous, a magnificent gift; I know how painful it would be for you if the king…”

Mazarin listened, dying as he was, with the intensity of ten living men. “If the king?” he repeated.

“If the king,” continued Queen Anne, “didn’t heartily accept what you so nobly offer.”

Mazarin fell back on his pillow like the tragic clown Pantaloon, with the exaggerated despair of a man who abandons himself to a shipwreck – but he retained enough strength and presence of mind to throw at Colbert one of those looks that exceed the tragedy of ten epic poems. “It’s true, isn’t it,” added the queen, “that you’d consider the king’s refusal a kind of insult?”

Mazarin rolled his head on his pillow without uttering a single syllable. The queen was deceived, or pretended to be deceived, by this behaviour. “Therefore, I’ve given him sound advice,” said she, “and though certain others, jealous no doubt of the glory you’ll gain by your generosity, tried to persuade the king to refuse the bequest, I took your side and argued so well that I hope you won’t have to suffer such a denial.”

“Oh!” murmured Mazarin from behind half-closed eyes. “That’s a service I won’t forget for a single minute during the few hours I have left to live.”

“And I must say that it wasn’t without difficulty that I rendered it to Your Eminence,” added Anne of Austria.

“Ah, *plague*, I believe it. Oh!”

“My God, what is it?”

“I’m burning up.”

“Are you suffering so badly?”

“Like the damned!”

Colbert wished he could disappear through the floor. “Then,” continued Mazarin, “Your Majesty thinks that the king” – he paused for several seconds – “that the king is coming here to pay me the compliment of accepting?”

“So I think,” said the queen.

Mazarin assassinated Colbert with a look like daggers. Just then, the ushers announced the king was approaching through the crowded antechambers. This announcement caused a stir, and Colbert took advantage of it to slip out through a side door. Anne of Austria arose and awaited her son. Louis XIV appeared in the chamber’s doorway, his eyes going straight to the dying man, who no longer took the trouble to even half rise for the monarch from whom he thought he had nothing more to expect. An usher rolled an armchair next to the bed. Louis saluted his mother, then the cardinal, and sat down. The queen sat down in her turn. The king glanced behind him, and the usher, understanding the look, waved those courtiers who remained in the room out ahead of him. As the velvet curtains fell across the door, silence fell over the chamber. The king, still childish and timid before he who had been his master since his birth, respected him all the more in the supreme majesty of impending death. He dared not start the conversation, feeling that every word must weigh with significance, not just in this world but the next. As for the cardinal, he had only one thing on his mind: his bequest. It was not the pain of his illness that gave him that dejected expression and dull look, it was the expectation of the gratitude that was about to come tumbling from the king’s mouth, destroying all hope of restitution. It was Mazarin who first broke the silence. “Your Majesty,” he said, “are you also lodged here at Vincennes?” Louis nodded. “It’s a gracious favour that you grant to a dying man,” continued Mazarin, “and which will make his death that much easier.”

"I hope," replied the king, "that I've come to visit, not a dying man but a patient still able to be cured."

Mazarin made a movement of his head that signified, *Your Majesty is very good but I know the truth of the matter.* "The final visit, Sire," he said, "the final visit."

"If that were so, Sir Cardinal," said Louis XIV, "then I've come one final time to hear the advice of a guide to whom I owe everything." Anne of Austria was a woman; she could no longer restrain her tears. Louis showed himself much moved as well but Mazarin was even more moved than his guests, though for different motives. Here the silence fell again. The queen dabbed at her cheeks, and Louis regained his resolve. "I said," continued the king, "that I owe a great deal to Your Eminence." The cardinal's eyes devoured Louis XIV, for he felt the approach of the supreme moment. "And," continued the king, "the principal object of my visit is to deliver sincere thanks for that final testimony of friendship that you sent me."

The cardinal's cheeks inflated, his lips parted, and the most lamentable sigh he'd ever uttered prepared to issue from this chest. "Sire," he said, "I've impoverished my poor family, and ruined all who depend upon me that some might call a mistake but at least no one can say that I refused to sacrifice everything to my king."

Anne of Austria resumed her weeping. "Dear Sir Mazarin," said the king, in a tone more serious than one would have expected given his youth, "I think you misunderstand me."

Mazarin raised himself on one elbow. "There's no question of ruining your dear family, nor of robbing your dependents. No, that must not be!"

*Come, he's going to leave me a bit after all,* thought Mazarin. *Let's get as much as we can.*

*The king softens enough to be generous,* thought the queen. *Just let him not be too generous – this chance at a fortune will never come again.*

"Sire," the cardinal said aloud, "my family is large, and my nieces will be destitute when I'm gone."

"Oh, don't worry about your family," the queen interrupted hastily. "Dear Sir Mazarin, we will hold no friends more precious than yours; your nieces will be my children, the sisters of His Majesty, and whenever favours are distributed in France, it will be to those you love."

*Rubbish!* Mazarin thought, who knew better than anyone what faith to put in the promises of monarchs.

Louis read the dying man's thoughts on his face. "Fear not, dear Sir de Mazarin," he said, with a sad and half-ironic smile. "Misses Mancini will lose their most precious blessing in losing you but they will nonetheless remain the richest heiresses in France, since you've given me their dowry..." the cardinal held his breath. "...and I restore it to them," continued Louis, drawing from his doublet and placing on the cardinal's bed the letter of bequest that, for two days, had been the burning obsession of Mazarin's mind.

"What did I tell you, My Lord?" came a whisper from the side door behind the bed.

"Your Majesty returns my bequest!" cried Mazarin, so overcome by joy that he forgot his role of benefactor.

"Your Majesty refuses the forty million!" cried Anne of Austria, so stupefied that she forgot her role of mourner.

"Yes, Sir Cardinal; yes, Madam," replied Louis XIV, tearing up the letter that Mazarin hadn't dared take back. "Yes, I annihilate this act that despoiled an entire family; the wealth acquired by His Eminence in my service is his and not mine."

"But, Sire, consider!" cried Anne of Austria. "Your Majesty doesn't have even ten thousand crowns in his coffers!"

"Madam, I have just committed my first act of royalty that I hope will worthily inaugurate my reign."

"Ah, Sire, you're right!" said Mazarin. "It's truly grand, truly generous what you've done here!" And he picked up, one after another, the pieces of the bequest scattered on his bedclothes to make sure it was the original and not a copy. Finally, he found the piece bearing his signature and, recognising it, fell back on his pillows. Anne of Austria, unable to hide her disappointment, raised her eyes and hands to the heavens. "Ah, Sire!" cried Mazarin. "My God! Sire, you will be blessed by my whole family! *Perbacco!* If any member of my family ever causes you trouble, just frown and I'll rise from my grave."

These theatrics didn't produce quite the effect Mazarin had counted upon. Louis had already passed on to considerations of a higher order, while as for Anne of Austria, unable to continue without giving in to the anger she felt at the magnanimity of her son and the hypocrisy of the cardinal, she rose and left the room to find another venue for her spite. Mazarin understood completely, and, afraid that Louis XIV might rescind his decision, to distract him he began to groan and cry out, like Scapin in a later role, making that sublime jest for which the sad grumbler Boileau dared to criticize Molière. But gradually his cries subsided, and when Anne of Austria left the room they ceased entirely. "Sir Cardinal," said the king, "do you have any advice to give me?"

"Sire," replied Mazarin, "you are already wisdom itself, prudence incarnate. As for benevolence, let's not speak of it; what you have done exceeds the generosity of all men from antiquity to modern times."

The king remained cool, unmoved by this praise. "So, Sir," he said, "you speak only of gratitude. Doesn't your experience that is far greater than my wisdom, prudence, and generosity, inspire you to give me any counsel that will help me in the future?"

Mazarin thought for a moment. "You came here," he said, "to do a great thing for me and for mine, Sire."

"No need to talk about that," said the king.

"Well!" continued Mazarin. "I do want to give you something in exchange for the forty million that you so royally gave up." Louis XIV made a gesture that indicated he'd heard enough flattery. "I wish to give you an opinion," said Mazarin, "a single idea more valuable than all those millions."

"Sir Cardinal!" interrupted Louis XIV.

"Sire, hear my advice."

"I'm listening."

"Come near, Sire, for I'm getting weaker ... closer, Sire, closer."

The king leaned down over the bed of the dying man.

"Sire," said Mazarin, so quietly that the breath of his words came like a whisper from the tomb into the ears of the young king, "Sire ... *never have a prime minister.*"

Louis sat up, astonished. This advice amounted to a confession. And it was a treasure indeed, this sincere confession from Mazarin. The cardinal's legacy to the young king consisted of no more than these six words – but these six words, as Mazarin had said, were worth millions in gold. Louis sat stunned for a moment. As for Mazarin, he acted as if he'd said nothing unusual. The young king finally spoke. "Apart from your family, Sir de Mazarin, do you have anyone else to recommend to me?"

A slight drumming sounded from the side door behind the bed. Mazarin understood. "Yes, yes," he said quickly. "Yes, Sire, I recommend to you a wise man, honest and capable."

"His name, Sir Cardinal?"

"His name will be entirely unknown to you, Sire – it's Sir Colbert, my financial secretary. Oh, you can trust him," added Mazarin with emphasis. "Everything he's predicted has come to pass, and he has a sharp eye for business and for judging men, one that's never mistaken. He's surprised even me. Sire, I owe you a great deal but I think I settle the score by giving you Sir Colbert."

"All right," said Louis faintly.

For as Mazarin had said, the name of Colbert was unknown to him and he thought the cardinal's enthusiasm might be no more than the delirium of a dying man. The cardinal had fallen back again on his pillow. "For now, Sire, farewell," murmured Mazarin. "I still have a hard road to travel before I present myself before my new master. Farewell, Sire." The young king felt tears in his eyes. He leaned over the dying man, already more than half dead ... and then he hurried away.

313  
Enter Colbert

That night was one of anguish for both the dying man and the king. The dying man awaited his deliverance. The king awaited his freedom. Louis never went to bed. An hour after he'd left the cardinal's chamber, he heard that the dying man, recovering a little strength, had had himself dressed, rouged, and combed, and had asked to receive the latest ambassadors. Like Caesar Augustus, he seemed to regard the world as a theatre and wanted to play out properly the last act of his comedy. Anne of Austria didn't visit the cardinal again; she had nothing more to do there. The appearance of propriety was the pretext for her absence. Besides, the cardinal didn't ask for her, as the advice the queen had given her son still irked him. Toward midnight, while still fully dressed, Mazarin entered his final agony. He had reviewed his will, and as that document was the exact expression of his desires, and he feared someone with another agenda would take advantage of his weakness to get him to change it, he'd given it to Colbert, a most vigilant sentry who posted himself in the corridor outside the cardinal's bedroom. The king, confining himself to his room, sent his old governess every hour to Mazarin's suite for the latest report on the cardinal's health. After having heard that Mazarin had had himself dressed to receive the ambassadors, Louis next heard that they were beginning the prayers for the dying. At one o'clock in the morning Guénaud prepared a final potion, his Remedy Heroic. This was a prime example of a period that saw everything as swordplay, an old attitude that, though on its way out, still clung to belief in a "secret thrust" effective even against death. Mazarin, after taking this remedy, was able to breathe easily for almost ten minutes. Immediately he gave orders that the word should be spread of a sudden improvement. The king, at this news, felt cold sweat break out on his forehead; having glimpsed his liberty, slavery seemed darker and less acceptable than ever. But the next report completely changed the face of things: suddenly Mazarin scarcely breathed at all, and had trouble following the prayers that the Curate of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs recited before him. The king began to march back and forth in his chamber, consulting, as he walked, several papers taken from a bureau to which he alone had the key. A third time the governess returned: Sir de Mazarin was making jokes and had ordered the cleaning of his *Flora* by Titian. Finally, at about half past two in the morning, the king could no longer stand the strain – he hadn't slept for twenty-four hours. Sleep, so powerful at that age, took hold of him for about an hour. But he didn't go to bed, he slept in an armchair. Around four o'clock the governess entered the room and woke him up.

"Well?" the king asked.

"Well, my dear Sire!" said the governess, wringing her hands sadly. "Well! He is dead."

The king rose suddenly, as if a steel spring had brought him to his feet. "Dead!" he cried.

"Alas! Yes."

"For sure?"

"Yes."

"Officially?"

"Yes."

"Has the news been announced?"

"Not yet."

"Then, who told you the cardinal was dead?"

"Sir Colbert."

"Sir Colbert?"

"Yes."

"And he was sure of what he told you?"

"He'd just come from the bedchamber where he'd spent several minutes holding a mirror up to the cardinal's lips."

"Ah!" said the king. "And what has become of this Sir Colbert?"

"He's just left His Eminence's chamber."

"To go where?"

"To follow me."

"So, then he's...?"

"Here, Sire, waiting outside your door for when it pleases you to receive him."

Louis sprang to the door, opened it himself, and saw Colbert standing there and waiting. The king started at the sight of this statue all dressed in black. Colbert bowed with profound respect and took two steps toward His Majesty. Louis withdrew into his room, gesturing for Colbert to follow him. Colbert came in. Louis dismissed the governess, who closed the door behind her as she left. Colbert stood humbly near the door. "What have you come to tell me, Sir?" said Louis, troubled by this surprise intruder who seemed to divine his secret thoughts. "That the cardinal has just passed away, Sire, and that I bring you his final farewell."

The king paused thoughtfully for a moment, looking attentively at Colbert. It was apparent that the cardinal's last words were on his mind. "So, you're Sir Colbert?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire."

"His Eminence's loyal servant, as he described you to me?"

“Yes, Sire.”

“Guardian of some of his secrets?”

“Of all of them.”

“The friends and servants of His Late Eminence will be dear to me, Sir, and I’ll make sure that you find a place in my own service.”

Colbert bowed. “You’re a financial secretary, Sir, are you not?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“And Sir Cardinal employed you in his accounting?”

“I had that honour, Sire.”

“But you didn’t do anything for the royal budget, I believe.”

“On the contrary, Sire, it was I who gave Sir Cardinal an idea that saved Your Majesty’s treasury three hundred thousand livres a year.”

“What idea was that, Sir?” asked Louis XIV.

“Your Majesty is aware that the Hundred Swiss display silver lace on all their uniform ribbons?”

“Of course.”

“Well, Sire! I proposed that their ribbons be made with imitation silver. No one can tell the difference, and three hundred thousand livres can feed a regiment for half a year, or buy ten thousand good muskets, or build a ten-gun flute ready to sail.”

“That’s true,” said Louis XIV, looking more attentively at the character before him. “And, my faith, that’s a sensible savings, for it’s ridiculous to have soldiers wearing lace like they’re lords.”

“I’m happy that His Majesty approves,” said Colbert.

“And is that the only job you had with the cardinal?” asked the king.

“It was I whom His Eminence charged with examining the accounts of the Superintendent of Finances, Sire.”

“Ah!” said Louis XIV, who had been about to dismiss Colbert when he was stopped by these final words. “So, it was you His Eminence charged with auditing Sir Fouquet. And what was the result of this audit?”

“It found a deficit, Sire. If Your Majesty will permit me…?”

“Speak, Sir Colbert.”

“I ought to give Your Majesty some explanations.”

“No need, Sir; you audited the accounts, so tell me the balance.”

“Easily done, Sire. Empty everywhere, money nowhere.”

“Take care, Sir, you’re impugning the management of Sir Fouquet, whom everyone says is a capable man.”

Colbert flushed, then turned pale, for he felt that from this moment, he was at war with a man whose power was nearly as great as that of the late minister. “Indeed, Sire, a very capable man,” Colbert repeated with a bow.

“But if Sir Fouquet is a capable man who, despite his capability, lacks funds, whose fault is that?”

“I accuse no one, Sire, I just state the facts.”

“Very well; summarize your accounts and present them to me. There’s a deficit, you say? But a deficit can be temporary – credit comes back, the funds replenish.”

“No, Sire.”

“Not this year, perhaps, I understand that but next year?”

“Next year, Sire, is as exhausted as this year.”

“And the year after that?”

“The same.”

“What are you telling me, Sir Colbert?”

“That the next four years’ revenue is expended in advance.”

“We’ll need a loan, then.”

“We’ll need three, Sire.”

“I’ll create offices and sell them, and the price of the posts will be paid into the treasury.”

“Impossible, Sire, for post upon post has already been created and sold, most with their requirements left blank so that the purchasers need do nothing to fulfil them – which means Your Majesty can’t even force them to resign for noncompliance. Furthermore, Sir le Surintendant sold the posts at a one-third discount, so the people are further burdened, and Your Majesty doesn’t even profit from it.”

The king frowned. “Explain that to me, Sir Colbert.”

“If Your Majesty can formulate his question more clearly, I shall try to explain what he wishes to know.”

“You’re right – clarity is what we need.”

“Yes, Sire, clarity. God is God above all because he made the light.”

“Then, tell me, for example, if Sir Cardinal is dead,” asked Louis XIV, “now that I rule as king, what if I want some money?”

“Your Majesty has none.”

“How can that be, Sir? Can’t the superintendent find me any money?”

Colbert shook his heavy head. “Why?” said the king. “Are the State’s revenues so completely committed that there’s no income at all?”

“At this point, Sire, yes.”

The king frowned. “In that case, I’ll have the King’s Council draw up orders to sell off our notes at a low rate for quick liquidation.”

“Impossible, for the notes have been converted into mortgages and the mortgages have been leveraged, with the debts divided into so many parts and resold that the original note could never be reconstructed.”

Louis, upset, was walking back and forth, frowning. “But if it’s as you say, Sir Colbert,” he said, stopping suddenly, “wouldn’t I be ruined before I’ve even reigned?”

“That is, in fact, the case, Sire,” replied the impassive compiler of figures.

“But surely, Sir, there’s some money somewhere?”

“There is, Sire, and as a beginning, I bring Your Majesty an account of funds that Sir Cardinal de Mazarin wasn’t willing to list in his last will and testament, or in any testament at all but which he entrusted to me.”

“To you?”

“Yes, Sire, with instructions to deliver them to Your Majesty.”

“What? Money beyond the forty million in the will?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Sir de Mazarin had even more money?”

Colbert bowed. “What a bottomless pit that man was!” murmured the king. “Sir de Mazarin on the one hand, Sir Fouquet on the other, and maybe a hundred million between them! It’s no wonder my coffers are empty.”

Colbert just waited. “And is the sum you bring me worth the trouble?” asked the king.

“Yes, Sire, it’s a goodly sum.”

“Amounting to…?”

“Thirteen million livres, Sire.”

“Thirteen million!” cried Louis XIV, trembling with joy. “Did you say *thirteen million*, Sir Colbert?”

“I said thirteen million, yes, Your Majesty.”

“That nobody knows about?”

“That nobody knows about.”

“And which are in your hands?”

“In my hands, yes, Sire.”

“And when could I have it?”

“Within two hours.”

“But where is it, then?”

“In the cellar of a house that Sir Cardinal had in the city, and which he was good enough to leave to me in a particular clause in his will.”

“You’re familiar with the cardinal’s will?”

“I have a legal copy signed by his hand.”

“A copy?”

“Yes, Sire. Here it is.”

Colbert drew the will from his doublet and showed it to the king. Louis read the article relative to the gift of the house. “But,” he said, “This is only about the house, and doesn’t mention any money.”

“Your pardon, Sire but that part was confided to my conscience.”

“And Sir de Mazarin confided that to you?”

“Why not, Sire?”

“Him, the most suspicious of all men?”

“He wasn’t so with me, Sire, as Your Majesty can see.”

Louis paused to admire that face, vulgar but expressive. “You’re an honest man, Sir Colbert,” said the king.

“It’s not a virtue, Sire, it’s a duty,” replied Colbert coolly.

“But isn’t that money intended for his family?” asked Louis XIV.

“If that money were for his family, it would be listed in the cardinal’s will with the rest of his fortune. If that money was owed to the family, I, who drew up the deed of bequest in favour of His Majesty, would have added the sum of thirteen million to the forty million already offered to you.”

“What!” said Louis XIV. “It was you who drew up the bequest, Sir Colbert?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“And yet the cardinal trusted you?” added the king naïvely.

“I told His Eminence that Your Majesty would never accept it,” said Colbert in his usual tone, calm and rather solemn.

Louis wiped his hand across his brow. “Oh, how young I am,” he murmured under his breath, “to think I can command men!”

Colbert waited until the end of this interior dialogue and Louis lifted his head. “At what time should I bring the money to Your Majesty?” he asked.

“Tonight, at eleven o’clock. And I don’t want anyone to know that I have this money.”

Colbert made no reply, as if he preferred to talk as little as necessary about secrets.

“This sum, is it in ingots or in coins?”

“In gold coins, Sire.”

“Good.”

“Where shall I bring it?”

“To the Louvre. Thank you, Sir Colbert.”

Colbert bowed and left.

“Thirteen million!” whispered Louis XIV when he was alone. “It’s like a dream!”

He leaned his forehead into his hands, as if he were preparing to sleep. But after a moment he raised his head, shook his shining hair, rose, and throwing open the window, bathed his burning forehead in the brisk morning breeze that brought him the bitter scent of the trees and the sweet perfume of the flowers. A resplendent dawn was rising on the horizon, and the first rays of the sun gilded the young king’s brow. “This golden dawn is the first of my reign,” murmured Louis XIV. “Is this an omen that you send me, Almighty God?”

The 1<sup>st</sup> Day of the Reign of Louis XIV

That morning the news of the cardinal’s death spread throughout the château, and from the château to the city. The ministers Fouquet, Lyonne, and Le Tellier went to the King’s Council chamber for a meeting; the king, hearing of it, sent for them immediately. “Gentlemen,” he said, “while Sir Cardinal lived, I allowed him to govern my affairs but now I intend to govern them myself. You will give me your opinion when I ask you for it. Now go!”

The ministers looked at each other in surprise. If they managed not to openly smile it was with great effort, for they knew that the prince, raised in absolute ignorance of affairs, had taken on, out of pride, a burden far beyond his abilities. Fouquet took leave of his colleagues on the staircase, saying, “So much the less work for us, Gentlemen.”

And he went cheerfully to his carriage. The other two, rather anxious about this turn of events, returned together to Paris. The king, around ten o’clock, went to visit his mother, with whom he had a long conversation, and then, after the midday meal, he called for a closed carriage and went straight to the Louvre. There he received a great many people, taking a certain pleasure in their curiosity and hesitation. Toward evening, he ordered the gates of the Louvre to be closed, all but one that opened onto the river quay. He sent as sentries to this gate two of the Hundred Swiss who didn’t speak a word of French, with orders to admit all bearers of deliveries but no one else, and then to let no one leave. At eleven exactly he heard the rumbling of a heavy wagon outside the river gate, then another, and finally a third, and then the gate squealed on its hinges as it closed. Shortly thereafter someone scratched at the door to his study; the king opened it himself to find Colbert, whose first words were, “The money is in Your Majesty’s cellars.”

Louis then went down personally to see for himself the barrels of coins, gold, and silver, that, under the eye of Colbert, four men had just rolled down into a vault the key to which the king had given Colbert that morning. His inspection completed, the king returned to his rooms, followed by Colbert, whose chilly demeanour seemed not the least bit warmed by the satisfaction of this personal success.

“Sir,” said the king, “what would you desire as your reward for this devotion and integrity?”

“Absolutely nothing, Sire.”

“What, nothing? Not even the opportunity to serve me?”

“If Your Majesty doesn’t give me an opportunity, I will serve him nonetheless. It’s impossible for me not to serve the king as well as I’m able.”

“You will be my Intendant des Finances, Sir Colbert.”

“But isn’t there a superintendent, Sire?”

“Indeed.”

“Sire, the Surintendant des Finances is the most powerful man in the realm.”

“Oh?” exclaimed Louis, flushing. “Is that what you think?”

“I won’t last a week under him, Sire, unless Your Majesty gives me independent authority. An intendant under a superintendent has none.”

“You don’t think you could depend upon me?”

“As I had the honour to tell Your Majesty, while Sir Mazarin was alive, Sir Fouquet was the second man in the kingdom; now that Sir Mazarin is dead, he’s the first.”

“Sir, I’m willing to tolerate hearing you say such things to me today but tomorrow, believe me, I won’t put up with it.”

“Then I shall be of no use to Your Majesty?”

“You’re already useless, since you’re afraid to compromise yourself by serving me.”

“The only thing I fear is not having the *means* to serve.”

“What do you want, then?”

“I want Your Majesty to give me some assistants to serve in his intendency.”

“Won’t that diminish your position?”

“It will add to its security.”

“Name your colleagues.”

“Gentlemen Breteuil, Marin, and Harvard.”

“They’ll be in place tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Sire!”

“Is that all you need?”

“No, Sire, one thing more…”

“What’s that?”

“Allow me to empanel a Court of Justice.”

“A Court of Justice? To do what?”

“To try the corrupt tax-farmers and debt collectors who’ve been cheating the treasury for the past ten years.”

“But … what will we do to them?”

“We’ll hang two or three of them that will make the rest come clean.”

“But I can’t begin my reign with a spate of executions, Sir Colbert.”

“On the contrary, Sire, better to begin with a few executions than to end in mass upheaval.”

The king said nothing to him.

“Does Your Majesty agree?” said Colbert.

“I’ll think about it, Sir.”

“A delay to think about it will render it too late.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re dealing with men whose positions, given time to reinforce them, are stronger than ours.”

“Empanel your Court of Justice, Sir.”

“I shall do so.”

“Is that all?”

“No, Sire, there’s one more important thing. What authority does Your Majesty give to this intendency?”

“Well, I don’t know … the usual authority, I suppose.”

“Sire, I need this intendency to include the right to read any correspondence with England.”

“Impossible, Sir – that correspondence isn’t even shared with the King’s Council. Sir Cardinal handled it personally.”

“I thought Your Majesty had declared this morning that he would handle such affairs *without* the council.”

“Yes, I did declare that.”

“Then let Your Majesty himself be the only one to read such correspondence, particularly from England; I must emphasize the importance of this.”

“Sir, you shall handle that particular correspondence, and give me a full account of it.”

“Now, Sire, what shall I do regarding the finances?”

“Everything that Sir Fouquet doesn’t do.”

“Then that’s all I need from Your Majesty. Thank you: that puts my mind at ease.” And with these words, he took his leave. Louis watched him go. Colbert wasn’t a hundred paces from the Louvre when the king received a courier from England. After a quick look at the envelope the king opened it and found within a letter from King Charles II. Here’s what the English prince wrote to his royal brother:

*Your Majesty must be very anxious about the illness of Sir Cardinal Mazarin but this imminent danger must serve to inspire you, as the cardinal is given up for dead by his own physician. I thank you for your gracious reply to my communication regarding Lady Henrietta Stuart, my sister, and in a week the princess will leave for Paris with her court. It warms my heart to acknowledge the fraternal friendship which you’ve shown me, and which makes you all the more my brother. And it’s good, moreover, to prove to Your Majesty just how warm my feelings are. You are quietly fortifying Belle-Île-en Mer. This is a mistake; we will never make war on one another. This measure doesn’t upset me, it just makes me sad. You are spending millions there uselessly and can tell your ministers as much. As you can see, my intelligencers are well informed, and I hope, my brother, that you can render me a similar service if the chance arises.*

The king tugged violently on his bell pull, and his valet appeared. “Sir Colbert just left and can’t have gone far,” he cried. “Call him back!”

The valet was about to follow this order when the king stopped him. “No, never mind,” he said, and then continued to himself, “I see what Colbert was up to. Belle-Île belongs to Sir Fouquet, and fortification of it implicates Fouquet in conspiracy. Discovery of this conspiracy is the ruin of the superintendent, its discovery would be reported in correspondence from England, and that’s why Colbert wanted to handle that correspondence. But, oh! I can’t rely solely on this man – he’s a brain but I also need brawn.”

Louis paused, then gave a cry of satisfaction. He said to the valet, “Didn’t I have a Lieutenant of Musketeers?”

“Yes, Sire, Sir d’Artagnan.”

“Who recently left my service?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Find him for me, and make sure he’s here for tomorrow morning’s lever.”

The valet bowed and went out. “Thirteen million in my cellar,” the king said, “Colbert holding my purse and d’Artagnan wielding my sword: I’m king!”

A Passion

On the day of his arrival in Paris, upon returning from the Place Royal, Athos returned to his lodgings on Rue Saint-Honoré. There he found the Viscount of Bragelonne waiting for him in his rooms and chatting with Grimaud. It was no easy thing to converse with the old servant and only 2 men possessed the secret: Athos and d’Artagnan. The first succeeded because Grimaud wanted to get him to speak; d’Artagnan on the contrary because he knew how to make Grimaud talk. Raoul was trying to get the story of the journey to England out of Grimaud who had told it in all its detail by way of gestures and about eight words, more or less. He had first indicated by a sinuous wave of his hand that he and his master had gone across the sea. “On some mission?” Raoul had asked. Grimaud,



replied yes in bowing his head. "In which sir Count went into danger?" asked Raoul. Grimaud shrugged his shoulders slightly as if to say, not too much. "But still, there's danger!" insisted Raoul. Grimaud pointed to a sword, the fire, and a musket hanging on the wall. "Then sir Count had an enemy there?" cried Raoul.

"Monck," Grimaud replied.

"It's strange," continued Raoul, "that sir Count persists in regarding me as a novice, refusing to share with me the honour and danger of these missions." Grimaud smiled. At that moment Athos returned. The hotelier lit his way up the stairway and Grimaud ran to meet him that cut the conversation short recognising his master's footsteps but Raoul had begun asking questions and was not about to stop. Gripping the count's hands with tender respect, he said, "How's it, sir, that you can go on a dangerous mission without bidding me farewell, let alone asking me to aid you with my sword – me who'd be your main support while in the strength of my youth? Me whom you raised to act like a man? Ah, sir! Would you risk putting me through the cruel ordeal of never seeing you again?"

"Who told you, Raoul, that my journey was dangerous?" replied the count, placing his cloak and hat in the arms of Grimaud who had just removed his sword.

"Me," said Grimaud.

"And why is that?" asked Athos severely.

Grimaud was embarrassed; Raoul tried to come to his rescue by replying: "It's natural, sir, for our good Grimaud to tell me the truth when it concerns you. By whom you'll be loved and supported if not by me?" Athos made no reply. He dismissed Grimaud with a friendly gesture, then sat in an armchair while Raoul, still standing, hovered over him. "Besides," Raoul continued, "it's not just a journey, it's a mission ... one on which you're threatened by iron and fire."

"No need to speak of that, viscount," said Athos softly. "I left quickly, it's true but the service of King Charles II required an urgent departure. As for your concern, I thank you for it and I know I can count on you. Did you lack anything during my absence, viscount?"

"Nothing, sir, thank you."

"I'd ordered Blaisois to issue you a hundred pistoles if you needed money."

"Sir, I've not seen Blaisois."

"Did you run short of money then?"

"Sir, I'd thirty pistoles left from the sale of the horses I captured in my last campaign and sir Prince of Condé had the kindness to let me win two hundred more at his card table three months ago."

"You, gambling? I don't like that, Raoul."

"I never gamble, sir but in Chantilly, sir Prince had me hold his cards for him one night while he received a courier from the king. I played, won, and the prince told me to keep the winnings."

"Is that the custom in his household, Raoul?" said Athos, frowning.

"Yes, sir, every week sir Prince finds one excuse or another to let one of his gentlemen win some money. His Highness's fifty gentlemen and my turn came up."

"Very well! You went to Spain for the royal wedding?"

"Yes, sir, it's a lovely trip and very interesting."

"And you've been back for about a month?"

"Yes, sir."

"And during that month?"

"During the month?"

"Yes, what did you do?"

"My duty, sir."

"You've not gone home to La Fère?"

Raoul blushed. Athos gave his son a look direct but calm. "You'd be wrong not to believe me," said Raoul. "I blush because of my feelings despite myself. The question you do me the honour to ask me is bound to raise such emotions; I blush because I'm moved, not because I lie."

"I know, Raoul that you never lie."

"No, sir."

"Besides, my friend, you might be wrong about what I'm asking you..."

"I know what you mean, sir – you want to know if I've been to Blois."

"That's it."

"I didn't go; I've not seen the person you're alluding to."

Raoul's voice trembled as he said this. Athos, sensitive in delicate matters, immediately added, "Raoul, I see your feelings are wounded; you're suffering."

"A great deal, sir – since you forbade me to go to Blois and see Miss La Vallière again."

There the young man stopped; that sweet name so lovely to say, tore his heart as it passed over his lips. "And I did the right thing," said Athos hastily. "I'm not a cruel or unjust father, I respect true love but I foresee a particular future for you, a grand future. We're at the dawn of a new reign and war calls to the spirit of our chivalrous young king. What he needs to support this heroic ardour's a brigade of cavaliers who're young, free, can charge into battle, and fall crying, 'Long live the King!' rather than, 'Farewell, my wife!' You understand that, Raoul. As heartless as my reasoning may seem, I implore you to listen to me and turn your gaze away from your younger days when you lived for love, soft and carefree days that weaken the heart until it can't stand the strong drink we call glory and adversity. Raoul, I tell you again, see in my counsels only the desire to help you, nothing but the ambition to see you prosper. I believe you capable of becoming a remarkable man. March forward alone and you'll march faster and farther."

"You've commanded, sir," replied Raoul. "I obey."

"Commanded!" cried Athos. "Is that your response? I commanded you! Oh, you twist my words because you misunderstand my intentions. I don't command, I entreat."

"No, sir, you command," said Raoul stubbornly. "However you ask, your wish is to me a command. I'll not see Miss La Vallière again."

"But that wounds you! You're hurt!" said Athos. Raoul made no reply. "You're pale, distressed ... this feeling's strong then!"

"It's a passion," said Raoul.

"No – just a habit."

"Sir, you know that I've been travelling a great deal, spent two years away from her. A habit, why in two years that'd fade, I think ... but when I saw her again, I loved her not more, that's impossible but still and deeply. Miss La Vallière's for me the woman beyond all other women – but to me, you're a god upon earth. For you, I'd sacrifice everything."

"And that'd be wrong," said Athos. "I've no further rights over you. Age's emancipated you; you've no need of my consent. Besides, I'd not refuse it after what you've just told me. Marry Miss La Vallière if that's what you wish."

Raoul started but quickly said, "You're very kind, sir and your concession warms me with gratitude – but I can't accept it."

"What, now you refuse?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll oppose you in nothing, Raoul."

"But in your heart, you do oppose this marriage. You'd have me choose another."

"That's ... true."

"That's enough to forestall me. I'll wait."

"Take care, Raoul! What you're saying is serious."

"I'm aware of it, sir. And I say, I'll wait."

"What? Until I die?" said Athos, dismayed.

"Oh, sir!" cried Raoul, voice choking. "How can you tear my heart that way when I've never given you a single cause for complaint?"

"My dear boy, that's true," murmured Athos between his lips, trying to contain the emotion he could no longer suppress. "No, I don't want to hurt you, I just don't know what you expect. Do you think you'll fall out of love with her?"

"No, never that, sir. I'll wait ... until you change your mind."

"Then I'll put it to the test, Raoul – and we'll see if Miss La Vallière will wait as you do."

"I hope so, sir."

"But be warned, Raoul – she might not wait! Ah, you're so young, so confident, so loyal ... but women are changeable."

"You've never spoken ill of women to me before, sir. You've never had cause to complain of them – why'd you doubt Miss La Vallière?"

"That's true," said Athos, looking away. "I've never spoken ill of women, never had reason to complain. Miss La Vallière's done nothing to deserve suspicion – but when one looks to the future, one must consider exceptions, even improbabilities! What if as I said, Miss La Vallière doesn't wait for you?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"What if she turned her eyes elsewhere?"

"Onto another man, you mean?" said Raoul, suddenly pale.

"Just so."

"Well, sir! I'd kill that man," said Raoul simply, "and every other man Miss La Vallière chooses until one of them kills me or Miss La Vallière comes back to me."

Athos winced. "I thought you told me just now," he said, voice strained, "that I was your god, your law in this world?"

"Oh!" said Raoul, trembling. "Would you forbid me the right to duel?"

"What if I did forbid it, Raoul?"

"Then you'd forbid me to hope, sir. But you could not forbid me to die."

Athos raised his eyes and looked searchingly at the viscount. He had spoken these words in a dark tone and followed them with a darker look. "Enough," said Athos after a long silence. "This is a sad subject and we've carried it to extremes. Live life day by day, Raoul; do your duty, love Miss La Vallière – in short, act like a man since you've reached the age of manhood. But never forget that I love you dearly as you say you love me as well."

"Ah, sir Count!" said Raoul, pressing Athos's hand against his heart.

"My dear child. Leave me now, I need rest. By the way, sir d'Artagnan's returned with me from England and you owe him a visit."

"With all my heart, sir! I love sir d'Artagnan."

"And rightly so: he's an honest man and a brave cavalier."

"Whom you love!" said Raoul.

"I do indeed. Do you know where to find him?"

"At the Louvre, I expect or the Place Royal – wherever the king is. Doesn't he still command the King's Musketeers?"

"Not at the moment: sir d'Artagnan took a leave of absence ... for his kind of vacation. No, don't look for him at his old posts. You'll find news of him at the house of Planchet."

"His former lackey?"

"Who's become a grocer, yes?"

"Rue des Lombards, right?"

"Or Rue des Arcis, something like that."

"I'll find him, sir, I'll find him."

"And you'll give him a thousand compliments on my behalf and bring him to dine with me before I leave for La Fère."

"Yes, sir."

"Goodnight, Raoul!"

"Sir, I see you wear an order that's new to me. Accept my compliments."

"The Fleece? Ah, yes. A trifle, my son and the kind of bone they throw to an old dog like me. Goodnight, Raoul!"

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**The Lesson of D'Artagnan**

Raoul did not find d'Artagnan the next day as he had hoped. He encountered only Planchet who was delighted to see the young man again, and paid him 2 or 3 warlike compliments that did not sound like they had come from a grocer. However, the next day as Raoul was returning to Paris from Vincennes at the head of 50 dragoons entrusted to him by Sir Prince, he saw a man who was looking at a house the way a man looks at a horse he is considering buying with his head cocked to the side on the Place Baudoyer. This man, dressed in a bourgeois suit buttoned up like a military coat, wearing a modest citizen's hat but with a long shagreen-sheathed sword at his side, turned his head when he heard the horses and left off looking at the house to consider the dragoons. It was none other than Sir d'Artagnan but d'Artagnan on foot, hands behind his back, reviewing the dragoons as they passed as closely as he'd reviewed the houses. Not a trooper, not a button or ribbon, not a horse's hoof escaped his inspection. Raoul was riding at his column's flank, and d'Artagnan noticed him last. "Hey!" he called. "Eyes right!"

"Can it really be you?" said Raoul, turning his horse.

"No, you're not mistaken. *Good morning!*" replied the former musketeer.

Raoul leaned down to shake his old friend's hand. "Watch it, Raoul," d'Artagnan said, "the second horse in the fifth rank will be unshod before you reach Pont Marie; there are only two nails still holding it on in front."

"Wait for me," said Raoul, "I'll be right back."

"Can you leave your detachment?"

"My cornet can take over."

"Will you have dinner with me?"

"I sure will, Sir d'Artagnan."

"Then be quick, either leave your horse or get me one."

"I'd rather walk back with you."

Raoul hurried off to warn the cornet, who took his place in the vanguard, then he dismounted, gave his horse to one of the dragoons to lead, and ran happily back to take the arm of Sir d'Artagnan, who watched all this activity with the satisfaction of a connoisseur. "Have you come from Vincennes?" he said.

"Yes, Sir Knight."

"And Cardinal Mazarin...?"

"He's very sick; some even say he's died."

"Are you in good standing with Sir Fouquet?" asked d'Artagnan, showing how little moved he was by the death of Mazarin with a disdainful shrug.

"With Sir Fouquet?" said Raoul. "I don't know him."

"Too bad, because a new king likes to elevate his own favourites."

"Oh, the king has nothing against me!" replied the young man.

"I'm not talking about the man wearing the crown but the king," said d'Artagnan, "by which I mean Sir Fouquet, now that the cardinal is dead. You should get in good with Fouquet unless you want to model your life after mine ... though it's true that you have other protectors, fortunately."

"Sir Prince, for one."

"He's yesterday's news, my friend."

"Sir Count of La Fère."

"Athos? Oh, well, that's different. If you want to make your fortune in England, you can't do better. And I'll tell you, without boasting too much, that I too have a little credit at the Court of Charles II. Now there's a king and no mistake!"

"Oh?" said Raoul with the natural curiosity of a well-bred young man in the presence of courage and experience.

"Yes, a king who's a pleasure-seeker, it's true but who knows how to hold a sword, and appreciates those who know what that's good for. Athos stands well with Charles II. Take service with him and leave behind this crowd of tax-farmers and corrupt officials who steal with French fingers anything the Italian left behind. And leave that little cry-baby of a king who will give us another reign like that of François II. Have you studied history, Raoul?"

"Yes, Sir Knight."

"Then you know how François II always had an earache?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"And Charles IX always had a headache?"

"Oh?"

"And Henri III always had a stomach-ache?"

Raoul laughed. "Well, my friend, Louis XIV always has a heartache. It's a sad sight to see a king who sighs from morning till night, never once shouting: *Belly of the Grey Saint! Or Ox-horn!* Like a man of spirit."

"Is that why you left his service, Sir Knight?" asked Raoul.

"Yes."

"But then you yourself have burned your bridges, and now will never make *your* fortune."

"Oh, me!" said d'Artagnan lightly. "I'm all set. I've had a legacy from my family."

Raoul just stared at him. The poverty of d'Artagnan was proverbial; Gascon to the core, his ill fortune out-Gascon-ed every other Gascon in the Kingdom of France and Navarre. Raoul had always heard the name d'Artagnan paired with that of Job, as close as Romulus with Remus. D'Artagnan noticed this look of surprise. "Hmm. Did your father tell you I was with him in England?"

"Yes, Sir Knight."

"And that I had a lucky break there?"

"No, Sir, I don't know anything about that."

"Yes, a good friend was made a great lord, Viceroy of Scotland and Ireland, and he awarded me an estate."

"An estate?"

"Of a decent size."

"So, now you're rich?"

"Eh!" d'Artagnan shrugged.

"Accept my sincere congratulations."

"Thanks ... look, this is my house."

"Here on the Place de Grève?"

"Yes. Don't you like this neighbourhood?"

"No, I do – you have a great view of the water. What a handsome old house!"

"Home of Our Lady's Portrait, an old tavern that I've converted to a residence."

"But isn't the tavern still open?"

"Lord, yes!"

"So, you don't live there?"

"No, I live at Planchet's."

"But didn't you just say: *this is my house?*"

"I said that because it is my house. I bought it."

"Ah!" said Raoul.

"I bought it for thirty thousand *livres* but it'll earn me ten per cent a year, my dear Raoul – a fine return indeed! It has a garden on the Rue de la Mortellerie, the tavern rents the first two floors for a thousand a month, and the attic goes for five hundred."

"You're jesting!"

"Word of honour."

"An attic for five hundred livres? But it's too small to live in."

"So, no one lives in it. Only, you see that the attic has two windows overlooking the square?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well! Whenever there's a hanging, quartering, or breaking on the wheel, those two windows rent for twenty pistoles apiece."

"Oh!" said Raoul with horror.

"Revolted, isn't it?" said d'Artagnan.

"Oh!" repeated Raoul.

"It's disgusting but there it is. Parisian spectators can be real cannibals. I don't see how Christian men can make money from such a thing."

"Truly."

"As for me," continued d'Artagnan, "if I lived in that house, I'd shut it up tight on execution days – but I don't live there."

"But don't you rent out the attic for five hundred livres?"

"Only to that animal of an innkeeper, who then sublets it. Anyway, that's how it brings in fifteen hundred livres a month."

"Five per cent, the natural return on investment," said Raoul.

"Exactly. And I still have the storerooms at the back of the house, plus the cooling cellars that flood every winter, and the garden that is quite pretty, well planted and very private under the shadow of the walls and gate of the adjoining church, Saint Gervais and Saint Protais. The garden brings thirteen hundred livres. "

"Thirteen hundred livres! That's a princely sum."

"Here's the story: it rents to a canon of the church – these canons are all as rich as Croesus – whom I suspect employs the garden for private frolics. The tenant rents it under the name Sir Godard that is either a true name or a false one. If it's true, then there's our canon; if it's false, then who knows? And why should I care, since he always pays in advance? Now, when you came by, I was considering the idea of buying, on Place Baudoyer there, a house that adjoins my garden to make a handsome combined property. But your dragoons distracted me. Here, let's go up the Rue de la Vannerie, it'll

take us straight to Master Planchet's." D'Artagnan marched on and led Raoul to Planchet's, inside and up to a room that the grocer had ceded to his former master. Planchet was out but dinner was served and ready. There was in this grocer still a touch of military punctuality. D'Artagnan returned to the subject of Raoul's future. "Does your father keep you within strict limits?" he said.

"Mostly, Sir Knight."

"Yes, I imagine Athos's fair but rather strict."

"But generous as a king, Sir d'Artagnan."

"In that case, lad, your money must be tight indeed! But if you ever need a few extra pistoles, your old musketeer's here."

"Ah, dear Sir d'Artagnan..."

"Do you gamble at all?"

"Never."

"But you try your luck with women? ...Ah, you blush – you little Aramis, you! My friend, that'll cost you more than cards and dice. Though with gambling, we often fight when we lose and that's some compensation. Bah! That little cry-baby king makes winners give him a chance at revenge. What a reign, my poor Raoul, what a reign! To think that in our day we musketeers were often besieged in our houses like Hector and Priam in the city of Troy, then the women wept, we laughed, five hundred rabble beat their hands together, and cried: *Kill them!* But they daren't touch a musketeer. *God be with you!* You won't see days like that."

"You're very hard on the king, Sir d'Artagnan though you barely know him."

"I? Barely know him? Listen, Raoul, day by day, hour by hour – mark my words! – I can predict exactly what he'll do. Now that the cardinal's dead, he'll worry – which isn't the silliest thing he'd do, especially if he doesn't weep about it."

"And then?"

"Then he'll beg a salary from Sir Fouquet and go to Fontainebleau <sup>13</sup> where he'll compose verses to some Mancini or other, whom the young queen will terrorize. You see, she's Spanish, the new queen, like her mother-in-law Madam Anne of Austria. I know them, the Spaniards of the House of Austria."

"And then?"

"Then having clipped the silver ribbons from the Swiss Guard because they were too expensive he'll dismount the musketeers and put them on foot because hay for horses costs five *sous* apiece every day."

"Oh, don't say that!"

"What do I care? I'm not a musketeer, am I? Whether they're on horse or afoot, and armed with a sword, a larding pin, or nothing at all, what do I care?"

"Dear Sir d'Artagnan, I beg you, please don't speak any more ill of the king. I'm practically in his service, and my father would be upset with me for hearing, even from your mouth, anything that would offend His Majesty."

"Your father, eh? Yes, he's the knight errant for every lost cause. *By my troth!* Brave as a Caesar, of course but a man of poor judgement."

"Oh, fine!" said Raoul, laughing. "Now you'll even speak ill of my father, whom you call the great Athos! You're in a foul mood today, and I think wealth makes you as sour as poverty does to others."

"You're right, by God! I'm a cranky old coot in my dotage, a petulant old man. I'm a tent cord unravelled, a cuirass with a hole in it, a boot missing a heel and a spur without a rowel. But listen, just say one thing for me."

"What would that be, Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Just say, 'Mazarin was a peasant.'"

"But he's probably dead!"

"All the more reason! I did say was. If I didn't think he was dead, I'd have said, *Mazarin is a peasant*. Now come on, say it for my sake."

"All right, I suppose."

"Say it!"

"Mazarin was a peasant," said Raoul, smiling at the musketeer now as cheerful as in the old days.

"All right," said the latter, "that was my first proposition, and here's the conclusion. Repeat after me, Raoul: 'But I'm going to miss him.'"

"Knight!"

"You don't want to say it? Then I'll say it for you: but I'm going to Miss Mazarin."

They were still laughing at this recitation of propositions when one of the shop boys came in. "A letter, Sir," he said, "for Sir d'Artagnan."

"Thank you ... what!" cried the musketeer.

"The handwriting of Sir Count," said Raoul.

"Yes, it is." D'Artagnan tore it open. "*Dear friend*, says Athos, *I just received a request on behalf of the king to send for you ... Me?*" said d'Artagnan and he let the paper fall onto the table. Raoul picked it up and continued to read it aloud: "*Make haste. His Majesty wants to see you and awaits you at the Louvre.*"

"*Me?*" the musketeer repeated.

"Oh ho!" laughed Raoul.

"Oh, no," replied d'Artagnan. "What can this mean?"

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The King

His first moment of surprise passed, d'Artagnan read the note from Athos again. "It's strange for the king to summon me," he said.

"Why?" said Raoul. "Don't you think, Sir, that the king misses a servant like you?"

"Ho-ho!" laughed the officer though through his teeth. "You throw my words back at me, Master Raoul. If the king missed me, he'd never have let me go. No, no, I see something more here – or less, if you like."

"Or less! What then, Sir Knight?"

"You are young, you are confident and optimistic ... how I'd love to be that way again! To be twenty-four, your brain occupied by thoughts of nothing by women, love, and good prospects. Ah, Raoul! Wait until you've received kings' smiles and queens' secrets, until you've had two cardinals shot out from under you, one a tiger, the other a fox, wait until – but what's the point of this blather? We must part, Raoul!"

"How you say that! Why so solemn?"

"Eh, because the situation warrants it. Listen to me; this is important."

"I'm listening, Sir d'Artagnan."

"You must inform your father of my departure."

"Your departure?"

"By God, yes! You must tell him that I've gone to England to take up residence in my house there."

"You, go to England? But what about the king's orders?"

"Don't be so naïve. Do you imagine that I'm going to report to the Louvre and put myself in the power of that little crowned wolf-cub?"

"Wolf-cub! The king? Are you mad, Sir Knight?"

"On the contrary, I've never been so sane. Don't you know what he wants with me, this worthy son of Louis the Just? *God be with me*, this is politics – he wants me in the Bastille surely and simply."

"The Bastille? For what?" cried Raoul, suddenly terrified.

"For what I said to him on a certain day in Blois. I was angry, and he hasn't forgotten."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him he was selfish, cowardly, and a fool."

"Good God!" said Raoul. "Is it possible such words came out of your mouth?"

"Not those words exactly, perhaps but that was the gist of it."

"But the king would have had you arrested right then!"

"By who? I was the commander of the musketeers; I would have had to order myself to be taken to prison, and I would have resisted arresting myself. And then I was off to England, so no more d'Artagnan. But now the cardinal is dead, or as good as, and my return to Paris is known, so they put the grab on me."

"The cardinal protected you?"

"The cardinal knew me and knew what I was good for – and I knew him. We respected each other. But now before confiding his soul to the devil, he'll have advised Anne of Austria to have me safely put away. Go tell your father I've gone, and farewell!"

"No, Sir d'Artagnan," said Raoul with dismay, after glancing out the window. "You're going nowhere."

"Why is that?"

"Because there's an officer of the Swiss waiting for you below."

"So?"

"So, he'll arrest you!"

D'Artagnan burst out in Homeric laughter. "Oh, I know you'll resist him, you'll fight him, you'll even beat him – but then that's rebellion, and as an officer yourself, that's a line you can't cross."

"Devil child! You and your logic!" growled d'Artagnan.

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes. So instead of going down into the street where this simpleton is waiting for me, I'll duck out the back. I have a horse in the stable, a good one, too; I'll ride him to death, since I can afford to do that now, and by killing horse after horse, I can reach Boulogne in eleven hours. I certainly know the way ... just tell your father one thing."

"What's that?"

"That ... that a certain thing he knows about is hidden at Planchet's except for a fifth of it and that..."

"But, my dear Sir d'Artagnan, if you run, there'll be talk about you that you won't care for."

"Such as?"

"First of all, they'll say you were scared."

"Oh? Who will say that?"

"The king, for one."

"Well! That's no more than the truth. I am scared."

"Second, they'll say you must be guilty."

"Guilty of what?"

"Whatever crimes they accuse you of."

"Probably still true. So, you advise me to get thrown into the Bastille?"

"That's what the Count of La Fère would tell you."

"God's own truth!" said d'Artagnan, considering. "You're right, I won't run for it. But what if they do throw me in the Bastille?"

“Oh, we’ll get you out,” said Raoul with absolute confidence.

“God!” said d’Artagnan, gripping his hand. “I like the way you said that, Raoul – it’s pure Athos, through and through. All right, I’ll obey. Don’t forget my final words.”

“All but a fifth,” said Raoul.

“Indeed, you’re a fine lad, so let me add something to that.”

“Say it!”

“It’s that, if you don’t get me out of the Bastille and I die in there – oh, it could happen! I’d be a terrible prisoner, you know. Anyway, in that event, I leave three fifths to you and one fifth to your father.”

“Knight!”

“And if you want to pay to have some masses said for me, feel free. *God be with you!*”

That said, d’Artagnan put on his baldric, hung his sword from it, picked out a hat with a fresh feather, and extended his hand to Raoul who threw himself into his arms. On his way out through the store he glanced at the shop-boys, who were watching the scene with a mixture of pride and anxiety. Scooping up a handful of Corinthian raisins, he strolled out toward the officer who was waiting philosophically at the door of the shop. “That face! Can it be you, Herr Friedisch?” said the musketeer cheerfully. “So, now we arrest our friends?”

“Arrested!” whispered the shop-boys to each other.

“Ya, it’s me,” said the Swiss. “*God morning*, Sir d’Artagnan.”

“Should I give you my sword? I warn you, it’s long and heavy. Let me keep it till we get to the Louvre; I feel awkward walking the streets without a sword, and you’ll be even more awkward with two.”

“*The könig* said nothing about that,” replied the Swiss, “so taking it yourself.”

“Well, that’s very kind of the king. Let’s be on our way.”

Herr Friedisch wasn’t much of a talker, and d’Artagnan had too much to think about to chat. It wasn’t far from Planchet’s shop to the Louvre, and they were there within ten minutes. By then night had fallen. Friedisch wanted to go in the grand entryway but d’Artagnan said, “No, that’s the long way around; let’s take the King’s Little Stair.”

The Swiss did as he asked and escorted d’Artagnan up to the vestibule outside Louis XIV’s study. Once there, he saluted his prisoner and, without a word, left to return to his duty post. D’Artagnan scarcely had time to wonder why his sword hadn’t been taken from him when the study door opened and a *valet* announced, “Sir d’Artagnan!”

The musketeer marched in as if on parade, face calm but moustache bristling. The king was sitting at his desk and writing. He didn’t stop when the musketeer’s footsteps sounded on the parquet floor – did not even turn his head. D’Artagnan advanced to the middle of the room and then seeing that the king was paying no attention to him and realising that this was a pretence, a sort of cold preamble to the interrogation he was expecting, he turned his back on the prince and began to run his eyes over the frescoes lining the upper wall and the cracks above in the ceiling. This manoeuvre was accompanied by the following inner monologue: *So, you wish to humble me – me who served you since you’re an infant as if you’re my own child and saint himself – that is, for nothing. Just wait then and you’ll see how a man behaves who’s been under fire from the Huguenots and tugged on the beard of the cardinal – the true cardinal!*

Louis XIV turned at that moment. “Are you there, Sir D’Artagnan?” he said.

D’Artagnan imitated him and turned as well. “Yes, Sire,” he said.

“Good, wait a moment while I finish adding this up.”

D’Artagnan said nothing, only bowed. *That’s polite enough*, he thought. *I can hardly complain about that*. Louis underlined something with a violent stroke and then threw down his pen. *Go ahead, work yourself up into a fury*, thought the musketeer. *That just puts me more at ease. I didn’t fire off all my shot on that day in Blois, as you’ll find out*. Louis rose, drew a hand across his forehead, and then stepped forward to face d’Artagnan, giving him a look imperious yet benevolent. *What does he want with me?* The musketeer thought. *Come on, get it over with*.

“Sir,” said the king, “you’ve heard by now that the cardinal is dead?”

“Indeed, Sire.”

“And so, you know that I’m now the master in my house?”

“That’s not something that dates from the death of the cardinal, Sire; a man is master in his house whenever he decides to act like it.”

“Yes – but do you remember what you told me in Blois?”

*Now we come to it*, thought d’Artagnan. *I wasn’t wrong. Well, all the better! That shows my wits haven’t gone entirely astray*.

“You have nothing to say to me?” said Louis.

“Sire, I think I recall…”

“You only think so?”

“It’s been a while.”

“If you don’t remember, I certainly do. Here’s what you told me, so listen carefully.”

“I’m all ears, Sire, as this is a conversation I’m sure to find interesting.”

Louis paused to look again at the musketeer who stroked its feather with one hand, holding his hat in the other, and then turned up the ends of his moustache. Louis XIV continued, “You left my service after telling me what you thought, sir, did you not?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“That is, after giving me your opinion about my ways of thinking and acting. There’s merit in that. You started out by telling me that you’d been serving my family for thirty-four years, and you were tired.”

“I said that, yes, Sire.”

“And then you admitted that this exhaustion’s only a pretext and the real cause’s discontent.”

“I was discontented, it’s true – but this discontent’s never apparent as far as I know and if I spoke out before Your Majesty as a man of spirit, I never even thought those things in front of anyone else.”

“No need for excuses, d’Artagnan, just listen to what I have to say. After reproaching me with your discontent, I answered you with a promise – I said, ‘Wait.’ Isn’t that true?”

“Yes, Sire, as true as what I said.”

“And you replied to me, ‘Wait? No; right now, right away!’ Make no excuses, I tell you – it was natural. But you had no compassion for your prince, Sir d’Artagnan.”

“Sire! Compassion for a king from a poor soldier?”

“You know very well what I’m talking about; you knew I was in need of it. You understood that I wasn’t yet the master, my hope’s in the future. But you responded to me when I spoke of that future: *Give me my leave and right away!*”

D’Artagnan chewed on his moustache. “That’s true,” he murmured.

“You failed to serve me when I was in distress,” said Louis XIV.

“But,” said d’Artagnan, looking up with a certain nobility, “if I didn’t continue to serve Your Majesty, neither have I betrayed him. I’d shed my blood for nothing; I watched at the door like a dog, knowing I’d never be thrown a bone. But though I had nothing, I asked for nothing from Your Majesty but my leave.”

“I know you’re a good man but I was young and you spared me nothing. And what did you have to reproach your king for? Because he didn’t help Charles II? Or more to the point: because he didn’t marry Miss Mancini?”

And saying this, he fixed the musketeer with a penetrating look. *Ah!* The latter thought. *The devil! He does more than just remember, he guesses*.

“Your sentence fell on the king but also on the man,” continued Louis XIV. “But, Sir d’Artagnan, that weakness – you regarded it as a weakness, didn’t you?” D’Artagnan made no response. “You reproached me also in regard to the late cardinal but didn’t Sir Cardinal raise and support me? In the act raising and supporting himself, I’m well aware but still, I benefited from it. An ingrate or an egotist that would you have preferred me to be, to serve me?”

“Sire…”

“Don’t answer that, sir – it’d only cause you regret and further pain me.” D’Artagnan wasn’t convinced. The young king had not made his case by adopting a haughty tone with him. “Have you considered, then?” continued Louis XIV.

“About what, Sire?” asked d’Artagnan politely.

“About all that I’ve said to you, Sir.”

“Yes, Sire, certainly…”

“And you’re just waiting for the right moment before retracting your words?”

“Sire…”

“You hesitate, it seems to me.”

“I don’t understand quite what Your Majesty has the honour to tell me.”

Louis frowned.

“Pardon me, Sire but my mind is rather thick, and things penetrate into it only with difficulty … though it’s true that once they get in there, they stay.”

“Yes, you seem to have a good memory.”

“Almost as good as Your Majesty’s.”

“Then give me a quick summary, as my time is valuable. What have you been doing with your leave?”

“Raising my ransom, Sire.”

“A crude way to put it, Sir d’Artagnan.”

“Your Majesty may think so, certainly. I have nothing but respect for the king, and if I speak crudely, after a life spent in the camps and the barracks, His Majesty is too far above me to take offense at the blunt speech of a soldier.”

“In fact, I know that you pulled off a brilliant affair in England, Sir. I only regret that you broke your promise thereby.”

“Me?” cried d’Artagnan.

“No doubt about it. You pledged to serve no other prince once you left my service – but it was for King Charles II that you planned the amazing abduction of Sir Monck.”

“On the contrary, Sire, I did it for myself.”

“And did you succeed?”

“Like the mercenary captains of the fifteenth century, with a surprise attack.”

“What do you call success? A fortune?”

“A hundred thousand crowns, Sire, in my possession. It was, in one week, three times what I’d made in the previous fifty years.”

“A round sum indeed – but you’re ambitious, are you not?”

“Me, Sire? A quarter of that seems a treasure to me, and I swear I have no thought of increasing it.”

“Ah! You plain to remain idle?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Give up the sword?”

“I’ve already done it.”

“Impossible, Sir d’Artagnan,” Louis said firmly.

“But, Sire…”

“Well?”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t wish it!” said the young prince in a voice so grave, imperious that d’Artagnan started in surprise, and some anxiety.

"Will Your Majesty allow me a response?" he asked.

"Speak."

"I made my resolution when I was poor and destitute."

"Indeed. And after?"

"Now that I've acquired some wealth by my efforts, would Your Majesty take from me my freedom? Would Your Majesty condemn me to labour for what I've already earned?"

"Who gave you the right, Sir, to question my plans or define my purview?" replied Louis testily. "Who told you what I can do, and what you can do with yourself?"

"Sire," the musketeer said calmly, "it seems to me that frankness no longer orders our conversation, as it did on the day we cleared the air in Blois."

"No, Sir; everything is changed."

"I offer Your Majesty my sincere congratulations but..."

"But you don't believe it?"

"I'm not great statesman but I keep my eye on affairs, Sire, and I can't say I see things as Your Majesty does. The reign of Mazarin is over but that of the financiers now begins. They have all the money, and Your Majesty won't see much of it. To live under the jaws of these hungry wolves will be hard for a man who'd hoped for independence."

Just then someone scratched at the study door and the king raised his head proudly. "Excuse me, Sir d'Artagnan," he said, "but Sir Colbert's come to make his report. Come in, Sir Colbert."

D'Artagnan stepped back into a corner. Colbert entered, papers in his hand, and approached the king. It goes without saying that the Gascon didn't lose the opportunity to give this newcomer a close inspection. "Is the inquiry complete?" the king asked Colbert.

"Yes, Sire."

"And the conclusion of the magistrates?"

"Is that the accused merit confiscation and death?"

"Ah," said the king impassively but with a glance at d'Artagnan. "And your opinion, Sir Colbert?" the king asked.

Colbert looked at d'Artagnan in his turn. That intimidating figure froze the words on his lips. Louis XIV understood. "Don't worry," he said, "this is Sir d'Artagnan; surely you recognise Sir d'Artagnan?"

The two men regarded each other for a moment, d'Artagnan's bold eye open and almost challenging, Colbert's eyes half-closed, his expression veiled. The frank bravura of the first nettled the second, while the calculating caution of the financier irritated the soldier. "Ah!" said Colbert. "Sir is he who achieved that brilliant coup in England."

And he bowed slightly to d'Artagnan. "Ah!" said the Gascon. "Sir is he who trimmed the silver from the ribbons of the Swiss – a brilliant exploit of thrift!"

And he bowed deeply. The financier had thought to put the musketeer in his place but the musketeer had upstaged the financier. "Sir d'Artagnan," said the king who had not caught all the nuances of the exchange, none of which would have escaped Mazarin. "The accused are corrupt tax-farmers who have robbed me, have been caught, and whom I will sentence to death."

D'Artagnan started. "Oh!" he said.

"You have something to say?"

"Nothing, Sire; this is no business of mine."

The king was already holding the pen and applying it to the paper. "Sir," said Colbert in a low voice, "I must warn Your Majesty that these executions will be troublesome though an example's necessary."

"Explain," said Louis XIV.

"It must be taken into account," Colbert continued calmly, "that to accuse these traitors is to accuse the Office of the Superintendent. These two culprits in particular are friends of a powerful personage and the hanging of such, when they'd usually just serve a brief and comfortable confinement in the Châtelet, is bound to cause trouble."

Louis flushed and turned to d'Artagnan who gnawed lightly at his moustache and with a smile of pity for the financier but also for the king who had to listen to him. Then Louis seized the pen and affixed his signature to the bottoms of the 2 papers with a rapid movement of his trembling hand, presented them to Colbert, and then said, looking him in the face, "Sir Colbert, when you speak to me of affairs, leave out any mention of mere trouble – and as for the word *impossible*, never use it."

Colbert bowed, hurt and humiliated at have been given a lesson in front of the musketeer. He turned to leave but then, eager to repair his mistake, he said, "I forgot to announce to Your Majesty that the confiscations come to five million livres."

*That's not bad*, thought d'Artagnan.

"Which makes my total assets...?" asked the king.

"Eighteen million livres, Sire," replied Colbert with a bow.

"*God be with you!*" d'Artagnan grunted. "That's lovely!"

"Sir Colbert," added the king, "on your way out, please cross the gallery where Sir Lyonne is waiting and ask him to bring me the document I ordered him to draw up."

"Right away, Sire. Has Your Majesty any further need of me this evening?"

"No, Sir; farewell!"

"Let's return to our business, Sir d'Artagnan," said Louis XIV, as if nothing had happened. "You see that, as for money, the situation is considerably changed."

"From zero to eighteen million," replied the musketeer cheerily. "Ah, that's what Your Majesty would have needed on the day Charles II came to Blois. The two states wouldn't be at odds today, for I must say that there I see a stumbling block."

"In that I think you're unjust, Sir," Louis replied, "for if Providence had allowed me to give my brother a million on that day, you wouldn't have left my service and made your fortune, as you just explained. But there's more good news to relate, as my relations with England are in no state to worry you."

The valet entered, interrupting the king, to announce Sir de Lyonne. "Come in, Sir," said the king. "You're punctual – I like that in a servant. Let me see the letter to my brother Charles II." D'Artagnan pricked up his ears. "One moment, Sir," Louis said nonchalantly to the Gascon. "I must send to London my consent to the marriage of my brother Philippe, Sir Duke of Orléans with Lady Henrietta Stuart, sister of King Charles."

"He certainly is knocking me about," murmured d'Artagnan, while the king signed the letter and dismissed Sir de Lyonne, "but, my faith, the more he knocks me about this way, the better I like it."

The king followed Sir de Lyonne with his eyes until the door was shut behind him; he even took three steps as if to follow his minister but stopped, paused, and returned to the musketeer. "Now, Sir," he said, "let's wrap this up. You told me that day in Blois that you're not wealthy?"

"I am now, Sire."

"Yes but that doesn't concern me – that's money you earned on your account, not mine."

"I don't really understand what Your Majesty is trying to tell me."

"All right, since you mean to drag the words out of me, answer this then: will you take twenty thousand livres a year in cash as your salary?"

"But, sire..." said d'Artagnan, eyes widening.

"Add in four horses furnished and maintained, plus repayment of all expenses as they arise – or would you rather have forty thousand without expenses? Tell me."

"Sire ... Your Majesty..."

"Yes, you're surprised, that's natural, and I expected it – but answer me or I'll think you no longer have the quick wits I've always appreciated in you."

"Sire, twenty thousand livres a year is a fair salary, a fine sum but..."

"No *but's*. Yes or no: is this an honourable offer?"

"Oh, certainly..."

"Then you're satisfied! Well and good. You'd really be better off reckoning the expenses separately but you can arrange all that with Colbert. Now, let's move on to more important matters."

"But sire, I told Your Majesty..."

"That you want to rest, I'm well aware of it. But I told you that's not what I want. I'm the master here, aren't I?"

"Yes, Sire."

"All right, then. Now you're on your way to becoming Captain of the Musketeers?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Well! Here's your signed promotion. I'll just put it in this drawer. The day you return from a certain mission I'll entrust to you, you can take this promotion out yourself." D'Artagnan looked down, hesitating. "Come, Sir," said the king, "am I to think you don't know that the Captain-Lieutenant of Musketeers outranks all the Marshals of France at the Court of the Most Religious King?"

"I know it, Sire."

"Then, am I to take it that you don't trust my word?"

"Oh, Sire, never that!"

"I wanted to prove to you that you, a good servant, had lost a good master. Am I, now, more like the master you required?"

"I begin to think so, Sire."

"Then, Sir, you will resume your duties. Your company has declined since you left, the men swaggering about and fighting in the taverns, despite my edicts and those of my father. You will restore discipline to the company as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sire."

"You will not leave me again."

"Fine."

"You will march with me when the army marches, and camp beside my tent."

"Well, Sire," said d'Artagnan, "if all you want from me is that kind of service, there's no point in paying me twenty thousand livres a year; I'll scarcely earn it."

"I wish you to maintain a proper household; I wish you to entertain at your table; I want my Captain of Musketeers to be person of consequence."

"And I don't like found money," said d'Artagnan abruptly. "I prefer to earn it! Your Majesty offers me an idle living that any officer you choose would perform for four thousand livres. "

"Ever the Gascon, Sir d'Artagnan. Of course, there's more to it than that, and I see I must reveal my secret."

"What! Your Majesty has a secret?"

"Yes, Sir."

"That's different! In that case, I accept the twenty thousand, for I can keep a secret, and discretion is priceless. Would Your Majesty care to share it now?"

"Grab your boots, Sir d'Artagnan, and saddle your horse."

"Right now?"

"Within two days."

"That's as well, Sire, because I have affairs to settle before I depart, especially if the matter might come to blows."

"It very well might."

"I can handle that. But, Sire, you've addressed pay, and promotion, and you've spoken to d'Artagnan's heart but there's one thing you forgot."

"What's that?"

"You didn't address my vanity; when will I be a knight of a royal order?"

"That matters to you?"

"Well, yes. My friend Athos is encrusted with orders, and I'm envious."

"You'll be knighted at my command one month after your promotion to captain."

"Ah!" said the officer thoughtfully. "After the mission."

"Exactly."

"Where is Your Majesty sending me then?"

"Do you know Brittany?"

"No, Sire."

"Any friends there?"

"In Brittany? Faith, no!"

"All the better. Are you familiar with fortifications?"

D'Artagnan smiled. "You could say that, Sire."

"That is, you can tell a full fortress from a mere fortified château, such as we allow to our vassals?"

"I would no more mistake a fort for a rampart than I would confuse a cuirass with a pie crust. Will that do, Sire?"

"Yes, Sir. Then that's where you'll go."

"To Brittany?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Completely alone. In this case, you can't even take a lackey."

"May I ask Your Majesty why?"

"Because, Sir, you may find it useful to assume the guise of a servant of a noble house. Your face is well known in France, Sir d'Artagnan."

"And then, Sire?"

"And then you will travel through Brittany and carefully examine the region's fortifications."

"Along the coast?"

"And the isles."

"Ah!"

"You will begin with Belle-Île-en-Mer."

"Meaning with Sir Fouquet?" said d'Artagnan in a serious tone and giving Louis XIV a significant look.

"I believe you're right, Sir – Belle-Île does, in fact, belong to Sir Fouquet."

"Then Your Majesty wishes me to determine if Belle-Île is being fortified?"

"Yes."

"If the fortifications are new or old?"

"Precisely."

"And if by chance the superintendent's retainers are numerous enough to form a garrison?"

"That's exactly what I wish, Sir – you've put your finger on it."

"And if it isn't being fortified, Sire?"

"You will travel around Brittany, keeping your eyes and ears open."

D'Artagnan twisted his moustache. "So, I'm a king's spy," he said slowly.

"No, Sir."

"Pardon but it seems so, Sire, since I'm spying on behalf of Your Majesty."

"This is a scouting mission, Sir. Would you lead your musketeers, sword in hand, toward an unknown enemy's position?"

At these last words d'Artagnan flinched imperceptibly. "Do you still think you're a spy?" continued the king.

"No," said d'Artagnan thoughtfully, "the nature of it changes when we're scouting an enemy; then we're just acting the soldier. And if Belle-Île is being fortified?" he quickly added.

"You will acquire an exact plan of the fortifications."

"Will I be able to get in?"

"That's not my affair, that's your business. Didn't you hear me offer you an extra twenty thousand livres a year if you want it?"

"All right, Sire. But what if no fortification is under way?"

"You'll come home quietly with a well-rested horse."

"Sire, I'm ready."

"You start tomorrow by going to the superintendent's estate to call for the first quarter of the salary I'm paying you. Do you know Sir Fouquet?"

"Not well, Sire but I should say to Your Majesty that it doesn't seem important that I meet him."

"Not so, Sir, because he'll refuse you the money I want you to demand, and that refusal is what I'm waiting for."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "And afterwards, Sire?"

"Once your salary is refused, you'll go and get it from Sir Colbert. By the way, do you have a good horse?"

"An excellent one, Sire."

"How much did you pay for it?"

"One hundred fifty pistoles."

"I'll buy it from you. Here are two hundred pistoles. "

"But I'll need a horse to travel, Sire."

"Well?"

"Well! You just bought mine from me."

"Not at all – on the contrary, I give it to you. Only now that he's mine rather than yours, I'm sure you won't spare him."

"Your Majesty is in haste?"

"Great haste."

"Why should I wait two days then?"

"Two reasons that concern me."

"That's different. The horse can make up the two days in the first week and there's the post after that."

"No, using the post is too obvious, Sir d'Artagnan. Go, keep a low profile, and remember you belong to me."

"Sire, I've never forgotten it! At what time, the day after tomorrow, shall I take my leave of Your Majesty?"

"Where are you living?"

"Henceforth I live at the Louvre."

"Not at the moment. Keep your lodging in town and I'll pay for it. As for your departure, it should be at night, since you must leave unseen by anyone – or if seen, without anyone knowing you're travelling for me. Keep silent, Sir."

"Your Majesty spoils everything that's been said by giving such an order."

"I must ask where you're staying, because I can't always send for you through the Count of La Fère."

"I'm staying with Sir Planchet, grocer, Rue des Lombards, under the sign of the Golden Pestle."

"Go out very little, show yourself less, and wait for my orders."

"Yet I must go out some, Sire."

"That's true but only to the superintendent's; where so many others go, you can lose yourself among the crowd."

"I'll need a note to draw the salary, Sire."

"Here it is."

The king signed it. D'Artagnan looked it over to make sure it was in order. "That's real money," he said, "or at least the paper for it."

"Farewell, Sir d'Artagnan," the king added. "I think you understand me now?"

"I understand that Your Majesty sends me to Belle-Île-en-Mer, that's all."

"To find out?"

"To find out what Sir Fouquet is building – that's all."

"Good. What if you're captured?"

"I admit no such possibility," replied the Gascon boldly.

"What if you're killed?"

"Not likely, Sire."

"In the first case, say nothing; in the second case, make sure you have nothing written down."

D'Artagnan shrugged and took his leave of the king without ceremony, saying to himself, "The English rain continues! Let's stay under the downspout."

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The Houses of Sir Fouquet

As d'Artagnan was returning to Planchet's house, his head bursting with recent events and new responsibilities, a scene of another sort was taking place, though it wasn't all that different from the conversation between the musketeer and the king. But this scene took place outside Paris in a house owned by Superintendent Fouquet in the village of Saint-Mandé. The minister had just arrived at this country house followed by his first clerk, who carried an enormous portfolio full of papers, some to examine and others to sign. As it was about five o'clock in the evening, the masters had already dined, and supper was being prepared for twenty lesser guests. The superintendent didn't pause upon alighting from his carriage; he hastened in through the front door, crossed the antechambers and reached his office, where he declared he was shutting himself in to work and no one was to disturb him for anything less than an order from the king. After giving this command, Fouquet closed the door behind him, and two footmen took their places as sentries at his door. Inside, Fouquet threw a bolt that slid a panel across the entry that prevented anything that took place in his office from being seen or heard. Surprisingly, Fouquet then began to follow through on his announcement, for he went straight to his desk, sat down, opened the portfolio, and began to sort through the enormous stack of papers it contained. After taking these precautions not to be disturbed, he'd been at work no more than ten minutes when he heard repeated knocks, equally spaced that seemed to attract his attention. Fouquet raised his head, cocked his ear, and listened. The knocking continued. Then the minister arose with a slight gesture of impatience and walked straight to a mirror from which the knocking emanated whether by hand or unseen mechanism. It was a tall mirror set in a wall panel. 3 other identical mirrors were placed symmetrically around the office walls. Nothing distinguished this one from the others but doubtless the taps from behind it were a signal and as Fouquet approached it, listening, the sound of evenly spaced rapping resumed. "Oh ho!" murmured the superintendent in surprise. "Who can be there? I was expecting no one today." Then apparently in response to the signal, the superintendent pulled thrice and released a golden knob on the mirror's mounting. Then he returned to his desk, sat back down, and said, "Faith, let them wait." And plunging himself back into the ocean of paper stacked in waves before him, he seemed to think of nothing but work. In fact,



with incredible rapidity and marvellous clarity, Fouquet reviewed the longest reports, correcting and annotating them with pen flying, and, carried away as if by a fever, the work melted away before him, signatures, calculations, and notations made as if ten clerks at once, with a hundred fingers and ten brains, were doing the work instead of a single man. The only pause was when, from time to time, Fouquet looked up from his work to glance at a clock placed on the desk before him. The reason for this was that Fouquet had set himself the task of one hour's work, setting out to accomplish in that time what another would finish in an entire day. And so long as he wasn't disturbed, he felt confident of achieving that goal. But in the midst of this furious work, the regular taps from behind the mirror came again, more hurried this time, and therefore sounding more urgent. "Come, it seems the lady is impatient," said Fouquet. "Calmly now, let's see: it must be the countess. But no, the countess is at Rambouillet for three days. Madam President then. Ah but the President wouldn't presume to be so insistent, she'd knock humbly and then await my good pleasure. I don't know *who* it can be – but I know who it *can't* be, and since it isn't the marquise, devil take the others!" And he continued his work, despite the repeated calls of the knocker. However, impatience conquered Fouquet at last after another quarter of an hour. He raced through the remainder of his work, stuffed the papers back in the portfolio, and glaring at the mirror, whence the rapping came more urgently than ever, he said, "Oh! What's the source of this passion? What's happened and who's the Ariadne tugging so impatiently at that thread? Let's find out." And he pushed with the tip of his finger on a knob parallel to the one he'd pulled earlier. Immediately the mirror pivoted like a door, opening to reveal a deep closet into which the superintendent disappeared, as if into a magic box. Inside, he pushed another knob that opened, not a wooden panel but a slab of the wall, and he passed through this new doorway, leaving it to close itself behind him. Fouquet then descended about twenty steps down a spiral staircase, where below surface level he found a long underground passage, the way lit by hidden vents. The walls were faced with stone slabs and the floor was carpeted. This subterranean corridor passed under the street that separated Fouquet's house from the Park of Vincennes. At the end of the passage was a staircase matching the one by which Fouquet had descended. He climbed the second staircase, pressed a knob to open a door into a closet similar to the one in his office, and from this closet emerged into a room that was deserted, though furnished with great elegance. Once inside the room he examined its mirror door to make sure that it showed no trace of its function when closed, and then, seemingly satisfied, he unlocked, with a small vermeil key, the triple locks of a door in the opposite wall. This time the door opened onto a lovely and sumptuously furnished room in which sat on a cushioned chair a woman of supreme beauty who rose and ran toward Fouquet at the sound of his entry. "My God!" cried the latter, recoiling in astonishment. "Madam Marquise of Bellière, you – here!"

"Yes," murmured the marquise, "yes, it's me, Sir."

"Marquise, dear Marquise," said Fouquet, almost falling at her feet. "Ah! *My God!* But how did you come here? And I, I made you wait!"

"For a long time, Sir, oh! A very long time."

"I'm happy to think such a wait seemed long to you, Marquise!"

"An eternity, Sir. I rang more than twenty times – didn't you hear?"

"Marquise, you are pale, you're trembling."

"Didn't you hear me calling you?"

"Yes, I heard you, Madam but I couldn't come. And how could I imagine that it was you, after your harshness and refusals? If I'd been able to suspect the happiness that awaited me, believe me,

Marquise, I would have left everything to fall at your knees, as I do at this moment."

The marquise looked around her. "Are we alone, Sir?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, Madam! I can answer for that."

"Really?" said the marquise sadly.

"You sigh? But why?"

"All these mysteries, all these precautions," said the marquise with some bitterness. "As if you were afraid of anyone suspecting your *loves*."

"Would you prefer their being conducted in public?"

"Oh, no – not for a man of such delicacy," said the marquise with a smile.

"Come, come, Marquise, no reproaches, I beg of you!"

"Reproaches! Do I have a right to make any?"

"No, unfortunately for me. But tell me, you who for a year I've loved without return and without hope..."

"You're mistaken: without hope, it's true but not without return."

"Ah but for me, with love, there's only one proof, and I still await it."

"I've come to bring it to you, Sir."

Fouquet tried to take the marquise in his arms but she disengaged herself with a gesture. "Will you always make that mistake and refuse to accept from me the only thing I can give you: my devotion, sir?"

"Ah, then you don't love me – for devotion is only a virtue, while love is a passion."

"Listen to me, Sir, I beg you, for I wouldn't have come here without a serious reason, as I'm sure you know."

"I don't care what the reason is so long as you're here, so long as I see you and talk with you."

"Yes, you're right, the important thing is that I'm here, where no one can see me, and where I can talk with you."

Fouquet fell on his knees before her. "Speak, speak, Madam," he said. "I listen!"

The marquise looked at Fouquet there on his knees, and in her expression there was a strange mixture of love and melancholy. "Oh!" she murmured at last. "If I could be the one who had the right to see you every minute, to speak with you whenever I wanted! How I wish I was the one to watch over you, that I didn't need to tug on wires to summon you and conjure up, like a sylph, the man she loves, though only for an hour before he disappears back into the shadows, a mystery even stranger when he leaves than when he came. Oh, she must be a very happy woman."

"Are you speaking, by chance, of my wife, Marquise?" said Fouquet with a smile.

"Yes, I speak of her."

"Well! Don't envy her, Marquise; of all the women with whom I have relations, Madam Fouquet is the one who sees me the least, speaks with me the least, and is the least in my confidence."

"At least, Sir, she's not reduced, as I am, to pulling a knob on a mirror to call for you; at least you don't reply to her summons by that awful clanging that comes from I know not where; at least you haven't forbidden her to seek the secret of those communications upon pain of never seeing you again, as you've forbidden those who came before me and will come here after me."

"Ah, you're unjust, dear Marquise, and mistaken in complaining about mystery when it's by mystery alone that one can love without trouble, and only by love without trouble can one be genuinely happy. But let's return to you, Marquise, to this devotion of which you spoke while trying to deceive me that devotion is actually love."

"A moment ago," replied the marquise, passing over her eyes a hand that modelled the perfect contours of antiquity, "I was ready to speak with clarity and boldness but now I'm confused, troubled, and trembling, afraid to bring you bad news."

"If it's bad news that brought you to me, Marquise, then that news, however bad, is welcome – but instead, since you're here, since you admit you're not completely indifferent to me, set aside the bad news and speak only of yourself."

"No, no, on the contrary, ask it of me, demand it immediately, so I won't be distracted by sentiment. Fouquet, my friend, it's of immense importance."

"You astound me, Marquise – more than that, you make me almost afraid, seeing you so serious, so preoccupied, you who understand so well the world in which we live. It's serious then?"

"Oh, very serious! Listen."

"But first, how did you come here?"

"I'll tell you later; first, to business."

"Speak, Marquise! Pardon my impatience, I beg."

"You know that Sir Colbert has been appointed a financial intendant?"

"Bah! Colbert, the little Colbert?"

"Yes, the little Colbert."

"The factotum of Sir de Mazarin?"

"Exactly."

"Well! What do you see frightening in that, dear Marquise? Little Colbert an intendant, that's surprising, I admit but it isn't terrible."

"Do you think that the king has given that man whom you call a little pen-pusher, such a position without an urgent reason?"

"First, is it really true the king gave him that appointment?"

"So they say."

"So who says?"

"Everyone."

"Everyone, that's the same as no one. Name me someone well informed who says it."

"Madam Vanel."

"Ah! Now you do begin to frighten me," said Fouquet with a smile. "If anyone is well informed, or ought to be, it's she."

"Don't speak ill of poor Marguerite, Sir Fouquet, not when she still loves you."

"Bah! Really? Unbelievable. I thought that little Colbert, as you called him, had trodden all over that love and covered it with his own tracks."

"Fouquet, Fouquet, is that how you are toward those you've given up?"

"Come, are you going to take the side of Madam Vanel, Marquise?"

"Yes, I am, because as I repeat, she still loves you – and the proof is she wants to save you."

"Through you, Marquise that is clever of her. No guardian angel could be more appealing to me and lead me more surely to salvation. But tell me, how do you know Marguerite?"

"We were at convent together."

"And you say she's the one who told you Sir Colbert had been appointed an intendant?"

"Yes."

"Well! Enlighten me, marquise: here is Sir Colbert, made an intendant; in what way can an intendant, in other words one of my subordinates, my clerk if you'll – how'd he be a threat to me even if he *is* Sir Colbert?"

"It seems to me you're overlooking something, Sir," replied the marquise.

"What?"

"This: that Sir Colbert hates you."

"Hates me!" cried Fouquet. "My God, Marquise, where have you been keeping yourself? Everyone hates me – he's just one of the many."

"This one more than the others."

"That's as may be."

"He is ambitious."

"Who isn't, Marquise?"

"Yes but his ambition knows no limits."

"So we see, since he tried to follow me with Madam Vanel."

"And he succeeded, so take care."

"Do you think he presumes to advance from intendant to superintendent?"

"Don't you already fear that?"

"Ho-ho!" laughed Fouquet. "To succeed me with Madam Vanel is all very well but to win favour with the king is another thing. France is not won over so easily as an accountant's wife."

"Everything has its price, Sir – if not in gold, then in power."

"You are evidence to the contrary, Madam – you, to whom I've offered millions."

"I don't need your millions, Fouquet, I need love, true and absolute – that I would have accepted. You see, everything *can* be bought, if not by one thing, then by another."

"So, Sir Colbert, as you see it, is bargaining to take my place as superintendent? Come, Marquise, don't be concerned, he's not nearly rich enough to buy that position."

"But what if, instead, he steals it?"

"Ah! That's another thing entirely. Unfortunately for him, before he can reach me in my central keep, he has to breach all the outer defences – and I'm devilishly well-fortified, Marquise."

"And what you call the outer defences are your retainers, aren't they? Your friends?"

"Exactly."

"And is Sir d'Emerys one of your retainers?"

"Yes."

"And is Sir Lyodot one of your friends?"

"Certainly."

"Sir de Vanin?"

"Oh, they can do what they like with Sir Vanin but..."

"But...?"

"But they'd better not touch the others."

"Well! If you don't want anyone to touch Gentlemen d'Emerys and Lyodot, you'd better stand to arms."

"Who's threatening them?"

"Will you listen to me now?"

"Intently, Marquise."

"Without interruption?"

"Speak."

"Well! This morning, Marguerite sent for me."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"And what did she want?"

"I dare not go to Sir Fouquet myself," she said to me."

"Bah! Why? Did she think I'd reproach her? Poor woman, she's wrong, God knows."

"You go to him and tell him to beware of Sir Colbert."

"What, she wants to warn me about her own lover?"

"I told you she still loves you."

"And then, Marquise?"

"Sir Colbert," she added, 'visited me two hours ago to inform me he'd been made an intendant."

"I've already told you, Marquise, that Sir Colbert is no threat to me as my subordinate."

"Yes but that's not all: Marguerite is friends, as you know, with Madam d'Emerys and Madam Lyodot."

"Yes."

"Well! Sir Colbert asked her a lot of probing questions about those two gentlemen, and their degree of devotion to you."

"Oh, I'd answer for those two absolutely. You'd have to kill them to separate them from me."

"Then Madam Vanel was obliged to receive a visitor, leaving Sir Colbert for a few minutes, and since Colbert never wastes a moment, the new intendant took out a pencil and began making some notes on a pad on the table."

"Notes about d'Emerys and Lyodot?"

"Exactly."

"I'd be curious to know what those notes said."

"That's just what I've come to bring you."

"Madam Vanel got hold of Colbert's notes and sent them through you?"

"No but by a lucky chance that feels like a miracle, she got a copy of those notes."

"How?"

"Listen. I told you that Colbert had found a writing pad on the table?"

"Yes."

"And that he'd taken a pencil from his pocket?"

"Yes."

"And used it to write on the paper?"

"Yes."

"Well! This was a hard pencil, of graphite, and when it wrote on the top sheet it made an impression on the one below, an invisible imprint in white."

"And then?"

"Colbert, in tearing off the first sheet, didn't think about the second."

"Well?"

"Well! On the second, with care one could read what had been written on the first. Madam Vanel read it and then sent for me."

"Ah!"

"Then, after making sure I was devoted to your interests, she gave me the paper and explained to me the secret of this house."

"And this paper?" said Fouquet, anxious despite himself.

"Here it is, Sir; read it," said the marquise.

Fouquet continued: "*The first two to death, the third to be dismissed, with Gentlemen d'Hautemont and de La Valette whose property will only be confiscated.* Good God!" cried Fouquet. "To death – to death, Lyodot and d'Emerys! ... But even if the Court of Justice condemns them to death, the king would never authorise their condemnation and they couldn't be executed without the king's signature."

"But the king appointed Sir Colbert an intendant."

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, as if he suddenly saw an abyss opening beneath his feet. "Impossible! Impossible! But who has rubbed pencil lead across Sir Colbert's impressions?"

"Me. I was afraid the first line would fade."

"Now, I must know everything."

"You will learn nothing, Sir, as long as you continue to despise your enemy as you do."

"Pardon me, dear Marquise, excuse me. Yes, Sir Colbert is my enemy, I believe that now. Yes, Sir Colbert is a man to fear, I admit it. But ... but I still have time and since you're here, assure me of your devotion, show me your love, and we're alone..."

"I came here to save you, Sir Fouquet, not to lose myself," said the marquise, rising. "So, take care."

"Marquise, really, you're too frightened by this, unless your fright is just a pretext..."

"He's brilliant, this Sir Colbert, and very deep! Take care..."

Fouquet arose as well. "And I?" he asked.

"Oh, you! You have only a noble heart. Take care. Take care!"

"So, now?"

"Now, my friend, I've done what I had to do, at the risk of losing my reputation. Farewell!"

"Not farewell but *au revoir!*"

"Perhaps," said the marquise. And giving Fouquet her hand to kiss, she marched so resolutely toward the door that Fouquet didn't dare to bar her passage. As for Fouquet, he returned, head bowed and forehead clouded, through his underground passage along which ran the copper wires that communicated from one house to the other, transmitting, on either side of the matching mirrors, the calls and responses of the unseen correspondents.

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Abbot Fouquet

Fouquet hurried home by the subterranean passage and triggered the spring to swing open the mirror. He was scarcely back in his office when he heard a knock at the door and a familiar voice called out, "Open up, My Lord, I beg you, open up."

Fouquet quickly restored some order to his desk so nothing would indicate his brief absence. He spread out some papers, took up a pen, and to gain a little time, said loudly, "Who's there?"

"What! My Lord doesn't recognise me?" the voice replied.

"Of course, I know you, my friend," Fouquet said to himself. Then aloud: "Isn't that Gourville?"

"*But yes*, my Lord."

Fouquet rose, glanced at himself in one of the mirrors, went to the door, slid the bolt open, and Gourville came in. "Ah, My Lord!" he said. "What cruelty!"

"Why?"

"I've spent a quarter of an hour begging you to open, and you never even answered me."

"Once and for all, you know quite well that I don't want to be disturbed when I'm working. Now, you may be an exception, Gourville but I want everyone else to respect that rule."

"My Lord, at this moment orders, doors, locks, and walls mean nothing to me, I'd smash them all."

"Oh? So, this is important?" asked Fouquet.

"I should say so, My Lord!" said Gourville.

"Tell me what's happened," said Fouquet, moved by the distress of Gourville, his closest confidant.

"There's a secret Court of Justice, My Lord."

"I know about that; but has it convened, Gourville?"

"It's not only convened, it's passed a sentence, My Lord."

"A sentence!" said the superintendent with a shudder and pallor he couldn't hide. "Against whom?"

"Against two of your friends."

"Lyodot and d'Emerys, isn't it?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"But sentenced to what?"

"Sentenced to death."

"Condemned! Oh but you must be mistaken, Gourville, it's impossible."

"Here's a copy of the sentence that the king is to sign today, if he hasn't already."

Fouquet grabbed the paper, read it, and returned it to Gourville. "The king will never sign it," he said.

Gourville shook his head. "Don't fool yourself, My Lord; that Sir Colbert is a bold official."

"Sir Colbert again!" cried Fouquet. "*That!* Why does his name keep tormenting my ears? He's too trivial a man, Gourville, to drive an affair of this weight. Let Sir Colbert appear, and I'll face him; let him raise his head, and I'll crush him; but you understand that I must have a light to see him by, and a platform upon which to stand."

"Steady, my Lord, you underestimate this Colbert. Watch out, for this grim financier's like one of those meteors that one barely glimpses before it strikes from above; by the time we see it coming, it's too late."

"Oh, Gourville, that's too much!" said Fouquet, smiling. "Pardon me, my friend, if I decline to panic. Sir Colbert, a meteor! *God!* We'll see him coming. Show me his words and deeds; what's he done?"

"He's ordered two gallows from the Paris Executioner," Gourville said simply.

Fouquet raised his head and his eyes flashed. "Are you sure about this?" he said.

"Here's the proof, my Lord."

And Gourville handed the superintendent a note copied by one of the secretaries at the Hôtel de Ville who was in Fouquet's pay. "Yes, it's true," murmured the minister. "The scaffold's ordered ... but the king's not signed, Gourville, and the king won't sign."

"We'll know that soon enough," said Gourville.

"How so?"

"If the king has signed the condemnations, the gallows will be delivered to the Hôtel de Ville tonight so they can be erected in the morning."

"But no, no!" Fouquet said, still in denial. "You're all wrong, and I'd be a fool to believe it. Lyodot came to see me just yesterday morning, and three days ago I received a cargo of Syracuse juice from our good d'Emerys."

"What does that prove?" Gourville replied. "Other than that the Court of Justice met secretly, deliberated in the absence of the accused, and then had them arrested."

"So, they've been arrested?"

"Indeed."

"But when and how were they arrested?"

"Lyodot, yesterday at dawn; d'Emerys, in the evening of the day before, when he was returning from his mistress's house. No one noticed their disappearance until Colbert lifted the mask and had it publicized; it's being shouted now in every street in Paris, and truly, My Lord, there's hardly anyone but you who hasn't heard it."

Fouquet circled the room, pacing ever more anxiously. "What have you decided, My Lord?" said Gourville.

"If this is so, I should go to the king," said Fouquet. "But on the way to the Louvre, I'll stop at the Hôtel de Ville. If the orders have been signed, we'll find out there!"

Gourville shrugged. "Incredulity!" he said. "It's the plague of all great minds."

"Gourville! Really!"

"Yes," he continued. "Too slow to believe, then the truth's upon you and it's all over in an instant."

"Let's go," said Fouquet. "On our way, Gourville."

"Not so fast," said the latter. "Abbot Fouquet\* is outside."

"My brother's here?" replied Fouquet with some chagrin. "He's come to bring me more bad news as usual? *Devil!* If my brother has come, things are bad indeed. You'd have told me sooner, I'd have been more easily persuaded."

"My Lord slanders him," said Gourville, laughing. "If he's come, it's not with bad intent."

"Are you his apologist?" said Fouquet. "For a man without a heart, a head without ideas, and a belly that's never full?"

"He just knows you have money."

"And would spend it all if he could. He'd happily ruin me."

"No, he only wants to fill his own purse."

"A hundred thousand crowns a month for the past two years! Enough, already! *God!* That's what I pay, Gourville, and I know my own accounts."

Gourville laughed behind his hand. "Yes, I know what you mean – it's the king who pays, not the superintendent. But that's an ugly joke, Gourville, and this isn't the time for it."

"Don't be angry, my Lord."

"No? Then send Abbot Fouquet away, I don't have a sou to spare. He's left me alone for a month – why couldn't he leave me be for another?"

Gourville moved toward the door. "Perhaps he's tired of bad company," he said, "and prefers you to his bandits."

"When he needs to pay them! It's strange, Gourville, to hear you act as advocate for Abbot Fouquet."

"Eh, all things and all men have their good side, My Lord – that is, their useful side."

"The bandits who feed and drink at the abbot's trough are useful? I'd like to see some proof."

"When the time comes, My Lord, you'll be glad to have these bandits at hand."

"Then, you advise me to stay on the abbot's good side?" said Fouquet ironically.

"I advise you, My Lord, not to turn away a hundred or so ruffians who would make a cordon of steel that could surround three thousand men if they put their rapiers end to end."

Fouquet looked thoughtfully at Gourville for a moment, and said, "You're right, Gourville." Then he opened the door and said to the footman, "Invite in Abbot Fouquet."

2 minutes later, the abbot appeared in the doorway with a deep bow. He was a man aged 40 to 45, half man of the Church, half man of the sword, a swashbuckling abbot; when he was not wearing a rapier, it was because his belt held pistols. Fouquet saluted him more as an older brother than as a churchman, and said, "What can I do for you, Sir Abbot?"

"Oh! How coldly you greet me, *my brother!*"

"I greet you like a man in a hurry, Sir."

The abbot looked suspiciously at Gourville, anxiously at Fouquet, and said, "I must pay three hundred pistoles to Sir de Brégy tonight – a gambling debt, a debt of honour."

"What else?" said Fouquet brusquely for he knew Abbot Fouquet would not have disturbed him just for that.

"A thousand to my butcher who's cut me off."

"And?"

"Twelve hundred to my tailor," continued the abbot. "The clown's withholding seven of my men's outfits that is compromising my livery and my mistress is threatening to replace me with a tax-farmer that would be a humiliation for the Church."

"And beyond that?"

"You will notice, Sir," said the abbot humbly, "that I've asked for nothing for myself."

"It's a hard thing to do," replied Fouquet, "so I'll wait until you're ready, Sir."

"And though I've asked for nothing, I assure you, it's not for lack of need."

The minister looked thoughtful for a moment. "Twelve hundred pistoles to the tailor," he said. "Rather a lot of clothing, it seems to me."

"I maintain a hundred men!" said the abbot proudly. "That costs money, you know."

"A hundred men? Why?" said Fouquet. "Are you a Richelieu or a Mazarin who needs a hundred guards? What do these hundred men do for you? Tell me."

"Are you serious?" cried Abbot Fouquet. "How can you ask why I keep a hundred men?"

"I want to know. What do you need with a hundred men? Explain!"

"Ingrate!" said the abbot indignantly.

"What do you mean?"

"For myself, Sir Surintendant, I need only a single valet but you, who have so many enemies ... why, not even a hundred men are enough to defend you! One hundred men? It would take ten thousand! I maintain these men so that in public places and in gatherings no one raises a voice against you; without that, Sir, you would be publicly insulted, even torn to pieces. You wouldn't last a week, not a single week, do you hear me?"

"Ah! I didn't know you were such a champion of mine, Sir Abbot."

"You doubt it!" cried the abbot. "Listen to the latest, then. Just yesterday, in the Rue de la Huchette, a man was bargaining for a chicken."

"Was he? And how did that hurt me, Abbot?"

"Like this: the chicken was scrawny. The buyer refused to pay eighteen sous for it, saying he'd not pay that much for the skin of chicken from which Sir Fouquet had already robbed the flesh and fat."

"And so?"

"This remark was greeted with laughter," continued the abbot, "laughter at your expense by the rabble, death of all the devils! The joker continued, 'Give me a chicken fed by Sir Colbert, if you please, and I'll pay whatever you like.' And he was applauded! What a frightful scandal! It was the kind of thing that makes a brother want to hide his face."

Fouquet coloured. "And you hid it?" said the superintendent.

"I did not," continued the abbot, "because I had one of my men in the crowd – a new recruit from the provinces, a Sir de Menneville <sup>25</sup> whom I love. He burst through the crowd and said to the joker, 'You rogue, here's a thrust for Colbert, by thunder!' And here's one for Fouquet," the joker replied. And they both drew steel in front of the poultry shop, with a mob of the curious around them and five hundred more watching from the windows."

"Well?" said Fouquet.

"Well, Sir! My Menneville skewered the joker, to the amazement of the audience, and said to the poultry vendor, *Take this turkey, my friend – he's fatter than your chicken*. And that's, sir," finished the abbot triumphantly, "how I spend my income: to sustain the family honour!"

Fouquet looked down.

"And I have a hundred more like that," the abbot concluded.

"Very well," said Fouquet. "Give your bills to Gourville and await me here this evening."

"We'll sup together?"

"We shall."

"But isn't the treasury closed?"

"Gourville will open it for you. *Au revoir*, Sir Abbot."

The abbot bowed. “Then we’re still friends?” he said.  
“Yes, we’re friends. Come, Gourville.”  
“You’re leaving? You won’t be eating with us?”  
“I should be back in an hour, don’t worry.” Then, in a whisper to Gourville: “Have them harness the team of English horses,” he said, “and we’ll head for the Hôtel de Ville in Paris.”

320  
Juice for Sir de La Fontaine

The carriages bringing Fouquet’s guests to Saint-Mandé were already arriving, and the whole house was warming up with supper preparations, when the superintendent took the road to Paris behind his swift horses, following the river quays to avoid the street traffic on the way to the Hôtel de Ville. When he arrived, it was a quarter to eight; Fouquet got out at the corner of the Rue du Long-Pont and went into the Place de Grève on foot with Gourville. At the entrance to the square they saw a man dressed in black and violet with a dignified air just preparing to enter a coach, telling the driver to take the road to Vincennes. He had loaded before him a huge basket of bottles he’d just bought at the Our Lady’s Portrait cabaret. “Hey! That’s Vatel, my steward,” said Fouquet to Gourville.

“Yes, My Lord,” replied the latter.  
“What’s he doing at Our Lady’s Portrait?”  
“Buying juice, it looks like.”

“What, buying juice for me at a cabaret?” said Fouquet. “Is my cellar reduced to that?”  
And he approached his steward as the man was arranging the juice in his coach with great care. “*Hello!* Vatel!” he said in a voice of authority. “Take care, my lord,” said Gourville, “you’ll attract attention.”  
“Fine, what do I care? Vatel!”

The man dressed in black and purple turned around. He had a mild and preoccupied expression, like a mathematician without the professorial pride. Vatel often looked like a child or absent-minded man; his eye twinkled a bit and a smile played around his lips but an observer might notice that this sparkle and smile were personal rather than reflections of his surroundings. At the sound of the voice he turned to look. “Oh! Is it you, my Lord?”  
“Yes, me. What the devil are you up to, Vatel? Juice? You’re buying juice at a cabaret in the Place de Grève? You might as well shop at the Pomme-de-Pin or the Barreaux Verts.”  
“But, My Lord,” said Vatel calmly after shooting a hostile glance at Gourville, “why do you question me? Is my cellar not well maintained?”  
“Yes, of course, Vatel but...”  
“But what?” replied Vatel.

Gourville nudged the superintendent’s arm. “Don’t be upset, Vatel, I just thought my cellar – your cellar – sufficiently well stocked that we wouldn’t need to buy from Our Lady’s Portrait.”  
“Because, Sir,” said Vatel, dropping from *my Lord* to *Sir* with a certain disdain, “your cellar was stocked such that when some of your guests came to dine with you, they found nothing to drink.”  
Fouquet, surprised, looked at Gourville and then back at Vatel. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that your sommelier doesn’t stock juice for all tastes, sir, and Sir de La Fontaine, Sir Pellisson, and Sir Conrar find nothing to drink at your house. Those gentlemen don’t care for fine juices so what is to be done?”  
“What, then?”

“I lay in a supply of this Joigny juice they like. I know they come every week to drink at Our Lady’s Portrait, so it’s there I make my purchase.”  
Fouquet had nothing to say to this. He was impressed. Vatel, however, had plenty more to say, and it was clear he was just warming up. “You might as well reproach me, my Lord, for also going to Rue Planche-Mibray to bring back the cider that Sir Loret drinks when he dines at your house.”  
“Loret drinks cider at my house?” said Fouquet, laughing.

“Why, yes, sir! That’s why he dines there with such pleasure.”  
“Vatel,” cried Fouquet, shaking his steward’s hand, “you’re quite a man! And I thank you for recognising that at my house Gentlemen de La Fontaine, Conrart, and Loret are as important as dukes, peers, and princes, even more so than myself. Vatel, you’re a fine servant, and I’m doubling your salary.”  
Vatel didn’t thank him, he just shrugged slightly and replied with this haughty sentiment: “To be thanked for doing one’s duty is a humiliation.”

“He’s right,” said Gourville and then drew Fouquet’s attention to another matter with a gesture. He was indicating a low tumbriI drawn by cart horses bearing a pair of gallows, lashed together and guarded by a bored archer who sat on the end of the beams while ignoring, as much as he could, the comments of a hundred onlookers as they remarked on their destination near the Hôtel de Ville. Fouquet shuddered. “It’s decided, as you see,” said Gourville.

“But it isn’t done yet,” replied Fouquet.  
“Don’t deceive yourself with false hopes, my Lord – if they’ve gone this far, there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“I’ve not approved this.”  
“Sir de Lyonne has approved it for you.”  
“I’m going to the Louvre.”  
“You’ll do no such thing.”  
“What you advise is cowardice!” cried Fouquet. “You advise me to abandon my friends, to throw down my arms and surrender!”  
“I advise nothing of the sort, My Lord. Think: can you afford to resign the post of superintendent right now?”  
“...No.”  
“Well! If the king plans to replace you...”  
“Then he’ll replace me.”  
“Certainly, if you choose to insult him.”  
“Yes but at least I won’t have been a coward. I don’t want my friends to die, and they’ll not die.”  
“And for that, you must go to the Louvre?”  
“Gourville!”

“Take care. Once you go to the Louvre, you’ll have to defend your friends’ actions and support everything they’ve done, or else abandon them.”  
“Never!”  
“Forgive me but the king will either frame it in those terms or force you to do so.”  
“...That’s true.”  
“Which is why you need to avoid an open breach. Return to Saint-Mandé, my Lord.”  
“Gourville, I’m not buding from this spot where the crime will be committed, to my eternal shame – I’m not moving, I say, until I find a way to combat my enemies.”  
“My Lord,” replied Gourville, “I’d sympathize if I didn’t know you have one of the world’s sharpest minds and control a hundred and fifty million into the bargain. You’re equal to the king in position, and a hundred and fifty million times greater than him in funds. Sir Colbert didn’t even have the sense to have the king accept Mazarin’s bequest. Now, if you’re the richest man in the kingdom but refuse to spend your money, you might as well be poor. I say, let’s go back to Saint-Mandé.”  
“To consult with Pellisson? Yes.”  
“No, My Lord, to consult with your money.”  
“Let’s go, then,” said Fouquet, his eyes stinging. “Yes! Back to Saint-Mandé!”

He returned to his carriage, followed by Gourville. On their way out of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine they passed Vatel’s little coach, packed with its Joigny juice. Fouquet’s black horses, given their head, thundered by at full speed, causing the steward’s coach horse to shy, and the steward to shout in alarm, “Careful of my bottles!”

321  
The Gallery of Saint-Mandé

50 guests awaited the superintendent. He didn’t even take a moment with his valet to spruce up, he went straight into the main salon. There his friends were gathered and chatting. The staff was preparing to serve supper, while Abbot Fouquet was watching for the return of his brother and trying to maintain the honour of his house in his absence. The superintendent arrived to a general murmur of joy and welcome. Fouquet, the epitome of affability, good humour, and generosity was beloved by his poets, artists, and men of affairs. His face, from which his little court read, as if from a god, the climate of his soul, and governed their behaviour thereby – his brow that business never troubled, was paler that evening than usual, and more than one eye noticed his pallor. Fouquet took his place at the head of the table and cheerfully presided over supper. He described Vatel’s expedition to La Fontaine. He recounted the story of Menneville and the scrawny chicken to Pellisson so the entire table could hear. The guests erupted in a storm of laughter and mockery that was only quelled by a grave and sombre gesture from Pellisson. Abbot Fouquet, unsure why his brother had made that the subject of conversation, listened carefully and studied the faces of Gourville and the superintendent but found no explanation. Pellisson took the matter up. “So, now we’re talking about Sir Colbert?” he said.

“Why not?” replied Fouquet. “Especially if it’s true, as they say, that the king has made him his intendant.”  
Fouquet said the word with a marked emphasis, and his guests instantly exploded with outrage. “That miser!” said one.  
“That peasant!” said another.

“That hypocrite!” said a third.  
Pellisson exchanged a significant glance with Fouquet. “Gentlemen, really,” he said, “we’re libelling a man we scarcely know. It’s uncharitable, it’s unseemly, and as you can see from Sir Surintendant, I’m sure he agrees.”  
“Completely,” replied Fouquet. “Pay no mind to Sir Colbert’s fat chickens when tonight we have before us Sir Vatel’s pheasants with truffle.”  
These words lifted the dark mood that had descended on the guests. Gourville plied the poets with the Joigny juice while the abbot, attentive as a man is who’s always short of funds, entertained the financiers and the military men, succeeding so well that, in the happy flow of conversation, their common anxiety was completely forgotten. The last will and testament of Cardinal Mazarin was the subject of discussion during the latter courses and dessert, and then Fouquet ordered the platters of sweets and decanters of liqueur carried into the salon next to the grand gallery. He led the way after them, taking the hand of a lady he’d selected as his queen of the evening. Then the guests began their promenades along the gallery as the violins played and out into the gardens under the soft and fragrant spring sky. Pellisson approached the superintendent and said to him, “My Lord’s troubled?”

“Deeply,” replied the minister. “Ask Gourville about it.”  
Pellisson turning, found La Fontaine hard on his heels and had to listen to a Latin verse the poet had composed about Vatel. La Fontaine had spent the last hour in the corner refining this poem and now sought a proper audience for it. He thought he’d found it in Pellisson but the essayist evaded him. He settled on Loret, who in his turn had just composed a quatrain in honour of the supper and its host, whom he dubbed Amphitryon. La Fontaine tried to recite his verse but Loret insisted on declaiming his quatrain. La Fontaine turned and fixed his sights upon the Count of Charost but just then Fouquet took the count by the arm. Abbot Fouquet saw that the poet, oblivious as usual, was going to pursue the pair, and intercepted him. La Fontaine immediately seized upon him and began reciting his verse. The abbot, who knew no Latin, just nodded his head in time to La Fontaine’s delivery, following the rhythm of the poet’s dactyls and spondees. Meanwhile, behind the pastry table, Fouquet recounted the day’s events to his son-in-law, Sir Charost. “We can’t talk seriously here,” said Pellisson to Gourville. “We should send all those not of the inner circle out to watch the fireworks.”  
“I’ll take care of it,” said Gourville, who went and said a few words to Vatel. Shortly thereafter they saw the latter leading the ladies, social butterflies, and gossipers outside. Meanwhile in the gallery, lit by three hundred wax candles and in full view of everyone in the garden, the key men talked while the frivolous enjoyed the fireworks. Gourville approached Fouquet and said to him, “Sir, everyone’s here.”  
“Everyone?” said Fouquet.

“Yes; see for yourself.”

The superintendent looked along the gallery and counted eight persons. Pellisson and Gourville walked arm in arm conversing about trivial matters. Loret and two officers passed them, similarly engaged. Abbot Fouquet stood alone. Fouquet with Sir Charost, continued strolling as if absorbed in conversation with his son-in-law. “Gentlemen,” he said aloud, “don’t turn your heads; keep walking and don’t seem to pay me any attention but listen.”

A perfect silence fell, disturbed only by the distant voices of the happy guests as they moved about the gardens to find better spots from which to view the fireworks. Inside was the strange spectacle of men walking back and forth in groups as if occupied with each other but actually listening to only one of their number who spoke as if only to his companion, “Gentlemen,” said Fouquet, “you’ve probably noticed that two of our friends are missing, two who were with us only last Wednesday ... for God’s sake, Abbot, don’t stop and look around, just listen. Walk as nonchalantly as you can to the window, where, with your excellent vision, if you see anyone approaching the gallery, you can warn us by coughing.”

The abbot obeyed. “I haven’t noticed anyone missing,” said Pellisson though his back was turned to Fouquet and he was walking in the opposite direction.

Loret said, “I don’t see Sir Lyodot, who pays me my salary.”

“And I don’t see my friend d’Emerys,” said the abbot from the window, “who owes me eleven hundred livres from our last card game.”

“Loret,” said Fouquet, sombrely and with head bowed, “you’ll never again be paid your salary by Lyodot; and you, Abbot, will never get your eleven hundred livres from d’Emerys – for both are doomed to die.”

“To die?” everyone cried, pausing their play-acting despite themselves at the sound of the terrible word.

“Control yourselves, Gentlemen,” said Fouquet, “for we may be spied upon. But yes: to die.”

“To die!” repeated Pellisson. “Those men whom I saw within the last week, full of health, happiness, and plans for the future! Dear God, what is a man, that disease should carry him away so suddenly?”

“They die of no disease,” said Fouquet.

“Then, there must be a cure,” said Loret.

“No cure. Gentlemen Lyodot and d’Emerys are in the evening of their final day.”

“What are these gentlemen dying of, then?” cried an officer.

“Ask that of he who kills them,” replied Fouquet.

“Who kills them? Who is killing them?” the chorus cried in fright.

“Or even better, ask what? For they are to be hanged!” said Fouquet in a hollow voice that sounded like a death knell in that luxurious gallery, glittering with gold, candles, flowers, and embroidery.

Everyone stopped involuntarily, and the abbot left his window, as the first rockets of the fireworks rose above the treetops. The cries from the gardens seemed to draw the superintendent to the sight. He approached a window and his friends gathered behind him, attentive to every word and gesture. “Gentlemen,” he said, “Sir Colbert has arrested, tried, and sentenced to death two of my friends; what’ll I do?”

“God!” said the abbot. “We must have Colbert’s guts out.”

“My Lord,” said Pellisson, “you must speak to His Majesty.”

“The king, my dear Pellisson, has signed the order of execution.”

“Well!” said the Count de Charost. “This execution must be prevented, that’s all.”

“Impossible,” said Gourville. “...unless we could bribe the jailers.”

“Or the prison warden,” said Fouquet.

“This very night, so the prisoners can escape.”

“Which of you will take charge of this matter?”

“I’ll carry the cash,” said the abbot.

“I’ll handle the negotiation,” said Pellisson.

“Words and money,” nodded Fouquet. “Five hundred thousand livres to the Governor of the Conciergerie ought to be enough but we’ll go a million if we have to.”

“A million!” cried the abbot. “For far less than that, I’d sack half of Paris.”

“No sacking, no disorder,” said Pellisson. “We buy off the governor, the prisoners escape, and once out of the arms of the law, they rally Colbert’s enemies and prove to this young king that this reckless judgement was a mistake.”

“Therefore, go to Paris, Pellisson, bring back our two victims, and then tomorrow we’ll see,” said Fouquet. “Gourville, get the five hundred thousand livres for Pellisson.”

“You’ll want some help with that,” said the abbot. “What a responsibility, *plague!* Don’t get carried away by it.”

“Quiet!” said Fouquet. “Someone’s coming. Ah, what a magical effect those fireworks produce!” he announced as a shower of sparks fell, glittering, in the branches of a nearby grove. Pellisson and Gourville left together by the door of the gallery as Fouquet went down into the garden with the other conspirators.

322  
The Epicureans

As Fouquet devoted, or seemed to devote, all his attentions to the sparkling lights, the gentle music of the violins and oboes, and glittering rain of the fireworks that, lighting up the sky with fiery flashes, outlined, behind the trees, the sombre silhouette of the Keep of Vincennes; as, we say, the superintendent was smiling upon the ladies and poets, the fête was as merry as usual, and even Vatel, whose anxious, almost jealous look continually queried Fouquet, showed no dissatisfaction with the unfolding of the soirée. The fireworks over, in the gardens and under the marble porticoes the guests of the master of the house relaxed with that feeling of freedom that reflects the master host’s courteous hospitality, casual grandeur, and magnificent nonchalance. The poets wandered, arm in arm, through the groves, where some of them stretched out on beds of moss, to the disservice of their velour suits and curled hair that picked up dry leaves and bits of greenery. The ladies, though few in number, gathered to hear the songs of the musicians and the verses of the poets; others listened to the artful oratory declaimed by men who were neither actors nor poets but to whom youth and melancholy granted an unusual eloquence. “Why,” said La Fontaine, “has our Epicurean master not come down into the gardens? It’s wrong of him, for Epicurus never abandoned his disciples so.”

“Sir,” Conrart said to him, “you’re wrong to persist in calling us Epicureans, for in truth, nothing here recalls the Philosopher of Gargettus.”

“Pfah!” replied La Fontaine. “Isn’t it written that Epicurus bought an expansive garden and lived there with his friends.”

“It is.”

“Well! Hasn’t Sir Fouquet bought a grand garden here at Saint-Mandé, and aren’t we living there peacefully with him and his friends?”

“Yes, quite so – but sadly neither the garden nor the friends at all resemble your example. What similarity is there between the philosophy of Sir Fouquet and that of Epicurus?”

“It is this: ‘Pleasure gives us happiness.’”

“So?”

“So, I think one could hardly call us unhappy. A fine meal with Joigny juice that they are as considerate as to import from my favourite tavern, and not a single embarrassing *faux pas* in an hour-long supper, despite the attendance of ten millionaires and twenty poets.”

“I’ll just stop you there: you mentioned fine food and Joigny juice – is that your evidence? Will you persist in that?”

“I will persist; *antecho* [I stand my ground] as they say at Port Royal.”

“Then I must remind you that the great Epicurus lived, and made his disciples live as well, on bread, beans, and spring water.”

“Are you sure of that?” said La Fontaine. “You might be confusing Epicurus with Pythagoras, my dear Conrart.”

“But it’s certain that the great philosopher was no follower of gods or monarchs.”

“I will *not* admit the certainty of that!” retorted La Fontaine. “I say that Epicurus was like Sir Fouquet.”

“Do not compare him to Sir Surintendant!” said Conrart with some emotion. “If you do, you’ll give credence to those who spread rumours about him ... and us.”

“What rumours?”

“That we are bad Frenchmen, indifferent to the monarch and scornful of the law.”

“I return to my original statement,” said La Fontaine. “Listen, Conrart, here’s the morality of Epicurus – whom I must say I consider something of a myth. Everything from that far back in antiquity’s myth. Jupiter, if you follow his historical development, is life while Alcides is strength. The origin of these names prove me right, for Zeus is *zên*, that is, to live while Alcides is *alcé* or vigour. Well! Epicurus stands for calm watchfulness or protection, and who protects our State and watches over us better than Sir Fouquet?”

“Mere wordplay is not moral philosophy. I say that we modern Epicureans make poor citizens.”

“Pfah!” cried La Fontaine. “If we make poor citizens, it’s not due to following the philosophy of our master. Listen to one of Epicurus’s most important aphorisms.”

“I’m listening.”

“‘Desire to have good leaders.’”

“Well?”

“Well! What does Sir Fouquet say to us daily? ‘When shall we be properly governed?’ Doesn’t he, Conrart? Be honest!”

“He says that, it’s true.”

“Well! There’s your Epicurean philosophy.”

“Maybe but it’s more than a little seditious.”

“What! Is it seditious to want to be governed by good leaders?”

“Certainly, when the current government is bad.”

“Be patient! I have a reply to all of this.”

“Including what I just said?”

“Here: ‘Submit even to those who govern badly.’ Or as it’s written: *Cacos politeuouisi*. You’ll grant me that text?”

“By God! I should think so. Why, you speak Greek as well as *Æsop*, my dear La Fontaine.”

“Is there any sedition in that, my dear Conrart?”

“God forbid!”

“Then, let’s return to Sir Fouquet. What has he said a thousand times? Isn’t it, ‘What a peasant that Mazarin is! What a leech! What an ass!’ Come now, Conrart, did he say that, or didn’t he?”

“I admit he did say it, perhaps a bit too often.”

“Just like Epicurus, my friend, always like Epicurus. I repeat, we are Epicureans, and isn’t that amusing?”

“Maybe but I’m afraid that a faction like that of Epictetus <sup>32</sup> will just rise to oppose us. You know well that Philosopher of Hierapolis who called bread wasteful, beans a luxury, and spring water no better than juice; he who, when beaten by his master, though he did complain a bit, said otherwise calmly, ‘Do you want to wager you’ve broken my leg?’ And he won that bet!”

“Epictetus was an idiot.”

“True enough but such idiocy might become the fashion if it goes by the name of Colbert.”

“Pfah!” replied La Fontaine. “Impossible. Colbert will never have followers like Epictetus.”

“Perhaps, though he is as sneaky as ... *Coluber* the snake.”

“Ha! You’re beaten, Conrart, if you have to stoop to wordplay that low – admit it! Sir Arnault of Port Royal claims I lack logic but I have more than his patron Sir Nicole.”

“Oh, that’s something, all right,” retorted Conrart, “to be more logical than a Jansenist!”

This conclusion was greeted by an immense burst of laughter. One by one, the debaters had attracted the attention of those promenading around the grove, and the whole argument had been closely followed by this growing audience. Even Fouquet himself, the very model of self-control, had trouble holding himself in. But the dénouement of the scene was more than he could bear, and he burst out laughing. Everyone joined him, and the two philosophers were greeted with unanimous applause. La Fontaine was acclaimed the victor, thanks to his erudition and irrefutable logic but Conrart was deemed a worthy opponent, praised for the integrity of his convictions and the purity of his conscience. In the midst of these loud congratulations, as the ladies were reproaching the two adversaries for not having admitted women to be part of the system of Epicurean happiness, Gourville appeared at the end of the garden. Fouquet, who'd been watching for him, deftly detached himself from the group. The superintendent maintained his smiling laughter as he nonchalantly moved off but as soon as he was out of sight, he dropped the mask. "Well?" he said eagerly. "Where's Pellisson? How did it go?"

"Pellisson has returned from Paris."

"Did he bring the prisoners back with him?"

"He got no farther than the warden of the prison."

"What! Didn't he tell him he'd come from me?"

"He did but the warden said, 'If someone comes on behalf of Sir Fouquet, they should bring a letter from Sir Fouquet.'"

"Oh!" said the latter. "If it's just a matter of giving him a letter..."

"It's not," said Pellisson, appearing from the shadows of the little grove. "You must go personally, My Lord, and speak for yourself."

"Yes, you're right. I left everything ready as if I might go back to work, Pellisson; the horses are still hitched to the carriage. Look after my guests, Gourville."

"May I offer another opinion, My Lord?" asked the latter.

"Speak, Gourville."

"Don't go to the warden except as a last resort; it's bold but it isn't smart. Pardon me, Sir Pellisson, if I disagree with you but I think, my Lord, that you'd send the warden a letter rather than go yourself. He's a worthy man but don't tempt him too far."

"I'll think about it," said Fouquet. "We still have most of the night ahead of us."

"Don't count too much on time, because you never have as much as you think you have," said Pellisson. "It's never a mistake to strike early."

"All right," said the superintendent. "Let's go, Pellisson. Gourville, I commend my guests to you." And they departed. The Epicureans didn't notice that the head of their school of philosophy had gone; the violins played all night long.

323  
15 Minutes' Delay

Fouquet, leaving his house for the second time that day, felt less troubled and anxious than one might have thought. He turned to Pellisson, who in his corner of the carriage was considering rebuttals to Colbert's more serious accusations. "My dear Pellisson," said Fouquet, "it's a shame that you're not a woman."

"On the contrary, My Lord," replied Pellisson, "I think it's lucky I'm not, considering how ugly I am."

"Oh, Pellisson!" said the superintendent, laughing. "You mention how ugly you are so often that it must be a painful thing for you to think about."

"It is indeed, My Lord, and no one is less happy about it than I am. I was a handsome youth but the smallpox made me hideous and stole away my main means of seduction. Now I'm your first secretary, or something like it, in charge of managing your interests – and right now, if I were a pretty woman, I could render you an important service."

"Like what?"

"I'd go to the warden of the Conciergerie and I'd seduce him, for he's a ladies' man, and I'd rescue our two prisoners."

"I hope to be able to manage that myself, though I'm not a pretty woman either," replied Fouquet.

"Agreed, My Lord, though by doing so you compromise yourself."

"Agh!" cried Fouquet suddenly, in an outburst of youthful blood, or at least a memory of what that was like. "Believe me, I know a woman who's what it takes to sway the Lieutenant Governor of the Conciergerie!"

"I know fifty, my Lord, all fifty of whom would announce such a victory to the world, praising everywhere your devotion to your friends and you'd win the battle as a result but lose the war."

"I don't speak of those women, Pellisson, I speak of a noble and beautiful creature who combines the spirit and energy of her sex with the wit and coolness of ours; I speak of a woman lovely enough that the walls of the prison would bow down before her but so discreet that none would ever suspect who'd sent her."

"A treasure," said Pellisson. "That would be a fabulous gift for the Governor of the Conciergerie, My Lord, and even if he lost his head for it, he'd go to his grave the luckiest of men."

"Not to mention," said Fouquet, "that the warden wouldn't have to lose his head, for he'd have some of my horses to escape upon, and half a million livres with which to live comfortably in England – and furthermore, my friend, the horses and money are the only things the lady would have to give him. Let's go find this lady, Pellisson."

The superintendent reached for the silk and golden cord that communicated with the driver. Pellisson stopped him. "My Lord," he said, "we could spend more time seeking this woman than Columbus took to find the New World. We have only two hours left to us, for after the warden goes to bed, how can you get to him without causing a commotion? Once the sun rises, how can we act in the shadows? Go now, My Lord, and don't spend the night looking for a woman, even if she is an angel."

"But, dear Pellisson, here we are before her door."

"Before the door of an angel?"

"Yes!"

"But ... this is the house of Madam de Bellière."

"Hush!"

"Oh, good Lord!" cried Pellisson.

"You have something to say against her?" asked Fouquet.

"Not a thing, alas! That's why I'm dismayed. There's absolutely nothing against her ... so what can I say to keep you from going in to see her?"

But Fouquet had already given his order and the carriage had stopped. "Keep me from going in?" said Fouquet. "No power in the world could stop me from paying a compliment to Madam du Plessis-Bellière – besides, who knows whether we might need her? Won't you go with me?"

"No, My Lord, no."

"But I don't want you to have to wait for me, Pellisson," replied Fouquet with sincere courtesy.

"All the better, My Lord; knowing that I'm waiting for you, you'll be quicker. But beware – there's a carriage in her courtyard already. Someone's visiting her." Fouquet leaned on the door and turned the handle. "Just one more word," said Pellisson. "In heaven's name, delay visiting this lady until our return from the Conciergerie."

"Eh! Five minutes, Pellisson," replied Fouquet, getting out at the hotel's steps.

Pellisson remained slumped in the carriage, scowling. Fouquet leapt up the stairs and gave his name to the footman who responded with a respectful eagerness that showed in what regard his name was held by the mistress of the house. "Sir Surintendant!" exclaimed the marquise, very pale as she approached Fouquet. "What an unexpected honour!" And then in a whisper, she added, "Beware! Marguerite Vanel's here."

"Madam," replied Fouquet urgently, "I come on business. Just one quick word."

And he went ahead into her salon. Madam Vanel rose from a chair, paler and more livid than Envy herself. Fouquet made her a most friendly and charming greeting but in vain; she replied only with a venomous look at the marquise and Fouquet. The piercing look of a jealous woman is a point that finds the chink in every armour, and Marguerite Vanel plunged it into the hearts of the two confidants. She made a bow to her friend, a deeper one to Fouquet and took her leave on the pretext that she had ever so many visits to make with the marquise saying nothing to stop her or Fouquet preoccupied with anxiety giving her another thought. She was scarcely gone before Fouquet was on his knees before her without saying a word, left alone with the marquise. "I was waiting for you," said the marquise with a gentle smile.

"If so, you'd have sent that woman away," he said.

"She hadn't been here a quarter of an hour, and I had no idea she was coming tonight."

"Do you love me a little, Marquise?"

"That's not what matters right now, Sir, when you're in danger. How are your affairs proceeding?"

"I'm going tonight to rescue my friends from the prisons at the Conciergerie."

"How will you do that?"

"By bribing and suborning the governor."

"He's a friend of mine; can I help you without harming you?"

"Marquise, that would be a very great help indeed! But how could you assist without compromising yourself? Nothing in my life is worth it, not my power nor my liberty, if it caused a single tear to fall from your eye, or a shadow to darken your brow."

"My Lord, don't talk that way, it makes my head spin. I've long dreamed of helping you without ever counting the cost. In truth, I love you as a dear friend, and as a friend I'm grateful for your delicacy but never, alas! Never will you find a mistress in me."

"Ah, Marquise!" cried Fouquet in a desperate voice. "But why?"

"Because you are too well loved by too many people," whispered the young woman, "because the gleam of fortune and glory hurts my eyes that are attracted only to melancholy and pain. Because I, who rejected you in your splendor and magnificence, who scarcely looked at you when you shone, came like a mad woman to throw myself into your arms when I saw dark clouds gather around you. Understand me, My Lord, you must become happy again so I can remain chaste in heart and mind – for your misfortune means my ruin."

"Oh, Madam!" said Fouquet with an emotion deeper than any he'd ever felt before. "If I plunge to lowest level of human misery and hear from you then those words you refuse me now, on that day, Madam, when you forget your noble pride, though you'll think you're consoling the most abject of men, you'll be saying 'I love you' to the most ecstatic, triumphant, and happy man in the world!"

He was still at her feet, bathing her hand in kisses, when Pellisson burst in and urgently cried, "My Lord! Madam! In God's name! Forgive me, My Lord but you've been here half an hour. Oh, don't look at me like that – Madam, I beg you, who was that lady who left your house when my Lord came in?"

"Madam Vanel," said Fouquet.

"There!" cried Pellisson. "I knew it!"

"Well? What of it?"

"She marched, pale as death, right into her carriage."

"Does it matter?" said Fouquet.

"What matters is what she said to her driver."

"In God's name, what's that?" said the marquise.

"To Sir Colbert's," "" said Pellisson hoarsely.

"Good Lord! Go, my Lord! Hurry!" gasped the marquise, almost pushing Fouquet from her salon, while Pellisson drew him by the hand.

"Come, now," said the superintendent. "Am I a child to be afraid of a shadow?"

"You are a giant," said the marquise, "with a viper trying to bite you on the heel."

Pellisson practically manhandled Fouquet into the carriage. "Drive hell for leather to the Conciergerie!" cried Pellisson to the coachman.

The horses took off like lightning, and at first nothing could stop them but in the Arcade Saint-Jean, where they were about to turn onto the Place de Grève, a line of horsemen barred the opening of the narrow street, blocking the superintendent's carriage. There was no way past them and they had to wait until the mounted guards cleared the way, riding after a heavy coach they were escorting



toward the Place Baudoyer. Fouquet and Pellisson took little notice of this event other than to curse the brief delay. They arrived at the gates of the Conciergerie five minutes later. The lieutenant governor was on the steps of the courtyard but at the name of Fouquet, whispered in his ear by Pellisson, he quickly approached the carriage and, hat in his hand, bowed deeply and repeatedly. "What an honour for me, my Lord!" he said.

"A word with you, Sir Governor. Would you be so kind as to step into my carriage?"

The officer entered the carriage and sat down facing Fouquet. "Sir," said Fouquet, "I've a favour to ask of you."

"Speak, My Lord!"

"It's a favour that could compromise you, Sir but it will earn you my friendship and protection forever."

"Should you need me to throw myself into a fire, My Lord, I'm happy to do it!"

"Good," said Fouquet. "What I'm asking for is very simple."

"It's as good as done, My Lord. What do you need?"

"For you to lead me to the cells of Gentlemen Lyodot and d'Emerys."

"Would My Lord deign to tell me why?"

"I will tell you when we get there, Sir, at the same time I give you the wherewithal to compensate for their escape."

"Escape! Then My Lord doesn't know?"

"What?"

"Gentlemen Lyodot and d'Emerys are no longer here."

"Since when?" gasped Fouquet.

"Since about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Where did they go?"

"To the dungeon of Vincennes."

"By what means?"

"By order of the king."

"No!" cried Fouquet, striking his forehead. "It can't be!"

And he dismissed him from the carriage without saying another word to the governor, death in his face and despair in his soul. "What now?" asked Pellisson anxiously.

"What now? Our friends are lost. Colbert is taking them to the dungeons. They were in the coach that passed us at the Arcade Saint-Jean."

Pellisson fell back as if struck by lightning. He said nothing; a single reproach would have slain his master outright. "Where to, my Lord?" asked the coachman.

"To my house in Paris. You, Pellisson, will go back to Saint-Mandé and return with Abbot Fouquet within the hour. On, driver! On!"

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The Plan of Battle

The night was well advanced when Abbot Fouquet arrived at his brother's Paris mansion. Fouquet, his brother, and Gourville, pale in the face of future events, looked less like three powerful aristocrats than like three conspirators united by the idea of violence. Fouquet paced for quite a while, his eyes fixed on the parquet floor, his hands clasped behind his back. Finally, summoning his courage after a great sigh, he said, "Abbot, didn't you speak to me about a certain group of men you maintain?"

"Yes, Sir," replied the abbot.

"Tell me, who are these people?" The abbot hesitated. "Come on! Don't worry, I'm not threatening you; give it to me straight, I'm not joking."

"Since you ask for the truth, Sir, here it is: I have a hundred and twenty soldiers of fortune who are as bound to me as a thief is to the gallows."

"And you can count on them?"

"Entirely."

"And they won't compromise you?"

"My name will never be mentioned."

"And these are men of firm resolve?"

"They would burn all Paris if I promised them they could get away with it."

"The thing I need to ask of you, Abbot," said Fouquet, wiping the sweat beading his face, "is to have your one hundred twenty men attack those I designate at a given moment. Is that possible?"

"It won't be the first time they've done such a thing, sir."

"Good; but would these bandits be willing to fight ... an armed force?"

"That's what they're used to doing."

"Then gather your hundred and twenty men, Abbot."

"Fine; just tell me where."

"On the road to Vincennes, tomorrow, at two o'clock sharp."

"To liberate Lyodot and d'Emerys? It will come to blows."

"Quite a few. Does that bother you?"

"Not me, though it might bother you."

"Will your men know their business?"

"They'll know what to do, and they'll know what it's about – they're too savvy not to. But a minister who incites a riot against his king ... is taking a risk."

"What do you care, so long as I pay for it? Besides, you go down with me if I fall."

"Then it might be wiser not to cause trouble, Sir, and to let the king have his little victory."

"You'd consider, Abbot, that Lyodot and d'Emerys imprisoned at Vincennes is the prelude to the ruin of my house. I repeat, when I'm arrested, you'll be imprisoned and when I'm imprisoned, you'll be exiled."

"Sir, I am at your orders. Do you have any to give me?"

"As I said: tomorrow I want the two financiers they intend to make scapegoats, when there are so many real criminals unpunished, liberated from the fury of my enemies. Take your measures accordingly. Is this feasible?"

"It's feasible."

"Tell me your plan."

"It is simplicity itself. At an ordinary execution, the guard is a dozen archers."

"Tomorrow there will be a hundred."

"My guess is it will be closer to two hundred."

"Then your hundred and twenty will be outnumbered?"

"Not at all. In every crowd of ten thousand spectators there are a thousand thugs and cutpurses but they dare start nothing."

"Well?"

"So, tomorrow on the Place de Grève that I choose for my field of battle, my one hundred and twenty will be joined by a thousand auxiliaries. We will start the attack and they will finish it."

"Good! But how will you get the prisoners from the Place de Grève?"

"We'll barricade them in one of the houses surrounding the square, so that getting them out again will take a siege. Now that I think of it, here's an even better idea: some of those houses have two exits, one onto the Place and the other onto the Rue de la Mortellerie, Vannerie, or Tixeranderie. The prisoners will go in one door and out the other."

"You'll need to pick the appropriate house."

"I'll find it."

"Ah but I've found it already!" said Fouquet. "Listen carefully to the details."

"I'm listening."

Fouquet made a sign to Gourville, who appeared to understand. "One of my friends occasionally lends me the keys to a house he rents on Place Baudoyer. It has gardens that extend behind a certain house on the Place de Grève."

"That sounds like the ticket," said the abbot. "Which house?"

"A busy little cabaret under the sign of Our Lady's Portrait."

"I know it," said the abbot.

"This cabaret has windows on the Place and a back door onto a courtyard that has a gate into my friend's garden."

"Good!"

"Burst into the cabaret, bring in the prisoners, then have your men defend the front door while you escort the escapees through the garden to the Place Baudoyer."

"Truly, Sir, if you're a general, you'd be the equal of Sir Prince."

"Have you got it?"

"Perfectly."

"How much cash do you need to juice your men with juice and grease their palms with gold?"

"Oh, Sir, how crude! Suppose they heard you? They're really quite sensitive, you know."

"They must be ready to storm the heavens from earth, for tomorrow I fight against the king, and when I fight, I intend to win, do you understand me?"

"It will be just as you say, Sir. Now, are there any other details?"

"I leave them up to you."

"Then open your purse, Sir."

"Gourville, issue the abbot a hundred thousand livres."

"Good! Spare no expense, I think you said?"

"Spare nothing and no one."

"As you command!"

"My Lord," warned Gourville, "if this gets out, it will cost us our heads."

"Don't be pathetic, Gourville," retorted Fouquet, purple with anger. "Speak for yourself, *my dear*. As for me, my head is firmly fixed on my shoulders. Let's see, Abbot, is that everything?"

"Everything."

"At two o'clock tomorrow, then?"

"At noon, because we now must make some preparations in advance."

"True enough. Don't spare the innkeeper's juice."

"I will spare neither his juice nor his house," sneered the abbot. "I've this covered, I tell you; leave me to do my work, and you'll see."

"Where will you be located?"

"Everywhere, and nowhere."

"And how will I stay informed?"

"By a courier whose horse will be posted in your friend's garden. By the way, what's your friend's name?"

Fouquet looked at Gourville, who came to his master's rescue. "The place is all that matters, Sir Abbot: Our Lady's Portrait in front and the only garden in the neighbourhood behind."

"Fine, fine. I'll tell my soldiers."

"Go with him, Gourville, and see that he gets his money," said Fouquet. "But wait a moment, Gourville – Abbot, what shall we call this uprising?"

"We'll call it just what it is, Sir: the Riot."

"Ah but whose riot? Because if there's any time the people of Paris love their king, it's when he hangs some tax collectors."

"I'll manage that," said the abbot.

"Yes but it's a key point, and I want to be assured of it."

"All right, one moment ... here's my idea."

"Tell me."

"My men will shout, 'Colbert! Long live Colbert!' and throw themselves on the prisoners as if to tear them to pieces because hanging is too good for them."

"Ah, now there's an idea indeed!" said Gourville. "*Plague*, what a mind you have, Sir Abbot!"

"It runs in the family, Sir," said the abbot proudly.

"Ass!" murmured Fouquet. Then aloud: "It's ingenious! Do it but minimise the bloodshed." Gourville and the abbot left to attend to their preparations. The superintendent laid down on soft cushions, at first mulling over the sinister plans for the morrow but then drifting into dreams of love.

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#### The Cabaret of the Portrait of our Lady

By two o'clock the next day, twenty thousand spectators had gathered in the Place de Grève around the two gibbets that had been erected in the plaza between the Quai de la Grève and the Quai Le Pelletier, <sup>33</sup> next to each other with their backs toward the parapet along the river. That morning, all the municipal criers of the good city of Paris had gone back and forth through every quarter, especially the markets and the near suburbs, announcing in their hoarse but indefatigable voices that the king's justice was to be done upon two corrupt officials who'd stolen from the people. And the people, on whose behalf this was done, and who didn't wish to disrespect their king, left their stalls, studios, and workshops so they could show their appreciation for Louis XIV just like guests who feared it would be rude to turn down an invitation to a banquet. According to the indictments of the judgement that the criers pronounced incorrectly but enthusiastically, two thieving tax farmers, frauds, counterfeiters, and embezzlers of the royal funds, were sentenced to undergo capital punishment on the Place de Grève with *Their Names Displayed Above their Heads*. As to these names, the indictment didn't mention them that just inflamed the curiosity of the Parisians all the more, until an immense crowd awaited the hour of execution with feverish impatience. The news had already spread that the prisoners, transferred to the Château de Vincennes, would be paraded from that prison to the Place de Grève, so the Faubourg and Rue Saint-Antoine <sup>34</sup> were also lined with crowds. The population of Paris, in those days of public executions, was divided into two categories: those of mild or timid heart but philosophical mind who preferred to watch the condemned pass by, and those whose hearts hungered for sensation and wanted to see them die. That morning, Sir d'Artagnan, having received his final instructions from the king, and having bade farewell to his friends, the number of which was for the moment reduced to Planchet, had drawn up his plan for the day, as every man must do who counts his minutes as important and expends them accordingly. "Departure is fixed for tomorrow at the crack of dawn, at three in the morning," he said, "so I have fifteen hours ahead of me. Reckon first the six hours of sleep that are the minimum I require; one hour to dine makes seven; one hour to visit Athos, eight; then two hours slack for the unexpected that makes a total of ten. That leaves five hours: one hour to ask for money from Sir Fouquet and be refused; one hour to get the money from Sir Colbert and suffer his questions and grimaces; one hour to sharpen my sword, brush my clothes, and polish my boots. And I still have two hours left over – *God be with you!* I'm rich, with time to spare!" And saying this, d'Artagnan felt a strange joy, a youthful glee, a whiff of those happy and carefree times gone by that rose to his head and intoxicated him. "With those two extra hours," said the musketeer, "I'll go to collect my quarterly rent from the innkeeper of our Lady's Portrait. Three hundred seventy-five livres! God, how jolly! It continues to amaze me. If a poor man who had no more than a livre in his pocket found there a livre plus a dozen deniers, that would be fine and just but that never happens to the poor. The rich man, on the other hand, makes money with his money without ever touching it. Here come three hundred seventy-five livres as if fallen from the sky. So, I'll go to Our Lady's Portrait and drink a glass of Spanish juice with my tenant, who can scarcely fail to offer it to me. But all things in their time, Sir d'Artagnan, and everything in its order. Let's plan this out properly. Article One: Athos. Article Two: Our Lady's Portrait. Article Three: Sir Fouquet. Article Four: Sir Colbert. Article Five: supper. Article Six: clothes, equipment, horses, and baggage. Article Seventh and Last: sleep!" And having settled on his plan, d'Artagnan went straight to call upon the Count of La Fère, to whom, modestly and simply, he related his latest adventures. Since the day before, Athos had been more than a little concerned about d'Artagnan's visit to the king but two sentences of explanation settled his mind. Athos guessed that Louis had entrusted d'Artagnan with some important mission and didn't even try to get him to divulge its secret. He advised him to take care of himself and discreetly offered to go with him if that was advisable. "But, dear friend, I'm going nowhere," said d'Artagnan.

"Really! You come to say goodbye but you're not leaving?"

"Oh, all right, fine," replied d'Artagnan, colouring a little. "I'm going to look at some properties."

"Ah, that's another thing entirely. In that case, instead of *don't get killed*, I'll say: *Don't get robbed*."

"I'll let you know, old friend, if I find anything worth looking at, because in that case I'll want your advice."

"Yes, of course," said Athos, too considerate to allow himself the amusement of a smile.

Raoul imitated the paternal reserve. D'Artagnan understood that it would be overly mysterious to leave his friends for a journey without telling them which way he'd be going. "I'm going through Le Mans," he said to Athos. "Do you know that country?"

"I do, *my friend*," replied the count without mentioning that Le Mans was in nearly the same direction as the Touraine and if he waited a couple of days, he could travel that way with a friend.

But d'Artagnan was too embarrassed to continue, finding he just dug himself deeper into his hole with each new explanation. Finally, he said, "I'm leaving tomorrow at dawn. Until then, Raoul, will you spend the time with me?"

"Yes, Sir Knight," said the young man, "unless the count has something he wants me to do."

"No, Raoul, the only thing I have today is an audience with Sir, the king's brother," said Athos.

Raoul asked Grimaud for his sword, and he brought it right away. "Then, farewell, dear friend!" said d'Artagnan, opening his arms to Athos. They held for a long embrace, and then the musketeer, mindful of his friend's discretion, whispered in his ear, "An affair of State!"

Athos replied to this with a final, significant handshake. And so, they parted. Raoul took his old friend's arm and they went east down the Rue Saint-Honoré. "I will lead you to the altar of the god Pluto," said d'Artagnan to the young man. "Prepare yourself to see piles of coins. I'm a changed man, by God!"

"Oh! Look how many people there are on the street," said Raoul.

"Is there a parade today?" asked d'Artagnan of a passer-by.

"A hanging, Sir," replied the stroller.

"Really? A hanging, on the Grève?" said d'Artagnan.

"Yes, Sir."

"Devil take the rogue who gets hanged on the day I have to go to collect my rent!" cried d'Artagnan. "Raoul, have you ever seen a hanging?"

"Never, Sir – thank God!"

"That's youth speaking. Now if you were on guard in a trench, and you caught a spy ... but pardon an old soldier's rambling, Raoul. You're quite right, a hanging is an ugly thing ... if you please, sir, at what hour's the execution?"

"Sir," replied the burgher, charmed at being the object of conversation of two men of the sword, "it's set for three o'clock."

"Ah, then we still have an hour and a half. Let's pick up the pace and get there in time to collect my three hundred seventy-five livres and get away again before the hangman's customer arrives."

"Two customers, Sir," added the burgher. "They're hanging a pair."

"A thousand thanks to you, sir," said d'Artagnan who had become more careful about his manners as he had matured. And hustling Raoul along, he made his way rapidly toward the Place de Grève. Without the musketeer's experience of dealing with crowds, and a wrist of steel backed by strapping shoulders, neither of the 2 would have reached their destination. They abandoned the Rue Saint-Honoré, where Athos lived, and followed the quay along the river. D'Artagnan went first: his wrist, elbow, and shoulder formed three corners of a wedge that he knew how to thrust into a mob to get it to split apart like a block of wood. Occasionally he added the persuasion of the pommel of his sword, pushing it between the ribs of recalcitrant and using it to pry them apart, separating husband from wife, uncle from nephew, and brother from brother. The musketeer did all this so naturally and with such a friendly grin that one would have had to have a broken rib not to forgive him, or a heart of granite not to be charmed by his smile. When they arrived within sight of the pair of gallows, Raoul turned his head aside in disgust. But d'Artagnan had no eyes for the gibbets; all his attention was focused on his crooked-gabled house with its windows on the plaza. He saw in the square and around the houses lining it a number of off-duty musketeers, who, some with women on their arms, others with friends, were awaiting the hour of the ceremony. What delighted him most was that his tenant, the innkeeper, was so busy he hardly knew which way to turn. Three potboys weren't nearly enough to serve all the drinkers, who overflowed its common room, ground floor parlours, and court. D'Artagnan pointed out this flood of customers to Raoul and said, "That buffoon will have no excuse not to pay his quarterly rent. Look at all those drinkers, Raoul, spending freely. *God be with you!* What a prime location."

D'Artagnan nonetheless succeeded in catching the host by the corner of his apron and drawing attention to himself. "Ah, Sir Knight!" said the innkeeper, badly distracted. "Half a minute, if you will! I've got a hundred customers crazy to plunder my cellar."

"The cellar, fine but not the strongbox."

"Oh, Sir, your thirty-seven-and-a-half pistols are already counted out in my office but there are a dozen people lining the windows up there and emptying a cask of port I broke out this morning for them... Just give me a minute, a single minute."

"Go, do it."

"I'm leaving," said Raoul in an undertone to d'Artagnan. "This festival's ... ignoble."

"Sir," d'Artagnan replied severely, "you will do me the favour to stay right here. A soldier has to be familiar with such spectacles. Youth is the time to see such sights, for you won't know your true worth until you can view coarse and terrible things without letting them harden your heart. Besides, Raoul, would you abandon me to this? You'd just be sorry later. Here, let's go through to the courtyard in back, where there's a tree with some shade. Come sit with me where we can breathe air clear of the fumes of spilled juice."

The 2 latest guests of Our Lady's Portrait sat themselves where they could hear the ever-increasing noise of the crowd without losing sight of the drinkers seated at the cabaret's tables and overflowing its ground floor parlours. If d'Artagnan had been looking for a place from which to survey the field of battle, as he thought of his real estate, he could hardly have chosen better. The tree under which he and Raoul were sitting half-concealed them under its low boughs, shading a tumbledown table too broken for the drinkers to balance their glasses on it. As mentioned, from this post d'Artagnan could see everything. He watched the potboys passing back and forth, and the arrival of new drinkers, and the welcome – sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile – accorded to the newcomers by those already settled in place. He was watching at first just to pass the time, because his thirty-seven-and-a-half pistols were a long time in coming. Raoul brought up the delay: "Sir," he said, "if you don't get your tenant to make haste, the, er, *customers* will arrive, and after that we'll be hard pressed to get away again."

"You're right," said the musketeer. "*Hello!* Hey, someone! *God be with you!*" But though he shouted and pounded on the ramshackle table until it fell into splinters, no one came. D'Artagnan was preparing to get up and go demand an explanation from the innkeeper when the gate to the garden behind the courtyard opened, screaming on its rusty hinges, and a cavalier came through. He was carrying a sword, sheathed but not on his belt; he cast an anxious glance at d'Artagnan and his companion, and without closing the gate he crossed the courtyard and went into the cabaret, looking suspiciously at everybody and everything. "So, my two tenants communicate," said d'Artagnan. "It's probably just someone curious about the hanging." But just then the shouts and loud talk from the drinkers in the upper room came to a sudden halt. In this situation, silence was a far stranger circumstance than an increase of noise. D'Artagnan suddenly wanted to know the cause of this silence. He saw then that the man in the cavalier outfit had gone into the common room and was haranguing the drinkers, who listened to him attentively. D'Artagnan couldn't quite hear this speech due to the

roar of the crowd that overwhelmed the words of the orator. But it soon came to an end, and then all the men in the common room went out in small groups, one after another, until only a half dozen remained upstairs. One of these six, the cavalier with the sword, took the innkeeper aside and engaged him in what looked like a serious talk, while the others built up the fire in the hearth – a strange thing to do, given the warmth of the weather. “It’s funny,” said d’Artagnan to Raoul, “but I think I recognise some of those men.”

“How, by their smell?” coughed Raoul. “All I can smell is smoke.”

“I think it smells more like a conspiracy,” said d’Artagnan.

He’d scarcely spoken when four of the men came out into the rear courtyard and, while maintaining a careless attitude, took up sentry positions by the garden gate, occasionally casting glances toward d’Artagnan that he found significant. “God,” he said to Raoul in a low voice, “there’s something going on here. Do you have a curious mind, Raoul?”

“Depending on the subject, Sir Knight.”

“Me, I’m as curious as an old woman. Let’s go inside and upstairs; I think we’ll see something to suit the curious.”

“But you know, Sir Knight, I have no desire to be a passive and indifferent spectator of the death of those two poor devils.”

“Do you think I do? What am I, a savage? Other business calls. Let’s go!”

They went into the cabaret and up to the common room, taking up positions at the front window that was strangely unoccupied. The two last customers in the room, instead of looking out the window, were still building up the fire. Upon seeing d’Artagnan and his friend come in, one whispered to the other, “Ah ha! Reinforcements.”

D’Artagnan nudged Raoul with his elbow. “Yes, *mes Braves*, reinforcements!” he said. “God’s noose, that’s a hell of a fire! What are you planning to cook with it?”

The two men burst into jovial laughter but instead of replying, just threw on more firewood. D’Artagnan continued to watch them. “Say,” remarked one of the fire-builders, “I guess you’re here to tell us when it’s time, is that it?”

“Exactly,” said d’Artagnan, in hopes of learning what was going on. “Why else would I be here?”

“In that case, you’d better go back to the window,” was the reply. D’Artagnan smiled into his moustache, made a sign to Raoul, and leaned casually on the windowsill.

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*Long Live Colbert!*

The spectacle that presented itself on the Grève at that moment was frightful. The heads of the crowd, dwindling in perspective, extended across the plaza like ears of corn in a vast field. From time to time an unexplained noise or a distant roar made heads bob and thousands of eyes flash. Now and then there were great rolling waves like those on the ocean, sweeping from the edges toward the centre, moving like tides to splash on the breakwater of archers that surrounded the gibbets. Then the hafts of halberds fell on the heads and shoulders of the more reckless spectators, and sometimes it was even steel rather than wood, and in that case an empty circle opened around that guard, a gap that compressed those beyond its edge, pressing the crowd against the parapets along the Seine. From the upper window that overlooked the entire square, d’Artagnan saw, with inner satisfaction, that the off-duty musketeers and guards in the crowd knew how to make room for themselves with their fists and sword pommels. He noted with approval that they’d succeeded in forming a coherent group of about fifty men, thanks to the *esprit de corps* that doubles a soldier’s strength. And he was pleased to see that, beyond a dozen or so outliers scattered through the crowd, the group was holding together and was within range of his voice. But it wasn’t only the musketeers and guards who attracted d’Artagnan’s attention. Around the gallows, and especially near the Arcade Saint-Jean, swarmed a busy mass of burly roughnecks, men with tough faces purposefully gathering from among the distracted spectators; signals were exchanged as they met and shook hands. D’Artagnan noticed among the most active members of this group the cavalier he had seen come in through the garden gate and go upstairs to harangue the drinkers. This man was organising squads and issuing orders. “*God be with you!*” said d’Artagnan. “Now I recognise him, and no mistake: it’s Menneville. What the devil is he doing here?” A muffled roar, gradually increasing, drew his attention in another direction: the prisoners were arriving. A strong picket of archers preceded them and took up positions at the entrance of the arcade. The whole crowd cried out, their voices combining into an immense roar. D’Artagnan saw Raoul go pale and smacked him roughly on the shoulder. At the sound of this great cry, the fire-stokers turned and called to ask what was happening. “The condemned have arrived,” said d’Artagnan.

“Good,” they replied, building the fire even higher.

D’Artagnan cast a worried look at them; it was obvious that men who made such a huge fire for no apparent reason were up to something – but what?

The condemned prisoners entered the Place. They walked on foot, the executioner leading them, fifty archers marching to their left and right. Both were dressed in black and appeared pale but resolute. They lifted their heads as they walked, looking up and ahead. D’Artagnan noticed this: “*God be with you!*” he said. “They’re in a strange hurry to see the gallows.”

Raoul recoiled from the sight, though he lacked the strength to leave the window entirely. Even terror has its attractions. “Death! Death!” cried twenty thousand voices.

“Death to the thieves!” cried the hundred roughnecks, louder than anyone.

“To the rope! String them up!” cried the surging crowd. “Long live the king!”

“The king?” murmured d’Artagnan. “That’s funny, I’d think it’s Sir Colbert who’s hanging these men.”

Just then a great rolling wave in the crowd stopped for a moment the march of the condemned. The gang of toughs d’Artagnan had noticed had managed, by dint of pushing and pummelling, in nearly reaching the line of archers. The procession resumed its march. Suddenly to cries of “Long live Colbert!” the roughnecks d’Artagnan was watching threw themselves upon the escort who tried in vain to drive them back. Behind the toughs surged the crowd. Then came a frightful commotion with an awful din. This time, in addition to shouts of excitement there were cries of pain. The halberds began to come down, swords began to thrust, muskets to fire. D’Artagnan couldn’t make out what was going on in the middle of this confusion until suddenly the chaos began to resolve into purposeful action. The condemned had been torn from the guards’ hands and were being hustled toward Our Lady’s Portrait. The tough customers who dragged them along were shouting, “Long live Colbert!” The people hesitated, unsure whether to fall on the archers or the roughnecks. What decided them was when the men shouting, “Long live Colbert!” began crying, “No hanging! Down with the gallows! Burn the thieves! Burn the embezzlers!” These cries were greeted with a rising enthusiasm. The crowd had come to see an execution and now had the chance to perform one themselves. This was an agreeable change for the populace, so they quickly took the side of the ruffians against the archers, and the shout of the minority soon became that of the majority: “Yes, yes, burn the thieves! Long live Colbert!”

“God!” said d’Artagnan. “This is beginning to look serious.”

One of the fire-stokers came to the window carrying a flaming brand. “Ah ha!” he said. “Things are heating up!” he turned to his companion and called, “That’s the signal!”

And he suddenly plunged his firebrand against the wall’s wooden baseboard. Our Lady’s Portrait was no new structure, and its aged wood needed little persuasion to catch fire. Within seconds the boards were aflame, and sparks were rising and spreading. A roar from outside responded to the cries from the arsonists. D’Artagnan who had been engrossed by the scene out the window, suddenly felt the heat of the flames and choked on the smoke. “*Hello!*” he cried, turning around. “What’re you doing with that fire? Are you out of your minds?”

The two men stared at him in astonishment. “What do you mean?” they said to d’Artagnan. “Isn’t this the plan?”

“That’s the plan? To burn down my house?” shouted d’Artagnan.

And he grabbed the firebrand from the arsonist’s hand and smashed it into his face. The second thug started to come to his friend’s aid but Raoul grabbed him, lifted him up and threw him out the window, while d’Artagnan threw the first thug down the stairs. Raoul who had finished first, wrenched the burning baseboard from the wall and threw it smoking into the middle of the room. At a glance, d’Artagnan saw there was nothing more to fear from the fire and dashed back to the window. The riot was at its height; everywhere people were shouting, “Burn them! Kill them! Hang them! Burn them at the stake! Long live Colbert and long live the king!”

The group carrying the condemned away from the archers was approaching the cabaret that appeared to be their goal. Menneville was at the head of the group, shouting louder than anyone, “Into the fire! Into the fire! Long live Colbert!”

D’Artagnan began to understand: they intended to burn the condemned men and his house was to be the inferno. “Stop there!” he shouted, sword in hand and one foot on the windowsill. “Menneville, what are you trying to do?”

“Sir d’Artagnan!” cried the latter. “Make way, make way!”

“Into the fire! Burn the thieves! Long live Colbert!” cried the crowd.

These shouts exasperated d’Artagnan. “*God be with you!*” he snarled. “To burn those poor devils when they were only condemned to be hanged is monstrous!”

Menneville and his men, dragging the convicts, were only ten paces from the door but in front of the entrance, the mass of curious people pressed up against the wall was so thick that it barred the way. Menneville made a final effort, shouting “Make way! Make way!” and waving his pistol.

“Burn them!” chanted the crowd. “Set fire to Our Lady’s Portrait! Burn the thieves! Burn them both in Our Lady’s Portrait!”

There could no longer be any doubt: it was d’Artagnan’s house they planned to burn. D’Artagnan remembered the old rallying cry he had always been able to depend upon and shouted in a voice like a giant, “To me, Musketeers!” He had one of those voices that carry over cannon fire, the sea, and storms. “To me, Musketeers!”

And balancing on the windowsill, d’Artagnan leapt down into the crowd that began to draw back from this house that rained men. Raoul followed, also with sword in hand. All the musketeers in the Place heard his call, turned and recognised d’Artagnan. “The captain! To the captain!” they cried with one voice.

And the crowd opened before them as the sea does before the prow of a ship. At that moment d’Artagnan and Menneville found themselves face to face. “Make way! Make way!” shouted Menneville, seeing he was within arm’s-reach of the door.

“No one gets by,” said d’Artagnan.

“Take this, then!” said Menneville and levelled his pistol at point-blank range.

But before the hammer came down, d’Artagnan knocked up his arm with his sword’s forte, then turned the blade and ran the point through his body. “I told you to stay out of trouble,” d’Artagnan said as Menneville fell at his feet.

“Make way! Make way!” cried Menneville’s companions who were frightened at first but reassured when they saw they had only two men to deal with.

But those two men were like giants with a hundred arms, their blades flickering in their hands like the flaming sword of the archangel. They pierced with the point, struck with the flat, and cut with the edge. Every blow took down a man. “For the king!” cried d’Artagnan with every man he struck, and every man fell. That call became the watchword of the musketeers, who, guided by it, cut their way to d’Artagnan. Meanwhile the archers recovered from their reversal, charged the gang of roughnecks and, grinding like millstones, crushed and shot down all opposition. The crowd, seeing swords flashing and blood spattering, recoiled upon itself. And then the cries for mercy rose from the vanquished, and the convicts fell back into the hands of the archers. D’Artagnan then approached the condemned men; seeing them pale and terrified, he said, “Console yourselves, gentlemen, you’ll not be tortured by these ruffians. The king’s sentenced you to be hanged and hanging’s all you have to fear.” Our Lady’s Portrait was out of danger: for lack of water, the fire had been put out with 2 barrels of juice. The conspirators had fled through the garden, and the archers took the condemned back to the gallows. After that, the affair didn’t take long to reach its conclusion. The executioner, hurriedly skipping his usual routines, hastily sent the two wretches to their fates. Meanwhile, a crowd gathered around d’Artagnan, admiring and congratulating him. He wiped his forehead dripping with sweat, his sword dripping with blood, and shrugged his shoulders at seeing Menneville at his feet writhing in his final agonies. While Raoul looked compassionately away, d’Artagnan gestured from his musketeers toward the gallows, laden with their sad fruit. “Poor devils!” he said. “I hope they died blessing me for I saved them from a more dreadful fate.”

These words reached Menneville just as he drew his final breath. A dark and ironic response trembled on his lips, and he tried to reply but the effort cost him his life. He died. “Oh, this is frightful,” murmured Raoul. “Let’s go, Sir Knight.”

“Are you wounded?” asked d’Artagnan.

“No, thankfully.”

“Good! You’re a brave lad, *God be with you!* You have your father’s wits and Porthos’s arm. Ah, if Porthos had been here, then we’d have seen some fine fighting!”

Then, as if that brought the subject to mind, he murmured, “But where the devil is my brave Porthos?”

“Come, Knight, let’s go,” insisted Raoul.

“One more minute, *my friend* – just let me collect my thirty-seven-and-half pistoles and I’m yours. It’s a profitable property,” added d’Artagnan as he re-entered Our Lady’s Portrait, “but I wish it was in a different neighbourhood, even if it that would make it less profitable.”

While this cacophonous and bloody scene was playing out on the Grève, several men, barricaded behind the cabaret’s garden gate, slammed their swords back in their sheaths and helped one of their number leap onto a waiting horse. Then, like a flock of frightened birds, they scattered in all directions, some climbing the walls, others rushing through doors with the recklessness of panic. The one who mounted the horse plied his spurs with such brutality that the animal nearly broke through the wall before getting out the back gate. This rider then crossed the Place Baudoyer like a flash of lightning through the people crowding the neighbouring streets, trampling or overturning anyone who got in his way, and ten minutes later arrived at the gate of the superintendent’s house, more breathless than his horse. Abbot Fouquet, at the sound of horseshoes ringing on pavement, appeared at a window overlooking the courtyard, and before the rider’s foot even touched the ground he leaned out and asked, “Well, Danicamp?”

“It’s all over,” said the horseman.

“Over!” said the abbot. “Then they’re saved?”

“No, Sir,” replied the rider. “They’re hanged.”

“Hanged!” repeated the abbot, going pale.

A side door suddenly opened and Fouquet entered the room, pale, distraught, lips parted in a cry of pain and anger. Just inside the doorway he paused, listening to the conversation between the window and courtyard. “Dogs!” said the abbot. “Didn’t you fight?”

“Like lions.”

“Say rather like cowards.”

“Sir!”

“A hundred soldiers of fortune, sword in hand, are a match for a thousand archers in a surprise attack. Where is Menneville, that braggart, who boasted that he would return either victorious or dead?”

“Well, Sir, he kept his word! He’s dead.”

“Dead! Who killed him?”

“A demon disguised as a man, a giant armed with ten flaming swords, a madman who at once put out the fire, stopped the riot, and called up a hundred musketeers from the pavement of the Place de Grève.”

Fouquet lifted his head, his brow dripping with sweat. “Oh! Lyodot and d’Emerys!” he murmured. “Dead! Dead! And I, dishonoured.”

The abbot turned and, seeing his brother so livid and distressed, said, “Come, now. It’s a stroke of fate, Sir, and we mustn’t take it so hard. If the attempt failed, it’s because God…”

“Silence, Abbot! Shut up!” cried Fouquet. “Your excuses are blasphemies. Get that man up here to tell us the details of this horrible event.”

“But, Brother…”

“Obey me, Sir!”

The abbot beckoned, and a half-minute later the man’s footsteps could be heard on the stairs. Meanwhile, Gourville appeared behind Fouquet like the superintendent’s guardian angel, pressing a finger to his lips to enjoin him to get control of himself despite his grief. The minister composed his demeanour and assumed what calmness he could with a heart half broken with pain. Danicamp came in.

“Make your report,” said Gourville.

“Sir,” replied the messenger, “we’d received the order to abduct the prisoners while shouting ‘Long live Colbert,’ and the condemned were taken.”

“To burn them alive, right, Abbot?” interrupted Gourville.

“Yes! Exactly! The orders had been given to Menneville, Menneville knew what had to be done and Menneville’s dead.”

This news seemed to reassure Gourville rather than sadden him. “To burn them alive, yes?” repeated the messenger as if he doubted that this order could be what was meant.

“Yes, of course, to burn them alive,” the abbot brutally repeated.

“Right, Sir, right,” said the messenger, looking intently at the faces of his 2 interrogators to try to understand what they wanted to hear, and how much of the truth it would be to his advantage to recount.

“Now, tell us what happened,” said Gourville.

“The prisoners,” continued Danicamp, “were carried across the Grève, the people in a fury calling for them to be burned rather than hanged.”

“The people had it right,” said the abbot. “Continue.”

“But,” resumed the man, “just as the archers had been driven back, at the moment when the fire was catching in the house designated as the pyre to burn the convicts, a madman, a demon, that giant I spoke of, whom we were told was the owner of the house in question, helped by a young man who was with him, threw the arsonists out the window, summoned the musketeers in the crowd to his aid, and jumped down into the square. There he plied his sword so desperately that victory went to the side of the archers, the prisoners were recaptured, and Menneville was killed. Once recaptured, the condemned were executed within three minutes.”

Fouquet, despite himself, couldn’t keep from uttering a groan. “And this man, the owner of the house, what was his name?” demanded the abbot.

“I can’t tell you, since I never saw him. My post was to remain in the garden, and I stayed at my post until they came to tell me what had happened. I was ordered, once the thing was over, to report to you how it had ended as soon as possible. Following orders, I left at the gallop, and here I am.”

“Very well, Sir, we have nothing more to ask of you,” said the abbot shakily, increasingly afraid of the moment when he’d have to face his brother alone.

“Have you received your fee?” asked Gourville.

“Just the down payment, Sir,” replied Danicamp.

“Here are twenty pistoles. Go, Sir, and continue to defend, as was done this time, the true interests of the king.”

“Yes, Sir,” said the man, bowing and putting the coins into his pocket.

Then he went out. He was scarcely out of the room before Fouquet, who had stood immobile in the background, stepped quickly forward between the abbot and Gourville. Both simultaneously opened their mouths to speak. “No excuses!” Fouquet said. “No recriminations against anyone. If I hadn’t been a false friend, I’d not have trusted anyone else to liberate Lyodot and d’Emerys. I alone am guilty, and to me alone belong the reproaches and the remorse. Leave me, Abbot.”

“However, Sir,” replied the latter, “you won’t stop me from finding the wretch who interceded so effectively on the behalf of Sir Colbert. Because if it’s good policy to love one’s friends well, I think it’s no bad thing to pursue one’s enemies as fiercely.”

“That’s enough politics, Abbot; go, I say, and make sure I hear nothing about you until I send for you again. What we need now, with this terrible example before us, are silence and circumspection. No reprisals, Gentlemen – I forbid it.”

“There are no orders,” growled the abbot, “that can prevent me from avenging on the culprit an affront to my family.”

“And I tell you,” announced Fouquet in that voice of authority to which there is no reply, “that if you have one thought, a single thought, that is not in accord with my will, two hours after you have that thought you will find yourself in the Bastille. Guide your behaviour accordingly, Abbot.”

The abbot coloured but bowed. Fouquet made a sign to Gourville to follow him and was already on his way to his office when the usher announced in a loud voice, “Sir Knight d’Artagnan.”

“Who’s that?” said Fouquet negligently to Gourville.

“A former lieutenant in His Majesty’s Musketeers,” replied Gourville in the same tone. Fouquet didn’t even bother to pause, just continued on his way. “A moment, My Lord!” Gourville then said. “Now that I think of it, this brave fellow’s left the king’s service and has probably come to collect his quarterly pension.”

“The devil!” said Fouquet. “Why is he so ill-timed as to do it now?”

“Allow me, my Lord, to politely refuse him then; he’s a man of my acquaintance, and one who is better, under the current circumstances, to have as a friend than an enemy.”

“Answer him however you like,” said Fouquet.

“What? *My God!*” said the abbot angrily, as full of spite as a man of the Church could be. “Tell him there’s no money, especially for musketeers.”

But the abbot had scarcely uttered these imprudent words when the half-opened door swung wide and d’Artagnan appeared. “Eh, Sir Fouquet,” he said, “I was well aware there wasn’t any money for musketeers. Which is why I didn’t come to get it but to be refused – which you’ve done, thank you. I bid you good morning and am off to find Sir Colbert.”

And after a rather curt bow, he left. “Gourville,” said Fouquet, “go after that man and bring him back to me.”

Gourville obeyed, catching up with d’Artagnan on the stairs. D’Artagnan, hearing quick footsteps behind him, turned and saw Gourville. “*God be with you*, Sir,” he said, “it’s a sad way you gentlemen of finance have of receiving people these days. I come to Sir Fouquet to ask for a sum ordered by His Majesty and am received like a beggar come to ask for alms, or a burglar who comes to steal the silver.”

“But I thought I heard you mention the name of Sir Colbert, dear Sir d’Artagnan; did you say you’re going to Colbert’s office?”

“Of course, I’m going there, if only to demand satisfaction for people who try to burn my house while crying, ‘Long live Colbert!’”

Gourville perked up his ears. “Oh ho!” he said. “Are you referring to what just happened on the Grève?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“And how did those events concern you?”

“What! How did it concern me? How could it not concern me if Sir Colbert wants to turn my house into a funeral pyre?”

“Wait, your house … you say it was your house they wanted to burn?”

“Yes, by God!”

“You own the cabaret of Our Lady’s Portrait?”

“Since a week ago.”

“And you were that brave officer, that valiant sword that scattered those who wanted to burn the condemned?”

“My dear Sir Gourville, put yourself in my place: I’m a king’s officer and a property owner. As an officer, my duty is to see the king’s orders accomplished. As a property owner, my interest is to not let people burn my house. So, I followed the laws of interest and duty at the same time by restoring Gentlemen Lyodot and d’Emerys into the hands of the archers.”

“So, it was you who threw a man out the window?”

“I, myself,” replied d’Artagnan modestly.

“It was you who killed Menneville?”

“I had that misfortune,” said d’Artagnan, bowing like a man being congratulated.

“It was you, in short, who caused the condemned to be hanged?”

“In place of being burned, yes, Sir, and I glory in it. I saved those poor devils from a terrible fate. Do you know, Sir Gourville, that they wanted to burn them alive? It’s unbelievable.”

“Go, my dear Sir d’Artagnan, go,” said Gourville, hoping to spare Fouquet the sight of the man who had caused him such deep sorrow.

“No,” said Fouquet, who had listened from the door to the antechamber. “No, Sir d’Artagnan – on the contrary, come in.”

D’Artagnan wiped a drop of blood that he’d missed from his sword pommel and returned. There he found himself face to face with three men whose faces bore very different expressions: anger from the abbot, confusion from Gourville, and dejection from Fouquet. “Excuse me, Sir Minister,” said d’Artagnan, “but time is pressing. I must see the intendant to explain myself to Sir Colbert and collect my quarterly pay.”

“But sir,” said Fouquet, “there is money here.”

D’Artagnan, astonished, stared at the superintendent. “You’ve been mistreated, sir – I know, for I heard it,” said the minister. “A man of your merit should be well received by everyone.”

D’Artagnan bowed. “Do you have an order of payment?” added Fouquet.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Give it to me and I’ll pay it myself. Come.” He made a sign to Gourville and the abbot to remain in the antechamber and took d’Artagnan into his office. Once within, he said, “How much are you owed, Sir?”

“Well … five thousand livres, my Lord.”

"For a year's salary?"

"For one quarter."

"Five thousand livres for a quarter!" said Fouquet, giving the musketeer a much closer look than before. "Is the king paying you twenty thousand livres a year?"

"Yes, My Lord, twenty thousand livres. Do you think it's too much?"

"Me!" said Fouquet, and he smiled bitterly. "If I knew anything about men if I was, instead of being frivolous, inconsequential, vain, of a mind that's prudent, and wise – if I was, in short, able to arrange my affairs properly, you'd not receive twenty thousand livres a year but a hundred thousand, and you'd not belong to the king but to me!"

D'Artagnan blushed slightly. There is sometimes in the way that a compliment is paid, in the voice of the admirer, in his affectionate tone, a poison so sweet that even the strongest may succumb to it. The superintendent followed this speech by opening a drawer with a flourish and drawing out four rolls of coins that he placed before d'Artagnan. The Gascon opened one. "It's gold!" he said.

"It's easier to carry, Sir."

"But, Sir, this is twenty thousand livres. "

"Quite so."

"But I'm owed only five."

"I wanted to save you the trouble of making more trips to the superintendent."

"You overwhelm me, Sir."

"I do my duty, Sir Knight, and I hope you won't hold a grudge over my brother's rude reception. He's a creature of spite and whimsy."

"Sir," said d'Artagnan, "believe me, nothing would grieve me more than to have to accept your apologies."

"Then I will stop there, and content myself with asking a favour of you."

"Of me? Oh, Sir!"

Fouquet drew from his finger a diamond ring easily worth a thousand pistoles. "Sir," he said, "this stone was given to me by a childhood friend, a man you have rendered a great service."

His voice nearly choked as he said this. "A service!" said the musketeer. "Me? I rendered a service to one of your friends?"

"You can't have forgotten it, Sir, for it happened today."

"Your friend's name's...?"

"Sir d'Emerys."

"One of the condemned?"

"Yes, one of the victims ... well! Sir d'Artagnan, in recognition of the service you rendered him, I beg you to please accept this diamond. Do it for my sake."

"Sir..."

"Accept it, I say. Today is a day of mourning for me – later you may understand why. Today, I lost one friend but, well, perhaps I can find another."

"But, Sir Fouquet..."

"Farewell, Sir d'Artagnan, farewell!" said Fouquet, his heart in his mouth. "Or rather, *see you shortly!*"

And the minister left his office, leaving in the hands of the musketeer the ring and twenty thousand livres. "My faith!" said d'Artagnan after a moment of gloomy reflection. "How am I supposed to make sense of this? *God be with you!* All I know is that there goes a very gallant man. Now to go and sort things out with Sir Colbert." And he went out.

Concerning the Notable Differences d'Artagnan found between the Intendant & the Superintendent

Sir Colbert lived in Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs in a house that had once belonged to Bautru. On d'Artagnan's legs he made it in a quarter-hour. When he arrived at the new favourite's house, the courtyard was full of archers and neighbourhood watchmen come either to congratulate him or to make their excuses, depending on whether they thought he'd praise or blame them. The urge to flatter is a survival instinct in the oppressed; it's a natural sense, like that of hearing and smell in a wild animal. These watchmen or their leader sensed there was an opportunity to gratify Sir Colbert by reporting to him how his name had been invoked during the riot. D'Artagnan arrived and stood near the door, behind the archers, just as the Chief of the Watch was making his report. This officer drew Colbert aside, despite the intendant's reluctance and the furious frown of his beetling brows. "In the event, Sir," the chief said, "that you really wanted the people to inflict justice on the two traitors, it would have been a good idea to warn them, because, though we'd hate to displease you, Sir, we had our orders to go through with the execution."

"Triple fool!" replied Colbert angrily, shaking his mane of black hair. "What are you saying? That I wanted to cause a riot? Are you drunk, or are you mad?"

"But, Sir, everyone was shouting, 'Long live Colbert!'" replied the chief, deeply dismayed.

"A handful of conspirators..."

"No, much more, a huge crowd of people!"

"Oh, really, now," said Colbert, exasperated. "A crowd of people cried: *Long live Colbert!* Be certain of what you're saying, Sir."

"All one had to do was open his ears, or rather cover them, the cries were so terrible."

"And you say these were the people, the true people?"

"Absolutely, Sir – assuming the true people could beat us up."

"Ah, is that so?" said Colbert thoughtfully. "So, you thought those must have been citizens who wanted to burn the condemned?"

"Oh, yes, Sir!"

"That's different then ... and you fought back bravely?"

"Three of our men were trampled, Sir."

"You didn't kill anyone, I hope?"

"A few rioters were left on the square, Sir, including one who's not a commoner."

"Who?"

"A certain Menneville whom the police have had their eyes on for a while."

"Menneville!" cried Colbert. "The same man who, in the Rue de la Huchette, killed a brave fellow who'd asked for a plump chicken?"

"Yes, Sir, the same."

"And this Menneville was one of those who cried, 'Long live Colbert'? Wasn't he?"

"Louder than anyone – like a madman."

Colbert's forehead furrowed darkly. The glow of successful ambition that had lit up his face went out like a firefly crushed underfoot. "Why then did you say," continued the intendant slowly, "that the movement sprang from the people? Menneville's my enemy; I'd have hanged him if I could as well he knew; and Menneville belonged to Abbot Fouquet. This whole affair originated with Fouquet – did you not know the condemned were his childhood friends?"

*That's true*, thought d'Artagnan, *and that makes matters clear. As clear as the fact that Fouquet, no matter what his actions, is still a gallant man.*

"And you're sure," continued Colbert, "that this Menneville is dead?"

D'Artagnan decided the moment had come to make his entrance. "Quite dead, Sir," he said, stepping forward suddenly.

"So, Sir, it's you, is it?" said Colbert.

"In person," replied the musketeer calmly and deliberately. "It seems that you had in this Menneville a nasty little enemy."

"He wasn't my enemy, Sir," replied Colbert, "but the king's."

*Two-faced animal*, thought d'Artagnan, *trying to play the haughty hypocrite with me.* Aloud he said, "Well! I'm happy to have rendered the king a service, then. Would you mention it to His Majesty, Sir Intendant?"

"Are you giving me an assignment, Sir? What, exactly, are you directing me to say?" replied Colbert in a voice dripping with hostility.

"I give no assignments," responded d'Artagnan with that calm that is more infuriating than mockery. "I thought it might be convenient for you to inform His Majesty that it was I who, finding myself with the opportunity, rendered justice upon Sir Menneville and restored the situation to order."

Colbert turned wide-eyed upon the watchman. "It's true, quite true," the chief said. "Sir here's our saviour."

"Sir, if you'd come to tell me that, why didn't you say so?" Colbert said to d'Artagnan, oozing envy. "That explains everything and makes it better for you than anyone."

"You are mistaken, Sir Intendant, I didn't come to tell you that."

"It's a notable feat nonetheless, sir."

"Oh, not if one does it often enough," the musketeer said nonchalantly.

"Then to what do I owe the honour of your visit?"

"That's simple enough: the king ordered me to come see you."

"Ah!" said Colbert, regaining his aplomb as he saw d'Artagnan draw a paper from his doublet. "So, it was to ask me for money?"

"Exactly, sir."

"Wait a moment, if you please, sir, while I finish with the watchman."

D'Artagnan turned on his heel rather insolently, and then, finding himself once more facing Colbert after spinning around, he bowed theatrically like a Harlequin on a stage and then marched away toward the door. Colbert was amazed at this unexpected response. Usually men of the sword, when they came to his office, had such a desperate need for money that until they were paid they seemed rooted to the floor with inexhaustible patience. *Was d'Artagnan on his way to the king? Was he going to complain about how badly he'd been received, or tell of today's exploit?* It was a matter for urgent and serious thought. In any event, it had been an ill-chosen moment to dismiss d'Artagnan whether he came from the king or on his own account. He had rendered too great a service and too recently to be fobbed off like that so Colbert thought it would be better to drop his haughty tone and recall the musketeer. "*Ahoy!* Sir d'Artagnan!" he called. "Are you leaving so soon?"

D'Artagnan turned around. "Why not?" he said serenely. "We don't have anything more to talk about, do we?"

"Don't you at least have money to collect, since you have a bill of payment?"

"Me? Not at all, my dear Sir Colbert."

"But, Sir, you have a bill! And just as you deliver a sword-thrust when the king requires it, I deliver payment when presented with a royal bill. So, present it."

"No need, my dear Sir Colbert," said d'Artagnan, who was enjoying Colbert's discomfiture. "This bill's been paid."

"Paid! By whom?"

"Why, by the superintendent."

Colbert paled. "Explain, then," he said, almost choking, "if it's been paid, why show it to me?"

"As a consequence of the king's order to which I referred just now, dear Sir Colbert. The king ordered me to collect a quarter of the year's salary he's been good enough to offer me."

"Collect it ... from me?" said Colbert.

"Not exactly. The king said, 'Go see Sir Fouquet; the superintendent might not have the money, so then go to Sir Colbert.'"

Colbert's expression brightened for a moment but his face was like a permanently stormy sky that was only ever lit by a brief and occasional flash of lightning among the clouds. "And ... the superintendent had the money?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, no shortage of money," replied d'Artagnan. "That must be the case, because Sir Fouquet, instead of making my quarterly payment of five thousand livres..."

"A quarterly payment of five thousand livres!" cried Colbert, as surprised as Fouquet had been by so large a sum designated as a soldier's salary. "Meaning twenty thousand livres a year?"

"Right, Sir Colbert. Faith, you calculate like Pythagoras! Yes, twenty thousand livres. "

"Ten times the salary of an Intendant des Finances. My compliments to you," said Colbert with a poisonous smile.

"Yes, the king apologised that it wasn't more," said d'Artagnan. "But he promised to make it up later when he was better funded. But time presses so if we'd...?"

"To be clear, despite the king's expectations, the superintendent paid you?"

"Just as, despite the king's expectations, you refused to pay me."

"I didn't refuse you, Sir, I asked you to wait a moment. And you say Sir Fouquet paid you the entire five thousand livres?"

"Yes, just as you say you would have done ... but he did even better than that, my dear Sir Colbert."

"What did he do?"

"He politely counted out the entire year's salary, saying that for the king, the coffers were always full."

"The entire year's salary! You're saying Sir Fouquet paid you twenty thousand livres instead of five thousand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And why was that?"

"To spare me three more visits to the superintendent. So, I have all twenty thousand livres here, in my pocket, in lovely new-minted gold. You see, then, that I can go, since I have no need of you and came solely for form's sake."

And d'Artagnan slapped his ringing pockets with a laugh that showed Colbert thirty-two magnificent teeth as white as any twenty-five-year-old's, and which seemed to say in their toothy language, "Serve us up thirty-two little Colberts and we'll snap and grind up all of them."

The serpent is as brave as the lion, and the sparrow hawk as courageous as the eagle, it can't be denied. Even those animals we think of as cowards are brave when they must defend themselves, and Colbert wasn't afraid of d'Artagnan's thirty-two teeth. He stiffened and said sharply, "Sir, what the superintendent did today, he had no right to do."

"Why do you say that?" replied d'Artagnan.

"Because your bill ... may I see it, please, your bill?"

"Gladly; here it is."

Colbert grabbed the paper with an eagerness that worried the musketeer and made him regret having handed it over. "Well, Sir!" said Colbert. "Your royal order says the following: *Upon presentation Sir d'Artagnan is to be paid five thousand livres that make up one quarter of the annual salary I grant him.* "

"It says that, in fact," said d'Artagnan, feigning calm.

"Well! The king owed you only five thousand livres – why have you been paid more than that?"

"Because he had more than that and wanted to give it to me. It doesn't concern anyone else."

"It's no surprise that you should be ignorant of the rules of finance," said Colbert with smooth pride, "but tell me, Sir, when you owe a thousand livres, what do you do?"

"I never owe anyone a thousand livres," replied d'Artagnan.

"No matter," said Colbert irritably. "If you owe a payment, wouldn't you pay only what you owe?"

"That proves nothing," said d'Artagnan, "except that you have your rules of finance and Sir Fouquet has his."

"Mine, Sir, are the correct rules."

"I wouldn't argue that."

"And you have taken more than was owed you."

D'Artagnan's eyes flashed. "I was paid in advance that I'm sure is what you mean, Sir Colbert. For if I'd taken more than I was owed, that would be stealing."

Colbert didn't acknowledge this subtlety. "Thus, you have fifteen thousand livres that belong in the king's coffers," he said with jealous anger.

"You may record it as credit," replied d'Artagnan with a hint of irony.

"Not at all, Sir."

"What, then? Do you think to take back those three rolls of coins?"

"You will return them to my coffers."

"Me? Oh, Sir Colbert, I don't think so..."

"The king has need of his money, Sir."

"And I, Sir, have need of money from the king."

"Nonetheless, you will return it."

"Not a chance. I've always heard that under the rules of finance, as you put it, a good cashier neither gives back nor takes back."

"Then, Sir, we will see what the king says when I show him this bill that proves that Sir Fouquet not only pays for more than he owes, he doesn't even keep a receipt when he does it."

"Ah!" hissed d'Artagnan. "Now I understand why you took my bill from me, *my dear Sir Colbert.*"

Colbert didn't remark the menace behind the way the musketeer pronounced his name. "You'll soon see how useful it is," he said, waving it between his fingers.

"Haha!" said d'Artagnan, snatching the paper away with a sudden movement. "I understand already, Sir Colbert, and don't need to wait to learn it."

And he stuffed away the paper he'd seized on the fly. "Sir, sir!" cried Colbert. "Such violence..."

"Come, now! Will you complain of the manners of an ignorant soldier?" replied the musketeer. "I kiss my hands to you, my dear Sir Colbert!"

And he went out, openly laughing at the future minister. "Now there was a man who was ready to befriend me," he said to himself. "It's a shame I had to put him in his place."

The Philosophy of the Heart & Mind

For a man who'd encountered so many men more dangerous than the intendant, d'Artagnan's clash with Colbert just seemed comical to him, so he didn't deny himself the pleasure of laughing at the intendant from the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs all the way to the Rue des Lombards. This took some time, so d'Artagnan had a good, long laugh. He was still laughing when he came upon Planchet, at the door of his house, also laughing – for Planchet, since the return of his former master and the arrival of the English guineas, spent most of his time doing what d'Artagnan had only done between the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs and the Rue des Lombards. "Are you home, then, my dear master?" said Planchet to d'Artagnan.

"No, my friend," replied the musketeer, "I'm away again as soon as I'm able, that is, after I eat and then sleep for five hours. At daybreak I jump into the saddle – did you give my horse a proper feeding?"

"Why, Master," replied Planchet, "you know very well your horse is the darling of the household. My boys indulge him all day long, sneaking him snacks from my sugar, hazelnuts, and biscuits. You ask if he's had enough to eat? Ask instead whether he's been fed to death."

"Fine, Planchet, fine. On, then, to my concerns: what about supper?"

"It's ready, *mon maître* : a roast joint, juice, steamed crayfish, and fresh cherries."

"You're a fine fellow, Planchet! Supper, then, and off to bed."

During supper, d'Artagnan noticed Planchet rubbing at his forehead, as if trying to focus his thoughts. He looked affectionately at his worthy companion of so many adventures, clinked his glass against Planchet's and said, "Come, friend Planchet, what are you having such a hard time putting into words? *God be with you!* Speak up and say your piece."

"It looks to me," said Planchet, "like you're going on an expedition of some sort."

"I wouldn't say no."

"Then you've got some new idea in mind?"

"It's possible, Planchet."

"Well, are you in need of capital to back this venture? I've fifty thousand livres to put behind whatever idea you're exploring."

And Planchet rubbed his hands together eagerly. "There's just one trouble with that, Planchet," replied d'Artagnan.

"What's that?"

"The idea isn't my own, so I can't profit from it." These words tore a heartfelt sigh from Planchet. Avarice is a seductive advisor; she leads her man as Satan led Jesus to the mountain, shows the unhappy fellow all the realms of the earth, and then retires with a smile, knowing she's leaving her companion, Envy, to gnaw at his heart. Planchet had tasted easy money and couldn't resist the desire for more of it. But as he was a good-hearted man despite his greed, and as he adored d'Artagnan, he couldn't keep from offering all sorts of careful advice and counsel. He wouldn't have been sorry to get a hint about the secret his master concealed so well but ruses, clever tricks, and artful questions were all to no avail; when d'Artagnan had a covert mission, his lips were sealed. And so, the evening passed. After supper, d'Artagnan turned his attention to his baggage, and then visited the stable, rubbing down his horse and inspecting its legs and tack. Then, having recounted his money, he went to bed, where, turning in like a twenty-year-old, without anxiety or remorse, he was asleep five minutes after blowing out his lamp. There was plenty that might have kept him awake: ideas filled his mind, there were possibilities to consider, and d'Artagnan was a great planner against contingencies but with that imperturbable calm that, to the man of action, is more valuable than genius, he put off all these considerations until the next day, in hopes, he told himself, of seeing them with fresh eyes in the morning. The day came. The Rue des Lombards received its share of caresses from rosy-fingered dawn, and d'Artagnan rose with the sun. He awoke no one, put his saddlebags under his arm, and crept down the staircase without a creak, unnoticed by all those still sonorously snoring from attic to cellar. Then having saddled his horse, he closed up both shop and stable and set off on his expedition to Brittany. He had had good reason the evening before not to think too much about all the political and diplomatic matters his mission touched upon, for now in the twilight and fresh air of morning he felt his ideas ripen and bear fruit. His first stop was in front of Fouquet's house where he threw into an open delivery box at the superintendent's door the blessed receipt that, the day before, he'd taken such pains to recover from the intendant's crooked fingers. Hidden in an envelope addressed to Fouquet, the note hadn't been noticed by Planchet, though in matters of divination he ranked with Calchas or Pythia of Apollo. D'Artagnan had thus returned the receipt to Fouquet without compromising himself, removing all further need to question his own honour. Having made his restitution, he said to himself, "Let's inhale deeply of the healthy morning air and breathe out all care! Let my horse Zephyr swell his lungs until he's a hemisphere, while I put my mind to ingenious calculations. It's time," continued d'Artagnan, "to devise a plan of campaign. Now, according to the methods of Sir de Turenne, who has a head positively swelling with ideas, before the plan of campaign it's advisable to consider the enemy generals with whom we'll be dealing. That brings us first to Sir Fouquet. And what's Sir Fouquet? Sir Fouquet," d'Artagnan replied to himself, "is a handsome man much loved by women, a gallant man much loved by poets, and a man of wit much hated by fools. As I'm not a woman, a poet, or a fool, I neither love nor hate the superintendent, so I find myself in the same position as Sir de Turenne before winning the Battle of the Dunes: he didn't hate the Spanish but he defeated them soundly anyway. Wait, *God be with you*, here's an even better example: I'm in the same position as Turenne when he faced the Prince de Condé at Jargeau, Gien, and Faubourg Saint-Antoine: he had nothing against Sir Prince but he was obeying the king. Sir Prince is a charming man but the king is the king; Turenne just gave a great sigh, said, 'Sorry, my Cousin,' and routed his army. Now, what does the king want? That's not my affair. Then, what does Sir Colbert want? Ah, that's another matter entirely! He wants whatever Sir Fouquet doesn't. And what does Sir Fouquet want? That's where it gets serious – because he wants to have everything the king wants." This monologue concluded, d'Artagnan laughed and twirled his riding crop merrily. He was already trotting along the high road, scattering the birds from the hedges, listening to his gold Louis jingle with every bounce, and we must confess when d'Artagnan was in that situation, timidity wasn't one of his vices. "Come," he said, "this mission isn't so dangerous! It'll be like that little show Sir Monck took me to see in London, the one titled *Much Ado about Nothing.*"

Travel

For perhaps the fiftieth time since we began his life story, this man with a heart of bronze and limbs of steel once more left his home and his friends to seek fortune and face death. The one, that is to say, death, had constantly retreated before him as if afraid; the other, that is to say fortune, had been allied with him for only a month. Although he was no great philosopher, no Epicurus or Socrates, he had a capable mind, honed by a life of activity and thought. One is not as brave, as adventurous, and as adept as d'Artagnan without being at the same time a bit of a dreamer. He had retained a few of the maxims of Sir de La Rochefoucauld <sup>41</sup> deemed worthy of being put into Latin by the gentlemen of Port Royal, and he had collected, from the conversation of Athos and Aramis, a fair number



of the sayings of Seneca and Cicero as translated by them and applied to the usages of everyday life. His contempt for wealth that our Gascon had considered an article of faith for the first 35 years of his career had long been regarded by him as the first commandment in the code of courage. "Article one," he would say, "we're brave because we've nothing and we've nothing because we despise riches." And with this leading principle as we've said, having guided his previous 35 years, a d'Artagnan suddenly rich had to wonder whether he was still brave despite his wealth. For anyone other than d'Artagnan, the events on the Place de Grève would have sufficed for an answer to that question. Another's conscience might have been satisfied with that but d'Artagnan was brave enough to inquire seriously into his bravery. "It seems to me I drew quickly enough and cut and thrust freely enough on the Place de Grève to be sure of my courage," he said to himself. Then, he replied, "That might sound good, Captain but it's no answer! I was brave because they threatened to burn my house, and it's a hundred, or even a thousand to one that if the rioters hadn't had that unfortunate idea, their plan of attack would have succeeded, or in any event it wouldn't have been me who thwarted it. And who do I have threatening me now? I have no house in Brittany to be burned, and no other treasure at risk. But no! I have my skin, the precious skin of Sir d'Artagnan that's worth more than all the houses and treasures in the world, the skin that's worth so much to me because, all things considered, it holds together a body around a warm heart that's always ready to fight, and therefore to live. So, I want to live, and in fact I live more fully and completely now that I'm rich. Who the devil said that money was the ruin of life? It's a lie, upon my soul! It seems to me, on the contrary, that now I enjoy the air and sun twice as much as before. *God be with you!* What if I double my fortune again, and trade in this riding crop I hold for a marshal's baton? If that happened, I don't think there'd be enough air and sun for me in the world! And that's by no means out of the question, for who the devil would oppose the king making me a duke and marshal, as his father, King Louis XIII, made a duke and constable out of Albert de Luynes? Aren't I as brave, and far smarter, than that imbecile de Vitry? Ah but that's just the thing that would hold me back – I'm too smart for my own good. Happily, if there's any justice in this world, then fortune will turn my way at some point. I'm certainly owed for everything I've done for Anne of Austria, given how little she's done in return. But now we're working for a king, and a king who seems to want to reign. God guide him to stay on that path! For if he wants to reign, he'll need me, and if needs me, he'll have to give me what he promised. Air and sun! So, I'm still marching, as I always have, from nothing to everything. Only the nothing of today is the everything of before and that's the thing that's changed. So, let's consider! Just what is the state of my heart? For that's what I was talking about, though I was only considering its former condition." And the Gascon placed his hand on his chest, as if seeking his heartbeat. "Why, you wretch!" he said with a bitter smile. "You dog! You hoped for a moment that you didn't have a heart but you do have one, and, terrible servant that you are, it's the heart of a traitor. For you have a heart that speaks to you on behalf of Sir Fouquet. And what is Sir Fouquet, now, in regard to the king? A conspirator, an actual conspirator, so much so that he didn't even bother to hide from you that he was conspiring. You could have been the blade to cut him down, if his good grace and noble spirit hadn't put you back in your sheath. An armed uprising! For that's no less than what Sir Fouquet devised. And if the king vaguely suspects Sir Fouquet of rebellion, I, in fact, could prove that Fouquet has already shed the blood of the king's subjects. So, let's summarize: I know all this and yet keep silent about it, and why? What more could I want from Sir Fouquet than an advance of fifteen thousand livres and a diamond worth a thousand pistoles, along with a smile in which there was as much bitterness as benevolence? Ah, it's that smile for which he owes me his life. But now, I hope that this fool of a heart will keep silent and speak to me no more of Sir Fouquet," continued the musketeer. "As of now, the king is my sun! We'll hear no more about Sir Fouquet, and anyone who comes between me and my sun must beware! Forward, forward, for His Majesty Louis XIV!" These reflections were the only impediment delaying d'Artagnan's travel. Now his reflections concluded, he picked up his mount's pace. But as perfect a horse as Zephyr was, he couldn't trot on indefinitely. The day after his departure from Paris he arrived at Chartres, where d'Artagnan left Zephyr with a friendly innkeeper he knew. From that point on, the musketeer travelled on post horses, employing that mode of locomotion to cross the distance from Chartres to Châteaubriand. In the latter town, far enough from the coast that no one would suspect d'Artagnan of aiming for the ocean, and far enough from Paris that no one might think he came from there as the messenger of Louis XIV, whom d'Artagnan had called his sun all unknowing that he who was still a poor star in the sky of royalty would one day take that day star as his emblem – that messenger of Louis XIV turned in his post horse and bought a swayback nag, a mount so disreputable that no cavalry officer would appear on it for fear of being dishonoured. Except for the colour of its coat, this new acquisition reminded d'Artagnan of the famous yellow horse on which he'd first made his entrance into the wide world. It would be fair to say that, once he'd mounted his new horse, it was no longer d'Artagnan who was riding forth but a man dressed in an iron-grey jerkin and brown knee breeches who could pass for either a priest or layman, though closer to a priest, for d'Artagnan had clapped on his head a velour skullcap and topped that with a round black hat. He wore no sword, just a thick stick hung by a cord from his forearm, with as backup a good ten-inch dagger hidden under his cloak. The nag bought at Châteaubriand completed the transformation, a mount called or rather that d'Artagnan named, "*Ferret*. And if Zephyr has been replaced by the lowly Ferret," d'Artagnan said, "then my name should diminish as well. So, instead of d'Artagnan I'll just be plain Agnan, a name that better suits my grey jerkin, round hat, and old skullcap." Sir Agnan thereafter travelled pretty comfortably upon Ferret, who could trot almost like a real horse, and even at his casual trot was able to make a good twelve leagues a day, thanks to his thin but sinewy shanks, whose virtues the experienced eye of d'Artagnan had detected beneath their coarse and furry coat. Along the way, the traveller made notes about the cold and severe country he rode across, while searching for a reasonable excuse to visit Belle-Île-en-Mer and take a look around without arousing suspicion. The more he thought about his mission, the more convinced he became of the importance of it. In that remote country, the formerly autonomous Duchy of Brittany that wasn't French at that time and is scarcely so today, the people knew nothing of the King of France. Not only didn't they know him, they did not want to know him. The only thing a Breton knew of politics was that his former dukes no longer governed him, leaving a void and nothing more. In place of the old sovereign duke, the parish lords ruled unchecked with above them only God, who has never been forgotten in Brittany. Among those lords of castles and convents, the richest, most powerful, and certainly the most popular was Sir Fouquet, Lord of Belle-Île. Even in that country, within actual sight of the mysterious isle, tradition made it the home of legends and wonders. Not everyone could go there: the island, 6 leagues long by 6 leagues wide was a lord-like property off-limits to the mainlanders who respected it all the more when it was ruled by the family of Rais, a name still dreaded in that country. Sometime after the lordship was elevated to a marquissate by Charles IX, Belle-Île had passed to Sir Fouquet. The isle's fame was no recent thing, dating back to farthest antiquity when it had been named Kalonese from two Greek words meaning *beautiful island*. Thus, even 1800 years earlier and in a different language, it had been called by the name it still bore. There was certainly something special about this property of the superintendent's beyond its position six leagues off the coast of France, a location that made it sovereign in its maritime solitude, like a majestic ship that scorned all harbours and cast its anchor in the open ocean. D'Artagnan learned all this without showing any apparent surprise or even interest. He also learned that the best place to hear news would be at La Roche-Bernard, a good-sized port town at the mouth of the Vilaine. Maybe there he could find a ship. Alternatively, he could cross the salt marshes to Guérande or Croisic and seek there for an opportunity to sail to Belle-Île. He had discovered, since his departure from Châteaubriand, that nothing seemed impossible to Ferret under the hand of Sir Agnan, and nothing Sir Agnan couldn't expect from the dependable Ferret. He therefore sat down to dine on some poultry and pie at an inn in La Roche-Bernard, washing them down from its cellar with some local cider that at first taste he recognised as the most Breton thing he had yet met.

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How d'Artagnan Met a Poet who had become a Printer to Make Sure his Poems got Printed

Before sitting down to dine, d'Artagnan first, as was usual with him, gathered all the local information he could, following the axiom of curiosity that says a man who wants to ask questions must first be ready to answer questions himself. So, d'Artagnan sought, with his usual skill, a useful questioner in the inn at La Roche-Bernard. At the moment, there were two travellers up on the first floor who were either at supper or preparing for it. D'Artagnan had seen their horses in the stable and their baggage in the common room. One travelled with a lackey that placed him above the common, and 2 Perche mares, well-kept and well fed, served as their mounts. The other, a nondescript fellow of meagre means, wearing a dusty coat, threadbare stockings, and boots worn more by pavement than by the stirrup, had come from the direction of Nantes in a cart drawn by a horse so much like Ferret, except for its colour, that d'Artagnan would have had to search for a hundred leagues to find a closer match. This cart contained a number of bundles covered with old canvas. "That traveller there," said d'Artagnan to himself, "is the man for me. He suits me perfectly; now I just have to suit him. Sir Agnan, in his grey jerkin and drooping hat, is quite worthy of dining with the gentleman with the old boots and tired nag." That decided, d'Artagnan called the innkeeper and ordered him to carry his poultry, pie, and cider up to the room of the humble gentleman. Then plate in hand, he climbed the wooden staircase to the man's room and knocked on the door. "Enter!" said the stranger. D'Artagnan entered with a hopeful smile, his plate under his arm, his hat in one hand and a candle in the other. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "I'm a traveller like you, I know no one at this inn and I've the unfortunate habit of being bored when I must eat alone, so much so that my food seems flat and unappetizing. Your face that I saw just now when you went down to have your oysters opened for you, your face looks friendly – and besides, I noticed that you have a horse much like mine, and that the host, doubtless also noticing the resemblance, had placed them next to each other in the stable where they seemed to be getting along famously. I don't see, Sir, why the masters should be lonely when their horses are in good company. So, I came to ask the favour of sharing your table with you. My name is Agnan. Sir Agnan at your service, the unworthy steward of a wealthy lord who wants to buy into the local salt-drying works and sent me to inspect his investment. Truly, Sir, I hope my face pleases you as much as yours does me because I'd be honoured to make your acquaintance." The stranger whom d'Artagnan now saw closely for the first time having only glimpsed him before, had shining black eyes, a sallow complexion, a forehead lined by the passage of fifty years, and good-natured features with an intelligent look about them. *You'd think this fellow never exercised anything but the upper part of his head*, thought d'Artagnan. *He's all eyes and brains; his mouth, nose, and chin are insignificant*. "Sir," replied the person being considered so closely, "I'd be honoured as well, though I'm rarely bored, as my own company always amuses me," he added with a smile. "But no matter, I'm delighted to receive you." However, while saying this the man with the worn boots cast an anxious glance at his table, where his oysters had already disappeared, leaving behind only a slice of salted beef. "Sir," d'Artagnan said quickly, "the innkeeper is coming up with a pretty roast fowl and a fine pie." For d'Artagnan had read in his companion's eyes, however briefly, the fear of being taken advantage by a freeloader. He'd guessed rightly, and with his remark the humble traveller's expression softened. Right on cue, the innkeeper appeared in the doorway with a pair of dishes. The pie and the poultry having been added to the slice of salt bacon, d'Artagnan and his new acquaintance bowed to each other, sat down face to face, and shared the bacon and other dishes like two brothers. "Sir," said d'Artagnan, "you have to admit that having a dining companion is a wonderful thing." "How so?" asked the stranger around a mouthful of pie. "Well, I'll tell you," replied d'Artagnan. The stranger stopped chewing so he could hear better, "First of all," continued d'Artagnan, "instead of each of us dining by the light of only one candle, now we're lit by two." "That's true," said the stranger, nodding at the undeniable truth of this. "Then, I see that you're fond of my pie, while I, on the other hand, prefer your bacon." "That's also true." "Finally, even better than being well illuminated and eating what we prefer, is the pleasure of doing so in company." "Truly, you're a cheerful fellow, Sir," said the friendly stranger. "But yes, Sir! As cheerful as those of us with empty heads always are. Oh, I don't mean you!" continued d'Artagnan. "I see in your eyes the spark of genius." "Oh, Sir!" "Come now, admit something." "What?" "That you're a scholar." "Faith, Sir..." "Aren't you?" "Nearly." "Ah ha! Near in which direction?" "I'm an author." "There! I knew I was right!" cried d'Artagnan delightedly, slapping his knee. "It's almost miraculous." "Oh, Sir..." "Truly!" continued d'Artagnan. "That I should have the good fortune to spend the evening in the company of an author ... perhaps even a famous one?" "Oh!" said the stranger, blushing. "Famous, Sir, is hardly the word." "He's modest!" cried d'Artagnan, as if thrilled. "Modest and humble!" Then turning back to the stranger with an eager familiarity: "But please tell me, at least, the titles of your works, since you didn't tell me your name and I had to guess what you were." "My name is Jupenet, Sir," said the author. "A distinguished name!" said d'Artagnan. "Distinguished, upon my word. I'm not sure why, and pardon me if this is a mistake but I'm sure I've heard that name before." "I've written a few verses," said the poet modestly. "Well, there you go! I must've read them."

"Plus, a tragedy."  
"I must have seen it performed."  
The poet blushed again. "I don't think that can be it. My verses haven't yet been printed."  
"In that case, I must know your name from that tragedy."  
"You're mistaken, I'm afraid because the gentleman comedians of the Hotel of Bourgogne turned it down," said the poet with a sad smile of a solemnity known only to poets. D'Artagnan gnawed his lip.  
"So, you see, Sir," continued the poet, "you can't have heard of me, as I'm still completely unknown."  
"I can't account for it. It seems to me the name of Jupenet is a fine one, entirely worthy of being as well-known as those of Gentlemen Corneille, Rotrou, and Garnier. <sup>47</sup> I hope, Sir, that in place of dessert you will tell me a bit about your tragedy. It will be as good as pudding, *God be with you!* ...Ah, your pardon, sir, that's an oath I indulge in because it's the favourite of my master the lord, so sometimes I borrow it, as it must be in good taste. I allow myself that indulgence only in his absence, of course, because you understand that in his presence ... but really, sir, this cider is quite terrible. Don't you agree? And the carafe is so crooked it wobbles on the table."  
"Shall we make it level?"  
"Sure but with what?"  
"With this knife."  
"And then how will we cut up the roast fowl? Were you thinking of leaving this roast untouched?"  
"Oh, by no means."  
"Then how'll we...?"  
"With this."

The poet fumbled in his pocket and drew out a rectangular bit of cast iron, about an inch and a half in length. But scarcely had the metal rectangle seen the light of day before the poet seemed to think he'd been incautious and made a move to return it to his pocket. But d'Artagnan had noticed it – he was a man who missed nothing – and reached for the bit of iron. "That's interesting. What's it?" he said. "May I see it?"  
"Certainly," said the poet who repented of his urge to conceal it. "Of course – but if I let you see it," he said a trifle smugly, "you have to try to guess what it's for. Though you won't." D'Artagnan had taken the poet's hesitation and urge to hide the bit of iron as proof of its importance. His attention thus focused, he adopted a casual circumspection that gave him the advantage. And despite what Sir Jupenet had said, he'd recognised the function of the metal rectangle at first glance: it was a movable-type printing character. "Can't you guess what it is?" urged the poet.

"No!" said d'Artagnan. "*My faith*, no!"  
"Well, Sir!" said Master Jupenet. "This little piece of metal is a printing character."  
"Never!"  
"An upper-case letter."  
"Is it really?" said Sir Agnan, eyes wide and naïve.  
"Yes, Sir, a capital J, the first letter of my name."  
"That's a printing letter, right there?"  
"Yes, Sir."

"Well! Can I ask something?"  
"What's that?"  
"No, never mind! It would sound too stupid."  
"No, not at all!" said Master Jupenet, patronising.  
"Well, all right, then. If this is just a letter, how do you make a word?"  
"A word?"

"A whole word in printing, yes."  
"That's very simple."  
"Show me!"  
"It interests you?"  
"Very much!"  
"Well, then! I'll explain it to you. Listen!"  
"I'm listening."  
"Pay attention."  
"I shall."  
"Watch closely."  
"I'm watching." D'Artagnan did in fact seem completely absorbed. Jupenet drew from his pocket seven or eight other, smaller pieces of cast iron. "Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan.

"What?"  
"You have a whole printing press in your pocket. Plague take me, it's fascinating!"  
"Isn't it, though?"  
"*My God*, the things you learn when you're travelling!"  
"Your health, Sir," said Jupenet, delighted.  
"And yours, *God be with you!* But not with any more of this cider – it's an abominable drink unworthy of a man who drinks *à la* Hippocrene. That *is* what you poets call your fountain, isn't it?"  
"Yes, Sir, in fact that's what we call the poetic fountain. It comes from two Greek words, *hippos* *that* means horse, and..."  
"Sir," interrupted d'Artagnan, "I'm going to pour you a drink that comes from a single French word, and none the worse for that: 'grape.' This cider nauseates and bloats me at once. Let me ask our host if he might not have a bottle of Beaugency or the vintage of Céran in the back of his cellar."  
They called for the host, and he immediately appeared. "Sir," said the poet to d'Artagnan, "you should know, we might not have time to drink a bottle of juice unless we drain it quickly, for my boat has to sail with the tide."  
"What boat?" asked d'Artagnan.  
"Why, the boat I'm taking to Belle-Île."  
"Ah! To Belle-Île!" said the musketeer. "How fine!"  
"Bah! You'll have plenty of time, Sir," replied the innkeeper, uncorking the bottle. "The tide doesn't turn for an hour."  
"But who will warn me when it's time?" asked the poet.  
"Just watch your neighbour in the next room," replied the host.  
"But I scarcely know him."  
"When he prepares to depart, it's time to go."  
"He's going to Belle-Île, too?"

"Yes."  
"That gentleman with a lackey?" asked d'Artagnan.  
"The gentleman with a lackey."  
"Some lord, doubtless?"  
"I have no idea."  
"Really? No idea?"

"Yes. All I know is he ordered the same juice you did."  
"*Plague!* That's quite an honour for us," said d'Artagnan, pouring a drink for his companion as the host departed.  
"So," said the poet, returning to his earlier idea, "You've never seen a printing press?"  
"Never."

"Here, I'll pick out some letters and with the J, we'll compose a word. O, R, my faith, here's a U, L, A, and N." And he assembled the letters with a speedy familiarity that didn't escape the eye of d'Artagnan. "There, you see? *Journal*."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "I see the letters put together but how do they stay together?" And he refilled the poet's glass. Sir Jupenet smiled like a man who had an answer for everything. He drew from his pocket a small metal rectangle, adjusted its length, and dropped the letters into its slot. "And what do you call this little iron widget?" asked d'Artagnan. "I'm sure it has a name."  
"It's called a composing stick," said Jupenet. "We stack and align them to form the rows of type."  
"You see, it's just as I said – you've a printing press in your pocket," said d'Artagnan, laughing with such silly glee that the poet was completely taken in.

"No," he replied, "I'm just too lazy to write so when I've an idea for a verse I compose it right away for printing. It's a bonus of the job."  
*God!* D'Artagnan thought. *I must make sure of this.* And making the usual excuse that didn't embarrass the musketeer in the least, he got up from the table, left the room, went down the staircase, and ran to the shed where he found the poet's little cart. There he poked under the canvas with the point of his dagger and opened one of the packages that he found full of cast-iron type like that in the poet's pocket. "Just so!" d'Artagnan said. "I don't know yet if Sir Fouquet plans to fortify Belle-Île but here's all the ammunition he could need to wage a war of words." Then pleased with his discovery, he returned to the table. D'Artagnan had learned everything he needed to know. Nonetheless, he stayed with his supper companion until they heard in the next room the sound of a man gathering his things. The printer had previously given orders for his horse to be harnessed, and immediately leapt to his feet. His cart was waiting at the door. The second traveller and his lackey were climbing into the saddle. D'Artagnan followed Jupenet to the port and watched him put his horse and cart onto the ferry. As for the well-dressed rider, he did the same with his horses and servant. But no matter who he asked about the traveller's name, he could learn nothing. However, he took careful notice of his face so it would remain engraved in his memory. D'Artagnan would have liked to have embarked with these 2 passengers but a higher goal than curiosity: that of success, kept him on the shore and returned him to the inn. He returned to his room with a sigh and went immediately to bed, the better to awake early the next day with fresh ideas and the good counsel of the night.

### 332

#### D'Artagnan Continues His Investigations

At daybreak d'Artagnan personally saddled Ferret, who'd been dining sumptuously all night on the feed left by his two companions. The musketeer had learned what little he could from the innkeeper, who was stubborn, defiant, and devoted body and soul to Sir Fouquet. Therefore, in order not to provoke the man's suspicion, he'd given him the story about looking for a salt-farm to invest in. After saying that, to embark for Belle-Île from La Roche-Bernard would excite sceptical commentary that might even be carried to the island. It was also notable that the identity of the gentleman traveller with the lackey remained a secret to d'Artagnan despite all the questions addressed to the innkeeper who pretended complete ignorance. The musketeer had to settle for directions to the salt marshes and took the road that led through them, leaving the shore on his right to pass into a vast and desolate plain that resembled nothing so much as a sea of mud crossed by narrow, salt-encrusted causeways. Ferret trod them carefully on his nervous little hooves, never more than a foot away from the salty muck. D'Artagnan, who knew that trying to manage the horse too closely would just result in a cold mud bath, let him choose his own route, contenting himself with looking ahead at the three sharp points, like spearheads, visible on the horizon of this broad, treeless plain. These were the

steeple of Piriac, the town of Batz, and Le Croisic, nearly identical but the only objects to attract an observer's attention. If the traveller turned to orient himself by looking behind, he saw on the opposite horizon three other steeples, of Guérande, Le Pouliguen, and Saint-Joachim that, added to the circumference, delineated a giant game of skittles in which Ferret and his rider were the wandering ball. Piriac was the first small port on the right. D'Artagnan turned toward it, reminding himself of the names of the principal local salt-farmers in case he needed to mention them. When he rode up to Piriac's little harbour, five big barges loaded with stones were just putting out from it. It seemed strange to d'Artagnan that stone was being shipped from a region where there was none. It took all the affability of Sir Agnan to learn from the closemouthed folk of the port the reason for this. Finally, an old angler told Sir Agnan that the stones didn't come from Piriac, nor from the marshes either, of course. "Then where *do* they come from?" asked the musketeer.

"Sir, they come from Nantes and Paimbœuf."

"Where are they going?"

"To Belle-Île, Sir."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan in the same tone he'd used to persuade the printer that the metal type interested him. "Are they building, then, on Belle-Île?"

"*Mais oui-da!* Every year Sir Fouquet makes repairs to his castle."

"Is it ruined, then?"

"It's very old."

"Oh! I see."

*In fact*, thought d'Artagnan, *nothing could be more natural. Every owner has the right to repair his property. If I was just improving the façade of Our Lady's Portrait, that wouldn't mean I was fortifying the place! Really, I think His Majesty has received false reports about this.*

"You must admit," he continued aloud, addressing the angler, for his mission compelled him to be contrary, "you must admit, my good Sir, that these stones are taking an unusual route."

"How so?" said the angler.

"They come from Nantes or Paimbœuf at the mouth of the Loire, didn't you say?"

"Down from there."

"That doesn't sound very convenient to me. Why not go straight from Saint-Nazaire to Belle-Île?"

"Why? Because those flat-bottomed barges don't take the sea waves well," replied the angler.

"Why is that a reason?"

"Pardon me, Sir but one can see you're no sailor," said the angler with a touch of disdain.

"Then explain it to me if you'd, my good man. Why go from Paimbœuf to Piriac and then from Piriac to Belle-Île when one could go from La Roche-Bernard to Nantes and from Nantes to Piriac?"

"By water, the first route is shorter," replied the angler imperturbably.

"But doesn't that just add a dogleg?" The angler shook his head. "The shortest route from one point to another is a straight line," d'Artagnan continued stubbornly.

"You forget the currents, Sir."

"Even given currents."

"And the wind."

"That too?"

"But yes. The current of the Loire carries the boats nearly to Croisic. If they need to refit a bit or rest the crew, they come a little further along the coast to Piriac; from Piriac they pick up a reverse current that carries them to Île Dumet, two and a half leagues out."

"All right."

"From there, the current of the Vilaine takes them to the next island, Hoëdic."

"I see that."

"And then, Sir, from that island to Belle-Île is a straight shot. The sea, though choppy to left and to right, is as calm as a mirror between those two islands, and the barges glide across like ducks paddling on the Loire!"

"Maybe," said the stubborn Sir Agnan, "but it's still a long way around."

"But that's how Sir Fouquet wants it," replied the angler conclusively, removing his woollen cap as he pronounced the honoured name. A glance from d'Artagnan, with a look as sharp and piercing as a sword blade, discerned nothing in the old man's heart but naive devotion while his expression showed placid satisfaction. When he said, "That's how Sir Fouquet wants it," it was as if he had said, "God wills it to be so."

D'Artagnan had gone as far as he could in this direction; besides, the barges having gone, the only boat left in Piriac was the old man's, and it looked like it needed a lot of work before it could venture out to sea. So d'Artagnan patted Ferret, who gave a new proof of his charming character by heading right back into the salt marshes, following his nose across the plain as he sniffed the constant dry breeze that bent the gorse and stunted heather of that country. They arrived at Croisic around 5 o'clock. If d'Artagnan had been a poet, those broad strands, a league wide in places and covered by the sea at high tide, would have been an inspiring sight. At the ebb they were greyish, desolate, strewn with seaweed and algae over scattered white stones, like bones in a vast cemetery. But the soldier, now a politician and man of ambition, had no need to consider it, or look to the heavens for hope or a warning. A red sky meant for the locals wind and storm, while white and fluffy clouds on the azure horizon said the sea will be likewise soft and serene. D'Artagnan just looked at the blue sky and sniffed at the salt breeze and said to himself, "I'll sail on the first tide even if it's in nothing bigger than a nutshell." At Croisic as at Piriac, he noticed enormous heaps of stone lined up on the beach. These tumbled walls, demolished further at each tide by transports bound for Belle-Île, were in the eyes of the musketeer further proof of what he'd suspected at Piriac. *Was it an old wall Sir Fouquet was repairing or was he building fortifications?* To find out, he had to see for himself. D'Artagnan put Ferret in the local stable, supped, went to bed, and the next morning at daybreak he was strolling along the port, or rather across the shingle. The opening to Croisic harbour was fifty feet wide and overseen by a lookout tower that resembled an enormous sugarloaf on a plate. The strand was the plate and mounds of stones piled into a cone formed the loaf, mounted by a spiral path that served as both way to the top and lookout platform. That's how it is today, and that's how it was 180 years ago only the loaf was smaller, and the path probably didn't have a trellised railing now wound with pretty plantings. On the shingle, three or four anglers were discussing sardines and shrimp. Sir Agnan approached the anglers with a cheerful look and a smile on his lips. "Are we fishing today?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said one of them. "We're just waiting on the tide."

"Where do you go to fish, my friends?"

"Along the coast, Sir."

"What are the best fishing sites?"

"Ah, that depends! Around the islands, for example."

"Is it far to these islands?"

"Not too far; four leagues."

"Four leagues! But that's a voyage!"

The anglers laughed in Sir Agnan's face. "But listen," he said with naïve simplicity, "At four leagues you lose sight of the coast, don't you?"

"Well, not always."

"I still say it's far, much too far. Otherwise I'd have asked you to let me come aboard and show me something I've never seen."

"What's that?"

"A live deep-sea fish."

"Sir is from the provinces?" said one of the anglers.

"Yes, I'm from Paris."

The Breton shrugged his shoulders, then asked "Have you seen Sir Fouquet in Paris?"

"Often," Agnan replied.

"Often?" said the anglers, moving closer to the Parisian. "Do you know him?"

"A little; he's a close friend of my master."

"Ah!" said the anglers.

"And," added d'Artagnan, "I've seen all his châteaux at Saint-Mandé, Vaux, and his hôtel in Paris."

"Is it beautiful?"

"Superb."

"But not as beautiful as Belle-Île," said one angler.

"Ha!" replied Sir Agnan with a disdainful chuckle that irritated his audience.

"It's obvious you've never seen Belle-Île," said the most vocal of the anglers. "Don't you know that it's six leagues long and has trees on it bigger than on the Nantes promenade?"

"Trees! Out at sea!" laughed d'Artagnan. "Oh, I'd like to see that!"

"Easily done. We're going fishing off the island of Hoëdic; come with us. From there you can see the paradise of Belle-Île, with its trees towering against the sky. You'll see the white walls of the castle that cut like a line across the horizon."

"Oh!" said d'Artagnan. "That does sound beautiful. But Sir Fouquet's château at Vaux has a hundred turrets, did you know that?"

The Breton raised his head in tentative admiration but wasn't convinced. "A hundred turrets!" he said. "That's good – but Belle-Île is better. Would you like to see Belle-Île?"

"Is such a thing possible?" asked Sir Agnan.

"Yes, with the governor's permission."

"But I don't know the governor."

"Since you know Sir Fouquet, you'll just give him your name."

"Oh, my friends! I'm not a gentleman!"

"Anyone can enter Belle-Île," declared the angler in his pure Breton dialect, "provided he means no harm to Belle-Île or its lord."

The musketeer felt a slight shiver go through him. *True enough*, he thought. Then he said aloud, "If I could be sure I wouldn't be seasick..."

"What, on this?" said the angler, proudly showing off his pretty little round-bottomed boat.

"Let's go! I'm convinced," cried Sir Agnan. "I want to see Belle-Île even if they won't let me in."

"We can get in."

"You can? How?"

"*Dame!* We sell our fish to the corsairs."

"What, you say there are corsairs?"

"I do – Sir Fouquet is having two fast privateers built to chase the Dutch and the English, and we sell our fish to the crews of those vessels."

*Well*, thought d'Artagnan. *Better and better! A printing press, fortifications, and now corsairs. It seems Sir Fouquet is no mean opponent after all, and I was wrong. It'll be worth the effort to see it up close.*

"We sail at five-thirty," the angler added gravely.

"I'm all yours and will stay with you till then."

In fact, d'Artagnan went with them as the anglers rolled the boat over logs down to the edge of the advancing tide. As the sea rose, he was drenched to his neck, feigning some fear, to the amusement of the little children of the port who watched him with their big, bright eyes. He laid down on a folded sail to dry off and watch the preparations, and after two hours the boat took to the sea. The anglers, busy with their lines and nets as they sailed, didn't notice that their passenger didn't blanch, groan, nor suffer, and that despite the horrible pitching and brutal rolling of the boat that no one bothered to mitigate, the novice sailor maintained his presence of mind and even appetite. They were fishing, and the fishing was pretty good. The shrimp took their baited lines, as did, with sudden jolts, the sole and plaice. Two nets had been fouled by enormous congers and cod, and three sea-eels writhed and twisted in the hold in their dying agonies. D'Artagnan had brought them luck, or so they told him. The soldier found the work so pleasant that he put his own hand to the job, that is to say the lines, and every time a jolt struck the line, he uttered joyful cries and oaths that would have astounded his musketeers. In conquering this new prey, he strained all the muscles of his arms and used every bit of his strength and skill. This pleasant occupation had made him forget his diplomatic mission. He was wrestling with a frightful conger, clinging to the side with one hand while he fought his antagonist with the other, avoiding its gaping jaw, when the boss said to him, "Take care they don't see you from Belle-Île!"

These words had the same effect on d'Artagnan as the first whistling musket-ball of a battle; he dropped the line and the conger, and both returned to the sea. D'Artagnan looked up to see, a half-league off, the bluish, rocky silhouette of Belle-Île, dominated by the white line of its castle walls. Beyond was the rising land, with forests, green plains, and cattle in the pastures. That's what first attracted the musketeer's attention; the sun, at a low angle, glanced golden rays from the sea and limned the island in a glimmering aura. This made it hard to discern details, as every tree or wall threw a solid streak of shadow across the adjacent terrain. "Ho!" said d'Artagnan at the sight of the shore's cliffs of dark rock. "There, it seems to me, are natural fortifications that no engineer need improve to forestall a landing. Where on earth could one set foot on ground that God has so completely defended?"

"This way," the master of the boat replied, throwing over the helm and porting the rudder with a jolt, turning the bow in the direction of a pretty little port with a half-moon harbour newly encircled with battlements.

"What the devil do I see there?" said d'Artagnan.

"You see Locmaria," replied the angler.

"Up on the heights?"

"That's Bangor."

"And beyond?"

"Sauzon ... and Le Palais."

"*God be with you!* It's a whole world. Ah! Look at all the soldiers."

"There are seventeen hundred men on Belle-Île, Sir," replied the angler with pride. "Don't you know the garrison is twenty-two companies of infantry?"

"*God be with you,*" d'Artagnan repeated, stamping his foot. *His Majesty might be right.*

### 333

#### In Which the Reader will Doubtless be as Astonished as d'Artagnan to Meet an Old Acquaintance

In a landing from the sea, even with the smallest boat, there's always a certain amount of trouble and confusion that doesn't give one the freedom to pay close attention to one's new surroundings. The swinging gangplank, the shouting sailors, the sound of the waves on the shingle, the eager shouts of those waiting ashore, all contribute to one result: hesitation. So, it was only after disembarking and spending a few minutes on shore that d'Artagnan noticed in the port and even more toward the island's interior, a moving mass of labourers. In front of him, d'Artagnan recognised the five barges of rubble that he had seen departing the port of Piriac. The stones were being transferred to shore by a human chain of 25 or 30 peasants. The largest boulders were being loaded onto carts and borne off in the same direction as the rubble, toward works the full extent of which d'Artagnan couldn't yet determine. The whole port seethed with activity like that which Telemachus saw when he landed at Salentum. D'Artagnan was aching to investigate further but he didn't dare to arouse distrust or suspicion by showing too much curiosity. So, he went further inland only little by little, barely venturing beyond the line of anglers on the beach, watching everything, saying nothing, and replying to all greetings or inquiries with a silly question or polite evasion. Meanwhile, as his companions plied their trade, selling and crying the virtues of their fish to the inhabitants of the town, d'Artagnan gradually gained ground until reassured by how little attention was paid to him, he began to make a sustained and intelligent examination of the locals and their surroundings. And the first thing d'Artagnan noticed was recent changes in the terrain whose purpose no soldier could mistake. At either end of the port, sited so their arcs of fire enfiladed the full sweep of the harbour, two shore batteries had been constructed and were nearly ready to receive their cannon. D'Artagnan could see the workmen completing the artillery platforms and finishing the half-circle rails upon which the pieces would rotate in their emplacements. Beside each outer battery, other workers were filling the rectangular wire baskets called gabions with rubble to build up the revetments before a second, inner battery. This one had embrasures for smaller guns and a foreman directed the men who bound the gabions into the gaps excavated for them in the turf around the embrasures with cables. Based on the activity visible at these terminal works, they looked to be nearly complete; they hadn't yet been furnished with guns but their platforms were filled and graded, and their planks fully installed. The surface of the earthworks had been carefully packed and compounded, and assuming the artillery was already on the island, in only two or three days the port's defences could be complete. What astonished d'Artagnan, when he turned his gaze from the shore batteries to the fortifications of the city, was his recognition that Belle-Île's defences were being built to a completely new system, an approach he'd heard about from the Count of La Fère as a great advance but which he'd never seen applied. These fortifications weren't built according to the Dutch method of de Marollois, nor the French method of Knight Antoine de Ville, nor even the system of Manesson Mallet, an able engineer who had recently left Portugal to take service with France. These works were remarkable in that, instead of rising from the ground like old-style ramparts designed to defend the town from escalades, these, on the contrary, sank into it, and what gave height to their walls was the depths of their moats. It didn't take d'Artagnan long to recognise the superiority of such a system that provides only a glancing target for cannon fire. In addition, because the moats were below sea level, their ditches could be flooded by opening their sea gates. Moreover, these works were almost completed, and a group of labourers, overseen by a man who appeared to be directing the job, was busy laying the final stones. A plank scaffold had been thrown over the ditch to connect the inside and outside and enable the passage of wheelbarrows. D'Artagnan asked, with naïve curiosity, whether he might be allowed to cross over this bridge and was told there was no order forbidding it. So, d'Artagnan crossed the planks and approached the group of workers. This group was dominated by the man d'Artagnan had already noticed, who appeared to be the engineer-in-chief. A plan was laid on a large flat stone that served as a table, and a few steps beyond that a crane was at work. This engineer, so obviously important, was the first to draw d'Artagnan's attention, partly because he wore a doublet that was so splendid it seemed at odds with the work he was doing that seemed to call for the outfit of a master mason rather than that of a noble lord. He was, moreover, a man of stature, tall, broad, and square-shouldered, and wearing a broad hat festooned with plumes. His gestures could not have been more majestic, and he seemed, from behind, to be chiding the workers for their laziness and weakness. D'Artagnan drew nearer. As he did the man with the plumes stopped gesticulating and with his hands on his knees, leaned forward to observe the efforts of six workers who were trying to lift a dressed stone above the height of a lumber roller so it could be brought to where the crane could grasp it. The six men, surrounding the stone, combined all their efforts to raise it eight or ten inches above the ground, sweating and panting, while a seventh prepared to slip the roller under it as soon as there was enough room. But already the stone had twice slipped from their hands before they could lift it high enough for the roller to slide under it. It goes without saying that every time the stone got away from them, they jumped back to avoid having their feet crushed, and each time the great stone fell it sank deeper into the slippery soil that made the workers' task that much more difficult. A third effort was made, the six men bending over the stone, the man with the plumes crying the word, "Heave!"

The exhortation always used in such affairs but with no better success that just discouraged the labourers even further. The chief straightened up. "Ho!" he said. "What's this? Am I dealing with men of straw? *Ox-horn!* Step aside, and I'll show you how it's done."

"*Plague!*" said d'Artagnan. "Does he think he can lift that rock himself? I'd like to see him try."

The workers, shamed by the engineer, stood back, eyes down and shaking their heads, all but the one manning the roller, who was preparing to do his job. The man with the plumes approached the stone, stooped, slipped his hands under its bottom side, flexed his Herculean muscles, and, without a jerk but moving slowly like a machine, lifted the great stone a foot off the ground. The worker with the roller took the opportunity to slide the lumber under the stone. "*That's it!*" said the giant, not dropping the stone, merely resting it on its support.

"*God be with you!*" cried d'Artagnan, "I know only one man capable of such a feat of strength."

"Eh?" said the colossus, turning around.

"Porthos!" whispered d'Artagnan in a stupor. "Porthos on Belle-Île!"

For his part, the man with the plumes took a close look at the pretended steward and recognised him, despite his disguise. "D'Artagnan!" he thundered.

But then a blush coloured his face. "Hush!" he said to d'Artagnan.

And, "Hush!" said the musketeer.

In fact, if Porthos had just been discovered by d'Artagnan, d'Artagnan had likewise been discovered by Porthos, and the first thought of both men had been to maintain their incognito. But their second thought was to rush into each other's arms, for what they wanted to conceal from those around them was their names, not their friendship. However, after the embrace came mutual reflection. *Why the devil is Porthos on Belle-Île lifting giant stones?* D'Artagnan thought.

But though d'Artagnan kept his question in his thoughts, his friend Porthos, who was not so diplomatic, spoke his question aloud. "Why the devil have you come to Belle-Île," he asked d'Artagnan, "and what are you doing here?"

It was necessary to reply without hesitation. To hesitate in answering Porthos's question would have been a blunder for which d'Artagnan could never forgive himself. "By God, my friend," he said, "I'm on Belle-Île because you are!"

"No!" said Porthos, visibly stunned by this statement and trying to process it with that clarity of thinking with which we're familiar.

"Absolutely," continued d'Artagnan, who had no intention of giving his friend time to think it through. "I went looking for you at Pierrefonds."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't find me there?"

"No but I found Mousqueton."

"Is he all right?"

"*By my troth*, yes!"

"But I don't think Mouston would tell you where I was."

"Why wouldn't he? Have I become unworthy somehow of Mouston's confidence?"

"No, he just didn't know where I was."

"Ha! Did you think that was reason enough to stop me?"

"But then how did you find me?"

"How? My dear friend, a grand lord like you always leaves traces of his passage, and I wouldn't be the man I think I am if I couldn't follow my own friends' tracks."

This explanation, flattering though it was, didn't entirely satisfy Porthos. "But I didn't leave tracks because I travelled in disguise," he said.

"Oh, you came in disguise?" said d'Artagnan.

"Yes."

"As what?"

"As a miller."

"And you think a noble lord like you, Porthos, can imitate common manners well enough to fool people?"

"But yes! I swear to you, my friend, I played my part so well that everyone was deceived."

"Maybe not as well as you think, since I was able to follow and discover you."

"All right, how *did* you follow and discover me?"

"Hold on, I was about to tell you. Imagine that Mouston..."

"So! It was that clown Mouston," said Porthos, arching his mighty eyebrows.

"Wait, wait, and hear me out. It's not Mouston's fault, since he didn't know where you were."

"That's true. Which is why I don't understand."

"How impatient you are, Porthos!"  
"When I don't understand, I'm a terror."  
"You will understand, really. Aramis wrote to you at Pierrefonds, didn't he?"  
"Yes."

"And he told you to arrive before the equinox, right?"  
"That's right."

"Well! There you have it," said d'Artagnan, hoping that explanation would be enough for Porthos.  
Porthos appeared to be thinking very hard. "Ah!" he said. "I *do* understand. Since Aramis said I was to arrive before the equinox, you knew that meant I should join him. You then asked yourself where Aramis was, saying, 'When I find Aramis, I find Porthos.' You learned that Aramis was in Brittany, so you said, 'Porthos is in Brittany.'"  
"Exactly! Really, Porthos, you're practically a prophet. You'll understand, then, that when I arrived at La Roche-Bernard, I heard about the beautiful fortification work under way on Belle-Île. That piqued my curiosity. I took passage on a fishing boat, without having any idea you were here. I landed, and saw a fellow lifting a stone that Ajax couldn't have budged. I cried, 'Only the Baron de Bracieux is capable of such a feat of strength!' You heard me, turned, recognised me, we embraced, and faith! If you will, dear friend, we'll embrace again."  
"Well, that explains everything," said Porthos.  
And he embraced d'Artagnan with such sincerity that the musketeer could scarcely breathe for 5 minutes. "Come now, you're stronger than ever," said d'Artagnan, "and in your arms, fortunately for you!" Porthos saluted d'Artagnan with a gracious smile. But during the five minutes while he recovered his breath, the musketeer thought about the difficult role he had to play. He had to be the one who always asked and never answered. And by the time his breathing had recovered, his plan of campaign was laid.

**334**  
**In which the Ideas of d'Artagnan Begin to clear Up, Though Cloudy at 1<sup>st</sup>**

D'Artagnan immediately took the offensive. "Now that I've told you everything, dear friend, or rather since you've guessed everything, tell me what you're doing here, getting covered in dust and mud?" Porthos wiped his brow, and looking around him with pride, said, "But it seems to me you can see exactly what I'm doing here!"  
"Right, right – you're lifting stones."  
"Oh, only to show these lazy folk what a real man is like!" Porthos said with contempt. "But, you understand..."  
"Yes, it's not your station to lift stones, though there are many whose station it is who can't lift them like you. That's what made me ask you just now, 'What are you doing here, Baron?'"  
"I'm studying topography, Knight."  
"What? You're studying topography?"  
"Yes. But you – why are you dressed as a bourgeois?"  
D'Artagnan realised he'd made a mistake by showing his astonishment that had given Porthos a chance to riposte with a question. Fortunately, it was a question d'Artagnan expected. "Well, you know," he said, "I *am* a bourgeois these days, so my outfit isn't surprising, as it reflects my condition."  
"Come, now, you're a musketeer!"  
"I was, *my good friend* but I've given my resignation."  
"Bah!"  
"I have, by God!"  
"You've quit the service?"  
"Resigned."  
"You've left the king?"  
"Completely."  
Porthos raised his arms to heaven as if this news was beyond belief. "Oh, I must confess," he said, "that bewilders me."  
"And yet, it's so."  
"But how'd such a thing happen?"  
"The king displeased me. Mazarin had disgusted me for a long while as you know and I finally just threw my helmet over the wall."  
"But Mazarin's dead."  
"Oh, I know but by the time of his death my resignation had already been handed in and accepted for two months. It was then that, being free at last, I went to Pierrefonds to see my dear Porthos. I had heard of the brilliant way you organised your leisure time, and I wanted to try your methods for a week or two."  
"My friend, you know that my house isn't open to you for just a week or two but for a year, ten years, or life."  
"Thank you, Porthos."  
"It's nothing! Do you need any money?" said Porthos, jingling a purse filled with fifty *Louis*. "You know, if you do..."  
"No, I need nothing; I invested my savings with Planchet who pays me the interest."  
"Your savings?"  
"Of course," said d'Artagnan. "Why do you think I'd not have savings like other people, Porthos?"  
"Me? I think no such thing. On the contrary, I always suspected ... that is, Aramis always suspected you'd savings. As for me, I know nothing of financial affairs, I just assumed a musketeer's savings wouldn't be that much."  
"I'm not worth much compared to a genuine millionaire like you, Porthos but you be the judge. For starters, I'd twenty-five thousand livres."  
"A nice amount," said Porthos affably.  
"And then," continued d'Artagnan, "as of the twenty-fifth of last month, I added another two hundred thousand livres."  
Porthos opened his eyes wide enough to ask without words: *Where the devil did you steal a sum like that, old friend?* He blinked and said, "Two hundred thousand livres!"  
"Yes, and with the twenty-five thousand I'd and the twenty thousand I've on me, that makes me worth two hundred and forty-five thousand livres."  
"But look here! Where did this fortune come from?"  
"Ah, well! I'll explain that later, dear friend – it's just that you have so much to tell me about yourself, I wanted to get my story out of the way first."  
"Bravo!" said Porthos. "Now we're all rich. But what's it I'd to tell you?"  
"You'd to tell me how Aramis's appointed..."  
"Oh, right! Bishop of Vannes."  
"That's it," said d'Artagnan, "Bishop of Vannes. Dear Aramis! He always did know how to get ahead."  
"Yes, yes! And he doesn't mean to stop there."  
"Oh? You think he won't be satisfied with the purple robe of a bishop and would prefer the red hat of a cardinal?"  
"Hush! But yes, it's been promised."  
"Bah! By the king?"  
"By someone more powerful than the king."  
"The devil you say, Porthos! Your story's incredible, my friend."  
"Why incredible? Isn't there always someone in France more powerful than the king?"  
"Oh, true enough. In the time of King Louis XIII, it's the Duke Richelieu, and during the Regency it's Cardinal Mazarin. And in the reign of Louis XIV, it's Sir..."  
"Go on!"  
"It's Sir Fouquet."  
"Bull's-eye! You hit it first shot."  
"So, it's Sir Fouquet who's promised the red hat to Aramis?"  
Porthos assumed an air of reserve. "Now, old friend," he said, "God forbid I should meddle in others' affairs, especially when it comes to secrets they'd prefer to keep. When you see Aramis, he'll tell you what he thinks he should tell you."  
"You're right, Porthos, and you're as silent as a stone. Let's return to you."  
"Sure," said Porthos.  
"You told me you're here to study topography?"  
"Exactly."  
"Well, by God, what a fine study you've made of it!"  
"How so?"  
"These new fortifications are admirable."  
"Is that your honest opinion?"  
"No doubt about it. Really, to anything but a prolonged siege, Belle-Île looks impregnable."  
Porthos rubbed his hands with satisfaction. "That's my opinion, too," he said.  
"But who the devil has fortified this backwater so well?"  
Porthos swelled with pride. "You mean I didn't tell you?"  
"No."  
"You don't suspect who it was?"  
"No; all I can say is it's clearly a man who's studied every system of fortification and arrived at the best."  
"Oh, hush!" said Porthos. "You make me blush, my dear d'Artagnan."  
"Wait!" replied the musketeer. "You mean, all the time ... it's you! Oh!"  
"By God's good grace, my friend."  
"You're the one who imagined, planned, and constructed these bastions, these redoubts, those curtain walls and demi-lunes, and that covered approach?"  
"Ah, please..."  
"You, who built that outwork with its retiring and salient angles?"  
"My friend..."  
"You, who gave those gun embrasures that oblique slope that protects both the cannon and those who serve them?"  
"Well, good Lord, yes."  
"Ah, Porthos, we must bow to you in admiration! How carefully you've always hidden this special genius! I hope, my friend, that you'll show me all the details of your works."  
"Nothing could be simpler. Here are the plans."  
"Let me see." Porthos led d'Artagnan to the flat rock that served as a table and upon which the plan was laid out. Across the base of the plan was written these instructions in Porthos's square hand:

Instead of using the Square or Rectangle as was previously done, you'll Plot All Works using Regular Hexagons. This Polygon's the Advantage of offering More Angles than the Quadrilateral. Each Side of your Hexagon, the Length of which will be decided by the dimensions of the site will be divided into 2 Parts, and from the Centre you will Draw a Perpendicular to the Centre of the Polygon that will be Equal in Length to 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the Side. From the Ends on Each Side of the Polygon you will Draw 2 Diagonals that Cut the Perpendicular. These 2 Lines will form the Major Lines of Defence.

"The devil!" said d'Artagnan when he reached the end of these instructions. "But is this the basis of the complete system, Porthos?"

"Every bit," said Porthos. "Would you like to see more?"

"No, I've read enough. But since you're the one, my dear Porthos, who directs the work, why do you need to have the system written out?"

"Because of death, my friend."

"Death? What do you mean?"

"Eh! We are, after all, only mortals."

"That's true," said d'Artagnan. "You have an answer for everything, my friend." And he set the plan back on the stone. But before he did so, d'Artagnan looked closely at the writing and had been able to distinguish, under the enormous lettering of Porthos, a smaller and more elegant handwriting that reminded him of certain letters to Marie Michon <sup>51</sup> he'd seen in his youth. However, a gum eraser had almost entirely effaced this writing that would have escaped the notice of any eye less keen than that of our musketeer. "Bravo, my friend!" d'Artagnan said.

"And now you know everything you want to know, don't you?" said Porthos with a broad gesture at his surroundings.

"My God, yes – except, do me one favour, old friend."

"Speak; I am the master here."

"Tell me the name of that gentleman walking across over there."

"Where, over there?"

"Beyond the soldiers."

"Followed by a lackey?"

"That's the one."

"Accompanied by a sort of old crow dressed in black?"

"Exactly!"

"That's Sir Gétard."

"And what's Sir Gétard, *my friend*?"

"He's the architect for the house."

"For what house?"

"Sir Fouquet's house."

"Oh ho!" said d'Artagnan. "Are you also considered part of Sir Fouquet's household, Porthos?"

"Me? Why do you say that?" asked the topographer, blushing to the tips of his ears.

"Well, you say *the house* when speaking of Belle-Île the same way you might when speaking of the Château de Pierrefonds."

Porthos pursed his lips. "Belle-Île belongs to Sir Fouquet, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"As Pierrefonds belongs to me?"

"Certainly."

"Did you go to Pierrefonds?"

"I told you, I was there not two months ago."

"Did you see a gentleman who was in the habit of walking around carrying drafting tools?"

"No, though I might have."

"Well! That gentleman is Sir Boulingrin."

"And what is Sir Boulingrin?"

"You see? At my place, when someone sees a gentleman carrying a ruler and asks me, 'What is Sir Boulingrin,' I answer, 'He's the architect for the house.' Well! Sir Gétard is Sir Fouquet's Boulingrin.

But he has nothing to do with the fortifications, that's solely my concern, do you understand? Absolutely nothing."

"Heavens, Porthos!" cried d'Artagnan, letting his arms fall limp as if defeated. "Old friend, you're not only a Herculean topographer, you're also a first-class logician."

"Aren't I, though?" replied Porthos. "Wasn't that profoundly reasoned?"

And he puffed up like the conger that d'Artagnan had let escape him that morning. "And now," continued d'Artagnan, "is that shabby crow who accompanies Sir Gétard also of the house of Sir Fouquet?"

"Him?" said Porthos with contempt. "That's a Sir Jupenet or Juponet, some kind of poet."

"Who's brought here?"

"I believe so."

"I should think Sir Fouquet had enough poets back home with Scudéry, Loret, Pellisson, and La Fontaine. Compared to them, I must say, Porthos, this poet doesn't reflect well on you."

"The saving grace, my friend, is that he isn't here as a poet."

"What is he then?"

"Some kind of printer – but since you mention him, I think I'd have a word with this shabby crow."

"Go ahead."

Porthos beckoned to Jupenet but the man had recognised d'Artagnan and was unsure if he should approach until Porthos beckoned to him again. This second gesture was so imperative that he had to obey and came over. "Here!" said Porthos. "You arrived just yesterday and already you're making a nuisance of yourself."

"How so, Sir Baron?" asked Jupenet, trembling.

"Your press was thumping and groaning all night, Sir," said Porthos, "and it kept me from sleeping, *ox-horn*!"

"But, Sir..." objected Jupenet timidly.

"You have nothing to print yet, so you have no excuse to run your press. What were you printing all night?"

"A little light poetry, sir, of my own composition."

"Light! Not light enough to keep your press from moaning piteously. See that it doesn't happen again, do you hear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"All right then, this once, I forgive you. Be gone!"

The poet withdrew even more humbly than he'd come. "Well! Now that that clown's been told off, let's have some lunch," said Porthos.

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, "let's eat."

"But I have to warn you, my friend," said Porthos, "that we have only two hours for our meal."

"We'll just have to make the best of it. But why do we have only two hours?"

"Because the tide turns at one o'clock, and I leave on the tide for Vannes. But I'll be back tomorrow, dear friend, so stay at my place, where your word will be law. I have a good cook and a better juice cellar."

"But no," interrupted d'Artagnan, "I have a better idea."

"What?"

"You're going to Vannes, you say?"

"That's right."

"To see Aramis?"

"Yes."

"Well, I came from Paris expressly to see Aramis..."

"That's true."

"So, I'll go with you."

"Yes! Of course!"

"I'd set out to see Aramis and then you but man proposes and God disposes, so I'll start with you and end with Aramis."

"Fine!"

"Now, how long does it take you to get from here to Vannes?"

"Lord love us, six hours at the most: three hours to cross the sea between here and Sarzeau, and then three hours on the road from Sarzeau to Vannes."

"Most convenient! And do you often go to Vannes, since you're so close to the bishopric?"

"Yes, once a week. Wait a moment while I get my construction plan."

Porthos picked up his plan, folded it carefully, and stuffed it inside his doublet. *Good!* D'Artagnan thought. *I think I now know the true identity of the engineer who's fortifying Belle-Île.* Two hours later, with the rising tide, Porthos and d'Artagnan sailed for Sarzeau.

The crossing from Belle-Île to Sarzeau was a quick one, thanks to one of those small corsair vessels d'Artagnan had heard about on the way over, and which, built for speed and made for pursuit, were temporarily sheltered in Locmaria harbour, where one of them, one-quarter crewed, was assigned to packet service between Belle-Île and the continent. The trip gave d'Artagnan an opportunity to convince himself once again that Porthos though serving as an engineer and topographer, had no knowledge of state secrets. His perfect ignorance might have seemed to others like clever deceit but d'Artagnan knew the ins and outs of his Porthos too well not to spot a secret if one was there, as a tidy and meticulous old man knows without looking where to find a book on the shelves of his library or the linen in the drawer of his dresser. So if he, the ingenious d'Artagnan had turned Porthos inside out and had found nothing, there was nothing to find. "It's likely," said d'Artagnan to himself, "that I'll learn more about Vannes in half an hour than Porthos's learned about Belle-Île in two months. But if I'm going to learn anything at all, I can't let Porthos use the only stratagem I've left to him – he mustn't warn Aramis of my arrival." Therefore, all the musketeer's attention was turned to keeping an eye on Porthos. It must be said that Porthos didn't deserve such suspicion; the giant didn't have a deceitful thought in his head. D'Artagnan's sudden appearance might have given him a moment of suspicion but d'Artagnan had quickly regained the position he had always occupied in that good, courageous heart, and no cloud of doubt obscured Porthos's gaze when he turned it from time to time with tenderness on his friend. Upon landing, Porthos asked if his horses were ready for him. In fact, he soon spotted them waiting with his equerry at the corner of the road that curves in a bypass around Sarzeau, and which, after passing the little town, leads to Vannes. These horses were 2 in number, 1 for Porthos and 1 for his equerry – for Porthos needed an equerry now that a cart was Mousqueton's only means of transportation. D'Artagnan expected Porthos to propose having his equerry ride ahead to fetch another mount, and planned to object to that idea but d'Artagnan's expectations were belied: Porthos simply ordered his equerry to dismount and wait for him at Sarzeau



while d'Artagnan rode the equerry's horse, and that's how it was arranged. "Why, you've become a man of foresight, my dear Porthos," said d'Artagnan to his friend when he found himself riding the equerry's horse.

"I have but this is all thanks to Aramis; I don't have my mounts and tack here, so Aramis has put his stables at my disposal."

"And good mounts they are, too, for bishop's horses!" said d'Artagnan. "Though I'm sure Aramis is very particular, for a bishop."

"He's a saintly man," Porthos replied, looking up at the heavens, though with a smile.

"Then he's considerably changed," said d'Artagnan, "for we both know how worldly he used to be."

"He's been touched by efficacious grace!" said Porthos.

"Excellent!" said d'Artagnan. "In that case I'm twice as eager to see him."

And he spurred his horse to greater speed. "A plague on that!" said Porthos. "If we ride that fast, it'll take us only one hour instead of two."

"How far did you say it was, Porthos?"

"Four and a half leagues."

"That's not so far."

"We could have taken a boat up the canal but the devil with rowers and tow-horses! The former are like tortoises and the latter are slugs. If one can get a good horse between his knees that always beats such things as rowers."

"Quite right, especially for you, Porthos, who always look so magnificent on horseback."

"Though I've grown a little heavy, my friend; I weighed myself the other day."

"And how heavy are you?"

"Three hundredweight!" said Porthos with pride.

"Bravo!"

"So, you understand, I have to choose horses who are wide in the hindquarters, or in two hours I break them."

"Yes, horses for a giant, right, Porthos?"

"Good of you to say so, my friend," replied the engineer with affectionate majesty.

"In fact, *my friend*, it looks to me like your horse is sweating already," said d'Artagnan.

"*Dame*, it's hot, though. Ah but look! There's Vannes, can you see it?"

"Yes, indeed. It's a beautiful city, isn't it?"

"Charming, at least according to Aramis. I find it too dark but it seems that artists are partial to black. I wish they're not."

"Why's that, Porthos?"

"Because my château at Pierrefonds was grey with age, so I just had it whitewashed."

"I see," said d'Artagnan. "White *is* more cheerful."

"More cheerful but Aramis says it's less dignified. Fortunately, there are black plaster experts here, and I'll just have to hire some to redo Pierrefonds in black. If grey was worthy, then black will be superb."

"I can't fault your logic," said d'Artagnan.

"Have you ever been to Vannes, d'Artagnan?"

"Never."

"So, you don't know this city?"

"Not at all."

"Then look there," said Porthos, lifting himself in his stirrups, a movement that caused his horse to splay his forelegs. "Do you see, in the sun there, that tower?"

"I see it."

"That's the cathedral."

"What's it called?"

"Saint-Pierre. Now, there, in the lower town on the left, do you see another steeple?"

"Perfectly."

"That's Saint-Paterne, the parish preferred by Aramis."

"Is it?"

"Indeed! You see, Saint Paterne is said to have been the first Bishop of Vannes, though Aramis says he wasn't. But with the scholarly way he puts things, that might just be a paro... pari..."

"A paradox," said d'Artagnan.

"Exactly. Thanks, it's so hot, my tongue was sticking in my mouth."

"*My friend*," said d'Artagnan, "please continue your guided tour. What's that tall, white building dotted with windows?"

"Ah! That's the College of Jesuits. You still have a sharp eye, by God! Do you see, near the college, that large house with turrets and a belfry built in the finest Gothic style as that brute Sir Gétard says?"

"Yes, I see it. Well?"

"Well! That's where Aramis lives."

"What, he doesn't live in the bishop's palace?"

"No, the bishop's palace is in ruins. Besides, the bishopric is in the old town, and Aramis prefers the lower town. That's why, like I said, he prefers Saint-Paterne, as that church is in the lower town, along with a mall, a tennis court, and a house of the Dominicans. Do you see where that handsome steeple points to heaven?"

"Very well."

"The lower town, you see, is practically a separate city, with its own walls, towers, and moat; that's where the town docks are, and the boats come right up to the wharf. If our little corsair didn't have an eight-foot draft, we could have sailed right up under Aramis's window."

"Ah, Porthos, my friend," d'Artagnan enthused, "you're a well of knowledge and a fount of ideas both ingenious and profound. Porthos, I'm beyond surprised, and deeply impressed."

"Well, here we are, and this is it," said Porthos, diverting the conversation with his usual modesty.

*And about time, too*, thought d'Artagnan, *for Aramis's mount's melting under him like a horse of ice.*

They had just entered the lower town and had gone hardly a hundred paces before they were surprised to find the streets strewn with flowers and garlands. From the aged walls of Vannes were hanging the oldest and most curious tapestries in France. The wrought iron balconies were draped with white bunting accented by bouquets. However, the streets were deserted as if the entire population was gathered elsewhere. The shutters on the houses were all closed but they were cooled by the hanging tapestries and bunting that cast dark, heavy shadows on the walls. Suddenly, from around a street corner, music and song struck the ears of the newcomers. A crowd in their Sunday best appeared in a cloud of blue incense that rose from swinging censers, while a blizzard of rose petals fluttered down from the balconies. It was a procession. Waving above the crowds' heads were crosses and banners inscribed with the sacred signs of religion. Dancing beneath these crosses and banners, as if under their protection, was a troupe of young girls dressed in white and crowned with blue cornflowers. Down each side of the street, flanking the cortège, marched a file of soldiers from the garrison, with flowers in their musket barrels and tied to the tips of their pikes. While d'Artagnan and Porthos watched with expressions of respect that masked their impatience to press onward, a magnificent canopy approached, preceded by a hundred Jesuits and a hundred Dominicans, and escorted by two archdeacons, an almoner, a penitent brother, and twelve canons. A cantor with a thundering voice, surely one of France's leading singers and as carefully chosen as a drum major of the Imperial Guard, accompanied by four other singers, made the sacred songs resound from the walls and vibrate the very windows of the houses. Under the canopy appeared a pale and noble face, with dark eyes, black hair salted with silver, and a mouth thin-lipped and judicious above a prominent and angular chin. This graceful and majestic head was topped by a bishop's mitre that gave it a character, not just of sovereignty but of asceticism and holy meditation. "Aramis!" cried the musketeer involuntarily as this haughty figure passed before him. The prelate started and shuddered, like the risen dead hearing the voice of the Saviour. He raised his large, dark, long-lashed eyes and turned them unerringly on the source of the exclamation. At a glance he saw Porthos with d'Artagnan beside him. For his part, d'Artagnan, so keen-eyed, had instantly seen and understood all. The full portrait of the prelate was stamped in his memory, never to leave it. One thing especially struck d'Artagnan: upon seeing him, Aramis had flushed, and in a single moment had suppressed the burning gaze of the master and replaced it with the affectionate look of a friend. For he knew his friend d'Artagnan's discernment and intelligence, and feared he might guess the reason for his surprise and sudden colouring. It was the same old Aramis, always with a secret to conceal. So, the penetrating gaze of the inquisitor must be deflected at all costs, as a general must, at any price, silence an artillery battery pounding his vanguard. Aramis extended his handsome white hand, upon which sparkled the amethyst of the episcopal ring, divided the air with the sign of the cross, and bestowed upon his two friends his blessing. D'Artagnan, riveted, might not have reacted to this holy benediction but Porthos had noticed his distraction and, with an amiable press on his friend's back, pushed him to his knees. D'Artagnan buckled and nearly fell flat. Meanwhile, Aramis had passed by. D'Artagnan, as if strengthened like Antaeus by the touch of the ground, turned on Porthos almost angrily. But he'd misunderstood his good Hercules, who had nothing in mind but religious propriety. Besides, Porthos who always spoke his mind without deceit, said, "It was very kind of him to give us a personal blessing. He really is a good and holy man." D'Artagnan, less convinced of this than Porthos, said nothing. "Look, friend," Porthos continued, "now that he's seen us, instead of continuing the procession's slow march, he's picked up the pace. Do you see how everyone's doubling their speed? Dear Aramis, he's in a hurry to receive and embrace us."

"That's true," d'Artagnan replied aloud. But to himself he added, *Moreover, now he's seen me, the sly fox, and will have time to prepare my reception.* Then the procession had passed, and the street was clear. D'Artagnan and Porthos went straight to the episcopal mansion that was surrounded by a large crowd gathered to see the prelate when he returned. D'Artagnan noticed that this crowd consisted mainly of soldiers and wealthy citizens, and in the nature of his partisans he recognised the interests of his friend. In fact, Aramis wasn't the type to chase puerile popularity; he had no interest in being liked by people of no use to him. Women, children, and old men – in other words, those who would fill out the procession of the average bishop – were of no value to Aramis. Ten minutes after the two friends had arrived at the bishop's mansion, Aramis appeared back from the procession like a victorious conqueror; the soldiers presented arms as if to a superior officer, and the town burghers saluted him as a friend, like a merchant prince rather than a prince of the church. There was in Aramis a resemblance to those Roman senators whose doorways were always crowded with clients and retainers. At the foot of the grand stairway he had a half-minute conference with a Jesuit who, to speak more discreetly, extended his head under the canopy. Then he entered his mansion, and the crowd began to disperse, to the sound of songs and loud prayers. It was a beautiful day in Vannes, the aromas of the earth mingling with the scents of sky and sea. The city exhaled happiness, joy, and strength. D'Artagnan sensed the presence of an invisible perfumed hand that, all-powerful, guided this strength, joy, and happiness, its scent pervading everything. "Oh ho!" he said to himself. "Porthos may have grown heavy but Aramis's become great."

Porthos and d'Artagnan entered the bishop's mansion by a private door that opened only to friends of the household. It goes without saying that Porthos served as d'Artagnan's guide. The worthy baron behaved as if he was at home wherever he went but whether as a tacit recognition of the character and pious authority of Aramis, or a habit of respecting his moral ascendancy that had always made Porthos behave around him as a model soldier and good citizen, or for all these reasons, in the house of His Grandeur the Bishop of Vannes, Porthos maintained a marked reserve that d'Artagnan first noticed in his attitude toward the episcopal valets and footmen. However, this reserve didn't go so far as to stop Porthos from asking questions, and so inquiries were made. They learned that His Grandeur had just returned to his private rooms, where he was preparing to appear, among his friends, as less majestic than he had to his flock. And in fact, after a quarter of an hour that d'Artagnan and Porthos spent staring at each other and uselessly twiddling their thumbs, a door into the audience hall opened and there stood His Grandeur, dressed in a prelate's receiving robes. Aramis held his head high, like a man with the habit of command, his hand on his hip atop purple skirts gathered for ease of movement. He still wore the slender moustache and pointed *royal* goatee of the time of Louis XIII. He entered with a waft of that delicate perfume common to all elegant and highborn men and women, an aroma of power that seems to emanate from them as a natural part of their being. But in this case the perfume seemed to partake of the sublime sanctity of holy incense that quenched rather than intoxicated, and inspired respect rather than desire. Aramis, upon entering the hall,

didn't hesitate a moment, and saying nothing, as no matter what he said would have felt cold given the occasion, he went straight to the musketeer so well disguised under the cloak of Sir Agnan and embraced him with a tender sincerity that no one could have thought either cool or affected. D'Artagnan, for his part, embraced him with equal ardour. Porthos squeezed Aramis's delicate hand between his great mitts, and d'Artagnan noticed that His Grandeur was careful to give him his left hand, probably knowing from experience that Porthos would grind the gemstones of his be-ringed right fingers into his flesh. Aramis, wary, had therefore presented only skin to be squeezed between those big hands rather than crushed against the facets of diamonds. After these embraces, Aramis looked searchingly into d'Artagnan's face, and then offered him a well-lit chair. He himself sat in shadow from where he could observe the light on his guest's face. This tactic, common to ladies and diplomats, resembled the advantage a duellist seeks by manoeuvring to face his opponent into the sun. D'Artagnan was familiar with this ploy but he pretended not to notice it. He felt he'd been caught but for that very reason he also felt he was on the road to discovery, and it didn't matter to the old soldier if by seeming to be outmanoeuvred he could still work his way around to victory. It was Aramis who began the conversation. "Ah, dear friend! Good old d'Artagnan!" he said. "What luck!"

"It wasn't luck, most reverend old scout but friendship," said d'Artagnan. "I was looking for you, as I always look for you when I have some great venture in hand, or even just a few hours to share."

"Really!" said Aramis, unruffled. "You were looking for me?"

"Of course, he was looking for you, dear Aramis," said Porthos, "and the proof is that he tracked me down at Belle-Île. Isn't that touching?"

"Ah," said Aramis, "of course, to Belle-Île..."

Good, thought d'Artagnan. *There goes my loose cannon Porthos, unwittingly firing the first shot of the battle.*

"To Belle-Île," said Aramis, "to that backwater, that edge of nowhere! That is touching, in fact."

"And so, it was I who told him you were at Vannes," continued Porthos in the same tone.

D'Artagnan smiled with a touch of irony. "I knew, of course," he said, "but I wanted to see for myself."

"To see what?"

"If our old friendship still held; if, seeing each other, our hearts, withered though they are by age, would beat with the old joy at meeting a friend."

"And now you're satisfied of that, aren't you?" asked Aramis.

"More or less."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Porthos's first word to me was *hush* and you..."

"Well? And I?"

"You gave me your blessing."

"But my friend, what else would I do?" said Aramis with a smile. "That's the most precious thing a poor prelate like me can offer."

"Come now, old friend."

"No, seriously."

"You know, they say in Paris that the Bishopric of Vannes is one of the richest in France."

"Oh, you're speaking of worldly goods?" said Aramis nonchalantly.

"Of course, I'm speaking of that. Don't I always?"

"In that case, let's talk about it," said Aramis, smiling again.

"Then you admit you're one of the wealthiest prelates in France?"

"*My dear*, since you're auditing my accounts, I can tell you that Vannes is worth twenty thousand livres a year, more or less. It's a diocese that contains one hundred and sixty parishes."

"That's pretty good," said d'Artagnan.

"It's superb!" said Porthos.

"However," said d'Artagnan, with a direct look at Aramis, "I'll wager you're not planning to bury yourself here forever."

"Pardon me – I'd hardly call this being buried."

"But it seems to me anyone this far from Paris might as well be buried."

"I'm getting old, *my friend*," said Aramis. "The noise and bustle of the city suit me no more. At fifty-seven one must seek calm and meditation, and I've found them here. What could be more beautiful and yet austere than old Armorica? I've discovered here, *dear* d'Artagnan, everything that is the opposite of what I once loved, and that's what one needs toward the end of life, the opposite of its beginning. Some of my old pleasures do find me here from time to time but they don't distract me from the approach of salvation. I am still of this world, and yet, every step I take, I'm closer to God."

"Eloquent, wise, discreet: you *are* an accomplished prelate, Aramis, and I congratulate you."

"But," said Aramis, smiling, "you haven't come here, *dear friend*, just to compliment me. Tell me, what brings you? Would I have the happiness to find that, somehow, you need something from me?"

"Thank God, no, dear friend, it's nothing like that," said d'Artagnan. "I'm rich and I'm free."

"Rich?"

"Rich for me, that is, not like you or Porthos. I have about fifteen thousand livres a year."

Aramis gave him a sceptical look; it was hard to believe, especially when he saw his old friend in such humble attire, that he'd found such a fortune. So, d'Artagnan, seeing that the hour for explanations had come, told the story of his exploits in England. During this account, he saw the prelate's eyes shine and fingers twitch ten times over. As for Porthos, it was not admiration or enthusiasm he showed for d'Artagnan, it was rapturous delight. When d'Artagnan had finished his story, Aramis said, "Well, then?"

"Well, then!" said d'Artagnan. "You see I now have friends and property in England, and wealth laid by in France. If you so desire, I'll share it with you. That's why I came."

But as confidant as he seemed, at that moment he couldn't quite meet Aramis's eyes. He let his gaze turn toward Porthos, as the blade yields to overwhelming force and seeks another line of attack.

"In that case," said the bishop, "you've donned strange travelling clothes, *dear friend*. "

"Frightful, aren't they? But you'll understand that I preferred not to travel as a cavalier or a lord. Now that I'm rich, I'm miserly."

"And you say that you came to Belle-Île?" said Aramis without warning.

"Yes," d'Artagnan replied. "I knew that way I'd find Porthos – and you."

"Mel!" cried Aramis. "I haven't been across the water in a year."

"Oh?" said d'Artagnan. "I never thought to find you such a homebody."

"Ah, *dear friend!* I must tell you I'm not the man I used to be. Riding a horse is uncomfortable and sailing is exhausting – I'm just a poor, ailing priest, always groaning and complaining, regarding all expense as waste, gradually succumbing to old age and speaking always of death. I survive, *my dear* d'Artagnan, I merely survive."

"I'm glad of that, my friend, as we're probably going to be neighbours."

"What?" said Aramis with a surprise he did not even bother to conceal, "You, my neighbour?"

"Good lord, yes!"

"How's that?"

"I'm going to buy some very profitable salt farms located between Piriac and Le Croisic. Imagine this, dear friend, a clear twelve percent return on investment, ever steady, always dependable, as the ocean, faithful and regular, brings a new deposit to my account every six hours. I'm the first Parisian to invest in such a venture, so keep this to yourself, if you please, and in a little while I'll be able to share the details. I'm getting three leagues of the coast for thirty thousand livres. "

Aramis glanced at Porthos as if to ask if this was true, or if some snare was hidden in this apparent show of amiable confidence. But then, as if ashamed at having resorted to his poor auxiliary, he recouped his forces for a new assault on this novel defence. "I'd heard that you'd had some trouble at Court," he said, "but that you'd gotten out of it as you get out of everything, my *dear* d'Artagnan, with the honours of victory."

"Me?" cried the musketeer, following it with a burst of laughter that didn't quite cover his embarrassment, for Aramis's remark indicated he knew something of his relations with the king. "Me? Ha! Tell me what you heard, if you would, Aramis."

"Yes, I'd heard, this poor bishop lost in the provinces, that the king was having you assist with his love affairs."

"With whom?"

"With Miss Mancini."

D'Artagnan exhaled with relief. "Well, I wouldn't say no," he replied.

"It seems that one morning the king took you over the bridge at Blois to talk with his ladylove."

"It's true," said d'Artagnan. "So, you know that? Then you must also know that was the same day I turned in my commission."

"Truly?"

"My friend, it couldn't be more so."

"That's when you went to see the Count of La Fère?"

"Yes."

"And then me?"

"Yes."

"And then Porthos?"

"Yes."

"Was it just for a simple visit?"

"No; I wanted to see if you were at liberty to go with me to England."

"Ah, yes, I understand – and then you went and accomplished alone, like a hero, what you wanted to propose to all four of us. I suspected something like that when I'd heard you were involved in the Restoration, and were seen at the receptions for King Charles, where he spoke to you like a friend, or rather, like a person to whom he owed an obligation."

"But how the devil did you learn all that?" asked d'Artagnan who feared that Aramis's investigations might have extended further than he had thought.

"Dear d'Artagnan," said the prelate, "my friendship's like the solicitude of the old night-watchman who keeps the little lighthouse on the end of the pier. Every night he lights a lantern for the boats returning from the sea. He's unnoticed behind his shutters but he watches everyone with interest, calling them into harbour and keeping track of each one. I'm like that watchman; from time to time scraps of news come my way that remind me of all I once loved. I'm the solitary friend of those who still ride the world's stormy seas, a poor watchman whom God has granted shelter in my little tower."

"And what have I done since England?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Ah, there you went over my horizon!" said Aramis. "I know nothing of you since your return, d'Artagnan; my eyes were clouded. I regretted that you didn't think of me and wept at your forgetfulness. But I was wrong, for now I see you again, and it's wonderful, a time to celebrate, I solemnly swear. And how is Athos getting along?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And his young pupil?"

"Raoul?"

"Yes."

"He seems to have inherited the poise of his father Athos and the strength of his mentor Porthos."

"And on what occasion were you able to judge that?"

"Eh, my God! On the very eve of my departure."

"Really?"

"Yes, there was an execution on the Grève, and it provoked a riot. We found ourselves in the middle of that riot, and there was cause for some swordplay. He handled himself quite well."

"Oh? What did he do?" asked Porthos.

"First, he threw a man from a window as if he were no more than a cotton pillow."

"Ho! That's pretty good!" cried Porthos.

"Then he drew, pointed, cut, and thrust, just as we used to do back in the old days."

"And what caused this riot?" Porthos asked.

D'Artagnan noticed that Aramis's expression showed complete disinterest in Porthos's question. "Oh," he said, looking at Aramis, "it was on account of a couple of tax-farmers the king wanted hanged, two friends of Sir Fouquet."

Only a slight frown indicated that the prelate had heard this.

"Oh ho!" said Porthos. "And what were their names, these friends of Sir Fouquet?"

"Gentlemen d'Emerys and Lyodot," said d'Artagnan. "Do you know those names, Aramis?"

"No," said the prelate with disdain. "They sound like the names of coin-counters."

"Exactly."

"Wait. Sir Fouquet allows his friends to be hanged?" cried Porthos.

"And why not?" said Aramis.

"It just seems to me..."

"If those wretches were hanged, it was by the king's orders," said Aramis. "After all, Sir Fouquet, as Surintendant des Finances, doesn't have power over life and death."

"Just the same," grumbled Porthos, "in Sir Fouquet's place..."

Aramis realised that Porthos was about to say something foolish and interrupted. "But see here, *dear* d'Artagnan," he said, "that's enough talk about others; let's speak a bit about you."

"But you already know all there is to say about me. On the contrary, let's talk about you, dear Aramis."

"I told you, my friend, that there's nothing of Aramis left in me."

"What about the Abbot d'Herblay?"

"Even less. You see before you a man whom God has taken by the hand and led to a position he never expected nor even hoped."

"God?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Yes."

"Huh! That's strange; I'd been told it was Sir Fouquet."

"Who told you that?" said Aramis and not all his willpower could prevent a slight flush from rising to his cheeks.

"My faith! It was Bazin."<sup>54</sup>

"That do!t!"

"I wouldn't call him a man of genius, true but that's what he told me that is why I repeat it to you."

"I've never met Sir Fouquet," replied Aramis with a look as serene and pure as that of a young virgin who has never told a lie.

"But meeting him, or even knowing him, there's no harm in that," said d'Artagnan. "He's a very fine man, Sir Fouquet."

"Oh?"

"A great politician."

Aramis shrugged indifferently.

"An all-powerful minister."

"I report only to the king and the pope," said Aramis.

"*Dame!* Listen to this, then," said d'Artagnan in a tone of simple sincerity. "I'll tell you about it because everyone around here swears by Sir Fouquet. The land's Sir Fouquet's; the salt-farm I'm going to buy is Sir Fouquet's; the island where Porthos does topography is Sir Fouquet's; the garrison there's Sir Fouquet's; and the ships are Sir Fouquet's. So it'd scarcely surprise me if the appointment to your diocese came from Sir Fouquet. He's a different master than the king, of course but just as powerful."

"Thanks be to God, I owe nothing to anyone and belong to no one but myself," Aramis replied who watched d'Artagnan's every expression and Porthos's every nod and glance during this speech. But d'Artagnan was impassive and Porthos was immobile; all these skilful thrusts were parried by able adversaries, and none of them touched. Nonetheless, the strain of the struggle was beginning to tell on everyone, and the announcement of supper was received gratefully by all three. Dining together changed the tone of the conversation, and besides, now that everyone was on their guard, they knew they would learn nothing more. Porthos had understood none of the nuances; he'd stayed immobile because Aramis had asked him not to budge. For him, supper was only supper. But for Porthos, supper was enough, and the mealtime passed remarkably well. D'Artagnan overflowed with cheer. Aramis surpassed himself in easy amiability. Porthos ate like Pelops. War and finance were discussed, and love and the arts. Aramis seemed naïvely surprised at every mention of politics d'Artagnan dared risk. This unlikely naïveté increased d'Artagnan's mistrust, just as d'Artagnan's invincible nonchalance aroused the distrust of Aramis. Finally, d'Artagnan deliberately dropped the name *Colbert* into the conversation. He'd reserved this as his final shot. "Who's this Colbert?" asked the bishop. *Oh, now that's going too far*, thought d'Artagnan. *God, that's too much. Careful!*

And he told Aramis everything about Colbert that he might want to know. The supper or rather the conversation between d'Artagnan and Aramis lasted until 1<sup>AM</sup>. At 10 o'clock precisely, Porthos fell asleep in his chair and began snoring like an organ. At midnight he was awakened and sent to his bed. "Huh!" he said. "I seem to have fallen asleep. But your conversation's very interesting."

At one o'clock, Aramis led d'Artagnan to the room designated for him, the best in the episcopal mansion. 2 servants were placed at his orders. "Tomorrow at eight <sup>AM</sup>," said Aramis in taking leave of d'Artagnan, "we'll go riding with Porthos."

"At eight o'clock!" said d'Artagnan. "Why so late?"

"You know I need seven hours of sleep," said Aramis.

"You did say that."

"*Goodnight, dear friend!*"

And he embraced the musketeer warmly. Once the door was shut firmly behind Aramis, d'Artagnan said, "Good! By five o'clock I'll be up and around." Then that resolution taken, he went to bed and began to *put two and two together* as they say.

Porthos Begins to be Sorry he had Brought d'Artagnan with him

No sooner had d'Artagnan blown out his candle than Aramis, who'd been watching from behind his curtains for the last light to go out in his friend's room, tiptoed across the hall to Porthos's room. The giant, who'd been in bed for about an hour and a half, was sprawled across the quilt. He was in the happy calm of early sleep that, for Porthos, could resist the toll of bells and the thunder of cannon. His head moved as if to the gentle rocking of a ship at sea, and in another minute, he would start to dream. The door of Porthos's room opened slowly under the pressure of Aramis's delicate hand. The bishop approached the sleeper; a thick carpet swallowed the sound of his footsteps, and besides, Porthos snored loudly enough to drown out any lesser noise. Aramis placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Come, we must go, *dear* Porthos."

The voice of Aramis was soft and affectionate but it wasn't asking, it was ordering. His touch was light but its firmness conveyed danger. In his sleep, Porthos heard the voice and felt Aramis's hand, and he trembled. "Who's there?" he said in his giant's voice.

"Hush! It's me," said Aramis.

"You, dear friend! And why the devil do you wake me?"

"To tell you that you've to go."

"Go?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Paris."

Porthos sat upright in bed and stared at Aramis in alarm. "Paris?"

"Yes."

"A hundred leagues!" Porthos gasped.

"A hundred and four."

"Dear God!" sighed Porthos, falling back into bed and rolling over, like a child who hopes his nanny will go away and let him sleep another hour.

"Thirty hours on horseback," Aramis continued resolutely. "You know there're good relays." Porthos kicked with one leg and groaned. "Come now, *dear friend*," insisted the prelate with a touch of impatience.

Porthos kicked with the other leg, then put both feet on the floor. "Must I go?" he said.

"It's essential." Porthos rose to his feet and stomped forward like a statue. "Hush!" said Aramis. "For the love of God, Porthos, you'll wake someone up."

"Ah! You're right," said Porthos in a voice of thunder. "I forgot. But don't worry, I'll be careful." And as he said this, he dropped a heavy belt laden with sword, pistols, and a purse whose crowns escaped and went bouncing across the floor in a prolonged clatter. The racket made Aramis's blood boil but it just provoked Porthos into a loud burst of laughter. "What a riot!" he rumbled.

"Not so loud, Porthos, please!"

"You're right," he said, lowering his voice half a notch. "I was just thinking," Porthos continued amiably, "that we're never as slow as when we're in a hurry and never as loud as when we want to be quiet."

"Yes, quite so but let's give the proverb the lie, Porthos, and hurry along quietly."

"You can see I'm doing my best," said Porthos, pulling on his breeches.

"Very well."

"Is it really so urgent?"

"It's not just urgent, Porthos, it's serious."

"Oh? All right."

"D'Artagnan questioned you, didn't he?"

"Me?"

"Yes, on Belle-Île."

"Not at all."

"Are you sure of that, Porthos?"

"Yes, by God!"

"Impossible. Think back."

"He asked me what I was doing, and I told him, 'Topography,' because I couldn't remember that other word you used."

"Castrametation?"

"That's the one! I never could remember it."

"All the better! What else did he ask you?"

"He asked who Sir Gétard was."

"What else?"

"Who was that Sir Jupenet."

"But he didn't see our plan of fortifications, I hope?"

"He did."

"The devil you say!"

"Don't worry, I'd rubbed out all your writing with a gum eraser. He couldn't possibly realise you'd been kind enough to advise me on the task."

"He has sharp eyes, our friend."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid he's discovered everything, Porthos, and we must keep that from causing serious trouble. I ordered my people to close the house up tight so d'Artagnan can't get out before dawn. Your horse is saddled, you'll ride it hard to the first relay, and by five in the morning you'll be fifteen leagues from here. Come."

Aramis then dressed Porthos piece by piece as quickly as the most capable valet. Porthos, half groggy, half confused, just apologised and let him do what he wanted. When he was ready, Aramis took him by the hand and drew him along, leading him carefully down the stairs, keeping him from bumping into doorways, turning and steering him as if Aramis was the giant and Porthos a dwarf, his body animated by Aramis's soul. A horse was, in fact, waiting ready in the courtyard, and Porthos got into the saddle. Then Aramis himself took the horse by the bridle and led him through the yard across a scattering of manure, apparently intended to quiet its hoof-beats. At the same time, he was pinching its nostrils so it wouldn't blow or neigh. Then, having arrived at the outer gate, he beckoned Porthos, who was ready to leave without asking why, and said into his ear, "Now, friend Porthos, ride without pause to Paris, eating, drinking, and sleeping in the saddle so as not to lose a minute."

"As you say; we won't stop."

"Here's a letter for Sir Fouquet that, whatever the cost, he must have by noon tomorrow."

"He'll get it."

"And keep one thing in mind, *dear friend*."

"What's that?"

"That what you're racing after is your promotion to duke and peer."

"Oh ho!" said Porthos, eyes sparkling. "In that case, I'll do it in twenty-four hours."

"Try it."

"Then release the bridle and forward, Goliath!"

Aramis let go of both bridle and nose. Porthos took the reins, applied the spurs, and the animal took off at a furious gallop. As long as he could see Porthos disappearing into the night, Aramis followed him with his eyes; then, once he lost sight of him, he returned into the courtyard. He peeked in at d'Artagnan's door but nothing had changed. The footman posted outside had heard nothing and seen no lights. Aramis closed the door carefully, sent the footman to bed, and went to his own room. D'Artagnan really suspected nothing; when he awoke in the morning at half past four, he still thought he was ahead of the game. Dressed in his night-shirt, he looked out his window into the courtyard, where day was just breaking. It was deserted; even the hens were still in their coop. No servants were visible, and all doors were yet closed. *All quiet; good!* D'Artagnan thought. *I'm the first of the household to awaken. Time to get dressed.*

And d'Artagnan drew on his clothes. But this time he donned the costume of Sir Agnan in a way that avoided the bourgeois, almost clerical look he'd previously adopted, tightening, tucking, and buttoning it in a martial manner, cocking his hat with a bit of flair, and restoring the look of a cavalier whose lack had alarmed Aramis so. That done, as a friend of the house, or pretended friend, he presumed to let himself into Aramis's rooms, where he found his friend asleep – or pretending to sleep. A big book was open on his nightstand, and a reading candle still burned before its reflective silver plate. That was more than enough to prove to d'Artagnan how innocently the prelate had spent his evening, and how wise he'd been to rise early. The musketeer then did to the bishop what the bishop had done to Porthos: he touched him on the shoulder. Evidently Aramis was feigning sleep for instead of waking suddenly, he who slept so lightly required a second touch to arouse him. "Ah!" he said. "It's you. What a happy surprise! Faith, sleep had made me forget I'd the good luck to have you here. What time is it?"

"I'm unsure," said d'Artagnan, a little embarrassed. "Early, I think. It's my damned old military habits that make me rise with the day."

"Were you hoping, by chance, to ride out so soon?" asked Aramis. "It seems too early to me."

"We shall do as you like."

"I thought we'd agreed we'd mount up around eight."

"Perhaps so but I was so eager to see you, I thought, the sooner the better."

"And my seven hours of sleep?" said Aramis. "I'm warning you, I'd counted on that, and what I miss now I'll have to make up later."

"Maybe but it seems to me you weren't always such a slug-a-bed, old friend, and had more to do awake than asleep."

"And that's exactly why I treasure my sleep now."

"Oh, confess that it wasn't for more sleep that you wanted to delay till eight o'clock."

"I was afraid you'd mock me if I told you the truth."

"So, tell me."

"All right! From six till eight I usually make my devotions."

"Your devotions?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think a bishop had such strict obligations."

"A bishop, *dear friend*, must pay more attention to appearances than a lowly cleric."

"*God be with you!* Now there, Aramis, is a word that reconciles me to Your Grandeur. Appearances! That's a musketeer's way of looking at things. Long live appearances, Aramis!"

"Pardon me instead of congratulating me, d'Artagnan, for letting slip a word entirely too worldly."

"Must I leave you then?"

"I really must make my devotions, *dear friend*."

"All right, I'll leave you but for the sake of this pagan named d'Artagnan, make them as short as you can. I'm eager to see you."

"Very well, d'Artagnan, I promise that in just an hour and a half..."

"An hour and a half of devotions? Come now, old friend, be reasonable. You can do better than that."

Aramis laughed. "Ever charming, ever cheerful, ever young," he said. "When you come to my diocese, even divine grace must step aside."

"Bah!"

"And you know I could never resist your temptations; you'll cost me my salvation, d'Artagnan."

D'Artagnan pursed his lips. "Here," he said, "I'll take the sin on my account. Make the sign of the cross, say a few *paters*, and we'll go."

"Hush!" said Aramis. "We're no longer alone; I hear someone coming."

"Well, send them away."

"Impossible; I made the appointment yesterday. It's the Principal of the College of Jesuits and the Superior of the Dominicans."

"Your chiefs of staff. Very well."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll go wake up Porthos and wait in his company until you've finished your conference."

Aramis didn't start, or stare, or show any emotion in gesture or speech. "Go ahead," he said. As d'Artagnan went toward the door, he added, "By the way, do you know the way to Porthos's room?"

"No but I'll find it."

"Go down the corridor and open the second door on the left."

"Thanks! *See you shortly*."

And d'Artagnan went off in the direction Aramis had indicated. Scarcely ten minutes passed before he returned. He found Aramis seated between the Principal of the College of Jesuits and the Superior of the Dominicans, in exactly the situation he'd found him before in the inn at Crèvecœur. This company didn't intimidate the musketeer. "What is it?" asked Aramis serenely. "Do you've something to ask me about, *dear friend*?"

"I do," replied d'Artagnan, looking closely at Aramis, "because Porthos isn't here."

"Not here?" said Aramis, no less calmly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, by God! I just came from his room."

"Where can he be, then?"

"I'm asking *you*."

"Have you enquired after him?"

"I did."

"And what did they tell you?"

"That Porthos often goes out in the morning without telling anyone and had probably left."

"What did you do then?"

"I went to the stable," said d'Artagnan nonchalantly.

"What for?"

"To see if Porthos had left on horseback."

"And...?" asked the bishop.

"Well! One horse is missing, Goliath, from stall number five."

This entire dialogue, it should be understood, was conducted with a touch of suspicion on the part of the musketeer but with perfect complacency by Aramis. "Ah! I see what's happened," said Aramis, after thinking for a moment. "Porthos has gone out to bring us a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yes. The canal that links Vannes with the sea is teeming with game – snipe and teal. It's Porthos's favourite hunting ground, and he'll bring us a dozen for dinner."

"Really?" said d'Artagnan.

"I'm sure of it. Where else would he be? I'd wager he took a harquebus."

"It's possible," said d'Artagnan.

"Do yourself a favour, *dear friend*, mount a horse and go join him."

"You're right," said d'Artagnan, "I'll go."

"Do you want a guide?"

"No, thanks – Porthos is hard to miss. I'll ask around."

"Would you like a harquebus, as well?"

"Thank you."

"Have whichever horse you like saddled for you."

"I'll take the one I rode here from Belle-Île."

"Go ahead; my house's yours." Aramis rang and gave the orders to have the horse d'Artagnan wanted saddled. D'Artagnan followed the servant charged with executing this order. At the door, the servant stepped aside to allow d'Artagnan to pass, and as he did so he exchanged a glance with his master. A twitch of Aramis's brow informed this agent that d'Artagnan was to be given everything he wished. D'Artagnan mounted his horse, and Aramis heard the sound of the iron shoes clattering on the cobblestones. A moment later, the servant returned. "Well?" asked the bishop.

"My Lord, he's following the canal that leads to the sea," said the servant.

"Good!" said Aramis.

In fact, d'Artagnan putting aside all suspicion, was galloping toward the ocean, hoping at every moment to see in the dunes or on the beach the colossal silhouette of his friend Porthos. He imagined he saw hoof-prints in every puddle; occasionally he thought he heard a gunshot. This illusion lasted for three hours, for two of which d'Artagnan searched for Porthos. At the end of the third, he returned to the bishop's mansion. "Now I'll finally catch up with him," he said, "and I'll find my two friends awaiting my return."

D'Artagnan was deceived. He no more found Porthos at the mansion than he had along the canal. Aramis was waiting at the top of the stairs with a haggard look on his face. "Did my people fail to find you, *my dear d'Artagnan?*" he called as soon as he saw the musketeer.

"No; did you send someone after me?"

"I'm desolate, *my dear friend*, at having sent you on a wild goose chase but about seven o'clock the almoner of Saint-Paterne came by and told me he'd met du Vallon on his way out; he'd left quietly, not wanting to bother the household and told the almoner to tell me that he was afraid Sir Gétard would do something stupid in his absence so he was going to take advantage of the morning tide to make for Belle-Île."

"But I hardly think Goliath has carried him across four leagues of sea, do you?"

"It's more like six," said Aramis.

"Even less likely then."

"Which is why, *dear friend*," said the prelate with a soft smile, "Goliath's back in the stable, happy for the rest and pleased to be out from under Porthos."

In fact, the horse had been returned from the relay station on the orders of the bishop, who allowed no detail to escape him. D'Artagnan let himself appear to be satisfied by this explanation. He adopted a demeanour that quite hid the suspicions forming in his mind. He dined between Aramis and the Jesuit and across from the Dominican, smiling a great deal at the latter, whose jolly fat face amused him. The meal was long and sumptuous: excellent Spanish juice, fresh oysters from Morbihan, succulent fish from the mouth of the Loire, enormous prawns from Paimbœuf, and delectable game from the heather along the shore. D'Artagnan ate quite a bit and drank very little, while Aramis drank not at all, other than water. When they were done, d'Artagnan asked, "You offered me a *harquebus?*"

"Yes."

"Lend me one."

"Are you going hunting?"

"I think I might as well, while waiting for Porthos."

"Take whatever you like from the gun-room."

"Are you coming with me?"

"Alas, *dear friend*, that would be a great pleasure but bishops are forbidden to hunt."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "I didn't know that."

"Besides," continued Aramis, "I have business until noon."

"I'm on my own, then?" said d'Artagnan.

"Alas, yes! But be back in time for dinner."

"By God! You eat too well here for me to miss it."

And with that d'Artagnan took his leave of his host, saluted his guests, and picked out a *harquebus* – but instead of going hunting, he rode straight to the docks at Vannes. He watched carefully to make sure he wasn't followed but saw no one. Convinced that he hadn't been trailed, he rented a small fishing boat for twenty-five livres and set off. And in truth, he hadn't been shadowed – but a Jesuit brother, posted in the steeple of his church, had followed his steps all morning with the aid of a telescope. At a quarter past eleven, Aramis was informed that d'Artagnan was headed for Belle-Île. With the help of a north-northeast wind, d'Artagnan made a quick crossing to Belle-Île. As he approached, his eyes scanned the coast, hoping to see, either on the shore or atop the fortifications, the splendid attire of Porthos, or his vast silhouette against the lightly clouded sky. D'Artagnan looked in vain; he landed without having seen anything and learned from the first soldier he questioned that Sir du Vallon had not yet returned from Vannes. Then, without losing a moment, d'Artagnan turned his little boat and set sail back to Sarzeau. The wind, of course, changes direction as the day passes, and had turned from north-northeast to southeast that was nearly as good for the return to Sarzeau as it had been for the trip to Belle-Île. In three hours d'Artagnan was back on the continent, and two hours after that he had reached Vannes. Despite the speed of this trip, the entire time d'Artagnan was eaten up with impatience, and the deck of the boat could testify to how he stamped and paced across it as he sailed. When he touched at the quay near the episcopal mansion, he disembarked with a bound. He hoped to surprise Aramis by the rapidity of his return, planning to reproach him for his duplicity while retaining enough wit to terrify him into revealing at least part of his secret. He hoped, in short, that with an onslaught of speech that was like a bayonet charge on a redoubt he could alarm the crafty Aramis into making an admission. But all he found at the entry hall of the mansion was the valet blocking the doorway and smiling smugly. "Where is my Lord?" cried d'Artagnan, trying to push past him.

He was nearly successful but then the valet found his feet and stood his ground. "My Lord?" he said.

"Yes, curse you. Don't you recognise me, fool?"

"Of course; you're the Knight d'Artagnan."

"Then, let me pass."

"It's pointless."

"Why?"

"Because His Grandeur is no longer at home."

"What do you mean, His Grandeur's not home! Where is he then?"

"Gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"To where?"

"As to that, I know nothing – but perhaps this will inform Sir Knight."

"This? This what?"

"This letter that I was told to give to you."

And the valet drew an envelope from his lapel. "What? Give me that, you animal!" said d'Artagnan, snatching it from him. At the first line he read, he snarled, "Oh, yes! Now I see it all." He read the rest in an undertone:

*Dear friend, an urgent matter has called me to one of the parishes in my diocese. I had hoped to see you before leaving but gave up that hope when it occurred to me that you'd probably spend two or three days on Belle-Île with our dear Porthos. Have a good time with him but don't try to out-drink him at the table; that's advice I'd have given even to Athos in his best days. Farewell, dear friend, and believe me when I say I'm sorry I didn't have the chance to spend more time in your excellent company.*

"God!" cried d'Artagnan. "I've been played. Idiot, imbecile, triple fool that I'm! I've been tricked like a monkey handed an empty nut. But we'll see who laughs last!" And wiping the smug smile from the valet's face with a blow, he dashed out of the episcopal mansion. Ferret, good trotter though he was, wasn't the mount for these circumstances. D'Artagnan hired a post horse and soon taught it with a touch of the spurs and a flick of the hand that deer are not the fastest runners in creation.

**In Which d'Artagnan Rides, Porthos Snores, and Aramis Counsels**

30 hours or so after the events just recounted while Sir Fouquet having locked his door as usual was working in the office of his house at Saint-Mandé, a carriage drawn by 4 horses dripping with sweat galloped into its courtyard. This carriage must have been expected, for three or four lackeys rushed to its door and opened it as Sir Fouquet rose from his desk and went to his window. A man emerged painfully from the carriage, stepping with difficulty from the running board to the ground while leaning on the lackeys' shoulders. He'd no sooner said his name than the lackey he wasn't leaning on rushed up the stairs and into the vestibule. This man was running to inform his master but he didn't even have to knock on the door, for Fouquet was standing on the threshold. "My Lord the Bishop of Vannes!" said the lackey.

"Good!" said Fouquet. Then, leaning over the banister of the stairs as Aramis began to climb them, he said, "You, dear friend! So soon!"

"Yes, in person, sir; but battered and broken as you see."

"You poor man!" said Fouquet, offering Aramis his arm that he took and leaned upon, while the servants withdrew respectfully.

"Bah!" Aramis replied. "It's nothing, just so long as I'm here; the main thing is that I've made it and found you when I arrived."

"Speak quickly," said Fouquet, closing the door of the private office behind Aramis and himself.

"We're alone here?"

"Completely alone."

"No one can listen in? No one can hear us?"

"No, I assure you."

"Sir du Vallon's arrived?"

"Yes."

"And you received my letter?"

"Yes, and the matter must be serious if it requires your presence in Paris at a time when you're needed so urgently elsewhere."

"You're right, it couldn't be more serious."

"Thanks, now what's it all about? But by God, before everything, catch your breath, dear friend! You're pale and trembling."

"I'm in pain, yes but good Lord, pay no attention to me. Didn't Sir du Vallon tell you anything when he gave you the letter?"

"No, I heard a great noise, went to the window, and saw a giant on horseback at the foot of the stairs. I went down, he gave me the letter, and his horse fell over dead."

"And he?"

"He fell with the horse; they got him out from under it and carried him upstairs to a spare bedroom. Once I'd read the letter, I went up to see if he had further news but he'd fallen so heavily asleep it was impossible to wake him. I took pity on him, ordered that his boots be removed, and he be left to rest."

"Good; now here is what this is all about, My Lord. You met Sir d'Artagnan in Paris, didn't you?"

"Indeed, and he's a man of intelligence and courage, even though he was responsible for the death of my friends Lyodot and d'Emerys."

"Alas, so I'd heard; at Tours I met the courier who was bringing me Gourville's letter and Pellisson's dispatches. Have you reflected on that event, Sir?"

"Yes."

"And did you understand that it was a direct attack on your sovereignty?"

“You think so?”

“Oh, yes, I think so!”

“Well! I admit that dark idea had occurred to me, too.”

“Don’t ignore that idea, Sir, hearken to it, in the name of heaven. Now, back to d’Artagnan.”

“I’m listening.”

“Under what circumstances did you meet him?”

“He came to me for money.”

“With an order?”

“From the hand of the king.”

“Directly?”

“Signed by His Majesty.”

“See, there! Well! D’Artagnan came to Belle-Île disguised as a steward, on the pretext of buying some salt-farms. Now, d’Artagnan has no other master than the king, so he came on behalf of the king. And he saw Porthos.”

“Who is this Porthos?”

“Pardon, my mistake. He saw Sir du Vallon at Belle-Île and he now knows as well as you or I do that Belle-Île’s been fortified.”

“And you think it was the king who sent him?” said Fouquet thoughtfully.

“Assuredly.”

“And d’Artagnan, in the king’s hands, is a dangerous weapon?”

“The most dangerous there is.”

“So I thought, at first meeting.”

“How’s that?”

“I immediately wished he was mine.”

“If you judged him at first sight the bravest, cleverest, and most skilful man in France, you judged him well.”

“We must have him at any price!”

“D’Artagnan?”

“Don’t you agree with me?”

“I may agree with you but we can’t get him.”

“Why not?”

“Because we missed our chance. He was dissatisfied at Court, and we could have taken advantage of his dissatisfaction but instead he went over to England where he was instrumental in the Restoration. That earned him a fortune, after which he came back to the service of the king. And if he’s returned to that service how, he’s been well paid to do so.”

“We’ll just pay him more, that’s all.”

“Oh, no, Sir, pardon me! D’Artagnan lives by his word, and that word, once given, isn’t taken back.”

“So, what do you conclude from all this?” Fouquet asked anxiously.

“That this is the moment to parry a terrible blow.”

“And how will we parry it?”

“Think ... d’Artagnan must come back to report on his mission to the king.”

“Oh, we’ve got time, then!”

“What do you mean?”

“You had a good lead on him, I presume?”

“Ten hours, more or less.”

“Well, then, with ten hours...”

Aramis shook his head. “See the clouds racing across the sky, the swallow diving through the air? D’Artagnan is faster than those clouds and that bird; d’Artagnan is the wind itself.”

“Come, now!”

“I tell you there’s something superhuman about that man, sir. He’s my age and I’ve known him for thirty-five years.”

“So?”

“So! Listen to my calculations, Sir: I sent Sir du Vallon to you at two in the morning, so Sir du Vallon left eight hours ahead of me. When did he arrive?”

“Around four o’clock.”

“So, you see, I gained four hours on him, though Porthos is a hardy horseman who killed eight mounts on the road – I found their bodies. Me, I rode post for fifty leagues but I have the gout and the gravel and who knows what else? It was killing me, so I dismounted at Tours and rolled the rest of the way in a carriage, half dead, thrown this way and that, forward and back, always with four horses at a furious gallop, so that I gained four hours on Porthos. However, d’Artagnan doesn’t weigh three hundred pounds like Porthos, or have the gout and the gravel like me – he’s not a horseman, he’s a centaur. D’Artagnan, though he left for Belle-Île when I left for Paris, giving me ten hours’ lead, despite all that, d’Artagnan will arrive only two hours behind me.”

“What about the accidents of travel?”

“He will have no accidents.”

“What if he runs out of horses?”

“He’ll run faster than the horses would have.”

“Good God! What a man!”

“Yes, he’s a man whom I admire and love, because he’s good, loyal, and true; I admire him because he represents the culmination of his kind of human. But though I love him, though I admire him, I also fear him and would forestall him. In short, Sir, d’Artagnan will be here in two hours, so get ahead of him, ride to the Louvre, and see the king before the king sees d’Artagnan.”

“And what shall I say to the king?”

“Nothing – just give him Belle-Île.”

“Oh, Sir d’Herblay!” Fouquet cried. “To have such a plan crushed at a single blow!”

“If one plan is crushed, we’ll proceed with another! Never despair, Sir, just go – and quickly.”

“But that garrison so carefully assembled, the king will change it all!”

“That garrison, Sir, belonged to the king when you bought Belle-Île; within two weeks it was yours, and it will still be yours once it’s dispersed. Let it go, Sir. Do you see a problem with having an army in a year where now you have but two regiments? Dispersed, your garrison of today will win you new partisans from the garrisons at La Rochelle, Nantes, Bordeaux, Toulouse, or wherever they’re sent. Go to the king, Sir, time is passing, and as it passes d’Artagnan flies like an arrow along the high road.”

“Sir d’Herblay, you know your every word blossoms in the garden of my thought. I’ll go to the Louvre.”

“This very moment, right?”

“I ask only enough time to change my clothes.”

“Remember that d’Artagnan doesn’t need to pass through Saint-Mandé, he’ll go straight to the Louvre, and there’s another hour gone from the time we have left.”

“But d’Artagnan doesn’t have my English horses. I’ll be at the Louvre in twenty-five minutes.” And, without wasting another second, Fouquet gave the orders for his departure.

Aramis had only enough time to say to him, “Return as quickly as you go, before I die of impatience.”

Five minutes later, the superintendent was flying toward Paris.

Meanwhile, Aramis asked to be shown to the room where Porthos was sleeping. As he left Fouquet’s office, he was enveloped in the arms of Pellisson, who had just learned of his arrival and hurried to see him. Aramis returned the hasty embrace with friendly dignity, and then, on the landing, asked, “What’s that I hear from above?”

Indeed, they could hear a deep, dull rumble like the growl of a hungry tiger or impatient lion. “Oh, that’s nothing!” said Pellisson with a smile.

“But what...?”

“It’s just Sir du Vallon snoring.”

“Of course,” said Aramis, “only he is capable of making such a noise. Allow me, Pellisson, to go see if he needs anything.”

“Can I go with you?”

“Please do!” They entered the room together. Porthos was lying on a bed, his face more purple than red, his eyes swollen and mouth gaping. The rumble escaping from the deep recesses of his chest rattled the windows. The sight of the mighty muscles tensing in his face and neck, his hair soaked with sweat, the energetic rise and fall of his chest and shoulders, couldn’t help but inspire a certain admiration, for here was strength that seemed nearly godlike. Porthos’s herculean legs and feet, in swelling, had split his stockings, as the might of his enormous body assumed the rigidity of stone. Porthos stirred no more than the granite giant on the plains of Agrigento. At Pellisson’s order, a valet had cut away Porthos’s boots, for no power in the world could have pulled them off. Four lackeys had tried in vain, pulling at them as if at a capstan. They hadn’t even managed to wake him. His boots cut away, his legs had fallen back on the bed. They removed the rest of his outer clothes, carried him into a bath where he soaked for an hour, dressed him in white linen, and carried him back to bed, all with effort and trouble that would have roused a dead man. But Porthos never opened an eye and didn’t stop for a moment the mighty organ of his snoring. As for Aramis, with his brave and restless nature, he tried to outface his fatigue and work with Gourville and Pellisson but passed out in the armchair he’d insisted they bring him. He was carried off and put to bed in a neighbouring chamber, where the repose of sleep soon calmed his nervous mind.

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Sir Fouquet Takes Action

Meanwhile, Sir Fouquet raced to the Louvre in a carriage drawn at a gallop by his English horses. The king was working with Colbert when suddenly he became pensive. The two death sentences he’d signed upon assuming the throne occasionally came back to haunt him. They were two black veils of mourning that he looked through when his eyes were open, and two bloodstains he saw when they were closed. “Sir,” he said suddenly to the intendant, “it sometimes seems to me that those two men whom you had me condemn weren’t guilty of so great a fault.”

“Sire, they were chosen from among the corrupt tax-farmers, a herd that needed to be culled.”

“Chosen by whom?”

“By necessity, Sire,” Colbert replied coldly.

“Necessity! An imperious word!” murmured the young king.

“An imperious goddess, Sire.”

“They were close friends of the superintendent, weren’t they?”

“Yes, Sire, friends who would have given their lives for Sir Fouquet.”

“And thus, they gave them, Sir,” said the king.

“That’s true but fortunately they gave them in vain – though that’s not their intention.”

“How much money had those men embezzled?”



"Ten million, perhaps, six of which were recovered from them."

"And that money is now in my coffers?" asked the king with a certain repugnance.

"It is, Sire but that confiscation, though it threatened Sir Fouquet, did him no real damage."

"And you think, Sir Colbert...?"

"That if Sir Fouquet was willing to raise a troop of brigands against Your Majesty to rescue his friends from execution, he'd raise an army to escape his own punishment."

The king fixed his confidant with one of those looks that are like lightning in a storm, a glance that lights the very depths of a man's conscience. "I'm astonished," he said, "that, thinking Sir Fouquet capable of such things, you never gave me advance warning."

"A warning of what, Sire?"

"Tell me first, clearly and precisely, what you think, Sir Colbert."

"About what?"

"About the conduct of Sir Fouquet."

"I think, Sire, that Sir Fouquet, not content with gathering money to himself, as Sir de Mazarin did, thus depriving Your Majesty of part of his power, wants in addition to gather to him all those friends of pleasure and easy living who make what the lazy call poetry but what politicians call corruption. I think that, by buying the loyalty of Your Majesty's subjects, he is encroaching on the royal prerogative, and will inevitably end, if he's allowed to continue, by relegating Your Majesty to weakness and obscurity."

"And what are such projects called, Sir Colbert?"

"Sir Fouquet's projects, Sire?"

"Yes."

"They're considered crimes of *lese-majesty*."

"And what do we do to those who commit *lese-majesty*?"

"They are arrested, judged, and punished."

"Are you certain Sir Fouquet has the intention of committing the crimes you impute to him?"

"I'll say more than that, Sire – he is beginning to carry them out."

"Well, then! I return to my question, Sir Colbert."

"What was that, Sire?"

"What are you warning me about?"

"Pardon me, Sire but before I say that I have one more thing to add."

"Speak."

"We have clear, obvious, and palpable proof of treason."

"What?"

"I've just learned that Sir Fouquet is fortifying Belle-Île-en-Mer."

"Ah! Really!"

"Yes, Sire."

"You're sure of that?"

"Perfectly. Do you know, Sire, how many troops are on Belle-Île?"

"Faith, no. Do you?"

"I don't, Sire, so I propose that Your Majesty send someone to Belle-Île."

"Such as?"

"Me, for example."

"What would you do on Belle-Île?"

"Learn if it's true that Sir Fouquet, like the old feudal lords, is building siege-proof walls."

"And what reason would he have to do that?"

"No reason except someday to defend himself against his king."

"But if that's so, Sir Colbert," said Louis, "we must act immediately, as you say; we must arrest Sir Fouquet."

"Impossible!"

"I thought I told you, Sir, not to employ that word in my service."

"Suppressing that word in Your Majesty's service doesn't change the fact that Sir Fouquet is Superintendent of Finance."

"So?"

"And consequently, as holder of that office, he has in his hand all of parliament, the entire army is in his pay, he's the patron of every writer, and the nobles are at his beck and call."

"In other words, I can do nothing against Sir Fouquet?"

"Absolutely nothing – at least right now, Sire."

"You're a sad disappointment as an advisor, Sir Colbert."

"Not at all, Sire! From now on I won't stop at just pointing out threats to Your Majesty."

"All right, then! How do we topple the colossus? Just push?" And the king laughed bitterly.

"His power comes from money, Sire; kill him with money."

"What if I discharge him from office?"

"Too difficult, and it's not the way to go."

"Then what is?"

"Ruin him, Sire, as I said."

"How would I do that?"

"Opportunities will arise; seize those opportunities."

"Give me an example."

"Here's one: His Royal Highness Sir is to be married, and his wedding must be magnificent. This is a good opportunity for Your Majesty to ask Sir Fouquet for a million; Sir Fouquet, who pays twenty thousand livres up front when he owes only five thousand, will certainly find the million Your Majesty asks for."

"That's good," said Louis XIV. "I will ask him for it."

"If Your Majesty would be so good as to sign an order, I'll collect the money myself."

And Colbert presented the king with a paper and pen. At that moment, the usher opened the door and announced Sir Surintendant. Louis paled. Colbert dropped the plume and withdrew behind the king, as if to enfold him in the dark wings of an evil angel. The superintendent made his entry like a born man of the Court, for whom a single glance tells him all he needs to know of a situation. This situation wasn't encouraging for Fouquet, no matter how conscious he was of his strength. Colbert's small dark eyes, dilated with envy, and the glittering gaze of Louis XIV, inflamed with anger, warned him of urgent danger. Courtiers are as sensitive to the atmosphere of the Court as old soldiers who can distinguish, from the sounds of wind and foliage, the distant tramp of an armed troop, and can tell, just by listening, how many men are on the march, how many sabres are rattling and how many cannons are rolling. Fouquet therefore had only to note the quality of the silence that had fallen upon his arrival to find it fraught with menace. The king allowed him enough time to advance to the middle of the room, for his youthful uncertainty prevented him from taking the initiative. Fouquet seized the advantage, saying, "Sire, I was impatient to see Your Majesty."

"Why is that?" asked Louis.

"To bring him good news."

Colbert, though lacking Fouquet's grandeur of person and generosity of heart, otherwise resembled him in many ways. He had the same brilliance, the same insight into other men, plus that power of self-possession that gives hypocrites time to think and prepare their attacks. He guessed that Fouquet was attempting to forestall the blow he was preparing to unleash, and his eyes gleamed darkly.

"What news?" asked the king.

Fouquet placed a parchment scroll on the table. "If Your Majesty would just cast his eyes over this," he said.

The king unrolled the scroll. "These are plans?" he said.

"Yes, Sire."

"And what kind of plans?"

"For a new kind of fortification, Sire."

"Ah ha!" said the king. "So, you're concerning yourself with strategy and tactics, Sir Fouquet."

"I concern myself with everything that might be useful to Your Majesty's reign," replied Fouquet.

"Very pretty!" said the king, looking over the drawings.

"As Your Majesty can undoubtedly see," said Fouquet, indicating the sketches, "here are the walls with their fortified strongpoints, and there the advance outworks."

"And what is all this beyond, Sir?"

"The sea."

"The sea? All around?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And what is the name of this place of which you show me the plan?"

"Sire, it is Belle-Île-en-Mer," Fouquet simply replied.

At this name, Colbert made a movement so abrupt that the king turned to quell him with a cold stare. Fouquet didn't appear to react at all to Colbert's movement, nor to notice the king's look. "Then sir," continued Louis, "you've fortified Belle-Île?"

"Yes, Sire, and I've brought Your Majesty all the estimates and accounts," replied Fouquet. "I have spent sixteen hundred thousand livres in this operation."

"For what reason?" replied Louis coldly, imitating the sullen glare of his intendant.

"A reason easy enough to explain," responded Fouquet, "given that Your Majesty was at odds with England."

"Yes but since the restoration of King Charles II, I've made an alliance with her."

"Only a month ago, Sire, as Your Majesty well knows but the fortification of Belle-Île was begun six months before that."

"But now it's been rendered useless."

"Sire, fortifications are never useless. I had fortified Belle-Île against Monck, Lambert, and all those citizens of London who wanted to play soldier. Belle-Île is equally well fortified against the Dutch, whom Your Majesty and the English are bound to oppose."

The king fell silent, glancing at Colbert, and then said, "Belle-Île, I believe, belongs to you, does it not, Sir Fouquet?"

"No, Sire."

"To whom, then?"

"To Your Majesty."

Colbert felt a wave of vertigo, as if a great abyss had opened before his feet. Louis gaped in admiration, either at the genius of Fouquet or his apparent devotion. "Explain yourself, Sir," he said.

"Easily done, Sire. Belle-Île is one of my domains, and I fortified it with my own money but as nothing in the world forbids a subject from offering a humble present to his king, I offer Your Majesty the full usage of the domain, though the ownership remains mine. Belle-Île, fortified for war, ought to be occupied by the king, and Your Majesty should henceforth be able to retain a dependable garrison there."

Colbert nearly lost his balance and slid to the floor. He had to lean against a wooden column just to keep from falling. "This plan you place before me is an example of great skill in the art of war, Sir," said Louis XIV.

"The plans weren't drawn up by me, Sire," said Fouquet. "I was advised by many officers but the plans themselves are the work of a distinguished military engineer."

"His name?"

"Sir du Vallon."

"Sir du Vallon?" Louis replied. "I don't know him. It's unfortunate, Sir Colbert," he continued, "when I don't know the names of the men of talent who honour my regime." As he said these words he turned slowly toward Colbert who dwindled before the assault, sweat bursting from his brow, lips speechless, spirit crushed. "You'll remember that name," Louis XIV added.

Colbert bowed, paler than his cuffs of white Flemish lace. Fouquet continued, "The masonry is of Roman concrete; the architects mixed it using an ancient and most durable formula."

"And the cannons?" asked Louis.

"Oh, Sire, that's Your Majesty's business! I wouldn't presume to place artillery in my domain unless Your Majesty was in command of it."

Louis began to waver indecisively between the resentment he felt toward this powerful man and the pity he felt for the man he'd outmanoeuvred, the accountant who seemed a mere shadow of the powerful minister. But the awareness of his duty as a king prevailed over his feelings as a man. He waved a finger across the paper. "Execution of these plans cost you a lot of money?" he said.

"I believe I had the honour of telling Your Majesty the amount."

"Remind me, I forgot."

"Sixteen hundred thousand livres."

"Sixteen hundred thousand livres! You are enormously wealthy, Sir Fouquet."

"It's Your Majesty who's wealthy," said the superintendent, "since Belle-Île is Your Majesty's."

"Yes, and thank you; but wealthy as I am, Sir Fouquet..."

The king paused. "Well, Sire?" asked the superintendent.

"I foresee a moment when I'll run out of money."

"You, Sire?"

"Yes, me."

"And when will that be?"

"Tomorrow, I believe."

"Would Your Majesty do me the honour to explain?"

"My brother is going to marry the English king's sister."

"Well, Sire?"

"Well! I must give the young princess a reception worthy of the granddaughter of Henri IV."

"That's entirely fair, Sire."

"So, I need money."

"No doubt about it."

"I'm going to need..." Louis XIV hesitated. The sum he was going to name was the same that he'd had to refuse to Charles II. He turned to Colbert to deliver the blow. "Tomorrow I'll need..." he repeated while looking at his intendant.

"A million," Colbert said brutally, thrilled to be able to resume his revenge.

Fouquet turned his back on the intendant to better attend the king. He waited until the king repeated, or rather murmured, "A million."

"Oh, Sire!" replied Fouquet disdainfully. "A million! What will Your Majesty do with a million?"

"But, it seems to me ..." said Louis XIV.

"That's no more than is spent on the wedding of a minor German prince."

"But Sir..."

"Your Majesty will need at least *two* million. The horses alone will cost five hundred thousand livres! I shall have the honour of sending Your Majesty sixteen hundred thousand livres – tonight."

"What?" said the king. "Sixteen hundred thousand livres!"

"Patience, Sire," replied Fouquet without so much as a glance at Colbert. "I know that's still four hundred thousand short of the two million. But Sir Intendant here," he said, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder at Colbert, "has in his coffers nine hundred thousand livres of mine."

The king turned to look at Colbert but the latter could say only, "*Uh...*"

"Sir, here," continued Fouquet, still speaking of Colbert without looking at him, "has received in the last week another sixteen hundred thousand livres. He paid a hundred thousand to the French Guards companies, seventy-five thousand to the hospitals, twenty-five thousand to the Swiss Guards, one hundred thirty thousand for provisions, a thousand for arms, and ten thousand for general expenses; if I'm not mistaken, that leaves a balance of nine hundred thousand."

Then, half turning toward Colbert, Fouquet said, in the scornful tone of an executive to his inferior, "Make sure those nine hundred thousand livres are handed to His Majesty tonight. In gold."

"But," said the king, "doesn't that add up to two and a half million livres?"

"Sire, the extra five hundred thousand will be pocket money for His Royal Highness. Do you hear, Sir Colbert? Tonight, before eight o'clock."

And with these words, and a respectful salute to the king, the superintendent withdrew from the royal presence without a single glance at the envious man whom he'd just taken to the cleaners. Colbert tore his Flemish lace in a rage and bit his lips till they bled. Fouquet was barely out the door when the usher rushed in past him, announcing, "A courier from Brittany for His Majesty."

"Sir d'Herblay's right!" muttered Fouquet as he consulted his watch. "An hour and fifty-five minutes. I was just in time!"

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D'Artagnan finally gets his Hands on the Commission of Captain

The reader already knows who the usher referred to when announcing a messenger from Brittany, for it was easy enough to recognise him. It was d'Artagnan, clothing dust-covered, face ruddy, hair dripping with sweat, legs stiff, painfully climbing the stairs, his bloody spurs ringing on every step. The moment he entered the doorway, he saw the superintendent. Fouquet greeted with a smile this man who, if he'd arrived one hour earlier, would have brought him ruin or death. D'Artagnan found within his greatness of soul and his inexhaustible vitality enough composure to remember how well the superintendent had received him; he returned the greeting, more from benevolence and compassion than from respect. On his lips was the word that had been repeated in vain so many times to the Duke Guise: "Fly!"

But to speak that word would have been to betray his oath; and moreover, to say that word on the threshold of the king's study in the presence of a Royal Guard would save no one. Thus, d'Artagnan contented himself with saluting Fouquet without speaking to him, and went on in, where he found the king torn between surprise at the final words of Fouquet and pleasure at the return of d'Artagnan. Though d'Artagnan was not a courtier, his eyes were just as sharp, quick, and upon entering he immediately read the painful humiliation printed on Colbert's face that was only exacerbated when he heard the king say, "So, Sir Colbert, you've nine hundred thousand livres at the ready according to the superintendent?"

Colbert, choking, bowed without answering. D'Artagnan's eyes and ears took in the entire scene at once. The first word Louis XIV directed at his musketeer as if in deliberate contrast to his previous utterance, was an affectionate, "*Good morning!*"

His next word was a dismissal of Colbert. The latter, livid and staggering, left the king's study, while d'Artagnan curled the ends of his mustachios. "Your disarray's just the kind of thing I love to see on my servants," said the king to d'Artagnan, admiring the wear and tear of the road on his envoy's clothing.

"In fact, Sire," said d'Artagnan, "I thought my presence at the Louvre sufficiently urgent to excuse presenting myself this way."

"You bring me important news, then, Sir?" asked the king with a smile.

"Sire, here's the entire story in three words: Belle-Île is fortified and well-fortified, too. It's a double wall, a citadel, two flanking forts, there are two swift corsairs in her port, and her shore batteries await only cannon."

"I know all that, Sir," replied the king.

"Er – Your Majesty knows all that?" said the musketeer, stupefied.

"I have the plan of Belle-Île's fortification," said the king.

"Your Majesty has the plan...?"

"Right here."

"Indeed, sire," said d'Artagnan, "that's it, the same one I saw there." D'Artagnan's face darkened. "Ah, I see now!" he said reproachfully. "Your Majesty didn't trust me to handle it alone and sent someone else as well."

"What does it matter, sir, how I learn what I know as long as I know it?"

"Maybe so, sire," said the musketeer, without even trying to disguise his discontent, "but I must say to Your Majesty that it's hardly fitting for me to ride so recklessly, risking my neck twenty times over, just to be received upon arrival with such news. Sire, when one distrusts people or thinks them insufficient, one shouldn't employ them."

And d'Artagnan with a distinctly military flourish, stamped his foot on the floor in a cloud of bloody dust. The king watched him calmly while inwardly enjoying this first triumph. "Sir," he said after a moment, "the state of Belle-Île isn't only known to me, Belle-Île is now mine."

"Fine, Sire, fine – I ask only one thing more," d'Artagnan replied. "My discharge!"

"What! Your discharge?"

"Absolutely. I'm too proud to take the king's silver without earning or worse, without deserving it. My discharge, Sire!"

"Oh ho!"

"My discharge, or I'll leave without it."

"Are you angry, Sir?"

"I have a right to be, *God be with you!* I cling to my saddle for thirty-two hours, riding day and night, breaking all records, I arrive stiff as a corpse, only to find someone else got here ahead of me. Enough! I'm clearly useless. My discharge, Sire!"

"Sir d'Artagnan," said Louis XIV, laying his white hand on the musketeer's dusty arm, "what I've just told you has no bearing on what I promised you. To give my word is to keep it."

And the young king, going to his desk, opened a drawer and removed a paper folded and sealed. "Here's your commission as Captain of the King's Musketeers," he said. "You've earned it, Sir d'Artagnan." D'Artagnan eagerly opened the letter and looked it over twice. He could scarcely believe his eyes. "And this commission," continued the king, "is awarded to you, not solely for your mission to Belle-Île but also for your brave intervention on the Place de Grève. There also, you served me bravely and well."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan, who despite his self-control couldn't prevent a blush from rising to his cheek. "You know about that, too, Sire?"

"Yes, I know it." The king had a penetrating gaze and infallible judgement when it came to reading a conscience. "You've something more to tell me," he said to the musketeer. "Come, speak frankly with me, sir. You know I said I always want you to be honest with me."

"Well, Sire! All I've to say is that I'd rather be named Captain of the Musketeers for having charged at the head of my company to silence a battery or take a town than for getting two sad wretches hanged."

"Is that true, what you just told me?"

"And why would Your Majesty suspect me of deceiving him, I must ask?"

"Because, if I've judged you at all well, Sir, I can hardly think you'd be sorry for having drawn your sword on my behalf."

"Well, this time you're wrong, Sire, and very much so. Yes, I am sorry about having drawn my sword this time because of what resulted; two poor people are dead, Sire, who couldn't defend themselves, and were neither your enemies nor mine."

The king was silent for a moment, then said, "And your companion, Sir d'Artagnan, is he sorry as well?"

"My companion?"

"Yes, you weren't alone, it seems to me."

"Alone? Where?"

"On the Place de Grève."

"No, Sire," said d'Artagnan, embarrassed that the king might suspect that he wanted all the glory that should be rightfully shared with Raoul. "No, *God be with you!* As Your Majesty says, I had a companion, and a good one."

"A young man?"

"Yes, Sire, a young man. I must compliment Your Majesty on how well informed he is, from first to last. Is it Sir Colbert who brings the king such thorough reports?"

"Sir Colbert has told me nothing but good of you, Sir d'Artagnan, and would have been ill received if he'd done otherwise."

"Ah! That's fine."

"He also spoke nothing but good of this young man."

"That's as it'd be," said the musketeer.

"In fact, he said the young man is a real hero," said Louis XIV to see if he could arouse some jealousy.

"A hero indeed, Sire," said d'Artagnan, delighted at the opportunity to speak well about Raoul before the king.

"Do you know his name?"

"I should think so!"

"So, you know him?"

"Only for about twenty-five years, Sire."

"But he's no older than that!" said the king.

"Well, Sire, that's because I've known him since birth."

"Really?"

"Sire," said d'Artagnan. "Your Majesty questions me with such suspicion that I think it must derive from someone else. Did Sir Colbert who informs you so well, forget to tell you that this young man's the son of my closest friend?"

"The Viscount of Bragelonne?"

"Exactly, Sire – the Viscount of Bragelonne's father is the Count of La Fère, who was instrumental in the restoration of King Charles II. Oh, Bragelonne springs from a valiant race, Sire!"

"Then he's the son of that lord who came to meet me, or rather to meet with Sir de Mazarin, to offer an alliance on the behalf of King Charles II?"

"Precisely."

"And you say this Count of La Fère is a brave man?"

"Sire, he's a man who drew his sword on the behalf of the king your father more times than there have been days in Your Majesty's life."

This time it was Louis XIV who was taken by surprise. "Very well, Sir d'Artagnan! And this Count of La Fère is your friend?"

"For about forty years, yes, Sire. I didn't just meet him yesterday, Your Majesty."

"Would you be pleased to see this young man, Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Delighted, Sire!"

The king struck a bell, and an usher appeared. "Call Sir de Bragelonne," said the king.

"What? He's here?" said d'Artagnan.

"He's on guard duty today at the Louvre with the gentlemen's company of Sir Prince."

The king had scarcely finished before Raoul presented himself, and, seeing d'Artagnan, smiled one of those charming smiles that appear only on the lips of youth. "Come, now," d'Artagnan said familiarly to Raoul, "the king will allow you to embrace me; only first give His Majesty your thanks."

Raoul bowed so graciously that Louis, who was pleased by all superiorities that didn't outdo his own, admired his good looks, vigour, and modesty. "Sir," said the king to Raoul, "I've asked Sir Prince to give you up to me; I've received his reply and as of this morning you belong to me. Sir Prince is a good master but I dare to hope you won't lose by the change."

"Yes, Raoul, don't worry, the king has his good points," said d'Artagnan who had divined Louis's character and could toy with his self-esteem – within limits of course, keeping to the proprieties and flattering when he seemed to be mocking.

"Sire," said Bragelonne in a soft and charming voice, with the easy eloquence inherited from his father, "it's not just from today that I belong to Your Majesty."

"Oh, I know that!" said the king. "You mean the exploit on the Place de Grève. On that day, indeed, you belonged to me, Sir."

"Sire, it's not of that day I speak; I wouldn't dare to recall such a trivial service in the presence of a man like Sir d'Artagnan. I speak of an experience of great significance to my life that consecrated me, at the age of sixteen, to the devoted service of Your Majesty."

"Oh ho!" said the king. "And what was this experience, Sir, tell me?"

"It was this: when I was leaving on my first campaign, on my way to join the army of Sir Prince, Sir Count of La Fère accompanied me as far as Saint-Denis, to the tomb of Louis XIII at the base of the steps in the basilica vault, where God will not, I hope, send his successor for many long years. There he made me swear on the ashes of our noble masters to serve our royalty, as represented by and incarnated in you, Sire – to serve it in thought, word, and deed. For the last ten years, Sire, I haven't had many opportunities to keep that oath but I am Your Majesty's sworn soldier, nothing less, and by calling me nearer I don't change my master, only my garrison."

Raoul fell silent and bowed. Though he was done, the king continued to listen. "*God be with you!*" cried d'Artagnan. "That's well said, wasn't it, Your Majesty? He comes of a noble race, sire, a grand race!"

"Yes," murmured the king, delighted but not daring to show his emotions, touched by contact with such a naturally aristocratic character. "Yes, sir, you speak the truth: wherever you're, you're the king's. But by changing your garrison, believe me, you'll find an advancement of which you're worthy." Raoul saw that was all the king had to say to him and with that perfect tact that characterised his refined nature, he bowed and withdrew. "Do you have anything more to report to me, sir?" said the king when he found himself alone with d'Artagnan.

"Yes, Sire, and I've kept this news for last because it's sad and will clothe the royalty of Europe in mourning."

"What are you telling me?"

"Sire, in passing through Blois, a sorrowful word echoed from the château to my ear."

"Really, you're frightening me, Sir d'Artagnan."

"Sire, that word was spoken by a footman who wore black crêpe on his arm."

"For my uncle Gaston of Orléans perhaps?"

"Sire, he's taken his last breath."

"And I uninformed!" cried the king who in his royal vulnerability felt insulted by not being told the news.

"Oh, don't be angry, Sire!" said d'Artagnan. "Not the couriers of Paris nor the messengers of the rest of the world can keep up with your servant; the courier from Blois won't be here before two o'clock and he's riding well, I assure you when I passed him just beyond Orléans."

"My uncle Gaston," murmured Louis, pressing his hand to his forehead, and expressing in those 3 words all the mixed feelings of a lifetime.

"Yes, sire. And so it goes," said d'Artagnan philosophically, responding to the royal thought. "The past escapes us."

"So true, Sir, so true. But we still have the future, thank God, and we can try to make it less sad."

"I count on Your Majesty for that," said the musketeer with a bow. "And now..."

"Yes, quite right, Sir – I forgot you just rode a hundred and ten leagues. Go, Sir, take good care of the best of my soldiers ... and when you're rested, return and receive my orders."

"Sire, absent or present, I'm always yours." D'Artagnan bowed and went out. Then as if he had only ridden from Fontainebleau, he went off through the Louvre to find Raoul of Bragelonne.

### 341

#### A Lover & his Mistress

While the wax-lights flickered in the Château de Blois around the dead body of Gaston d'Orléans, the last prince of the former reign; while the citizens of the town composed their epitaph for him that was far from complimentary; while Madam the dowager princess outside the funeral hall forgetting that in her youth she had so loved the dead man that she had fled her paternal palace to elope with him, considered her life, reckoning her calculations of interest and totalling her sacrifices of pride; meanwhile, elsewhere in the château, other interests and other prides were anxiously being reckoned in light of the prince's passing. Not the mournful tolling of the bells, nor the chants of the singers, nor the gleam of the candles through the windows, nor the preparations for the burial, none of these things had the power to distract two people who stood inside a window of the château's inner courtyard, a window we already know<sup>63</sup> that admitted light into a room in what was called the Little Apartments. A joyful ray of sunshine – for the sun didn't seem concerned about the loss France had just suffered – a ray of sunshine fell upon the pair, drawing perfume from the surrounding flowers and scattering reflections from the gold wallpaper. These two people who were occupied, not by the death of the prince but by the concerns that death provoked, were a young woman and a young man. The latter was a man in his mid-twenties favoured with two large and long-lashed eyes that could make his expression seem open or veiled depending on their play. He was small of stature and dark of skin and smiled with a wide and handsome mouth above a pointed and unusually mobile chin. He sometimes leaned very lovingly toward his companion, who, it must be said, didn't recoil nearly as quickly as strict propriety might require. This young woman, whom we already know, for we've seen her before at this same window by the light of the same sun, was comprised of a singular mix of finesse and intelligence, charming when she laughed and beautiful when she was serious – but we must admit, she was more often charming than beautiful. The pair seemed to have reached the climax of a half-mocking, half-serious discussion. "Come, Sir Malicorne,"\* said the young woman, "are you finally prepared to be reasonable?"

"You think it's so easy, Miss Aure, to do what we'd like," replied the young man, "When we really do only what we can."

"Oh, fie! Always hiding behind your words."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Leave behind your lawyer's logic, my dear."

"Another impossibility. I must be who I am, Miss Montalais."

"And I must be a lady, Sir Malicorne."

"Alas, I know it well, and your rank overwhelms me. I can tell you nothing."

"I, overwhelm you? Never! Now tell me what you came here to say. I've waited long enough."

"Very well! I must obey."

"I'm eager to hear it, in fact."

"First, 'Sir' is dead."

*"Plague!* Old news. Where do you come from with that?"

"I come from Orléans, Miss."

"And is that the only news you bring?"

"Not at all! I also come to tell you that Princess Henrietta of England is on her way to marry King Louis's brother and become the new Madam."

"Really, Malicorne, you're quite insufferable with your news of the last century. If you continue to mock me like this, I'll have you thrown out."

"Oh! Will you?"

"Yes, you're really quite exasperating."

"Now, now! Have patience, Miss."

"You're just pretending to have something important to say. If you don't, then be off."

"Tell me what you want to know, and I'll answer honestly. Well, as honestly as I can."

"You know what I want to hear! Am I to be appointed a maid of honour, a position I foolishly expected you to use your leverage to obtain?"

"Me?" Malicorne lowered his eyes, took her hands, and gave her an impish look. "And what leverage do you imagine a poor lawyer might have?"

"Your father's income can't be less than twenty thousand livres a year, Sir Malicorne."

"He doesn't do badly for a provincial, Miss Montalais."

"And he's deep in the confidence of the Prince de Condé."

"A confidence that comes of lending freely to my Lord."

"In short, you're the best-connected rogue in the province."

"You flatter me."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"How so?"

"Because you say I have leverage when I say I have none."

"Seriously, now – what of my appointment?"

"Well, then! Your appointment?"

"Will I have it or not?"

"You ... shall have it."

"But when?"

"Whenever you want."

"Where is it then?"

"In my pocket."

"What! In your pocket?"

"Yes."

And with a sly smile, Malicorne drew from his pocket a letter that Montalais pounced upon and read avidly. And as she read, her face lit up. "Malicorne!" she cried. "You're really a good lad."

"How so, Miss?"

"Because you could have made me pay for this appointment – but you didn't."

And to needle him, she burst out laughing. But Malicorne bravely withstood the attack. "I've no idea what you mean," he said.

Then it was Montalais who was taken aback. "I've declared my feelings to you," continued Malicorne. "You've told me three times, laughing that you don't love me – but you kissed me once without laughing, and that's all I need."

"All?" said the proud and enticing Montalais in a tone of wounded pride.

"Absolutely all, Miss," replied Malicorne.

"Fah!"

This single syllable conveyed as much in anger as the young man might have expected in gratitude. But he calmly shook his head. "Listen, Montalais," he said, seeming not to care whether this familiarity pleased his mistress or not, "there's no point in pretending."

"Isn't there?"

"Indeed not, since, in the year I've known you, you could have had me thrown out twenty times if I didn't please you."

"Really? Why would I do that?"

"I've certainly been impertinent enough to deserve it."

"Well, that's true enough."

"Therefore, you have to admit that I've pleased you," said Malicorne.

"Sir Malicorne!"

"Let's not fight about it. Since you kept me around, you must have had a reason for it."

"As long as you don't think it's because I love you!" hissed Montalais.

"Fine. I'm even sure that at this moment you hate me."

"Never have you spoken more truly!"

"Fine! I can't stand you, either."

"I'll make a note of it."

"I'm sure. You think I'm tactless and foolish, and that I find you shrill and short-tempered, always twisting up your face in anger. Right now, you'd rather jump out the window than let me kiss the tip of your finger, while I'd rather throw myself from the highest tower than touch the hem of your gown. And yet, five minutes from now you'll love me and I will adore you. That's just how it goes."

"I say you're wrong."

"And I swear it's the truth."

"Fah!"

"But none of this means a thing. The truth is, you need me, Aure – and I need you. When you want to be merry, I make you laugh, and when it suits me to be in love, I need only look at you. I've brought you the royal appointment you desired, and eventually you'll give me something that I want."

"Me?"

"Yes, you! But at the moment, my dear Aure, I don't want a single thing so relax."

"What an awful man you are, Malicorne! Here I was, ready to rejoice in my appointment, and you go and ruin it."

"No loss! You'll have plenty of time to rejoice in it after I've gone on my way."

"Go, then."

"I will – but first, a final word."

"What?"

"You should cheer up and find your good mood again. Sulking just makes you ugly."

"What a brute you are!"

"Look, we might as well be honest with each other."

"You're hard-hearted, Malicorne!"

"And you're ungrateful, Montalais!"

The young man turned, leaned on the windowsill, and stared out at nothing. Montalais picked up a book and opened it. Malicorne stood up, brushed his hat on his sleeve, and straightened his black doublet. Montalais, while pretending to read, watched him from the corner of her eye. "Fine!" she cried furiously. "Resume your phony air of respectability. Now you'll sulk for a week."

"Two weeks, Miss," said Malicorne with a bow.

Montalais shook her fist at him. "Monster!" she said. "Oh, if I was a man!"

"What would you do to me?"

"I'd strangle you!"

"Oh, excellent," said Malicorne. "You know ... I think I'm finally beginning to want something."

"And what do you want, Sir Demon? That I should lose my soul to anger?"

Malicorne turned his hat respectfully in his hands – and then suddenly he dropped it, grabbed the young woman by the shoulders, drew her to him and kissed her with two burning lips surprisingly ardent for a man who'd pretended indifference. Aure began to cry out but it was swallowed in the kiss. Annoyed and upset, the young woman pushed Malicorne back against the wall. "Suit yourself!" said Malicorne philosophically. "That kiss will hold me for a good six weeks. Farewell, Miss! Accept my humble farewell."

And he took three steps toward the door. "Ooh! No!" cried Montalais, stamping her foot. "You're not going anywhere! Stop! I command you!"

"You command me?"

"Yes. Am I not mistress here?"

"Of my mind and my soul, utterly."

"Fine things for me to have! The mind is bone dry and the soul is foolish."

"Careful, Montalais – I know you," said Malicorne. "You're going to fall in love with your humble servant."

"Well! ... Maybe I will," she said, draping her arms around his neck more with childish indolence than with voluptuous abandon. "Maybe I will. After all, I still have to thank you."

"For what?"

"My appointment! For isn't it my entire future?"

"And mine as well."

Montalais stared at him. "You know what's frightful?" she asked. "I can never tell when you're speaking seriously."

"I've never been more serious. I wanted to go to Paris, and now that *you're* going there – *we* are going there."

"So that's the real reason you did this, selfish one?"

"What would you have, Aure? I can't do without you."

"Well, to tell the truth, it's the same with me. But you're still a man with a heart of stone."

"Aure, dearest Aure, take care – you know your insults just make me adore you."

And saying this, Malicorne approached the young woman a second time. Just then a footstep echoed from the stair. The young folk were so close they'd have been surprised in each other's arms if Montalais hadn't violently shoved Malicorne against the door as it was opening. There was a thump, a loud cry, and curses from the other side. It was Madam de Saint-Rémy\* who uttered the cry and the curses; the unlucky Malicorne had half crushed her in the doorway. "This rascal again?" shrilled the old woman. "It's always him!"

"On the contrary, Madam," replied Malicorne respectfully. "This is the first time it's been me in a week."

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The True Heroine of This Tale Finally Appears

Behind Madam de Saint-Rémy on the stairs was her daughter, Miss Louise de La Vallière. She heard the explosion of maternal fury, and guessing the reason for it, she entered the room trembling. There she saw as expected the unhappy Malicorne, whose woeful expression would have aroused sympathy or amusement in anyone not already angry. He had entrenched himself behind a large chair to fend off Madam de Saint-Rémy's attacks. He couldn't reach her by words, as she was louder than he, so he had to rely on the eloquence of his gestures. But the old lady heard and saw nothing, as she'd long considered Malicorne an archenemy, and her anger was sufficient that it overflowed from Malicorne onto his accomplice, Montalais, who got her share. "And *you*, Miss, do you think I won't warn Madam about what's going on with one of her maids of honour?"

"Oh, no, Mother!" cried Miss La Vallière. "Please, spare her..."

"Hold your tongue, Miss, and don't waste effort on the behalf of the unworthy. That an honest girl like you is subject to such a bad influence's trouble enough, I'll not have you defending her into the bargain."

"But, really," said Montalais, rebelling at last, "I can't imagine why you should treat me this way. I've done nothing to injure you, have I?"

"Oh, Miss? And this lowborn loafer, what good is he doing here? I ask you!" retorted Madam de Saint-Rémy.

"He's not here for good or ill, Madam, he just comes to see me, that's all."

"So, so?" said Madam de Saint-Rémy. "Well, Her Royal Highness will be informed, and she will decide."

"Even so," replied Montalais, "I don't see why Sir Malicorne should be forbidden to have intentions toward me, if his intentions are honourable."

"Honourable intentions, with a face like that!" snapped Madam de Saint-Rémy.

"I thank you on behalf of my face, Madam," said Malicorne.

"Come, Louise," continued Madam de Saint-Rémy. "We must warn Madam that while she mourns for her husband, even as we all grieve for the loss of the master of our château, in this house of sorrow there are people who amuse themselves and rejoice."

"Oh!" cried the accused pair in a single voice.

"A maid of honour! A *maid of honour!*" cried the old lady, raising her hands to the heavens.

"Well! That's where you're wrong, Madam," said Montalais, exasperated. "I'm no maid of honour, at least not to Madam."

"Have you resigned your position, Miss? Very well! I'm surprised by your integrity but I can only applaud your honesty."

"I haven't resigned, Madam but I have taken service elsewhere."

"Among the bourgeoisie? Or the *lawyers*?" asked Madam de Saint-Rémy with disdain.

"You should know, Madam, that I'm not a young lady to serve citizens or clerks," said Montalais. "Instead of this miserable court in which you vegetate, I go to a court nearly royal."

"*Haha!* A royal court," said Madam de Saint-Rémy, choking on a laugh. "A royal court – what do you think of that, daughter?"

And she turned toward Miss La Vallière, whom she hoped to incite against Montalais but who, contrary to her mother's impulse, gave a look intended to conciliate Montalais and Madam de Saint-Rémy.

"I said a *nearly* royal court, Madam," replied Montalais, "as Princess Henrietta of England who's to be the wife of His Royal Highness Sir, isn't a queen. I said nearly royal and that's quite correct as she'll be sister-in-law to the king."

A lightning bolt striking the Château de Blois couldn't have stunned Madam de Saint-Rémy more than Montalais's words. "Wh-what's that you say about Her Royal Highness Madam Henrietta?" stammered the old lady.

"I say that I'm joining her household as a maid of honour. That's what I say."

"A maid of honour!" cried Madam de Saint-Rémy with despair and Miss La Vallière with joy.

"Yes, Madam. A maid of honour."

The old lady bowed her head as if this blow were too much for her. However, she straightened almost immediately to fire a final shot at her adversary. "Oh, yes," she said, "we often hear *talk* of such future promises, flattering ourselves with vain hopes until, at the last moment, we see what we counted upon disappear like mist and steam."

"Ah but Madam, the credit of my protector is rock solid, and a promise from him is a deed done."

"And this protector, oh so powerful, would it be indiscreet to inquire as to his name?"

"*My God*, not at all. It is Sir, here," said Montalais, indicating Malicorne who had maintained perfect sangfroid and an almost comical dignity throughout this scene.

"Sir, here!" cried Madam de Saint-Rémy with an explosion of hilarity. "Sir is your protector! The man whose credit's rock solid and promises are deeds done is Sir Malicorne?"

Malicorne bowed. As for Montalais, her only response was to draw the letter of appointment from her purse and present it to the old lady. "Here's the appointment," she said.

It was the final blow. As soon as she saw the official parchment, the good woman clasped her hands together, an indescribable expression of despair and envy distorted her face, and she had to sit down to avoid passing out. Montalais was not as petty as to rejoice overmuch in this victory by crushing her vanquished enemy, especially since this enemy was her friend's mother; she accepted her triumph but didn't revel in it. Malicorne was less generous; he leaned back in an armchair in a pose of insolent over-familiarity that, two hours earlier, would have gotten him a swift whack with a stick.

"Maid of honour to the young Madam!" repeated Madam de Saint-Rémy, still unable to believe it.

"Yes, Madam, thanks to the influence of Sir Malicorne, here."

"It's incredible!" repeated the old lady. "Doesn't it seem incredible, Louise?"

But Louise did not answer, distracted. She stood dreaming, one hand to her brow and sighed. "Tell me, sir," Madam de Saint-Rémy said suddenly, "however did you obtain such an appointment?"

"By asking for it, Madam."

"Asking who?"

"One of my friends."

"And you have such good friends at Court that you have that much credit with them?"

"*Dame!* Apparently."

"And might we know the names of these friends?"

"I didn't say friends, Madam, just a friend."

"And what's this friend called?"

"*Plague*, Madam, what are you thinking? When one has a friend as powerful as mine, you don't risk losing him by flaunting his name."

"You're quite right, Sir, not to mention a name that might not exist."

"In any case," said Montalais, "whether the friend exists or not, the appointment certainly does, and that's the point of the issue."

"Then I suppose," said Madam de Saint-Rémy with the grimace of a cat about to scratch, "that when I found Sir here just now..."

"Well?"

"He was bringing you your appointment."

"That's right, Madam – quite so."

"Nothing could be more proper, then."

"So I think, Madam."

"And I was wrong, it seems, to reproach you, Miss."

"Very wrong, Madam – but I'm so used to your reproaches that I forgive you."

"In that case, Louise, we should withdraw, don't you think?"

"What, Madam?" said La Vallière, with a shiver, "What did you say?"

"You weren't listening, my child?"

"No, Madam, I was thinking."

"About what?"

"A thousand things."

"You're not angry with me, are you, Louise?" said Montalais, taking her hand.

"And why would you think that, my dear Aure?" replied the young woman in a voice soft and musical.

"By Our Lady!" said Madam de Saint-Rémy. "If she's a bit angry at you, poor girl, she could hardly be blamed."

"Dear God, why's that?"

"It seems to me she's as pretty as you, and of as good a family."

"Mother!" Louise cried.

"A hundred times more beautiful, Madam, though not of a better family," said Montalais. "But that doesn't explain why she should be mad at me."

"Do you think it right for her to be buried in Blois while you go to shine in Paris?"

"But, Madam, I'm not stopping Louise from following me to Paris; on the contrary, I'd love for her to come."

"Yet it seems to me that Sir Malicorne, who is all-powerful at Court..."

"Alas, Madam," said Malicorne, "it's everyone for himself in this sad world."

"Malicorne!" warned Montalais. Then leaning over the young man, she whispered, "Keep Madam de Saint-Rémy busy, either by arguing with her or making up; I need to talk to Louise." And a gentle press of her hand rewarded him for his obedience. Malicorne groaned and turned toward Madam de Saint-Rémy while Montalais spoke to her friend, an arm draped around her neck, "Let's hear it. What're you thinking? Is it true you'll love me no more if I go away to shine, as your mother says?"

"Of course not!" replied the young woman, blinking back tears. "No, I'd be happy for your happiness."

"Happy! You look like you're ready to cry."

"Do we cry only from envy?"

"Ah, yes! I understand – I'm going to Paris, and the word *Paris* brings to mind a certain young cavalier."

"Aure!"

"A certain cavalier who formerly lived in Blois and now lives in Paris."

"I don't know what's wrong with me, really, I'm just overcome."

"Cry then since you can't find a smile for me." Louise raised a face streaming softly with tears, rolling one after another, glittering like diamonds. "Come, confess," said Montalais.

"What'd I confess?"

"To what's making you cry for we don't cry without a reason. I'm your friend; whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. Malicorne has more pull than you – or he – thinks! Do you want to come to Paris?"

"Oh, my heart!" said Louise.

"Do you want to come to Paris?"

"To stay here alone, in this old château, no more to hear your sweet songs, to press your hand, to run with you in the gardens – oh, it will be so tedious that I'll die in just days!"

"Do you *want to come to Paris?*"

Louise sighed. "That's not an answer."

"How am I supposed to answer you?"

"Yes or no; that's not so hard, it seems to me."

"Oh! You're going to be so happy there, Montalais!"

"Which means, I suppose, that you'd like to be where I'll be?"

Louise said nothing. "Stubborn thing!" said Montalais. "Do we keep secrets from our friends? Confess that you want to come to Paris, confess that you're dying to see Raoul de Bragelonne again!"

"I can't confess that."

"Then you're in the wrong."

"Why?"

"Because ... do you see this appointment?"

"Of course, I see it."

"Well! I'll get you one just like it."

"From who?"

"From Malicorne."

"Aure, are you serious? Is that even possible?"

"*Dame!* Here is Malicorne, and what he's done for me, he'll just have to do for you."

Malicorne had heard his name spoken twice and was delighted to have an excuse to turn away from Madam de Saint-Rémy. "What is it, Miss?"

"Come here, Malicorne," said Montalais with a commanding gesture. Malicorne obeyed. "Another appointment like this one," said Montalais.

"How's that?"

"Another appointment like this one. Did I mumble?"

"But..."

"I must have it!"

"Oh ho! You must?"

"Yes."

"It isn't possible, is it, Sir Malicorne?" said Louise in her soft voice.

"*Dame!* If it's for you, Miss..."

"For me. Yes, Sir Malicorne, it'd be for me."

"And if Miss Montalais asks for it as well..."

"Miss Montalais does not ask for it, she requires it."

"Well! I see I must obey, Miss."

"With her name on it?"

"We shall try."

"No weasel words. Louise de La Vallière shall be a maid of honour to Madam Henrietta within a week."

"Just as you say!"

"Within a week, or..."

"Or?"

"Or take back your appointment, Sir Malicorne. I won't go without my friend."

"Aure!" cried Louise.

"All is well, you can keep your appointment. Miss La Vallière shall be a maid of honour."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I can hope to go to Paris?"

"Count on it."

"Oh, Sir Malicorne, how grateful I'll be!" cried Louise, clapping her hands in joy.

"Little liar!" said Montalais. "Trying to make me think you were no longer in love with Raoul."

Louise blushed like a rose in May but instead of answering, she went to embrace her mother. "Madam," she said to her, "did you hear? Sir Malicorne's going to have me appointed a maid of honour!"

"Sir Malicorne is a prince in disguise," said the old lady. "He is all-powerful."

"Would you like to be a maid of honour as well?" Malicorne asked Madam de Saint-Rémy. "I might as well appoint everyone while I'm at it." And he went out on that note, leaving the old lady with mouth open but empty, as Tallemant des Réaux would say. "Here we go," murmured Malicorne as he went down the stairs. "This is going to cost me another thousand livres *but* there's no way around it; my friend Manicamp\* does nothing for free."

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Malicorne & Manicamp

The introduction of these two characters into the story and the connection between them deserves some explanation to the reader. We will therefore relate a few details about Sirs Malicorne and Manicamp. Malicorne, as mentioned, had come from Orléans to bring the appointment for Miss Montalais, the arrival of which had produced such a sensation in the Château de Blois. Orléans was where, at the moment, Sir de Manicamp was abiding. A singular person, this Sir de Manicamp: a young man of intelligence but always penniless, always needy, though he had free access to the purse of Sir Count de Guiche,\* one of the deepest purses of the period. This access was due to Manicamp having been the childhood companion of the Count de Guiche, and though a poor dependent of the noble household of Marshal Grammont, <sup>65</sup> Sir de Manicamp had learned to make a way for himself despite having no prospects of his own. With a wisdom beyond his years, from early childhood he had taken the blame for all the follies of the young Count de Guiche. If his noble companion stole some fruit intended for Madam la Maréchale, or broke a window, or hurt a hunting dog, Manicamp declared himself guilty of the crime and suffered the punishment that was none the softer because it fell upon an innocent. But over time this system of loyal sacrifice had paid off. And now, instead of wearing the drab clothing compelled by his father's lack of fortune, Manicamp's wardrobe was brilliant, superb, like that of a young lord with an income of 50000 livres. Not that he was a man coarse of character or corrupt of will, no, his turn of mind was philosophical, or rather indifferent to personal ambition, unconcerned with rank or hierarchy. The only thing he cared about was having money to spend. But in that regard, Sir de Manicamp was a bottomless pit. About three or four times a year the Count de Guiche's purse ran empty, and when de Guiche was drained, his purse and pockets turned out, and he declared it would be a fortnight before the paternal generosity replenished them, Manicamp, drained like the purse, went to bed and stayed there. On these occasions he refused to eat and sold off his fine clothes on the pretext that, since he was in bed, he did not need them. During this low tide of exhaustion, the Count de Guiche's purse slowly refilled, and, once replenished, overflowed once more upon Manicamp, who bought new clothes, put them on, and resumed his former life. This eccentric habit of selling off his clothes for a quarter of what they were worth had made him a hero in certain circles in Orléans, a city that, in truth, we'd be hard pressed to say why he'd chosen it as the abode of his low tides. Provincial ne'er-do-wells with no more than six hundred livres a year were always waiting to take advantage of his sudden clothing sales. Among these local fops was our friend Malicorne, the son of an Orléans city alderman from whom the Prince de Condé, needy as the Condés always were, regularly borrowed money at ruinous interest. Sir Malicorne managed the paternal loans that meant, in those times of loose fiscal morality, that following the example of his father he also loaned out money for short terms at high interest, earning a good eighteen hundred livres a year on top of the six hundred afforded him by his father's generosity. With twenty-four hundred livres to squander on whatever follies he liked, this made Malicorne the king of the young dandies of Orléans. However, unlike Manicamp, Malicorne was frightfully ambitious. He loved from ambition, spent out of ambition, and might yet ruin himself through ambition. Malicorne was resolved to establish himself at any price, and his chosen means was to find for himself from the petty nobility both a mistress and a friend. The mistress was Miss Montalais, cruel in matters of amour but from a noble family, and that was what mattered to Malicorne. The friend lacked all friendship but he was the favourite of the Count de Guiche, himself a favourite of *Sir*, the king's brother and that sufficed for Malicorne. But ambition was expensive. Among such expenses, Miss Montalais cost him, in ribbons, gloves, and charming gifts, a thousand livres a year. Manicamp cost him, in cash loaned but never repaid, twelve to fifteen hundred livres a year. Taken together, that left nothing for Malicorne. Ah but we are mistaken! For he still had access to his father's treasury. Keeping a private side account, he advanced himself from the alderman's coffers a 6 years' allowance, about 15000 livres, vowing to himself of course, to repay it at the first opportunity. That opportunity would be his appointment to a prime position in Sir's royal household that would be established upon the prince's marriage. That time had come, and Sir's household was being assembled. A good position in the household of a Prince of the Blood, when backed by the recommendation of a close friend like the Count de Guiche, would be worth at least twelve thousand livres a year that Malicorne, with his fiscal practices, could easily increase to twenty thousand. Then, with an office and title, Malicorne would marry Miss Montalais, a lady of the petty nobility that would thus ennoble Malicorne. However, for Miss Montalais to have a proper dowry, because though she was an only child her family fortune wasn't much to speak of, she herself would have to be placed in the household of a grand princess, as generous as that of the Dowager Madam was frugal. And to make sure that the wife and the husband were in allied households, because to be in opposing houses would be a serious inconvenience, Malicorne had decided that both should be associated with the house of Sir, the king's brother. So, Miss Montalais would be maid of honour to the young Madam, just as Sir Malicorne would become an officer of Sir. Here was a plan clearly devised and boldly executed. Malicorne had therefore asked Manicamp to obtain a maid of honour appointment from the Count de Guiche. And the Count de Guiche had asked for such an appointment from Sir, who had signed the letter without hesitation. Malicorne's long-term plan – for a mind as active as his must see far into the future – was this: to place near Madam Henrietta a woman devoted to him, a lady who was witty, pretty, young, and intriguing, and thereby to learn all the feminine secrets of the princess's household, while he, Malicorne, together with his friend Manicamp, would divine all the masculine mysteries of the young prince's court. And by this means they would rapidly rise in rank and fortune. Now, *Malicorne* was an ill-sounding name, and he who bore it had no illusions on that score but if he could buy an estate somewhere, he could be Malicorne of some minor domain, or even *de Malicorne* that sounded much nobler. It might even be possible to discover an overlooked aristocratic heritage for the name of Malicorne: mightn't there be a provincial domain where an ancient bull with deadly horns had caused some great misfortune and baptized the ground with blood? Of course, the plan did have certain risks, the first of which was Miss Montalais herself. Capricious, changeable, evasive, free-spirited one moment and prudish the next, a grape-stained Erigone, she sometimes demolished, with a snap of her fingers or a silvery laugh, an edifice that Malicorne had laboured a month to build. Affection aside, Malicorne was pleased with his progress; but his love for Montalais that he couldn't help but feel, he nonetheless had the strength to conceal with care, convinced that if he revealed the true ties that bound him to this protean female, the demon would repudiate and mock him. So, he humbled his mistress by disdaining her. Though burning with desire, his demeanour was icy, because he was sure that if he opened his arms to her, she'd just laugh and run away. For her part, Montalais professed to be irritated by Malicorne but actually she loved him. Malicorne reflected her indifference back at her until she thought she believed it and felt she must detest him. If she tried to tempt him back by coquetry, Malicorne played even harder to get than she did. What made Montalais come back to Malicorne time and again was that he always arrived with fresh news of Court and the city, bringing to Blois a new fashion, scent, or secret, while never asking for anything in return, burning for favours though he was. For her part, Montalais repaid him with what stories she could. Through her, Malicorne knew all the gossip of the Dowager Madam's household, stories he slyly recounted until Manicamp nearly died laughing, before passing them on to de Guiche, who told them in turn to Sir. And that, in short, was the plot that united the petty intrigues of Blois to Orléans and Orléans to Paris, and which would draw to the latter city, where she would cause such a commotion, our poor little La Vallière, who was far from suspecting what her future held as she went joyfully home on her mother's arm. As for the worthy Malicorne, by which we mean the father, the alderman of Orléans, he saw the future no more clearly than the others and never suspected as he took his after-dinner walk from 3 o'clock to 5 around the Place Sainte-Catherine, wearing his grey cloak and beribboned shoes in the fashion



of the time of Louis XIII, that it was he who was paying for all the stolen kisses, whispered secrets, and little surprise gifts that would lay a ribbon of love for 45 leagues from the Château de Blois to the Palais Royal.

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Manicamp & Malicorne

Thus, Malicorne went to find his friend Manicamp, who was in temporary seclusion in the city of Orléans. He arrived just as the young nobleman was preparing to sell off the last of his fine clothing. A fortnight before, he'd extracted a hundred pistoles from the Count de Guiche on the pretext that he had to make a proper appearance when Madam Henrietta arrived at Le Havre. 3 days earlier, he had received 50 pistoles from Malicorne as the price of Montalais's appointment but having depleted all his resources, he had no expectations of further income unless he sold his handsome suit of organdie and satin, embroidered and laced with gold, an ensemble that had been admired by all the Court. However, to sell this outfit, the last in his wardrobe, Manicamp had been forced to don his sleepwear and take to his bed. No fire in his hearth, no money in his pocket, no funds for a promenade, he had nothing but sleep to take the place of food, friends, and fêtes. As the saying goes, "He who sleeps, eats," but no one says, "He who sleeps, converses," or "He who sleeps, revels." Manicamp, who for a week had been forced to give up dancing and playing cards, was therefore in a sad way. He was expecting a moneylender when instead Malicorne come in, and a cry of dismay escaped him. "What now?" he said in a tone of suffering and despair. "You, again, *dear friend*?"

"That's a fine reception," said Malicorne.

"It is, if you only knew the reason. I was expecting someone with money but instead of money, I got you."

"And what if I brought you some money?"

"Well! That's another thing entirely. Be welcome, dear friend."

And he extended his hand, not to take that of Malicorne but for his purse. Malicorne pretended to misunderstand and gave him his hand instead. "What about the money?" said Manicamp.

"My dear friend, if you want that, you'll have to earn it."

"What must I do?"

"Work for it, by God!"

"Work? How so?"

"I warn you, it's going to be rough."

"The devil!"

"You must get out of bed right away and go see the Count de Guiche."

"Me, get up?" said Manicamp, stretching luxuriously under the covers. "Not a chance."

"So, you've sold all your clothes?"

"No, I have one outfit left, the finest of all but I'm waiting for a buyer."

"And shoes?"

"I think you can see a pair on that chair."

"Well! Since you still have breeches and a doublet, put your legs in the one and your torso in the other, have them saddle a horse and take to the road."

"I think not."

"Why's that?"

"*Morbleu!* Don't you know Sir de Guiche is at Étampes?"

"No, I thought he was in Paris, so this is better: you have to go only fifteen leagues instead of thirty."

"How charming you are! But if I ride fifteen leagues in my best outfit it will be ruined, and instead of selling it for thirty pistoles, I'll be lucky to get fifteen for it."

"Do whatever you have to, because I must have a second appointment for a maid of honour."

"Really? Who for? Is La Montalais twins?"

"Reprobate! *You* must be twins, the way you squander two fortunes, mine and that of the Count de Guiche."

"You should say that of the Count de Guiche and yours."

"Quite so – all preference and deference to the lords. But let's return to my appointment."

"A waste of time."

"Why do you say that?"

"*Mon ami*, Madam can have no more than twelve maids of honour, and there are already twelve hundred women vying for those positions. Why, just to get one I had to deploy all my diplomacy..."

"Yes, I know you've made heroic efforts, my friend."

"We *do* know our business," said Manicamp.

"Oh, clearly! When I'm king, I promise you a great favour."

"What? To allow me to address you as Malicorne the First?"

"No, to be my superintendent of finance – but we're not at that point yet."

"Sadly."

"Which is why you need to get me a second maid of honour appointment."

"My friend, you can promise me heaven and earth later but right now I'm staying put."

Malicorne jingled his purse. "I've got twenty pistoles here," he said.

"*My God!* And what do you think you can get for twenty pistoles?"

"I think I could add them to the five hundred you owe me already," said Malicorne, a bit tartly.

"True enough," replied Manicamp, once more extending his hand. "And on that basis, I think I could accept them. Hand it over."

"Not so fast, devil take you! There's more to it than that. If I give you these twenty pistoles, will I get my appointment?"

"No doubt about it."

"Soon?"

"Today."

"Oh ho! Don't overpromise, Sir de Manicamp, I'm not that demanding! Riding thirty leagues in a day is too much, you'll kill yourself."

"In the service of a friend, I can do the impossible."

"You're a true hero."

"So, then, the twenty pistoles?"

"Here they are," said Malicorne, holding them out.

"Good."

"But, my dear Sir de Manicamp, you're going to spend the whole sum on post horses."

"Not at all; don't worry about a thing."

"Excuse me but it's fifteen leagues from here to Étampes..."

"Fourteen."

"Even so, fourteen leagues means seven posts. At twenty sous per post, that's seven livres, plus the postilion fee makes fourteen, twice that for the return makes twenty-eight, with food and lodging at least that much again; that's sixty livres all told."

Manicamp coiled like a serpent in his bed and looked with two heavy eyes at Malicorne. "You're right," he said, "I wouldn't be back before tomorrow."

And he took the twenty pistoles. "But now you have to go."

"Since I couldn't possibly get back before tomorrow, we've plenty of time."

"Plenty of time for what?"

"A card game."

"A card game? For what stakes?"

"For your twenty pistoles, by God!"

"No, thanks – you always win."

"How about a little wager, then?"

"For how much?"

"Twenty more pistoles. "

"And what's the wager about?"

"This: you said it's fourteen leagues to Étampes."

"So it is."

"And fourteen leagues back again."

"Yes."

"A total of twenty-eight leagues."

"Quite so."

"To cover these twenty-eight leagues, you'll grant me fourteen hours?"

"I would."

"Plus, an hour to find the Count de Guiche?"

"Fine."

"And an hour to get him to write the letter to Sir?"

"Very well."

"Sixteen hours in total."

"You calculate like Colbert."

"It's noon now?"

"Half past."

"My! That's a fine watch you have."

Malicorne hastily returned his watch to its pocket. "And so?"

"And so! I'll wager the twenty pistoles you loaned me against another twenty that you'll have the Count de Guiche's letter in..."

"In how long?"

"In just eight hours."

"Do you have a flying horse?"

"I might. Are you on?"

"I'll have the count's letter in eight hours?"

"Yes."

"Signed?"

"Yes."

"In my hand?"

"In your hand."

"All right, I'll take that bet!" said Malicorne, curious to see how this tailor's-dummy would manage it.

"You're on?"

"I'm on."

"Pass me that pen, ink, and paper."

"Here you go."

"Ah!" With a sigh, Manicamp half-raised himself onto his left arm, and then with beautiful penmanship traced the following lines: *Good for one appointment of a maid of honour to Madam that Sir Count de Guiche will take care to obtain at the first opportunity. De Manicamp.*

This exhausting task accomplished, Manicamp burrowed back into his bed. "Well?" asked Malicorne. "What does this mean?"

"It means that if you're really in a hurry to get your letter for Sir from the Count de Guiche, then I've won my wager."

"How so?"

"It's pretty clear, it seems to me. You take this note."

"All right."

"And you go in my place."

"Oh."

"You gallop hell for leather."

"I see."

"In six hours, you're in Étampes, by seven o'clock you have your letter from the count, and I've won my bet without ever leaving my bed that suits me perfectly – and you too, for that matter."

"Manicamp, I salute you; you're a great man."

"I suppose so."

"I leave, then, for Étampes."

"Indeed."

"Once there, I present the Count de Guiche with this note."

"And he'll give you one like it for Sir."

"Then I ride for Paris."

"Where you'll find Sir and give him the note from the Count de Guiche."

"Sir will approve the request."

"Instantly."

"And I'll have my appointment."

"So you shall."

"Ah!"

"I hope my behaviour has been proper in this?"

"Adorably proper!"

"*Thank you.*"

"You get from the Count de Guiche pretty much anything you want, eh, my dear Manicamp?"

"Anything! Except money."

"The devil! That is an unfortunate exception. But suppose instead of money, you asked for..."

"What?"

"Something really important."

"And what do you call *important*?"

"Well, suppose one of your friends asked you for a favour?"

"I wouldn't do it."

"How selfish!"

"Not, that is, until I found out what I'd get in return."

"Now we're talking. The friend of which I speak is in front of you."

"You, Malicorne?"

"Me."

"*Ah that!* Are you so wealthy then?"

"If you call fifty pistoles wealth."

"Fifty pistoles is just the amount I need. Where are they?"

"Right here," said Malicorne, patting his money belt.

"Then tell me, *my dear*, what it is you need."

Malicorne took up the pen, ink, and paper, and presented them to Manicamp. "Write," he said.

"Dictate."

"*Good for one appointment to an office in Sir's household.* "

"Oh ho!" said Manicamp, putting down the plume. "An office in Sir's household – for a mere fifty pistoles?"

"Perhaps I misspoke."

"What did you mean to say?"

"I meant to say five hundred."

"And this five hundred?"

"Here they are."

And he took five rolls of coins from his money belt. Manicamp devoured the rolls of coins with his eyes – but this time, Malicorne held them at a distance. "So, what do you say? Five hundred pistoles..."

Malicorne clinked them in his hand. "I say it's a bargain, *my dear*," said Manicamp as he took up the pen, "though you're going to exhaust my credit. However, dictate."

Malicorne continued, "*Which my friend the Count de Guiche will obtain from Sir for my friend Malicorne.* "

"It's done," said Manicamp.

"Pardon me but you forgot to sign it."

"Why, so I did! ...Er, the five hundred pistoles?"

"Here are two hundred and fifty."

"And the other two hundred and fifty?"

"When I get my appointment."

Manicamp made a face. "In that case, give me back the note."

"To do what?"

"So I can add a word to it."

"A word?"

"Yes, a single word."

"Which is?"

"*Quickly.* "

Malicorne gave him the note, Manicamp added the word and signed. "Good!" said Malicorne, taking the paper.

Manicamp was counting the pistoles. "It's twenty short," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's short the twenty that I won."

"When?"

"When I wagered that you'd have the letter from the Count de Guiche in eight hours."

"That's only fair."

And Malicorne gave him twenty more pistoles. Manicamp gathered the gold in both hands and let it rain down on his bed. "The second maid of honour appointment," said Malicorne to himself, blowing the note dry, "seems, at first blush, to cost me more than the first but..." he paused, took up the pen, a fresh sheet, and wrote to Montalais:

*Miss, tell your friend that her appointment won't be long in coming. I'm off to get it signed personally, riding 86 leagues for love of you...*

Then, with his devilish smile, he resumed his internal monologue: "An appointment that, at first blush, seems to cost more than the first but I think it will be worth it, for if Miss La Vallière isn't an even better investment than Miss Montalais – well, my name isn't Malicorne!"

Then, aloud, he said, "Goodbye, Manicamp," bowed, and took his leave.

When Malicorne arrived at Étampes, he found that the Count de Guiche had departed for Paris. Malicorne took two hours to rest and then continued on his way. It was night by the time he arrived in Paris, so he went to a little inn where he always stayed on his visits to the capital, and at eight o'clock the next morning he presented himself at the Hôtel de Grammont. Malicorne arrived just in time, for the Count de Guiche was preparing to bid farewell to Sir before departing for Le Havre, where the elite of the French nobility were gathering to greet Madam on her arrival from England. Malicorne dropped Manicamp's name and was admitted instantly. The Count de Guiche was in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Grammont inspecting his carriage and horses that his equerries were passing in review before him. The count was doling out praise and blame regarding the horses, their caparisons and tack when this important activity was interrupted by the name of Manicamp. "Manicamp?" he cried. "Send him in, *good Lord!* Send him in!"

And he turned and walked toward the gate. Malicorne slid in through the half-open gate, causing the Count de Guiche to stop in surprise at the sight of an unknown face in place of the one he expected. "Pardon me, Sir Count," Malicorne said, "but there's been a slight mistake. I'm not Manicamp, I'm just his envoy."

"Ah!" said de Guiche a bit coldly. "And you bring me...?"

"A letter, Sir Count."

Malicorne presented the first note while carefully observing the count's expression. De Guiche read the note and laughed. "What?" he said. "Another maid of honour? *Ah that!* Is this madcap Manicamp the sponsor of every hopeful maiden in France?"

Malicorne just bowed.

"And why doesn't he come himself?" the count asked.

"He's ... in bed."

"The devil you say! Is he out of cash?" De Guiche shrugged and shook his head. "What does he do with all of his money?"

Malicorne answered with a shrug that implied that on this matter he was as ignorant as the count. De Guiche continued, "Why doesn't he just use his credit?"

"I might have an idea about that."

"Which is?"

"That Manicamp has no credit with anyone but you, Sir Count."

"Then he won't be coming to Le Havre?" Another shrug of ignorance from Malicorne. "But that's impossible. Everyone will be there!"

"I'd hope, Sir Count that he'd not pass up such an opportunity."

"He should be in Paris already."

"He might be able to cut across to make up the lost time."

"Where is he now?"

"At Orléans."

"Hmm. Sir," de Guiche said with a bow, "you appear to me to be a man of good taste."

Malicorne was wearing one of Manicamp's old outfits. He bowed in his turn, and said, "You honour me, Sir."

"With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"My name is Malicorne, Sir."

"Sir de Malicorne, give me your opinion: what do you think of these saddle holsters?"

Malicorne was a man of quick wits and understood what was called for. Besides, the *de* placed before his name raised him to a rank equal to the nobleman speaking to him. Looking over the holsters like a connoisseur, he said without hesitation, "They're a trifle heavy, Sir."

"You see?" said de Guiche to the saddler. "Sir, who is a man of taste, finds the holsters a trifle heavy. Isn't that what I just told you?"

The saddler apologised. "And this horse, what do you think?" asked de Guiche. "I've just purchased it."

"At first glance, it seems perfectly fine, Sir Count but I couldn't really say without riding it."

"Well! Mount up, Sir de Malicorne, and take two or three turns around the yard."

In fact, the courtyard of the hôtel had been set up like a riding ring. Malicorne, showing no embarrassment, took hold of the reins and bridle, gripped the mane with his left hand, placed his foot in the stirrup, and vaulted into the saddle. The first time around the yard he took the horse at a walk, the second time at the trot, and the third time around at the gallop. Then he stopped near the count, dismounted, and tossed the reins to a groom. "Well!" said the count. "What do you think, Sir Malicorne?"

"Sir Count," said Malicorne, "this horse is of the Mecklenburg breed. In checking how the bit rode in his mouth, I could see that he was rising seven, just the age at which a horse should be trained for war. The forehand is light; a horse that holds its head up, as they say, never tires the rider's hand. Its withers are a bit low; the droopy rump almost makes me doubt the purity of its German blood. I think it might have a touch of English in it. The animal stands well but trots a trifle high, and might cut itself; keep an eye on its shoes. Overall, though, it's quite manageable, and quick and easy in changing its gait."

"Well judged, Sir de Malicorne," said the count. "You're a connoisseur." Then, looking over the newcomer, he said, "You have a charming outfit. You didn't get that in the provinces, I imagine; they don't tailor clothes that way in Tours or Orléans."

"No, Sir Count, this suit was made in Paris."

"Yes, and it shows ... but back to business. Manicamp wants a second appointment for a maid of honour?"

"You saw what he wrote, Sir Count."

"Who was the first one, again?"

Malicorne coloured slightly. "A charming maiden," he answered hastily, "Miss Montalais."

"Ah! You know her, Sir?"

"Yes, she's my fiancée, or nearly so."

"Well, that's something. A thousand compliments!" said de Guiche, suppressing the bawdy jest that was on his lips before Malicorne naming Montalais as his fiancée reminded him to be respectful.

"And the second appointment, who's that for?" asked de Guiche. "Is it for Manicamp's fiancée? If so, I'm sorry for her, poor girl! She'll have a dreadful husband."

"No, Sir Count, the second appointment is for Miss La Baume Le Blanc de La Vallière."

"Never heard of her," said de Guiche.

"You will, Sir," said Malicorne, smiling in his turn.

"Fine! I'll speak of it to Sir. By the way, is she well born?"

"She's of a very good house and is maid of honour to the Dowager Madam."

"Excellent! Will you go with me to see Sir?"

"Gladly, if you'll do me the honour."

"Do you have a carriage?"

"No, I came on horseback."

"In that outfit?"

"No, Sir, I came from Orléans by post horse and changed my riding clothes before presenting myself to you."

"Oh, right, you said you'd come from Orléans."

And he stuffed the letter from Manicamp into his pocket. "Sir," said Malicorne timidly, "I think you didn't read everything."

"What do you mean?"

"There were two notes in that envelope."

"Ah! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure!"

"Let's take a look." And the count reopened the seal. "My faith, you're right," he said, unfolding the note he hadn't read yet. "As I thought," he said, "another request for an appointment in Sir's household. What a bottomless pit Manicamp is! Is he selling these now?"

"No, Sir Count, he wants to make a gift of it."

"To whom?"

"To me, Sir."

"But why didn't you say so right away, my dear Sir Mauvaisecome?"

"Malicorne!"

"Ah, pardon me! These Latin names always trip me up. Why do they teach it to us when it only leads to confusion? *Mala, mauvaise*, it's all one to me. You'll forgive me, won't you, Sir Malicorne?"

"Your kindness moves me, Sir, and I feel there's something else I'd tell you."

"What's that, Sir?"

"That I'm not a gentleman; I have a good heart and a fair amount of brains but my name is just plain Malicorne."

"Well!" said de Guiche, smiling at the sly features of his companion. "You seem like a pleasant enough fellow to me. I like your face, Sir Malicorne, and you must have more than a few good qualities if you please that snob Manicamp. In fact, you must be a very saint come to Earth."

"Why's that?"

*"Blue death!* Because he's willing to give you something for nothing. Didn't you say he wanted to get you an appointment to the royal household?"

"Pardon me, Sir Count but if I obtain this appointment, it'll be thanks to you, not him."

"And then won't he have gotten it for you for nothing?"

"Ah, Sir Count..."

"Wait a moment, isn't there a Malicorne in Orléans? One who lends money to Sir Prince?"

"I think you mean my father, Sir."

"Ah, just so! Sir Prince has the father, and that bottomless pit Manicamp has the son. Take care, Sir, I know him, and God, he'll pick you clean to your bones!"

"Except I lend money without interest, Sir," said Malicorne, smiling.

"Ha! I said you were a saint, or something like it, Sir Malicorne. You'll have your appointment, or my name isn't de Guiche."

"Oh, Sir Count, I'll be forever in your debt!" said Malicorne with delight.

"Come along, let's go see the prince, my dear Sir Malicorne."

And de Guiche started toward the gate, beckoning Malicorne to follow him. But as they were about to cross the threshold, a young man appeared on the other side. He was a cavalier of age 24 or 25 with a pale face, thin lips, bright eyes, brown hair, and eyebrows. "Well, hello!" he said, pushing his way through the gate.

"Ah! It's you, de Wardes." Booted, spurred, and with whip in hand!"

"The proper dress for a man about to ride to Le Havre. By tomorrow, no one will be left in Paris."

And the newcomer bowed politely to Malicorne, whose outfit was of almost princely quality. "Sir Malicorne," said de Guiche to his friend.

De Wardes bowed again. "Sir de Wardes," said de Guiche to Malicorne. Malicorne bowed in his turn. "Come, de Wardes," continued de Guiche, "you're always in the know on these things – what offices are still available in the court, or rather the household of Sir?"

"In Sir's household?" said de Wardes, gazing up as if searching his memory. "Let's see ... that of grand equerry, I think."

"Oh!" said Malicorne. "Such a post is entirely too high, Sir. I'm not nearly so ambitious."

De Wardes had a sharper eye than de Guiche and sized up Malicorne in an instant. "In fact," he said, "to occupy that post, you'd have to be a duke and peer."

"All I ask," said Malicorne, "is a very humble position. I'm not a great man and seek nothing beyond my rank."

"Sir Malicorne, here," said de Guiche to de Wardes, "is a charming fellow whose only misfortune is in not being born a gentleman. But, as you know, I care more about the man than I do about his birth."

"Of course," said de Wardes, "but I have to point out, my dear Count, that, without noble birth, it's not reasonable to hope to enter Sir's household."

"That's true," said the count. "Etiquette is so formal. Devil take it! We hadn't thought about that."

"Alas! That's quite a blow for me," said Malicorne, paling slightly. "Quite a blow, Sir Count."

"But I'm sure we can find a remedy," replied de Guiche.

"*By my troth!*" cried de Wardes. "That remedy is easily found – he can just be made into a gentleman! His Eminence Cardinal Mazarini did nothing else from morning till night."

"Oh, hush, de Wardes!" said the count. "That's not funny, and you should know better than to make such a joke. Yes, a title can be bought but it's bad enough for us in the *noblesse* that it's true without joking about it."

"My faith! You've become as stiff as a Puritan, like one of those English."

"Sir Viscount of Bragelonne," announced a valet at the courtyard gate as if at the entrance to a salon.

"Ah, dear Raoul! Welcome! Look at you, all booted and spurred. Ready to go?"

Bragelonne approached the group of young men and bowed with that grave but gracious air that was unique to him. His greeting was directed especially toward de Wardes, whom he didn't know, and whose expression had turned cold at the appearance of Raoul. "My friend," he said to de Guiche, "I come to ask to join your company. You leave soon for Le Havre, I presume?"

"Yes, that's great! Charming! We'll have a delightful journey. Sir Malicorne, this is Sir de Bragelonne. And allow me to present Sir de Wardes."

The young men exchanged formal bows. Their natures seemed opposed from the moment they met: de Wardes was smooth, facile, and insincere, while Raoul was serious, well-meaning, and forthright.

"Raoul," said de Guiche, "help decide this outstanding issue between de Wardes and me."

"What issue is that?"

"A matter of noblesse. "

"Who would know better than a Grammont?"

"I'm not asking for compliments, I'm asking for your opinion."

"Then explain to me the matter under discussion."

"De Wardes claims that the award of noble titles has been abused; I claim that the man is more important than the title."

"And you have the right of it," said Bragelonne quietly.

"But I, Sir Viscount," replied de Wardes stubbornly, "claim that *I* have the right of it."

"Your rationale, Sir?"

"My rationale is the fact that everything in France nowadays conspires to humiliate our noblemen."

"Where do you see that?" asked Raoul.

"I see it in the king himself. He surrounds himself with 'gentlemen' who don't have four quarters of nobility."

"Come, now!" said de Guiche. "I don't know how the devil you can say that."

"One example is enough."

And de Wardes looked directly at Bragelonne. "Say on."

"Do you know who has just been named Captain-Lieutenant of the Musketeers, a position worth more than a peerage, a title that takes precedence over all the Marshals of France?"

Raoul began to flush, for he saw where de Wardes was going. "No," said de Guiche. "Who is it? It must have just happened, as that position was vacant as recently as last week. I know because the king refused it to Sir, who wanted it for one of his protégés."

"Well, *my dear!* The king who refused it to the protégé of Sir, gave it to the Knight d'Artagnan, a younger son from Gascony who's dragged his sword through the antechambers for thirty years."

"Pardon me, Sir, if I interrupt," said Raoul, with a sharp look at de Wardes, "but you speak like a man who doesn't know what he's talking about."

"I, not know Sir d'Artagnan! *My God!* Who doesn't know him?"

"Those who know him, Sir," replied Raoul, calmly and coldly, "are bound to say that, if he isn't as good a gentleman as the king that isn't his fault, he equals every king in the world in courage and loyalty. That's my opinion, Sir, because I've known Sir d'Artagnan, thank God, since I was born." De Wardes drew breath to reply but de Guiche stopped him.

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The Portrait of Madam

The conversation was taking a nasty turn, as de Guiche could clearly see. The look in Bragelonne's eye was hostile, while de Wardes's expression seemed calculated to offend. Without understanding what was behind the emotions agitating his two friends, de Guiche thought it best to parry the blow he sensed coming from one or perhaps both of them. "Gentlemen," he said, "the household must continue preparing to leave but also I must go see Sir. Let's manage it this way: you, de Wardes, can come with me to the Palais Royal, while you, Raoul, stay here and manage my retainers; make sure they do what you say and take a final look over all the preparations for departure."

Raoul, calm as a man who neither seeks nor avoids a conflict, nodded as a sign of assent, and took a seat on a bench in the sunlight. "Perfect," said de Guiche. "Stay there, Raoul, and have a look at those two horses I just bought; let me know what you think, because I took them only on condition that you ratified the purchase. Oh but excuse me, I forgot to ask for news of the Count of La Fère!"

As he spoke these final words, he glanced at de Wardes to see what effect the name of Raoul's father would have on him. "Thank you," replied Bragelonne, "the count is well."

A gleam of hatred flashed from de Wardes's eyes. De Guiche pretended not to notice this flicker of fury and instead shook hands with Raoul, saying, "Bragelonne, you'll catch up with us in the Palais Royal courtyard, won't you?"

Then, beckoning de Wardes, who was swaying agitatedly from one foot to the other, to follow him, he said, "We're off. Come along, Sir Malicorne."

This name made Raoul start. He had a feeling he'd heard that name before but couldn't remember when. While he was blinking, distracted by the half-memory, the other three young men left to head for the Palais Royal, where Sir was staying. Malicorne was thinking that it seemed the count's two friends had something to settle between them but also that he needed to remember his rank. He walked behind the young noblemen. "Are you mad?" said de Guiche to his companion, once they'd left the Hôtel de Grammont. "Attacking Sir d'Artagnan, and in front of Raoul!"

"Well? What of it?" said de Wardes.

"What do you mean, what of it?"

"Is attacking Sir d'Artagnan forbidden?"

"But you must know that Sir D'Artagnan is one of that famous quartet they called the Four Musketeers."

"Of course but I don't see why that should stop me from hating Sir d'Artagnan."

"What did he do to you?"

"To me? Nothing."

"Then why hate him?"

"Ask the ghost of my father that."

"Really, de Wardes? Sir d'Artagnan isn't the kind of man to leave unfinished business behind him. Your father carried on affairs in a high-handed manner, or so I've heard but there are no insults that can't be washed away by the honourable blood shed with a few sword strokes."

"What would you have, *dear friend*? This hatred between my father and Sir d'Artagnan was real; when I was very young, he told me the reason for it, and I regard its legacy as part of my heritage."

"And this hatred was solely for Sir d'Artagnan?"

"Oh, d'Artagnan was so closely associated with his three comrades that there's hatred enough for all. They'll have no need to complain about any shortage."

De Guiche was watching de Wardes closely and shuddered when he saw the young man's pale smile. Something like a premonition darkened his thoughts, and though he told himself that the time had passed when gentlemen settled their differences with swords, such heartfelt hatred, with no means of release, could only fester. Such a smile could be as threatening as a word – and then after the fathers, who had hated with their hearts and fought with their arms, would come the sons, who might hate as deeply but instead fight with intrigue and deceit. And as it wasn't Raoul whom he suspected of intrigue and deceit, it was for him that de Guiche shuddered. But while these dark thoughts passed behind de Guiche's brow, de Wardes had regained control of himself. "Anyway," he said, "I have nothing personal against Sir de Bragelonne; I don't even know him."

"In any case, de Wardes, remember this," said de Guiche a bit sharply. "Raoul is one of my closest friends."

De Wardes just bowed. The matter ended there, for though de Guiche tried to get him to say what he really felt, de Wardes seemed resolved to let it pass and remained impenetrable. De Guiche told himself he'd just have to get the full story from Raoul. Meanwhile, they arrived at the Palais Royal that was surrounded by a crowd of curious citizens. Sir's retainers were already on horseback, awaiting his orders to escort the ambassadors charged with bringing back the young princess. The spectacle of the household's magnificent horses, equipment, and livery, along with their respectful attachment to royalty, had to be enough to compensate the onlookers for this enormous expense their taxes supported. Mazarin had said, "Let them recite their angry poems so long as they pay."

Louis XIV just said, "Let them look."

Vision had replaced the voice; they could look all they wanted but they no longer sang. Sir de Guiche left de Wardes and Malicorne at the foot of the grand stairway while he went straight up to Sir's rooms, a privilege he shared with the Knight de Lorraine,\* Sir's other favourite. He found the young prince putting on rouge and admiring himself. In the corner of the boudoir, stretched out on a pile of cushions was Sir Knight de Lorraine who had curled his long blond hair and now toyed with it as a woman would. He smiled at de Guiche, though he could not stand him. The prince turned at the sound of his entrance, saw the count, and said, "Ah, it's you, de Guiche! Come here and tell me the truth."

"Of course, My Lord. As you know, that's my greatest fault."

"De Guiche, you can scarcely believe how this wicked knight wounds me."

The knight shrugged.

"Wounds you?" asked de Guiche. "That seems out of character for the knight."

"Well!" continued the prince. "He claims that Miss Henrietta is better looking as a woman than I am as a man."

"Take care, My Lord," said de Guiche with a frown. "You asked me to tell the truth."

"I did," said Sir, almost trembling.

"Very well! In that case, I'll tell you."

"No rush, de Guiche," cried the prince. "Take your time. Look me over carefully and then recall our young Madam; if it will help, here's her portrait."

And he handed him a miniature, exquisitely detailed. De Guiche took the portrait and considered it at length. "My faith, My Lord but here's an adorable face," he said.

"But consider me as well – consider me!" cried the prince, trying to attract the count's attention.

"Really, it's quite wonderful," murmured de Guiche, absorbed by the portrait

"*Ohé*, Sir," huffed the prince. "It's almost as if you'd never seen the girl before."

"I have seen her, My Lord, yes but not for five years, and a lot can change between a girl of age twelve and a young woman of seventeen."

"Enough, let's have your opinion. Come, speak!"

"My opinion is that this is a very flattering portrait, My Lord."

"Well, of course it is!" said the prince, triumphant. "Of course it is. But if one supposes that it *isn't* flattering, *then* what do you think?"

"I think, My Lord, that Your Highness is blessed with a charming fiancée."

"Fine, I get your opinion of her – but what about *me*?"

"My opinion, My Lord, is that you're far too good-looking for a man."

The Knight de Lorraine burst out laughing. Sir found the Count de Guiche's opinion less than flattering and pouted. "I have the meanest friends," he said.

De Guiche looked once more at the portrait, and then after several seconds returned it with visible reluctance to sir, saying, “Decidedly, my Lord, , I’d rather look at Your Highness ten times over instead of one more look at Madam.”

The knight must have heard something in these words that the prince didn’t, for he said, “Maybe you’re the one who should be getting married!”

Sir continued applying his rouge, and when he was done, he glanced again at the portrait and then at his face in the glass. He seemed satisfied with the comparison. “Anyway, it was kind of you to come,” he said to de Guiche. “I was afraid you’d leave without saying goodbye to me.”

“My Lord knows me too well to think I’d ever do anything like that.”

“I imagine you have something to ask of me before leaving Paris.”

“Why, Your Highness has guessed right! I do, in fact, have a request to present to him.”

“Fine! Present it.”

The Knight de Lorraine was suddenly all eyes and ears; for the knight, every favour granted to others was something stolen from him. As de Guiche hesitated, the prince asked, “Is it for money? That would be well timed, for I’m simply rolling in it – the Surintendant des Finances gave me fifty thousand pistoles.”

“Thank you, Your Highness but it isn’t for money.”

“What then? Let’s hear it.”

“An appointment for a maid of honour.”

“*Zounds!* De Guiche, you’re practically a schoolmaster,” said the prince with disdain. “Will you ever speak to me of anyone but silly girls?”

The Knight de Lorraine smiled for he knew well that Sir cared little for ladies. “My Lord,” said the count, “I’m not the sponsor of the person for whom I ask, it’s a friend of mine.”

“Ah, that’s different! And what’s the name of your friend’s protégée?”

“Miss La Baume Le Blanc de La Vallière, currently maid of honour to the Dowager Madam.”

“Fie! She’s a cripple,” said the Knight de Lorraine from his nest of cushions.

“A cripple!” repeated the prince. “Should my wife Madam have that before her eyes? Faith, no, it would endanger her pregnancies.”

The Knight de Lorraine burst out laughing. “Sir Knight,” said de Guiche, “your remarks are ungenerous; I ask an honest favour and you do your best to confound it.”

“Oh, pardon me, Sir Count!” said Lorraine, alarmed by the edge in the count’s voice. “That wasn’t my intention, and now that I think about it, I must have mistaken that demoiselle for someone else.”

“In fact, I believe you *were* mistaken.”

“Come, is this important to you, de Guiche?” asked the prince.

“Very, My Lord.”

“Well, then, I agree! But no more appointments, the household is full.”

“Look!” cried the knight. “It’s noon already, the time set for departure.”

“Are you rushing me out, Knight?” asked de Guiche.

“Oh, Count! How severe you are with me today,” replied the knight in mock dismay.

“For God’s sake, Count and Knight!” said Sir. “No bickering! Can’t you see how it upsets me?”

“Your signature?” asked de Guiche.

“Take a brevet from the drawer and hand it to me.”

De Guiche picked up the appointment with one hand, and with the other presented Sir a plume dipped in ink. The prince signed. “Here,” he said, returning the brevet, “but it’s on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“That you make up with the knight.”

“Gladly,” said de Guiche.

And he offered his hand to the knight with an indifference that was scarcely distinguishable from contempt. “Off with you, then, Count,” said the knight without appearing to notice the count’s evident disdain. “Go, and bring us back a princess who won’t spend as much time as you in looking at her portrait.”

“Yes, go and come back quickly,” said the prince. “By the way, who are you taking with you?”

“Bragelonne and de Wardes.”

“Two brave cavaliers.”

“Entirely too brave,” said the knight. “Try to bring back *both* of them, Count.”

“Black-hearted villain!” murmured de Guiche. “He smells trouble sooner than anyone.” Then with a bow to Sir, he took his leave. Coming out under the portico, he waved the signed appointment in the air. Malicorne rushed forward and greeted him, trembling for joy – but de Guiche could see he was hoping for something else as well. “Patience, sir, patience,” he said to his new friend. “The Knight of Lorraine’s there and I was afraid he’d upset the cart if I asked for too much. We’ll try again when I return. Farewell!”

“Farewell, Sir Count, and a thousand thanks,” said Malicorne.

“And send Manicamp to me. By the way, Sir, is it true that Miss La Vallière is lame?”

Just as he said these words, a horse pulled up behind him. He turned and saw Bragelonne, pale of face, having just re-entered the courtyard. With the quick ears of a lover, he’d overheard de Guiche – unlike Malicorne, who had already moved out of range of his voice. “Why are they talking about Louise?” Raoul said to himself. “Oh! If I hear her name from de Wardes, and if he says it with a smirk…!”

“Come, come, Gentlemen!” cried the Count de Guiche. “Let’s get moving.” At that moment the prince, having finished his makeup, appeared at the window. The whole cortège cheered and waved, and ten minutes later, banners, scarves, and plumes aflutter, the coursers left at the gallop.

### 347 Le Havre

This whole Court, so brilliant, so gay, so alive with differing desires, arrived at Le Havre <sup>71</sup> four days after its departure from Paris. It was about five o’clock in the evening but there was no news of Madam. Everyone was concerned about finding lodging, and arguments were breaking out between masters and their servants. In the midst of this chaos the Count de Guiche thought he recognised Manicamp. It was indeed him but as Malicorne had taken the last of his fine clothes, he was clad in all he had left, an outfit of purple velvet trimmed with silver. De Guiche recognised him as much from his clothing as from his features. He’d often seen Manicamp in this purple suit, his outfit of last resort. Manicamp presented himself to the count under a wall of torches that flamed on the archway over Le Havre’s city gate, the one near the tower of François I. The count, seeing Manicamp’s woeful expression, couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, my poor Manicamp. Dressed again in purple! Are you in mourning?”

“I am, indeed, in mourning,” Manicamp replied.

“For whom or what?”

“For my fine blue and gold outfit that has vanished, leaving me only this one that I still had to pay solid coin to buy back.”

“Really?”

“By God! Are you surprised? You, who left me destitute?”

“Well, what matters is that you got here.”

“Over execrable roads.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Staying?”

“Yes.”

“I’m staying nowhere.”

De Guiche laughed. “Then where will you sleep?”

“Wherever you do.”

“I have no idea where that will be.”

“What do you mean, no idea?”

“You heard me; how should I know where I’m staying?”

“Haven’t you rented a hôtel?”

“Who, me?”

“You, or Sir.”

“It didn’t occur to either of us. Le Havre is big enough, I suppose, that I should be able to find a decent house in a good neighbourhood with stabling for twelve horses.”

“Oh, there are plenty of decent houses.”

“All right, then…”

“Just not for us.”

“What do you mean, not for us? For whom then?”

“For the English, *good Lord!*”

“For the English?”

“Yes, they’ve rented all of them.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“Why, Sir Buckingham.”

“I beg your pardon?” said de Guiche, struck by the name.

“Yes, of course, *my dear*, Sir de Buckingham! His Grace was preceded by a courier who arrived three days ago and proceeded to rent every available house in town.”

“Come, come, Manicamp, talk sense.”

“*Dame!* Did I say something that was hard to understand?”

“But, devil take it, Sir de Buckingham can’t have rented *every* house in Le Havre!”

“He hasn’t occupied them yet, true but once he disembarks, they’re his.”

“But … but that…!”

“It’s clear you don’t know the English. They don’t like to share.”

“Really, come now! A man who has one house doesn’t need two.”

“But what if there are more men than two?”

“Two, four, six houses, what have you! There must be a hundred houses in Le Havre.”

“Indeed. And they’re all rented.”

“Impossible!”

“How stubborn you are. I tell you Sir de Buckingham has rented every house anywhere near those that are to be occupied by Her Majesty the Dowager Queen of England and the princess her daughter.”

“Well, now. Isn’t that telling?” said de Wardes, stroking his horse’s neck.

“You may well say so, Sir.”

“Are you completely sure of all this, Sir de Manicamp?” said de Wardes with a sly glance at de Guiche as if to question how far they could trust his friend’s reason.

Meanwhile night had fallen, and under the gate’s torches, the pages, lackeys, equerries, horses, and carriages all crowded the gate and the square beyond. The torchlight reflected from the harbour on the water of the rising tide, while along the jetty a thousand curious sailors and citizens stood taking in the spectacle. During this delay, Bragelonne, as if he had no part in it, sat on his horse a bit behind de Guiche and gazed out at the light playing on the water, enjoying the salt breeze as the waves rolled in on the shore, pebbles and seaweed tossing in the foam. “But why,” said de Guiche, “would Sir de Buckingham send ahead to rent every lodging?”

“Why, indeed?” asked de Wardes.

“For the best of reasons,” replied Manicamp.

“Do you know what it is?”

“I think I do.”

“Then tell us.”

“Shh. Lean closer.”

“The devil! Can you tell us only in a whisper?”

“You be the judge.”

“Fine.”

De Guiche leaned closer. “*Love*,” said Manicamp.

“I don’t understand.”

“Ah but you will.”

“Explain yourself.”

“So I shall! It’s sad to say it, Sir Count but His Royal Highness Sir will be the unhappiest of husbands.”

“What! Are you saying the Duke of Buckingham…?”

“I’m saying that name brings nothing but sadness to the Royal House of France.”

“So, the duke…?”

“Is madly in love with Madam, or so everyone says, and will allow no one near her but himself.”

De Guiche flushed. “Fine! Now I get it. Thank you,” he said, shaking Manicamp’s hand. Then he added, “But for God’s sake, Manicamp, make sure the Duke of Buckingham’s folly doesn’t spread to French ears, or we’ll see many a sword drawn that doesn’t fear English anger.”

“Don’t blame me! After all, I have no proof of this folly,” said Manicamp. “It’s only what I’ve heard.”

“No,” said de Guiche, “this rings true.”

And he ground his teeth in spite of himself. “Well, so what? Who cares if Buckingham is to Sir what his father was to the late king? Buckingham the father for the queen mother, and Buckingham the son for the young Madam. That’s how it goes.”

“Manicamp! Really!”

“What the devil! It’s the plain truth! …Or so they say.”

“Enough!” said the count.

“Enough? But why?” said de Wardes. “Such English attention honours the nation of France! Don’t you agree, Sir de Bragelonne?”

“Sorry. What?” said Bragelonne, distracted.

“Shouldn’t the English pay homage to the beauty of our princesses and queens?”

“I beg your pardon, please tell me what you’re talking about.”

“It was probably necessary for Sir de Buckingham the elder to come to Paris before His Majesty King Louis XIII realised that his wife was one of the most beautiful ladies at the Court of France – and now Sir de Buckingham the younger, in his turn, pays homage to the beauty of a princess of French blood. And it appears that loving homage is to come with him over the sea.”

“Sir,” replied Bragelonne, “I don’t like hearing jests about these matters. We gentlemen are the guardians our queens’ and princesses’ honour. If we stoop so low as to mock them, how will the commoners behave?”

“Is that so, Sir? Is that so?” snapped de Wardes, colouring to the tips of his ears. “How am I supposed to take that?”

“Take it however you please, Sir,” replied Bragelonne coldly.

“Bragelonne! Bragelonne!” whispered de Guiche.

“Sir de Wardes! Really!” cried Manicamp, seeing the young man press his horse toward Raoul’s.

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!” said de Guiche. “Don’t be such bad examples here in a public street! De Wardes, you’re in the wrong.”

“Wrong! How so? Tell me.”

“Wrong because you’re always speaking ill of something or someone,” replied Raoul with his implacable coolness.

“Let it go, Raoul,” said de Guiche quietly.

“Yes, let it go. You could scarcely put on an entertaining fight until after you’ve had a rest,” said Manicamp.

“Enough! Come on!” said de Guiche. “Forward, Gentlemen, forward!”

And with that, pushing aside horses and servants, he made his way into the square through the middle of the crowd, drawing after him all the French cortège. A large gateway stood open into a courtyard, and de Guiche rode in, followed by Bragelonne, de Wardes, Manicamp, and three or four other gentlemen. There they had a kind of council of war, debating how to preserve the dignity of their ambassadorial company. Bragelonne advised them to respect the English rights of priority. De Wardes said they should sack the entire city. This proposal seemed a trifle extreme to Manicamp; he thought they ought to sleep on it first. Unfortunately, two things were lacking before they could follow this advice: housing and beds. De Guiche considered quietly for a few moments, and then said aloud, “Who loves me, follows me.”

“Servants, too?” asked a page who had approached the group of noblemen.

“Everyone!” cried the fiery young man. “Come, Manicamp, lead us to the house that Her Highness Madam will occupy.” Without knowing what the count had in mind, his friends went with him, followed by their retainers, loudly cheering to applaud whatever unknown project the ardent young man was pursuing. Meanwhile, the wind from the harbour was picking up, blowing in ever stronger gusts.

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On the Sea

The next day dawned a bit quieter, though the gale continued to blow. The sun rose behind a red cloud and carved its bloody rays across the crests of black waves. The lookouts of Le Havre watched impatiently from the tops of the towers, until at about eleven in the morning, one signalled that a ship was approaching under full sail, followed at a distance by two others. They came on like arrows launched by a mighty archer but the cross-seas were so heavy that the speed of their approach was matched by the ships’ alarming rolls from starboard to port and back again. Soon the ships’ designs and the colour of their banners identified them as English. In the lead sailed the ship that bore the princess, flying the flag of the admiralty. Immediately the rumour spread that the princess was arriving. All the French nobility flocked to the harbour, and the quays and jetties were lined with people. Two hours later, the vessels following behind had caught up with the flagship, and all three, apparently unwilling to risk the narrow opening of the harbour, had dropped anchor between Le Havre and the headland of La Hève. This manoeuvre completed, the flagship gave France a twelve-gun salute that was repeated shot for shot from the tower of François I. At once a hundred boats put to sea, all brilliant with bright bunting and intended to bear the French gentility out to the anchored vessels. But it was immediately obvious from the way they were tossed about while still in the harbour that, if they ventured beyond the jetty, where the waves rose like mountains and crashed, roaring, on the shore, none of those boats would make it even a quarter of the way to the ships without capsizing. Only one boat: that of the harbour pilot seemed determined despite the wind and waves, to try to reach the English flagship. De Guiche, who’d been assessing the boats in the harbour to try to pick out the hardiest and most likely to reach the English ships, had spotted the harbour pilot preparing to set off.

“Raoul,” he said, “don’t you think it’s shameful for creatures as intelligent and brave as we to be daunted by the brute force of the wind and waves?”

“That’s just what I was telling myself,” Bragelonne replied.

“Well! What say we board the harbour pilot’s boat and take our chances? How about you, de Wardes?”

“Take care or you’ll drown yourselves,” said Manicamp.

“And all for nothing,” said de Wardes, “because with the wind like this, you’ve no chance of making it out to the ships.”

“So, you refuse?”

“Yes, by God! I’m happy to risk my life in a fight with other men,” he said, glancing sideways at Bragelonne, “but to lose it wrestling with the salt sea is not to my taste.”

“And as for me,” said Manicamp, “even if we made it to the ships, my last decent outfit would be ruined by the salt water, and that’s quite unthinkable.”

“So, you refuse as well?” asked de Guiche.

“I should say so; it’s entirely out of the question.”

“But de Wardes, Manicamp, just look,” cried de Guiche. “Can’t you see? Out there, on the flagship, the princesses are watching us.”

“All the more reason, *dear friend*, not to take a ridiculous dunking in front of them.”

“Is that your final word, Manicamp?”

“Indeed.”

“And you, de Wardes?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll go alone.”

“Not at all,” said Raoul. “I go where you go. I thought you knew that.”

In point of fact, Raoul, not driven by passion, had coolly assessed the danger and decided to risk what de Wardes would not. The boat was casting off; de Guiche called out to the pilot, “Ahoy, the boat! Two more coming aboard!”

And wrapping a handful of pistols in a sheet of paper, he tossed it into the craft. “So, you’re not afraid of a little salt water, my young masters?” called the pilot.

“We’re not afraid of anything,” replied de Guiche.

“Then come aboard, Gentlemen.”

The pilot steered the craft near the wharf, and the young men jumped lightly into the boat. “Come, courage, my lads,” said de Guiche to the crew. “There’re another twenty pistoles in this purse and when we reach the flagship, they’re yours.”

At once the rowers bent over their oars and the boat bounded across the waves. Everyone was watching this hazardous attempt, the whole population of Le Havre lining the jetties, every eye fixed on the pilot boat. Sometimes the frail craft was suspended for a moment atop a foamy crest before plunging to the bottom of a roaring abyss, seemingly lost. But she always reappeared, and after an hour of struggle she came into the lee of the flagship, where two ship’s boats were waiting to come to her aid. On the quarterdeck of the flagship, sheltered by a canopy hung with velvet and ermine and held up by taut and powerful stays, Madam Henriette\* the Dowager Queen and her daughter, the young Madam Henrietta, with the admiral, the Duke of Norfolk at their sides, had watched apprehensively as the approaching boat was raised to heaven one moment and plummeted toward hell the next. Against the dark waves they could see, like luminous apparitions, the bright and noble figures of the two French gentlemen. The ship’s crew, leaning on the rail and hanging from the shrouds, had cheered the courage of the nobles, the pilot, and his sailors. A triumphant huzzah welcomed their arrival on board. The Duke of Norfolk, a handsome man of age twenty-six or twenty-seven, came forward to meet them. De Guiche and Bragelonne came bounding up the starboard ladder and conducted by



Norfolk, were escorted to greet the princesses. Out of respect and a certain hesitation that he barely acknowledged even to himself, the Count de Guiche delayed looking directly at the young Madam. But Henrietta on the contrary, picked him out right away and asked her mother, “Is this my Sir who’s coming aboard?”

Madam Henriette who was more familiar with Sir than her daughter, smiled at this error of self-importance and replied, “No, that’s just Sir de Guiche, his favourite.”

With this answer, the princess felt she’d best conceal her instinctive admiration of the count’s courage. It was just as she was controlling her expression that de Guiche finally dared to raise his eyes to her so he could compare the original to her portrait. When he saw that pale face, those lively eyes, that adorable chestnut hair, those trembling lips, and her gesture so eminently royal and yet at the same time encouraging, he was so overcome with emotion that, if he hadn’t been leaning on Raoul as he came over the rail, he would have staggered. At his friend’s astonished glance, and a benevolent nod from the queen, de Guiche recovered himself. In a few words, he introduced himself as Sir’s envoy, explained his mission, and saluted, according to their rank and precedence, the admiral and the various English lords who were grouped around the princesses. Raoul was presented in his turn and as the son of the Count of La Fère was graciously received as everyone knew the part the count had played in the restoration of King Charles II and it was the count who’d been charged with the negotiation of the marriage that returned to France the granddaughter of Henri IV. Raoul spoke English perfectly and made himself the interpreter between his friend and those young English lords who were unfamiliar with French. Just then there appeared a remarkably handsome young man garbed in rich and splendid raiment. He approached the princesses who were conversing with the Duke of Norfolk and said with barely contained impatience, “Come, ladies, it’s time we went ashore.”

At this invitation, the young Madam rose and moved to accept the hand the young man offered her with an eagerness born of several motivations but the admiral stepped between her and the newcomer. “A moment if you please, Milord Buckingham,” he said. “Getting the ladies to shore isn’t possible right now. The sea’s too unruly but by four bells it’ll probably settle and they can disembark this evening.”

“I must say, Milord,” said Buckingham with an irritation he did not even try to disguise, “that you’ve no right to detain these ladies aboard your ship. One of them now belongs to France, alas! And France as you see has sent their ambassadors to claim her.”

And he gestured toward de Guiche and Raoul, while bowing to them. “I scarcely think these gentlemen intend to risk the lives of the princesses,” the admiral replied.

“Milord, these gentlemen have arrived despite the wind in their faces; permit me to believe it’s no more dangerous for the ladies, who will travel with the wind behind.”

“These gentlemen were very brave,” said the admiral. “As you can see, the harbour is lined with hundreds who didn’t dare to follow them. Their chivalrous desire to present themselves to Madam as soon as possible led them to challenge the sea that today is terrible even for sailors. I’ll hold up these gentlemen as an example my crew should follow but these noble ladies must not.”

A sidewise glance from Madam spotted the blush that rose to the count’s cheeks, a look that escaped Buckingham. His eyes were fixed on Norfolk, and it was evident that he was jealous of the admiral, burning with the desire to remove the princesses from that floating realm where the admiral was king. “In that case,” said Buckingham, “I appeal to Madam in person.”

“And I, Milord,” replied the admiral, “appeal to my conscience and my responsibility. I promised to return Madam to France safe and sound, and I intend to keep my promise.”

“But, see here, Sir…”

“Milord Buckingham, permit me to remind you that I am in sole command here.”

“Milord Admiral, do you know whom you address?” replied Buckingham, voice rising.

“Perfectly, Milord, and I repeat: I am in sole command here, over the sea, the wind, the ships, and the sailors.”

He pronounced these words with nobility and grandeur. Raoul paid close attention to Buckingham, as the duke shuddered and grasped at one of the pavilion’s posts to keep from falling, his eyes red with rage, and his other hand creeping toward the hilt of his sword. “Milord,” said the queen, “permit me to say that I entirely agree with the Duke of Norfolk. Even if the wind, so unruly at the moment, were completely calm and favourable, we still owe a few hours to this officer who’s conducted us so pleasantly and carefully to within sight of the coast of France, where he must leave us.”

Buckingham looked for guidance from Madam instead of responding. But Henrietta, half hidden behind the gold and velvet curtains that sheltered her, wasn’t listening as her eyes were on the Count de Guiche, who was conversing with Raoul. This was a fresh blow to Buckingham, who thought he detected in Madam Henrietta’s gaze something more than mere curiosity. He reeled back against the mainmast. “Milord Buckingham still has no sea-legs,” said the queen mother in French. “Perhaps that’s why he’s so keen to go ashore.”

At these words, the young man turned pale, dropped his hands in discouragement to his sides, and withdrew, expressing with a single deep sigh both his old loves and his new hostilities. The admiral however, invited the princesses into the stern cabin where a farewell dinner had been laid out with a magnificence worthy of his guests. At the table, the admiral sat to the right of Madam and placed the Count de Guiche to her left – the place usually occupied by Buckingham. The duke, when he entered the cabin, felt another blow when he saw the secondary seat where, by etiquette, he was now relegated with respect to his princess. For his part, de Guiche, paler perhaps from happiness than his rival was from fury, trembled as he sat next to the princess, and when he brushed against her silk dress felt shudders of pleasure such as he’d never known. After the meal, Buckingham sprang forward to offer Madam his hand. But it was now de Guiche’s turn to give the duke a lecture. “Milord,” he said, “be as kind as to stop interposing yourself between Her Royal Highness Madam and me. From now on Her Royal Highness belongs to France, and it is the hand of Sir, the king’s brother who touches the hand of the princess when Her Royal Highness does me the honour to take *my* hand.” And having said these words, he offered his hand to the young Madam with a timidity so obvious and yet with such courageous nobility that the assembled English lords murmured in admiration while Buckingham sighed in anguish. Raoul, who knew what it meant to be in love, saw it all and understood completely. He gave de Guiche one of those looks that only a close friend or mother can give to one held dear who is about to go badly astray. Finally toward 2 o’clock, the sun came out, the wind fell, and the sea calmed to a sheet of crystal, and the fog shrouding the coast was shredded and torn away. Then the smiling hills of France appeared, its slopes dotted with white houses, bright against the green of the trees or the deep blue of the sky.

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The Pavilions

The admiral, as we’ve seen, had decided to ignore Buckingham’s threatening glares and outbursts. It had been going on ever since they left England, and he’d learned to put up with the duke’s behaviour. De Guiche hadn’t yet paid much attention to the animosity the young lord seemed to feel toward him, though he instinctively felt no sympathy toward the favourite of Charles II. The queen mother, with greater experience and a cooler head, had a firmer grasp of the situation and, aware of its dangers, was ready to force a clean break when the right moment arrived. That moment had come. Calm had been restored to the entire company except in the heart of Buckingham, who implored the young princess in a low voice, “Madam, Madam, in the name of heaven, let’s go ashore, I beg you! Can’t you see how this insolent Duke of Norfolk is killing me with his impertinent attentions to you?”

Henrietta heard these words, smiled and without turning around, replied in that tone of languid reproach that coquettishly pushes back without pushing away, “Dear Milord, I’ve already told you that you must be quite mad.”

As we’ve said, none of the nuances of this scene escaped Raoul; he heard Buckingham’s plea, the princess’s response, watched Buckingham step back as if struck, sigh, and put a hand to his forehead – and Raoul understood the state of affairs and shuddered with an open heart behind his eyes and ears. The admiral finally gave the order to launch the ship’s boats after careful deliberation. When Buckingham heard these orders, he reacted with such unrestrained glee a stranger might think he’d lost his mind. At the Duke of Norfolk’s orders, a grand barge, elaborately decorated, large enough for twenty oarsmen and fifteen passengers, was lowered over the side of the flagship. Its deck was carpeted in velvet, banners sported the arms of England, and its rigging was garlanded with flowers, for at that time diplomacy was draped in decoration, and this was a vessel for royalty. The barge was scarcely in the water, the rowers standing by their oars like soldiers at attention awaiting the embarkation of the princess, when Buckingham hastened to the top of the ladder that led to the boat. But the queen stopped him. “Milord,” she said, “it’s improper for me and my daughter to go ashore before you’ve ascertained that our lodgings there are in order. Go ahead, Milord, I pray, to make sure that everything is prepared for our arrival.”

This was a new blow to the duke, all the more terrible because it was unexpected. He stammered, turned red, and was silent, crushed. He had thought to accompany Madam during the stately approach of the barge, savouring every last moment near her. But the order was clear. The admiral who had heard it, immediately cried, “Launch the longboat!”

The order was executed with the speed typical of a well-disciplined warship. Buckingham, stricken, sent a look of despair toward the princess, a look of entreaty toward the queen, and a look of fury toward the admiral. The princess pretended not to notice, the queen turned her head, and the admiral laughed. Buckingham, at this laugh, took a step toward Norfolk. The queen rose with a glare. “On your way, Milord,” she said with authority.

The young duke stopped short. Then making a final effort, he looked around and said in a voice choked with emotion, “Gentlemen! What of you, Sir de Guiche, and you, Sir Bragelonne? Do you go with me?”

De Guiche bowed. “I’m at the queen’s orders like Sir de Bragelonne,” he said. “What she commands, we’ll do.”

And he looked at the young princess who lowered her eyes. “Your pardon, Milord Buckingham,” said the queen, “but the Count de Guiche represents Sir in this; he must do for us the honours of France, as you have done the honours of England. It’s his duty to accompany us, and in any event, he’s earned that small favour by his courage in making his way to us through that foul weather.”

Buckingham opened his mouth as if to reply but whether he couldn’t think of anything to say or had lost the power to say it, no sound came from his lips. Turning as if in a delirium, he jumped down into the longboat. The rowers, surprised, were barely able to seat him and then settle themselves, as he’d almost capsized the boat. “Really, milord must be mad,” the admiral said to Raoul.

“I fear for him,” replied Bragelonne. As the longboat rowed away, the duke never stopped staring at the flagship like a miser who’d lost his gold or a mother leaving behind her child to march to the scaffold. But no one responded to his looks, his gestures, and his sad, silent pleas. Finally, stunned, he slumped on a thwart, hands clutching his hair, as the carefree sailors diligently drove the longboat over the waves. By the time they landed, he was in such a state of torpor that, if he hadn’t been met by a messenger from the steward he’d sent ahead to arrange the lodgings, he wouldn’t have known what to do. He was led to the house that had been rented for him, where he shut himself up like Achilles in his tent. Meanwhile, just as Buckingham went ashore, the barge bearing the princesses was leaving the flagship. It was followed by another longboat filled with officers, courtiers, and favoured friends. Half the population of Le Havre, in fishing boats or Norman barges, was in the harbour to greet them. The guns of the forts sounded their salutes, and the flagship replied shot for shot, the mounds of the cannons spilling flames and smoke that blew away into the azure sky. The princess stepped off the gangplank onto the stones of the quay, where joyful music greeted her and welcomed her ashore. As she advanced toward the city centre, she walked upon rich tapestries strewn with fresh flowers. Meanwhile de Guiche and Raoul ducked out of the English procession and made their way quickly along side streets toward the residence designated for Madam. “We’d better hurry,” Raoul said to de Guiche. “If I know Buckingham, he’ll cause trouble when he sees the results of yesterday’s preparations.”

“We’re ready no matter what,” said the count. “We left behind de Wardes, who is severity personified, and Manicamp, who is the essence of gentility.”

But de Guiche hurried nonetheless, and five minutes later they came in sight of the Hôtel de Ville. The first thing they saw was the crowd filling the municipal square. “Good!” said de Guiche. “Our lodgings are ready as planned.”

In fact, in the plaza before the grand hôtel had been erected eight elegant canvas pavilions sporting the united arms of France and England. The Hôtel de Ville was surrounded by these brightly coloured tents while 10 pages and 12 cavaliers ready to escort the ambassadors stood waiting before them. The resulting spectacle was curious, strange, and almost magical; these improvised lodgings had sprung up overnight, thrown together from the richest materials de Guiche had been able to buy in Le Havre, and stood in front of all the entrances to the Hôtel de Ville, the designated residence of the young princess. They were linked to each other by twisted garlands of silk behind which stood French guards, so that if Buckingham’s plan had been to control access to the Hôtel de Ville, it was completely foiled; the only way to approach the steps of the city building was to pass between the 2 grandest pavilions, the doors of which faced each other in front of the hotel’s entrance; these 2 tents were those of de Guiche and Raoul occupied in their absence by de Wardes in de Guiche’s pavilion and Manicamp in Raoul’s. Around these 2 pavilions and the 6 secondary tents, 100 officers, gentlemen, and pages, resplendent in shining golden silk, buzzed around like bees at a hive. There they waited, swords on their hips, ready to instantly obey a gesture from the chief ambassadors, de Guiche and Bragelonne. Just as those two young men appeared at the entrance to the square, they saw, crossing the plaza ahead of them at the gallop, a mounted gentleman clad in marvellous elegance. He rode through the curious crowd, and at the sight of the improvised lodgings he gave out a cry of anger and despair. It was Buckingham, recovered from his stupor to don a dazzling costume, and now come to await the arrival of Madam and the queen at the Hôtel de Ville. But at the two main pavilions his passage was blocked, and he had to pull up short. Exasperated, Buckingham raised his whip but two officers grabbed his arms. Only one of the wardens of the pavilions was there, as de Wardes was inside the Hôtel de Ville overseeing the preparations ordered by de Guiche. At the commotion caused by Buckingham, Manicamp who had been relaxing on a pile of cushions just inside Raoul’s pavilion, rose with his habitual nonchalance and sought the source of the disturbance. “Is there a problem?” he said suavely. “What’s all this fuss about?”

His questions happened to come between ducal outbursts, so that despite their mild tone everyone heard them. Buckingham turned and regarded the long, lean figure with the indolent face. Possibly the appearance of our gentleman, who was dressed quite simply, didn’t inspire his respect, for he replied with disdain, “Just who are you to ask, Sir?”

Manicamp leaned on the arm of a huge French guard standing like the pillar of a cathedral, and calmly replied, “You first, Sir.”

“!? I’m Milord the Duke of Buckingham. I rented all the houses around the Hôtel de Ville where I’ve affairs to conduct, as all these houses belong to me, and since I rented them in order to have free passage to the Hôtel de Ville, you have no right to deny me passage.”

“But, Sir, who denies you passage?” asked Manicamp.

“Why, your guards.”

“That’s because you come on horseback, Sir, and the orders are to allow only pedestrians to pass.”

"No one has the right to give orders here but me," said Buckingham.

"How so, Sir?" asked Manicamp in his soft voice. "Do me the honour to explain this mystery."

"Because, as I told you, I've rented all the houses around the square."

"We're well aware of that, since only the square itself was left to us."

"You are mistaken. Since the square is between my houses, it belongs to me."

"Oh, pardon me, Sir but it's you who are mistaken. Here in France we say that the roads belong to the king, so the square is the king's property – and as we're the king's ambassadors, the plaza belongs to us."

"Sir, I already asked once, *who are you?*" cried Buckingham, exasperated by this cool reception.

"My name is Manicamp," replied the young man in a voice as harmonious as the strum of an Aeolian harp.<sup>75</sup>

Buckingham shrugged. "Enough," he said as he dismounted. "When I rented these houses around the Hôtel de Ville, the square was empty. These shabby tents obstruct my view; remove them!"

The surrounding crowd responded to these words with a low and menacing murmur. Just then de Guiche arrived, stepping between the crowd and Buckingham on one side, while de Wardes, coming down the steps, did the same on the other. "Pardon me, Milord," said de Guiche, "but if you have any complaints, address them to me, as it was I who ordered these pavilions put here."

"And I would like to add, Sir, that the word *shabby* could be regarded as objectionable," said Manicamp smoothly.

"You were saying, Sir?" continued de Guiche to Buckingham.

"I was saying, Sir Count," replied Buckingham in a tone in which irritation was still detectable, though it was suppressed in the presence of an equal, "that it's impossible for these tents to remain where they are."

"Impossible?" said de Guiche. "Why is that?"

"Because they annoy me."

De Guiche started an intemperate gesture but restrained himself at a sharp glance from Raoul. He said, "They will bother you less, Sir, when you consider how they rectify an abuse of priority."

"An abuse!"

"Indeed. You sent an envoy who rented, on your behalf, the entire city centre of Le Havre without considering the French ambassadors who must come to receive Madam. For the representative of a friendly nation, Sir Duke, that was less than friendly."

"The right of first possession takes precedence," said Buckingham.

"Not in France, Sir."

"And *why* not in France?"

"Because in France we observe courtesy."

"Which means?" Buckingham barked, so angrily that the sentries stepped back, expecting an immediate outburst.

"Which means, Sir," replied de Guiche, turning pale, "that I had these pavilions constructed for myself and my friends as lodging for the ambassadors of France, as that was the sole recourse your actions had left us. And here, in this square in Le Havre, we remain, unless a will more powerful and with greater authority than yours makes us move."

"I believe *until lawfully evicted* is the legal term," said Manicamp sweetly.

"I know an authority, Sir, that I think you will respect," said Buckingham, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword.

At that moment, when the Goddess of Discord was about to put all their hands to their swords, Raoul gently placed his hand on Buckingham's arm. "A word, Milord," he said.

"My right and my honour come first!" cried the fiery young man.

"It is precisely upon the point of honour that I must speak to you," said Raoul quietly.

"Do so but keep it short, Sir."

"Just one question, so you see it couldn't be shorter."

"Speak, I'm listening."

"Is it you or Sir Duke of Orléans who is to marry the grand-daughter of King Henri IV?"

"What's that?" asked Buckingham, stepping back in surprise.

"Answer me, Sir, if you please," said Raoul calmly.

"Are you mocking me, Sir?" asked Buckingham.

"That question is answer enough for me, Sir. So, you admit that it isn't you who is to marry the Princess of England."

"You know that perfectly well, it seems to me."

"Pardon me but based on your conduct, it wasn't clear that you know it."

"What are you trying to say to me, Sir?"

Raoul stepped closer to the duke and lowered his voice. "Are you aware, Milord, that your angry behaviour looks a lot like jealousy? Jealousy of a woman from a man who is neither her lover nor her husband casts a shadow on all concerned, the more so when the woman is a royal princess."

"Sir!" cried Buckingham. "Do you insult Madam Henrietta?"

"If you're not careful, Milord," said Bragelonne coldly, "it is you who will subject her to insult. On the flagship, you tried the admiral's patience and pushed the queen to her limits. I watched you, Milord, and thought you must have taken leave of your senses – but since then I've guessed what it is that's really driving you."

"Sir!"

"Just one more word: I hope we can keep it so I'm the only one in the French delegation who's guessed the truth."

"Are you aware, Sir," said Buckingham, trembling from a mixture of anger and anxiety, "that that's the kind of language that must meet a certain reply?"

"Choose your words carefully, Milord," said Raoul with hauteur. "Those of my blood do not speak recklessly, while you, on the contrary, are of a heritage that makes all true Frenchmen wary. I say to you for the second time: take care, Milord."

"What's this? Are you threatening me?"

"I am the son of the Count of La Fère, Sir de Buckingham, and I never threaten because I strike first. So, listen, not to my threat but to my promise..."

Buckingham clenched his fists but Raoul continued as if he hadn't noticed. "If you say anything improper that reflects on Her Royal Highness, just one word, well ... show some patience, Sir Buckingham, and watch yourself, for I, too, will be watching."

"You?"

"Me. As long as Madam was under English protection, I held back; but now that her foot has touched French soil, now that she's been received in the name of the prince, at the first insult which you, in your unwise attachment, commit to the House of France, I will respond in one of two ways: either I will denounce your folly before the entire Court and prompt a shameful recall to England, or, if you prefer, I will simply run my dagger through your throat. Frankly, the second means would suit me the best."

Buckingham turned paler than the ruff of English lace around his neck. "Sir de Bragelonne," he said, "can this really be the speech of a gentleman?"

"It is, when the gentleman speaks to a madman. Get hold of yourself and this gentleman will speak to you quite differently."

"Oh but Sir Bragelonne," murmured the duke, voice breaking, "Sir Bragelonne, you must see that all this is killing me!"

"And if it killed you," said Raoul with his untouchable sangfroid, "I'd have to regard it as a lucky outcome as it would put an end to this folly and there'd be no more of this language and behaviour that threatens to compromise illustrious persons of high rank."

"Oh, you're right!" said the distraught young man. "You're right. Yes, better to die than to suffer what I'm going through now."

He put his hand on an ornamental dagger with a jewelled hilt and half drew it from his belt. Raoul shoved his hand aside. "Take care, Milord," he said. "If you failed to kill yourself, you'd look ridiculous, and if you succeeded your blood would stain the nuptial gown of the Princess of England."

Buckingham stood for a moment, gasping for breath, lips trembling, cheeks quivering, eyes staring as if in delirium. Then he suddenly breathed deeply, squared his shoulders, and said, "Sir Bragelonne, I've never met a nobler spirit than yours and you're a worthy son of the most perfect gentleman I know. Keep your pavilions!" And he threw his arms around Raoul's shoulders. All those watching, amazed by this embrace that upended all their expectations, given the fury of one adversary and the obduracy of the other, began to applaud, and a thousand cheers rose to the sky. De Guiche in his turn embraced Buckingham, who was reluctant at first but then returned it. And that was the signal. English and French who had regarded each other with suspicion a moment before, immediately fell to fraternising. Such was the situation upon the arrival of the procession of the princesses, who, without Bragelonne, would have come into a battle with blood raining on the banners and flowers. But to the eyes of the princess and the queen, everything was in perfect order.

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The Night

Goodwill reigned in the plaza of the pavilions. English and French surpassed each other in gallantry and courtesies to the royal travellers. The English, who had purchased great quantities of flowers in advance, sent them to the French in honour of the young princess; the French invited the English to dine with them at a great feast planned for the next day. Madam was applauded wherever she passed. She seemed as regal as a queen in the eyes of all who respected her, and as holy as an idol to those who adored her. The queen mother returned the affectionate welcome of the French. France was her homeland, and she'd been too unhappy in England to ever forget France. She'd taught her daughter, through her own love, to love the country where both had found hospitality in a troubled past, and where they were now come to find the fortune of a brilliant future. The royal entrance complete, the spectators beginning to scatter, the fanfares finished and the sound of the crowd subsiding, night fell, enveloping under its starry veil the sea, the countryside, the harbour, and the city, still bustling in the aftermath of the great event. De Guiche returned to his pavilion and sat on a camp stool with such a pained expression that Bragelonne who followed him, paused until he heard him sigh and then approached. The count was leaning against the wall of the tent, his head in his hands, breath ragged, knees trembling. "Are you suffering, my friend?" asked Raoul.

"Cruelly."

"Physically in pain?"

"Oh, yes."

"It was an exhausting day," continued the young viscount, eyes fixed on his friend, assessing.

"It was. Maybe, with sleep, I'll recover."

"Do you want me to leave you?"

"No, I need to talk to you."

"Of course. But first, de Guiche, I have questions to ask."

"Ask then."

"Be honest."

"I always am."

"Do you know why Buckingham was so furious?"

"I have an idea."

"You think he's in love with Madam, am I right?"

"Hard to think otherwise, looking at him."

"Well! I think not."

"Oh! This time you're wrong, Raoul. I read the pain in his eyes, in his words, his every act from the morning onward."

"You're a poet, my dear Count, and see poetry wherever you look."  
"More than that, I see love."  
"Even where there is none."  
"Where there is."  
"Come, de Guiche, don't you think you're fooling yourself?"  
"I know exactly what I'm saying!" the count said sharply.  
"Tell me, Count," asked Raoul with a significant look, "why love is what you think you see."  
"Well," said de Guiche, hesitating, "experience, I guess."  
"Experience! So, you think you can trust your judgement."  
"What are you trying to say?"  
"I'm saying, my friend, that you're not usually as disturbed as you are tonight."  
"I'm tired."  
"You're tired?"  
"Yes."  
"Listen, dear friend, we've fought on campaign together, ridden eighteen hours at a stretch, killed our horses beneath us, fell down hungry and exhausted, and yet we laughed. It isn't because you're tired, Count, that you're sad."  
"I'm upset, then."  
"Upset? About what?"  
"What happened tonight."  
"Lord Buckingham's folly?"  
"What else? Shouldn't it upset us as Frenchmen who represent our prince, to see an Englishman pay court to our future princess, the second lady of the realm?"  
"Yes, I would be upset – if I thought Lord Buckingham an actual danger."  
"Oh but he is. He came roaring in, stirring up trouble between us and the English, and if it wasn't for you, so calm and so firm, there'd have been swordplay in the plaza."  
"But he did calm down, as you saw."  
"Yes, he did, and it was astounding. You spoke quietly with him; what did you say? You could see that he loves her but somehow you talked him out of it. He must not really love her, then!"  
De Guiche said this with such emphasis that Raoul looked at him sharply. The young noble's passion was easily read. "What did I say to him, Count?" said Raoul. "I'll repeat it to you. Listen closely, here it is: 'Milord, you look with an air of envy, of dangerous lust, upon the sister of your king, who is engaged to someone else and who can never return your love; and this is an affront to those, like us, who come to bring this young woman to her intended spouse.'"  
"You said that?" asked de Guiche, colouring.

"Not just that but more than that." De Guiche flinched. "I said to him, 'What would you think if you saw one of us so improper, so disloyal, as to show inappropriate feelings toward the princess destined for our master?'" These words hit de Guiche so hard that he paled, shuddered, and stretched one hand out toward Raoul while the other covered his eyes and forehead. "'But,'" continued Raoul without appearing to notice his friend's reaction, "'the French, thank God, though accused of being frivolous, indiscreet, even reckless, know to rely on sound judgement and solid morality when faced with questions of such high importance. You should know, Milord Buckingham,' I added, 'that we gentlemen of France serve our kings by sacrificing our passions as well as our fortunes and our lives, and that if, by some chance, the Devil suggests one of those evil thoughts that inflames the heart, we extinguish that flame, even if we must quench it in blood. That way, we preserve three honours: our country's, our master's, and our own. That's how we behave, Milord Buckingham, and it's how every man of honour should behave.' And that, my dear de Guiche," continued Raoul, "is how I spoke to Milord Buckingham, and why he gave in to my reasoning without resistance."  
De Guiche who had been cringing at Raoul's words, now looked up, eyes bright, and feverishly gripped Raoul's hand; his cheeks that had been pale as ice, now glowed red as flame. "And you spoke well," he said, voice choking. "Thank you, you're a good friend, Raoul. Now, please, leave me to myself."  
"That's what you want?"  
"Yes, I need rest. Today was a disturbing day for me, in both mind and body. But tomorrow, when I see you again, I'll be a new man."  
"Well, then! I'll take my leave," said Raoul, withdrawing. The count stepped toward his friend and embraced him warmly. But behind this friendly embrace, Raoul thought he detected the trembling of a greater passion. The night was cool, starry, and splendid; after the storm, the warmth of the sun had brought a general return of life and joy. A few long, slender clouds trailed across the sky behind a breeze from the east, promising fine days ahead. In the square before the Hôtel de Ville, the dark shadows of the pavilions divided by bands of moonlight formed a vast mosaic of black and white. Soon the city was asleep ... but there was still a faint light in the window of Madam's chamber that overlooked the square, the soft light of a dim lamp just before it flickers out, a seeming symbol of the calm repose of a young woman who scarcely aware of life's anxieties, slowly sinks into deep sleep. Bragelonne emerged from his tent with the slow care of a man wishing to see while remaining unseen. From the opening between the door flaps he surveyed the entire square at a glance, and then, after a moment, saw the corners of the door to de Guiche's pavilion tremble and part. Behind the opening was the shadow of de Guiche, eyes glinting in the gloom as he fixed them on the window of Madam's chamber, still lit by the flickering glimmer from within. The soft glow that tinted that window was the count's pole star. In his eyes could be seen the aspirations of his entire soul. Raoul, hidden in the shadows, guessed at the passionate longings that formed between the young ambassador and the young princess behind the balcony a mysterious bond of sympathetic magic, a link forged of will and obsession that must have sent amorous dreams into the chamber the count gazed at, his soul in his eyes. But de Guiche and Raoul weren't the only ones who were awake. The window of one of the houses overlooking the square was open, in the house occupied by Buckingham. The silhouette of the duke, leaning on the carved and velvet-trimmed windowsill, was sending across to the light in Madam's window its own wild message of love. Bragelonne noticed and could not help but smile. Thinking of Madam, he said, "There is a poor heart thoroughly besieged." Then with a sympathetic thought for Sir, he added, "And there is a poor husband thoroughly threatened. He's lucky that he's a great prince with an army to watch out for him." Bragelonne gazed a while longer at the silent appeals of the two suitors, while listening to the indecorous snoring of Manicamp, who wheezed as proudly as if he were wearing his suit of blue and gold instead of just his purple doublet, nearly drowning out the breeze that brought the distant song of a nightingale; and with that added to his store of melancholy, Raoul returned to his bed, wondering if maybe 2 or even 3 pairs of eyes as ardent as those of de Guiche and Buckingham were turned upon the window of his beloved back in the château at Blois. "And Miss Montalais isn't the most dependable defender, alas," he whispered to himself with a sigh.

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From Le Havre to Paris

The next day, the welcome festivities were celebrated with all the pomp and merriment the city and its residents could muster. And meanwhile, during the final hours the French cortège spent in Le Havre, they prepared for their departure. After the grand welcome, Madam first bid farewell to the English fleet, honouring the nation by saluting their flags; she then got into her carriage surrounded by a brilliant procession. De Guiche had hoped that Buckingham would return with the admiral to England but Buckingham had persuaded the queen that it would be improper to leave Madam without a ranking English noble to escort her to Paris. Buckingham, having scored the point that he would accompany Madam, chose a glittering entourage of gentlemen and officers with which to surround himself, so that it was almost an army that marched toward Paris, scattering gold and drawing excited crowds in the towns and villages through which they proceeded. The weather was perfect. France was beautiful to see, especially along the route the cortège had chosen. Spring tossed its flowers and sweet-smelling foliage at the feet of youth as it passed. Normandy, with its lush vegetation, blue horizons, and silvery streams, presented itself as a pastoral paradise for the king's new sister. The journey was an ongoing entertainment and festival, and de Guiche and Buckingham surrendered to it, de Guiche hoping to eclipse the efforts of the Englishman, and Buckingham trying to recall in the princess's heart recollections of happy days in the country she'd left behind. But alas, the poor duke could clearly see that the memory of his dear England was fading day by day in Madam's mind as she increasingly recalled her love of France. In fact, he saw that all his efforts awoke no longing in her for England, and that though he rode with skill and grace on a high-spirited Yorkshire charger, it was only occasionally and by accident that the princess's gaze lit upon him. In vain did he attempt, when one of those looks was turned toward him, to make his mount produce all it could from strength, spirit, force, and finesse: in vain did he drive the horse to risky extremes, to headlong, breakneck leaps over logs and ditches that did no more than cause Madam, attracted by the commotion, to turn her head for a moment and then, smiling slightly, return to her loyal guardians, Raoul and de Guiche, who rode calmly beside the doors to her carriage. Buckingham fell prey to all the torments of jealousy, a pain deeper than any he'd ever known, burning in his veins and besieging his heart; then, as if to show that he was aware of his folly, and that he wished to redeem his recklessness by humble submission, he tamed his foaming horse and forced it, dripping with sweat, into the crowd around the coach, among the throng of courtiers. Sometimes as a reward he was afforded a word of recognition from Madam, a word that seemed to him little more than a reproach. "There, Milord Buckingham," she would say, "that's much more reasonable."  
Or Raoul would remark, "Don't kill your horse, Milord Buckingham."  
Buckingham bore this patiently from Raoul, for he instinctively knew with no direct evidence that Raoul was also reining in de Guiche, and there would already have been some kind of clash between the count and Buckingham without Raoul on hand that might have gotten one or both of them exiled in disgrace. Since the confrontation between the young men among the pavilions of Le Havre, in which Raoul had forced the duke to acknowledge his inappropriate behaviour, Buckingham had, despite himself, come to respect Raoul. He often engaged him in conversation, usually to talk about his father or about d'Artagnan, their mutual friend, about whom Buckingham was almost as enthusiastic as Raoul. Bragelonne was always happy to talk about d'Artagnan, particularly in front of de Wardes, who during the entire trip was seething with resentment toward Raoul, especially regarding his influence over de Guiche. De Wardes had the sharp eye of the mean spirited and saw how de Guiche yearned for the attentions of the princess. Instead of addressing the subject with Raoul's reserve, treating it with the appropriate dignity and propriety, de Wardes deliberately aggravated the count by appealing to his youthful audacity and selfish pride. Thus it happened that one evening, when they were paused at Mantes, de Guiche and de Wardes were talking together, leaning on a fence, while Buckingham and Raoul were strolling up and down and conversing, and Manicamp was paying court to the princesses, who had already learned to enjoy his company without taking him seriously, thanks to his agile wit and his smooth manners that were as supercilious as they were obsequious. "Confess," said de Wardes to the count, "that you're suffering badly and your friend the pedagogue offers no cure."  
"I don't know what you're talking about," said the count.  
"But you do – you're smitten by love."  
"That's crazy, de Wardes!"  
"It *would* be crazy, I agree, if Madam was indifferent to your passion. But she's aware of it to the point of compromising herself, and I fear that when you arrive in Paris, your pedagogue will denounce the both of you."  
"Oh, de Wardes! Yet another attack on Bragelonne!"  
"Come, enough of this childish pretence," continued the count's cunning tempter in a low voice. "You know as well as I do what the truth is: you've seen how the princess's gaze softens when she speaks to you, you can tell from the sound of her voice that she likes to hear yours. You see how she hangs on the verses you recite to her, and then doesn't she say the next morning that she slept badly the night before?"  
"Even if all that's true, de Wardes, what's the point of bringing it up?"  
"Isn't it important to see the situation clearly?"  
"Not when the sight would drive one mad."  
And he turned to glance anxiously at the princess, as if, despite denying de Wardes's accusations, he sought confirmation of them from her eyes. "See there?" said de Wardes. "That look from her is as good as a summons! Come, take advantage of the opportunity while your pedagogue isn't around to interfere."  
De Guiche couldn't resist; an invincible attraction drew him toward the princess. De Wardes looked on and smiled. "Ah but you're mistaken, Sir de Wardes," said Raoul suddenly, appearing around the fence on which the two had been leaning. "The pedagogue is here and heard what you said." De Wardes recognised Raoul's voice the moment he spoke, and half drew his sword. "Sheathe your sword," said Raoul. "You know perfectly well that on a mission like ours such a display is unthinkable. Sheathe your sword, and also your tongue. Why pour into the heart of one you call your friend a

dose of the poison that eats at your own? It's the same as when you tried to turn him against another good man, my father's friend and mine. Now you're trying to get the count to pursue a woman who's destined for your master, the prince. Really, sir, I'd take you for a cowardly meddler, if you didn't seem more like a madman!"

"Sir," cried de Wardes, exasperated, "I was right to call you a pedagogue! This haughty tone you affect is more that of a Jesuit schoolmaster than the speech of a gentleman. Don't speak in a tone like that when you speak to a man like me. And Sir d'Artagnan earned my hatred because he dealt with my father in a cowardly fashion."

"That, Sir, is a lie," said Raoul coldly.

"What!" cried de Wardes, "Do you call me a liar, Sir?"

"Why not, if what you say is a lie?"

"You call me a liar, and yet you don't draw your sword?"

"Sir, I swore an oath to myself not to kill you until after we've turned Madam over to her bridegroom."

"You, kill me? You might slap my wrist with a ruler, Sir Pedagogue but no more."

"True, a ruler wouldn't kill," replied Raoul in voice of ice, "but the sword of Sir d'Artagnan would – and I not only have his sword, sir but he taught me how to use it. And it's with that sword, sir, that I'll in time avenge the lies you've spoken about him."

"Take care, Sir," snarled de Wardes. "If you don't give me immediate satisfaction, I'll use whatever means I must to get even."

"I think not, Sir," said Buckingham, suddenly appearing on stage. "That's a vow that sounds very much like a threat of assassination. Hardly proper for a gentleman."

"What are you saying, Sir Duke?" said de Wardes, turning on him.

"I'm saying that, to my English ears, what you said sounded very wrong indeed."

"Well, Sir!" said de Wardes, now furious. "If that's so, all the better. At least in you I won't find the kind of man who slips away from a fight. Take my words however you like."

"I take them as I hear them, and my hearing is excellent," said Buckingham in his haughty tone that gave every statement an air of defiance. "Sir Bragelonne's my friend; you insult Sir Bragelonne; you'll give me satisfaction for that insult."

De Wardes glanced at Bragelonne who sticking to his chosen role, remained cool and calm, even after the duke's challenge. "It seems to me I must *not* have insulted Sir Bragelonne," said de Wardes, "because Sir de Bragelonne who wears a sword doesn't act like a man who's been insulted."

"But you were certainly insulting someone."

"Yes, I insult Sir d'Artagnan!" replied de Wardes who had noticed that this was the only rowel he could use to spur Raoul's anger.

"That's something else entirely," said Buckingham.

"It is, isn't it?" said de Wardes. "And it's up to the friends of Sir d'Artagnan to defend him."

"I agree with you on that," said the Englishman, who'd regained his composure. "If Sir de Bragelonne were insulted, I couldn't reasonably come to the defence of Sir de Bragelonne, since he's right here. But once it's a question of Sir d'Artagnan..."

"You step aside, eh, sir?" said de Wardes.

"No, on the contrary, I draw," said Buckingham, sliding his sword from its scabbard. "For though Sir d'Artagnan may have offended your father, he rendered or at least tried to render a great service to mine." De Wardes shook his head as if stunned. "Sir d'Artagnan," continued Buckingham, "is the most gallant gentleman I know. Having obligations to him, I'd be delighted to repay them upon you with the point of a sword."

And Buckingham raised his sword, saluted Raoul, and placed himself on guard. De Wardes drew his own steel. "Come, come, Gentlemen," said Raoul, stepping forward and placing his own naked blade between the combatants. "This affair is scarcely worth spilling blood over right before the eyes of the princess. Sir de Wardes speaks ill of Sir d'Artagnan but he doesn't even know him."

"What?" said de Wardes, grinding his teeth and dropping the point of his blade to the toe of his boot, "You say I don't know Sir d'Artagnan?"

"That's right. You not only don't know him," Raoul said coldly, "you don't even know where to find him."

"I don't know where to find him?"

"Obviously, since you're picking a fight with strangers instead of with Sir d'Artagnan himself."

De Wardes paled. "Well, then! I'll tell you where to find him," continued Raoul. "Sir d'Artagnan is in Paris in the Louvre when he's on duty and in the Rue des Lombards when he's not. Sir d'Artagnan's easily found at either of these locations so with the grievances you bear against him, it'd be gallant of you to go where he can be found. That way he can give you the satisfaction you seem to ask of everyone but him." De Wardes wiped his forehead that dripped with sweat. "For shame, Sir de Wardes," continued Raoul. "It isn't right to go around provoking fights when we have edicts against duelling. Think about it: the king would be angry with us for our disobedience, especially given our current responsibilities, and the king would be in the right."

"Excuses!" murmured de Wardes. "Excuses and pretexts!"

"Besides," said Raoul, "you were talking nonsense, my dear Sir de Wardes. You're well aware that the Duke of Buckingham is a gallant man who's already fought ten duels and will certainly fight eleven. What the devil! His name practically requires it. As for me, you know that I'm a fighter as well. I fought at Lens, Bléneau, the Dunes, and not just in front of the gunners but a hundred paces in advance of the line – while you, it must be said, were a hundred paces behind it. Maybe in a battle, among so many other people, no one could notice your courage, and you'd like to show it off but this isn't the time or place for it. And don't count on me, Sir de Wardes, to help you with your little project, because I wouldn't give you the pleasure."

"You talk sense," said Buckingham, sheathing his sword, "and I apologise, Sir de Bragelonne, for allowing myself to be tempted into drawing first."

"No!" de Wardes shouted, leaping forward furiously and lunging toward Raoul who had only time enough for a parry in *fourth*. "Watch it, sir," said Bragelonne calmly. "You could put someone's eye out."

"Then you won't fight?" cried de Wardes.

"At the moment, I will not – but I'll tell you what I'll do when we reach Paris: I'll take you to Sir d'Artagnan, to whom you can recount what grievances you have against him. Sir d'Artagnan will ask the king for permission to cross swords with you, the king will grant it, and once you've met *his* sword, well, my dear Sir de Wardes! You will take more seriously the words of the Gospel that tell us to forgive others' trespasses."

"Agh!" cried de Wardes, inflamed by such coolness. "It's clear that you're at least half a bastard, Sir de Bragelonne!"

Raoul went as pale as the lace at his collar, and his eye flashed in a way that made de Wardes take a step back. When Buckingham saw that, he threw himself between the two adversaries, whom he expected to tear each other apart. De Wardes had saved this insult for the last; his sword trembled eagerly as he awaited an attack. "You're right, Sir," said Raoul, making a heroic effort to control himself. "I know only my father's name. But I know too well that the Count of La Fère is a man of honour and worth to fear for a moment that, as you imply, there's a stain upon my birth. My ignorance of my mother's name is therefore for me a misfortune but not a disgrace. The shame is on you, Sir, for your discourtesy in reproaching me for a misfortune. But no matter: the insult exists, and I must respond to it. So, if you please, after you settle your quarrel with Sir d'Artagnan, you will have me to deal with."

"Oh ho!" replied de Wardes with a bitter smile. "I admire your deliberation, Sir. Just now you promised me a thrust from Sir d'Artagnan's sword but I'm to take a thrust from yours only after one from him. Very prudent."

"Oh, never fear," replied Raoul, an edge to his voice. "Sir d'Artagnan is a master of arms, and I'll ask him to take the same care with you that he did with your father and refrain from killing you, so he'll leave me the pleasure, once you've recovered, of killing you myself. You are rotten to the core, Sir de Wardes, and one can't, in good conscience, take too many precautions against you."

"As I shall take my precautions against you," said de Wardes. "Count on it."

"Sir," said Buckingham, "allow me to interpret your words by giving a piece of advice to Sir de Bragelonne: Sir, under your everyday doublet, wear armour."

De Wardes clenched his fists. "Oh, I see," he said. "You gentlemen are waiting till you've taken that advice before you measure your swords against mine."

"Very well, then, Sir," said Raoul, "since you absolutely demand it, let's finish this."

And he took a step toward de Wardes, extending his sword. "What are you doing?" asked Buckingham.

"Nothing much," said Raoul. "This won't take long."

De Wardes came on guard, and their blades touched. De Wardes then lunged so hastily that, from Raoul's easy parry, it was obvious to Buckingham that Raoul was sparing his adversary. Buckingham took a step back and watched the duel. Raoul was as calm as if sparring with a foil rather than fighting with a sword; he freed his weapon that was pressed up to the hilt, with a back-step, and parried three or four more blows from de Wardes. Then, threatened by a low thrust, he parried de Wardes's sword with a circular bind, whipped the blade out of his hand and sent it flying over the fence. And then, as de Wardes stood there stunned and disarmed, Raoul sheathed his blade, grabbed him by the collar and belt, and threw him over the fence after his sword. "Next time! Next time!" snarled de Wardes as he picked up his sword and scrambled to his feet.

"No rush, by God," said Raoul. "Give it at least an hour." Then turning to Buckingham, he said, "Duke, I implore you not to say a word about this incident. I'm ashamed at having gone this far but anger got the better of me. Please forget all about it."

"My dear Viscount," said the duke, shaking his hand sincerely and long, "on the contrary, let's both remember it and watch out for your safety. That man is dangerous and will murder you in a heartbeat."

"My father lived for twenty years under the threat of a much more formidable enemy than him, and he still lives," Raoul replied. "God protects those of my blood, Sir Duke."

"Your father had some very good friends, Viscount."

"Yes," sighed Raoul, "but there are no such friends around now."

"Oh, never say that!" said Buckingham. "Not at the moment I offer you my own friendship!" And he spread his arms to embrace Bragelonne, who received the offer with joy.

"Men of *my* blood," added Buckingham, "will die for those we love. You know that, Sir Bragelonne."

"Yes, Duke," said Raoul. "I know it."

What the Knight of Lorraine Thought of Madam

Nothing disturbed the rest of the journey. Under the pretext of scouting the route, Sir de Wardes left and rode ahead. He was scarcely missed. With him he took Manicamp, whose congeniality and dreamy disposition served to balance his own temperament. High strung and quarrelsome types often seek out those of a soft and timid nature, as if the former sought relief from the contrast to their harsh moods, while the latter sought a defence for their weakness. Buckingham and Bragelonne formed a trio of friendship with de Guiche, singing a chorus of praises in honour of the princess. To counter the dangerous habits of de Guiche and his rival, Bragelonne had organised the perpetual concert so the three would sing in harmony instead of solo arias. These harmonious paeans pleased Madam Henriette the queen mother but were less appreciated by the young princess, who was a demon of coquetry and would have joined her voice to the solos in risky flirtation. She had one of those bold and reckless hearts who seek strong emotion, even at the cost of pain. So her glances, her smiles, her flicks of her fan, rained down on the three young men in crushing volleys, and this inexhaustible ammunition was likewise expended at longer range on the gentlemen and officers of the escort, the citizens and aldermen of the towns they passed through, even the pages and the servants; it was a general slaughter, an ongoing massacre. By the time Madam arrived in Paris she'd broken a hundred thousand hearts along the road and had in her train a dozen devotees and two absolute lunatics. Raoul alone was aware of her methods and immune to her seductions. His heart was already given to another and thus was no target for her arrows, so he arrived still cool and self-possessed at the capital of the realm. Once, along the way, he spoke with the Queen of England about the intoxicating effect Madam had on those around her and her mother who had learned wisdom from many misfortunes and disappointments, replied, "Henrietta was born to be brilliant, whether in the light of a throne or in darkness, for she is a woman of imagination, caprice, and infinite will."

De Wardes and Manicamp gone ahead as heralds, announced the coming of the princess. The procession was met in Nanterre by a brilliant escort of cavaliers and carriages. It was Sir himself who accompanied by the Knight de Lorraine and his other favourites, along with a company of the king's household troops, had come to greet his fiancée. Just before then, at Saint-Germain, the princess and her mother had exchanged their travel coach, heavy and road-worn, for a light and elegant carriage drawn by six horses caparisoned in white and gold. In this setting, on a mobile throne under a silk parasol edged with a fringe of long feathers, the young and beautiful princess was displayed to all, her radiant face glowing with rosy highlights that emphasized her mother-of-pearl skin. Sir upon seeing the carriage, was struck by Madam's radiance, and expressed his admiration in such enthusiastic terms that the Knight de Lorraine shrugged and sniffed, while Buckingham and de Guiche were struck to the heart. Once the ceremonies of reception were completed and the usual civilities had been exchanged, the procession, now enlarged, resumed making its slow way toward Paris. The introductions had been rushed and though Buckingham and the other Englishmen had been introduced to Sir, the prince had paid little notice. But along the way as he saw the duke paying his attentions with his usual ardour at the door of Madam's carriage, he asked his invariable favourite, the Knight de Lorraine, "Who's that cavalier?"

"He was presented to Your Highness just a few minutes ago," replied the knight. "He's the famously handsome Duke of Buckingham."

“Oh, right.”

“Madam’s ‘knight,’” added the favourite with that tone the jealous use to give significance to even the simplest statement.

“What does *that* mean?” replied the prince, ever alert to such nuances.

“It just means he’s her knight.”

“Does Madam have a designated knight then?”

“*Dame!* I would think you could see that for yourself. Look at them laughing and flirting, the pair of them.”

“You mean, the three of them.”

“Three? Why, what do you mean?”

“Can’t you see that de Guiche is joining in?”

“I do but so what? It just means Madam has not one personal knight but two.”

“You poison everything, you viper.”

“I don’t poison anything! Ah, My Lord, how ill-natured you are. Here we all are, paying the honours of the Kingdom of France to your wife but somehow you’re displeased.”

The prince dreaded the knight’s satirical tone once it turned bitter and cutting, so he changed the subject. “The princess is quite pretty,” he said lightly as if speaking of a stranger.

“Yes,” replied the knight in the same tone.

“The way you say yes sounds like *no*. Her dark eyes are quite lovely, it seems to me.”

“Small though.”

“Small but brilliant. She’s quite tall.”

“Tall enough to be awkward.”

“I don’t disagree. But she has an air of nobility.”

“Her features are too sharp.”

“Yet her teeth are admirable.”

“We see enough of them, God knows, given the size of her mouth. Really, My Lord, I was quite wrong: you *are* better-looking than your wife.”

“And do you think I’m more handsome than Buckingham? Tell me.”

“Oh, yes, and he’s well aware of it – see how he redoubles his attentions to Madam when you’re nearby.”

Sir flicked his reins in impatience but as he saw a triumphant smile pass over the knight’s lips, he dropped back into a walk. “But really,” he said, “why should I worry about my lady cousin at all? Don’t I know her? Wasn’t I brought up with her? Didn’t I see her in the Louvre as a child?”

“She’s changed a bit since then, my Prince, if you don’t mind my saying so,” said the knight. “She was less brilliant then, and considerably less proud, at the time of which you speak. Especially on that night that I’m sure you remember, My Lord, when the king refused to dance with her because he thought her ugly and ill-dressed.”

These words made the Duke of Orléans frown. It wasn’t very flattering to marry a princess whom the king had disdained in her youth. He was preparing an answer when de Guiche left the carriage and approached the prince. From a distance he’d seen the knight talking to the prince and seemed to guess at the nature of the conversation between Sir and his favourite – which the latter continued, from nastiness or impudence. “Count, you’re a man of excellent taste,” the knight said.

“Nice of you to say so,” de Guiche replied, “but why bring it up?”

“*Dame!* I’ll let His Highness answer that.”

“I’ll only say that de Guiche knows I consider him the perfect cavalier,” said Sir.

“And that said, Count, you’ve been with Madam for a week now, haven’t you?” said the knight.

“Quite so,” replied de Guiche, blushing in spite of himself.

“Well, then! Tell us frankly what you think of her appearance.”

“Of her appearance?” said de Guiche, dumbfounded.

“Yes, of her appearance, and of her personality – everything about her, really.”

Struck speechless by this question, de Guiche hesitated to answer. “Come now, de Guiche!” said the knight, laughing. “Tell us what you think – and be frank, Sir wants to know.”

“Yes, quite, be frank,” said Sir.

De Guiche stammered out something unintelligible. “I know it’s a delicate matter,” said Sir, “but you know you can say anything to me. What do you think of her?”

Caught by surprise, de Guiche fell back on the only defence he could muster: he lied. “I find Madam not so good but not so bad, either,” he said. “A bit more good than bad.”

“Really, my dear Count!” said the knight. “You, who were in such ecstasies at the sight of her portrait!”

De Guiche blushed to his ears. Fortunately, his horse that was a lively one, did a little caracole that served to hide his reaction. “Her portrait?” he muttered, drawing near again. “What portrait?”

The knight had never stopped watching him closely. “You remember the portrait. Doesn’t she resemble her miniature?”

“I ... don’t know. I don’t remember the portrait, it’s faded from my mind.”

“It made a strong impression on you at the time,” said the knight.

“That’s possible.”

“Does she have wit, at least?” asked the prince.

“I think so, my Lord.”

“And what about Buckingham?” asked the knight.

“I couldn’t say.”

“I think he must have *some*,” replied the knight, “for he makes Madam laugh, and she seems to take a great deal of pleasure in his company that doesn’t happen to a witty woman in the company of a fool.”

“Then he must be witty,” said de Guiche naively, turning with relief at the arrival of Raoul who had noticed him being subjected to this dangerous inquisition.

Raoul deftly changed the subject, and the interrogation was over. The entry to Paris was grand and jubilant. The king, to honour his brother, had ordered a magnificent reception. With a large and brilliant retinue, Madam and her mother were escorted to the Louvre – that same Louvre where, during their time in exile, they had suffered so painfully in obscurity, misery, and privation. That inhospitable lodging for the daughter of Henri IV, with its bare walls, cracked floors, ceilings draped with spider webs, cold chimneys and empty hearths barely warmed by the charity of parliament, had entirely changed: now it showed splendid draperies, thick carpets, new marble flooring, bright paintings in gilded frames, and mirrors that reflected candelabra everywhere. Light glinted from sumptuous furniture and the arms of the many ceremonial guards, plumes dancing above their heads, while behind them stood a crowd of servants and courtiers in the antechambers and on the staircases. In the courtyards, where formerly grass and weeds had been allowed to grow, as if the contemptuous Mazarin had thought it proper to show Parisians that neglect and disorder were, along with misery and despair, the lot of fallen monarchies – those vast and desolate courtyards were now thronged with brilliant mounted cavaliers whose horses’ hoofs struck sparks from the gleaming cobblestones. Bright carriages overflowed with beautiful young ladies waiting to greet that Daughter of France who, during her widowhood and exile, sometimes couldn’t find wood for her hearth or bread for her table, and whom the lowliest servants of the palace had treated with disdain. But Madam Henriette returned to the Louvre with a heart more wounded by grief and bitter memories than that of her daughter Henrietta, whose nature was less reminiscent and more spontaneous, and brimming now with triumph and joy. The queen was well aware that this brilliant welcome was addressed to the proud mother of a king now placed on the second throne of Europe, while the previous ungracious reception of the daughter of Henri IV had been a punishment for royal misfortune. After the princesses had been installed in their apartments to be given time for a rest, their escorting cavaliers, needing also to recover from the fatigue of travel, left to go about their business. Raoul began by going to see his father but Athos had left for Blois. He tried, then, to visit d’Artagnan but he, busy organising the young king’s military household, was impossible to find. So Bragelonne fell back on seeking out de Guiche. But the count, accompanied by Manicamp, was consulting his tailors, a conference that was liable to last all day. The Duke of Buckingham was even busier, buying horse after horse and diamond upon diamond, monopolizing every other tailor, embroiderer, and jeweller in Paris. Buckingham and de Guiche were conducting a courteous rivalry in which to ensure success, Buckingham was prepared to spend a million in gold, while de Guiche had only his allowance from the Maréchal de Grammont of sixty thousand livres. While Buckingham laughed and spent his million, de Guiche, egged on by de Wardes, groaned and tore out his hair. “A million!” he complained daily. “I’m doomed. Why won’t the marshal advance me a share of my inheritance?”

“Because you’d just squander it,” Raoul said.

“So? What does it matter to him? Maybe I should just die. Then I’d need nothing.”

“Why this talk of dying?” asked Raoul.

“Better that than to be outdone in elegance by an Englishman.”

“My dear Count,” put in Manicamp, “elegance is less a matter of expense than of effort.”

“Yes but making an effort costs money, and I have only sixty thousand livres.”

“*By my troth!*” said de Wardes. “That is embarrassing, to say the least. You just need to spend the same amount as Buckingham; it’s only a difference of nine hundred and forty thousand livres.”

“But where would I get it?”

“Go into debt.”

“I’m there already.”

“Then you might as well go deeper.”

This kind of advice aggravated de Guiche into further spending, until he was deep in extravagance while Buckingham was just incurring expenses. The merchants of Paris were all excited by this spending spree, as orders for miracles issued from Buckingham’s rented mansion and the Hôtel de Grammont. Meanwhile, as Madam was recovering from her travels, Bragelonne was writing to Miss La Vallière. Four letters had already flown from his pen with no answer forthcoming, when, on the very morning of the royal wedding that was to take place in the chapel of the Palais Royal, Raoul, grooming himself in preparation, heard his footman announce, “Sir Malicorne.”

*What can this Malicorne want with me?* Raoul thought. “Make him wait,” he told the footman.

“He’s a gentleman from Blois,” said the footman.

“Ah! Show him in!” said Raoul eagerly.

Malicorne entered, brilliant as the evening star and wearing a superb sword. After bowing gracefully, he said, “Sir Bragelonne, I bring you a thousand greetings from a lady.”

Raoul blushed. “From a lady,” he said. “A lady of Blois?”

“Yes, Sir, from Miss Montalais.”

“Ah, yes, thank you, Sir, I recognise you now,” said Raoul. “And what does Miss Montalais want with me?”

Malicorne drew four letters from his doublet and offered them to Raoul. “My letters!” said Bragelonne. “How can this be? And still sealed!”

“Sir, your letters couldn’t find the person they were intended for in Blois, and so we return them to you here.”

“Miss La Vallière has left Blois?” cried Raoul.

“The week before last.”

“Then, where is she?”

“I believe she’s in Paris, Sir.”

“But how did you know these letters came from me?”

“Miss Montalais recognised your handwriting,” said Malicorne.

Raoul blushed and smiled. “How kind of Miss Aure,” he said. “Always so thoughtful and charming.”

“Always, Sir.”

“But she ought to send me more precise information about Miss La Vallière. I don’t know where to look in the immensity of Paris.”

Malicorne drew another envelope from his doublet. “Perhaps,” he said, “you’ll find what you wish to know in this.”

Raoul hastily broke the seal. The note within was from Miss Aure, and it read, “Paris, Palais Royal, day of the blessed nuptials.”

“What does this mean?” Raoul asked Malicorne. “Do you know, Sir?”

“Yes, Sir Viscount.”

“Then, in heaven’s name, tell me!”

“Impossible, Sir.”

“Why?”

“Because Miss Aure forbade me to say.”

Raoul stared at this strange messenger, momentarily dumbstruck. “At least,” he finally said, “tell me whether this means good or ill for me.”

“You’ll find out.”

“This discretion is cruel!”

“A favour, if you will, Sir.”

“In exchange for the one you won’t do me?”

“Exactly.”

“Speak!”

“I have a powerful desire to see the wedding ceremony but I have no invitation, despite my best efforts to acquire one. Could you get me in?”

“Yes, I could.”

“Please do that for me, Sir Viscount, I beg you.”

“Willingly, Sir. Come with me.”

“Sir, I am your humble servant.”

“But wait, aren’t you a friend of Sir de Manicamp?”

“Yes, Sir. But this morning, as I was watching him dress, I knocked a bottle of lace whitener onto his new suit and he flew at me sword in hand. I was compelled to depart in haste. So, I could have asked him for an invitation but he’d have killed me.”

“Very possibly,” said Raoul. “I think Manicamp quite capable of killing someone for the crime you describe. But I’ll make up for your loss: just let me grab my half-cape and we’ll be on our way.”

The Surprise of Miss Montalais

Madam was married in the chapel of the Palais Royal before an audience of carefully chosen Court favourites. However, despite the exclusive criteria for admission, Raoul, faithful to his promise, contrived to get an invitation for Malicorne, who was eager to see the curious spectacle. Once they were both inside, Raoul approached de Guiche, who, belying his splendid clothes, wore an expression of such misery that only the face of the Duke of Buckingham could match him for dejection and despair. “Watch yourself, Count,” said Raoul, gently warning his friend just as the archbishop was blessing the bride and groom.

In fact, the Prince de Condé was visibly taking note of these twin statues of sorrow, standing like sad caryatids on either side of the nave. The count made an effort to get hold of himself. When the ceremony was over, the king and the queen progressed into the large salon, where they were to be introduced to Madam and her suite. It was remarked that the king who seemed quite taken with his new sister-in-law, reserved his most sincere compliments for her. It was also remarked that Queen Mother Anne after fixing Buckingham with a long and searching look, leaned toward Madam de Motteville and said, “Don’t you think he resembles his father?”

Others remarked that Sir looked anxiously at everyone and seemed unhappy with everything. After the reception of the princes and ambassadors, Sir asked permission of the king to present to him, as well as to Madam, the new members of his now expanded household. “Do you know, Viscount,” the Prince de Condé asked Raoul in a low voice, “if the household has been selected by a person of taste, and if we’ll see any faces worth looking at?”

“I have no idea, My Lord,” replied Raoul.

“Ha! That’s hard to believe.”

“Why so, My Lord?”

“Because you’re close friends with de Guiche, one of the prince’s favourites.”

“Quite so, My Lord but as I have no interest in the subject, I never asked him about it, and since I never asked him, he never told me.”

“What about Manicamp?”

“It’s true, Manicamp’s with us at Le Havre and on the road here but I spoke to him about it no more than I did to de Guiche. Besides, why would he know? He’s not exactly a noble of the first rank.”

“Really, my dear Viscount, is that what you think?” said the prince. “In matters like this, it’s people of the second rank who are the movers and shakers. I think you’ll find that Sir de Manicamp arranged everything with de Guiche, and de Guiche got it accepted by Sir.”

“Well, My Lord, I really had no idea,” said Raoul, “and I’m grateful to Your Highness for the lesson I had the honour to receive.”

“I’m willing to believe that, incredible though it is. Anyway, it won’t be long before we find out: here comes the Flying Squadron as Queen Catherine used to call them. *God!* What lovely faces!”

A troop of young ladies was advancing into the hall under the direction of Madam de Navailles,\* and it must be said that their appearance was a triumph for Manicamp, if in fact he deserved the credit for their selection afforded him by the Prince de Condé. Even at first glance they were a delight to those who, like Sir Prince, were connoisseurs of beauty. A young blond woman of perhaps twenty or twenty-one years of age led the way, and was the first to be introduced: “Miss Tonnay-Charente,”\*\* announced old Madam de Navailles.

“Miss Tonnay-Charente,” repeated Sir, bowing to Madam.

“Oh ho!” said the prince, leaning toward Raoul. “She’s certainly attractive enough.”

“She is pretty, in fact,” said Raoul, “though a trifle haughty.”

“Oh, we know those country airs, Viscount; less than three months will see her tamed. But look, here’s another beauty.”

“Indeed,” said Raoul, “and a beauty I know myself.”

“Miss Aure de Montalais,” said Madam de Navailles.

Name and surname were scrupulously repeated by Sir.

“Good God!” cried Raoul, staring at the doorway into the hall, eyes wide.

“What is it?” asked the prince. “Is it Miss Aure de Montalais that makes you call on God?”

“No, My Lord, no,” replied Raoul, suddenly pale and trembling.

“If it isn’t Miss Aure de Montalais, it must be this charming blond who follows her. Lovely eyes, my faith! Too thin by half but charming!”

“Miss La Baume Le Blanc de La Vallière,” said Madam de Navailles.

As that name resounded in the depths of Raoul’s heart, he felt a clutch in his chest and a cloud rose before his eyes. For long moments he saw and heard nothing, and Sir Prince, suddenly finding himself without an audience for his commentary, left him to get a closer look at the young ladies. “Louise, here! Louise, a maid of honour to Madam!” murmured Raoul.

And his eyes, as if seeking an explanation, wandered from Louise to Montalais. The latter had already abandoned her pretended shyness, having worn a demure expression just long enough to get her through the presentation and courtesies. Miss Montalais had perched herself on a corner from which she could observe the entire company with amusement, and having spotted Raoul, she was enjoying the lovelorn cavalier’s profound astonishment at the presence of herself and her friend. Raoul tried to avoid the mutinous, mischievous, mocking looks that put him through the wringer but desperate for an explanation, he kept helplessly turning back to her. As for Louise either from timidity or some other reason Raoul could not account for, she kept her eyes downcast. Dazzled, intimidated, breathing quickly and shallowly, she withdrew as far as she could into the background, ignoring even Montalais’s insistent elbows. For Raoul, all of this was a deep mystery, the solution to which the poor viscount would have given a great deal. But no one was there to give it to him, not even Malicorne, who, anxious at finding himself among so many gentlemen of high rank, and spooked by Montalais’s mocking glances, had drifted to the outside. Making the circuit, he eventually found himself within a few steps of Sir Prince, behind the collected maids of honour and almost within the sound of Miss Aure’s voice, a planet around which, like a humble satellite, he seemed fated to orbit. Regaining his self-possession, Raoul thought he recognised some voices to his left. In fact, it was de Wardes, de Guiche, and the Knight de Lorraine, in quiet conversation, talking so low one could hardly hear the breath of their words in that vast hall. To speak quietly but clearly in this place, maintaining a posture of attention without leaning or looking toward one’s interlocutor, was a skill achieved by only the most talented of courtiers. It took some attention and study to pick out the thread of conversation between these three who otherwise appeared to be statues. In fact, in that audience before the king and queens, apparently listening raptly to Their Majesties, there were a number of such conversations surreptitiously under way in which deference and respect were not the dominant notes. But Raoul was experienced in this mode of conversation, and even when he could not quite hear the words, he could often read the meaning from the movements of their lips. “Who is this Montalais?” asked de Wardes. “What’re we to make of this La Vallière? Have the provinces come to Paris?”

“I know this Montalais,” said the Knight de Lorraine. “She’s a clever girl who will amuse the Court. La Vallière is likewise charming, though a trifle lame.”

“Ugh!” said de Wardes.

“Don’t count her out, de Wardes; there are some very spicy Latin sayings about ladies who are lame.”

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen,” said de Guiche, glancing anxiously at Raoul, “a little restraint, if you please.”

But the count’s anxiety seemed misplaced, for Raoul’s expression remained calm and indifferent, though he hadn’t missed a word of what had been said. He was recording the insolence and insults of the two provocateurs for later settlement. However, de Wardes seemed to guess his thoughts and said, “Who then are these ladies’ lovers?”

“Do you mean Montalais?” said the knight.

“Yes, Montalais – for starters.”

“Who? Why, you, me, de Guiche ... anyone!”

“And ... the other?”

“Miss La Vallière?”

“Yes.”

“Hush, Gentlemen,” hissed de Guiche to cut off the knight’s answer. “Hush, Madam is listening to us.”

Raoul thrust his clenched right hand into his doublet, where it tore at the laces of his shirt. But this casual malice toward these young women drove him to a sudden decision. “Poor Louise,” he said to himself, “has certainly come here for an honourable purpose under honourable protection – but I must know this purpose, and who protects her.”

Then imitating Malicorne’s manoeuvre, he casually sidled toward the group of maids of honour. Soon the formal presentation was complete. The king, who had never ceased looking at and admiring Madam, left the reception hall with the 2 queens. The Knight de Lorraine resumed his place beside Sir, and while in his company dripped into his ear a few drops of the poison he had brewed over the past hour while looking at the new faces at Court and suspecting that some of them might have happiness in their hearts. The king, when leaving, had been followed by some of his entourage but those of his courtiers who professed independence or cultivated gallantry remained behind and approached the young ladies. Sir Prince complimented Miss Tonnay-Charente, while Buckingham paid court to Madam de Chalais and Madam de La Fayette, ladies of whom Madam was already fond. As for the Count de Guiche, abandoning Sir until he could approach Madam alone, he was talking animatedly with Madam de Valentinóis, his sister, and Mesdemoiselles de Créquy and de Châtillon. Alone in the midst of all this political and amorous socializing was Malicorne, who wanted only to spirit Montalais away but she preferred conversing with Raoul, if only to parry his questions and savour his surprise. Raoul had gone straight to Miss La Vallière and greeted her with the most profound respect. Seeing him, Louise only blushed and stammered, so Montalais had come to her rescue. “Well!” she said. “Here we are, sir Viscount.”



"So I see," said Raoul, smiling, "and your being here is just what I'm hoping you'll explain."

Malicorne approached, wearing his most charming smile. "Not so near, Sir Malicorne," warned Montalais. "Really, you're very indiscreet."

Malicorne pursed his lips and withdrew several steps without saying a word. But his expression changed from pleasant to the mocking smile of a jester.

"You'd like an explanation, Sir Raoul?" asked Montalais.

"Yes, I think one is in order; I mean, Miss La Vallière a maid of honour to Madam!"

"And why shouldn't she, or I, be a maid of honour?" asked Montalais.

"Please accept my congratulations, Mesdemoiselles," sighed Raoul who could see he wasn't going to get a direct answer.

"That didn't sound very congratulatory, Sir Viscount," said Montalais.

"It didn't?"

"Don't you agree, my lady?" she asked Louise.

"Maybe Sir de Bragelonne thinks the appointment is a-above my condition," stammered Louise.

"Oh, not at all, Miss!" Raoul quickly replied. "You know I don't feel that way – I think you're worthy to be not just a maid of honour but a queen! I'm just surprised I didn't learn of it till today."

"True enough," said Montalais in her usual teasing tone. "You didn't know about it, and there's no reason why you should have. Sir de Bragelonne had written you four letters, Louise but there was no one in Blois to receive them but your mother, and those letters couldn't be allowed to fall into her hands, so I had them intercepted and returned to Sir Raoul. Thus, he thought you were in Blois and was unaware you were actually in Paris, rising to your new level of dignity."

"What? You didn't notify Sir Raoul as I'd asked you?" gasped Louise.

"Why would I? So he could moralize, and meddle, and ruin everything we'd worked so hard to achieve? Certainly not!"

"Am I really that bad?" asked Raoul.

"Yes," said Montalais, "and anyway, this way suited me better. I was bound for Paris, you're nowhere around and Louise wept bitterly, interpret that however you like. I asked my sponsor who'd gotten me my appointment to get one for Louise and the appointment arrived. Louise went ahead to Paris to order her new wardrobe but I stayed behind because I already had my clothes; I received your letters and had them returned to you, adding a word or two promising you a surprise. Your surprise, my dear Sir, is right here, and I think she looks fine, so ask for nothing more from me. Now come, Sir Malicorne, it's time that we left these two young people alone, as I'm sure they have a lot to say to each other. You may take my hand, Sir Malicorne, and I hope you appreciate the honour."

"One moment, Miss," said Raoul, halting the young lady in her flight, and speaking in a serious tone in sharp contrast to that of Montalais. "Your pardon but could I please know the name of this sponsor? For if this sponsor lends you his protection, as he might for many reasons" – and he bowed – "then it seems to me that Miss La Vallière should have a protector as well."

"Good Lord, Sir Raoul," Louise said naively, "that's simple enough, and I don't see why I shouldn't tell you myself; my sponsor was Sir Malicorne."

Raoul stood speechless for a moment, wondering if he were still being teased, then turned to speak to Malicorne. But he was already far away and being driven farther by Montalais. Miss La Vallière moved as if to follow her friend but Raoul restrained her with gentle authority. "A word, Louise, I beg of you," he said.

"But, Sir Raoul," said Louise, blushing, "we're alone here, everyone else is leaving. They'll be looking for me."

"Don't worry about that," said the young man, smiling. "Neither of us are so important that our absence will be noticed."

"But my duties, Sir Raoul?"

"Fear not, Miss, I know the customs of the Court; your duties don't start until tomorrow, so you have a few minutes to answer the questions I have the honour to ask you."

"Sir Raoul, you're so very serious," said Louise, agitated.

"Because the circumstances are serious, Miss. Will you listen to me?"

"I'm listening, Sir but I must repeat, we're very alone here."

"You're right," said Raoul. And offering her his hand, he led the young woman to the gallery of the reception hall, where the windows looked out over the courtyard. Everyone still in the hall was hurrying to the middle window that opened onto a balcony from which one could see the departures of those of high rank. Raoul went to one of the side windows, where it was just the two of them, and said,

"Louise, you know that since childhood I've loved you like a sister; you've been the confidante of all my sorrows and the object of all my hopes."

"Yes," she quietly replied. "Yes, Sir Raoul, I know that."

"And on your side, you've always showed me the same friendship, the same confidence. Why, in this new matter, have you not confided in me? Why have you shut me out?" La Vallière made no answer. "I thought you loved me," said Raoul, voice beginning to tremble. "I thought you agreed to all our shared plans for happiness together, the plans we made walking the trails of Cour-Cheverny and under the poplars that line the lane that leads to Blois. You have no answer, Louise?" he paused. "Can it be," he asked, nearly choking, "that you no longer love me?"

"I didn't say that," Louise replied, almost whispering.

"Oh, tell me the truth, I beg you! All the hopes I've in life are centred on you, for you've always been so true, so sweet, and so simple. Please don't be dazzled by the Court, Louise, now that you're in the middle of it, here where all purity is corrupted, and all youth succumbs to age. Cover your ears, Louise, to avoid hearing their words, close your eyes against their seductions, and close even your lips not to breathe in the corrupting air! Now without falsehood or evasion, tell me, Louise: should I believe Miss Montalais? Louise, did you come to Paris because I no longer came to Blois?" La Vallière blushed and buried her face in her hands. "That's it, isn't it?" cried Raoul, exalted. "That is why you came! Oh, I love you as I've never loved you before! Oh, thank you, Louise, for your devotion! But now that you're here, I must protect you from the shadow of insult, be your shield against all dishonour. Louise, a maid of honour to a young princess, at a Court of loose morals and inconstant love, such a maid is always a target of attacks unless she has a defence. It's an untenable position; to be respected, you must be married."

"M-married?"

"Yes."

"My God!"

"Here is my hand, Louise; take it."

"But ... your father?"

"My father allows me the freedom to make my choice."

"Even so..."

"I understand your hesitation, Louise; I'll consult my father."

"Oh, Sir Raoul, reconsider. Wait."

"Wait? Impossible. Reconsider? About you, Louise? That would be an insult to you, unbearable. I'm the master of my own fate, and my father will consent, I promise you. Take my hand now, don't make me wait, or I might think that to change your nature it took only a single step into the palace, one breath of royal favour, a single smile from the queen, or a mere glance from the king." As Raoul uttered that final word La Vallière turned as pale as death, perhaps from fear at seeing the young man so agitated. Whatever the reason, with a movement as quick as thought, she placed her 2 hands between those of Raoul. Then she turned and ran away without speaking another syllable while Raoul's whole body shuddered from the touch of her hands. He took her brief touch as an oath, a solemn oath wrung from her virginal timidity by pure love.

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The Consent of Athos

Raoul left the Palais Royal with urgent intentions that called for action without delay. He went to the courtyard, mounted his horse, and took the road to Blois, while behind him the marriage of Sir and the Princess of England was celebrated with joy by the courtiers and sorrow by de Guiche and Buckingham. Raoul rode hard and arrived at Blois after eighteen hours, having spent the journey preparing his arguments. A fever is also an argument, one to which there is no reply, and Raoul had a fever. Athos was in his study adding a few pages to his memoirs<sup>80</sup> when Raoul was brought in by Grimaud. At a glance, the astute nobleman saw something extraordinary in his son's expression. "You seem to have come on a matter of great consequence," he said, embracing Raoul and then urging him toward a chair.

"Yes, sir," replied the young man, "and I beg you to listen with that kind attention which has never failed me."

"Speak, Raoul."

"Sir, with a man like you I can go straight to the facts of the matter: Miss La Vallière is now in Paris in the capacity of maid of honour to Madam. I've thought hard about this, I love Miss La Vallière above all else and it is against my principles to leave her undefended in a position where her reputation and virtue are vulnerable. I wish to marry her, sir, and I've come to ask for your consent to this marriage." Throughout this speech, Athos had maintained a cool and silent reserve. Raoul had begun his speech with cool self-possession but his emotion had risen with every word. Athos regarded Raoul with a look both profound and veiled with a certain sadness. "So, you've thought about this?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"I believe you're aware of how I feel about such an alliance."

"I know, Sir," Raoul replied, very low, "but you said that if I insisted..."

"Do you insist?"

Raoul stuttered a few words in which only yes was intelligible. "In fact, Sir," continued Athos quietly, "your passion must be strong for you to persist in desiring this union despite my opposition."

Raoul passed a trembling hand across his forehead to wipe away the sweat bursting from his brow. Athos looked at him and pity filled his heart. He rose and said, "Very well, my feelings in the matter are nothing, since they differ from yours. If you want something from me, it's yours. What can I give you?"

"Your indulgence, Sir, I need no more than that," said Raoul, grasping his hands.

"You underestimate my feelings for you, Raoul," said the count. "There's more for you in my heart than mere indulgence."

Raoul lifted his hands and kissed them like the most passionate lover. "Come, come," said Athos. "Tell me, Raoul, what must I sign?"

"Oh, nothing, Sir, nothing – only, it would be good if you could take the trouble to write to the king and ask His Majesty, to whom I belong, for his permission for me to marry Miss La Vallière."

"In fact, that's a fine idea, Raoul, for after me, or even before me, you have a master in the king, and it's your loyal duty to ask permission of both these masters."

"Oh, Sir!"

"I'll accede to your request this very moment, Raoul." The count approached the window, leaned out, and called, "Grimaud!"

Grimaud's head appeared beneath an arbour of jasmine he was pruning. "My horses!" called the count.

"What does this mean, Sir?" asked Raoul.

"That we leave within two hours."

"For where?"

"For Paris."

"For Paris! Are you coming to Paris?"

"Isn't the king in Paris?"

"Certainly."

"Well, then, isn't that where we need to go? Are you befuddled?"

"But, Sir," said Raoul, overwhelmed by this paternal zeal, "wouldn't a simple letter do just as well?"

"You exaggerate my importance, Raoul; it wouldn't do for a simple gentleman like me to write a letter to the king. I should make such a request of His Majesty personally, and that's what I mean to do. We'll go together, Raoul."

"Oh, Sir! You're too kind!"

"How do things stand with His Majesty?"

"You mean, regarding me, Sir?"

"Yes."  
"Oh! Very well indeed."  
"You know this for a fact?"  
"I heard it from his own lips."  
"On what occasion?"  
"Upon being commended by Sir d'Artagnan in connection with an affair in the Place de Grève when I had the honour of drawing my sword on His Majesty's behalf. I've reason to believe therefore that His Majesty thinks well of me."  
"All the better!"  
"But please, don't be so distant and formal with me," continued Raoul. "Don't make me regret being overcome by these powerful emotions."  
"To ask me again, Raoul, is quite unnecessary. You requested my formal consent. I agreed, you have it and there's no need to speak further about it. Now, Raoul, come see my new additions to the gardens."  
The young man knew that once the will of the count had been spoken, there was no arguing with it. He lowered his head and followed his father to the gardens. Athos slowly led him around, pointing out recent grafts, green shoots, and new-laid paths. Raoul found the count's calm demeanour increasingly unsettling; the love that filled his heart felt so immense that the world could hardly contain it. How could the heart of Athos be so empty and closed to it? Finally, Bragelonne, unable to contain himself any longer, burst out, "Sir, there must be some hidden reason for you to disapprove of Miss La Vallière! She's so good, so sweet, so pure that your nature, so wise and just, should appreciate her many virtues. In the name of heaven, tell me, is there between our families some secret enmity, some hereditary hatred?"  
"Look, Raoul, at this beautiful bed of lilies of the valley," said Athos. "See how well the light and moisture of this spot suit it, under the shade of this sycamore, whose canopy protects it from the direct heat of the sun while allowing its warmth to pass through."  
Raoul stopped, biting his lips and then feeling the blood pounding in his temples, plucked up his courage to say, "Sir, give me an explanation, I implore you. You can't possibly forget that your son is also a man."  
"Then prove you're a man," said Athos, drawing himself up stiffly, "for you refuse to act like a son. I implored *you* to await the arrangement of an illustrious alliance; I would have found you a wife from the highest ranks of the nobility, for I wanted you to shine with the double glory of wealth and family. By your heritage you deserve no less."  
"Yet, Sir," cried Raoul, carried away by a sudden pang, "the other day, I was mocked for not knowing my mother's name."  
Athos turned pale; then, frowning like the God of the Old Testament, he said majestically, "I can scarcely wait to hear how you replied, Sir."  
"Oh! Forgive me!" murmured the young man, plunging from outrage to agony.  
"How did you reply, Sir?" asked the count, with a stamp of his foot.  
"Sir, I instantly drew my sword, he who insulted me came on guard, and I flung his sword over a fence and threw him after it."  
"And why didn't you kill him?"  
"His Majesty forbids us to duel, Sir, and at that moment I was His Majesty's ambassador."  
"Very well," said Athos, "that's just one more reason for me to talk to the king."  
"What else are you going to ask of him, Sir?"  
"Permission to draw my sword against he who has offended us."  
"Sir, if I didn't do what I should have, forgive me, I beg of you."  
"I've not blamed you for anything, Raoul."  
"But this permission you want to ask of the king..."  
"Raoul, I will ask His Majesty to personally sign your marriage contract."  
"Sir..."  
"But on one condition."  
"A condition, Sir, with me? Just give me an order and I'll obey it."  
"On condition," continued Athos, "that you tell me the name of he who has spoken so about your mother."  
"But, Sir, why do you need to know his name? The insult was against me, and once His Majesty grants his permission, it's on me to avenge it."  
"His name, Sir?"  
"I won't allow you to risk yourself!"  
"Do you take me for a Don Diego <sup>81</sup> who would let another avenge him? His name!"  
"You demand it?"  
"I ... wish it."  
"The Count de Wardes."  
"Ah!" said Athos serenely. "Very good; I know him. But our horses are ready, Sir, so instead of leaving in two hours, we leave immediately. To horse, Sir – to horse!"

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**Sir is Jealous of the Duke of Buckingham**

While the Count of La Fère was on his way to Paris with Raoul, the Palais Royal was the site of a scene so comical not even Molière could have improved upon it. It was four days after the marriage. Madam had taken breakfast in her rooms, while Sir, having eaten hastily in his own, marched into his outer chambers, lips pouting, brows contracted. Sir's morning meal had not been cheerful. He'd dined with a small entourage, just the Knight de Lorraine and Manicamp sharing his breakfast that lasted three quarters of an hour without a single word spoken between them. Manicamp, less familiar with the moods of His Royal Highness than the knight, tried vainly to read the prince's looks to figure out what was making him so sullen. The Knight de Lorraine, who wondered at nothing because he knew everything, ate with the hearty appetite he had when enjoying others' sorrows, savouring both Sir's spite and Manicamp's stress. He took pleasure in keeping everyone at the table, continuing to eat though the prince was obviously impatient to be away. Sometimes Sir regretted that he'd become so close with the knight that Lorraine was exempted from all etiquette. He was having one of those regrets now but he feared the knight's temper as much as he loved his company, so he settled for silently seething. He would stare up at the ceiling, then lower his eyes to glare at the slices of pâté the knight was attacking, until eventually, not daring to say what he thought, he gestured in a pantomime of frustration that would have been the envy of Harlequin. Finally, Sir could stand it no longer, and during the fruit course he stood up angrily and went off in a huff, leaving the Knight de Lorraine to finish his breakfast however he saw fit. Manicamp, seeing Sir get up, rose awkwardly, napkin in his hand. He watched as Sir dashed rather than walked out into the antechamber, where, finding a footman, he gave him an order in a low voice. Then, turning aside so as not to go back through the breakfast room, he passed through his chambers and went out, intending to seek out the queen mother in her oratory, where she usually was at this time. It was about ten o'clock in the morning. Anne of Austria was writing when Sir entered. The queen mother was very fond of her younger son, who was sweet-faced and affectionate. Compared to the king, Sir was gentler with her, almost effeminate. He always treated his mother with those little considerations that women find endearing. Anne of Austria would have loved to have had a daughter but found in this son the attentiveness and docility of a child of twelve. Sir spent his time with his mother admiring her famously lovely arms, giving her his opinion on powder and advice on perfumes that she very much enjoyed. He kissed her hands and forehead with a charming innocence, and always had some sweetmeat to offer her and some new fashion to recommend. Anne of Austria loved the king, or rather she loved the principle of royalty her eldest son represented, the divine right of kings to rule. To the king, Anne was the queen mother – but to Philippe, she was solely a mother. And he knew that, of all shelters, the mother's bosom was the sweetest and safest. As a small child, he would take refuge there whenever storms raged between he and his brother; and after the squalling insults that constituted the crime of juvenile lèse-majesté, after the scuffles when the king and his rebellious subject fought in their night-shirts over a disputed bed with their valet La Porte\* as referee, Philippe, victorious but terrified by his victory, would flee to his mother for aid, or at least the assurance of a pardon that Louis XIV grudgingly granted. Anne had succeeded, by this habit of peaceful intercession, in reconciling all her sons' disputes and at the same time sharing in all their secrets. The king, a little jealous of the maternal solicitude that favoured his brother, often behaved more submissively to Anne of Austria than was consistent with his character. Anne of Austria practiced this same policy toward Marie-Thérèse, the young queen. She reigned like a despot over the king's household and was already arranging her forces to exert a similar rule over that of her younger son. Anne of Austria was almost proud when she saw someone come to her with a long face, pale cheeks, and red eyes, aware that by lending her aid to the weakest or most rebellious members of the house, she was strengthening her own hold. She was writing in her oratory when Sir entered, not with pale cheeks or red eyes but anxious, spiteful, and irritated. He kissed his mother's hand distractedly and sat down before she gave him permission. Given the rigid etiquette enforced in Anne of Austria's presence, this lapse was clear evidence of disorder, especially in Philippe, usually so meticulous in his respectful adulation. He wouldn't violate propriety in that way without serious cause. "What's wrong, Philippe?" asked Anne of Austria, turning to her youngest son.

"Ah, Mother! So many things," murmured the prince dolefully.

"You do look like a man with many things on his mind," said the queen, putting the pen down on her writing desk. Philippe frowned but said nothing. "In all those things on your mind," said Anne of Austria, "there must be one that occupies you more than the others."

"Yes, Mother, there is indeed one thing that concerns me most of all."

"I'm listening to you."

Philippe opened his mouth to release all the grievances fighting to make their way out. But he closed his mouth again, heart full, and could only breathe a sigh. "Come, Philippe, show some resolve," said the queen mother. "When we have such complaints on our mind, there's almost always someone to complain about, isn't there?"

"I don't disagree, Mother."

"Then who do you wish to complain about? Come now, pull yourself together."

"In truth, Mother, what I have to say is very confidential."

"Really? *My God!*"

"Yes, because it involves a woman..."

"Oh? You wish to speak about Madam Henrietta?" asked the queen mother with eager curiosity.

"About Madam?"

"About your wife, in fact."

"Yes. Yes, that's it."

"Well! If it's about Madam that you wish to speak to me, my son, don't be embarrassed. I'm your mother, and next to that Madam is to me little more than a stranger. However, as she is my daughter-in-law, I'm obliged to listen with interest for your sake – so tell me all."

"In that case, Mother, admit that you've ... noticed something," said Philippe.

"Noticed something? That's scary but vague. What kind of something?"

"Madam is pretty, I think."

"Indeed."

"But not quite a beauty."

"No but she's still maturing, and has time yet to bloom. You've already seen what a change a few years have made in her looks. Well, she will bloom – she's only sixteen. Why, at fifteen I myself was somewhat too slender but Madam is already rather pretty."

"Which means she attracts attention."

"Quite so, a pretty woman is always noticed, the more so when she's a princess."

"She was brought up well, wasn't she?"

"Her mother, Queen Henriette, is a trifle cold and pretentious but her heart is in the right place. The young princess's education may have been somewhat neglected but her principles seem proper enough. That at least was my opinion of her during her sojourn in France; I don't know what might have happened since her return to England."

"What could have happened?"

"Who can say? But some heads, if they're frivolous, are easily turned by sudden prosperity."

"That's the word exactly, Mother. Frivolous! That sums her up."

"It's not that simple, Philippe. She has wit, and a certain coquettishness quite natural in a pretty woman – and in a young lady of rank at Court, that flaw becomes an advantage. A charming young princess usually gathers a brilliant crowd around her; her smile excites dash and rivalry among the ardent cavaliers, and the nobles will fight with fervour for a prince who has a pretty wife."

"Oh, a thousand thanks, Mother!" Philippe said tartly. "You paint a pretty picture – I think not!"

"How so?" asked the queen with pretended naïveté.

"You know, Mother, how reluctant I was to marry," said Philippe. "And now..."

"Ah, you begin to alarm me. Do you have a serious grievance against Madam?"

"I wouldn't say ... serious."

"Then put aside this long face. If you go around your house looking like this, people will take you for an unhappy husband."

"In fact," replied Philippe, "I am an unhappy husband, and I don't care who knows it."

"Philippe! Philippe!"

"Faith, Mother, to be quite honest, I don't understand this new life and how I'm supposed to live it."

"Explain yourself."

"My wife doesn't seem to belong to me, she's always somewhere else. In the morning there are callers, clothiers, correspondence, in the evening it's off to dances, and concerts."

"Philippe! You're jealous!"

"Me? God forbid! I'll leave the stupid role of jealous husband to others. But I'm ... vexed."

"Philippe, you can't reproach a wife for such innocent behaviours as those. If that's all you have to complain about..."

"But listen, a wife, however innocent, can still make one anxious. There are certain visitors, over-frequent and over-familiar who can make even the least jealous husband apprehensive."

"Ah, now we're getting to it. Over-frequent and over-familiar, is it? It took you half an hour but at last you've come to the point."

"Well ... yes."

"This might be serious. So, you think Madam might be giving you cause to worry about her behaviour?"

"Precisely."

"Really? After only four days of marriage, you think your wife might be straying on you? Take care not to exaggerate, Philippe – you can't accuse a person of something if you can prove nothing."

The prince, abashed by his mother's serious tone, tried to reply but just stammered a few disconnected syllables. "You have nothing to say," said Anne of Austria. "Because there's nothing to it."

"Not so!" cried Philippe. "There is something, and I'll prove it. I said too frequent, didn't I? And too familiar? Well, listen."

Anne of Austria prepared herself to hear the kind of juicy gossip that every woman, even a mother and a queen, is eager to savour, especially if it's about the dependents in her household. "All right!" said Philippe. "First of all, explain one thing to me."

"What?"

"Why does my wife still maintain an English entourage? Eh?"

Philippe crossed his arms and regarded his mother with an air of triumph, as if she couldn't possibly have a response to this complaint. "But that's quite simple," said Anne of Austria. "The English are her compatriots, they spent a great deal of money to escort her to France, and it would be impolite, not to mention impolitic, to abruptly dismiss noblemen who haven't stinted at any devotion or sacrifice."

"Right, Mother, some sacrifice to leave behind an ugly land and come to this beautiful country where you can get more and better for a single crown than you can get anywhere else for four. And as for devotion, why not travel a hundred leagues with a woman you love?"

"Love, Philippe, really? Do you know what you're saying!"

"Yes, *good Lord!*"

"And who is in love with Madam?"

"That too-handsome Duke of Buckingham. Are you going to defend *him*, Mother?"

Anne of Austria simultaneously smiled and blushed. The name *Buckingham* stirred up memories both sweet and sad. "The Duke of Buckingham?" she whispered.

"Yes, one of those boudoir knights, as my grandfather Henri IV used to call them."

"The Buckinghams are loyal and brave," said Anne of Austria stoutly.

"Oh, this is too much! My mother takes the side of my wife's lover against me!" cried Philippe, voice breaking and eyes filling with tears.

"Son! Oh! Son!" cried Anne of Austria. "Such talk is unworthy of you! Your wife has no lover, and even if she did, it wouldn't be Sir de Buckingham – the men of his blood are loyal and discreet, I tell you. Hospitality is sacred to them!"

"Really, Mother?" sniffed Philippe. "Sir de Buckingham is an Englishman. Are the English really that respectful of the marital rights of French princes?"

Anne blushed again, this time to her hairline. She turned aside as if to pick up her pen from her writing desk but really to conceal her colour from the eyes of her son. "Truly, Philippe," she said, "you know too well how to find words that disturb me – but your anger blinds you as much as it alarms me. Take a breath and consider!"

"Mother, I don't need to consider – I see."

"And what do you see?"

"I see that Sir de Buckingham never leaves my wife's side. He dares to give her gifts, and she dares to accept them. Yesterday she mentioned violet sachets; our French perfumers can't get them, as you know so well, Mother, who've asked for them so many times in vain. Our perfumers can't reproduce that scent. Well! The duke was wearing just such a violet sachet, and shortly thereafter my wife was wearing it."

"Really, Sir," said Anne of Austria, "you're building pyramids out of pebbles; take care. What harm, I ask you, is there in passing along a perfume to a fellow compatriot? These strange suspicions remind me all too much of your father, who made me suffer so unjustly."

"Sir de Buckingham's father was probably more discreet and respectful than his son," said Philippe, unaware how his words lanced his mother's heart.

The queen turned pale and pressed a hand to her bosom but recovering quickly she said, "Well, do you intend to do anything about it?"

"Absolutely."

"Tell me your intentions."

"I intend to complain loudly about it, Mom. I tell you, I'll endure nothing from this Sir de Buckingham."

"You will endure nothing?"

"Nothing."

"What will you do?"

"I will complain to the king."

"And do you expect the king to respond?"

"If he does not," said Sir, with a fierce expression at odds with the usual softness of his features, "well, I will see justice done myself!"

"What justice would that be?" asked Anne of Austria with an edge of alarm.

"I would have Sir de Buckingham leave Madam; in fact, I would have Sir de Buckingham leave France; and I will inform him that such is my will."

"You will do no such thing, Philippe," said the queen. "If you do, and thereby violate our royal hospitality, I'll see to it that the king treats you most severely."

"You threaten me, my own mother!" cried Philippe, tears starting from his eyes. "You threaten me if I complain!"

"I don't oppose you, I oppose your anger. I tell you that to take such steps against Sir de Buckingham, or against any Englishman, even in a personal matter, will drag France and England into a painful clash. What! Is a Prince of France, the brother to the king, unable to ignore a slight, or even an insult, in the face of political necessity? For shame."

Philippe shrugged sullenly. "Besides," continued the queen, "this imagined insult isn't true or even possible, it's just ridiculous jealousy."

"I know what I know."

"Whatever you think you know, I must urge you to patience."

"I'm not a patient man, Mother."

The queen rose with stiff hauteur. "Then explain your demands."

"I make no demands, Mother but I do have desires. If Sir de Buckingham will not, of his own accord, stay away from my house, I will forbid his admittance."

"This is a matter we will refer to the king," said Anne of Austria, her voice nearly choking as her heart swelled within her.

"Please," cried Philippe, clasping his hands before her, "as your son, I beg you, act as my mother and not as a queen. I can settle this business between myself and Sir de Buckingham with a few brief words."

"It is exactly those words that I forbid you to say, Sir," said the queen, recovering her authority. "It's beneath you."

"So be it, then! Instead of talking to him, I'll talk to Madam."

"Never," said Anne of Austria, the past rising before her eyes. "Never tyrannize your wife, my son. Never command her from on high; a wife conquered in that way is never convinced."

"Then what am I to do? I'll have to ask my friends."

"Your council of hypocrites, with your Knight de Lorraine and your de Wardes? Leave this to me, Philippe. You want the Duke of Buckingham to go away, isn't that so?"

"As soon as possible, Mom."

"Well, then! Send the duke to me, my son. But do it smiling, and say nothing to your wife, to the king, or to your so-called friends. In this matter, listen only to me. Alas! I know what happens to a household when it's troubled by false advisors."

"I will obey, Mother."

"And you'll be glad you did, Philippe. Find me the duke."

"Oh, that won't be hard!"

"Where do you think he is?"

"At Madam's door, of course, waiting to attend her morning *lever*."

"Very well," said Anne of Austria calmly. "Please tell the duke that I beg him to come and see me." Philippe kissed his mother's hand and went to find the Duke of Buckingham.

356  
*Forever!*

Lord Buckingham, at the invitation of the queen mother, presented himself at her chambers a half an hour after the departure of the Duke of Orléans. When his name was announced by the footman, the queen, who'd been leaning on her table, head in her hands, arose and received the duke's gracious and respectful greeting with a smile. Anne of Austria was still beautiful. It's well known that even at her age, now somewhat advanced, her long ashen hair, lovely hands, and rosy lips were still admired by all who saw her. At that moment, enlivened by past memories that warmed her heart, she

was as beautiful as in the days of her youth, when her palace had welcomed the young and passionate father of this later Buckingham, that ill-fated father who had lived for this queen and had died whispering her name. Now Anne of Austria favoured Buckingham with so tender a look one could detect in it both the pleasure of maternal affection and something of the sweet coquetry of a lover.

“Your Majesty wished to speak with me?” asked Buckingham with respect.

“Yes, Duke,” replied the queen in English. “Please take a seat.”

This favour granted to the young man by Anne of Austria, as well as the compliment of addressing him in the language of his country that the duke had scarcely heard since he’d been in France, moved him to his soul. He immediately guessed that the queen had something to ask of him. After reverting for a moment to the oppression she’d felt earlier, the queen resumed her smiling demeanour. “Sir,” she said in French, “how are you finding your stay in France?”

“It’s a beautiful place, Madam,” replied the duke.

“Have you been here before?”

“Once before, yes, Madam.”

“But, like any good Englishman, you prefer England?”

“I prefer my country to France,” said the duke, “but if Your Majesty asked me if I’d rather be in London or Paris, I would have to say Paris.”

Anne of Austria noted the emotion with which these words were spoken. She said, “I’m told, Milord, that you’ve a beautiful estate and live in a rich and ancient palace.”

“The palace of my father,” said Buckingham, nodding and looking down.

“A place to treasure, and a home of precious memories,” replied the queen, touching, despite herself, on memories of her own that were no less precious.

“In fact,” said the duke, falling under the influence of this melancholy reminiscence, “people of the heart live as much in a reverie of the past as in a dream of the future.”

“That’s true,” said the queen in a low voice. “So, it follows that you, Milord, who are a man of the heart, must soon leave France and return home to your reveries and your relics.”

Buckingham raised his head. “I think not, Madam,” he said.

“How’s that?”

“I think, on the contrary, that I will leave England and come to live in France.”

It was Anne of Austria’s turn to be astonished. “What!” she said. “Are you out of favour with your new king?”

“On the contrary, Madam, His Majesty showers me with benevolence.”

“You can’t have run out of money,” said the queen. “You’re said to have a considerable fortune.”

“My finances, Madam, have never been healthier.”

“Is there some secret reason then?”

“No, Madam,” said Buckingham, too quickly, “there’s no secret about the reasons for my decision. I’ve loved my time in France, I adore a court ruled by elegance and etiquette, and enjoy these French pleasures that aren’t pursued as seriously in my country.”

Anne of Austria smiled slyly. “Serious pleasures! Have you considered, Sir Buckingham, just how serious they really are?”

The duke stammered something senseless. “Is there no pleasure so serious,” continued the queen, “that it would prevent a man of your rank…”

“Madam!” interrupted the duke. “It seems to me Your Majesty makes too much of this.”

“Do you think so, Duke?”

“If Your Majesty doesn’t mind my saying so, it’s strange to extol the attractions of living in England to anyone who has experienced the charms of France.”

Anne of Austria approached the young man, placed her beautiful hand on his shoulder that trembled at her touch, and said, “Milord, believe me, nothing is worth the abandonment of one’s country of birth. Time and again I have regretted leaving Spain. I have lived a long life, for a woman, and I must confess that not a year has passed in which I haven’t missed Spain.”

“Not even one, Madam?” said the duke stiffly. “Not even those years when you reigned as Queen of Beauty, as you still do?”

“Ah, spare me the flattery, Duke. A woman my age could almost … be your mother.”

She said this in a tone so sweet it touched Buckingham’s heart. “Yes,” she went on, “I could almost be your mother, so I will give you some maternal advice.”

“To advise me to go back to London?” he cried.

“Yes, Milord,” she said.

The duke gasped and clutched his hands to his chest, a gesture that couldn’t fail to move this woman, already inclined toward tender feelings by precious memories. “That’s how it is,” she said.

“What?” he cried. “How can this be? Are you really telling me that I must go, I must exile myself, cut and run?”

“Can you call it exile, Milord? One would think that you considered France your native country.”

“Madam, the country of those who love is the country of those whom they love.”

“Not one more word, Milord!” said the queen. “You forget to whom you are speaking!”

Buckingham fell to his knees. “Madam, Madam, you are the wellspring of wisdom, of kindness, and of clemency. You are not only the first in this kingdom by rank but by those divine qualities I spoke of, the first lady in the world. I’ve said nothing, Madam, nothing that deserved so cruel a response. How have I betrayed you?”

“You have betrayed yourself,” said the queen in a low voice.

“I? I’ve said nothing! I’ve done nothing!”

“You forget that you’ve thought and spoken in the presence of a woman and more than that…”

“There need be no more!” he interrupted. “No one knows what I’ve spoken of with you.”

“On the contrary, Duke, the matter *is* known. Such are the flaws and qualities of youth.”

“I must have been betrayed! Denounced!”

“By whom?”

“By those who’d the infernal perception to read my heart like a book as early as at Le Havre!”

“I don’t know who you mean by that.”

“Sir de Bragelonne, for one.”

“I’ve heard the name but don’t know who it belongs to. No, it wasn’t Sir de Bragelonne.”

“But who then, who? Oh, Madam, if someone had the insolence to see in me what I do not wish to be seen…”

“What would you do, Milord?”

“There are secrets that kill those who discover them.”

“He who’s discovered your secret, young fool that you’re, is one who cannot be killed by it, and you cannot touch him, for he is within his rights. He’s a husband, a *jealous* husband, and the second man in all France, for he is my son, the Duke of Orléans.”

The duke paled. “Ah but you are cruel, Madam!” he said.

“You must see, Buckingham,” said Anne of Austria sadly, “that you’ve set yourself up to fight with the clouds when it would be so much easier to turn aside and be at peace.”

“But if it is war, then I will die on the battlefield,” said the young man gently, his face full of sadness and pain.

Anne reached out to him and took his hand. “Villiers, what is it you’re asking?” she said in English, with a vehemence that could not be denied. “Do you ask a mother to sacrifice her son? A queen to dishonour her house? Are you child enough to ask me that? To commit those crimes to spare you some tears, Villiers? You spoke of one who is dead but he, at least, was respectful and honourable. If he accepted exile and despair, he did so with a full heart because the order came from his beloved, and death, when it arrived, was a promise of peace that came as a gift or a favour.”

Buckingham rose with a grimace, hands over his heart. “You are right, Madam,” he said, “but the one you speak of had received the order from the mouth of his beloved. He was not expelled, he was asked to leave, and no one mocked him for it.”

“I remember,” whispered Anne of Austria. “But who says you are expelled or exiled? Who says that no one will remember *your* devotion? I speak on no one’s behalf but mine, Villiers, when I say, ‘Depart!’ Render me this service, grant me this grace, and allow me to owe one more debt to a man of your name.”

“It would be for you, Madam?”

“For me alone.”

“I won’t leave behind a man who laughs at me, or a prince who says, ‘I demanded it.’”

“Duke, listen to me.” And here the august features of the aging queen assumed a solemn expression. “I swear that here no one commands but I, and I swear to you that not only will no one laugh or brag, no one will fail to pay you the respect your rank deserves. Count on me, Duke, as I am counting on you.”

“But you don’t tell me why, Madam, and I’m left angry and in despair. The consolation you offer, sweet and compelling though it may be, isn’t enough.”

“Dear friend,” the queen replied with a gentle smile, “did you know your mother?”

“Alas! Very little, Madam, only as a noble lady who covered me with kisses and tears when I cried.”

“Oh, Villiers!” murmured the queen, putting her arm across the young man’s shoulder. “I am a mother to you, and believe me, no one will ever make my son cry.”

“Thank you, Madam, thank you,” said the young man, softened and suffocated by emotion. “It seems there was still room in my heart for a sweeter and nobler feeling than love.”

The queen mother looked tenderly at him and stroked his hand. “Go,” she said.

“When must I go? Command me!”

“The choice of time is yours, Milord,” the queen replied. “You will go but at the proper moment. So, instead of leaving today, as you might wish, or tomorrow morning, as might be expected, leave tomorrow evening – but announce your departure today as your own will.”

“My… will?” whispered the young man.

“Yes, Duke.”

“And… am I never to return to France?”

Anne of Austria thought for a moment, gravely and sadly. “It would mean much to me,” she said, “if you returned on the day I go to my eternal rest in Saint-Denis at the side of my husband, the king.”

“Who made you suffer so!” said Buckingham.

“Who was the King of France,” replied the queen.

“Madam, you are goodness itself, you live in prosperity and joy, and there are still many years ahead of you.”

“Well! Then it might be a while until your return,” said the queen, trying to smile.

“I will not return, young though I am,” said Buckingham sadly.

“Oh but God’s mercy …!”

“Death, Madam, is impartial, and pays no attention to age. Some live to old age but others die young.”

“None of these dark thoughts, Duke. Come, I’ll cheer you up – return in two years! I can tell from your features that the feelings that weigh you down today will be gone inside of six months. By the time of your return, they will be long forgotten.”

“I think, Madam, that you judged me better before when you said that the house of Buckingham was a house of dreams and reveries.”

“Hush! Oh, hush!” said the queen, kissing the duke on the forehead with a tenderness she couldn’t suppress. “Go! Go now, before you forget yourself further! I am the Queen of France, you are the subject of the King of England, and King Charles awaits you. Farewell, Villiers!” and she added in English, “Villiers, *farewell*. “

“*Forever!*” the young man replied.

And he fled, choking back tears. Anne rested her head in her hands and then looked at her reflection in a mirror. “All in vain,” she murmured. “A woman who’s been in love’s always in some corner of her heart just twenty years old.”

His Majesty Louis XIV Finds Miss La Vallière neither Rich Enough nor Pretty Enough for a Gentleman of the Rank of the Viscount of Bragelonne

Raoul and the Count of La Fère arrived in Paris on the evening of the day in which Buckingham had had his interview with the queen mother. As soon as he arrived, the count sent Raoul to request an audience with the king. The king had spent part of the day with Madam and the ladies of the Court admiring a shipment of fine Lyon fabric which he had presented to his sister-in-law. That was followed by dinner with the Court and then play at the tables, the king, as usual, leaving the game at eight o'clock to withdraw to his study to work with Sir Colbert and Sir Fouquet. Raoul entered the antechamber just as the two ministers went out, and the king saw him through the half-opened door. "What do you want, Sir de Bragelonne?" he asked.

The young man approached. "An audience, Sire, for the Count of La Fère," he replied, "who has come from Blois with a strong desire to speak to Your Majesty."

"The card games are over, and I have an hour until supper," said the king. "Is Sir de La Fère ready?"

"Sir Count is below, awaiting Your Majesty's orders."

"Send him up."

Five minutes later, the count was in the presence of Louis XIV welcomed by the monarch with that gracious benevolence that Louis with tact beyond his age, reserved for men who could not be won over with simple favours. "I hope you've come to ask me for something, Count," the king said.

"I won't hide it from Your Majesty," replied the count. "I do indeed come with a request."

"Let's hear it!" encouraged the king.

"It isn't anything for me, Sire."

"Too bad! But if I can't do something for you, Count, maybe I can for your protégé."

"Your Majesty gladdens me. As it happens, I do come to speak to the king on the behalf of the Viscount of Bragelonne."

"In that case, Count, it's the same as speaking for yourself."

"Not quite, Sire. What I hope to obtain from Your Majesty is of no use to myself. The viscount thinks of marrying."

"He's young for that but no matter. He's a man of distinction, and I'll find him a wife to match."

"He has found one on his own, Sire, and seeks only Your Majesty's consent."

"Ah! It's only a matter of approving a marriage contract?"

Athos bowed. "And has he chosen a fiancée whose wealth and quality suits you?"

Athos hesitated a moment. "The fiancée is noble enough," he said, "but not wealthy."

"That's an illness for which we have the cure."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me with gratitude – but perhaps he will allow me to make an observation."

"Do, Count."

"Your Majesty proposes to grant this young woman a dowry?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And my visit to the Louvre would be responsible for that? That, Sire, I would regret."

"No false delicacy, Count. What is the fiancée's name?"

"It is," said Athos coolly, "Miss La Vallière de La Baume Le Blanc."

"Ah," said the king, searching his memory. "I know that name; there's a Marquis of La Vallière."

"Yes, Sire. This is his daughter."

"He's dead?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And his widow remarried Sir de Saint-Rémy, major-domo to the Dowager Madam?"

"Your Majesty is well informed."

"Just so. And I now recall that the young lady is one of the new maids of honour to Madam the Younger."

"Your Majesty knows these matters better than I do myself."

The king considered, giving Athos's anxious face a sidelong glance. "Count," he said, "she's not very pretty, this young lady as I recall?"

"I couldn't say," replied Athos.

"I can, for I saw her, and I wasn't struck by her beauty."

"If not a beauty, Sire, she has a gentle and modest demeanour."

"Lovely blond hair, though."

"Yes."

"And pretty blue eyes."

"Quite so."

"In terms of beauty, then, the match is average. Let's move on to money."

"The dowry is fifteen to twenty thousand livres at the most – but the lovers are indifferent to that. I, myself, care little for money."

"In excess, you mean; a certain amount is a necessity. A lady can't live at Court on fifteen thousand livres without additional rent from an estate. I'll take care of that; I want to do it for Bragelonne."

Athos bowed again but with, the king noted, a certain coldness. "Let's move on from money to rank," said Louis XIV. "Daughter of the Marquis de La Vallière, that's all very well – but the connection to our worthy Saint-Rémy is unfortunate. I won't say it ruins the young woman, exactly but I know that you, Count, take pride in your house."

"I, Sire, have pride in nothing but my devotion to Your Majesty."

The king paused once more. "You know, sir," he said, "The course of this conversation has surprised me. You come for my approval for a marriage but seem not to approve of it yourself. Now, now I'm rarely wrong about such things, young as I'm for though I may often choose friendship over wisdom, my innate scepticism enables me to see things clearly. So, I repeat, you don't approve of your request."

"Well, Sire – you're right."

"Then what's the problem? Refuse them."

"No, Sire. I love Bragelonne with all my heart, and he is in love with Miss La Vallière. He's built castles in the air, and I'm not one to crush the illusions of youth. This marriage does displease me but I implore Your Majesty to approve it at once and ensure Raoul's happiness."

"Come, Count. Does she love him?"

"If Your Majesty requires me to speak frankly, I don't trust the love of Miss La Vallière. She's young, almost a child, dazzled by the Court, and I feel the honour of her service to Madam will turn her head and overcome the tenderness in her heart, and then their marriage will be typical of those Your Majesty sees at Court. But Bragelonne wishes it, and so be it."

"And yet you don't seem like one of those indulgent fathers who is a slave to his children," said the king.

"Sire, I have an iron will to resist the wicked but none to defy those I love. Raoul suffers and grieves; his thoughts, usually so light, have become heavy and dark. I don't want to deprive Your Majesty of the future services he can render the crown."

"I understand your mind," said the king, "and above all I understand your heart."

"In that case," the count replied, "I need not explain to Your Majesty that above all I desire the happiness of these children, or rather of this child."

"And like you, I desire Sir de Bragelonne's happiness."

"Then we needn't wait for Your Majesty's signature. Raoul will have the honour to appear before you and receive your immediate consent."

"You're mistaken, Count," the king said firmly. "I told you that I desire the viscount's happiness – so I'm opposed to his marriage at this time."

"But, Sire," cried Athos, "Your Majesty promised me..."

"No, Count, I made no such promise, because it's not what I want."

"I understand that Your Majesty intends to be considerate of my desires but I take the liberty of reminding you that I came here as an ambassador for another."

"An ambassador, Count, doesn't always get what he came to request."

"Ah, Sire! What a blow to Bragelonne!"

"I'll take it from here. Let me speak to the viscount."

"Love, Sire, is an irresistible force."

"Sometimes, Count, it is resisted, I can assure you."

"When one has the soul of a king – your soul, Sire."

"Don't give it another thought. I have plans for Bragelonne; I don't say that he won't marry Miss La Vallière but I don't want him to marry quite so young. I don't want him to marry a spouse without fortune, and he, for his part, deserves to earn my good graces, and I intend to see he gets them. In short, I want him to wait."

"Sire, once again..."

"Sir Count, you have come, you say, to ask me a favour?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well! Grant me one instead, and let's speak of this no more. It's possible that before long I'll go to war, and I'll need free gentlemen around me. I hesitate to send in front of the bullets and cannon balls the father of a family. And for Bragelonne's sake, I would also hesitate to endow an unknown girl without good reason, as it would sow jealousy among the nobility."

Athos bowed and made no reply.

"Is that everything you needed to ask me?" added Louis XIV.

"Absolutely everything, Sire, and I take my leave of Your Majesty. But must I inform Raoul?"

"Spare yourself that care and vexation. Tell the viscount that I will speak to him tomorrow at my lever. As for tonight, Count, join me at the card table."

"Alas, I am in travelling clothes, Sire."

"I hope the day will come when you will not leave me. Before long, Count, the monarchy will be housed in such a way as to offer a dignified hospitality to men of your merit."

"Sire, if a king is great in the hearts of his subjects, it matters not if he lives in a palace, for he's worshiped as if in a temple."

And with these words, Athos withdrew to the antechamber, where he found Bragelonne waiting for him. "Well, Sir?" said the young man.

"Raoul, the king favours us, perhaps not in the way you hope but he means well to our house."

"You have bad news, Sir," said the young man, turning pale.

"The king will tell you in the morning that it is not bad news."

"But Sir, do you mean the king hasn't signed the proposal?"

"The king wants to write your marriage contract himself, and he wants to make the terms so good that it will take time to get it right. Mistrust your own impatience before you doubt the king's goodwill."

Raoul, who knew the count's frankness but was wary of his diplomatic eloquence, stood blinking, plunged into dark dismay. "Will you come home with me?" said Athos.

"Forgive me, Sir, I'm c-coming," he stammered.  
And he followed Athos down the stairs. "Oh, while I'm here," Athos said suddenly, "could we stop and see Sir d'Artagnan?"  
"Shall I lead you to his rooms?" said Bragelonne.  
"Yes, absolutely."  
"Then we need to take the other stairs," Raoul said, changing their direction. But when they arrived on the landing of the grand gallery, he met a footman in the livery of the Count de Guiche hurrying toward him. "What is it?" said Raoul.  
"This note, Sir. The count heard you were back and wrote to you at once; I've been looking for you for an hour."  
Raoul turned toward Athos before opening the envelope. "If I may, sir?"  
"Go ahead." The Count de Guiche wrote:  
*Dear Raoul,*  
*I've an important affair that demands urgent attention. I know you're back; come quickly.*  
He had scarcely finished reading it when a valet in the livery of the Duke of Buckingham appeared on the gallery and recognising him, approached respectfully. "On the behalf of Milord Duke," he said.  
"Ah!" said Athos. "I see that you're as busy as a General of the Army. I'll leave you to it and find d'Artagnan on my own."  
"Please excuse me," said Raoul.  
"Yes, yes, you're excused. Farewell, Raoul; you'll find me at my lodgings until mid-morning tomorrow, after which I intend to leave for Blois, unless something interferes."  
"Sir, I'll pay my respects to you in the morning." Athos left and Raoul opened Buckingham's letter. It read:  
*Sir Bragelonne, of all the Frenchmen I've met, I'm best pleased with you and now I must call upon your friendship. I've received a certain note and though it's written in good French, I'm an Englishman and fear I may misunderstand it. The only part I'm sure of is that it's signed by a good name. As I hear you've arrived from Blois, would you be so kind as to call upon me?*  
*Your devoted etc.*  
*Villiers, Duke of Buckingham.*  
"I'll find your master," Raoul said to de Guiche's footman, dismissing him. "And within the hour I'll call upon Sir de Buckingham," he added to the duke's messenger, dismissing him as well.

**358**  
**An Invitation to Cross Swords in the Surf**

Raoul, when he arrived at de Guiche's rooms, found him conversing with de Wardes and Manicamp. De Wardes, since the incident at the fence, had treated Raoul as a stranger. It didn't seem as if there'd been a break between them, they just acted as if they didn't know each other. Raoul entered and de Guiche came to meet him. Raoul, while shaking his friend's hand, glanced at the other two young men, hoping to read on their faces what was moving their minds. De Wardes was cold and impenetrable; Manicamp seemed absorbed in adjusting his suit's lace trim. De Guiche took Raoul into a dressing room and bade him sit down. "You look well," he said to him.  
"That's odd," replied Raoul, "because I certainly don't feel well."  
"It's the same as with me, isn't it? Love goes wrong."  
"All the better for your sake, Count. For you, I think good news in love would be the worst news of all."  
"Don't worry, then, because not only am I miserable, I'm surrounded by people who are happy."  
"Now you've lost me," said Raoul. "Explain, my friend, explain."  
"I will, and then you'll understand. I've fought in vain against that feeling you saw born in me; it's grown to take complete hold of me, against all my wisdom and will. I've measured this misfortune, I know it for an abyss but it's my fate and I'll follow it through."  
"Madman! One step over that edge and today it's your ruin, tomorrow maybe your death."  
"Then so be it!"  
"De Guiche!"  
"I tell you, I've thought about this until I can think no more."  
"And do you believe that if you tell her everything that Madam will love you?"  
"I believe nothing, Raoul, I merely hope, because hope is the heart of man, and lives in him till he dies."  
"But that happiness you grasp for, if you gained it, you'd be lost."  
"Don't try to stop me, Raoul, I beg you. I tell you right out you can't convince me because I refuse to be convinced. I've suffered so much I'm past the point of no return, and even death would feel like a blessing. Not only do I love to delirium, I'm jealous to mad fury."  
Raoul thumped his fist into his hand in a gesture that looked, at long last, like anger. "Great," he said.  
"Great or terrible, it hardly matters. Here's what I ask of you, my friend, my brother. For the last three days Madam has been giddy with happiness. The first day I could scarcely look at her, I hated her so for not being as unhappy as I. The second day I couldn't look away, and on her side, Raoul, I thought I saw that she looked on me, if not with pity, then at least with some tenderness. But between her gaze and mine there arose a shadow as another's smile drew a smile from her. Always beside her horse was a horse that wasn't mine, always her ear turned toward a caressing voice that was not my own. Raoul, for three days my head has been on fire, my veins have run with flame. This shadow, I must banish it; that smile, I must smash it; that voice, I must strangle it."  
"You want to kill Sir?" Raoul cried.  
"What? No! I'm not jealous of Sir, not jealous of the husband. I'm jealous of the lover."  
"Of the lover?"  
"You mean you haven't noticed him here when he was so apparent to you before?"  
"You're jealous of Sir de Buckingham?"  
"Unto death!"  
"Again? Or is it still?"  
"Oh, this time we'll settle it properly! I took the initiative and sent him a challenge."  
"Wait, you're the one who wrote to him?"  
"How do you know about it?"  
"I know because he told me. Here."  
And he handed de Guiche the note he had received at the same time as his friend's. De Guiche read it eagerly. "He's a brave man, and more than that, a gallant man," he said.  
"Of course, the duke is a gallant man, and I don't need to ask if your challenge was equally gallant."  
"He'll show you my letter when you call on him on my behalf."  
"But that's impossible."  
"What is?"  
"For me to call on him for you."  
"Why?"  
"Because both you and the duke summon me."  
"Oh, I assume you'll give me the preference! Now listen, here's what I want you to tell His Grace, it's very simple: just pick a day, today, tomorrow, the day after, whatever suits him, and meet me at Vincennes."  
"Think about this."  
"I thought I told you I was done thinking."  
"The duke is a foreign envoy here on a mission, he's untouchable ... and Vincennes is dangerously close to the Bastille."  
"The consequences are my business."  
"But the pretext for this meeting? What reason do you want me to give him?"  
"He'll ask for no reason, trust me. The duke must be as sick of me as I am of him, must hate as much as I hate. I beg you to do this for me and if I've to beg him to accept my challenge, then I'll beg."  
"This is pointless. Look, the duke said he wanted to speak to me. He's in the king's gaming party; come along with me. I'll talk to him in the gallery while you hang back. Two words are all it will take."  
"Good, fine. I'm going to bring de Wardes along as support."  
"Why not Manicamp? We can always call de Wardes if we need him, leave him here."  
"True but I'd rather not."  
"He knows nothing of this?"  
"Absolutely nothing! ... You're so cold to him these days."  
"Has he told you why?"  
"No."  
"I don't like that man and I never have so I'm no colder to him today than I was yesterday."  
"Let's go then."  
All 4 went down to the courtyard. De Guiche's carriage was waiting at the door to take them to the Palais Royal. On the way, Raoul was thinking furiously. Privy to both parties' secrets, he still hoped to find a way to reconcile them. He knew his influence with Buckingham and his sway over de Guiche so he was not ready to despair. Arriving in the gallery, resplendent with wax lights, where the most beautiful and illustrious ladies of the court were orbiting like stars through a sky of flame, Raoul couldn't help but forget de Guiche for a moment when he saw Louise, who stood, amid the other maids of honour, staring at the royal circle that was dazzling with diamonds and gold. The king was the only man who was seated, the other cavaliers were standing. Among them Raoul saw Buckingham. He was ten paces from Sir among a group of French and Englishmen admiring the duke's hauteur and the incomparable magnificence of his clothing. Some of the older courtiers remembered having seen his father, and their recollections did no harm to the son. Buckingham was conversing with Fouquet, who was speaking loudly of Belle-Île. "I couldn't possibly interrupt them," said Raoul.  
"Wait and choose your moment but don't wait too long," said de Guiche. "I burn!"  
"Ah, here comes our saviour," said Raoul, seeing d'Artagnan, who, resplendent in his new uniform as Captain of the Musketeers, had just made a triumphal entry into the gallery. He went straight to d'Artagnan. "The Count of La Fère was looking for you," Raoul said.  
"Yes, I just left him," d'Artagnan replied.  
"I expected you to spend most of the evening together."  
"We've arranged to meet again."  
While answering Raoul, d'Artagnan was looking right and left, preoccupied, scanning the crowd in the gallery for someone or something. Suddenly his eye fixed like that of an eagle spotting its prey. Raoul followed his look, and though he saw de Guiche and d'Artagnan nod to each other, he could not discern the target of the proud captain's piercing gaze. "Sir Knight," said Raoul, "there's a service that only you can render me."  
"What would that be, my dear Viscount?"  
"I need to say a couple of words to Sir de Buckingham but as he's speaking with Sir Fouquet, I'm not the person to interrupt them."  
"Ah, Sir Fouquet is here?" asked d'Artagnan.



“Yes, do you see him? There.”  
“Faith, so I do! And you think I carry more weight than you?”  
“You’re a man of importance!”  
“Why, so I am – I’m captain of the musketeers. I was promised the rank for so long, and have had it so briefly, that I quite forgot my dignity.”  
“You’ll do this for me, won’t you?”  
“Sir Fouquet, *devil!*”  
“Do you have an issue with him?”  
“No, he’s more likely to have an issue with me. But still, it has to be done one day or another...”  
“There, I think he’s looking at you. Or could it be...?”  
“No, you’re not wrong, it really is me he does the honour to look at.”  
“Then this is a good moment.”  
“You think so?”  
“Go, then, I beg you.”  
“I’m going.”

De Guiche had kept an eye on Raoul, and Raoul signalled him that everything was arranged. D’Artagnan walked straight up to the glittering group and bowed politely to Sir Fouquet. “*Good morning*, Sir d’Artagnan. We were just talking about Belle-Île-en-Mer,” said Fouquet with a meaningful glance and the social grace that it takes half a life to learn, and that some people, no matter how they study, never achieve.

“About Belle-Île?” said d’Artagnan. “I believe that’s your domain, isn’t it, Sir Fouquet?”  
“Your servant, Sir d’Artagnan,” said Buckingham with a bow. “Sir Fouquet just informed me that he’s given Belle-Île to the king,”  
“Do you know Belle-Île, Knight?” Fouquet asked the musketeer.  
“I’ve been there only once, Sir,” replied d’Artagnan like a man born to wit and gallantry.

“Did you stay long?”  
“Less than a day, My Lord.”  
“But you got a good look at it?”  
“As much as can be seen in a day.”

“One might see a lot in a day with eyes like yours, Sir.”  
D’Artagnan bowed. Meanwhile, Raoul was signalling to Buckingham. “Sir Surintendant,” said Buckingham, “I’ll leave you with the captain, who knows so much more than I about bastions, scarps, and counterscarps. I leave only to join a friend who beckons to me. You understand...”  
And Buckingham detached himself from the group and moved toward Raoul, only pausing for a moment by the table where Madam, the queen mother, the young queen, and the king were playing cards. “Quickly, Raoul,” said de Guiche, “there he is: be fast and firm!”  
Buckingham indeed, after paying his compliments to Madam, continued toward Raoul. Raoul advanced to meet him; de Guiche hung back but followed him with his eyes. The manoeuvre was performed so that the young men met in the gap between the group around the card table and a band of gentlemen talking by the gallery windows. But just as the two were about to meet, they were joined by a third. It was Sir who was advancing on the Duke of Buckingham. Sir wore on his pink and perfumed lips his most charming smile. “*My God*,” he said, aggressively polite, “what’s this story I’ve heard, my dear Duke?”  
Buckingham hadn’t seen Sir coming but turned suddenly at his voice. He shuddered despite himself, and a slight pallor appeared on his cheeks. “Why, my Lord,” he said, “what’d Your Highness have heard to cause such great astonishment?”

“A thing that fills me with despair, Duke,” said the prince, “and that will drive the whole Court into mourning.”  
“Ah, Your Highness is too good,” said Buckingham, “for I see he wishes to speak of my departure.”  
“Quite so.”

“Alas, My Lord, to spend only a week in Paris is more a matter of mourning for me.”  
De Guiche heard all this from his nearby position and shuddered in his turn. “His departure!” he murmured. “Can it be?”  
Philippe was continuing with the same gracious air, “If the King of England summons you, Sir, that I can understand; we all know that His Majesty Charles II, who loves his gentlemen, can’t do without you. But it shouldn’t be said that we lost you without regrets, so please accept mine.”  
“My Lord,” said the duke, “believe that if I leave the Court of France...”  
“It’s because they call you back, I understand that. But if you think my word has any weight with your king, I offer to beg His Majesty Charles II to leave you with us a while longer.”  
“Such kindness overwhelms me, My Lord,” replied Buckingham, “but I have specific orders. My sojourn in France was limited, and I’ve prolonged it at the risk of displeasing my gracious sovereign. Only today did I remember that I should have left four days ago.”  
“Oh!” Sir said.

“Yes, however,” added Buckingham, raising his voice loud enough to be heard by the princesses, “I’m like that man from the far east who was lost for several days in a beautiful dream, then woke one fine morning to find himself cured and restored to sanity. The Court of France has intoxications as strong as that dream but one day we awaken and must leave. I couldn’t prolong my stay even if Your Highness asked it of me.”  
“And when do you depart?” Philippe asked, all solicitude.  
“Tomorrow, My Lord. My carriages have been ready for three days.”  
The Duke of Orléans gave a nod and a shrug that signified: *If that’s how it is, Duke, there’s nothing more to say.*  
Buckingham raised his eyes to the queens and his gaze met that of Anne of Austria who nodded her thanks and approval. Buckingham returned the gesture, concealing behind a smile the tightening around his heart. Sir returned the way he’d come – but from the other direction the Count de Guiche approached. Raoul feared the impatient young man would deliver his challenge himself and hastened to intercept him. “No, no, Raoul, it’s all pointless now,” said de Guiche, extending his hands to the duke and drawing him behind a pillar. “Oh, Duke, Duke!” said de Guiche. “Forgive me for what I wrote to you, I was out of my mind. Give me back my letter!”

“Too true,” said the young duke with a melancholy smile. “You can’t hold a grudge against me now.”  
“Oh, Duke, forgive me and take my friendship, my eternal friendship...”  
“Why, indeed, should you object to me, Count, from the moment after which I’ll never see her again?”  
Hearing these friendly words, Raoul realised his services were of no further use to these two young men and withdrew a few steps. This movement brought him closer to de Wardes, who was speaking of Buckingham’s departure to the Knight de Lorraine. “A wise retreat!” said de Wardes.  
“Why is that?”

“Because the dear duke saves himself from a sword-thrust by it.”  
And both of them laughed. Raoul indignant, turned toward them with a glare, lips curled disdainfully, and flushed to the temples. The Knight de Lorraine spun on his heel and faced away but de Wardes stood firm and waited. “Sir,” said Raoul to de Wardes, “you continue your practice of insulting the absent? Yesterday it was Sir d’Artagnan, and today it is Sir de Buckingham.”

“But you know, Sir,” said de Wardes, “that sometimes I insult those who are present.”  
De Wardes prodded Raoul with a finger, their shoulders leaned toward each other, their faces bent together as if each would inflame the other with the fire of his anger. The first felt that he was at the crest of his hatred, the second at the end of his patience. Suddenly they heard a voice full of grace and civility say calmly, “I believe I heard my name mentioned.”  
They turned: it was d’Artagnan who placed a hand on de Wardes’s shoulder with a smiling eye and a cheerful expression. Raoul stepped aside to make room for the musketeer. De Wardes shuddered all over and turned pale but didn’t retreat. D’Artagnan, still smiling, stepped into the space Raoul had made for him. “Thank you, my dear Raoul,” he said. “De Wardes, I need to talk to you. Don’t go away, Raoul; everyone can hear what I have to say to Sir de Wardes.”  
Then his smile faded, and his eyes went as cold and as sharp as a steel blade. “I’m at your service, Sir,” said de Wardes.

“Sir, I’ve been looking for an opportunity to speak with you for quite a while but haven’t found it until today,” said d’Artagnan. “This isn’t the best place for it, I admit but if you will take the trouble to come to my rooms, they are just downstairs from this gallery.”  
“I’m all yours, Sir,” said de Wardes.  
“Are you by yourself, Sir?” said d’Artagnan.  
“No, I with Gentlemen de Manicamp and de Guiche, two of my friends.”  
“Fine,” said d’Artagnan, “but two isn’t enough; can you find a few more?”  
“Certainly!” said the young man, who wasn’t sure what d’Artagnan had in mind. “As many as you like.”  
“Friends?”

“Yes, Sir.”  
“Good friends?”  
“Absolutely.”  
“Then arrange it, if you please. You too, Raoul – bring along Sir de Guiche and Sir de Buckingham, if you would.”

“*My God*, Sir, what a production!” said de Wardes, trying to smile.  
The captain raised a hand to enjoin patience and said, “No rush. I’ll be waiting, Sir.”  
“Give me a minute.”  
“In a minute, then.”

And he went down to his chambers. His rooms weren’t empty; the Count of La Fère was waiting there, sitting in the embrasure of a window. “Well?” he asked d’Artagnan as he came in.  
“Well!” said the latter. “Sir de Wardes does me the honour to pay me a visit, in the company of some of his friends and ours.”  
In fact, de Wardes and Manicamp came in behind him, followed by de Guiche and Buckingham, surprised and unsure what was afoot. Raoul followed with three other gentlemen; he surveyed the room, spotted the count, and went to stand near him. D’Artagnan received his visitors with all courtesy, keeping his countenance calm and polite. All his guests were men of distinction well known at Court. He apologised to everyone for any inconvenience he’d caused, then turned to de Wardes, who, despite himself, couldn’t keep from showing some surprise and anxiety. “Sir,” d’Artagnan said, “now that we’re out of the king’s presence, where we can speak frankly without impropriety, I’ll tell you why I took the liberty of inviting you to my quarters, and to gather these gentlemen as well. I’ve learned, from my friend the Count of La Fère, of the insulting accusations you’ve made about me, and that you consider me your mortal enemy because I had fought with your father.”  
“It’s true, Sir, I did say that,” hissed de Wardes, his pallor tinged with a slight flame.  
“You accuse me of some crime, or fault, or act of cowardice. Please state your accusation.”  
“In front of witnesses, Sir?”  
“Yes, absolutely, in front of witnesses – and you see the witnesses I’ve chosen are experts in matters of honour.”  
“I don’t think you properly appreciate my delicacy, Sir. I accused you, it’s true but I have kept confidential the details of my accusation. Rather than act indiscreetly, I chose to express my hatred before people who would be sure to let you know of it. You overlook my discretion, though you said nothing to my silence. This doesn’t seem to me like your usual careful prudence, Sir d’Artagnan.”  
D’Artagnan gnawed on the end of his moustache. “Sir,” he said, “I’ve already had the honour to beg you to articulate your grievances against me.”

"Aloud?"

"*Good Lord!*"

"I will speak, then."

"So, speak, Sir," said d'Artagnan, bowing. "We're all listening to you."

"Well, Sir, it was not an injury to me but an injury to my father."

"You already said that."

"Yes but there are certain matters that can be handled only with circumspection."

"Do you imply that it was a shameful act?"

"In every way."

The witnesses began to glance at each other anxiously but they were reassured when they saw that d'Artagnan's face showed no emotion. De Wardes was silent. "Speak, Sir," said the musketeer.

"You see that you're keeping us waiting."

"Well, then, listen! My father loved a woman, a noble woman, and this woman loved my father."

D'Artagnan exchanged a glance with Athos. De Wardes continued. "D'Artagnan intercepted a letter appointing a tryst, and substituted himself, in darkness and disguise, for the invited lover."

"That's true," said d'Artagnan.

A slight murmur was heard from the listeners. "Yes, I did that disgraceful thing. You should have added, Sir, you who are so impartial, that at the time of the event you reproach me for I was not yet twenty-one years old."

"The act was no less shameful for that," said de Wardes, "and the age of reason is old enough for a gentleman not to commit an indelicacy."

A louder murmur was heard, of astonishment and almost doubt. "It was a shameful trick, indeed," said d'Artagnan, "and I didn't wait for Sir de Wardes's reproaches to reproach myself for it, and very bitterly, too. Age has made me more reasonable, and above all more honest, and I've expiated this shame by long and deep regrets. But I appeal to you, gentlemen: it happened in 1626, at a time that, luckily for you, you know only from history, a time when romance lacked scruples, and a man's conscience didn't choke him with poison and bitterness. We were young soldiers at war, sometimes winning, sometimes losing, with our swords rarely long in their sheaths; the hand of war made us hard, and the hand of the cardinal made us hasty. But I repented all that long ago, Sir de Wardes, and there are other things I'm still repenting."

"Yes, Sir, that's understandable, for the action required repentance – but you nonetheless brought a lady to ruin. She of whom you speak, overcome by shame, crushed by the insult, was driven from France, and we never knew what became of her..."

"But others did," said the Count of La Fère, raising his arm toward de Wardes with a grim smile. "Yes, Sir, others did, and there are still some who, having heard of her, will recognise her from the portrait I shall draw. She was a woman of twenty-five, slender, fair, and blond, who had married in England."

"Married?" said de Wardes.

"Ah, you didn't know she was married? You see, Sir de Wardes, that we are better informed than you. Did you know she was usually referred to as *Milady*, with no other name than that?"

"Yes, Sir, I knew that."

"My God," murmured Buckingham.

"Well! This Milady, having come from England, returned there, after having three times conspired at the murder of Sir d'Artagnan. Simple justice, you might say; after all, Sir d'Artagnan had insulted her. But it was not for justice that while in England, by her seductions, she enslaved a young man in the service of Lord de Winter, a man named Felton. Do you grow pale, Milord Buckingham? Your eyes kindle with anger and pain. Then finish the story, Milord, and tell Sir de Wardes about the woman who put the knife in the hand of your father's assassin."

A gasp came from every mouth. The young duke said nothing, only mopped his suddenly sodden forehead with a handkerchief. Silence fell upon all the listeners. "You see, Sir de Wardes," said d'Artagnan, unexpectedly moved as his memories were revived by Athos's words, "my crime caused no lady to lose her soul, for this woman's soul was lost long before my deceitful act. But it was still a matter that gnawed at my conscience. However, now that the fact has been established, it remains for me to ask you, Sir de Wardes, very humbly to pardon this shameful act, as I would have asked your father's forgiveness, if he still lived, upon my return to France after the death of Charles I."

"That's going too far, Sir d'Artagnan," several voices burst out.

"I think not, Gentlemen," said the captain. "Now, Sir de Wardes, I hope the matter is settled between us, and you will no longer speak ill of me. That heals the wound, does it not?"

De Wardes looked down and muttered something unintelligible. "I hope, too," said d'Artagnan, stepping closer to the young man, "that you will give up the unfortunate habit of speaking ill of others, for a man as upright and conscientious as you, who would reproach an old soldier with the sins of his youth thirty-five years before – you, I repeat, so upright and conscientious, must accept the duty to do nothing yourself that would violate honour and conscience. Listen to what I say to you, Sir de Wardes. Take care that no shameful story that involves your name should reach my ears."

"Sir, there's no point in threatening me over nothing," said de Wardes.

"Nothing? But I haven't finished, Sir de Wardes," said d'Artagnan, "and I'm afraid that I have more yet to say."

The circle of listeners, curious, closed in. "You spoke just now of the honour of a lady and the honour of your father, and that pleased us, for it's sweet to think that this feeling of delicacy and honour so rare in my generation's soul lives now in the soul of our children, and it's encouraging to see a young man at the age where one is usually the thief of a woman's honour instead respecting and defending them."

De Wardes pursed his lips and clenched his fists, clearly anxious about where a speech that started so ominously would end. "How is it, then," continued d'Artagnan, "that you allowed yourself to say to Sir de Bragelonne that he did not know his mother?"

Raoul's eyes flashed. "Oh, Sir Knight," he cried, rushing forward, "Sir Knight, that's a matter personal to me."

De Wardes smiled wickedly.

D'Artagnan's arm restrained Raoul. "Young man, don't interrupt me," he said. And looking down at de Wardes, he continued, "I'm dealing here with the kind of question that isn't solved by the sword. I bring it up before men of honour who have all had their swords in their hands more than once. I chose them deliberately, for these gentlemen all know that a secret one fights for cannot remain a secret. I repeat my question to you, Sir de Wardes: why did you offend this young man by insulting both his father and his mother?"

"It seems to me," said de Wardes, "that one may speak freely when one supports his words with the means at the disposal of a man of honour."

"Indeed, Sir? What are the means by which a man of honour can support dishonourable words?"

"By the sword."

"You're wrong, not only by logic but also by faith and by honour, and being wrong you would risk the lives of several men in addition to your own that seems reckless to me. All fashions pass away, Sir, and the fashion for such armed encounters has passed, not to mention that there are His Majesty's edicts that forbid duelling. So, to be consistent with your own ideas of chivalry, you will apologise to Sir Raoul de Bragelonne; you will tell him that you regret having made such a petty remark, and that the nobility and purity of his heritage are written, not just on his face but in all the actions of his life. You will make this apology, Sir de Wardes, as I made mine just now, me, an old captain to your downy lad's moustache."

"And what if I don't?" de Wardes demanded.

"Well! If it comes to that..."

"It will come to what you hoped to prevent!" said de Wardes with a laugh. "All of your logic of conciliation will just lead to a violation of the king's edicts."

"No, Sir, you're quite wrong," the captain said quietly.

"What will happen, then?"

"What will happen is that I will go to the king with whom I'm in pretty good standing; the king to whom I've had the happiness to render some service since before the time you were born; the king, in short, who, at my request, has just given me a *carte blanche* for Sir Baisemeaux de Montlezun, Governor of the Bastille. I will say to the king, 'Sire, a man has delivered a cowardly insult about the person of his mother to Sir Bragelonne. I've filled that man's name in the *stamp letter* that Your Majesty kindly gave me, and by it Sir de Wardes shall be confined in the Bastille for three years.'" And d'Artagnan, drawing from his pocket an order signed by the king, handed it to de Wardes. Then seeing that the young man was not entirely convinced and thought he was bluffing, he shrugged his shoulders and strode calmly to the table, where there was ink and a plume large enough even for Porthos. Then de Wardes saw that the threat was serious – and the Bastille, even in that time, was already a source of terror. He took a step toward Raoul and said, in an almost unintelligible voice, "Sir, I apologise to you in the terms which Sir d'Artagnan has dictated, and which I am forced to say to you."

"Now, now, Sir," said the musketeer with the utmost tranquillity. "I did not dictate, 'which I am forced to say to you.' I said that the apology was one that your conscience compelled you to make. That phrase is superior, believe me, and will be a more convincing expression of your feelings."

"I agree to that phrasing, then," said de Wardes, "though in truth, Gentlemen, you must admit that a sword thrust through the body, the former method, is better than this bullying."

"No, Sir," replied Buckingham, "for taking a sword thrust doesn't show whether you were right or wrong, it means only that you were less skilled."

"Sir..." cried de Wardes.

"Ah, ah!" interrupted d'Artagnan, cutting de Wardes off. "You're about to say something unwise, and I'm doing you the favour of stopping you."

"Is that all, Sir?" demanded de Wardes.

"Absolutely all," replied d'Artagnan, "and these gentlemen and I are satisfied with you."

"Believe me, Sir," said de Wardes, "your verbal expediences don't satisfy everyone!"

"And why is that?"

"Because I would wager that Sir de Bragelonne and I will part even greater enemies than before."

"You are mistaken about me, Sir," replied Raoul. "I don't have even an atom of enmity in my heart toward you."

D'Artagnan bowed graciously to the gentlemen who had been kind enough to attend this exhibition, and each one shook his hand as they departed. No one shook de Wardes's hand. "Oh!" cried the young man, succumbing to the rage devouring his heart. "Is there no one upon whom I can avenge myself?"

"Indeed there is, Sir, because there's still me," whispered a voice in his ear dripping with menace.

De Wardes turned to see the Duke of Buckingham, who, apparently remaining behind for just this purpose, had drawn near. "You, Sir!" cried de Wardes.

"Yes, me. I'm no subject of the King of France, and I'm not staying in his realm, since I'm leaving for England. And I, too, am consumed with rage and despair. Like you, I need to avenge myself on someone. I approve of the principles stated by Sir d'Artagnan but I'm not obliged to apply them to you. I'm English, and I'm here to propose to you what you have vainly proposed to others."

"Sir Duke!"

"Come, Sir de Wardes, since you're so angry, use me for your target dummy. I'll be in Calais in thirty-four hours. Ride with me, the road will seem shorter with company. We'll draw our swords on the strand that's covered by the tide, land which for six hours at a time is the territory of France and for the following six hours belongs only to God."

"Very well," replied de Wardes, "I accept."

"By God!" said the duke. "If you kill me, Sir de Wardes, I swear you'll be doing me a favour."

"I'll do what I can to make myself agreeable, Duke," said de Wardes.

"Then it's agreed, you're coming with me."

"I'm at your service. *By my troth!* I need to soothe my heart with some mortal danger."

"Well, I think we've found it for you! Your servant, Sir de Wardes; tomorrow morning, my footman will call upon you to name the time of our departure. We'll travel together as friends but understand that I like to travel fast. Farewell!" Buckingham bowed to de Wardes and returned to the king's gaming party. De Wardes, exasperated, left the Palais Royal and rode fiercely to his Paris address.

After the austere lesson administered to De Wardes, Athos and D'Artagnan together descended the staircase which led to the courtyard of the Palais Royal. "You perceive," said Athos to D'Artagnan, "that Raoul cannot, sooner or later, avoid a duel with De Wardes, for De Wardes is as brave as he is vicious and wicked."

"I know such fellows well," replied D'Artagnan; "I had an affair with the father. I assure you that, although at that time I had good muscles and a sort of brute courage—I assure you that the father did me some mischief. But you should have seen how I fought it out with him. Ah, Athos, such encounters never take place in these times! I had a hand which could never remain at rest, a hand like quicksilver,—you knew its quality, for you have seen me at work. My sword was no longer than a piece of steel; it was a serpent that assumed every form and every length, seeking where it might thrust its head; in other words, where it might fix its bite. I advanced half a dozen paces, then three, and then, body to body, I pressed my antagonist closely, then I darted back again ten paces. No human power could resist that ferocious ardor. Well, De Wardes the father, with the bravery of his race, with his dogged courage, occupied a good deal of my time; and my fingers, at the end of the engagement, were, I well remember, tired enough."

"It is, then, as I said," resumed Athos, "the son will always be looking out for Raoul, and will end by meeting him; and Raoul can easily be found when he is sought for."

"Agreed; but Raoul calculates well; he bears no grudge against De Wardes,—he has said so; he will wait until he is provoked, and in that case his position is a good one. The king will not be able to get out of temper about the matter; besides we shall know how to pacify his majesty. But why so full of these fears and anxieties? You don't easily get alarmed."

"I will tell you what makes me anxious; Raoul is to see the king to-morrow, when his majesty will inform him of his wishes respecting a certain marriage. Raoul, loving as he does, will get out of temper, and once in an angry mood, if he were to meet De Wardes, the shell would explode."

"We will prevent the explosion."

"Not I," said Athos, "for I must return to Blois. All this gilded elegance of the court, all these intrigues, sicken me. I am no longer a young man who can make terms with the meanness of the day. I have read in the Great Book many things too beautiful and too comprehensive to longer take any interest in the trifling phrases which these men whisper among themselves when they wish to deceive others. In one word, I am weary of Paris wherever and whenever you are not with me; and as I cannot have you with me always, I wish to return to Blois."

"How wrong you are, Athos; how you gainsay your origin and the destiny of your noble nature. Men of your stamp are created to continue, to the very last moment, in full possession of their great faculties. Look at my sword, a Spanish blade, the one I wore at La Rochelle; it served me for thirty years without fail; one day in the winter it fell upon the marble floor on the Louvre and was broken. I had a hunting-knife made of it which will last a hundred years yet. You, Athos, with your loyalty, your frankness, your cool courage, and your sound information, are the very man kings need to warn and direct them. Remain here; Monsieur Fouquet will not last as long as my Spanish blade."

"Is it possible," said Athos, smiling, "that my friend, D'Artagnan, who, after having raised me to the skies, making me an object of worship, casts me down from the top of Olympus, and hurls me to the ground? I have more exalted ambition, D'Artagnan. To be a minister—to be a slave,—never! Am I not still greater? I am nothing. I remember having heard you occasionally call me 'the great Athos'; I defy you, therefore, if I were minister, to continue to bestow that title upon me. No, no; I do not yield myself in this manner."

"We will not speak of it any more, then; renounce everything, even the brotherly feeling which unites us."

"It is almost cruel what you say."

D'Artagnan pressed Athos's hand warmly. "No, no; renounce everything without fear. Raoul can get on without you. I am at Paris."

"In that case I shall return to Blois. We will take leave of each other to-night; to-morrow at daybreak I shall be on my horse again."

"You cannot return to your hotel alone; why did you not bring Grimaud with you?"

"Grimaud takes his rest now; he goes to bed early, for my poor old servant gets easily fatigued. He came from Blois with me, and I compelled him to remain within doors; for if, in retracing the forty leagues which separate us from Blois, he needed to draw breath even, he would die without a murmur. But I don't want to lose Grimaud."

"You shall have one of my musketeers to carry a torch for you. *Hola!* some one there," called out D'Artagnan, leaning over the gilded balustrade. The heads of seven or eight musketeers appeared. "I wish some gentleman, who is so disposed, to escort the Comte de la Fere," cried D'Artagnan.

"Thank you for your readiness, gentlemen," said Athos; "I regret to have occasion to trouble you in this manner."

"I would willingly escort the Comte de la Fere," said some one, "if I had not to speak to Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Who is that?" said D'Artagnan, looking into the darkness.

"I, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Heaven forgive me, if that is not Monsieur Baisemeaux's voice."

"It is, monsieur."

"What are you doing in the courtyard, my dear Baisemeaux?"

"I am waiting your orders, my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Wretch that I am," thought D'Artagnan; "true, you have been told, I suppose, that some one was to be arrested, and have come yourself, instead of sending an officer?"

"I came because I had occasion to speak to you."

"You did not send to me?"

"I waited until you were disengaged," said Monsieur Baisemeaux, timidly.

"I leave you, D'Artagnan," said Athos.

"Not before I have present Monsieur Baisemeaux de Montlezun, the governor of the Bastille."

Baisemeaux and Athos saluted each other.

"Surely you must know each other," said D'Artagnan.

"I have an indistinct recollection of Monsieur Baisemeaux," said Athos.

"You remember, my dear, Baisemeaux, the king's guardsman with whom we used formerly to have such delightful meetings in the cardinal's time?"

"Perfectly," said Athos, taking leave of him with affability.

"Monsieur le Comte de la Fere, whose *nom de guerre* was Athos," whispered D'Artagnan to Baisemeaux.

"Yes, yes, a brave man, one of the celebrated four."

"Precisely so. But, my dear Baisemeaux, shall we talk now?"

"If you please."

"In the first place, as for the orders—there are none. The king does not intend to arrest the person in question.

"So much the worse," said Baisemeaux with a sigh.

"What do you mean by so much the worse?" exclaimed D'Artagnan, laughing.

"No doubt of it," returned the governor, "my prisoners are my income."

"I beg your pardon, I did not see it in that light."

"And so there are no orders," repeated Baisemeaux with a sigh. "What an admirable situation yours is, captain," he continued, after a pause; "captain-lieutenant of the musketeers."

"Oh, it is good enough; but I don't see why you should envy me; you, governor of the Bastille, the first castle in France."

"I am well aware of that," said Baisemeaux, in a sorrowful tone of voice.

"You say that like a man confessing his sins. I would willingly exchange my profits for yours."

"Don't speak of profits to me, if you wish to save me the bitterest anguish of mind."

"Why do you look first on one side and then on the other, as if you were afraid of being arrested yourself, you whose business it is to arrest others?"

"I was looking to see whether any one could see or listen to us; it would be safer to confer more in private, if you would grant me such a favour."

"Baisemeaux, you seem to forget we are acquaintances of five and thirty years' standing. Don't assume such sanctified airs; make yourself quite comfortable; I don't eat governors of the Bastille raw."

"Heaven be praised!"

"Come into the courtyard with me; it's a beautiful moonlit night; we will walk up and down, arm in arm, under the trees, while you tell me your pitiful tale." He drew the doleful governor into the courtyard, took him by the arm as he had said, and, in his rough, good-humored way, cried: "Out with it, rattle away, Baisemeaux; what have you got to say?"

"It's a long story."

"You prefer your own lamentations, then; my opinion is, it will be longer than ever. I'll wager you are making fifty thousand francs out of your pigeons in the Bastille."

"Would to heaven that were the case, M. d'Artagnan."

"You surprise me, Baisemeaux; just look at you, acting the anchorite. I should like to show you your face in a glass, and you would see how plump and florid-looking you are, as fat and round as a cheese, with eyes like lighted coals; and if it were not for that ugly wrinkle you try to cultivate on your forehead, you would hardly look fifty years old, and you are sixty, if I am not mistaken."

"All quite true."

"Of course I knew it was true, as true as the fifty thousand francs profit you make;" at which remark Baisemeaux stamped on the ground.

"Well, well," said D'Artagnan, "I will add up your accounts for you: you were captain of M. Mazarin's guards; and twelve thousand francs a year would in twelve years amount to one hundred and forty thousand francs."

"Twelve thousand francs! Are you mad?" cried Baisemeaux; "the old miser gave me no more than six thousand, and the expenses of the post amounted to six thousand five hundred francs. M. Colbert, who deducted the other six thousand francs, condescended to allow me to take fifty thousand francs as a gratification; so that, if it were not for my little estate at Montlezun, which brings me in twelve thousand francs a year, I could not have met my engagements."

"Well, then, how about the fifty thousand francs from the Bastille? There, I trust, you are boarded and lodged, and get your six thousand francs salary besides."

"Admitted!"

"Whether the year be good or bad, there are fifty prisoners, who, on the average, bring you in a thousand francs a year each."

"I don't deny it."

"Well, there is at once an income of fifty thousand francs; you have held the post three years, and must have received in that time one hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"You forget one circumstance, dear M. d'Artagnan."

"What is that?"

"That while you received your appointment as captain from the king himself, I received mine as governor from Messieurs Tremblay and Louviere."

"Quite right, and Tremblay was not a man to let you have the post for nothing."

"Nor Louviere either: the result was, that I gave seventy-five thousand francs to Tremblay as his share."

"Very agreeable that! and to Louviere?"

"The very same."

"Money down?"

"No: that would have been impossible. The king did not wish, or rather M. Mazarin did not wish, to have the appearance of removing those two gentlemen, who had sprung from the barricades; he permitted them, therefore, to make certain extravagant conditions for their retirement."

"What were those conditions?"

"Tremble... three years' income for the good-will."

"The deuce! so that the one hundred and fifty thousand francs have passed into their hands."

"Precisely so."

"And beyond that?"

“A sum of one hundred and fifty thousand francs, or fifteen thousand pistoles, whichever you please, in three payments.”

“Exorbitant.”

“Yes, but that is not all.”

“What besides?”

“In default of the fulfilment by me of any one of those conditions, those gentlemen enter upon their functions again. The king has been induced to sign that.”

“It is monstrous, incredible!”

“Such is the fact, however.”

“I do indeed pity you, Baisemeaux. But why, in the name of fortune, did M. Mazarin grant you this pretended favour? It would have been far better to have refused you altogether.”

“Certainly, but he was strongly persuaded to do so by my protector.”

“Who is he?”

“One of your own friends, indeed; M. d’Herblay.”

“M. d’Herblay! Aramis!”

“Just so; he has been very kind towards me.”

“Kind! to make you enter into such a bargain!”

“Listen! I wished to leave the cardinal’s service. M. d’Herblay spoke on my behalf to Louviere and Tremblay—they objected; I wished to have the appointment very much, for I knew what it could be made to produce; in my distress I confided in M. d’Herblay, and he offered to become my surety for the different payments.”

“You astound me! Aramis became your surety?”

“Like a man of honour; he procured the signature; Tremblay and Louviere resigned their appointments; I have paid every year twenty-five thousand francs to these two gentlemen; on the thirty-first of May, every year, M. d’Herblay himself comes to the Bastille, and brings me five thousand pistoles to distribute between my crocodiles.”

“You owe Aramis one hundred and fifty thousand francs, then?”

“That is the very thing which is the cause of my despair, for I only owe him one hundred thousand.”

“I don’t quite understand you.”

“He came and settled with the vampires only two years. To-day, however, is the thirty-first of May, and he has not been yet, and to-morrow, at midday, the payment falls due; if, therefore, I don’t pay to-morrow, those gentlemen can, by the terms of the contract, break off the bargain; I shall be stripped of everything; I shall have worked for three years, and given two hundred and fifty thousand francs for nothing, absolutely for nothing at all, dear M. d’Artagnan.”

“This is very strange,” murmured D’Artagnan.

“You can now imagine that I may well have wrinkles on my forehead, can you not?”

“Yes, indeed!”

“And you can imagine, too, that notwithstanding I may be as round as a cheese, with a complexion like an apple, and my eyes like coals on fire, I may almost be afraid that I shall not have a cheese or an apple left me to eat, and that my eyes will be left me only to weep with.”

“It is really a very grievous affair.”

“I have come to you, M. d’Artagnan, for you are the only man who can get me out of my trouble.”

“In what way?”

“You are acquainted with the Abbe d’Herblay, and you know that he is a somewhat mysterious gentleman.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you can, perhaps, give me the address of his presbytery, for I have been to Noisy-le-Sec, and he is no longer there.”

“I should think not, indeed. He is Bishop of Vannes.”

“What! Vannes in Bretagne?”

“Yes.”

The little man began to tear his hair, saying, “How can I get to Vannes from here by midday to-morrow? I am a lost man.”

“Your despair quite distresses me.”

“Vannes, Vannes!” cried Baisemeaux.

“But listen; a bishop is not always a resident. M. d’Herblay may not possibly be so far away as you fear.”

“Pray tell me his address.”

“I really don’t know it.”

“In that case I am lost. I will go and throw myself at the king’s feet.”

“But, Baisemeaux, I can hardly believe what you tell me; besides, since the Bastille is capable of producing fifty thousand francs a year, why have you not tried to screw one hundred thousand out of it?”

“Because I am an honest man, M. d’Artagnan, and because my prisoners are fed like ambassadors.”

“Well, you’re in a fair way to get out of your difficulties; give yourself a good attack of indigestion with your excellent living, and put yourself out of the way between this and midday to-morrow.”

“How can you be hard-hearted enough to laugh?”

“Nay, you really afflict me. Come, Baisemeaux, if you can pledge me your word of honour, do so, that you will not open your lips to anyone about what I am going to say to you.”

“Never, never!”

“You wish to put your hands on Aramis?”

“At any cost!”

“Well, go and see where M. Fouquet is.”

“Why, what connection can there be—”

“How stupid you are! Don’t you know that Vannes is in the diocese of Belle-Isle, or Belle-Isle in the diocese of Vannes? Belle-Isle belongs to M. Fouquet, and M. Fouquet nominated M. d’Herblay to that bishopric!”

“I see, I see; you restore me to life again.”

“So much the better. Go and tell M. Fouquet very simply that you wish to speak to M. d’Herblay.”

“Of course, of course,” exclaimed Baisemeaux, delightedly.

“But,” said D’Artagnan, checking him by a severe look, “your word of honour?”

“I give you my sacred word of honour,” replied the little man, about to set off running.

“Where are you going?”

“To M. Fouquet’s house.”

“It is useless doing that; M. Fouquet is playing at cards with the king. All you can do is to pay M. Fouquet a visit early to-morrow morning.”

“I will do so. Thank you.”

“Good luck attend you,” said D’Artagnan.

“Thank you.”

“This is a strange affair,” murmured D’Artagnan, as he slowly ascended the staircase after he had left Baisemeaux. “What possible interest can Aramis have in obliging Baisemeaux in this manner? Well, I suppose we shall learn some day or another.”

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The King’s Card-Table

Fouquet was present, as D’Artagnan had said, at the king’s card-table. It seemed as if Buckingham’s departure had shed a balm on the lacerated hearts of the previous evening. Monsieur, radiant with delight, made a thousand affectionate signs to his mother. The Count de Guiche could not separate himself from Buckingham, and while playing, conversed with him upon the circumstance of his projected voyage. Buckingham, thoughtful, and kind in his manner, like a man who has adopted a resolution, listened to the count, and from time to time cast a look full of regret and hopeless affection at Madame. The princess, in the midst of her elation of spirits, divided her attention between the king, who was playing with her, Monsieur, who quietly joked her about her enormous winnings, and De Guiche, who exhibited an extravagant delight. Of Buckingham she took but little notice; for her, this fugitive, this exile, was now simply a remembrance, no longer a man. Light hearts are thus constituted; while they themselves continue untouched, they roughly break off with every one who may possibly interfere with their little calculations of self comfort. Madame had received Buckingham’s smiles and attentions and sighs while he was present; but what was the good of sighing, smiling, and kneeling at a distance? Can one tell in what direction the winds in the Channel, which toss mighty vessels to and fro, carry such sighs as these? The duke could not fail to mark this change, and his heart was cruelly hurt. Of a sensitive character, proud and susceptible of deep attachment, he cursed the day on which such a passion had entered his heart. The looks he cast, from time to time at Madame, became colder by degrees at the chilling complexion of his thoughts. He could hardly yet despair, but he was strong enough to impose silence upon the tumultuous outcries of his heart. In exact proportion, however, as Madame suspected this change of feeling, she redoubled her activity to regain the ray of light she was about to lose; her timid and indecisive mind was displayed in brilliant flashes of wit and humor. At any cost she felt that she must be remarked above everything and every one, even above the king himself. And she was so, for the queens, notwithstanding their dignity, and the king, despite the respect which etiquette required, were all eclipsed by her. The queens, stately and ceremonious, were softened and could not restrain their laughter. Madame Henriette, the queen-mother, was dazzled by the brilliancy which cast distinction upon her family, thanks to the wit of the grand-daughter of Henry IV. The king, jealous, as a young man and as a monarch, of the superiority of those who surrounded him, could not resist admitting himself vanquished by a petulance so thoroughly French in its nature, whose energy more than ever increased by English humor. Like a child, he was captivated by her radiant beauty, which her wit made still more dazzling. Madame’s eyes flashed like lightning. Wit and humor escaped from her scarlet lips like persuasion from the lips of Nestor of old. The whole court, subdued by her enchanting grace, noticed for the first time that laughter could be indulged in before the greatest monarch in the world, like people who merited their appellation of the wittiest and most polished people in Europe. Madame, from that evening, achieved and enjoyed a success capable of bewildering all not born to those altitudes termed thrones; which, in spite of their elevation, are sheltered from such giddiness. From that very moment Louis XIV. acknowledged Madame as a person to be recognized. Buckingham regarded her as a coquette deserving the cruellest tortures, and De Guiche looked upon her as a divinity; the courtiers as a star whose light might some day become the focus of all favour and power. And yet Louis XIV., a few years previously, had not even condescended to offer his hand to that “ugly girl” for a ballet; and Buckingham had worshipped this coquette “on both knees.” De Guiche had once looked upon this divinity as a mere woman; and the courtiers had not dared to extol this star in her upward progress, fearful to disgust the monarch whom such a dull star had formerly displeased. Let us see what was taking place during this memorable evening at the king’s card-table. The young queen, although Spanish by birth, and the niece of Anne of Austria, loved the king, and could not conceal her affection. Anne of Austria, a keen observer, like all women, and imperious, like every queen, was sensible of Madame’s power, and acquiesced in it immediately, a circumstance which induced the young queen to raise the siege and retire to her apartments. The king hardly paid any attention to her departure, notwithstanding the pretended symptoms of indisposition by which it was accompanied. Encouraged by the rules of etiquette, which he had begun to introduce at the court as an element of every relation of life, Louis XIV. did not disturb himself; he offered his hand to Madame without looking at Monsieur his brother, and led the young princess to the door of her apartments. It was remarked, that at the threshold of the door, his majesty, freed from every restraint, or not equal to the situation, sighed very deeply. The ladies present—nothing escapes a woman’s glance—Mademoiselle Montalais, for instance—did not fail to say to each other, “the king sighed,” and “Madame sighed too.” This had been indeed the case. Madame had sighed very noiselessly, but with an accompaniment very far more dangerous for the king’s repose. Madame had sighed, first closing her beautiful black eyes, next opening them, and then, laden, as they were, with an indescribable mournfulness of expression, she had raised them towards the king, whose face at that moment visibly

heightened in colour. The consequence of these blushes, of those interchanged sighs, and of this royal agitation, was, that Montalais had committed an indiscretion which had certainly affected her companion, for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, less clear sighted, perhaps, turned pale when the king blushed; and her attendance being required upon Madame, she tremblingly followed the princess without thinking of taking the gloves, which court etiquette required her to do. True it is that the young country girl might allege as her excuse the agitation into which the king seemed to be thrown, for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, busily engaged in closing the door, had involuntarily fixed her eyes upon the king, who, as he retired backwards, had his face towards it. The king returned to the room where the card-tables were set out. He wished to speak to the different persons there, but it was easy to see that his mind was absent. He jumbled different accounts together, which was taken advantage of by some of the noblemen who had retained those habits since the time of Monsieur Mazarin—who had a poor memory, but was a good calculator. In this way, Monsieur Manicamp, with a thoughtless and absent air—for M. Manicamp was the most honest man in the world, appropriated twenty thousand francs, which were littering the table, and which did not seem to belong to any person in particular. In the same way, Monsieur de Wardes, whose head was doubtless a little bewildered by the occurrences of the evening, somehow forgot to leave behind him the sixty double louis which he had won for the Duke of Buckingham, and which the duke, incapable, like his father, of soiling his hands with coin of any sort, had left lying on the table before him. The king only recovered his attention in some degree at the moment that Monsieur Colbert, who had been narrowly observant for some minutes, approached, and, doubtless, with great respect, yet with much perseverance, whispered a counsel of some sort into the still tingling ears of the king. The king, at the suggestion, listened with renewed attention and immediately looking around him, said, “Is Monsieur Fouquet no longer here?”

“Yes, sire, I am here,” replied the superintendent, till then engaged with Buckingham, and approached the king, who advanced a step towards him with a smiling yet negligent air. “Forgive me,” said Louis, “if I interrupt your conversation; but I claim your attention wherever I may require your services.”

“I am always at the king’s service,” replied Fouquet.

“And your cash-box, too,” said the king, laughing with a false smile.

“My cash-box more than anything else,” said Fouquet, coldly.

“The fact is, I wish to give a *fête* at Fontainebleau—to keep open house for fifteen days, and I shall require—” and he stopped, glancing at Colbert. Fouquet waited without showing discomposure; and the king resumed, answering Colbert’s icy smile, “four million francs.”

“Four million,” repeated Fouquet, bowing profoundly. And his nails, buried in his bosom, were thrust into his flesh, but the tranquil expression of his face remained unaltered. “When will they be required, sire?”

“Take your time,—I mean—no, no; as soon as possible.”

“A certain time will be necessary, sire.”

“Time!” exclaimed Colbert, triumphantly.

“The time, monsieur,” said the superintendent, with the haughtiest disdain, “simply to *count the money*; a million can only be drawn and weighed in a day.”

“Four days, then,” said Colbert.

“My clerks,” replied Fouquet, addressing himself to the king, “will perform wonders on his majesty’s service, and the sum shall be ready in three days.”

It was for Colbert now to turn pale. Louis looked at him astonished. Fouquet withdrew without any parade or weakness, smiling at his numerous friends, in whose countenances alone he read the sincerity of their friendship—an interest partaking of compassion. Fouquet, however, should not be judged by his smile, for, in reality, he felt as if he had been stricken by death. Drops of blood beneath his coat stained the fine linen that clothed his chest. His dress concealed the blood, and his smile the rage which devoured him. His domestics perceived, by the manner in which he approached his carriage, that their master was not in the best of humors: the result of their discernment was, that his orders were executed with that exactitude of maneuver which is found on board a man-of-war, commanded during a storm by an ill-tempered captain. The carriage, therefore, did not simply roll along—it flew. Fouquet had hardly time to recover himself during the drive; on his arrival he went at once to Aramis, who had not yet retired for the night. As for Porthos, he had supped very agreeably off a roast leg of mutton, two pheasants, and a perfect heap of cray-fish; he then directed his body to be anointed with perfumed oils, in the manner of the wrestlers of old; and when this anointment was completed, he had himself wrapped in flannels and placed in a warm bed. Aramis, as we have already said, had not retired. Seated at his ease in a velvet dressing-gown, he wrote letter after letter in that fine and hurried handwriting, a page of which contained a quarter of a volume. The door was thrown hurriedly open, and the superintendent appeared, pale, agitated, anxious. Aramis looked up: “Good-evening,” said he; and his searching look detected his host’s sadness and disordered state of mind. “Was your play as good as his majesty’s?” asked Aramis, by way of beginning the conversation.

Fouquet threw himself upon a couch, and then pointed to the door to the servant who had followed him; when the servant had left he said, “Excellent.”

Aramis, who had followed every movement with his eyes, noticed that he stretched himself upon the cushions with a sort of feverish impatience. “You have lost as usual?” inquired Aramis, his pen still in his hand.

“Even more than usual,” replied Fouquet.

“You know how to support losses?”

“Sometimes.”

“What, Monsieur Fouquet a bad player!”

“There is play and play, Monsieur d’Herblay.”

“How much have you lost?” inquired Aramis, with a slight uneasiness.

Fouquet collected himself a moment, and then, without the slightest emotion, said, “The evening has cost me four millions,” and a bitter laugh drowned the last vibration of these words.

Aramis, who did not expect such an amount, dropped his pen. “Four millions,” he said; “you have lost four millions,—impossible!”

“Monsieur Colbert held my cards for me,” replied the superintendent, with a similar bitter laugh.

“Ah, now I understand; so, so, a new application for funds?”

“Yes, and from the king’s own lips. It was impossible to ruin a man with a more charming smile. What do you think of it?”

“It is clear that your destruction is the object in view.”

“That is your opinion?”

“Still. Besides, there is nothing in it which should astonish you, for we have foreseen it all along.”

“Yes; but I did not expect four millions.”

“No doubt the amount is serious, but, after all, four millions are not quite the death of a man, especially when the man in question is Monsieur Fouquet.”

“My dear D’Herblay, if you knew the contents of my coffers, you would be less easy.”

“And you promised?”

“What could I *do*?”

“That’s true.”

“The very day I refuse, Colbert will procure the money; whence I know not, but he *will* procure it: and I shall be lost.”

“There is no doubt of that. In how many days did you promise the four millions?”

“In three days. The king seemed exceedingly pressed.”

“*In three days?*”

“When I think,” resumed Fouquet, “that just now as I passed along the streets, the people cried out, ‘There is the rich Monsieur Fouquet,’ it is enough to turn my brain.”

“Stay, monsieur, the matter is not worth so much trouble,” said Aramis, calmly, sprinkling some sand over the letter he had just written.

“Suggest a remedy, then, for this evil without a remedy.”

“There is only one remedy for you,—pay.”

“But it is very uncertain whether I have the money. Everything must be exhausted; Belle-Isle is paid for; the pension has been paid; and money, since the investigation of the accounts of those who farm the revenue, is scarce. Besides, admitting that I pay this time, how can I do so on another occasion? When kings have tasted money, they are like tigers who have tasted flesh, they devour everything. The day will arrive—*must* arrive—when I shall have to say, ‘Impossible, sire,’ and on that very day I am a lost man.”

Aramis raised his shoulders slightly, saying:

“A man in your position, my lord, is only lost when he wishes to be so.”

“A man, whatever his position may be, cannot hope to struggle against a king.”

“Nonsense; when I was young I wrestled successfully with the Cardinal Richelieu, who was king of France,—nay more—cardinal.”

“Where are my armies, my troops, my treasures? I have not even Belle-Isle.”

“Bah! necessity is the mother of invention, and when you think all is lost, something will be discovered which will retrieve everything.”

“Who will discover this wonderful something?”

“Yourself.”

“! I resign my office of inventor.”

“Then I will.”

“Be it so. But set to work without delay.”

“Oh! we have time enough!”

“You kill me, D’Herblay, with your calmness,” said the superintendent, passing his handkerchief over his face.

“Do you not remember that I one day told you not to make yourself uneasy, if you possessed courage? *Have* you any?”

“I believe so.”

“Then don’t make yourself uneasy.”

“It is decided then, that, at the last moment, you will come to my assistance.”

“It will only be the repayment of a debt I owe you.”

“It is the vocation of financiers to anticipate the wants of men such as yourself, D’Herblay.”

“If obligingness is the vocation of financiers, charity is the virtue of the clergy. Only, on this occasion, do you act, monsieur. You are not yet sufficiently reduced, and at the last moment we will see what is to be done.”

“We shall see, then, in a very short time.”

“Very well. However, permit me to tell you that, personally, I regret exceedingly that you are at present so short of money, because I myself was about to ask you for some.”

“For yourself?”

“For myself, or some of my people, for mine or for ours.”

“How much do you want?”

“Be easy on that score; a roundish sum, it is true, but not too exorbitant.”

“Tell me the amount.”

“Fifty thousand francs.”

“Oh! a mere nothing. Of course one has always fifty thousand francs. Why the deuce cannot that knave Colbert be as easily satisfied as you are—and I should give myself far less trouble than I do. When do you need this sum?”

“To-morrow morning; but you wish to know its destination?”

“Nay, nay, chevalier, I need no explanation.”

"To-morrow is the first of June."  
"Well?"  
"One of our bonds becomes due."  
"I did not know we had any bonds."  
"Certainly, to-morrow we pay our last third instalment."  
"What third?"  
"Of the one hundred and fifty thousand francs to Baisemeaux."  
"Baisemeaux? Who is he?"  
"The governor of the Bastille."  
"Yes, I remember. On what grounds am I to pay one hundred and fifty thousand francs for that man."  
"On account of the appointment which he, or rather we, purchased from Louviere and Tremblay."  
"I have a very vague recollection of the matter."  
"That is likely enough, for you have so many affairs to attend to. However, I do not believe you have any affair in the world of greater importance than this one."  
"Tell me, then, why we purchased this appointment."  
"Why, in order to render him a service in the first place, and afterwards ourselves."  
"Ourselves? You are joking."  
"My lord, the time may come when the governor of the Bastille may prove a very excellent acquaintance."  
"I have not the good fortune to understand you, D'Herblay."  
"My lord, we had our own poets, our own engineer, our own architect, our own musicians, our own printer, and our own painters; we needed our own governor of the Bastille."  
"Do you think so?"  
"Let us not deceive ourselves, my lord; we are very much opposed to paying the Bastille a visit," added the prelate, displaying, beneath his pale lips, teeth which were still the same beautiful teeth so much admired thirty years previously by Marie Michon.  
"And you think it is not too much to pay one hundred and fifty thousand francs for that? I thought you generally put out money at better interest than that."  
"The day will come when you will admit your mistake."  
"My dear D'Herblay, the very day on which a man enters the Bastille, he is no longer protected by his past."  
"Yes, he is, if the bonds are perfectly regular; besides, that good fellow Baisemeaux has not a courtier's heart. I am certain, my lord, that he will not remain ungrateful for that money, without taking into account, I repeat, that I retain the acknowledgements."  
"It is a strange affair! Usury in a matter of benevolence."  
"Do not mix yourself up with it, my lord; if there be usury, it is I who practice it, and both of us reap the advantage from it—that is all."  
"Some intrigue, D'Herblay?"  
"I do not deny it."  
"And Baisemeaux an accomplice in it?"  
"Why not?—there are worse accomplices than he. May I depend, then, upon the five thousand pistoles to-morrow?"  
"Do you want them this evening?"  
"It would be better, for I wish to start early; poor Baisemeaux will not be able to imagine what has become of me, and must be upon thorns."  
"You shall have the amount in an hour. Ah, D'Herblay, the interest of your one hundred and fifty thousand francs will never pay my four millions for me."  
"Why not, my lord?"  
"Good-night, I have business to transact with my clerks before I retire."  
"A good night's rest, my lord."  
"D'Herblay, you wish things that are impossible."  
"Shall I have my fifty thousand francs this evening?"  
"Yes."  
"Go to sleep, then, in perfect safety—it is I who tell you to do so." Notwithstanding this assurance, and the tone in which it was given, Fouquet left the room shaking his head, and heaving a sigh.

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**M. Baisemeaux de Montlezun's Accounts**

The clock of St. Paul was striking seven as Aramis, on horseback, dressed as a simple citizen, that is to say, in coloured suit, with no distinctive mark about him, except a kind of hunting-knife by his side, passed before the Rue du Petit-Musc, and stopped opposite the Rue des Tournelles, at the gate of the Bastille. Two sentinels were on duty at the gate; they made no difficulty about admitting Aramis, who entered without dismounting, and they pointed out the way he was to go by a long passage with buildings on both sides. This passage led to the drawbridge, or, in other words, to the real entrance. The drawbridge was down, and the duty of the day was about being entered upon. The sentinel at the outer guardhouse stopped Aramis's further progress, asking him, in a rough tone of voice, what had brought him there. Aramis explained, with his usual politeness, that a wish to speak to M. Baisemeaux de Montlezun had occasioned his visit. The first sentinel then summoned a second sentinel, stationed within an inner lodge, who showed his face at the grating, and inspected the new arrival most attentively. Aramis reiterated the expression of his wish to see the governor; whereupon the sentinel called to an officer of lower grade, who was walking about in a tolerably spacious courtyard and who, in turn, on being informed of his object, ran to seek one of the officers of the governor's staff. The latter, after having listened to Aramis's request, begged him to wait a moment, then went away a short distance, but returned to ask his name. "I cannot tell it you, monsieur," said Aramis; "I need only mention that I have matters of such importance to communicate to the governor, that I can only rely beforehand upon one thing, that M. de Baisemeaux will be delighted to see me; nay, more than that, when you have told him that it is the person whom he expected on the first of June, I am convinced he will hasten here himself." The officer could not possibly believe that a man of the governor's importance should put himself out for a person of so little importance as the citizen-looking visitor on horseback. "It happens most fortunately, monsieur," he said, "that the governor is just going out, and you can perceive his carriage with the horses already harnessed, in the courtyard yonder; there will be no occasion for him to come to meet you, as he will see you as he passes by." Aramis bowed to signify his assent; he did not wish to inspire others with too exalted an opinion of himself, and therefore waited patiently and in silence, leaning upon the saddle-bow of his horse. Ten minutes had hardly elapsed when the governor's carriage was observed to move. The governor appeared at the door, and got into the carriage, which immediately prepared to start. The same ceremony was observed for the governor himself as with a suspected stranger; the sentinel at the lodge advanced as the carriage was about to pass under the arch, and the governor opened the carriage-door, himself setting the example of obedience to orders; so that, in this way, the sentinel could convince himself that no one quitted the Bastille improperly. The carriage rolled along under the archway, but at the moment the iron-gate was opened, the officer approached the carriage, which had again been stopped, and said something to the governor, who immediately put his head out of the door-way, and perceived Aramis on horseback at the end of the drawbridge. He immediately uttered almost a shout of delight, and got out, or rather darted out of his carriage, running towards Aramis, whose hands he seized, making a thousand apologies. He almost embraced him. "What a difficult matter to enter the Bastille!" said Aramis. "Is it the same for those who are sent here against their wills, as for those who come of their own accord?"  
"A thousand pardons, my lord. How delighted I am to see your Grace!"  
"Hush! What are you thinking of, my dear M. Baisemeaux? What do you suppose would be thought of a bishop in my present costume?"  
"Pray, excuse me, I had forgotten. Take this gentleman's horse to the stables," cried Baisemeaux.  
"No, no," said Aramis; "I have five thousand pistoles in the saddle-bags."  
The governor's countenance became so radiant, that if the prisoners had seen him they would have imagined some prince of the royal blood had arrived. "Yes, you are right, the horse shall be taken to the government house. Will you get into the carriage, my dear M. d'Herblay? And it shall take us back to my house."  
"Get into a carriage to cross a courtyard! Do you believe I am so great an invalid? No, no, we will go on foot."  
Baisemeaux then offered his arm as a support, but the prelate did not accept it. They arrived in this manner at the government house, Baisemeaux rubbing his hands and glancing at the horse from time to time, while Aramis was looking at the bleak bare walls. A tolerably handsome vestibule and a staircase of white stone led to the governor's apartments, who crossed the ante-chamber, the dining-room, where breakfast was being prepared, opened a small side door, and closeted himself with his guest in a large cabinet, the windows of which opened obliquely upon the courtyard and the stables. Baisemeaux installed the prelate with that all-inclusive politeness of which a good man, or a grateful man, alone possesses the secret. An arm-chair, a footstool, a small table beside him, on which to rest his hand, everything was prepared by the governor himself. With his own hands, too, he placed upon the table, with much solicitude, the bag containing the gold, which one of the soldiers had brought up with the most respectful devotion; and the soldier having left the room, Baisemeaux himself closed the door after him, drew aside one of the window-curtains, and looked steadfastly at Aramis to see if the prelate required anything further.  
"Well, my lord," he said, still standing up, "of all men of their word, you still continue to be the most punctual."  
"In matters of business, dear M. de Baisemeaux, exactitude is not a virtue only, it is a duty as well."  
"Yes, in matters of business, certainly; but what you have with me is not of that character; it is a service you are rendering me."  
"Come, confess, dear M. de Baisemeaux, that, notwithstanding this exactitude, you have not been without a little uneasiness."  
"About your health, I certainly have," stammered out Baisemeaux.  
"I wished to come here yesterday, but I was not able, as I was too fatigued," continued Aramis. Baisemeaux anxiously slipped another cushion behind his guest's back. "But," continued Aramis, "I promised myself to come and pay you a visit to-day, early in the morning."  
"You are really very kind, my lord."  
"And it was a good thing for me I was punctual, I think."  
"What do you mean?"  
"Yes, you were going out." At which latter remark Baisemeaux coloured and said, "It is true I was going out."  
"Then I prevent you," said Aramis; whereupon the embarrassment of Baisemeaux became visibly greater. "I am putting you to inconvenience," he continued, fixing a keen glance upon the poor governor;  
"if I had known that, I should not have come."  
"How can your lordship imagine that you could ever inconvenience me?"  
"Confess you were going in search of money."  
"No," stammered out Baisemeaux, "no! I assure you I was going to—"  
"Does the governor still intend to go to M. Fouquet?" suddenly called out the major from below. Baisemeaux ran to the window like a madman. "No, no," he exclaimed in a state of desperation, "who the deuce is speaking of M. Fouquet? Are you drunk below there? Why am I interrupted when I am engaged on business?"  
"You were going to M. Fouquet's," said Aramis, biting his lips, "to M. Fouquet, the abbe, or the superintendent?"  
Baisemeaux almost made up his mind to tell an untruth, but he could not summon courage to do so. "To the superintendent," he said.  
"It is true, then, that you were in want of money, since you were going to a person who gives it away!"  
"I assure you, my lord—"  
"You were afraid?"  
"My dear lord, it was the uncertainty and ignorance in which I was as to where you were to be found."



"You would have found the money you require at M. Fouquet's, for he is a man whose hand is always open."

"I swear that I should never have ventured to ask M. Fouquet for money. I only wished to ask him for your address."

"To ask M. Fouquet for my address?" exclaimed Aramis, opening his eyes in real astonishment.

"Yes," said Baisemeaux, greatly disturbed by the glance which the prelate fixed upon him,—“at M. Fouquet's certainly."

"There is no harm in that, dear M. Baisemeaux, only I would ask, why ask my address of M. Fouquet?"

"That I might write to you."

"I understand," said Aramis smiling, "but that is not what I meant; I do not ask you what you required my address for: I only ask why you should go to M. Fouquet for it?"

"Oh!" said Baisemeaux, "as Belle-Isle is the property of M. Fouquet, and as Belle-Isle is in the diocese of Vannes, and as you are bishop of Vannes—"

"But, my dear Baisemeaux, since you knew I was bishop of Vannes, you had no occasion to ask M. Fouquet for my address."

"Well, monsieur," said Baisemeaux, completely at bay, "if I have acted indiscreetly, I beg your pardon most sincerely."

"Nonsense," observed Aramis calmly: "how can you possibly have acted indiscreetly?" And while he composed his face, and continued to smile cheerfully on the governor, he was considering how Baisemeaux, who was not aware of his address, knew, however, that Vannes was his residence. "I shall clear all this up," he said to himself; and then speaking aloud, added,—“Well, my dear governor shall we now arrange our little accounts?"

"I am at your orders, my lord; but tell me beforehand, my lord, whether you will do me the honour to breakfast with me as usual?"

"Very willingly, indeed."

"That's well," said Baisemeaux, as he struck the bell before him three times.

"What does that mean?" inquired Aramis.

"That I have some one to breakfast with me, and that preparations are to be made accordingly."

"And you rang thrice. Really, my dear governor, I begin to think you are acting ceremoniously with me."

"No, indeed. Besides, the least I can do is to receive you in the best way I can."

"But why so?"

"Because not even a prince could have done what you have done for me."

"Nonsense! nonsense!"

"Nay, I assure you—"

"Let us speak of other matters," said Aramis. "Or rather, tell me how your affairs here are getting on."

"Not over well."

"The deuce!"

"M. de Mazarin was not hard enough."

"Yes, I see; you require a government full of suspicion—like that of the old cardinal, for instance."

"Yes; matters went on better under him. The brother of his 'gray eminence' made his fortune here."

"Believe me, my dear governor," said Aramis, drawing closer to Baisemeaux, "a young king is well worth an old cardinal. Youth has its suspicions, its fits of anger, its prejudices, as old age has its hatreds, its precautions, and its fears. Have you paid your three years' profits to Louvivre and Tremblay?"

"Most certainly I have."

"So that you have nothing more to give them than the fifty thousand francs I have brought with me?"

"Nothing."

"Have you not saved anything, then?"

"My lord, in giving the fifty thousand francs of my own to these gentlemen, I assure you that I gave them everything I gain. I told M. d'Artagnan so yesterday evening."

"Ah!" said Aramis, whose eyes sparkled for a moment, but became immediately afterwards as unmoved as before; "so you have been to see my old friend D'Artagnan; how was he?"

"Wonderfully well."

"And what did you say to him, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"I told him," continued the governor, not perceiving his own thoughtlessness; "I told him that I fed my prisoners too well."

"How many have you?" inquired Aramis, in an indifferent tone of voice.

"Sixty."

"Well, that is a tolerably round number."

"In former times, my lord, there were, during certain years, as many as two hundred."

"Still a minimum of sixty is not to be grumbled at."

"Perhaps not; for, to anybody but myself, each prisoner would bring in two hundred and fifty pistoles; for instance, for a prince of the blood I have fifty francs a day."

"Only you have no prince of the blood; at least, I suppose so," said Aramis, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"No, thank heaven!—I mean, no, unfortunately."

"What do you mean by unfortunately?"

"Because my appointment would be improved by it. So fifty francs per day for a prince of the blood, thirty-six for a marechal of France—"

"But you have as many marechals of France, I suppose, as you have princes of the blood?"

"Alas! no more. It is true lieutenant-generals and brigadiers pay twenty-six francs, and I have two of them. After that, come councilors of parliament, who bring me fifteen francs, and I have six of them."

"I did not know," said Aramis, "that councilors were so productive."

"Yes; but from fifteen francs I sink at once to ten francs; namely, for an ordinary judge, and for an ecclesiastic."

"And you have seven, you say; an excellent affair."

"Nay, a bad one, and for this reason. How can I possibly treat these poor fellows, who are of some good, at all events, otherwise than as a councilor of parliament?"

"Yes, you are right; I do not see five francs difference between them."

"You understand; if I have a fine fish, I pay four or five francs for it; if I get a fine fowl, it cost me a franc and a half. I fatten a good deal of poultry, but I have to buy grain, and you cannot imagine the army of rats that infest this place."

"Why not get half a dozen cats to deal with them?"

"Cats, indeed; yes, they eat them, but I was obliged to give up the idea because of the way in which they treated my grain. I have been obliged to have some terrier dogs sent me from England to kill the rats. These dogs, unfortunately, have tremendous appetites; they eat as much as a prisoner of the fifth order, without taking into account the rabbits and fowls they kill."

Was Aramis really listening or not? No one could have told; his downcast eyes showed the attentive man, but the restless hand betrayed the man absorbed in thought—Aramis was meditating.

"I was saying," continued Baisemeaux, "that a good-sized fowl costs me a franc and a half, and that a fine fish costs me four or five francs. Three meals are served at the Bastille, and, as the prisoners, having nothing to do, are always eating, a ten-franc man costs me seven francs and a half."

"But did you not say that you treated those at ten francs like those at fifteen?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well! Then you gain seven francs and a half upon those who pay you fifteen francs."

"I *must* compensate myself somehow," said Baisemeaux, who saw how he had been snapped up.

"You are quite right, my dear governor; but have you no prisoners below ten francs?"

"Oh, yes! we have citizens and barristers at five francs."

"And do they eat, too?"

"Not a doubt about it; only you understand that they do not get fish or poultry, nor rich wines at every meal; but at all events thrice a week they have a good dish at their dinner."

"Really, you are quite a philanthropist, my dear governor, and you will ruin yourself."

"No; understand me; when the fifteen-franc has not eaten his fowl, or the ten-franc has left his dish unfinished, I send it to the five-franc prisoner; it is a feast for the poor devil, and one must be charitable, you know."

"And what do you make out of your five-franc prisoners?"

"A franc and a half."

"Baisemeaux, you're an honest fellow; in honest truth I say so."

"Thank you, my lord. But I feel most for the small tradesmen and bailiffs' clerks, who are rated at three francs. They do not often see Rhine carp or Channel sturgeon."

"But do not the five-franc gentlemen sometimes leave some scraps?"

"Oh! my lord, do not believe I am so stingy as that; I delight the heart of some poor little tradesman or clerk by sending him a wing of a red partridge, a slice of venison, or a slice of a truffled pasty, dishes which he never tasted except in his dreams; these are the leavings of the twenty-four-franc prisoners; and as he eats and drinks, at dessert he cries 'Long live the King,' and blesses the Bastille; with a couple bottles of champagne, which cost me five sous, I make him tipsy every Sunday. That class of people call down blessings upon me, and are sorry to leave the prison. Do you know that I have remarked, and it does me infinite honour, that certain prisoners, who have been set at liberty, have, almost immediately afterwards, got imprisoned again? Why should this be the case, unless it be to enjoy the pleasures of my kitchen? It is really the fact."

Aramis smiled with an expression of incredulity.

"You smile," said Baisemeaux.

"I do," returned Aramis.

"I tell you that we have names which have been inscribed on our books thrice in the space of two years."

"I must see it before I believe it," said Aramis.

"Well, I can show it to you, although it is prohibited to communicate the registers to strangers; and if you really wish to see it with your own eyes—"

"I should be delighted, I confess."

"Very well," said Baisemeaux, and he took out of a cupboard a large register. Aramis followed him most anxiously with his eyes, and Baisemeaux returned, placed the register upon the table, and turned over the leaves for a minute, and stayed at the letter M.

"Look here," said he, "Martinier, January, 1659; Martinier, June, 1660; Martinier, March, 1661. Mazarinades, etc.; you understand it was only a pretext; people were not sent to the Bastille for jokes against M. Mazarin; the fellow denounced himself in order to get imprisoned here."

"And what was his object?"

"None other than to return to my kitchen at three francs a day."

"Three francs—poor devil!"

"The poet, my lord, belongs to the lowest scale, the same style of board as the small tradesman and bailiff's clerk; but I repeat, it is to those people that I give these little surprises."

Aramis mechanically turned over the leaves of the register, continuing to read the names, but without appearing to take any interest in the names he read.

"In 1661, you perceive," said Baisemeaux, "eighty entries; and in 1659, eighty also."

“Ah!” said Aramis. “Seldon; I seem to know that name. Was it not you who spoke to me about a certain young man?”

“Yes, a poor devil of a student, who made—What do you call that where two Latin verses rhyme together?”

“A distich.”

“Yes; that is it.”

“Poor fellow; for a distich.”

“Do you know that he made this distich against the Jesuits?”

“That makes no difference; the punishment seems very severe. Do not pity him; last year you seemed to interest yourself in him.”

“Yes, I did so.”

“Well, as your interest is all-powerful here, my lord, I have treated him since that time as a prisoner at fifteen francs.”

“The same as this one, then,” said Aramis, who had continued turning over the leaves, and who had stopped at one of the names which followed Martinier.

“Yes, the same as that one.”

“Is that Marchiali an Italian?” said Aramis, pointing with his finger to the name which had attracted his attention.

“Hush!” said Baisemeaux.

“Why hush?” said Aramis, involuntarily clenching his white hand.

“I thought I had already spoken to you about that Marchiali.”

“No, it is the first time I ever heard his name pronounced.”

“That may be, but perhaps I have spoken to you about him without naming him.”

“Is he an old offender?” asked Aramis, attempting to smile.

“On the contrary, he is quite young.”

“Is his crime, then, very heinous?”

“Unpardonable.”

“Has he assassinated any one?”

“Bah!”

“An incendiary, then?”

“Bah!”

“Has he slandered any one?”

“No, no! It is he who—” and Baisemeaux approached Aramis’s ear, making a sort of ear-trumpet of his hands, and whispered: “It is he who presumes to resemble the—”

“Yes, yes,” said Aramis; “I now remember you already spoke about it last year to me; but the crime appeared to me so slight.”

“Slight, do you say?”

“Or rather, so involuntary.”

“My lord, it is not involuntarily that such a resemblance is detected.”

“Well, the fact is, I had forgotten it. But, my dear host,” said Aramis, closing the register, “if I am not mistaken, we are summoned.”

Baisemeaux took the register, hastily restored it to its place in the closet, which he locked, and put the key in his pocket. “Will it be agreeable to your lordship to breakfast now?” said he; “for you are right in supposing that breakfast was announced.”

“Assuredly, my dear governor,” and they passed into the dining-room.

XXIV. The Breakfast at Monsieur de Baisemeaux’s.

Aramis was generally temperate; but on this occasion, while taking every care of his constitution, he did ample justice to Baisemeaux’s breakfast, which, in all respects, was most excellent. The latter on his side, was animated with the wildest gayety; the sight of the five thousand pistoles, which he glanced at from time to time, seemed to open his heart. Every now and then he looked at Aramis with an expression of the deepest gratitude; while the latter, leaning back in his chair, took a few sips of wine from his glass, with the air of a connoisseur. “Let me never hear any ill words against the fare of the Bastille,” said he, half closing his eyes; “happy are the prisoners who can get only half a bottle of such Burgundy every day.”

“All those at fifteen francs drink it,” said Baisemeaux. “It is very old Volnay.”

“Does that poor student, Seldon, drink such good wine?”

“Oh, no!”

“I thought I heard you say he was boarded at fifteen francs.”

“He! no, indeed; a man who makes districts—distichs I mean—at fifteen francs! No, no! it is his neighbor who is at fifteen francs.”

“Which neighbor?”

“The other, second Bertaudiere.”

“Excuse me, my dear governor; but you speak a language which requires quite an apprenticeship to understand.”

“Very true,” said the governor. “Allow me to explain: second Bertaudiere is the person who occupies the second floor of the tower of the Bertaudiere.”

“So that Bertaudiere is the name of one of the towers of the Bastille? The fact is, I think I recollect hearing that each tower has a name of its own. Whereabouts is the one you are speaking of?”

“Look,” said Baisemeaux, going to the window. “It is that tower to the left—the second one.”

“Is the prisoner at fifteen francs there?”

“Yes.”

“Since when?”

“Seven or eight years, nearly.”

“What do you mean by nearly? Do you not know the dates more precisely?”

“It was not in my time, M. d’Herblay.”

“But I should have thought that Louviere or Tremblay would have told you.”

“The secrets of the Bastille are never handed over with the keys of the governorship.”

“Indeed! Then the cause of his imprisonment is a mystery—a state secret.”

“Oh, no! I do not suppose it is a state secret, but a secret—like everything that happens at the Bastille.”

“But,” said Aramis, “why do you speak more freely of Seldon than of second Bertaudiere?”

“Because, in my opinion, the crime of the man who writes a distich is not so great as that of the man who resembles—”

“Yes, yes; I understand you. Still, do not the turnkeys talk with your prisoners?”

“Of course.”

“The prisoners, I suppose, tell them they are not guilty?”

“They are *always* telling them that; it is a matter of course; the same song over and over again.”

“But does not the resemblance you were speaking about just now strike the turnkeys?”

“My dear M. d’Herblay, it is only for men attached to the court, as you are, to take trouble about such matters.”

“You’re right, you’re right, my dear M. Baisemeaux. Let me give you another taste of this Volnay.”

“Not a taste merely, a full glass; fill yours too.”

“Nay, nay! You are a musketeer still, to the very tips of your fingers, while I have become a bishop. A taste for me; a glass for yourself.”

“As you please.” And Aramis and the governor nodded to each other, as they drank their wine. “But,” said Aramis, looking with fixed attention at the ruby-coloured wine he had raised to the level of his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy it with all his senses at the same moment, “but what you might call a resemblance, another would not, perhaps, take any notice of.”

“Most certainly he would, though, if it were any one who knew the person he resembles.”

“I really think, dear M. Baisemeaux, that it can be nothing more than a resemblance of your own creation.”

“Upon my honour, it is not so.”

“Stay,” continued Aramis. “I have seen many persons very like the one we are speaking of; but, out of respect, no one ever said anything about it.”

“Very likely; because there is resemblance and resemblance. This is a striking one, and, if you were to see him, you would admit it to be so.”

“If I were to see him, indeed,” said Aramis, in an indifferent tone; “but in all probability I never shall.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I were even to put my foot inside one of those horrible dungeons, I should fancy I was buried there forever.”

“No, no; the cells are very good places to live in.”

“I really do not, and cannot believe it, and that is a fact.”

“Pray do not speak ill of second Bertaudiere. It is really a good room, very nicely furnished and carpeted. The young fellow has by no means been unhappy there; the best lodging the Bastille affords has been his. There is a chance for you.”

“Nay, nay,” said Aramis, coldly; “you will never make me believe there are any good rooms in the Bastille; and, as for your carpets, they exist only in your imagination. I should find nothing but spiders, rats, and perhaps toads, too.”

“Toads?” cried Baisemeaux.

“Yes, in the dungeons.”

“Ah! I don’t say there are not toads in the dungeons,” replied Baisemeaux. “But—will you be convinced by your own eyes?” he continued, with a sudden impulse.

“No, certainly not.”

“Not even to satisfy yourself of the resemblance which you deny, as you do the carpets?”

“Some spectral-looking person, a mere shadow; an unhappy, dying man.”

“Nothing of the kind—as brisk and vigorous a young fellow as ever lived.”

“Melancholy and ill-tempered, then?”

“Not at all; very gay and lively.”

“Nonsense; you are joking.”

“Will you follow me?” said Baisemeaux.

“What for?”

“To go the round of the Bastille.”

“Why?”

“You will then see for yourself—see with your own eyes.”

“But the regulations?”

"Never mind them. To-day my major has leave of absence; the lieutenant is visiting the post on the bastions; we are sole masters of the situation."

"No, no, my dear governor; why, the very idea of the sound of the bolts makes me shudder. You will only have to forget me in second or fourth Bertaudiere, and then—"

"You are refusing an opportunity that may never present itself again. Do you know that, to obtain the favour I propose to you gratis, some of the princes of the blood have offered me as much as fifty thousand francs."

"Really! he must be worth seeing, then?"

"Forbidden fruit, my lord; forbidden fruit. You who belong to the church ought to know that."

"Well, if had any curiosity, it would be to see the poor author of the distich."

"Very well, we will see him, too; but if I were at all curious, it would be about the beautiful carpeted room and its lodger."

"Furniture is very commonplace; and a face with no expression in it offers little or no interest."

"But a boarder at fifteen francs is always interesting."

"By the by, I forgot to ask you about that. Why fifteen francs for him, and only three francs for poor Seldon?"

"The distinction made in that instance was a truly noble act, and one which displayed the king's goodness of heart to great advantage."

"The king's, you say."

"The cardinal's, I mean. 'This unhappy man,' said M. Mazarin, 'is destined to remain in prison forever.'"

"Why so?"

"Why, it seems that his crime is a lasting one; and, consequently, his punishment ought to be so, too."

"Lasting?"

"No doubt of it, unless he is fortunate enough to catch the small-pox, and even that is difficult, for we never get any impure air here."

"Nothing can be more ingenious than your train of reasoning, my dear M. Baisemeaux. Do you, however, mean to say that this unfortunate man must suffer without interruption or termination?"

"I did not say he was to suffer, my lord; a fifteen-franc boarder does not suffer."

"He suffers imprisonment, at all events."

"No doubt; there is no help for that, but this suffering is sweetened for him. You must admit that this young fellow was not born to eat all the good things he does eat; for instance, such things as we have on the table now; this pasty that has not been touched, these crawfish from the River Marne, of which we have hardly taken any, and which are almost as large as lobsters; all these things will at once be taken to second Bertaudiere, with a bottle of that Volnay which you think so excellent. After you have seen it you will believe it, I hope."

"Yes, my dear governor, certainly; but all this time you are thinking only of your very happy fifteen-franc prisoner, and you forget poor Seldon, my *protege*."

"Well, out of consideration for you, it shall be a gala day for him; he shall have some biscuits and preserves with this small bottle of port."

"You are a good-hearted fellow; I have said so already, and I repeat it, my dear Baisemeaux."

"Well, let us set off, then," said the governor, a little bewildered, partly from the wine he had drunk, and partly from Aramis's praises.

"Do not forget that I only go to oblige you," said the prelate.

"Very well; but you will thank me when you get there."

"Let us go, then."

"Wait until I have summoned the jailer," said Baisemeaux, as he struck the bell twice; at which summons a man appeared. "I am going to visit the towers," said the governor. "No guards, no drums, no noise at all."

"If I were not to leave my cloak here," said Aramis, pretending to be alarmed, "I should really think I was going to prison on my own account."

The jailer preceded the governor, Aramis walking on his right hand; some of the soldiers who happened to be in the courtyard drew themselves up in a line, as stiff as posts, as the governor passed along. Baisemeaux led the way down several steps which conducted to a sort of esplanade; thence they arrived at the drawbridge, where the sentinels on duty received the governor with the proper honours. The governor turned toward Aramis, and, speaking in such a tone that the sentinels could not lose a word, he observed,—"I hope you have a good memory, monsieur?"

"Why?" inquired Aramis.

"On account of your plans and your measurements, for you know that no one is allowed, not architects even, to enter where the prisoners are, with paper, pens or pencil."

"Good," said Aramis to himself, "it seems I am an architect, then. It sounds like one of D'Artagnan's jokes, who perceived in me the engineer of Belle-Isle." Then he added aloud: "Be easy on that score, monsieur; in our profession, a mere glance and a good memory are quite sufficient."

Baisemeaux did not change countenance, and the soldiers took Aramis for what he seemed to be. "Very well; we will first visit la Bertaudiere," said Baisemeaux, still intending the sentinels to hear him. Then, turning to the jailer, he added: "You will take the opportunity of carrying to No. 2 the few dainties I pointed out."

"Dear M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, "you are always forgetting No. 3."

"So I am," said the governor; and upon that, they began to ascend. The number of bolts, gratings, and locks for this single courtyard would have sufficed for the safety of an entire city. Aramis was neither an imaginative nor a sensitive man; he had been somewhat of a poet in his youth, but his heart was hard and indifferent, as the heart of every man of fifty-five years of age is, who has been frequently and passionately attached to women in his lifetime, or rather who has been passionately loved by them. But when he placed his foot upon the worn stone steps, along which so many unhappy wretches had passed, when he felt himself impregnated, as it were, with the atmosphere of those gloomy dungeons, moistened with tears, there could be but little doubt he was overcome by his feelings, for his head was bowed and his eyes became dim, as he followed Baisemeaux without a syllable.

XXV. The Second Floor of la Bertaudiere.

On the second flight of stairs, whether from fatigue or emotion, the breathing of the visitor began to fail him, and he leaned against the wall. "Will you begin with this one?" said Baisemeaux; "for since we are going to both, it matters very little whether we ascend from the second to the third story, or descend from the third to the second."

"No, no," exclaimed Aramis, eagerly, "higher, if you please; the one above is the more urgent." They continued their ascent. "Ask the jailer for the keys," whispered Aramis. Baisemeaux did so, took the keys, and, himself, opened the door of the third room. The jailer was the first to enter; he placed upon the table the provisions, which the kind-hearted governor called dainties, and then left the room. The prisoner had not stirred; Baisemeaux then entered, while Aramis remained at the threshold, from which place he saw a youth about eighteen years of age, who, raising his head at the unusual noise, jumped off the bed, as he perceived the governor, and clasping his hands together, began to cry out, "My mother, my mother," in tones which betrayed such deep distress that Aramis, despite his command over himself, felt a shudder pass through his frame. "My dear boy," said Baisemeaux, endeavoring to smile, "I have brought you a diversion and an extra,—the one for the mind, the other for the body; this gentleman has come to take your measure, and here are some preserves for your dessert."

"Oh, monsieur!" exclaimed the young man, "keep me in solitude for a year, let me have nothing but bread and water for a year, but tell me that at the end of a year I shall leave this place, tell me that at the end of a year I shall see my mother again."

"But I have heard you say that your mother was very poor, and that you were very badly lodged when you were living with her, while here—upon my word!"

"If she were poor, monsieur, the greater reason to restore her only means of support to her. Badly lodged with her! Oh, monsieur, every one is always well lodged when he is free."

"At all events, since you yourself admit you have done nothing but write that unhappy distich—"

"But without any intention, I swear. Let me be punished—cut off the hand which wrote it, I will work with the other—but restore my mother to me."

"My boy," said Baisemeaux, "you know very well that it does not depend upon me; all I can do for you is to increase your rations, give you a glass of port wine now and then, slip in a biscuit for you between a couple of plates."

"Great heaven!" exclaimed the young man, falling backward and rolling on the ground.

Aramis, unable to bear this scene any longer, withdrew as far as the landing. "Unhappy, wretched man," he murmured.

"Yes, monsieur, he is indeed very wretched," said the jailer; "but it is his parents' fault."

"In what way?"

"No doubt. Why did they let him learn Latin? Too much knowledge, you see; it is that which does harm. Now I, for instance, can't read or write, and therefore I am not in prison." Aramis looked at the man, who seemed to think that being a jailer in the Bastille was not being in prison. As for Baisemeaux, noticing the little effect produced by his advice and his port wine, he left the dungeon quite upset.

"You have forgotten to close the door," said the jailer.

"So I have," said Baisemeaux; "there are the keys, do you do it."

"I will solicit the pardon of that poor boy," said Aramis.

"And if you do not succeed," said Baisemeaux, "at least beg that he may be transferred to the ten-franc list, by which both he and I shall be gainers."

"If the other prisoner calls out for his mother in a similar manner," said Aramis, "I prefer not to enter at all, but will take my measure from outside."

"No fear of that, monsieur architect, the one we are now going to see is as gentle as a lamb; before he could call after his mother he must open his lips, and he never says a word."

"Let us go in, then," said Aramis, gloomily.

"Are you the architect of the prisons, monsieur?" said the jailer.

"I am."

"It is odd, then, that you are not more accustomed to all this."

Aramis perceived that, to avoid giving rise to any suspicions, he must summon all his strength of mind to his assistance. Baisemeaux, who carried the keys, opened the door. "Stay outside," he said to the jailer, "and wait for us at the bottom of the steps." The jailer obeyed and withdrew.

Baisemeaux entered first, and opened the second door himself. By the light which filtered through the iron-barred window, could be seen a handsome young man, short in stature, with closely cut hair, and a beard beginning to grow; he was sitting on a stool, his elbow resting on an armchair, and with all the upper part of his body reclining against it. His dress, thrown upon the bed, was of rich black velvet, and he inhaled the fresh air which blew in upon his breast through a shirt of the very finest cambric. As the governor entered, the young man turned his head with a look full of indifference; and on recognizing Baisemeaux, he arose and saluted him courteously. But when his eyes fell upon Aramis, who remained in the background, the latter trembled, turned pale, and his hat, which he held in his hand, fell upon the ground, as if all his muscles had become relaxed at once. Baisemeaux, habituated to the presence of his prisoner, did not seem to share any of the sensations which Aramis experienced, but, with all the zeal of a good servant, he busied himself in arranging on the table the pasty and crawfish he had brought with him. Occupied in this manner, he did not remark how disturbed his guest had become. When he had finished, however, he turned to the young prisoner and said: "You are looking very well,—are you so?"

"Quite well, I thank you, monsieur," replied the young man.

The effect of the voice was such as almost to overpower Aramis, and notwithstanding his control over himself, he advanced a few steps towards him, with his eyes wide open and his lips trembling. The movement he made was so marked that Baisemeaux, notwithstanding his preoccupation, observed it. "This gentleman is an architect who has come to examine your chimney," said Baisemeaux; "does it smoke?"

"Never, monsieur."

"You were saying just now," said the governor, rubbing his hands together, "that it was not possible for a man to be happy in prison; here, however, is one who is so. You have nothing to complain of, I hope?"

"Nothing."

"Do you ever feel weary?" said Aramis.

"Never."

"Ha, ha," said Baisemeaux, in a low tone of voice; "was I right?"

"Well, my dear governor, it is impossible not to yield to evidence. Is it allowed to put any question to him?"

"As many as you like."

"Very well; be good enough to ask him if he knows why he is here."

"This gentleman requests me to ask you," said Baisemeaux, "if you are aware of the cause of your imprisonment?"

"No, monsieur," said the young man, unaffectedly, "I am not."

"That is hardly possible," said Aramis, carried away by his feelings in spite of himself; "if you were really ignorant of the cause of your detention, you would be furious."

"I was so during the early days of my imprisonment."

"Why are you not so now?"

"Because I have reflected."

"That is strange," said Aramis.

"Is it not odd?" said Baisemeaux.

"May one venture to ask you, monsieur, on what you have reflected?"

"I felt that as I had committed no crime, Heaven could not punish me."

"What is a prison, then," inquired Aramis, "if it be not a punishment."

"Alas! I cannot tell," said the young man; "all that I can tell you now is the very opposite of what I felt seven years ago."

"To hear you converse, to witness your resignation, one might almost believe that you liked your imprisonment?"

"I endure it."

"In the certainty of recovering your freedom some day, I suppose?"

"I have no certainty; hope, I have, and that is all; and yet I acknowledge that this hope becomes less every day."

"Still, why should you not again be free, since you have already been so?"

"That is precisely the reason," replied the young man, "which prevents me from expecting liberty; why should I have been imprisoned at all if it had been intended to release me afterwards?"

"How old are you?"

"I do not know."

"What is your name?"

"I have forgotten the name by which I was called."

"Who are your parents?"

"I never knew them."

"But those who brought you up?"

"They did not call me their son."

"Did you ever love any one before coming here?"

"I loved my nurse, and my flowers."

"Was that all?"

"I also loved my valet."

"Do you regret your nurse and your valet?"

"I wept very much when they died."

"Did they die since you have been here, or before you came?"

"They died the evening before I was carried off."

"Both at the same time?"

"Yes, both at the same time."

"In what manner were you carried off?"

"A man came for me, directed me to get into a carriage, which was closed and locked, and brought me here."

"Would you be able to recognize that man again?"

"He was masked."

"Is this not an extraordinary tale?" said Baisemeaux, in a low tone of voice, to Aramis, who could hardly breathe.

"It is indeed extraordinary," he murmured.

"But what is still more extraordinary is, that he has never told me so much as he has just told you."

"Perhaps the reason may be that you have never questioned him," said Aramis.

"It's possible," replied Baisemeaux; "I have no curiosity. Have you looked at the room? it's a fine one, is it not?"

"Very much so."

"A carpet—"

"Beautiful."

"I'll wager he had nothing like it before he came here."

"I think so, too." And then again turning towards the young man, he said, "Do you not remember to have been visited at some time or another by a strange lady or gentleman?"

"Yes, indeed; thrice by a woman, who each time came to the door in a carriage, and entered covered with a veil, which she raised when we were together and alone."

"Do you remember that woman?"

"Yes."

"What did she say to you?"

The young man smiled mounfully, and then replied, "She inquired, as you have just done, if I were happy, and if I were getting weary."

"What did she do on arriving, and on leaving you?"

"She pressed me in her arms, held me in her embrace, and kissed me."

"Do you remember her?"

"Perfectly."

"Do you recall her features distinctly?"

"Yes."

"You would recognize her, then, if accident brought her before you, or led you into her person?"

"Most certainly."

A flush of fleeting satisfaction passed across Aramis's face. At this moment Baisemeaux heard the jailer approaching. "Shall we leave?" he said, hastily, to Aramis.

Aramis, who probably had learnt all that he cared to know, replied, "When you like."

The young man saw them prepare to leave, and saluted them politely. Baisemeaux replied merely by a nod of the head, while Aramis, with a respect, arising perhaps from the sight of such misfortune, saluted the prisoner profoundly. They left the room, Baisemeaux closing the door behind them.

"Well," said Baisemeaux, as they descended the staircase, "what do you think of it all?"

"I have discovered the secret, my dear governor," he said.

"Bah! what is the secret, then?"

"A murder was committed in that house."

"Nonsense."

"But attend; the valet and nurse died the same day."

"Well."

"And by poison. What do you think?"

"That is very likely to be true."

"What! that that young man is an assassin?"

"Who said that? What makes you think that poor young fellow could be an assassin?"

"The very thing I was saying. A crime was committed in his house," said Aramis, "and that was quite sufficient; perhaps he saw the criminals, and it was feared that he might say something."

"The deuce! if I only thought that—"

"Well?"

"I would redouble the surveillance."

"Oh, he does not seem to wish to escape."

"You do not know what prisoners are."

"Has he any books?"

"None; they are strictly prohibited, and under M. de Mazarin's own hand."

"Have you the writing still?"

"Yes, my lord; would you like to look at it as you return to take your cloak?"

"I should, for I like to look at autographs."

"Well, then, this one is of the most unquestionable authenticity; there is only one erasure."

"Ah, ah! an erasure; and in what respect?"

"With respect to a figure. At first there was written: 'To be boarded at fifty francs.'"

"As princes of the blood, in fact?"

"But the cardinal must have seen his mistake, you understand; for he canceled the zero, and has added a one before the five. But, by the by—"

"What?"

"You do not speak of the resemblance."

"I do not speak of it, dear M. de Baisemeaux, for a very simple reason— because it does not exist."

"The deuce it doesn't."

"Or, if it does exist, it is only in your own imagination; but, supposing it were to exist elsewhere, I think it would be better for you not to speak of about it."

"Really."

"The king, Louis XIV.—you understand—would be excessively angry with you, if he were to learn that you contributed in any way to spread the report that one of his subjects has the effrontery to resemble him."

"It is true, quite true," said Baisemeaux, thoroughly alarmed; "but I have not spoken of the circumstance to any one but yourself, and you understand, my lord, that I perfectly rely on your discretion."

“Oh, be easy.”  
“Do you still wish to see the note?”  
“Certainly.”

While engaged in this manner in conversation, they had returned to the governor’s apartments; Baisemeaux took from the cupboard a private register, like the one he had already shown Aramis, but fastened by a lock, the key which opened it being one of a small bunch which Baisemeaux always carried with him. Then placing the book upon the table, he opened it at the letter “M,” and showed Aramis the following note in the column of observations: “No books at any time; all linen and clothes of the finest and best quality to be procured; no exercise; always the same jailer; no communications with any one. Musical instruments; every liberty and every indulgence which his welfare may require; to be boarded at fifteen francs. M. de Baisemeaux can claim more if the fifteen francs be not sufficient.”

“Ah,” said Baisemeaux, “now I think of it, I shall claim it.”  
Aramis shut the book. “Yes,” he said, “it is indeed M. de Mazarin’s handwriting; I recognize it well. Now, my dear governor,” he continued, as if this last communication had exhausted his interest, “let us now turn over to our own little affairs.”

“Well, what time for repayment do you wish me to take? Fix it yourself.”  
“There need not be any particular period fixed; give me a simple acknowledgement for one hundred and fifty thousand francs.”  
“When to be made payable?”

“When I require it; but, you understand, I shall only wish it when you yourself do.”  
“Oh, I am quite easy on that score,” said Baisemeaux, smiling; “but I have already given you two receipts.”  
“Which I now destroy,” said Aramis; and after having shown the two receipts to Baisemeaux, he destroyed them. Overcome by so great a mark of confidence, Baisemeaux unhesitatingly wrote out an acknowledgement of a debt of one hundred and fifty thousand francs, payable at the pleasure of the prelate. Aramis, who had, by glancing over the governor’s shoulder, followed the pen as he wrote, put the acknowledgement into his pocket without seeming to have read it, which made Baisemeaux perfectly easy. “Now,” said Aramis, “you will not be angry with me if I were to carry off one of your prisoners?”

“What do you mean?”  
“By obtaining his pardon, of course. Have I not already told you that I took a great interest in poor Seldon?”  
“Yes, quite true, you did so.”

“Well?”  
“That is your affair; do as you think proper. I see you have an open hand, and an arm that can reach a great way.”  
“Adieu, adieu.” And Aramis left, carrying with him the governor’s best wishes.

XXVI. The Two Friends.

At the very time M. de Baisemeaux was showing Aramis the prisoners in the Bastille, a carriage drew up at Madame de Belliere’s door, and, at that still early hour, a young woman alighted, her head muffled in a silk hood. When the servants announced Madame Vanel to Madame de Belliere, the latter was engaged, or rather was absorbed, in reading a letter, which she hurriedly concealed. She had hardly finished her morning toilette, her maid being still in the next room. At the name—at the footsteps of Marguerite Vanel, Madame de Belliere ran to meet her. She fancied she could detect in her friend’s eyes a brightness which was neither that of health nor of pleasure. Marguerite embraced her, pressed her hands, and hardly allowed her time to speak. “Dearest,” she said, “have you forgotten me? Have you quite given yourself up to the pleasures of the court?”

“I have not even seen the marriage *fetes*.”  
“What are you doing with yourself, then?”  
“I am getting ready to leave for Belliere.”  
“For Belliere?”

“Yes.”  
“You are becoming rustic in your tastes, then; I delight to see you so disposed. But you are pale.”  
“No, I am perfectly well.”

“So much the better; I was becoming uneasy about you. You do not know what I have been told.”  
“People say so many things.”  
“Yes, but this is very singular.”  
“How well you know how to excite curiosity, Marguerite.”

“Well, I was afraid of vexing you.”  
“Never; you have yourself always admired me for my evenness of temper.”  
“Well, then, it is said that—no, I shall never be able to tell you.”  
“Do not let us talk about it, then,” said Madame de Belliere, who detected the ill-nature that was concealed by all these prefaces, yet felt the most anxious curiosity on the subject.

“Well, then, my dear marquise, it is said, for some time past, you no longer continue to regret Monsieur de Belliere as you used to.”  
“It is an ill-natured report, Marguerite. I do regret, and shall always regret, my husband; but it is now two years since he died. I am only twenty-eight years old, and my grief at his loss ought not always to control every action and thought of my life. You, Marguerite, who are the model of a wife, would not believe me if I were to say so.”  
“Why not? Your heart is so soft and yielding,” she said, spitefully.

“Yours is so, too, Marguerite, and yet I did not perceive that you allowed yourself to be overcome by grief when your heart was wounded.” These words were in direct allusion to Marguerite’s rupture with the superintendent, and were also a veiled but direct reproach made against her friend’s heart.  
As if she only awaited this signal to discharge her shaft, Marguerite exclaimed, “Well, Elise, it is said you are in love.” And she looked fixedly at Madame de Belliere, who blushed against her will.

“Women can never escape slander,” replied the marquise, after a moment’s pause.  
“No one slanders you, Elise.”

“What!—people say that I am in love, and yet they do not slander me!”  
“In the first place, if it be true, it is no slander, but simply a scandal-loving report. In the next place—for you did not allow me to finish what I was saying—the public does not assert that you have abandoned yourself to this passion. It represents you, on the contrary, as a virtuous but loving woman, defending yourself with claws and teeth, shutting yourself up in your own house as in a fortress; in other respects, as impenetrable as that of Danae, notwithstanding Danae’s tower was made of brass.”

“You are witty, Marguerite,” said Madame de Belliere, angrily.  
“You always flatter me, Elise. In short, however, you are reported to be incorruptible and unapproachable. You cannot decide whether the world is calumniating you or not; but what is it you are musing about while I am speaking to you?”

“I?”  
“Yes; you are blushing and do not answer me.”  
“I was trying,” said the marquise, raising her beautiful eyes brightened with an indication of growing temper, “I was trying to discover to what you could possibly have alluded, you who are so learned in mythological subjects, in comparing me to Danae.”

“You were trying to guess that?” said Marguerite, laughing.  
“Yes; do you not remember that at the convent, when we were solving our problems in arithmetic—ah! what I have to tell you is learned also, but it is my turn—do you not remember, that if one of the terms were given, we were to find the other? Therefore do *you* guess now?”

“I cannot conjecture what you mean.”  
“And yet nothing is more simple. You pretend that I am in love, do you not?”  
“So it is said.”

“Very well; it is not said, I suppose, that I am in love with an abstraction. There must surely be a name mentioned in this report.”  
“Certainly, a name is mentioned.”

“Very well; it is not surprising, then, that I should try to guess this name, since you do not tell it.”  
“My dear marquise, when I saw you blush, I did not think you would have to spend much time in conjectures.”  
“It was the word Danae which you used that surprised me. Danae means a shower of gold, does it not?”

“That is to say that the Jupiter of Danae changed himself into a shower of gold for her.”  
“My lover, then, he whom you assign me—”

“I beg your pardon; I am your friend, and assign you no one.”  
“That may be; but those who are ill disposed towards me.”

“Do you wish to hear the name?”  
“I have been waiting this half hour for it.”  
“Well, then, you shall hear it. Do not be shocked; he is a man high in power.”

“Good,” said the marquise, as she clenched her hands like a patient at the approach of the knife.  
“He is a very wealthy man,” continued Marguerite; “the wealthiest, it may be. In a word, it is—”

The marquise closed her eyes for a moment.  
“It is the Duke of Buckingham,” said Marguerite, bursting into laughter. This perfidy had been calculated with extreme ability; the name that was pronounced, instead of the name which the marquise awaited, had precisely the same effect upon her as the badly sharpened axes, that had hacked, without destroying, Messieurs de Chalais and de Thou upon the scaffold. She recovered herself, however, and said, “I was perfectly right in saying you were a witty woman, for you are making the time pass away most agreeably. This joke is a most amusing one, for I have never seen the Duke of Buckingham.”

“Never?” said Marguerite, restraining her laughter.  
“I have never even left my own house since the duke has been at Paris.”

“Oh!” resumed Madame Vanel, stretching out her foot towards a paper which was lying on the carpet near the window; “it is not necessary for people to see each other, since they can write.” The marquise trembled, for this paper was the envelope of the letter she was reading as her friend had entered, and was sealed with the superintendent’s arms. As she leaned back on the sofa on which she was sitting, Madame de Belliere covered the paper with the thick folds of her large silk dress, and so concealed it.

“Come, Marguerite, tell me, is it to tell me all these foolish reports that you have come to see me so early in the day?”  
“No; I came to see you, in the first place, and to remind you of those habits of our earlier days, so delightful to remember, when we used to wander about together at Vincennes, and, sitting beneath an oak, or in some sylvan shade, used to talk of those we loved, and who loved us.”  
“Do you propose that we should go out together now?”

“My carriage is here, and I have three hours at my disposal.”  
“I am not dressed yet, Marguerite; but if you wish that we should talk together, we can, without going to the woods of Vincennes, find in my own garden here, beautiful trees, shady groves, a green sward covered with daisies and violets, the perfume of which can be perceived from where we are sitting.”

"I regret your refusal, my dear marquise, for I wanted to pour out my whole heart into yours."

"I repeat again, Marguerite, my heart is yours just as much in this room, or beneath the lime-trees in the garden here, as it would be under the oaks in the woods yonder."

"It is not the same thing for me. In approaching Vincennes, marquise, my ardent aspirations approach nearer to that object towards which they have for some days past been directed." The marquise suddenly raised her head. "Are you surprised, then, that I am still thinking of Saint-Mande?"

"Of Saint-Mande?" exclaimed Madame de Belliere; and the looks of both women met each other like two resistless swords.

"You, so proud!" said the marquise, disdainfully.

"I, so proud!" replied Madame Vanel. "Such is my nature. I do not forgive neglect—I cannot endure infidelity. When I leave any one who weeps at my abandonment, I feel induced still to love him; but when others forsake me and laugh at their infidelity, I love distractedly."

Madame de Belliere could not restrain an involuntary movement.

"She is jealous," said Marguerite to herself.

"Then," continued the marquise, "you are quite enamored of the Duke of Buckingham—I mean of M. Fouquet?" Elise felt the allusion, and her blood seemed to congeal in her heart. "And you wished to go to Vincennes,—to Saint-Mande, even?"

"I hardly know what I wished: you would have advised me perhaps."

"In what respect?"

"You have often done so."

"Most certainly I should not have done so in the present instance, for I do not forgive as you do. I am less loving, perhaps; when my heart has been once wounded, it remains so always."

"But M. Fouquet has not wounded you," said Marguerite Vanel, with the most perfect simplicity.

"You perfectly understand what I mean. M. Fouquet has not wounded me; I do not know of either obligation or injury received at his hands, but you have reason to complain of him. You are my friend, and I am afraid I should not advise you as you would like."

"Ah! you are prejudging the case."

"The sighs you spoke of just now are more than indications."

"You overwhelm me," said the young woman suddenly, as if collecting her whole strength, like a wrestler preparing for a last struggle; "you take only my evil dispositions and my weaknesses into calculation, and do not speak of my pure and generous feelings. If, at this moment, I feel instinctively attracted towards the superintendent, if I even make an advance to him, which, I confess, is very probable, my motive for it is, that M. Fouquet's fate deeply affects me, and because he is, in my opinion, one of the most unfortunate men living."

"Ah!" said the marquise, placing her hand upon her heart, "something new, then, has occurred?"

"Do you not know it?"

"I am utterly ignorant of everything about him," said Madame de Belliere, with the poignant anguish that suspends thought and speech, and even life itself.

"In the first place, then, the king's favour is entirely withdrawn from M. Fouquet, and conferred on M. Colbert."

"So it is stated."

"It is very clear, since the discovery of the plot of Belle-Isle."

"I was told that the discovery of the fortifications there had turned out to M. Fouquet's honour."

Marguerite began to laugh in so cruel a manner that Madame de Belliere could at that moment have delightedly plunged a dagger in her bosom. "Dearest," continued Marguerite, "there is no longer any question of M. Fouquet's honour; his safety is concerned. Before three days are passed the ruin of the superintendent will be complete."

"Stay," said the marquise, in her turn smiling, "that is going a little fast."

"I said three days, because I wish to deceive myself with a hope; but probably the catastrophe will be complete within twenty-four hours."

"Why so?"

"For the simplest of all reasons,—that M. Fouquet has no more money."

"In matters of finance, my dear Marguerite, some are without money to-day, who to-morrow can procure millions."

"That might be M. Fouquet's case when he had two wealthy and clever friends who amassed money for him, and wrung it from every possible or impossible source; but those friends are dead."

"Money does not die, Marguerite; it may be concealed, but it can be looked for, bought and found."

"You see things on the bright side, and so much the better for you. It is really very unfortunate that you are not the Egeria of M. Fouquet; you might now show him the source whence he could obtain the millions which the king asked him for yesterday."

"Millions!" said the marquise, in terror.

"Four—an even number."

"Infamous!" murmured Madame de Belliere, tortured by her friend's merciless delight.

"M. Fouquet, I should think, must certainly have four millions," she replied, courageously.

"If he has those which the king requires to-day," said Marguerite, "he will not, perhaps, possess those which the king will demand in a month or so."

"The king will exact money from him again, then?"

"No doubt; and that is my reason for saying that the ruin of poor M. Fouquet is inevitable. Pride will induce him to furnish the money, and when he has no more, he will fall."

"It is true," said the marquise, trembling; "the plan is a bold one; but tell me, does M. Colbert hate M. Fouquet so very much?"

"I think he does not like him. M. Colbert is powerful; he improves on close acquaintance; he has gigantic ideas, a strong will, and discretion; he will rise."

"He will be superintendent?"

"It is probable. Such is the reason, my dear marquise, why I felt myself impressed in favour of that poor man, who once loved, and even adored me; and why, when I see him so unfortunate, I forgive his infidelity, which I have reason to believe he also regrets; and why, moreover, I should not have been disinclined to afford him some consolation, or some good advice; he would have understood the step I had taken, and would have thought kindly of me for it. It is gratifying to be loved, you know. Men value love more highly when they are no longer blinded by its influence."

The marquise, bewildered and overcome by these cruel attacks, which had been calculated with the greatest nicety and precision, hardly knew what to answer in return; she even seemed to have lost all power of thought. Her perfidious friend's voice had assumed the most affectionate tone; she spoke as a woman, but concealed the instincts of a wolf.

"Well," said Madame de Belliere, who had a vague hope that Marguerite would cease to overwhelm a vanquished enemy, "why do you not go and see M. Fouquet?"

"Decidedly, marquise, you have made me reflect. No, it would be unbecoming for me to make the first advance. M. Fouquet no doubt loves me, but he is too proud. I cannot expose myself to an affront.... besides, I have my husband to consider. You tell me nothing? Very well, I shall consult M. Colbert on the subject." Marguerite rose smilingly, as though to take leave, but the marquise had not the strength to imitate her. Marguerite advanced a few paces, in order that she might continue to enjoy the humiliating grief in which her rival was plunged, and then said, suddenly,—"You do not accompany me to the door, then?" The marquise rose, pale and almost lifeless, without thinking of the envelope, which had occupied her attention so greatly at the commencement of the conversation, and which was revealed at the first step she took. She then opened the door of her oratory, and without even turning her head towards Marguerite Vanel, entered it, closing the door after her. Marguerite said, or rather muttered a few words, which Madame de Belliere did not even hear. As soon, however, as the marquise had disappeared, her envious enemy, not being able to resist the desire to satisfy herself that her suspicions were well founded, advanced stealthily like a panther, and seized the envelope. "Ah!" she said, gnashing her teeth, "it was indeed a letter from M. Fouquet she was reading when I arrived," and then darted out of the room. During this interval, the marquise, having arrived behind the rampart, as it were, of her door, felt that her strength was failing her; for a moment she remained rigid, pale and motionless as a statue, and then, like a statue shaken on its base by an earthquake, tottered and fell inanimate on the carpet. The noise of the fall resounded at the same moment as the rolling of Marguerite's carriage leaving the hotel.

#### XXVII. Madame de Belliere's Plate.

The blow had been the more painful on account of its being unexpected. It was some time before the marquise recovered herself; but once recovered, she began to reflect upon the events so heartlessly announced to her. She therefore returned, at the risk even of losing her life in the way, to that train of ideas which her relentless friend had forced her to pursue. Treason, then—deep menaces, concealed under the semblance of public interest—such were Colbert's maneuvers. A detestable delight at an approaching downfall, untiring efforts to attain this object, means of seduction no less wicked than the crime itself—such were the weapons Marguerite employed. The crooked atoms of Descartes triumphed; to the man without compassion was united a woman without heart. The marquise perceived, with sorrow rather than indignation, that the king was an accomplice in the plot which betrayed the duplicity of Louis XIII. in his advanced age, and the avarice of Mazarin at a period of life when he had not had the opportunity of gorging himself with French gold. The spirit of this courageous woman soon resumed its energy, no longer overwhelmed by indulgence in compassionate lamentations. The marquise was not one to weep when action was necessary, nor to waste time in bewailing a misfortune as long as means still existed of relieving it. For some minutes she buried her face in her cold fingers, and then, raising her head, rang for her attendants with a steady hand, and with a gesture betraying a fixed determination of purpose. Her resolution was taken.

"Is everything prepared for my departure?" she inquired of one of her female attendants who entered.

"Yes, madame; but it was not expected that your ladyship would leave for Belliere for the next few days."

"All my jewels and articles of value, then, are packed up?"

"Yes, madame; but hitherto we have been in the habit of leaving them in Paris. Your ladyship does not generally take your jewels with you into the country."

"But they are all in order, you say?"

"Yes, in your ladyship's own room."

"The gold plate?"

"In the chest."

"And the silver plate?"

"In the great oak closet."

The marquise remained silent for a few moments, and then said calmly, "Let my goldsmith be sent for."

Her attendants quitted the room to execute the order. The marquise, however, had entered her own room, and was inspecting her casket of jewels with the greatest attention. Never, until now, had she bestowed such close attention upon riches in which women take so much pride; never, until now, had she looked at her jewels, except for the purpose of making a selection according to their settings or their colours. On this occasion, however, she admired the size of the rubies and the brilliancy of the diamonds; she grieved over every blemish and every defect; she thought the gold light, and the stones wretched. The goldsmith, as he entered, found her thus occupied. "M. Faucheux," she said, "I believe you supplied me with my gold service?"

"I did, your ladyship."

"I do not now remember the amount of the account."

"Of the new service, madame, or of that which M. de Belliere presented to you on your marriage? for I have furnished both."

"First of all, the new one."

"The covers, the goblets, and the dishes, with their covers, the *eau-epergne*, the ice-pails, the dishes for the preserves, and the tea and coffee urns, cost your ladyship sixty thousand francs."

"No more?"

"Your ladyship thought the account very high."

"Yes, yes; I remember, in fact, that it was dear; but it was the workmanship, I suppose?"

"Yes, madame; the designs, the chasings—all new patterns."

"What proportion of the cost does the workmanship form? Do not hesitate to tell me."

"A third of its value, madame."

"There is the other service, the old one, that which belonged to my husband?"



"Yes, madame; there is less workmanship in that than in the other. Its intrinsic value does not exceed thirty thousand francs."

"Thirty thousand," murmured the marquise. "But, M. Fauchaux, there is also the service which belonged to my mother; all that massive plate which I did not wish to part with, on account of the associations connected with it."

"Ah! madame, that would indeed be an excellent resource for those who, unlike your ladyship, might not be in position to keep their plate. In chasing that they worked in solid metal. But that service is no longer in fashion. Its weight is its only advantage."

"That is all I care about. How much does it weigh?"

"Fifty thousand livres at the very least. I do not allude to the enormous vases for the buffet, which alone weigh five thousand livres, or ten thousand the pair."

"One hundred and thirty," murmured the marquise. "You are quite sure of your figures, M. Fauchaux?"

"The amount is entered in my books. Your ladyship is extremely methodical, I am aware."

"Let us now turn to another subject," said Madame de Belliere; and she opened one of her jewel-boxes.

"I recognize these emeralds," said M. Fauchaux; "for it was I who had the setting of them. They are the most beautiful in the whole court. No, I am mistaken; Madame de Chatillon has the most beautiful set; she had them from Messieurs de Guise; but your set, madame, comes next."

"What are they worth?"

"Mounted?"

"No; supposing I wished to sell them."

"I know very well who would buy them," exclaimed M. Fauchaux.

"That is the very thing I ask. They could be sold, then?"

"All your jewels could be sold, madame. It is well known that you possess the most beautiful jewels in Paris. You are not changeable in your tastes; when you make a purchase it is of the very best; and what you purchase you do not part with."

"What could these emeralds be sold for, then?"

"A hundred and thirty thousand francs."

The marquise wrote down upon her tablets the amount which the jeweler mentioned. "The ruby necklace?" she said.

"Are they balas-rubies, madame?"

"Here they are."

"They are beautiful—magnificent. I did not know your ladyship had these stones."

"What is their value?"

"Two hundred thousand francs. The center one is alone worth a hundred thousand."

"I thought so," said the marquise. "As for diamonds, I have them in numbers; rings, necklaces, sprigs, ear-rings, clasps. Tell me their value, M. Fauchaux."

The jeweler took his magnifying-glass and scales, weighed and inspected them, and silently made his calculations. "These stones," he said, "must have cost your ladyship an income of forty thousand francs."

"You value them at eight hundred thousand francs?"

"Nearly so."

"It is about what I imagined—but the settings are not included?"

"No, madame; but if I were called upon to sell or to buy, I should be satisfied with the gold of the settings alone as my profit upon the transaction. I should make a good twenty-five thousand francs."

"An agreeable sum."

"Very much so, madame."

"Will you then accept that profit, then, on condition of converting the jewels into money?"

"But you do not intend to sell you diamonds, I suppose, madame?" exclaimed the bewildered jeweler.

"Silence, M. Fauchaux, do not disturb yourself about that; give me an answer simply. You are an honourable man, with whom my family has dealt for thirty years; you knew my father and mother, whom your own father and mother served. I address you as a friend; will you accept the gold of the settings in return for a sum of ready money to be placed in my hands?"

"Eight hundred thousand francs! it is enormous."

"I know it."

"Impossible to find."

"Not so."

"But reflect, madame, upon the effect which will be produced by the sale of your jewels."

"No one need know it. You can get sets of false jewels made for me, similar to the real. Do not answer a word; I insist upon it. Sell them separately, sell the stones only."

"In that way it is easy. Monsieur is looking out for some sets of jewels as well as single stones for Madame's toilette. There will be a competition for them. I can easily dispose of six hundred thousand francs' worth to Monsieur. I am certain yours are the most beautiful."

"When can you do so?"

"In less than three days' time."

"Very well, the remainder you will dispose of among private individuals. For the present, make me out a contract of sale, payment to be made in four days."

"I entreat you to reflect, madame; for if you force the sale, you will lose a hundred thousand francs."

"If necessary, I will lose two hundred; I wish everything to be settled this evening. Do you accept?"

"I do, your ladyship. I will not conceal from you that I shall make fifty thousand francs by the transaction."

"So much the better for you. In what way shall I have the money?"

"Either in gold, or in bills of the bank of Lyons, payable at M. Colbert's."

"I agree," said the marquise, eagerly; "return home and bring the sum in question in notes, as soon as possible."

"Yes, madame, but for Heaven's sake—"

"Not a word, M. Fauchaux. By the by, I was forgetting the silver plate. What is the value of that which I have?"

"Fifty thousand francs, madame."

"That makes a million," said the marquise to herself. "M. Fauchaux, you will take away with you both the gold and silver plate. I can assign, as a pretext, that I wish it remodeled on patters more in accordance with my own taste. Melt it down, and return me its value in money, at once."

"It shall be done, your ladyship."

"You will be good enough to place the money in a chest, and direct one of your clerks to accompany the chest, and without my servants seeing him; and order him to wait for me in a carriage."

"In Madame de Fauchaux's carriage?" said the jeweler.

"If you will allow it, and I will call for it at your house."

"Certainly, your ladyship."

"I will direct some of my servants to convey the plate to your house." The marquise rung. "Let the small van be placed at M. Fauchaux's disposal," she said. The jeweler bowed and left the house, directing that the van should follow him closely, saying aloud, that the marquise was about to have her plate melted down in order to have other plate manufactured of a more modern style. Three hours afterwards she went to M. Fauchaux's house and received from him eight hundred francs in gold inclosed in a chest, which one of the clerks could hardly carry towards Madame Fauchaux's carriage—for Madame Fauchaux kept her carriage. As the daughter of a president of accounts, she had brought a marriage portion of thirty thousand crowns to her husband, who was syndic of the goldsmiths. These thirty thousand crowns had become very fruitful during twenty years. The jeweler, though a *millionaire*, was a modest man. He had purchased a substantial carriage, built in 1648, ten years after the king's birth. This carriage, or rather house upon wheels, excited the admiration of the whole quarter in which he resided—it was covered with allegorical paintings, and clouds scattered over with stars. The marquise entered this somewhat extraordinary vehicle, sitting opposite the clerk, who endeavored to put his knees out of the way, afraid even of touching the marquise's dress. It was the clerk, too, who told the coachman, who was very proud of having a marquise to drive, to take the road to Saint-Mande.

XXVIII. The Dowry.

Monsieur Fauchaux's horses were serviceable animals, with thickset knees and legs that had some difficulty in moving. Like the carriage, they belonged to the earlier part of the century. They were not as fleet as the English horses of M. Fouquet, and consequently it took two hours to get to Saint-Mande. Their progress, it might be said, was majestic. Majesty, however, precludes hurry. The marquise stopped the carriage at the door so well known to her, although she had seen it only once, under circumstances, it will now be remembered, no less painful than those which brought her now to it again. She drew a key from her pocket, and inserted it into the lock, pushed open the door, which noiselessly yielded to her touch, and directed the clerk to carry the chest upstairs to the first floor. The weight of the chest was so great that the clerk was obliged to get the coachman to assist him with it. They placed it in a small cabinet, ante-room, or boudoir rather, adjoining the saloon where we once saw M. Fouquet at the marquise's feet. Madame de Belliere gave the coachman a louis, smiled gracefully at the clerk, and dismissed them both. She closed the door after them, and waited in the room, alone and barricaded. There was no servant to be seen about the rooms, but everything was prepared as though some invisible genius had divined the wishes and desires of an expected guest. The fire was laid, candles in the candelabra, refreshments upon the table, books scattered about, fresh-cut flowers in the vases. One might almost have imagined it an enchanted house. The marquise lighted the candles, inhaled the perfume of the flowers, sat down, and was soon plunged in profound thought. Her deep musings, melancholy though they were, were not untinged with a certain vague joy. Spread out before her was a treasure, a million wrung from her fortune as a gleaner plucks the blue corn-flower from her crown of flowers. She conjured up the sweetest dreams. Her principal thought, and one that took precedence of all others, was to devise means of leaving this money for M. Fouquet without his possibly learning from whom the gift had come. This idea, naturally enough, was the first to present itself to her mind. But although, on reflection, it appeared difficult to carry out, she did not despair of success. She would then ring to summon M. Fouquet and make her escape, happier than if, instead of having given a million, she had herself found one. But, being there, and having seen the boudoir so coquettishly decorated that it might almost be said the least particle of dust had but the moment before been removed by the servants; having observed the drawing-room, so perfectly arranged that it might almost be said her presence there had driven away the fairies who were its occupants, she asked herself if the glance or gaze of those whom she had displaced—whether spirits, fairies, elves, or human creatures—had not already recognized her. To secure success, it was necessary that some steps should be seriously taken, and it was necessary also that the superintendent should comprehend the serious position in which he was placed, in order to yield compliance with the generous fancies of a woman; all the fascinations of an eloquent friendship would be required to persuade him, and, should this be insufficient, the maddening influence of a devoted passion, which, in its resolute determination to carry conviction, would not be turned aside. Was not the superintendent, indeed, known for his delicacy and dignity of feeling? Would he allow himself to accept from any woman that of which she had stripped herself? No! He would resist, and if any voice in the world could overcome his resistance, it would be the voice of the woman he loved. Another doubt, and that a cruel one, suggested itself to Madame de Belliere with a sharp, acute pain, like a dagger thrust. Did he really love her? Would that volatile mind, that inconstant heart, be likely to be fixed for a moment, even were it to gaze upon an angel? Was it not the same with Fouquet, notwithstanding his genius and his uprightness of conduct, as with those conquerors on the field of battle who shed tears when they have gained a victory? "I must learn if it be so, and must judge of that for myself," said the marquise. "Who can tell whether that heart, so coveted, is not common in its impulses, and full of alloy? Who can tell if that mind, when the touchstone is applied to it, will not be found of a mean and vulgar character? Come, come," she said, "this is doubting and hesitation too much—to the proof," she said, looking at the timepiece. "It is now seven o'clock," she said; "he must have arrived; it is the hour for signing his papers." With a feverish impatience she rose and walked towards the mirror, in which she smiled with a resolute smile of devotedness; she touched the spring and drew out the handle of the bell. Then, as if exhausted beforehand by the struggle she had just undergone, she threw herself on her knees, in utter abandonment, before a large couch, in which she buried her face in her trembling hands. Ten minutes afterwards she heard the spring of the door sound. The door moved upon invisible hinges, and Fouquet appeared. He looked pale, and seemed bowed down by the weight of some bitter reflection. He did not hurry, but simply came at the

summons. The preoccupation of his mind must indeed have been very great, that a man, so devoted to pleasure, for whom indeed pleasure meant everything, should obey such a summons so listlessly. The previous night, in fact, fertile in melancholy ideas, had sharpened his features, generally so noble in their indifference of expression, and had traced dark lines of anxiety around his eyes. Handsome and noble he still was, and the melancholy expression of his mouth, a rare expression with men, gave a new character to his features, by which his youth seemed to be renewed. Dressed in black, the lace in front of his chest much disarranged by his feverishly restless hand, the looks of the superintendent, full of dreamy reflection, were fixed upon the threshold of the room which he had so frequently approached in search of expected happiness. This gloomy gentleness of manner, this smiling sadness of expression, which had replaced his former excessive joy, produced an indescribable effect upon Madame de Belliere, who was regarding him at a distance.

A woman’s eye can read the face of the man she loves, its every feeling of pride, its every expression of suffering; it might almost be said that Heaven has graciously granted to women, on account of their very weakness, more than it has accorded to other creatures. They can conceal their own feelings from a man, but from them no man can conceal his. The marquise divined in a single glance the whole weight of the unhappiness of the superintendent. She divined a night passed without sleep, a day passed in deceptions. From that moment she was firm in her own strength, and she felt that she loved Fouquet beyond everything else. She arose and approached him, saying, “You wrote to me this morning to say you were beginning to forget me, and that I, whom you had not seen lately, had no doubt ceased to think of you. I have come to undeceive you, monsieur, and the more completely so, because there is one thing I can read in your eyes.”

“What is that, madame?” said Fouquet, astonished.

“That you have never loved me so much as at this moment; in the same manner you can read, in my present step towards you, that I have not forgotten you.”

“Oh! madame,” said Fouquet, whose face was for a moment lighted up by a sudden gleam of joy, “you are indeed an angel, and no man can suspect you. All he can do is to humble himself before you and entreat forgiveness.”

“Your forgiveness is granted, then,” said the marquise. Fouquet was about to throw himself upon his knees. “No, no,” she said, “sit here by my side. Ah! that is an evil thought which has just crossed your mind.”

“How do you detect it, madame?”

“By the smile that has just marred the expression of your countenance. Be candid, and tell me what your thought was—no secrets between friends.”

“Tell me, then, madame, why you have been so harsh these three or four months past?”

“Harsh?”

“Yes; did you not forbid me to visit you?”

“Alas!” said Madame de Belliere, sighing, “because your visit to me was the cause of your being visited with a great misfortune; because my house is watched; because the same eyes that have seen you already might see you again; because I think it less dangerous for you that I should come here than that you should come to my house; and, lastly, because I know you to be already unhappy enough not to wish to increase your unhappiness further.”

Fouquet started, for these words recalled all the anxieties connected with his office of superintendent—he who, for the last few minutes, had indulged in all the wild aspirations of the lover. “I unhappy?” he said, endeavoring to smile: “indeed, marquise, you will almost make me believe I am so, judging from your own sadness. Are your beautiful eyes raised upon me merely in pity? I was looking for another expression from them.”

“It is not I who am sad, monsieur; look in the mirror, there—it is yourself.”

“It is true I am somewhat pale, marquise; but it is from overwork; the king yesterday required a supply of money from me.”

“Yes, four millions; I am aware of it.”

“You know it?” exclaimed Fouquet, in a tone of surprise; “how can you have learnt it? It was after the departure of the queen, and in the presence of one person only, that the king—”

“You perceive that I do know it; is that not sufficient? Well, go on, monsieur, the money the king has required you to supply—”

“You understand, marquise, that I have been obliged to procure it, then to get it counted, afterwards registered—altogether a long affair. Since Monsieur de Mazarin’s death, financial affairs occasion some little fatigue and embarrassment. My administration is somewhat overtaxed, and this is the reason why I have not slept during the past night.”

“So you have the amount?” inquired the marquise, with some anxiety.

“It would indeed be strange, marquise,” replied Fouquet, cheerfully, “if a superintendent of finances were not to have a paltry four millions in his coffers.”

“Yes, yes, I believe you either have, or will have them.”

“What do you mean by saying I shall have them?”

“It is not very long since you were required to furnish two millions.”

“On the contrary, it seems almost an age; but do not let us talk of money matters any longer.”

“On the contrary, we will continue to speak of them, for that is my only reason for coming to see you.”

“I am at a loss to compass your meaning,” said the superintendent, whose eyes began to express an anxious curiosity.

“Tell me, monsieur, is the office of superintendent a permanent position?”

“You surprise me, marchioness, for you speak as if you had some motive or interest in putting the question.”

“My reason is simple enough; I am desirous of placing some money in your hands, and naturally I wish to know if you are certain of your post.”

“Really, marquise, I am at a loss what to reply; I cannot conceive your meaning.”

“Seriously, then, dear M. Fouquet, I have certain funds which somewhat embarrass me. I am tired of investing my money in lands, and am anxious to intrust it to some friend who will turn it to account.”

“Surely it does not press,” said M. Fouquet.

“On the contrary, it is very pressing.”

“Very well, we will talk of that by and by.”

“By and by will not do, for my money is there,” returned the marquise, pointing out the coffer to the superintendent, and showing him, as she opened it, the bundles of notes and heaps of gold. Fouquet, who had risen from his seat at the same moment as Madame de Belliere, remained for a moment plunged in thought; then suddenly starting back, he turned pale, and sank down in his chair, concealing his face in his hands. “Madame, madame,” he murmured, “what opinion can you have of me, when you make me such an offer?”

“Of you!” returned the marquise. “Tell me, rather, what you yourself think of the step I have taken.”

“You bring me this money for myself, and you bring it because you know me to be embarrassed. Nay, do not deny it, for I am sure of it. Can I not read your heart?”

“If you know my heart, then, can you not see that it is my heart I offer you?”

“I have guessed rightly, then,” exclaimed Fouquet. “In truth, madame, I have never yet given you the right to insult me in this manner.”

“Insult you,” she said, turning pale, “what singular delicacy of feeling! You tell me you love me; in the name of that affection you wish me to sacrifice my reputation and my honour, yet, when I offer you money which is my own, you refuse me.”

“Madame, you are at liberty to preserve what you term your reputation and your honour. Permit me to preserve mine. Leave me to my ruin, leave me to sink beneath the weight of the hatreds which surround me, beneath the faults I have committed, beneath the load, even, of my remorse, but, for Heaven’s sake, madame, do not overwhelm me with this last infliction.”

“A short time since, M. Fouquet, you were wanting in judgment; now you are wanting in feeling.”

Fouquet pressed his clenched hand upon his breast, heaving with emotion, saying: “overwhelm me, madame, for I have nothing to reply.”

“I offered you my friendship, M. Fouquet.”

“Yes, madame, and you limited yourself to that.”

“And what I am now doing is the act of a friend.”

“No doubt it is.”

“And you reject this mark of my friendship?”

“I do reject it.”

“Monsieur Fouquet, look at me,” said the marquise, with glistening eyes, “I now offer you my love.”

“Oh, madame,” exclaimed Fouquet.

“I have loved you for a long while past; women, like men, have a false delicacy at times. For a long time past I have loved you, but would not confess it. Well, then, you have implored this love on your knees, and I have refused you; I was blind, as you were a little while since; but as it was my love that you sought, it is my love I now offer you.”

“Oh! madame, you overwhelm me beneath a load of happiness.”

“Will you be happy, then, if I am yours—entirely?”

“It will be the supremest happiness for me.”

“Take me, then. If, however, for your sake I sacrifice a prejudice, do you, for mine, sacrifice a scruple.”

“Do not tempt me.”

“Do not refuse me.”

“Think seriously of what you are proposing.”

“Fouquet, but one word. Let it be ‘No,’ and I open this door,” and she pointed to the door which led into the streets, “and you will never see me again. Let that word be ‘Yes,’ and I am yours entirely.”

“Elise! Elise! But this coffer?”

“Contains my dowry.”

“It is your ruin,” exclaimed Fouquet, turning over the gold and papers; “there must be a million here.”

“Yes, my jewels, for which I care no longer if you do not love me, and for which, equally, I care no longer if you love me as I love you.”

“This is too much,” exclaimed Fouquet. “I yield, I yield, even were it only to consecrate so much devotion. I accept the dowry.”

“And take the woman with it,” said the marquise, throwing herself into his arms.

#### XXIX. Le Terrain de Dieu.

During the progress of these events Buckingham and De Wardes traveled in excellent companionship, and made the journey from Paris to Calais in undisturbed harmony together. Buckingham had hurried his departure, so that the greater part of his *adieux* were very hastily made. His visit to Monsieur and Madame, to the young queen, and to the queen-dowager, had been paid collectively—a precaution on the part of the queen-mother which saved him the distress of any private conversation with Monsieur, and also the danger of seeing Madame again. The carriages containing the luggage had already been sent on beforehand, and in the evening he set off in his traveling carriage with his attendants.

De Wardes, irritated at finding himself dragged away in so abrupt a manner by this Englishman, had sought in his subtle mind for some means of escaping from his fetters; but no one having rendered him any assistance in this respect, he was absolutely obliged, therefore, to submit to the burden of his own evil thoughts and caustic spirit.

Such of his friends in whom he had been able to confide, had, in their character of wits, rallied him upon the duke’s superiority. Others, less brilliant, but more sensible, had reminded him of the king’s orders prohibiting dueling. Others, again, and they the larger number, who, in virtue of charity, or national vanity, might have rendered him assistance, did not care to run the risk of incurring disgrace, and would, at the best, have informed the ministers of a departure which might end in a massacre on a small scale. The result was, that, after having fully deliberated upon the matter, De Wardes packed up his luggage, took a couple of horses, and, followed only by one servant, made his way towards the barrier, where Buckingham’s carriage was to await him.

The duke received his adversary as he would have done an intimate acquaintance, made room beside him on the same seat with himself, offered him refreshments, and spread over his knees the sable cloak that had been thrown on the front seat. They then conversed of the court, without alluding to Madame; of Monsieur, without speaking of domestic affairs; of the king, without speaking of his brother’s wife; of the queen-mother, without alluding to her daughter-in-law; of the king of England, without alluding to his sister; of the state of the affections of either of the travelers, without pronouncing any name that might be dangerous. In this way the journey, which was performed by short stages, was most agreeable, and Buckingham, almost a Frenchman from wit and education, was delighted at having so admirably selected his traveling companion. Elegant repasts were served, of which they partook but lightly; trials of horses made in the beautiful meadows that skirted the road; coursing

indulged in, for Buckingham had his greyhounds with him; and in such ways did they pass away the pleasant time. The duke somewhat resembled the beautiful river Seine, which folds France a thousand times in its loving embrace, before deciding upon joining its waters with the ocean. In quitting France, it was her recently adopted daughter he had brought to Paris whom he chiefly regretted; his every thought was a remembrance of her—his every memory a regret. Therefore, whenever, now and then, despite his command over himself, he was lost in thought, De Wardes left him entirely to his musings. This delicacy might have touched Buckingham, and changed his feelings towards De Wardes, if the latter, while preserving silence, had shown a glance less full of malice, and a smile less false. Instinctive dislikes, however, are relentless; nothing appeases them; a few ashes may, sometimes, apparently, extinguish them; but beneath those ashes the smothered embers rage more furiously. Having exhausted every means of amusement the route offered, they arrived, as we have said, at Calais towards the end of the sixth day. The duke's attendants, since the previous evening, had traveled in advance, and now chartered a boat, for the purpose of joining the yacht, which had been tacking about in sight, or bore broadside on, whenever it felt its white wings wearied, within cannon-shot of the jetty.

The boat was destined for the transport of the duke's equipages from the shore to the yacht. The horses had been embarked, having been hoisted from the boat upon the deck in baskets, expressly made for the purpose, and wadded in such a manner that their limbs, even in the most violent fits of terror or impatience, were always protected by the soft support which the sides afforded, and their coats not even turned. Eight of these baskets, placed side by side, filled the ship's hold. It is well known that, in short voyages horses refuse to eat, but remain trembling all the while, with the best of food before them, such as they would have greatly coveted on land. By degrees, the duke's entire equipage was transported on board the yacht; he was then informed that everything was in readiness, and that they only waited for him, whenever he would be disposed to embark with the French gentleman; for no one could possibly imagine that the French gentleman would have any other accounts to settle with his Grace other than those of friendship. Buckingham desired the captain to be told to hold himself in readiness, but that, as the sea was beautiful, and as the day promised a splendid sunset, he did not intend to go on board until nightfall, and would avail himself of the evening to enjoy a walk on the strand. He added also, that, finding himself in such excellent company, he had not the least desire to hasten his embarkation.

As he said this he pointed out to those who surrounded him the magnificent spectacle which the sky presented, of deepest azure in the horizon, the amphitheatre of fleecy clouds ascending from the sun's disc to the zenith, assuming the appearance of a range of snowy mountains, whose summits were heaped one upon another. The dome of clouds was tinged at its base with, as it were, the foam of rubies, fading away into opal and pearly tints, in proportion as the gaze was carried from base to summit. The sea was gilded with the same reflection, and upon the crest of every sparkling wave danced a point of light, like a diamond by lamplight. The mildness of the evening, the sea breezes, so dear to contemplative minds, setting in from the east and blowing in delicious gusts; then, in the distance, the black outline of the yacht with its rigging traced upon the empurpled background of the sky—while, dotting the horizon, might be seen, here and there, vessels with their trimmed sails, like the wings of a seagull about to plunge; such a spectacle indeed well merited admiration. A crowd of curious idlers followed the richly dressed attendants, amongst whom they mistook the steward and the secretary for the master and his friend. As for Buckingham, who was dressed very simply, in a gray satin vest, and doublet of violet-coloured velvet, wearing his hat thrust over his eyes, and without orders or embroidery, he was taken no more notice of than De Wardes, who was in black, like an attorney.

The duke's attendants had received directions to have a boat in readiness at the jetty head, and to watch the embarkation of their master, without approaching him until either he or his friend should summon them,—“whatever may happen,” he had added, laying a stress upon these words, so that they might not be misunderstood. Having walked a few paces upon the strand, Buckingham said to De Wardes, “I think it is now time to take leave of each other. The tide, you perceive, is rising; ten minutes hence it will have soaked the sands where we are now walking in such a manner that we shall not be able to keep our footing.”

“I await your orders, my lord, but—”

“But, you mean, we are still upon soil which is part of the king's territory.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, do you see yonder a kind of little island surrounded by a circle of water? The pool is increasing every minute, and the isle is gradually disappearing. This island, indeed, belongs to Heaven, for it is situated between two seas, and is not shown on the king's charts. Do you observe it?”

“Yes; but we can hardly reach it now, without getting our feet wet.”

“Yes; but observe that it forms an eminence tolerably high, and that the tide rises up on every side, leaving the top free. We shall be admirably placed upon that little theatre. What do you think of it?”

“I shall be perfectly happy wherever I may have the honour of crossing my sword with your lordship's.”

“Very well, then, I am distressed to be the cause of your wetting your feet, M. de Wardes, but it is most essential you should be able to say to the king: ‘Sire, I did not fight upon your majesty's territory.’ Perhaps the distinction is somewhat subtle, but, since Port-Royal, your nation delights in subtleties of expression. Do not let us complain of this, however, for it makes your wit very brilliant, and of a style peculiarly your own. If you do not object, we will hurry ourselves, for the sea, I perceive, is rising fast, and night is setting in.”

“My reason for not walking faster was, that I did not wish to precede your Grace. Are you still on dry land, my lord?”

“Yes, at present I am. Look yonder! My servants are afraid we shall be drowned, and have converted the boat into a cruiser. Do you remark how curiously it dances upon the crests of the waves? But, as it makes me feel sea-sick, would you permit me to turn my back towards them?”

“You will observe, my lord, that in turning your back to them, you will have the sun full in your face.”

“Oh, its rays are very feeble at this hour and it will soon disappear; do not be uneasy on that score.”

“As you please, my lord; it was out of consideration for your lordship that I made the remark.”

“I am aware of that, M. de Wardes, and I fully appreciate your kindness. Shall we take off our doublets?”

“As you please, my lord.”

“Do not hesitate to tell me, M. de Wardes, if you do not feel comfortable upon the wet sand, or if you think yourself a little too close to French territory. We could fight in England, or even upon my yacht.”

“We are exceedingly well placed here, my lord; only I have the honour to remark that, as the sea is rising fast, we have hardly time—”

Buckingham made a sign of assent, took off his doublet and threw it on the ground, a proceeding which De Wardes imitated. Both their bodies, which seemed like phantoms to those who were looking at them from the shore, were thrown strongly into relief by a dark red violet-coloured shadow with which the sky became overspread.

“Upon my word, your Grace,” said De Wardes, “we shall hardly have time to begin. Do you not perceive how our feet are sinking into the sand?”

“I have sunk up to the ankles,” said Buckingham, “without reckoning that the water is even now breaking in upon us.”

“It has already reached me. As soon as you please, therefore, your Grace,” said De Wardes, who drew his sword, a movement imitated by the duke.

“M. de Wardes,” said Buckingham, “one final word. I am about to fight you because I do not like you,—because you have wounded me in ridiculing a certain devotional regard I have entertained, and one which I acknowledge that, at this moment, I still retain, and for which I would very willingly die. You are a bad and heartless man, M. de Wardes, and I will do my very utmost to take your life; for I feel assured that, if you survive this engagement, you will, in the future, work great mischief towards my friends. That is all I have to remark, M. de Wardes,” concluded Buckingham as he saluted him.

“And I, my lord, have only this to reply to you: I have not disliked you hitherto, but, since you give me such a character, I hate you, and will do all I possibly can to kill you;” and De Wardes saluted Buckingham.

Their swords crossed at the same moment, like two flashes of lightning on a dark night. The swords seemed to seek each other, guessed their position, and met. Both were practiced swordsmen, and the earlier passes were without any result. The night was fast closing in, and it was so dark that they attacked and defended themselves almost instinctively. Suddenly De Wardes felt his word arrested,—he had just touched Buckingham's shoulder. The duke's sword sunk, as his arm was lowered.

“You are wounded, my lord,” said De Wardes, drawing back a step or two.

“Yes, monsieur, but only slightly.”

“Yet you quitted your guard.”

“Only from the first effect of the cold steel, but I have recovered. Let us go on, if you please.” And disengaging his sword with a sinister clashing of the blade, the duke wounded the marquis in the breast.

“A hit?” he said.

“No,” cried De Wardes, not moving from his place.

“I beg your pardon, but observing that your shirt was stained—” said Buckingham.

“Well,” said De Wardes furiously, “it is now your turn.”

And with a terrible lunge, he pierced Buckingham's arm, the sword passing between the two bones. Buckingham feeling his right arm paralyzed, stretched out his left, seized his sword, which was about falling from his nerveless grasp, and before De Wardes could resume his guard, he thrust him through the breast. De Wardes tottered, his knees gave way beneath him, and leaving his sword still fixed in the duke's arm, he fell into the water, which was soon crimsoned with a more genuine reflection than that which it had borrowed from the clouds. De Wardes was not dead; he felt the terrible danger that menaced him, for the sea rose fast. The duke, too, perceived the danger. With an effort and an exclamation of pain he tore out the blade which remained in his arm, and turning towards De Wardes said, “Are you dead, marquis?”

“No,” replied De Wardes, in a voice choked by the blood which rushed from his lungs to his throat, “but very near it.”

“Well, what is to be done; can you walk?” said Buckingham, supporting him on his knee.

“Impossible,” he replied. Then falling down again, said, “call to your people, or I shall be drowned.”

“Halloa! boat there! quick, quick!”

The boat flew over the waves, but the sea rose faster than the boat could approach. Buckingham saw that De Wardes was on the point of being again covered by a wave; he passed his left arm, safe and unwounded, round his body and raised him up. The wave ascended to his waist, but did not move him. The duke immediately began to carry his late antagonist towards the shore. He had hardly gone ten paces, when a second wave, rushing onwards higher, more furious and menacing than the former, struck him at the height of his chest, threw him over and buried him beneath the water. At the reflux, however, the duke and De Wardes were discovered lying on the strand. De Wardes had fainted. At this moment four of the duke's sailors, who comprehended the danger, threw themselves into the sea, and in a moment were close beside him. Their terror was extreme when they observed how their master became covered with blood, in proportion to the water, with which it was impregnated, flowed towards his knees and feet; they wished to carry him.

“No, no,” exclaimed the duke, “take the marquis on shore first.”

“Death to the Frenchman!” cried the English sullenly.

“Wretched knaves!” exclaimed the duke, drawing himself up with a haughty gesture, which sprinkled them with blood, “obey directly! M. de Wardes on shore! M. de Wardes's safety to be looked to first, or I will have you all hanged!”

The boat had by this time reached them; the secretary and steward leaped into the sea, and approached the marquis, who no longer showed any sign of life.

“I commit him to your care, as you value your lives,” said the duke. “Take M. de Wardes on shore.” They took him in their arms, and carried him to the dry sand, where the tide never rose so high. A few idlers and five or six fishermen had gathered on the shore, attracted by the strange spectacle of two men fighting with the water up to their knees. The fishermen, observing a group of men approaching carrying a wounded man, entered the sea until the water was up to their waists. The English transferred the wounded man to them, at the very moment the latter began to open his eyes again. The salt water and the fine sand had got into his wounds, and caused him the acutest pain. The duke's secretary drew out a purse filled with gold from his pocket, and handed it to the one among those present who appeared of most importance, saying: “From my master, his Grace the Duke of Buckingham, in order that every possible care may be taken of the Marquis de Wardes.”

Then, followed by those who had accompanied him, he returned to the boat, which Buckingham had been enabled to reach with the greatest difficulty, but only after he had seen De Wardes out of danger. By this time it was high tide; embroidered coats, and silk sashes were lost; many hats, too, had been carried away by the waves. The flow of the tide had borne the duke's and De Wardes's clothes to the shore, and De Wardes was wrapped in the duke's doublet, under the belief that it was his own, when the fishermen carried him in their arms towards the town.

XXX. Threefold Love.

As soon as Buckingham departed, Guiche imagined the coast would be perfectly clear for him without any interference. Monsieur, who no longer retained the slightest feeling of jealousy, and who, besides, permitted himself to be monopolized by the Chevalier de Lorraine, allowed as much liberty and freedom in his house as the most exacting could desire. The king, on his side, who had conceived a strong predilection for his sister-in-law's society, invented a variety of amusements, in quick succession to each other, in order to render her residence in Paris as cheerful as possible, so that in fact, not a day passed without a ball at the Palais Royal, or a reception in Monsieur's apartments. The king had directed that Fontainebleau should be prepared for the reception of the court, and every one

was using his utmost interest to get invited. Madame led a life of incessant occupation; neither her voice nor her pen were idle for a moment. The conversations with De Guiche were gradually assuming a tone of interest which might unmistakably be recognized as the prelude of a deep-seated attachment. When eyes look languishingly while the subject under discussion happens to be colours of materials for dresses; when a whole hour is occupied in analyzing the merits and the perfume of a *sachet* or a flower;—there are words in this style of conversation which every one might listen to, but there are gestures and sighs that every one cannot perceive. After Madame had talked for some time with De Guiche, she conversed with the king, who paid her a visit regularly every day. They played, wrote verses, or selected mottoes or emblematical devices; this spring was not only the Maytide of nature, it was the youth of an entire people, of which those at court were the head. The king was handsome, young, and of unequalled gallantry. All women were passionately loved by him, even the queen, his wife. This mighty monarch was, however, more timid and more reserved than any other person in the kingdom, to such a degree, indeed, that he did not confess his sentiments even to himself. This timidity of bearing restrained him within the limits of ordinary politeness, and no woman could boast of having any preference shown her beyond that shown to others. It might be foretold that the day when his real character would be displayed would be the dawn of a new sovereignty; but as yet he had not declared himself. M. de Guiche took advantage of this, and constituted himself the sovereign prince of the whole laughter-loving court. It had been reported that he was on the best of terms with Mademoiselle de Montalais; that he had been assiduously attentive to Mademoiselle de Chatillon; but now he was not even barely civil to any of the court beauties. He had eyes and ears for one person alone. In this manner, and, as it were, without design, he devoted himself to Monsieur, who had a great regard for him, and kept him as much as possible in his own apartments. Unsociable from natural disposition, he had estranged himself too much previous to the arrival of Madame, but, after her arrival, he did not estrange himself sufficiently. This conduct, which every one had observed, had been particularly remarked by the evil genius of the house, the Chevalier de Lorraine, for whom Monsieur exhibited the warmest attachment because he was of a very cheerful disposition, even in his remarks most full of malice, and because he was never at a loss how to wile the time away. The Chevalier de Lorraine, therefore, having noticed that he was threatened with being supplanted by De Guiche, resorted to strong measures. He disappeared from the court, leaving Monsieur much embarrassed. The first day of his absence, Monsieur hardly inquired about him, for he had De Guiche with him, and, except that the time given to conversation with Madame, his days and nights were rigorously devoted to the prince. On the second day, however, Monsieur, finding no one near him, inquired where the chevalier was. He was told that no one knew.

De Guiche, after having spent the morning in selecting embroideries and fringes with Madame, went to console the prince. But after dinner, as there were some amethysts to be looked at, De Guiche returned to Madame's cabinet. Monsieur was left quite to himself during the time devoted to dressing and decorating himself; he felt that he was the most miserable of men, and again inquired whether there was any news of the chevalier, in reply to which he was told that no one could tell where the chevalier was to be found. Monsieur, hardly knowing in what direction to inflict his weariness, went to Madame's apartments dressed in his morning-gown. He found a large assemblage of people there, laughing and whispering in every part of the room; at one end, a group of women around one of the courtiers, talking together, amid smothered bursts of laughter; at the other end, Manicamp and Malicorne were being pillaged at cards by Montalais and Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, while two others were standing by, laughing. In another part were Madame, seated upon some cushions on the floor, and De Guiche, on his knees beside her, spreading out a handful of pearls and precious stones, while the princess, with her white and slender fingers pointed out such among them as pleased her the most. Again, in another corner of the room, a guitar player was playing some of the Spanish seguedillas, to which Madame had taken the greatest fancy ever since she had heard them sung by the young queen with a melancholy expression of voice. But the songs which the Spanish princess had sung with tears in her eyes, the young Englishwoman was humming with a smile that well displayed her beautiful teeth. The cabinet presented, in fact, the most perfect representation of unrestrained pleasure and amusement. As he entered, Monsieur was struck at beholding so many persons enjoying themselves without him. He was so jealous at the sight that he could not resist exclaiming, like a child, "What! you are amusing yourselves here, while I am sick and tired of being alone!"

The sound of his voice was like a clap of thunder coming to interrupt the warbling of birds under the leafy covert of the trees; a dead silence ensued. De Guiche was on his feet in a moment. Malicorne tried to hide himself behind Montalais. Manicamp stood bolt upright, and assumed a very ceremonious demeanor. The guitar player thrust his instrument under a table, covering it with a piece of carpet to conceal it from the prince's observation. Madame was the only one who did not move, and smiling at her husband, said, "Is not this the hour you usually devote to your toilette?"

"An hour which others select, it seems, for amusing themselves," replied the prince, grumblingly.

This untoward remark was the signal for a general rout; the women fled like a flock of terrified starlings; the guitar player vanished like a shadow; Malicorne, still protected by Montalais, who purposely widened out her dress, glided behind the hanging tapestry. As for Manicamp, he went to the assistance of De Guiche, who naturally remained near Madame, and both of them, with the princess herself, courageously sustained the attack. The count was too happy to bear malice against the husband; but Monsieur bore a grudge against his wife. Nothing was wanting but a quarrel; he sought it, and the hurried departure of the crowd, which had been so joyous before he arrived, and was so disturbed by his entrance, furnished him with a pretext.

"Why do they run away at the very sight of me?" he inquired, in a supercilious tone; to which remark Madame replied, that, "whenever the master of the house made his appearance, the family kept aloof out of respect." As she said this, she made so funny and so pretty a grimace, that De Guiche and Manicamp could not control themselves; they burst into a peal of laughter; Madame followed their example, and even Monsieur himself could not resist it, and he was obliged to sit down, as, for laughing, he could scarcely keep his equilibrium. However, he very soon left off, but his anger had increased. He was still more furious because he had permitted himself to laugh, than from having seen others laugh. He looked at Manicamp steadily, not venturing to show his anger towards De Guiche; but, at a sign which displayed no little amount of annoyance, Manicamp and De Guiche left the room, so that Madame, left alone, began sadly to pick up her pearls and amethysts, no longer smiling, and speaking still less.

"I am very happy," said the duke, "to find myself treated as a stranger here, Madame," and he left the room in a passion. On his way out, he met Montalais, who was in attendance in the ante-room. "It is very agreeable to pay you a visit here, but outside the door."

Montalais made a very low obeisance. "I do not quite understand what your royal highness does me the honour to say."

"I say that when you are all laughing together in Madame's apartment, he is an unwelcome visitor who does not remain outside."

"Your royal highness does not think, and does not speak so, of yourself?"

"On the contrary, it is on my own account that I do speak and think. I have no reason, certainly, to flatter myself about the reception I meet with here at any time. How is it that, on the very day there is music and a little society in Madame's apartments—in my own apartments, indeed, for they are mine—on the very day that I wish to amuse myself a little in my turn, every one runs away? Are they afraid to see me, that they all take wing as soon as I appear? Is there anything wrong, then, going on in my absence?"

"Yet nothing has been done to-day, my lord, which is not done every day."

"What! do they laugh like that every day?"

"Why, yes, my lord."

"The same group of people simpering and the same singing and strumming going on every day?"

"The guitar, my lord, was introduced to-day; but when we have no guitars, we have violins and flutes; ladies soon weary without music."

"The deuce!—and the men?"

"What men, my lord?"

"M. de Guiche, M. de Manicamp, and the rest of them?"

"They all belong to your highness's household."

"Yes, yes, you are right," said the prince, as he returned to his own apartments, full of thought. He threw himself into the largest of his arm-chairs, without looking at himself in the glass. "Where can the chevalier be?" said he. One of the prince's attendants happened to be near him, overheard his remark, and replied,—

"No one knows, your highness."

"Still the same answer. The first one who answers me again, 'I do not know,' I will discharge." Every one at this remark hurried out of his apartments, in the same manner as the others had fled from Madame's apartments. The prince then flew into the wildest rage. He kicked over a chiffonier, which tumbled on the carpet, broken into pieces. He next went into the galleries, and with the greatest coolness threw down, one after another, an enameled vase, a porphyry ewer, and a bronze candelabrum. The noise summoned every one to the various doors.

"What is your highness's pleasure?" said the captain of the guards, timidly.

"I am treating myself to some music," replied the prince, gnashing his teeth.

The captain of the guards desired his royal highness's physician to be sent for. But before he came, Malicorne arrived, saying to the prince, "My lord, the Chevalier de Lorraine is here."

The duke looked at Malicorne, and smiled graciously at him, just as the chevalier entered.

XXXI. M. de Lorraine's Jealousy.

The Duc d'Orleans uttered a cry of delight on perceiving the Chevalier de Lorraine. "This is fortunate, indeed," he said; "by what happy chance do I see you? Had you indeed disappeared, as every one assured me?"

"Yes, my lord."

"A caprice?"

"I to venture upon caprices with your highness! The respect—"

"Put respect out of the way, for you fail in it every day. I absolve you; but why did you leave me?"

"Because I felt that I was of no further use to you."

"Explain yourself."

"Your highness has people about you who are far more amusing than I can ever be. I felt I was not strong enough to enter into contest with them, and I therefore withdrew."

"This extreme diffidence shows a want of common sense. Who are those with whom you cannot contend? De Guiche?"

"I name no one."

"This is absurd. Does De Guiche annoy you?"

"I do not say he does; do not force me to speak, however; you know very well that De Guiche is one of our best friends."

"Who is it, then?"

"Excuse me, my lord, let us say no more about it." The chevalier knew perfectly well that curiosity is excited in the same way as thirst —by removing that which quenches it; or in other words, by denying an explanation.

"No, no," said the prince; "I wish to know why you went away."

"In that case, my lord, I will tell you; but do not get angry. I remarked that my presence was disagreeable."

"To whom?"

"To Madame."

"What do you mean?" said the duke in astonishment.

"It is simple enough; Madame is very probably jealous of the regard you are good enough to testify for me."

"Has she shown it to you?"

"Madame never addresses a syllable to me, particularly since a certain time."

"Since *what* time?"

"Since the time when, M. de Guiche having made himself more agreeable to her than I could, she receives him at every and any hour."

The duke coloured. "At any hour, chevalier; what do you mean by that?"

"You see, your highness, I have already displeased you; I was quite sure I should."

"I am not displeased; but what you say is rather startling. In what respect does Madame prefer De Guiche to you?"

"I shall say no more," said the chevalier, saluting the prince ceremoniously.

"On the contrary, I require you to speak. If you withdraw on that account, you must indeed be very jealous."

"One cannot help being jealous, my lord, when one loves. Is not your royal highness jealous of Madame? Would you not, if you saw some one always near Madame, and always treated with great favour, take umbrage at it? One's friends are as one's lovers. Your highness has sometimes conferred the distinguished honour upon me of calling me your friend."

"Yes, yes; but you used a phrase which has a very equivocal significance; you are unfortunate in your phrases."

“What phrase, my lord?”

“You said, ‘treated with great favour.’ What do you mean by favour?”

“Nothing can be more simple,” said the chevalier, with an expression of great frankness; “for instance, whenever a husband remarks that his wife summons such and such a man near her; whenever this man is always to be found by her side, or in attendance at the door of her carriage; whenever the bouquet of the one is always the same colour as the ribbons of the other; when music and supper parties are held in private apartments; whenever a dead silence takes place immediately the husband makes his appearance in his wife’s rooms; and when the husband suddenly finds that he has, as a companion, the most devoted and the kindest of men, who, a week before, was with him as little as possible; why, then—”

“Well, finish.”

“Why, then, I say, my lord, one possibly may get jealous. But all these details hardly apply; for our conversation had nothing to do with them.”

The duke was evidently very much agitated, and seemed to struggle with himself a good deal. “You have not told me,” he then remarked, “why you absented yourself. A little while ago you said it was from a fear of intruding; you added, even, that you had observed a disposition on Madame’s part to encourage De Guiche.”

“Pardon me, my lord, I did not say that.”

“You did, indeed.”

“Well, if I did say so, I observed nothing but what was very inoffensive.”

“At all events, you remarked something.”

“You embarrass me, my lord.”

“What does that matter? Answer me. If you speak the truth, why should you feel embarrassed?”

“I always speak the truth, my lord; but I also always hesitate when it is a question of repeating what others say.”

“Ah! repeat? It appears that it is talked about, then?”

“I acknowledge that others have spoken to me on the subject.”

“Who?” said the prince.

The chevalier assumed almost an angry air, as he replied, “My lord, you are subjecting me to cross-examination; you treat me as a criminal at the bar; the rumors which idly pass by a gentleman’s ears do not remain there. Your highness wishes me to magnify rumors until it attains the importance of an event.”

“However,” said the duke, in great displeasure, “the fact remains that you withdrew on account of this report.”

“To speak the truth, others have talked to me of the attentions of M. de Guiche to Madame, nothing more; perfectly harmless, I repeat, and more than that, allowable. But do not be unjust, my lord, and do not attach any undue importance to it. It does not concern you.”

“M. de Guiche’s attentions to Madame do not concern me?”

“No, my lord; and what I say to you I would say to De Guiche himself, so little do I think of the attentions he pays Madame. Nay, I would say it even to Madame herself. Only you understand what I am afraid of—I am afraid of being thought jealous of the favour shown, when I am only jealous as far as friendship is concerned. I know your disposition; I know that when you bestow your affections you become exclusively attached. You love Madame—and who, indeed, would *not* love her? Follow me attentively as I proceed:—Madame has noticed among your friends the handsomest and most fascinating of them all; she will begin to influence you on his behalf in such a way that you will neglect the others. Your indifference would kill me; it is already bad enough to have to support Madame’s indifference. I have, therefore, made up my mind to give way to the favourite whose happiness I envy, even while I acknowledge my sincere friendship and sincere admiration for him. Well, my lord, do you see anything to object to in this reasoning? Is it not that of a man of honour? Is my conduct that of a sincere friend? Answer me, at least, after having so closely questioned me.”

The duke had seated himself, with his head buried in his hands. After a silence long enough to enable the chevalier to judge the effect of this oratorical display, the duke arose, saying, “Come, be candid.”

“As I always am.”

“Very well. You know that we already observed something respecting that mad fellow, Buckingham.”

“Do not say anything against Madame, my lord, or I shall take my leave. It is impossible you can be suspicious of Madame?”

“No, no, chevalier; I do not suspect Madame; but in fact, I observe—I compare—”

“Buckingham was a madman, my lord.”

“A madman about whom, however, you opened my eyes thoroughly.”

“No, no,” said the chevalier, quickly; “it was not I who opened your eyes, it was De Guiche. Do not confound us, I beg.” And he began to laugh in so harsh a manner that it sounded like the hiss of a serpent.

“Yes, yes; I remember. You said a few words, but De Guiche showed the most jealousy.”

“I should think so,” continued the chevalier, in the same tone. “He was fighting for home and altar.”

“What did you say?” said the duke, haughtily, thoroughly roused by this insidious jest.

“Am I not right? for does not M. de Guiche hold the chief post of honour in your household?”

“Well,” replied the duke, somewhat calmed, “had this passion of Buckingham been remarked?”

“Certainly.”

“Very well. Do people say that M. de Guiche’s is remarked as much?”

“Pardon me, my lord; you are again mistaken; no one says that M. de Guiche entertains anything of the sort.”

“Very good.”

“You see, my lord, that it would have been better, a hundred times better, to have left me in my retirement, than to have allowed you to conjure up, by aid of any scruples I may have had, suspicions which Madame will regard as crimes, and she would be in the right, too.”

“What would you do?”

“Act reasonably.”

“In what way?”

“I should not pay the slightest attention to the society of these new Epicurean philosophers; and, in that way, the rumors will cease.”

“Well, I will see; I will think it over.”

“Oh, you have time enough; the danger is not great; and then, besides, it is not a question of danger or of passion. It all arose from a fear I had to see your friendship for me decrease. From the very moment you restore it, with so kind an assurance of its existence, I have no longer any other idea in my head.”

The duke shook his head as if he meant to say: “If you have no more ideas, I have, though.” It being now the dinner hour, the prince sent to inform Madame of it; but she returned a message to the effect that she could not be present, but would dine in her own apartment.

“That is not my fault,” said the duke. “This morning, having taken them by surprise in the midst of a musical party, I got jealous; and so they are in the sulks with me.”

“We will dine alone,” said the chevalier, with a sigh; “I regret De Guiche is not here.”

“Oh! De Guiche will not remain long in the sulks; he is a very good-natured fellow.”

“My lord,” said the chevalier, suddenly, “an excellent idea has struck me, in our conversation just now. I may have exasperated your highness, and caused you some dissatisfaction. It is but fitting that I should be the mediator. I will go and look for the count, and bring him back with me.”

“Ah! chevalier, you are really a very good-natured fellow.”

“You say that as if you were surprised.”

“Well, you are not so tender-hearted every day.”

“That may be; but confess that I know how to repair a wrong I may have done.”

“I confess that.”

“Will your highness do me the favour to wait here a few minutes?”

“Willingly; be off, and I will try on my Fontainebleau costume.”

The chevalier left the room, called his different attendant with the greatest care, as if he were giving them different orders. All went off in various directions; but he retained his *valet de chambre*.

“Ascertain, and immediately, too, of M. de Guiche is not in Madame’s apartments. How can one learn it?”

“Very easily, monsieur. I will ask Malicorne, who will find out from Mlle. de Montalais. I may as well tell you, however, that the inquiry will be useless; for all M. de Guiche’s attendants are gone, and he must have left with them.”

“Ascertain, nevertheless.”

Ten minutes had hardly passed, when the valet returned. He beckoned his master mysteriously towards the servants’ staircase, and showed him into a small room with a window looking out upon the garden. “What is the matter?” said the chevalier; “why so many precautions?”

“Look, monsieur,” said the valet, “look yonder, under the walnut-tree.”

“Ah?” said the chevalier. “I see Manicamp there. What is he waiting for?”

“You will see in a moment, monsieur, if you wait patiently. There, do you see now?”

“I see one, two, four musicians with their instruments, and behind them, urging them on, De Guiche himself. What is he doing there, though?”

“He is waiting until the little door of the staircase, belonging to the ladies of honour, is opened; by that staircase he will ascend to Madame’s apartments, where some new pieces of music are going to be performed during dinner.”

“This is admirable news you tell me.”

“Is it not, monsieur?”

“Was it M. de Malicorne who told you this?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“He likes you, then?”

“No, monsieur, it is Monsieur that he likes.”

“Why?”

“Because he wishes to belong to his household.”

“And most certainly he shall. How much did he give you for that?”

“The secret which I now dispose of to you, monsieur.”

“And which I buy for a hundred pistoles. Take them.”

“Thank you, monsieur. Look, look, the little door opens; a woman admits the musicians.”

“It is Montalais.”

“Hush, my lord; do not call out her name; whoever says Montalais says Malicorne. If you quarrel with the one, you will be on bad terms with the other.”

“Very well; I have seen nothing.”

“And I,” said the valet, pocketing the purse, “have received nothing.”

The chevalier, being now certain that Guiche had entered, returned to the prince, whom he found splendidly dressed and radiant with joy, as with good looks. "I am told," he exclaimed, "that the king has taken the sun as his device; really, my lord, it is you whom this device would best suit."

"Where is De Guiche?"

"He cannot be found. He has fled—has evaporated entirely. Your scolding of this morning terrified him. He could not be found in his apartments."

"Bah! the hair-brained fellow is capable of setting off post-haste to his own estates. Poor man! we will recall him. Come, let us dine now."

"My lord, to-day is a very festival of ideas; I have another."

"What is it?"

"Madame is angry with you, and she has reason to be so. You owe her revenge; go and dine with her."

"Oh! that would be acting like a weak and whimsical husband."

"It is the duty of a good husband to do so. The princess is no doubt wearied enough; she will be weeping in her plate, and here eyes will get quite red. A husband who is the cause of his wife's eyes getting red is an odious creature. Come, my lord, come."

"I cannot; for I have directed dinner to be served here."

"Yet see, my lord, how dull we shall be; I shall be low-spirited because I know that Madame will be alone; you, hard and savage as you wish to appear, will be sighing all the while. Take me with you to Madame's dinner, and that will be a delightful surprise. I am sure we shall be very merry; you were in the wrong this morning."

"Well, perhaps I was."

"There is no perhaps at all, for it is a fact you were so."

"Chevalier, chevalier, your advice is not good."

"Nay, my advice is good; all the advantages are on your own side. Your violet-coloured suit, embroidered with gold, becomes you admirably. Madame will be as much vanquished by the man as by the action. Come, my lord."

"You decide me; let us go."

The duke left his room, accompanied by the chevalier and went towards Madame's apartments. The chevalier hastily whispered to the valet, "Be sure there are some people before that little door, so that no one can escape in that direction. Run, run!" And he followed the duke towards the ante-chambers of Madame's suite of apartments, and when the ushers were about to announce them, the chevalier said, laughing, "His highness wishes to surprise Madame."

XXXII. Monsieur is Jealous of Guiche.

Monsieur entered the room abruptly, as persons do who mean well and think they confer pleasure, or as those who hope to surprise some secret, the terrible reward of jealous people. Madame, almost out of her senses with joy at the first bars of music, was dancing in the most unrestrained manner, leaving the dinner, which had been already begun, unfinished. Her partner was M. de Guiche, who, with his arms raised, and his eyes half closed, was kneeling on one knee, like the Spanish dancers, with looks full of passion, and gestures of the most caressing character. The princess was dancing round him with a responsive smile, and the same air of alluring seductiveness. Montalais stood by admiringly; La Vallière, seated in a corner of the room, looked on thoughtfully. It is impossible to describe the effect which the presence of the prince produced upon this gleeful company, and it would be equally impossible to describe the effect which the sight of their happiness produced upon Philip. The Comte de Guiche had no power to move; Madame remained in the middle of one of the figures and of an attitude, unable to utter a word. The Chevalier de Lorraine, leaning his back against the doorway, smiled like a man in the very height of the frankest admiration. The pallor of the prince, and the convulsive twitching of his hands and limbs, were the first symptoms that struck those present. A dead silence succeeded the merry music of the dance. The Chevalier de Lorraine took advantage of this interval to salute Madame and De Guiche most respectfully, affecting to join them together in his reverences as though they were the master and mistress of the house. Monsieur then approached them, saying, in a hoarse tone of voice, "I am delighted; I came here expecting to find you ill and low-spirited, and I find you abandoning yourself to new amusements; really, it is most fortunate. My house is the pleasantest in the kingdom." Then turning towards De Guiche, "Comte," he said, "I did not know you were so good a dancer." And, again addressing his wife, he said, "Show a little more consideration for me, Madame; whenever you intend to amuse yourselves here, invite me. I am a prince, unfortunately, very much neglected."

Guiche had now recovered his self-possession, and with the spirited boldness which was natural to him, and sat so well upon him, he said, "Your highness knows very well that my very life is at your service, and whenever there is a question of its being needed, I am ready; but to-day, as it is only a question of dancing to music, I dance."

"And you are perfectly right," said the prince, coldly. "But, Madame," he continued, "you do not remark that your ladies deprive me of my friends; M. de Guiche does not belong to you, Madame, but to me. If you wish to dine without me you have your ladies. When I dine alone I have my gentlemen; do not strip me of *everything*."

Madame felt the reproach and the lesson, and the colour rushed to her face. "Monsieur," she replied, "I was not aware, when I came to the court of France, that princesses of my rank were to be regarded as the women in Turkey are. I was not aware that we were not allowed to be seen; but, since such is your desire, I will conform myself to it; pray do not hesitate, if you should wish it, to have my windows barred, even."

This repartee, which made Montalais and De Guiche smile, rekindled the prince's anger, no inconsiderable portion of which had already evaporated in words.

"Very well," he said, in a concentrated tone of voice, "this is the way in which I am respected in my own house."

"My lord, my lord," murmured the chevalier in the duke's ear, in such a manner that every one could observe he was endeavoring to calm him.

"Come," replied the prince, as his only answer to the remark, hurrying him away, and turning round with so hasty a movement that he almost ran against Madame. The chevalier followed him to his own apartment, where the prince had no sooner seated himself than he gave free vent to his fury. The chevalier raised his eyes towards the ceiling, joined his hands together, and said not a word.

"Give me your opinion," exclaimed the prince.

"Upon what?"

"Upon what is taking place here."

"Oh, my lord, it is a very serious matter."

"It is abominable! I cannot live in this manner."

"How miserable all this is," said the chevalier. "We hoped to enjoy tranquillity after that madman Buckingham had left."

"And this is worse."

"I do not say that, my lord."

"Yes, but I say it; for Buckingham would never have ventured upon a fourth part of what we have just now seen."

"What do you mean?"

"To conceal oneself for the purposes of dancing, and to feign indisposition in order to dine *tete-a-tete*."

"No, no, my lord."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the prince, exciting himself like a self-willed child; "but I will not endure it any longer, I must learn what is really going on."

"Oh, my lord, an exposure—"

"By Heaven, monsieur, *shall* I put myself out of the way, when people show so little consideration for me? Wait for me here, chevalier, wait for me here." The prince disappeared in the neighboring apartment and inquired of the gentleman in attendance if the queen-mother had returned from chapel.

Anne of Austria felt that her happiness was now complete; peace restored to her family, a nation delighted with the presence of a young monarch who had shown an aptitude for affairs of great importance; the revenues of the state increased; external peace assured; everything seemed to promise a tranquil future. Her thoughts recurred, now and then, to the poor young nobleman whom she had received as a mother, and had driven away as a hard-hearted step-mother, and she sighed as she thought of him.

Suddenly the Duc d'Orleans entered her room. "Dear mother," he exclaimed hurriedly, closing the door, "things cannot go on as they are now."

Anne of Austria raised her beautiful eyes towards him, and with an unmoved suavity of manner, said, "What do you allude to?"

"I wish to speak of Madame."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, madame."

"I suppose that silly fellow Buckingham has been writing a farewell letter to her."

"Oh! yes, madame; of course, it is a question of Buckingham."

"Of whom else could it be, then? for that poor fellow was, wrongly enough, the object of your jealousy, and I thought—"

"My wife, madame, has already replaced the Duke of Buckingham."

"Philip, what are you saying? You are speaking very heedlessly."

"No, no. Madame has so managed matters, that I am still jealous."

"Of whom, in Heaven's name?"

"Is it possible you have not remarked it? Have you not noticed that M. de Guiche is always in her apartments—always with her?"

The queen clapped her hands together, and began to laugh. "Philip," she said, "your jealousy is not merely a defect, it is a disease."

"Whether a defect or a disease, madame, I am the sufferer from it."

"And do you imagine that a complaint which exists only in your own imagination can be cured? You wish it to be said you are right in being jealous, when there is no ground whatever for your jealousy."

"Of course, you will begin to say for this gentleman what you already said on the behalf of the other."

"Because, Philip," said the queen dryly, "what you did for the other, you are going to do for this one."

The prince bowed, slightly annoyed. "If I give you facts," he said, "will you believe me?"

"If it regarded anything else but jealousy, I would believe you without your bringing facts forward; but as jealousy is the case, I promise nothing."

"It is just the same as if your majesty were to desire me to hold my tongue, and sent me away unheard."

"Far from it; you are my son, I owe you a mother's indulgence."

"Oh, say what you think; you owe me as much indulgence as a madman deserves."

"Do not exaggerate, Philip, and take care how you represent your wife to me as a woman of depraved mind—"

"But facts, mother, facts!"

"Well, I am listening."

"This morning at ten o'clock they were playing music in Madame's apartments."

"No harm in that, surely."

"M. de Guiche was talking with her alone—Ah! I forgot to tell you, that, during the last ten days, he has never left her side."

"If they were doing any harm they would hide themselves."

"Very good," exclaimed the duke, "I expected you to say that. Pray remember with precision the words you have just uttered. This morning I took them by surprise, and showed my dissatisfaction in a very marked manner."

"Rely upon it, that is quite sufficient; it was, perhaps, even a little too much. These young women easily take offense. To reproach them for an error they have not committed is, sometimes, almost equivalent to telling them they might be guilty of even worse."

"Very good, very good; but wait a minute. Do not forget what you have just this moment said, that this morning's lesson ought to have been sufficient, and that if they had been doing what was wrong, they would have hidden themselves."

"Yes, I said so."



"Well, just now, repenting of my hastiness of the morning, and imagining that Guiche was sulking in his own apartments, I went to pay Madame a visit. Can you guess what, or whom, I found there? Another set of musicians; more dancing, and Guiche himself—he was concealed there."

Anne of Austria frowned. "It was imprudent," she said. "What did Madame say?"

"Nothing."

"And Guiche?"

"As much—oh, no! he muttered some impertinent remark or another."

"Well, what is your opinion, Philip?"

"That I have been made a fool of; that Buckingham was only a pretext, and that Guiche is the one who is really to blame in the matter."

Anne shrugged her shoulders. "Well," she said, "what else?"

"I wish De Guiche to be dismissed from my household, as Buckingham was, and I shall ask the king, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you, my dear mother, who are so clever and so kind, will execute the commission yourself."

"I will not do it, Philip."

"What, madame?"

"Listen, Philip; I am not disposed to pay people ill compliments every day; I have some influence over young people, but I cannot take advantage of it without running the chances of losing it altogether. Besides, there is nothing to prove that M. de Guiche is guilty."

"He has displeased me."

"That is your own affair."

"Very well, I know what I shall do," said the prince, impetuously.

Anne looked at him with some uneasiness. "What do you intend to do?" she said.

"I will have him drowned in my fish-pond the very next time I find him in my apartments again." Having launched this terrible threat, the prince expected his mother would be frightened out of her senses; but the queen was unmoved.

"Do so," she said.

Philip was as weak as a woman, and began to cry out, "Every one betrays me,—no one cares for me; my mother, even, joins my enemies."

"Your mother, Philip, sees further in the matter than you do, and does not care about advising you, since you will not listen to her."

"I will go to the king."

"I was about to propose that to you. I am now expecting his majesty; it is the hour he usually pays me a visit; explain the matter to him yourself."

She had hardly finished when Philip heard the door of the ante-room open with some noise. He began to feel nervous. At the sound of the king's footsteps, which could be heard upon the carpet, the duke hurriedly made his escape. Anne of Austria could not resist laughing, and was laughing still when the king entered. He came very affectionately to inquire after the even now uncertain health of the queen-mother, and to announce to her that the preparations for the journey to Fontainebleau were complete. Seeing her laugh, his uneasiness on her account diminished, and he addressed her in a vivacious tone himself. Anne of Austria took him by the hand, and, in a voice full of playfulness, said, "Do you know, sire that I am proud of being a Spanish woman?"

"Why, madame?"

"Because Spanish women are worth more than English women at least."

"Explain yourself."

"Since your marriage you have not, I believe, had a single reproach to make against the queen."

"Certainly not."

"And you, too, have been married some time. Your brother, on the contrary, has been married but a fortnight."

"Well?"

"He is now finding fault with Madame a second time."

"What, Buckingham still?"

"No, another."

"Who?"

"Guiche."

"Really? Madame is a coquette, then?"

"I fear so."

"My poor brother," said the king, laughing.

"You don't object to coquettes, it seems?"

"In Madame, certainly I do; but Madame is not a coquette at heart."

"That may be, but your brother is excessively angry about it."

"What does he want?"

"He wants to drown Guiche."

"That is a violent measure to resort to."

"Do not laugh; he is extremely irritated. Think of what can be done."

"To save Guiche—certainly."

"Of, if your brother heard you, he would conspire against you as your uncle did against your father."

"No; Philip has too much affection for me for that, and I, on my side, have too great a regard for him; we shall live together on very good terms. But what is the substance of his request?"

"That you will prevent Madame from being a coquette and Guiche from being amiable."

"Is that all? My brother has an exalted idea of sovereign power. To reform a man, not to speak about reforming a woman!"

"How will you set about it?"

"With a word to Guiche, who is a clever fellow, I will undertake to convince him."

"But Madame?"

"That is more difficult; a word will not be enough. I will compose a homily and read it to her."

"There is no time to be lost."

"Oh, I will use the utmost diligence. There is a repetition of the ballet this afternoon."

"You will read her a lecture while you are dancing?"

"Yes, madame."

"You promise to convert her?"

"I will root out the heresy altogether, either by convincing her, or by extreme measures."

"That is all right, then. Do not mix me up in the affair; Madame would never forgive me all her life, and as a mother-in-law, I ought to desire to live on good terms with my new-found daughter."

"The king, madame, will take all upon himself. But let me reflect."

"What about?"

"It would be better, perhaps, if I were to go and see Madame in her own apartment."

"Would that not seem a somewhat serious step to take?"

"Yes; but seriousness is not unbecoming in preachers, and the music of the ballet would drown half my arguments. Besides, the object is to prevent any violent measures on my brother's part, so that a little precipitation may be advisable. Is Madame in her own apartment?"

"I believe so."

"What is my statement of grievances to consist of?"

"In a few words, of the following: music uninterruptedly; Guiche's assiduity; suspicions of treasonable plots and practices."

"And the proofs?"

"There *are* none."

"Very well; I will go at once to see Madame." The king turned to look in the mirrors at his costume, which was very rich, and his face, which was radiant as the morning. "I suppose my brother is kept a little at a distance," said the king.

"Fire and water cannot be more opposite."

"That will do. Permit me, madame, to kiss your hands, the most beautiful hands in France."

"May you be successful, sire, as the family peacemaker."

"I do not employ an ambassador," said Louis, "which is as much as to say that I shall succeed." He laughed as he left the room, and carelessly adjusted his ruffles as he went along.

XXXIII. The Mediator.

When the king made his appearance in Madame's apartments, the courtiers, whom the news of a conjugal misunderstanding had dispersed through the various apartments, began to entertain the most serious apprehensions. A storm was brewing in that direction, the elements of which the Chevalier de Lorraine, in the midst of the different groups, was analyzing with delight, contributing to the weaker, and acting, according to his own wicked designs, in such a manner with regard to the stronger, as to produce the most disastrous consequences possible. As Anne of Austria had herself said, the presence of the king gave a solemn and serious character to the event. Indeed, in the year 1662, the dissatisfaction of Monsieur with Madame, and the king's intervention in the private affairs of Monsieur, was a matter of no inconsiderable moment. 3

The boldest, even, who had been the associates of the Comte de Guiche, had, from the first moment, held aloof from him, with a sort of nervous apprehension; and the comte himself, infected by the general panic, retired to his own room. The king entered Madame's private apartments, acknowledging and returning the salutations, as he was always in the habit of doing. The ladies of honour were ranged in a line on his passage along the gallery. Although his majesty was very much preoccupied, he gave the glance of a master at the two rows of young and beautiful girls, who modestly cast down their eyes, blushing as they felt the king's gaze fall upon them. One only of the number, whose long hair fell in silken masses upon the most beautiful skin imaginable, was pale, and could hardly sustain herself, notwithstanding the knocks which her companion gave her with her elbow. It was La Vallière whom Montalais supported in that manner by whispering some of that courage to her with which she herself was so abundantly provided. The king could not resist turning round to look at them again. Their faces, which had already been raised, were again lowered, but the only fair head among them remained motionless, as if all the strength and intelligence she had left had abandoned her. When he entered Madame's room, Louis found his sister-in-law reclining upon the cushions of her cabinet. She rose and made a profound reverence, murmuring some words of thanks for the honour she was receiving. She then resumed her seat, overcome by a sudden weakness, which was no doubt assumed, for a delightful colour animated her cheeks, and her eyes, still red from the tears she had recently shed, never had more fire in them. When the king was seated, as soon as he had remarked, with that accuracy of observation which characterized him, the disorder of the apartment, and the no less great disorder of Madame's countenance, he assumed a playful manner, saying, "My dear sister, at what hour to-day would you wish the repetition of the ballet to take place?"



Madame, shaking her charming head, slowly and languishingly said: “Ah! sire, will you graciously excuse my appearance at the repetition? I was about to send to inform you that I could not attend to-day.”

“Indeed,” said the king, in apparent surprise; “are you not well?”

“No, sire.”

“I will summon your medical attendants, then.”

“No, for they can do nothing for my indisposition.”

“You alarm me.”

“Sire, I wish to ask your majesty’s permission to return to England.”

The king started. “Return to England,” he said; “do you really say what you mean?”

“I say it reluctantly, sire,” replied the grand-daughter of Henry IV., firmly, her beautiful black eyes flashing. “I regret to have to confide such matters to your majesty, but I feel myself too unhappy at your majesty’s court; and I wish to return to my own family.”

“Madame, madame,” exclaimed the king, as he approached her.

“Listen to me, sire,” continued the young woman, acquiring by degrees that ascendancy over her interrogator which her beauty and her nervous nature conferred; “young as I am, I have already suffered humiliation, and have endured disdain here. Oh! do not contradict me, sire,” she said, with a smile. The king coloured.

“Then,” she continued, “I had reasoned myself into the belief that Heaven called me into existence with that object—I, the daughter of a powerful monarch; that since my father had been deprived of life, Heaven could well smite my pride. I have suffered greatly; I have been the cause, too, of my mother suffering much; but I vowed that if Providence ever placed me in a position of independence, even were it that of a workman of the lower classes, who gains her bread by her labor, I would never suffer humiliation again. That day has now arrived; I have been restored to the fortune due to my rank and to my birth; I have even ascended again the steps of a throne, and I thought that, in allying myself with a French prince, I should find in him a relation, a friend, an equal; but I perceive I have found only a master, and I rebel. My mother shall know nothing of it; you whom I respect, and whom I—love—”

The king started; never had any voice so gratified his ear.

“You, sire, who know all, since you have come here; you will, perhaps, understand me. If you had not come, I should have gone to you. I wish for permission to go away. I leave it to your delicacy of feeling to exculpate and to protect me.”

“My dear sister,” murmured the king, overpowered by this bold attack, “have you reflected upon the enormous difficulty of the project you have conceived?”

“Sire, I do not reflect, I feel. Attacked, I instinctively repel the attack, nothing more.”

“Come, tell me, what have they done to you?” said the king.

The princess, it will have been seen, by this peculiarly feminine maneuver, had escaped every reproach, and advanced on her side a far more serious one; from the accused she became the accuser. It is an infallible sign of guilt; but notwithstanding that, all women, even the least clever of the sex, invariably know how to derive some such means of turning the tables. The king had forgotten that he was paying her a visit in order to say to her, “What have you done to my brother?” and he was reduced to weakly asking her, “What have they done to you?”

“What have they done to me?” replied Madame. “One must be a woman to understand it, sire—they have made me shed tears;” and, with one of her fingers, whose slenderness and perfect whiteness were unequaled, she pointed to her brilliant eyes swimming with unshed drops, and again began to weep.

“I implore you, my dear sister!” said the king, advancing to take her warm and throbbing hand, which she abandoned to him.

“In the first place, sire, I was deprived of the presence of my brother’s friend. The Duke of Buckingham was an agreeable, cheerful visitor; my own countryman, who knew my habits; I will say almost a companion, so accustomed had we been to pass our days together, with our other friends, upon the beautiful piece of water at St. James’s.”

“But Villiers was in love with you.”

“A pretext! What does it matter,” she said, seriously, “whether the duke was in love with me or not? Is a man in love so very dangerous for me? Ah! sire, it is not sufficient for a man to love a woman.” And she smiled so tenderly, and with so much archness, that the king felt his heart swell and throb in his breast.

“At all events, if my brother were jealous?” interrupted the king.

“Very well, I admit that is a reason; and the duke was sent away accordingly.”

“No, not sent away.”

“Driven away, dismissed, expelled, then, if you prefer it, sire. One of the first gentlemen of Europe obliged to leave the court of the King of France, of Louis XIV., like a beggar, on account of a glance or a bouquet. It was little worthy of a most gallant court; but forgive me, sire; I forgot, that, in speaking thus, I am attacking your sovereign power.”

“I assure you, my dear sister, it was not I who dismissed the Duke of Buckingham; I was charmed with him.”

“It was not you?” said Madame; “ah! so much the better;” and she emphasized the “so much the better,” as if she had instead said, “so much the worse.”

A few minutes’ silence ensued. She then resumed: “The Duke of Buckingham having left—I now know why and by whose means—I thought I should have recovered my tranquillity; but not at all, for all at once Monsieur found another pretext; all at once—”

“All at once,” said the king, playfully, “some one else presents himself. It is but natural; you are beautiful, and will always meet with men who will madly love you.”

“In that case,” exclaimed the princess, “I will create a solitude around me, which indeed seems to be what is wished, and what is being prepared for me. But no, I prefer to return to London. There I am known and appreciated. I shall have friends, without fearing they may be regarded as my lovers. Shame! it is a disgraceful suspicion, and unworthy a gentleman. Monsieur has lost everything in my estimation, since he has shown me he can be a tyrant to a woman.”

“Nay, nay, my brother’s only fault is that of loving you.”

“Love me! Monsieur love me! Ah! sire,” and she burst out laughing. “Monsieur will never love any woman,” she said; “Monsieur loves himself too much; no, unhappily for me, Monsieur’s jealousy is of the worst kind—he is jealous without love.”

“Confess, however,” said the king, who began to be excited by this varied and animated conversation; “confess that Guiche loves you.”

“Ah! sire, I know nothing about that.”

“You must have perceived it. A man who loves readily betrays himself.”

“M. de Guiche has not betrayed himself.”

“My dear sister, you are defending M. de Guiche.”

“I, indeed! Ah, sire, I only needed a suspicion from yourself to crown my wretchedness.”

“No, madame, no,” returned the king, hurriedly; “do not distress yourself. Nay, you are weeping. I implore you to calm yourself.”

She wept, however, and large tears fell upon her hands; the king took one of her hands in his, and kissed the tears away. She looked at him so sadly and with so much tenderness that he felt his heart giving way under her gaze.

“You have no kind of feeling, then, for Guiche?” he said, more disturbed than became his character of mediator.

“None—absolutely none.”

“Then I can reassure my brother in that respect?”

“Nothing will satisfy him, sire. Do not believe he is jealous. Monsieur has been badly advised by some one, and he is of nervous disposition.”

“He may well be so when you are concerned,” said the king.

Madame cast down her eyes, and was silent; the king did so likewise, still holding her hand all the while. Their momentary silence seemed to last an age. Madame gently withdrew her hand, and from that moment, she felt her triumph was certain, and that the field of battle was her own.

“Monsieur complains,” said the king, “that you prefer the society of private individuals to his own conversation and society.”

“But Monsieur passes his life in looking at his face in the glass, and in plotting all sorts of spiteful things against women with the Chevalier de Lorraine.”

“Oh, you are going somewhat too far.”

“I only tell you what is true. Do you observe for yourself, sire, and you will see that I am right.”

“I will observe; but, in the meantime, what satisfaction can I give my brother?”

“My departure.”

“You repeat that word,” exclaimed the king, imprudently, as if, during the last ten minutes, such a change had been produced that Madame would have had all her ideas on the subject thoroughly changed.

“Sire, I cannot be happy here any longer,” she said. “M. de Guiche annoys Monsieur. Will he be sent away, too?”

“If it be necessary, why not?” replied the king, smiling.

“Well; and after M. de Guiche—whom, by the by, I shall regret—I warn you, sire.”

“Ah, you will regret him?”

“Certainly; he is amiable, he has a great friendship for me, and he amuses me.”

“If Monsieur were only to hear you,” said the king, slightly annoyed, “do you know I would not undertake to make it up again between you; nay, I would not even attempt it.”

“Sire, can you, even now, prevent Monsieur from being jealous of the first person who may approach? I know very well that M. de Guiche is not the first.”

“Again I warn you that as a good brother I shall take a dislike to De Guiche.”

“Ah, sire, do not, I entreat you, adopt either the sympathies or the dislikes of Monsieur. Remain king; better for yourself and for every one else.”

“You jest charmingly, madame; and I can well understand how the people you attack must adore you.”

“And is that the reason why you, sire, whom I had regarded as my defender, are about to join these who persecute me?” said Madame.

“I your persecutor! Heaven forbid!”

“Then,” she continued, languishingly, “grant me a favour.”

“Whatever you wish.”

“Let me return to England.”

“Never, never!” exclaimed Louis XIV.

“I am a prisoner, then?”

“In France—if France is a prison—yes.”

“What must I do, then?”

“I will tell you. Instead of devoting yourself to friendships which are somewhat unstable, instead of alarming us by your retirement, remain always in our society, do not leave us, let us live as a united family. M. de Guiche is certainly very amiable; but if, at least, we do not possess his wit—”

“Ah, sire, you know very well you are pretending to be modest.”

“No, I swear to you. One may be a king, and yet feel that he possesses fewer chances of pleasing than many other gentlemen.”

“I am sure, sire, that you do not believe a single word you are saying.”

The king looked at Madame tenderly, and said, “Will you promise me one thing?”

“What is it?”

“That you will no longer waste upon strangers, in your own apartments, the time which you owe us. Shall we make an offensive and defensive alliance against the common enemy?”

“An alliance with you, sire?”

"Why not? Are you not a sovereign power?"

"But are you, sire, a reliable ally?"

"You shall see, madame."

"And when shall this alliance commence?"

"This very day."

"I will draw up the treaty, and you shall sign it."

"Blindly."

"Then, sire, I promise you wonders; you are the star of the court, and when you make your appearance, everything will be resplendent."

"Oh, madame, madame," said Louis XIV., "you know well that there is no brilliancy that does not proceed from yourself, and that if I assume the sun as my device, it is only an emblem."

"Sire, you flatter your ally, and you wish to deceive her," said Madame, threatening the king with her finger menacingly raised.

"What! you believe I am deceiving you, when I assure you of my affection?"

"Yes."

"What makes you so suspicious?"

"One thing."

"What is it? I shall indeed be unhappy if I do not overcome it."

"That one thing in question, sire, is not in your power, not even in the power of Heaven."

"Tell me what it is."

"The past."

"I do not understand, madame," said the king, precisely because he had understood her but too well.

The princess took his hand in hers. "Sire," she said, "I have had the misfortune to displease you for so long a period, that I have almost the right to ask myself to-day why you were able to accept me as a sister-in-law."

"Displease me! You have displeased me?"

"Nay, do not deny it, for I remember it well."

"Our alliance shall date from to-day," exclaimed the king, with a warmth that was not assumed. "You will not think any more of the past, will you? I myself am resolved that I will not. I shall always remember the present; I have it before my eyes; look." And he led the princess before a mirror, in which she saw herself reflected, blushing and beautiful enough to overcome a saint.

"It is all the same," she murmured; "it will not be a very worthy alliance."

"Must I swear?" inquired the king, intoxicated by the voluptuous turn the whole conversation had taken.

"Oh, I will not refuse to witness a resounding oath," said Madame; "it has always the *semblance* of security."

The king knelt upon a footstool and took Madame's hand. She, with a smile that no painter could ever succeed in depicting, and which a poet might only imagine, gave him both her hands, in which he hid his burning face. Neither of them could utter a syllable. The king felt Madame withdraw her hands, caressing his face while she did so. He rose immediately and left the apartment. The courtiers remarked his heightened colour, and concluded that the scene had been a stormy one. The Chevalier de Lorraine, however, hastened to say, "Nay, be comforted, gentlemen, his majesty is always pale when he is angry."

XXXIV. The Advisers.

The king left Madame in a state of agitation it would have been difficult even for himself to have explained. It is impossible, in fact, to depict the secret play of those strange sympathies which, suddenly and apparently without any cause, are excited, after many years passed in the greatest calmness and indifference, by two hearts destined to love each other. Why had Louis formerly disdained, almost hated, Madame? Why did he now find the same woman so beautiful, so captivating? And why, not only were his thoughts occupied about her, but still more, why were they so continuously occupied about her? Why, in fact, had Madame, whose eyes and mind were sought for in another direction, shown during the last week towards the king a semblance of favour which encouraged the belief of still greater regard. It must not be supposed that Louis proposed to himself any plan of seduction; the tie which united Madame to his brother was, or at least, seemed to him, an insuperable barrier; he was even too far removed from that barrier to perceive its existence. But on the downward path of those passions in which the heart rejoices, towards which youth impels us, no one can decide where to stop, not even the man who has in advance calculated all the chances of his own success or another's submission. As far as Madame was concerned, her regard for the king may easily be explained: she was young, a coquette, and ardently fond of admiration. Hers was one of those buoyant, impetuous natures, which upon a theatre would leap over the greatest obstacles to obtain an acknowledgement of applause from the spectators. It was not surprising, then, that, after having been adored by Buckingham, by De Guiche, who was superior to Buckingham, even if it were only from that negative merit, so much appreciated by women, that is to say, novelty—it was not surprising, we say, that the princess should raise her ambition to being admired by the king, who not only was the first person in the kingdom, but was one of the handsomest and cleverest men in Europe. As for the sudden passion with which Louis was inspired for his sister-in-law, physiology would perhaps supply an explanation by some hackneyed commonplace reasons, and nature by means of her mysterious affinity of characters. Madame had the most beautiful black eyes in the world; Louis, eyes as beautiful, but blue. Madame was laughter-loving and unreserved in her manners; Louis, melancholy and diffident. Summoned to meet each other for the first time upon the grounds of interest and common curiosity, these two opposite natures were mutually influenced by the mingling of their reciprocal contradictions of character. Louis, when he returned to his own rooms, acknowledged to himself that Madame was the most attractive woman of his court. Madame, left alone, delightedly thought that she had made a great impression on the king. This feeling with her must remain passive, whilst the king could not but act with all the natural vehemence of the heated fancies of a young man, and of a young man who has but to express a wish to see his wish fulfilled. The first thing the king did was to announce to Monsieur that everything was quietly arranged; that Madame had the greatest respect, the sincerest affection for him; but that she was of a proud, impetuous character, and that her susceptibilities were so acute as to require very careful management. Monsieur replied in the reticent tone of voice he generally adopted with his brother, that he could not very well understand the susceptibilities of a woman whose conduct might, in his opinion, expose her to censorious remarks, and that if any one had a right to feel wounded, it was he, Monsieur himself. To this the king replied in a quick tone of voice, which showed the interest he took in his sister-in-law, "Thank Heaven, Madame is above censure."

"The censure of others, certainly, I admit," said Monsieur; "but not above mine, I presume."

"Well," said the king, "all I have to say, Philip, is that Madame's conduct does not deserve your censure. She certainly is heedless and singular, but professes the best feelings. The English character is not always well understood in France, and the liberty of English manners sometimes surprises those who do not know the extent to which this liberty is enriched by innocence."

"Ah!" said Monsieur, more and more piqued, "from the very moment that your majesty absolves my wife, whom I accuse, my wife is not guilty, and I have nothing more to say."

"Philip," replied the king hastily, for he felt the voice of conscience murmuring softly in his heart, that Monsieur was not altogether wrong, "what I have done, and what I have said, has been only for your happiness. I was told that you complained of a want of confidence and attention on Madame's part, and I did not wish your uneasiness to be prolonged. It is part of my duty to watch over your household, as over that of the humblest of my subjects. I have satisfied myself, therefore, with the sincerest pleasure, that your apprehensions have no foundation."

"And," continued Monsieur, in an interrogative tone of voice, and fixing his eyes upon his brother, "what your majesty has discovered for Madame—and I bow myself to your superior judgment—have you verified for those who have been the cause of the scandal of which I complain?"

"You are right, Philip," said the king; "I will reserve that point for future consideration."

These words comprised an order as well as a consolation; the prince felt it to be so, and withdrew.

As for Louis, he went to seek his mother, for he felt that he had need of a more complete absolution than that he had just received from his brother. Anne of Austria did not entertain for M. de Guiche the same reasons for indulgence she had had for Buckingham. She perceived, at the very first words he pronounced, that Louis was not disposed to be severe.

To appear in a contradictory humor was one of the stratagems of the good queen, in order to succeed in ascertaining the truth. But Louis was no longer in his apprenticeship; already for more than a year past he had been king, and during that year he had learned how to dissemble. Listening to Anne of Austria, in order to permit her to disclose her own thoughts, testifying his approval only by look and gesture, he became convinced, from certain piercing glances, and from certain skillful insinuations, that the queen, so clear-sighted in matters of gallantry, had, if not guessed, at least suspected, his weakness for Madame. Of all his auxiliaries, Anne of Austria would be the most important to secure; of all his enemies, Anne of Austria would prove most dangerous. Louis, therefore, changed his maneuvers. He complained of Madame, absolved Monsieur, listened to what his mother had to say of De Guiche, as he had previously listened to what she had to say of Buckingham, and then, when he saw that she thought she had gained a complete victory over him, he left her.

The whole of the court, that is to say, all the favourites and more intimate associates, and they were numerous, since there were already five masters, were assembled in the evening for the repetition of the ballet. This interval had been occupied by poor De Guiche in receiving visits; among the number was one which he hoped and feared nearly to an equal extent. It was that of the Chevalier de Lorraine. About three o'clock in the afternoon the chevalier entered De Guiche's rooms. His looks were of the most reassuring character. "Monsieur," said he to De Guiche, "was in an excellent humor, and no none could say that the slightest cloud had passed across the conjugal sky. Besides, Monsieur was not one to bear ill-feeling."

For a long time past, during his residence at the court, the Chevalier de Lorraine had decided, that of Louis XIII.'s two sons, Monsieur was the one who had inherited the father's character—an uncertain, irresolute character; impulsively good, indifferently disposed at bottom; but certainly a cipher for his friends. He especially cheered De Guiche, by pointing out to him that Madame would, before long, succeed in governing her husband, and that, consequently, that man would govern Monsieur who should succeed in influencing Madame.

To this, De Guiche full of mistrust and presence of mind, replied, "Yes, chevalier; but I believe Madame to be a very dangerous person."

"In what respect?"

"She has perceived that Monsieur is not very passionately inclined towards women."

"Quite true," said the Chevalier de Lorraine, laughing.

"In that case, Madame will choose the first one who approaches, in order to make him the object of her preference, and to bring back her husband by jealousy."

"Deep! deep!" exclaimed the chevalier.

"But true," replied De Guiche.

Neither the one nor the other expressed his real thought. De Guiche, at the very moment he thus attacked Madame's character, mentally asked her forgiveness from the bottom of his heart. The chevalier, while admiring De Guiche's penetration, was leading him, blindfolded, to the brink of the precipice. De Guiche then questioned him more directly upon the effect produced by the scene of the morning, and upon the still more serious effect produced by the scene at dinner.

"But I have already told you they are all laughing at it," replied the Chevalier de Lorraine, "and Monsieur himself at the head of them."

"Yet," hazarded De Guiche, "I have heard that the king paid Madame a visit."

"Yes, precisely so. Madame was the only one who did not laugh, and the king went to her in order to make her laugh, too."

"So that—"

"So that nothing is altered in the arrangements of the day," said the chevalier.

"And is there a repetition of the ballet this evening?"

"Certainly."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite," returned the chevalier.

At this moment of the conversation between the two young men, Raoul entered, looking full of anxiety. As soon as the chevalier, who had a secret dislike for him, as for every other noble character, perceived him enter, he rose from his seat.

"What do you advise me to do, then?" inquired De Guiche of the chevalier.

"I advise you to go to sleep in perfect tranquillity, my dear count."

"And my advice, De Guiche," said Raoul, "is the very opposite."

“What is that?”

“To mount your horse and set off at once for one of your estates; on your arrival, follow the chevalier’s advice, if you like; and, what is more, you can sleep there as long and as tranquilly as you please.”

“What! set off!” exclaimed the chevalier, feigning surprise; “why should De Guiche set off?”

“Because, and you cannot be ignorant of it—you particularly so— because every one is talking about the scene which has passed between Monsieur and De Guiche.”

De Guiche turned pale.

“Not at all,” replied the chevalier, “not at all; and you have been wrongly informed, M. de Bragelonne.”

“I have been perfectly well informed, on the contrary, monsieur,” replied Raoul, “and the advice I give De Guiche is that of a friend.”

During this discussion, De Guiche, somewhat shaken, looked alternately first at one and then at the other of his advisers. He inwardly felt that a game, important in all its consequences for the rest of his life, was being played at that moment.

“Is it not fact,” said the chevalier, putting the question to the count himself, “is it not fact, De Guiche, that the scene was not so tempestuous as the Vicomte de Bragelonne seems to think, and who, moreover, was not himself there?”

“Whether tempestuous or not,” persisted Raoul, “it is not precisely of the scene itself that I am speaking, but of the consequences that may ensue. I know that Monsieur has threatened, I know that Madame has been in tears.”

“Madame in tears!” exclaimed De Guiche, imprudently clasping his hands.

“Ah!” said the chevalier, laughing, “this is indeed a circumstance I was not acquainted with. You are decidedly better informed than I am, Monsieur de Bragelonne.”

“And it is because I am better informed than yourself, chevalier, that I insist upon De Guiche leaving.”

“No, no; I regret to differ from you, vicomte; but his departure is unnecessary. Why, indeed, should he leave? tell us why.”

“The king!”

“The king!” exclaimed De Guiche.

“Yes; I tell you the king has taken up the affair.”

“Bah!” said the chevalier, “the king likes De Guiche, and particularly his father; reflect, that, if the count were to leave, it would be an admission that he had done something which merited rebuke.”

“Why so?”

“No doubt of it; when one runs away, it is either from guilt or fear.”

“Sometimes, because a man is offended; often because he is wrongfully accused,” said Bragelonne. “We will assign as a reason for his departure, that he feels hurt and injured—nothing will be easier; we will say that we both did our utmost to keep him, and you, at least, will not be speaking otherwise than the truth. Come, De Guiche, you are innocent, and, being so, the scene of to-day must have wounded you. So set off.”

“No, De Guiche, remain where you are,” said the chevalier; “precisely as M. de Bragelonne has put it, because you are innocent. Once more, forgive me, vicomte; but my opinion is the very opposite to your own.”

“And you are at perfect liberty to maintain it, monsieur; but be assured that the exile which De Guiche will voluntarily impose upon himself will be of short duration. He can terminate it whenever he pleases, and returning from his voluntary exile, he will meet with smiles from all lips; while, on the contrary, the anger of the king may now draw down a storm upon his head, the end of which no one can foresee.”

The chevalier smiled, and muttered to himself, “That is the very thing I wish.” And at the same time he shrugged his shoulders, a movement which did not escape the count, who dreaded, if he quitted the court, to seem to yield to a feeling of fear.

“No, no; I have decided, Bragelonne; I stay.”

“I prophesy, then,” said Raoul, sadly, “that misfortune will befall you, De Guiche.”

“I, too, am a prophet, but not a prophet of evil; on the contrary, count, I say to you, ‘remain.’”

“Are you sure,” inquired De Guiche, “that the repetition of the ballet still takes place?”

“Quite sure.”

“Well, you see, Raoul,” continued De Guiche, endeavoring to smile, “you see, the court is not so very sorrowful, or so readily disposed for internal dissensions, when dancing is carried on with such assiduity. Come, acknowledge that,” said the count to Raoul, who shook his head, saying, “I have nothing to add.”

“But,” inquired the chevalier, curious to learn whence Raoul had obtained his information, the exactitude of which he was inwardly forced to admit, “since you say you are well informed, vicomte, how can you be better informed than myself, who am one of the prince’s most intimate companions?”

“To such a declaration I submit. You certainly ought to be perfectly well informed, I admit; and, as a man of honour is incapable of saying anything but what he knows to be true, or of speaking otherwise than what he thinks, I will say no more, but confess myself defeated, and leave you in possession of the field of battle.”

Whereupon Raoul, who now seemed only to care to be left quiet, threw himself upon a couch, whilst the count summoned his servants to aid him in dressing. The chevalier, finding that time was passing away, wished to leave; but he feared, too, that Raoul, left alone with De Guiche, might yet influence him to change his mind. He therefore made use of his last resource.

“Madame,” he said, “will be brilliant; she appears to-day in her costume of Pomona.”

“Yes, that is so,” exclaimed the count.

“And she has just given directions in consequence,” continued the chevalier. “You know, Monsieur de Bragelonne, that the king is to appear as Spring.”

“It will be admirable,” said De Guiche; “and that is a better reason for me to remain than any you have yet given, because I am to appear as Autumn, and shall have to dance with Madame. I cannot absent myself without the king’s orders, since my departure would interrupt the ballet.”

“I,” said the chevalier, “am to be only a simple *egyptian*; true, it is, I am a bad dancer, and my legs are not well made. Gentlemen, adieu. Do not forget the basket of fruit, which you are to offer to Pomona, count.”

“Rest assured,” said De Guiche, delightedly, “I shall forget nothing.”

“I am now quite certain that he will remain,” murmured the Chevalier de Lorraine to himself.

Raoul, when the chevalier had left, did not even attempt to dissuade his friend, for he felt that it would be trouble thrown away; he merely observed to the comte, in his melancholy and melodious voice, “You are embarking in a most dangerous enterprise. I know you well; you go to extremes in everything, and the lady you love does so, too. Admitting for an instant that she should at last love you—”

“Oh, never!” exclaimed De Guiche.

“Why do you say never?”

“Because it would be a great misfortune for both of us.”

“In that case, instead of regarding you simply imprudent, I cannot but consider you absolutely mad.”

“Why?”

“Are you perfectly sure—mind, answer me frankly—that you do not wish her whom you love to make any sacrifice for you?”

“Yes, yes; quite sure.”

“Love her, then, at a distance.”

“What! at a distance?”

“Certainly; what matters being present or absent, since you expect nothing from her? Love her portrait, a memento.”

“Raoul!”

“Love is a shadow, an illusion, a chimera; be devoted to the affection itself, in giving a name to your ideality.”

“Ah!”

“You turn away; your servants approach. I will say no more. In good or bad fortune, De Guiche, depend on me.”

“Indeed I shall do so.”

“Very well; that is all I had to say to you. Spare no pains in your person, De Guiche, and look your very best. Adieu.”

“You will not be present, then, at the ballet, vicomte?”

“No; I shall have a visit to pay in town. Farewell, De Guiche.”

The reception was to take place in the king’s apartments. In the first place, there were the queens, then Madame, and a few ladies of the court, who had been carefully selected. A great number of courtiers, also selected, occupied the time, before the dancing commenced, in conversing, as people knew how to converse in those times. None of the ladies who had received invitations appeared in the costumes of the *fete*, as the Chevalier de Lorraine had predicted, but many conversations took place about the rich and ingenious toilettes designed by different painters for the ballet of “The Demi-Gods;” for thus were termed the kings and queens of which Fontainebleau was about to become the Pantheon. Monsieur arrived, holding in his hand a drawing representing his character; he looked somewhat anxious; he bowed courteously to the young queen and his mother, but saluted Madame almost cavalierly. His notice of her and his coldness of manner were observed by all. M. de Guiche indemnified the princess by a look of passionate devotion, and it must be admitted that Madame, as she raised her eyes, returned it to him with interest. It is unquestionable that De Guiche had never looked so handsome, for Madame’s glance had its customary effect of lighting up the features of the son of the Marshal de Gramont. The king’s sister-in-law felt a storm mustering above her head; she felt, too, that during the whole of the day, so fruitful in future events, she had acted unjustly, if not treasonably, towards one who loved her with such a depth of devotion. In her eyes the moment seemed to have arrived for an acknowledgement to the poor victim of the injustice of the morning. Her heart spoke, and murmured the name of De Guiche; the count was sincerely pitied and accordingly gained the victory over all others. Neither Monsieur, nor the king, nor the Duke of Buckingham, was any longer thought of; De Guiche at that moment reigned without a rival. But although Monsieur also looked very handsome, still he could not be compared to the count. It is well known—indeed all women say so—that a wide difference invariably exists between the good looks of a lover and those of a husband. Besides, in the present case, after Monsieur had left, and after the courteous and affectionate recognition of the young queen and of the queen-mother, and the careless and indifferent notice of Madame, which all the courtiers had remarked; all these motives gave the lover the advantage over the husband. Monsieur was too great a personage to notice these details. Nothing is so certain as a well settled idea of superiority to prove the inferiority of the man who has that opinion of himself. The king arrived. Every one looked for what might possibly happen in the glance, which began to bestir the world, like the brow of Jupiter Tonans. Louis had none of his brother’s gloominess, but was perfectly radiant. Having examined the greater part of the drawings which were displayed for his inspection on every side, he gave his opinion or made his remarks upon them, and in this manner rendered some happy and others wretched by a single word. Suddenly his glance, which was smilingly directed towards Madame, detected the slight correspondence established between the princess and the count. He bit his lips, but when he opened them again to utter a few commonplace remarks, he said, advancing towards the queens:—

“I have just been informed that everything is now prepared at Fontainebleau, in accordance with my directions.” A murmur of satisfaction arose from the different groups, and the king perceived on every face the greatest anxiety to receive an invitation for the *fetes*. “I shall leave to-morrow,” he added. Whereupon the profoundest silence immediately ensued. “And I invite,” said the king, finishing, “all those who are now present to get ready to accompany me.”

Smiling faces were now everywhere visible, with the exception of Monsieur, who seemed to retain his ill-humor. The different noblemen and ladies of the court thereupon defiled before the king, one after the other, in order to thank his majesty for the great honour which had been conferred upon them by the invitation. When it came to De Guiche’s turn, the king said, “Ah! M. de Guiche, I did not see you.”

The comte bowed, and Madame turned pale. De Guiche was about to open his lips to express his thanks, when the king said, “Comte, this is the season for farming purposes in the country; I am sure your tenants in Normandy will be glad to see you.”

The king, after this pitiless attack, turned his back on the poor comte, whose turn it was now to become pale; he advanced a few steps towards the king, forgetting that the king is never spoken to except in reply to questions addressed.

“I have perhaps misunderstood your majesty,” he stammered out.

The king turned his head slightly, and with a cold and stern glance, which plunged like a sword relentlessly into the hearts of those under disgrace, repeated, "I said retire to your estates," allowing every syllable to fall slowly one by one.

A cold perspiration bedewed the comte's face, his hands convulsively opened, and his hat, which he held between his trembling fingers, fell to the ground. Louis sought his mother's glance, as though to show her that he was master; he sought his brother's triumphant look, as if to ask him if he were satisfied with the vengeance taken; and lastly, his eyes fell upon Madame; but the princess was laughing and smiling with Madame de Noailles. She heard nothing, or rather had pretended not to hear at all. The Chevalier de Lorraine looked on also, with one of those looks of fixed hostility that seemed to give to a man's glance the power of a lever when it raises an obstacle, wrests it away, and casts it to a distance. M. de Guiche was left alone in the king's cabinet, the whole of the company having departed. Shadows seemed to dance before his eyes. He suddenly broke through the settled despair that overwhelmed him, and flew to hide himself in his own room, where Raoul awaited him, immovable in his own sad presentiments.

"Well?" he murmured, seeing his friend enter, bareheaded, with a wild gaze and tottering gait.

"Yes, yes, it is true," said De Guiche, unable to utter more, and falling exhausted upon the couch.

"And she?" inquired Raoul.

"She," exclaimed his unhappy friend, as he raised his hand clenched in anger, towards Heaven. "She!—"

"What did she say and do?"

"She said that her dress suited her admirably, and then she laughed."

A fit of hysteric laughter seemed to shatter his nerves, for he fell backwards, completely overcome.

XXXV. Fontainebleau.

For four days, every kind of enchantment brought together in the magnificent gardens of Fontainebleau had converted this spot into a place of the most perfect enjoyment. M. Colbert seemed gifted with ubiquity. In the morning there were the accounts of the previous night's expenses to settle; during the day, programmes, essays, enrolments, payments. M. Colbert had amassed four millions of francs, and dispersed them with sleepless economy. He was horrified at the expenses which mythology involved; not a wood nymph, nor a dryad, that cost less than a hundred francs a day! The dress alone amounted to three hundred francs. The expense of powder and sulphur for fireworks amounted, every night, to a hundred thousand francs. In addition to these, the illuminations on the borders of the sheet of water cost thirty thousand francs every evening. The *fetes* had been magnificent; and Colbert could not restrain his delight. From time to time, he noticed Madame and the king setting forth on hunting expeditions, or preparing for the reception of different fantastic personages, solemn ceremonials, which had been extemporized a fortnight before, and in which Madame's sparkling wit and the king's magnificence were equally well displayed.

For Madame, the heroine of the *fete*, replied to the addresses of the deputations from unknown races—Garamanth's, Scythians, Hyperboreans, Caucasians, and Patagonians, who seemed to issue from the ground for the purpose of approaching her with their congratulations; and upon every representative of these races the king bestowed a diamond, or some other article of value. Then the deputies, in verses more or less amusing, compared the king to the sun, Madame to Phoebe, the sun's sister, and the queen and Monsieur were no more spoken of than if the king had married Henrietta of England, and not Maria Theresa of Austria. The happy pair, hand in hand, imperceptibly pressing each other's fingers, drank in deep draughts the sweet beverage of adulation, by which the attractions of youth, beauty, power and love are enhanced. Every one at Fontainebleau was amazed at the extent of the influence which Madame had so rapidly acquired over the king, and whispered among themselves that Madame was, in point of fact, the true queen; and in effect, the king himself proclaimed its truth by his every thought, word, and look. He formed his wishes, he drew his inspirations from Madame's eyes, and his delight was unbounded when Madame deigned to smile upon him. And was Madame, on her side, intoxicated with the power she wielded, as she beheld every one at her feet? This was a question she herself could hardly answer; but what she did know was, that she could frame no wish, and that she felt herself to be perfectly happy. The result of all these changes, the source of which emanated from the royal will, was that Monsieur, instead of being the second person in the kingdom, had, in reality, become the third. And it was now far worse than in the time when De Guiche's guitars were heard in Madame's apartments; for, then, at least, Monsieur had the satisfaction of frightening those who annoyed him. Since the departure, however, of the enemy, who had been driven away by means of his alliance with the king, Monsieur had to submit to a burden, heavier, but in a very different sense, to his former one. Every evening Madame returned home quite exhausted. Horse-riding, bathing in the Seine, spectacles, dinners under the leafy covert of the trees, balls on the banks of the grand canal, concerts, etc., etc.; all this would have been sufficient to have killed, not a slight and delicate woman, but the strongest porter in the *chateau*. It is perfectly true that, with regard to dancing, concerts, and promenades, and such matters, a woman is far stronger than the most robust of porters. But, however great a woman's strength may be, there is a limit to it, and she cannot hold out long under such a system. As for Monsieur, he had not even the satisfaction of witnessing Madame's abdication of her royalty in the evening, for she lived in the royal pavilion with the young queen and the queen-mother. As a matter of course, the Chevalier de Lorraine did not quit Monsieur, and did not fail to distil drops of gall into every wound the latter received. The result was, that Monsieur—who had at first been in the highest spirits, and completely restored since Guiche's departure—subsided into his melancholy state three days after the court was installed at Fontainebleau.

It happened, however, that, one day, about two o'clock in the afternoon, Monsieur, who had risen late, and had bestowed upon his toilet more than his usual attention,—it happened, we repeat, that Monsieur, who had not heard of any plans having been arranged for the day, formed the project of collecting his own court, and of carrying Madame off with him to Moret, where he possessed a charming country house. He accordingly went to the queen's pavilion, and was astonished, on entering, to find none of the royal servants in attendance. Quite alone, therefore, he entered the rooms, a door on the left opening to Madame's apartment, the one on the right to the young queen's. In his wife's apartment, Monsieur was informed, by a sempstress who was working there, that every one had left at eleven o'clock, for the purpose of bathing in the Seine, that a grand *fete* was to be made of the expedition, that all the carriages had been placed at the park gates, and that they had all set out more than an hour ago.

"Very good," said Monsieur, "the idea is a good one; the heat is very oppressive, and I have no objection to bathe, too."

He summoned his servants, but no one came. He summoned those in attendance on Madame, but everybody had gone out. He went to the stables, where he was informed by a groom that there were no carriages of any description. He desired that a couple of horses should be saddled, one for himself and the other for his valet. The groom told him that all the horses had been sent away. Monsieur, pale with anger, again descended towards the queen's apartments, and penetrated as far as Anne of Austria's oratory, where he perceived, through the half-opened tapestry-hangings, his young and beautiful sister on her knees before the queen-mother, who appeared weeping bitterly. He had not been either seen or heard. He cautiously approached the opening, and listened, the sight of so much grief having aroused his curiosity. Not only was the young queen weeping, but she was complaining also. "Yes," she said, "the king neglects me, the king devotes himself to pleasures and amusements only, in which I have no share."

"Patience, patience, my daughter," said Anne of Austria, in Spanish; and then, also in Spanish, added some words of advice, which Monsieur did not understand. The queen replied by accusations, mingled with sighs and sobs, among which Monsieur often distinguished the word *banos*, which Maria Theresa accentuated with spiteful anger.

"The baths," said Monsieur to himself, "it seems it is the baths that have put her out." And he endeavored to put together the disconnected phrases which he had been able to understand. It was easy to guess that the queen was complaining bitterly, and that, if Anne of Austria did not console her, she at least endeavored to do so. Monsieur was afraid to be detected listening at the door and he therefore made up his mind to cough; the two queens turned round at the sound and Monsieur entered. At sight of the prince, the young queen rose precipitately, and dried her tears. Monsieur, however, knew the people he had to deal with too well, and was naturally too polite to remain silent, and he accordingly saluted them. The queen-mother smiled pleasantly at him, saying, "What do you want, Philip?"

"I?—nothing," stammered Monsieur. "I was looking for—"

"Whom?"

"I was looking for Madame."

"Madame is at the baths."

"And the king?" said Monsieur, in a tone which made the queen tremble.

"The king also, the whole court as well," replied Anne of Austria.

"Except you, madame," said Monsieur.

"Oh! I," said the young queen, "I seem to terrify all those who amuse themselves."

"And so do I,—judging from appearances," rejoined Monsieur.

Anne of Austria made a sigh to her daughter-in-law, who withdrew, weeping.

Monsieur's brows contracted, as he remarked aloud, "What a cheerless house. What do you think of it, mother?"

"Why, no; everybody here is pleasure-hunting."

"Yes, indeed, that is the very thing that makes those dull who do not care for pleasure."

"In what a tone you say that, Philip."

"Upon my word, madame, I speak as I think."

"Explain yourself; what is the matter?"

"Ask my sister-in-law, rather, who, just now, was detailing all her grievances to you."

"Her grievances, what—"

"Yes, I was listening; accidentally, I confess, but still I listened—so that I heard only too well my sister complain of those famous baths of Madame—"

"Ah! folly!"

"No, no, no; people are not always foolish when they weep. The queen said *banos*, which means baths."

"I repeat, Philip," said Anne of Austria, "that your sister is childishly jealous."

"In that case, madame," replied the prince, "I, too, must with great humility accuse myself of possessing the same defect."

"You also, Philip?"

"Certainly."

"Are you really jealous of these baths?"

"And why not, madame, when the king goes to the baths with my wife, and does not take the queen? Why not, when Madame goes to the baths with the king, and does not do me the honour to even invite me? And you enjoin my sister-in-law to be satisfied, and require me to be satisfied, too."

"You are raving, my dear Philip," said Anne of Austria; "you have driven the Duke of Buckingham away; you have been the cause of M. de Guiche's exile; do you now wish to send the king away from Fontainebleau?"

"I do not pretend to anything of the kind, madame," said Monsieur, bitterly; "but, at least, I can withdraw, and I shall do so."

"Jealous of the king—jealous of your brother?"

"Yes, madame, I am jealous of the king—of my own brother, and remarkably jealous, too."

"Really, Monsieur," exclaimed Anne of Austria, affecting to be indignant, "I begin to believe you are mad, and a sworn enemy to my repose. I therefore abandon the place to you, for I have no means of defending myself against such monomanias."

She arose and left Monsieur a prey to the most extravagant transport of passion. He remained for a moment completely bewildered; then, recovering himself, again went to the stables, found the groom, once more asked him for a carriage or a horse, and upon his reply that there was neither the one or the other, Monsieur snatched a long whip from the hand of a stable-boy, and began to pursue the poor devil of a groom all round the servants' courtyard, whipping him the while, in spite of his cries and excuses; then, quite out of breath, covered with perspiration, and trembling in every limb, he returned to his own apartments, broke in pieces some beautiful specimens of porcelain, and then got into bed, booted and spurred as he was, crying out for some one to come to him. 4

XXXVI. The Bath.

At Vulaines, beneath the impenetrable shade of flowering osiers and willows, which, as they bent down their green heads, dipped the extremities of their branches in the blue waters, a long and flat-bottomed boat, with ladders covered with long blue curtains, served as a refuge for the bathing Dianas, who, as they left the water, were watched by twenty plumed Acteons, who, eagerly, and full of admiration, galloped up and down the flowery banks of the river. But Diana herself, even the chaste Diana, clothed in her long chlamys, was less beautiful—less impenetrable, than Madame, as young and beautiful as that goddess herself. For, notwithstanding the fine tunic of the huntress, her round and delicate knee can be seen; and notwithstanding the sonorous quiver, her brown shoulders can

be detected; whereas, in Madame's case, a long white veil enveloped her, wrapping her round and round a hundred times, as she resigned herself into the hands of her female attendants, and thus was rendered inaccessible to the most indiscreet, as well as to the most penetrating gaze. When she ascended the ladder, the poets were present—and all were poets when Madame was the subject of discussion—the twenty poets who were galloping about, stopped, and with one voice, exclaimed that pearls, and not drops of water, were falling from her person, to be lost again in the happy river. The king, the center of these effusions, and of this respectful homage, imposed silence upon those expatiators, for whom it seemed impossible to exhaust their raptures, and he rode away, for fear of offending, even through the silken curtains, the modesty of the woman and the dignity of the princess. A great blank thereupon ensued in the scene, and perfect silence in the boat. From the movements on board—from the flutterings and agitations of the curtains—the goings to and fro of the female attendants engaged in their duties, could be guessed.

The king smilingly listened to the conversation of the courtiers around him, but it could easily be perceived that he gave but little, if any, attention to their remarks. In fact, hardly had the sound of the rings drawn along the curtain-rods announced that Madame was dressed, and that the goddess was about to make her reappearance, than the king, returning to his former post immediately, and running quite close to the river-bank, gave the signal for all those to approach whose duty or pleasure summoned them to Madame's side. The pages hurried forward, conducting the led horses; the carriages, which had remained sheltered under the trees, advanced towards the tent, followed by a crowd of servants, bearers, and female attendants, who, while their masters had been bathing, had mutually exchanged their own observations, critical remarks, and the discussion of matters personal—the fugitive journal of that period, of which no one now remembers anything, not even by the waves, the witnesses of what went on that day—theirselfes now sublimed into immensity, as the actors have vanished into eternity.

A crowd of people swarming upon the banks of the river, without reckoning the groups of peasants drawn together by their anxiety to see the king and the princess, was, for many minutes, the most disorderly, but the most agreeable, mob imaginable. The king dismounted from his horse, a movement which was imitated by all the courtiers, and offered his hat to Madame, whose rich riding-habit displayed her fine figure, which was set off to great advantage by that garment, made of fine woolen cloth embroidered with silver. Her hair, still damp and blacker than jet, hung in heavy masses upon her white and delicate neck. Joy and health sparkled in her beautiful eyes; composed, yet full of energy, she inhaled the air in deep draughts, under a lace parasol, which was borne by one of her pages. Nothing could be more charming, more graceful, more poetical, than these two figures buried under the rose-coloured shade of the parasol, the king, whose white teeth were displayed in continual smiles, and Madame, whose black eyes sparkled like carbuncles in the glittering reflection of the changing hues of the silk. When Madame approached her horse, a magnificent animal of Andalusian breed, of spotless white, somewhat heavy, perhaps, but with a spirited and splendid head, in which the mixture, happily combined, of Arabian and Spanish blood could be readily traced, and whose long tail swept the ground; and as the princess affected difficulty in mounting, the king took her in his arms in such a manner that Madame's arm was clasped like a circlet of alabaster around the king's neck. Louis, as he withdrew, involuntarily touched with his lips the arm, which was not withheld, and the princess having thanked her royal equerry, every one sprang to his saddle at the same moment. The king and Madame drew aside to allow the carriages, the outriders, and runners, to pass by. A fair proportion of the cavaliers, released from the restraint etiquette had imposed upon them, gave the rein to their horses, and darted after the carriages which bore the maids of honour, as blooming as so many virgin huntresses around Diana, and the human whirlwind, laughing, chattering, and noisy, passed onward.

The king and Madame, however, kept their horses in hand at a foot-pace. Behind his majesty and his sister-in-law, certain of the courtiers —those, at least, who were seriously disposed or were anxious to be within reach, or under the eyes, of the king—followed at a respectful distance, restraining their impatient horses, regulating their pace by that of the king and Madame, and abandoned themselves to all the delight and gratification which is to be found in the conversation of clever people, who can, with perfect courtesy, make a thousand atrocious, but laughable remarks about their neighbors. In their stifled laughter, and in the little reticences of their sardonic humor, Monsieur, the poor absentee, was not spared. But they pitied, and bewailed greatly, the fate of De Guiche, and it must be confessed that their compassion, as far as he was concerned, was not misplaced. The king and Madame having breathed the horses, and repeated a hundred times over such remarks as the courtiers, who supplied them with talk, suggested to them, set off at a hand gallop, and the leafy coverts of the forest resounded to the footfalls of the mounted party. To the conversations beneath the shade of the trees,—to remarks made in the shape of confidential communications, and observations, mysteriously exchanged, succeeded the noisiest bursts of laughter;—from the very outriders to royalty itself, merriment seemed to spread. Every one began to laugh and to cry out. The magpies and the jays fluttered away uttering their guttural cries, beneath the waving avenues of oaks; the cuckoo staid his monotonous cry in the recesses of the forest; the chaffinch and tomtit flew away in clouds; while the terrified deer bounded riverwards from the midst of the thickets. This crowd, spreading joy, confusion, and light wherever it passed, was heralded, it may be said, to the chateau by its own clamor. As the king and Madame entered the village, they were received by the acclamations of the crowd. Madame hastened to look for Monsieur, for she instinctively understood that he had been far too long kept from sharing in this joy. The king went to rejoin the queens; he knew he owed them—one especially—a compensation for his long absence. But Madame was not admitted to Monsieur's apartments, and she was informed that Monsieur was asleep. The king, instead of being met by Maria Theresa smiling, as was usual with her, found Anne of Austria in the gallery watching for his return, who advanced to meet him, and taking him by the hand, led him to her own apartment. No one ever knew what was the nature of the conversation which took place between them, or rather what it was that the queen-mother said to Louis XIV.; but the general tenor of the interview might certainly be guessed from the annoyed expression of the king's face as he left her.

But we, whose mission it is to interpret all things, as it is also to communicate our interpretations to our readers,—we should fail in our duty, if we were to leave them in ignorance of the result of this interview. It will be found sufficiently detailed, at least we hope so, in the following chapter.

XXXVII. The Butterfly-Chase.

The king, on retiring to his apartments to give some directions and to arrange his ideas, found on his toilette-glass a small note, the handwriting of which seemed disguised. He opened it and read—"Come quickly, I have a thousand things to say to you." The king and Madame had not been separated a sufficiently long time for these thousand things to be the result of the three thousand which they had been saying to each other during the route which separated Vulaines from Fontainebleau. The confused and hurried character of the note gave the king a great deal to reflect upon. He occupied himself but slightly with his toilette, and set off to pay his visit to Madame. The princess, who did not wish to have the appearance of expecting him, had gone into the gardens with the ladies of her suite. When the king was informed that Madame had left her apartments and had gone for a walk in the gardens, he collected all the gentlemen he could find, and invited them to follow him. He found Madame engaged in chasing butterflies, on a large lawn bordered with heliotrope and flowering broom. She was looking on as the most adventurous and youngest of her ladies ran to and fro, and with her back turned to a high hedge, very impatiently awaited the arrival of the king, with whom she had appointed the rendezvous. The sound of many feet upon the gravel walk made her turn round. Louis XIV. was hatless, he had struck down with his cane a peacock butterfly, which Monsieur de Saint-Aignan had picked up from the ground quite stunned.

"You see, Madame," said the king, as he approached her, "that I, too, am hunting on your behalf!" and then, turning towards those who had accompanied him, said, "Gentlemen, see if each of you cannot obtain as much for these ladies," a remark which was a signal for all to retire. And thereupon a curious spectacle might have been observed; old and corpulent courtiers were seen running after butterflies, losing their hats as they ran, and with their raised canes cutting down the myrtles and the furze, as they would have done the Spaniards.

The king offered Madame his arm, and they both selected, as the center of observation, a bench with a roof of boards and moss, a kind of hut roughly designed by the modest genius of one of the gardeners who had inaugurated the picturesque and fanciful amid the formal style of the gardening of that period. This sheltered retreat, covered with nasturtiums and climbing roses, screened the bench, so that the spectators, insulated in the middle of the lawn, saw and were seen on every side, but could not be heard, without perceiving those who might approach for the purpose of listening. Seated thus, the king made a sign of encouragement to those who were running about; and then, as if he were engaged with Madame in a dissertation upon the butterfly, which he had thrust through with a gold pin and fastened on his hat, said to her, "How admirably we are placed here for conversations."

"Yes, sire, for I wished to be heard by you alone, and yet to be seen by every one."

"And I also," said Louis.

"My note surprised you?"

"Terrified me rather. But what I have to tell you is more important."

"It cannot be, sire. Do you know that Monsieur refuses to see me?"

"Why so?"

"Can you not guess why?"

"Ah, Madame! in that case we have both the same thing to say to each other."

"What has happened to you, then?"

"You wish me to begin?"

"Yes, for I have told you all."

"Well, then, as soon as I returned, I found my mother waiting for me, and she led me away to her own apartments."

"The queen-mother?" said Madame, with some anxiety, "the matter is serious then."

"Indeed it is, for she told me... but, in the first place, allow me to preface what I have to say with one remark. Has Monsieur ever spoken to you about me?"

"Often."

"Has he ever spoken to you about his jealousy?"

"More frequently still."

"Of his jealousy of me?"

"No, but of the Duke of Buckingham and De Guiche."

"Well, Madame, Monsieur's present idea is a jealousy of myself."

"Really," replied the princess, smiling archly.

"And it really seems to me," continued the king, "that we have never given any ground—"

"Never! at least I have not. But who told you that Monsieur was jealous?"

"My mother represented to me that Monsieur entered her apartments like a madman, that he uttered a thousand complaints against you, and—forgive me for saying it—against your coquetry. It appears that Monsieur indulges in injustice, too."

"You are very kind, sire."

"My mother reassured him; but he pretended that people reassure him too often, and that he had had quite enough of it."

"Would it not be better for him not to make himself uneasy in any way?"

"The very thing I said."

"Confess, sire, that the world is very wicked. Is it possible that a brother and sister cannot converse together, or take pleasure in each other's company, without giving rise to remarks and suspicions? For indeed, sire, we are doing no harm, and have no intention of doing any." And she looked at the king with that proud yet provoking glance that kindles desire in the coldest and wisest of men.

"No!" sighed the king, "that is true."

"You know very well, sire, that if it were to continue, I should be obliged to make a disturbance. Do you decide upon our conduct, and say whether it has, or has not, been perfectly correct."

"Oh, certainly—perfectly correct."

"Often alone together,—for we delight in the same things,—we might possibly be led away into error, but *have* we been? I regard you as a brother, and nothing more."

The king frowned. She continued:

"Your hand, which often meets my own, does not excite in me that agitation and emotion which is the case with those who love each other, for instance—"

"Enough," said the king, "enough, I entreat you. You have no pity—you are killing me."

"What is the matter?"

"In fact, then, you distinctly say you experience nothing when near me."

"Oh, sire! I don't say that—my affection—"

"Enough, Henrietta, I again entreat you. If you believe me to be marble, as you are, undeceive yourself."

"I do not understand you, sire."

"Very well," said the king, casting down his eyes. "And so our meetings, the pressure of each other's hand, the looks we have exchanged—Yes, yes; you are right, and I understand your meaning," and he buried his face in his hands.

"Take care, sire," said Madame, hurriedly, "Monsieur de Saint-Aignan is looking at you."



"Of course," said Louis, angrily; "never even the shadow of liberty! never any sincerity in my intercourse with any one! I imagine I have found a friend, who is nothing but a spy; a dearer friend, who is only a—sister!"

Madame was silent, and cast down her eyes.

"My husband is jealous," she murmured, in a tone of which nothing could equal its sweetness and charm.

"You are right," exclaimed the king, suddenly.

"You see," she said, looking at him in a manner that set his heart on fire, "you are free, you are not suspected, the peace of your house is not disturbed."

"Alas," said the king, "as yet you know nothing, for the queen is jealous."

"Maria Theresa!"

"Stark mad with jealousy! Monsieur's jealousy arises from hers; she was weeping and complaining to my mother, and was reproaching us for those bathing parties, which have made me so happy."

"And me too," answered Madame, by a look.

"When, suddenly," continued the king, "Monsieur, who was listening, heard the word '*banos*,' which the queen pronounced with some degree of bitterness, that awakened his attention; he entered the room, looking quite wild, broke into the conversation, and began to quarrel with my mother so bitterly that she was obliged to leave him; so that, while you have a jealous husband to deal with, I shall have perpetually present before me a specter of jealousy with swollen eyes, a cadaverous face, and sinister looks."

"Poor king," murmured Madame, as she lightly touched the king's hand. He retained her hand in his, and in order to press it without exciting suspicion in the spectators, who were not so much taken up with the butterflies that they could not occupy themselves about other matters, and who perceived clearly enough that there was some mystery in the king's and Madame's conversation, Louis placed the dying butterfly before his sister-in-law, and bent over it as if to count the thousand eyes of its wings, or the particles of golden dust which covered it. Neither of them spoke; however, their hair mingled, their breaths united, and their hands feverishly throbbed in each other's grasp. Five minutes passed in this manner.

XXXVIII. What Was Caught after the Butterflies.

The two young people remained for a moment with their heads bent down, bowed, as it were, beneath the double thought of the love which was springing up in their hearts, and which gives birth to so many happy fancies in the imaginations of twenty years of age. Henrietta gave a side glance, from time to time, at the king. Hers was one of those finely-organized natures capable of looking inwardly at itself, as well as at others at the same moment. She perceived Love lying at the bottom of Louis's heart, as a skillful diver sees a pearl at the bottom of the sea. She knew Louis was hesitating, if not in doubt, and that his indolent or timid heart required aid and encouragement. "And so?" she said, interrogatively, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?" inquired Louis, after a moment's pause.

"I mean, that I shall be obliged to return to the resolution I had formed."

"To what resolution?"

"To that which I have already submitted to your majesty."

"When?"

"On the very day we had a certain explanation about Monsieur's jealousies."

"What did you say to me then?" inquired Louis, with some anxiety.

"Do you not remember, sire?"

"Alas! if it be another cause of unhappiness, I shall recollect it soon enough."

"A cause of unhappiness for myself alone, sire," replied Madame Henrietta; "but as it is necessary, I must submit to it."

"At least, tell me what it is," said the king.

"Absence."

"Still that unkind resolve?"

"Believe me, sire, I have not found it without a violent struggle with myself; it is absolutely necessary I should return to England."

"Never, never will I permit you to leave France," exclaimed the king.

"And yet, sire," said Madame, affecting a gentle yet sorrowful determination, "nothing is more urgently necessary; nay, more than that, I am persuaded it is your mother's desire I should do so."

"Desire!" exclaimed the king; "that is a very strange expression to use to me."

"Still," replied Madame Henrietta, smilingly, "are you not happy in submitting to the wishes of so good a mother?"

"Enough, I implore you; you rend my very soul."

"I?"

"Yes; for you speak of your departure with tranquillity."

"I was not born for happiness, sire," replied the princess, dejectedly; "and I acquired, in very early life, the habit of seeing my dearest wishes disappointed."

"Do you speak truly?" said the king. "Would your departure gainsay any one of your cherished thoughts?"

"If I were to say 'yes,' would you begin to take your misfortune patiently?"

"How cruel you are!"

"Take care, sire; some one is coming."

The king looked all round him, and said, "No, there is no one," and then continued: "Come, Henrietta, instead of trying to contend against Monsieur's jealousy by a departure which would kill me—" Henrietta slightly shrugged her shoulders like a woman unconvinced. "Yes," repeated Louis, "which would kill me, I say. Instead of fixing your mind on this departure, does not your imagination—or rather does not your heart—suggest some expedient?"

"What is it you wish my heart to suggest?"

"Tell me, how can one prove to another that it is wrong to be jealous?"

"In the first place, sire, by giving no motive for jealousy; in other words, in loving no one but the person in question."

"Oh! I expected more than that."

"What did you expect?"

"That you would simply tell me that jealous people are pacified by concealing the affection which is entertained for the object of jealousy."

"Dissimulation is difficult, sire."

"Yet it is only be means of conquering difficulties that any happiness is attained. As far as I am concerned, I swear I will give the lie to those who are jealous of me by pretending to treat you like any other woman."

"A bad, as well as unsafe, means," said the young princess, shaking her pretty head.

"You seem to think everything bad, dear Henrietta," said Louis, discontentedly. "You negative everything I propose. Suggest, at least, something else in its stead. Come, try and think. I trust implicitly to a woman's invention. Do you invent in your turn?"

"Well, sire, I have hit upon something. Will you listen to it?"

"Can you ask me? You speak of a matter of life or death to me, and then ask if I will listen."

"Well, I judge of it by my own case. If my husband intended to put me on the wrong scent with regard to another woman, one thing would reassure me more than anything else."

"What would that be?"

"In the first place to see that he never took any notice of the woman in question."

"Exactly. That is precisely what I said just now."

"Very well; but in order to be perfectly reassured on the subject, I should like to see him occupy himself with some one else."

"Ah! I understand you," replied Louis, smiling. "But confess, dear Henrietta, if the means is at least ingenious, it is hardly charitable."

"Why so?"

"In curing the dread of a wound in a jealous person's mind, you inflict one upon the heart. His fear ceases, it is true; but the evil still exists; and that seems to me to be far worse."

"Agreed; but he does not detect, he does not suspect the real enemy; he does no prejudice to love itself; he concentrates all his strength on the side where his strength will do no injury to anything or any one. In a word, sire, my plan, which I confess I am surprised to find you dispute, is mischievous to jealous people, it is true; but to lovers it is full of advantage. Besides, let me ask, sire, who, except yourself, has ever thought of pitying jealous people? Are they not a melancholy crew of grumblers always equally unhappy, whether with or without a cause? You may remove that cause, but you never can remove their sufferings. It is a disease which lies in the imagination, and, like all imaginary disorders, it is incurable. By the by, I remember an aphorism upon this subject, of poor Dr. Dawley, a clever and amusing man, who, had it not been for my brother, who could not do without him, I should have with me now. He used to say, 'Whenever you are likely to suffer from two affections, choose that which will give you the least trouble, and I will allow you to retain it; for it is positive,' he said, 'that that very ailment is of the greatest service to me, in order to enable me to get rid of the other.'"

"Well and judiciously remarked, Henrietta," replied the king, smiling.

"Oh! we have some clever people in London, sire."

"And those clever people produce adorable pupils. I will grant this Daley, Darley, Dawley, or whatever you call him, a pension for his aphorism; but I entreat you, Henrietta, to begin by choosing the least of your evils. You do not answer—you smile. I guess that the least of your bugbears is your stay in France. I will allow you to retain this information; and, in order to begin with the cure of the other, I will this very day begin to look out for a subject which shall divert the attention of the jealous members of either sex who persecute us both."

"Hush! this time some one is really coming," said Madame; and she stooped to gather a flower from the thick grass at her feet. Some one, in fact, was approaching; for, suddenly, a bevy of young girls ran down from the top of the hillock, following the cavaliers—the cause of this interruption being a magnificent hawk-moth, with wings like rose-leaves. The prey in question had fallen into the net of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who displayed it with some pride to her less successful rivals. The queen of the chase had seated herself some twenty paces from the bank on which Louis and Madame Henrietta were reclining; and leaned her back against a magnificent oak-tree entwined with ivy, and stuck the butterfly on the long cane she carried in her hand. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was very beautiful, and the gentlemen, accordingly, deserted her companions, and under the pretext of complimenting her upon her success, pressed in a circle around her. The king and princess looked gloomily at this scene, as spectators of maturer age look on at the games of little children. "They seem to be amusing themselves there," said the king.

"Greatly, sire; I have always found that people are amused wherever youth and beauty are to be found."

"What do you think of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, Henrietta?" inquired the king.

"I think she has rather too much flax-yellow and lily-whiteness in her complexion," replied Madame, fixing in a moment upon the only fault it was possible to find in the almost perfect beauty of the future Madame de Montespan."

"Rather too fair, yes; but beautiful, I think, in spite of that."

"Is that your opinion, sire?"

"Yes, really."

"Very well; and it is mine, too."

"And she seems to be much sought after."

"On, that is a matter of course. Lovers flutter from one to another. If we had hunted for lovers instead of butterflies, you can see, from those who surround her, what successful sport we should have had."

"Tell me, Henrietta, what would be said if the king were to make himself one of those lovers, and let his glance fall in that direction? Would some one else be jealous, in such a case?"

"Oh! sire, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente is a very efficacious remedy," said Madame, with a sigh. "She would cure a jealous man, certainly; but she might possibly make a woman jealous, too."

"Henrietta," exclaimed Louis, "you fill my heart with joy. Yes, yes; Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente is far too beautiful to serve as a cloak."

“A king’s cloak,” said Madame Henrietta, smiling, “ought to be beautiful.”

“Do you advise me to do it, then?” inquired Louis.

“! what should I say, sire, except that to give such an advice would be to supply arms against myself? It would be folly or pride to advise you to take, for the heroine of an assumed affection, a woman more beautiful than the one for whom you pretend to feel real regard.”

The king tried to take Madame’s hand in his own; his eyes sought hers; and then he murmured a few words so full of tenderness, but pronounced in so low a tone, that the historian, who ought to hear everything, could not hear them. Then, speaking aloud, he said, “Do you yourself choose for me the one who is to cure our jealous friend. To her, then, all my devotion, all my attention, all the time that I can spare from my occupations, shall be devoted. For her shall be the flower that I may pluck for you, the fond thoughts with which you have inspired me. Towards her I will direct the glance I dare not bestow upon you, and which ought to be able to rouse you from your indifference. But, be careful in your selection, lest, in offering her the rose which I may have plucked, I find myself conquered by you; and my looks, my hand, my lips, turn immediately towards you, even were the whole world to guess my secret.”

While these words escaped from the king’s lips, in a stream of wild affection, Madame blushed, breathless, happy, proud, almost intoxicated with delight. She could find nothing to say in reply; her pride and her thirst for homage were satisfied. “I shall fail,” she said, raising her beautiful black eyes, “but not as you beg me, for all this incense which you wish to burn on the altar of another divinity. Ah! sire, I too shall be jealous of it, and want restored to me; and would not that a particle of it should be lost in the way. Therefore, sire, with your royal permission, I will choose one who shall appear to me the least likely to distract your attention, and who will leave my image intact and unshadowed in your heart.”

“Happily for me,” said the king, “your heart is not hard and unfeeling. If it were so, I should be alarmed at the threat you hold out. Precautions were taken on this point, and around you, as around myself, it would be difficult to meet with a disagreeable-looking face.”

Whilst the king was speaking, Madame had risen from her seat, looked around the greensward, and after a careful and silent examination, she called the king to her side, and said, “See yonder, sire, upon the declivity of that little hill, near that group of Guelder roses, that beautiful girl walking alone, her head down, her arms hanging by her side, with her eyes fixed upon the flowers, which she crushes beneath her feet, like one who is lost in thought.”

“Mademoiselle de Vallière, do you mean?” remarked the king.

“Yes.”

“Oh!”

“Will she not suit you, sire?”

“Why, look how thin the poor child is. She has hardly any flesh upon her bones.”

“Nay: am I stout then?”

“She is so melancholy.”

“The greater contrast to myself, who am accused of being too lively.”

“She is lame.”

“Do you really think so?”

“No doubt of it. Look; she has allowed every one to pass by her, through fear of her defect being remarked.”

“Well, she will not run so fast as Daphne, and will not be as able to escape Apollo.”

“Henrietta,” said the king, out of temper; “of all your maids of honour, you have really selected for me the one most full of defects.”

“Still she is one of my maids of honour.”

“Of course; but what do you mean?”

“I mean that, in order to visit this new divinity, you will not be able to do so without paying a visit to my apartments, and that, as propriety will forbid your conversing with her in private, you will be compelled to see her in my circle, to speak, as it were, at me, while speaking to her. I mean, in fact, that those who may be jealous, will be wrong if they suppose you come to my apartments for my sake, since you will go there for Mademoiselle de la Vallière.”

“Who happens to be lame.”

“Hardly that.”

“Who never opens her lips.”

“But who, when she does open them, displays a beautiful set of teeth.”

“Who may serve as a model for an osteologist.”

“Your favour will change her appearance.”

“Henrietta!”

“At all events you allowed me to choose.”

“Alas! yes.”

“Well, my choice is made: I impose her upon you, and you must submit.”

“Oh! I would accept one of the furies, if you were to insist upon it.”

“La Vallière is as gentle as a lamb: do not fear she will ever contradict you when you tell her you love her,” said Madame, laughing.

“You are not afraid, are you, that I shall say too much to her?”

“It would be for my sake.”

“The treaty is agreed to, then?”

“Not only so, but signed. You will continue to show me the friendship of a brother, the attention of a brother, the gallantry of a monarch, will you not?”

“I will preserve for you intact a heart that has already become accustomed to beat only at your command.”

“Very well, do you not see that we have guaranteed the future by this means?”

“I hope so.”

“Will your mother cease to regard me as an enemy?”

“Yes.”

“Will Maria Theresa leave off speaking in Spanish before Monsieur, who has a horror of conversation held in foreign languages, because he always thinks he is being ill spoken of? and lastly,” continued the princess, “will people persist in attributing a wrongful affection to the king when the truth is, we can offer nothing to each other, except absolute sympathy, free from mental reservation?”

“Yes, yes,” said the king, hesitatingly. “But other things may still be said of us.”

“What can be said, sire? shall we never be left in tranquillity?”

“People will say I am deficient in taste; but what is my self-respect in comparison with your tranquillity?”

“In comparison with my honour, sire, and that of our family, you mean. Besides, I beg you to attend, do not be so hastily prejudiced against La Vallière. She is slightly lame, it is true, but she is not deficient in good sense. Moreover, all that the king touches is converted into gold.”

“Well, Madame, rest assured of one thing, namely, that I am still grateful to you: you might even yet make me pay dearer for your stay in France.”

“Sire, some one approaches.”

“Well!”

“One last word.”

“Say it.”

“You are prudent and judicious, sire; but in the present instance you will be obliged to summon to your aid all your prudence, and all your judgment.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Louis, laughing, “from this very day I shall begin to act my part, and you shall see whether I am not quite fit to represent the character of a tender swain. After luncheon, there will be a promenade in the forest, and then there is supper and the ballet at ten o’clock.”

“I know it.”

“The ardor of my passion shall blaze more brilliantly than the fireworks, shall shine more steadily than our friend Colbert’s lamps; it shall shine so dazzlingly that the queens and Monsieur will be almost blinded by it.”

“Take care, sire, take care.”

“In Heaven’s name, what have I done, then?”

“I shall begin to recall the compliments I paid you just now. You prudent! you wise! did I say? Why, you begin by the most reckless inconsistencies! Can a passion be kindled in this manner, like a torch, in a moment? Can a monarch, such as you are, without any preparation, fall at the feet of a girl like La Vallière?”

“Ah! Henrietta, now I understand you. We have not yet begun the campaign, and you are plundering me already.”

“No, I am only recalling you to common-sense ideas. Let your passion be kindled gradually, instead of allowing it to burst forth so suddenly. Jove’s thunders and lightnings are heard and seen before the palace is set on fire. Everything has its commencements. If you are so easily excited, no one will believe you are really captivated, and every one will think you out of your senses—if even, indeed, the truth itself not be guessed. The public is not so fatuous as they seem.”

The king was obliged to admit that Madame was an angel for sense, and the very reverse for cleverness. He bowed, and said: “Agreed, Madame, I will think over my plan of attack: great military men—my cousin De Conde for instance—grow pale in meditation upon their strategical plans, before they move one of the pawns, which people call armies; I therefore wish to draw up a complete plan of campaign; for you know that the tender passion is subdivided in a variety of ways. Well, then, I shall stop at the village of Little Attentions, at the hamlet of Love-Letters, before I follow the road of Visible Affection; the way is clear enough, you know, and poor Madame de Scudery would never forgive me for passing though a halting-place without stopping.”

“Oh! now we have returned to our proper senses, shall we say adieu, sire?”

“Alas! it must be so, for see, we are interrupted.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Henrietta, “they are bringing Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and her sphinx butterfly in grand procession this way.”

“It is perfectly well understood, that this evening, during the promenade, I am to make my escape into the forest, and find La Vallière without you.”

“I will take care to send her away.”

“Very well! I will speak to her when she is with her companions, and I will then discharge my first arrow at her.”

“Be skillful,” said Madame, laughing, “and do not miss the heart.”

Then the princess took leave of the king, and went forward to meet the merry troop, which was advancing with much ceremony, and a great many pretended flourishes of trumpets, imitated with their mouths.

#### XXXIX. The Ballet of the Seasons.

At the conclusion of the banquet, which was served at five o’clock, the king entered his cabinet, where his tailors were awaiting him for the purpose of trying on the celebrated costume representing Spring, which was the result of so much imagination, and had cost so many efforts of thought to the designers and ornament-workers of the court. As for the ballet itself, every person knew the part he had to take in it, and how to perform it. The king had resolved to make it surprise. Hardly, therefore, had he finished his conference, and entered his own apartment, than he desired his two masters of the ceremonies, Villeroy and Saint-Aignan, to be sent for. Both replied that they only awaited his orders, and that everything was ready to begin, but that it was necessary to be sure of fine weather and a favourable night before these orders could be carried out. The king opened his window; the pale-gold hues of the evening were visible on the horizon through the vistas of the wood, and the moon, white as snow, was already mounting the heavens. Not a ripple could be noticed on the surface of the green waters; the swans themselves, even, reposing with folded wings like ships at anchor, seemed inspirations of the warmth of the air, the freshness of the water, and the silence of the beautiful evening. The king, having observed all these things, and contemplated the magnificent picture



before him, gave the order which De Villeroy and De Saint-Aignan awaited; but with a view of insuring the execution of this order in a royal manner, one last question was necessary, and Louis XIV. put it to the two gentlemen in the following manner:—"Have you any money?"

"Sire," replied Saint-Aignan, "we have arranged everything with M. Colbert."

"Ah! very well!"

"Yes, sire, and M. Colbert said he would wait upon your majesty, as soon as your majesty should manifest an intention of carrying out the *fetes*, of which he has furnished the programme."

"Let him come in, then," said the king; and as if Colbert had been listening at the door for the purpose of keeping himself *au courant* with the conversation, he entered as soon as the king had pronounced his name to the two courtiers.

"Ah! M. Colbert," said the king. "Gentlemen, to your posts," whereupon Saint-Aignan and Villeroy took their leave. The king seated himself in an easy-chair near the window, saying: "The ballet will take place this evening, M. Colbert."

"In that case, sire, I will pay all accounts to-morrow."

"Why so?"

"I promised the tradespeople to pay their bills the day following that on which the ballet should take place."

"Very well, M. Colbert, pay them, since you have promised to do so."

"Certainly, sire; but I must have money to do that."

"What! have not the four millions, which M. Fouquet promised, been sent? I forgot to ask you about it."

"Sire, they were sent at the hour promised."

"Well?"

"Well, sire, the coloured lamps, the fireworks, the musicians, and the cooks, have swallowed up four millions in eight days."

"Entirely?"

"To the last penny. Every time your majesty directed the banks of the grand canal to be illuminated, as much oil was consumed as there was water in the basins."

"Well, well, M. Colbert; the fact is, then, you have no more money?"

"I have no more, sire, but M. Fouquet has," Colbert replied, his face darkening with a sinister expression of pleasure.

"What do you mean?" inquired Louis.

"We have already made M. Fouquet advance six millions. He has given them with too much grace not to have others still to give, if they are required, which is the case at the present moment. It is necessary, therefore, that he should comply."

The king frowned. "M. Colbert," said he, accentuating the financier's name, "that is not the way I understood the matter; I do not wish to make use, against any of my servants, of a means of pressure which may oppress him and fetter his services. In eight days M. Fouquet has furnished six millions; that is a good round sum."

Colbert turned pale. "And yet," he said, "your majesty did not use this language some time ago, when the news about Belle-Isle arrived, for instance."

"You are right, M. Colbert."

"Nothing, however, has changed since then; on the contrary, indeed."

"In my thoughts, monsieur, everything has changed."

"Does your majesty then no longer believe the disloyal attempt?"

"My affairs concern myself alone, monsieur; and I have already told you I transact them without interference."

"Then, I perceive," said Colbert, trembling with anger and fear, "that I have had the misfortune to fall into disgrace with your majesty."

"Not at all; you are, on the contrary, most agreeable to me."

"Yet, sire," said the minister, with a certain affected bluntness, so successful when it was a question of flattering Louis's self-esteem, "what use is there in being agreeable to your majesty, if one can no longer be of any use?"

"I reserve your services for a better occasion; and believe me, they will only be the better appreciated."

"Your majesty's plan, then, in this affair, is—"

"You want money, M. Colbert?"

"Seven hundred thousand francs, sire."

"You will take them from my private treasure." Colbert bowed. "And," added Louis, "as it seems a difficult matter for you, notwithstanding your economy, to defray, with so limited a sum, the expenses which I intend to incur, I will at once sign an order for three millions."

The king took a pen and signed an order immediately, then handed it to Colbert. "Be satisfied, M. Colbert, the plan I have adopted is one worthy of a king," said Louis XIV., who pronounced these words with all the majesty he knew how to assume in such circumstances; and dismissed Colbert for the purpose of giving an audience to his tailors.

The order issued by the king was known throughout the whole of Fontainebleau; it was already known, too, that the king was trying on his costume, and that the ballet would be danced in the evening. The news circulated with the rapidity of lightning; during its progress it kindled every variety of coquetry, desire, and wild ambition. At the same moment, as if by enchantment, every one who knew how to hold a needle, every one who could distinguish a coat from a pair of trousers, was summoned to the assistance of those who had received invitations. The king had completed his toilette by nine o'clock; he appeared in an open carriage decorated with branches of trees and flowers. The queens had taken their seats upon a magnificent dias or platform, erected upon the borders of the lake, in a theater of wonderful elegance of construction. In the space of five hours the carpenters had put together all the different parts connected with the building; the upholsterers had laid down the carpets, erected the seats; and, as if at the wave of an enchanter's wand, a thousand arms, aiding, instead of interfering with each other, had constructed the building, amidst the sound of music; whilst, at the same time, other workmen illuminated the theater and the shores of the lake with an incalculable number of lamps. As the heavens, set with stars, were perfectly unclouded, as not even a breath of air could be heard in the woods, and as if Nature itself had yielded complacently to the king's fancies, the back of the theater had been left open; so that, behind the foreground of the scenes, could be seen as a background the beautiful sky, glittering with stars; the sheet of water, illuminated by the lights which were reflected in it; and the bluish outline of the grand masses of woods, with their rounded tops. When the king made his appearance, the theater was full, and presented to the view one vast group, dazzling with gold and precious stones; in which, however, at the first glance, no single face could be distinguished. By degrees, as the sight became accustomed to so much brilliancy, the rarest beauties appeared to the view, as in the evening sky the stars appear one by one to him who closes his eyes and then opens them again.

The theater represented a grove of trees; a few fauns lifting up their cloven feet were jumping about; a dryad made her appearance on the scene, and was immediately pursued by them; others gathered round her for her defense, and they quarrelled as they danced. Suddenly, for the purpose of restoring peace and order, Spring, accompanied by his whole court, made his appearance. The Elements, subaltern powers of mythology, together with their attributes, hastened to follow their gracious sovereign. The Seasons, allies of Spring, followed him closely, to form a quadrille, which, after many words of more or less flattering import, was the commencement of the dance. The music, hautboys, flutes, and viols, was delightfully descriptive of rural delights. The king had already made his appearance, amid thunders of applause. He was dressed in a tunic of flowers, which set off his graceful and well-formed figure to advantage. His legs, the best-shaped at court, were displayed to great advantage in flesh-coloured silken hose, of silk so fine and so transparent that it seemed almost like flesh itself. The most beautiful pale-lilac satin shoes, with bows of flowers and leaves, imprisoned his small feet. The bust of the figure was in harmonious keeping with the base; Louis's waving hair floated on his shoulders, the freshness of his complexion was enhanced by the brilliancy of his beautiful blue eyes, which softly kindled all hearts; a mouth with tempting lips, which deigned to open in smiles. Such was the prince of that period: justly that evening styled "The King of all the Loves."

There was something in his carriage which resembled the buoyant movements of an immortal, and he did not dance so much as seem to soar along. His entrance produced, therefore, the most brilliant effect. Suddenly the Comte de Saint-Aignan was observed endeavoring to approach either the king or Madame.

The princess—who was robed in a long dress, diaphanous and light as the finest network tissue from the hands of skillful Mechlin workers, one knee occasionally revealed beneath the folds of the tunic, and her little feet encased in silken slippers decked with pearls—advanced radiant with beauty, accompanied by her *cortege* of Bacchantes, and had already reached the spot assigned to her in the dance. The applause continued so long that the comte had ample leisure to join the king.

"What is the matter, Saint-Aignan?" said Spring.

"Nothing whatever," replied the courtier, as pale as death; "but your majesty has not thought of Fruits."

"Yes; it is suppressed."

"Far from it, sire; your majesty having given no directions about it, the musicians have retained it."

"How excessively annoying," said the king. "This figure cannot be performed, since M. de Guiche is absent. It must be suppressed."

"Ah, sire, a quarter of an hour's music without any dancing will produce an effect so chilling as to ruin the success of the ballet."

"But, come, since—"

"Oh, sire, that is not the greatest misfortune; for, after all, the orchestra could still just as well cut it out, if it were necessary; but—"

"But what?"

"Why, M. de Guiche is here."

"Here?" replied the king, frowning, "here? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sire; and ready dressed for the ballet."

The king felt himself colour deeply, and said, "You are probably mistaken."

"So little is that the case, sire, that if your majesty will look to the right, you will see that the comte is in waiting."

Louis turned hastily towards the side, and in fact, on his right, brilliant in his character of Autumn, De Guiche awaited until the king should look at him, in order that he might address him. To give an idea of the stupefaction of the king, and that of Monsieur, who was moving about restlessly in his box,—to describe also the agitated movement of the heads in the theater, and the strange emotion of Madame, at the sight of her partner,—is a task we must leave to abler hands. The king stood almost gaping with astonishment as he looked at the comte, who, bowing lowly, approached Louis with the profoundest respect.

"Sire," he said, "your majesty's most devoted servant approaches to perform a service on this occasion with similar zeal that he has already shown on the field of battle. Your majesty, in omitting the dance of the Fruits, would be losing the most beautiful scene in the ballet. I did not wish to be the substance of so dark a shadow to your majesty's elegance, skill, and graceful invention; and I have left my tenants in order to place my services at your majesty's commands."

Every word fell distinctly, in perfect harmony and eloquence, upon Louis XIV.'s ears. Their flattery pleased, as much as De Guiche's courage had astonished him, and he simply replied: "I did not tell you to return, come."

"Certainly not, sire; but your majesty did not tell me to remain."

The king perceived that time was passing away, that if this strange scene were prolonged it would complicate everything, and that a single cloud upon the picture would eventually spoil the whole. Besides, the king's heart was filled with two or three new ideas; he had just derived fresh inspiration from the eloquent glances of Madame. Her look had said to him: "Since they are jealous of you, divide their suspicions, for the man who distrusts two rivals does not object to either in particular." So that Madame, by this clever diversion, decided him. The king smiled upon De Guiche, who did not comprehend a word of Madame's dumb language, but he remarked that she pretended not to look at him, and he attributed the pardon which had been conferred upon him to the princess's kindness of heart. The king seemed only pleased with every one present. Monsieur was the only one who did not understand anything about the matter. The ballet began; the effect was more than beautiful. When the music, by its bursts of melody, carried away these illustrious dancers, when the simple, untutored pantomime of that period, only the more natural on account of the very indifferent acting of the august actors, had reached its culminating point of triumph, the theater shook with tumultuous applause.

De Guiche shone like a sun, but like a courtly sun, that is resigned to fill a subordinate part. Disdainful of a success of which Madame showed no acknowledgement, he thought of nothing but boldly regaining the marked preference of the princess. She, however, did not bestow a single glance upon him. By degrees all his happiness, all his brilliancy, subsided into regret and uneasiness; so that his limbs lost their power, his arms hung heavily by his sides, and his head drooped as though he was stupefied. The king, who had from this moment become in reality the principal dancer in the

quadrille, cast a look upon his vanquished rival. De Guiche soon ceased to sustain even the character of the courtier; without applause, he danced indifferently, and very soon could not dance at all, by which accident the triumph of the king and of Madame was assured.

XL: The Nymphs of the Park of Fontainebleau.

The king remained for a moment to enjoy a triumph as complete as it could possibly be. He then turned towards Madame, for the purpose of admiring her also a little in her turn. Young persons love with more vivacity, perhaps with greater ardor and deeper passion, than others more advanced in years; but all the other feelings are at the same time developed in proportion to their youth and vigor: so that vanity being with them almost always the equivalent of love, the latter feeling, according to the laws of equipoise, never attains that degree of perfection which it acquires in men and women from thirty to five and thirty years of age. Louis thought of Madame, but only after he had studiously thought of himself; and Madame carefully thought of herself, without bestowing a single thought upon the king. The victim, however, of all these royal affections and affectations, was poor De Guiche. Every one could observe his agitation and prostration—a prostration which was, indeed, the more remarkable since people were not accustomed to see him with his arms hanging listlessly by his side, his head bewildered, and his eyes with all their bright intelligence bedimmed. It rarely happened that any uneasiness was excited on his account, whenever a question of elegance or taste was under discussion; and De Guiche's defeat was accordingly attributed by the greater number present to his courtier-like tact and ability. But there were others—keen-sighted observers are always to be met with at court—who remarked his paleness and his altered looks; which he could neither feign nor conceal, and their conclusion was that De Guiche was not acting the part of a flatterer. All these sufferings, successes, and remarks were blended, confounded, and lost in the uproar of applause. When, however, the queens expressed their satisfaction and the spectators their enthusiasm, when the king had retired to his dressing-room to change his costume, and whilst Monsieur, dressed as a woman, as he delighted to be, was in his turn dancing about, De Guiche, who had now recovered himself, approached Madame, who, seated at the back of the theater, was waiting for the second part, and had quitted the others for the purpose of creating a sort of solitude for herself in the midst of the crowd, to meditate, as it were, beforehand, upon chorographic effects; and it will be perfectly understood that, absorbed in deep meditation, she did not see, or rather pretended not to notice, anything that was passing around her. De Guiche, observing that she was alone, near a thicket constructed of painted cloth, approached her. Two of her maids of honour, dressed as hamadryads, seeing De Guiche advance, drew back out of respect., whereupon De Guiche proceeded towards the middle of the circle and saluted her royal highness; but, whether she did or did not observe his salutations, the princess did not even turn her head. A cold shiver passed through poor De Guiche; he was unprepared for such utter indifference, for he had neither seen nor been told of anything that had taken place, and consequently could guess nothing. Remarking, therefore, that his obeisance obtained him no acknowledgement, he advanced one step further, and in a voice which he tried, though vainly, to render calm, said: "I have the honour to present my most humble respects to your royal highness."

Upon this Madame deigned to turn her eyes languishingly towards the comte, observing. "Ah! M. de Guiche, is that you? good day!"

The comte's patience almost forsook him, as he continued,—“Your royal highness danced just now most charmingly."

"Do you think so?" she replied with indifference.

"Yes; the character which your royal highness assumed is in perfect harmony with your own."

Madame again turned round, and, looking De Guiche full in the face with a bright and steady gaze, said,—“Why so?"

"Oh! there can be no doubt of it."

"Explain yourself?"

"You represented a divinity, beautiful, disdainful, inconstant."

"You mean Pomona, comte?"

"I allude to the goddess."

Madame remained silent for a moment, with her lips compressed, and then observed,—“But, comte, you, too, are an excellent dancer."

"Nay, Madame, I am only one of those who are never noticed, or who are soon forgotten if they ever happen to be noticed."

With this remark, accompanied by one of those deep sighs which affect the remotest fibers of one's being, his heart burdened with sorrow and throbbing fast, his head on fire, and his gaze wandering, he bowed breathlessly, and withdrew behind the thicket. The only reply Madame condescended to make was by slightly raising her shoulders, and, as her ladies of honour had discreetly retired while the conversation lasted, she recalled them by a look. The ladies were Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais.

"Did you hear what the Comte de Guiche said?" the princess inquired.

"No."

"It really is very singular," she continued, in a compassionate tone, "how exile has affected poor M. de Guiche's wit." And then, in a louder voice, fearful lest her unhappy victim might lose a syllable, she said,—“In the first place he danced badly, and afterwards his remarks were very silly."

She then rose, humming the air to which she was presently going to dance. De Guiche had overheard everything. The arrow pierced his heart and wounded him mortally. Then, at the risk of interrupting the progress of the *fete* by his annoyance, he fled from the scene, tearing his beautiful costume of Autumn in pieces, and scattering, as he went along, the branches of vines, mulberry and almond trees, with all the other artificial attributes of his assumed divinity. A quarter of an hour afterwards he returned to the theater; but it will be readily believed that it was only a powerful effort of reason over his great excitement that enabled him to go back; or perhaps, for love is thus strangely constituted, he found it impossible even to remain much longer separated from the presence of one who had broken his heart. Madame was finishing her figure. She saw, but did not look at De Guiche, who, irritated and revengeful, turned his back upon her as she passed him, escorted by her nymphs, and followed by a hundred flatterers. During this time, at the other end of the theater, near the lake, a young woman was seated, with her eyes fixed upon one of the windows of the theater, from which were issuing streams of light—the window in question being that of the royal box. As De Guiche quitted the theater for the purpose of getting into the fresh air he so much needed, he passed close to this figure and saluted her. When she perceived the young man, she rose, like a woman surprised in the midst of ideas she was desirous of concealing from herself. De Guiche stopped as he recognized her, and said hurriedly,—“Good evening, Mademoiselle de la Vallière; I am indeed fortunate in meeting you."

"I, also, M. de Guiche, am glad of this accidental meeting," said the young girl, as she was about to withdraw.

"Pray do not leave me," said De Guiche, stretching out his hand towards her, "for you would be contradicting the kind words you have just pronounced. Remain, I implore you: the evening is most lovely. You wish to escape from the merry tumult, and prefer your own society. Well, I can understand it; all women who are possessed of any feeling do, and one never finds them dull or lonely when removed from the giddy vortex of these exciting amusements. Oh! Heaven!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"What is the matter, monsieur le comte?" inquired La Vallière, with some anxiety. "You seem agitated."

"I! oh, no!"

"Will you allow me, M. de Guiche, to return you the thanks I had proposed to offer you on the very first opportunity? It is to your recommendation, I am aware, that I owe my admission among the number of Madame's maids of honour."

"Indeed! Ah! I remember now, and I congratulate myself. Do you love any one?"

"I!" exclaimed La Vallière.

"Forgive me, I hardly know what I am saying; a thousand times forgive me; Madame was right, quite right, this brutal exile has completely turned my brain."

"And yet it seemed to me that the king received you with kindness."

"Do you think so? Received me with kindness—perhaps so—yes—"

"There cannot be a doubt he received you kindly, for, in fact, you returned without his permission."

"Quite true, and I believe you are right. But have you not seen M. de Bragelonne here?"

La Vallière started at the name. "Why do you ask?" she inquired.

"Have I offended you again?" said De Guiche. "In that case I am indeed unhappy, and greatly to be pitied."

"Yes, very unhappy, and very much to be pitied, Monsieur de Guiche, for you seem to be suffering terribly."

"Oh! mademoiselle, why have I not a devoted sister, or a true friend, such as yourself?"

"You have friends, Monsieur de Guiche, and the Vicomte de Bragelonne, of whom you spoke just now, is, I believe, one of the most devoted."

"Yes, yes, you are right, he is one of my best friends. Farewell, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, farewell." And he fled, like one possessed, along the banks of the lake. His dark shadow glided, lengthening as it disappeared, among the illumined yews and glittering undulations of the water. La Vallière looked after him, saying,—“Yes, yes, he, too, is suffering, and I begin to understand why."

She had hardly finished when her companions, Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, ran forward. They were released from their attendance, and had changed their costumes of nymphs; delighted with the beautiful night, and the success of the evening, they returned to look after their companion.

"What, already here!" they said to her. "We thought we should be first at the rendezvous."

"I have been here this quarter of an hour," replied La Vallière.

"Did not the dancing amuse you?"

"No."

"But surely the enchanting spectacle?"

"No more than the dancing. As far as beauty is concerned, I much prefer that which these dark woods present, in whose depths can be seen, now in one direction and again in another, a light passing by, as though it were an eye, in colour like a midnight rainbow, sometimes open, at others closed."

"La Vallière is quite a poetess," said Tonnay-Charente.

"In other words," said Montalais, "she is insupportable. Whenever there is a question of laughing a little or of amusing ourselves, La Vallière begins to cry; whenever we girls have reason to cry, because, perhaps, we have mislaid our dresses, or because our vanity as been wounded, or our costume fails to produce an effect, La Vallière laughs."

"As far as I am concerned, that is not my character," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. "I am a woman; and there are few like me; whoever loves me, flatters me; whoever flatters me, pleases me; and whoever pleases—"

"Well!" said Montalais, "you do not finish."

"It is too difficult," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, laughing loudly. "Do you, who are so clever, finish for me."

"And you, Louise?" said Montalais, "does any one please you?"

"That is a matter that concerns no one but myself," replied the young girl, rising from the mossy bank on which she had been reclining during the whole time the ballet lasted. "Now, mesdemoiselles, we have agreed to amuse ourselves to-night without any one to overlook us, and without any escort. We are three in number, we like one another, and the night is lovely. Look yonder, do you not see the moon slowly rising, silvering the topmost branches of the chestnuts and the oaks. Oh, beautiful walk! sweet liberty! exquisite soft turf of the woods, the happiness which your friendship confers upon me! let us walk arm in arm towards those large trees. Out yonder all are at this moment seated at table and fully occupied, or preparing to adorn themselves for a set and formal promenade; horses are being saddled, or harnessed to the carriages—the queen's mules or Madame's four white ponies. As for ourselves, we shall soon reach some retired spot where no eyes can see us and no step follow ours. Do you not remember, Montalais, the woods of Cheverny and of Chambord, the innumerable rustling poplars of Blois, where we exchanged our mutual hopes?"

"And confidences too?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "I also think a good deal; but I take care—"

"To say nothing," said Montalais, "so that when Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente thinks, Athenais is the only one who knows it."

"Hush!" said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "I hear steps approaching from this side."

"Quick, quick, then, among the high reed-grass," said Montalais; "stoop, Athenais, you are so tall."

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente stooped as she was told, and, almost at the same moment, they saw two gentlemen approaching, their heads bent down, walking arm in arm, on the fine gravel walk running parallel with the bank. The young girls had, indeed, made themselves small—indeed invisible.

"It is Monsieur de Guiche," whispered Montalais in Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's ear.

"It is Monsieur de Bragelonne," whispered the latter to La Vallière.

The two young men approached still closer, conversing in animated tones. "She was here just now," said the count. "If I had only seen her, I should have declared it to be a vision, but I spoke to her."

"You are positive, then?"

"Yes; but perhaps I frightened her."

"In what way?"

"Oh! I was still half crazy at you know what; so that she could hardly have understood what I was saying, and must have grown alarmed."

"Oh!" said Bragelonne, "do not make yourself uneasy: she is all kindness, and will excuse you; she is clear-sighted, and will understand."

"Yes, but if she should have understood, and understood too well, she may talk."

"You do not know Louise, count," said Raoul. "Louise possesses every virtue, and has not a single fault." And the two young men passed on, and, as they proceeded, their voices were soon lost in the distance.

"How is it, La Vallière," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "that the Vicomte de Bragelonne spoke of you as Louise?"

"We were brought up together," replied Louise, blushing; "M. de Bragelonne has honoured me by asking my hand in marriage, but—"

"Well?"

"It seems the king will not consent to it."

"Eh! Why the king? and what has the king to do with it?" exclaimed Aure, sharply. "Good gracious! has the king any right to interfere in matters of that kind? Politics are politics, as M. de Mazarin used to say; but love is love. If, therefore, you love M. de Bragelonne, marry him. *I give my consent.*"

Athenais began to laugh.

"Oh! I am speaking seriously," replied Montalais, "and my opinion in this case is quite as good as the king's, I suppose; is it not, Louise?"

"Come," said La Vallière, "these gentlemen have passed; let us take advantage of our being alone to cross the open ground and so take refuge in the woods."

"So much the better," said Athenais, "because I see the torches setting out from the chateau and the theater, and they seem as if they were preceding some person of distinction."

"Let us run, then," said all three. And, gracefully lifting up the long skirts of their silk dresses, they lightly ran across the open space between the lake and the thickest covert of the park. Montalais agile as a deer, Athenais eager as a young wolf, bounded through the dry grass, and, now and then, some bold Acteon might, by the aid of the faint light, have perceived their straight and well-formed limbs somewhat displayed beneath the heavy folds of their satin petticoats. La Vallière, more refined and more bashful, allowed her dress to flow around her; retarded also by the lameness of her foot, it was not long before she called out to her companions to halt, and, left behind, she obliged them both to wait for her. At this moment, a man, concealed in a dry ditch planted with young willow saplings, scrambled quickly up its shelving side, and ran off in the direction of the chateau. The three young girls, on their side, reached the outskirts of the park, every path of which they well knew. The ditches were bordered by high hedges full of flowers, which on that side protected the foot-passengers from being intruded upon by the horses and carriages. In fact, the sound of Madame's and the queen's carriages could be heard in the distance upon the hard dry ground of the roads, followed by the mounted cavaliers. Distant music reached them in response, and when the soft notes died away, the nightingale, with throat of pride, poured forth his melodious chants, and his most complicated, learned, and sweetest compositions to those who had met beneath the thick covert of the woods. Near the songster, in the dark background of the large trees, could be seen the glistening eyes of an owl, attracted by the harmony. In this way the *fete* of the whole court was a *fete* also for the mysterious inhabitants of the forest; for certainly the deer in the brake, the pheasant on the branch, the fox in its hole, were all listening. One could realize the life led by this nocturnal and invisible population from the restless movements that suddenly took place among the leaves. Our sylvan nymphs uttered a slight cry, but, reassured immediately afterwards, they laughed, and resumed their walk. In this manner they reached the royal oak, the venerable relic of a tree which in its prime has listened to the sighs of Henry II. for the beautiful Diana of Poitiers, and later still to those of Henry IV. for the lovely Gabrielle d'Estrees. Beneath this oak the gardeners had piled up the moss and turf in such a manner that never had a seat more luxuriously rested the wearied limbs of man or monarch. The trunk, somewhat rough to recline against, was sufficiently large to accommodate the three young girls, whose voices were lost among the branches, which stretched upwards to the sky.

#### XLI. What Was Said under the Royal Oak.

The softness of the air, the stillness of the foliage, tacitly imposed upon these young girls an engagement to change immediately their giddy conversation for one of a more serious character. She, indeed, whose disposition was the most lively,—Montalais, for instance,—was the first to yield to the influence; and she began by heaving a deep sigh, and saying:—"What happiness to be here alone, and at liberty, with every right to be frank, especially towards one another."

"Yes," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; "for the court, however brilliant it may be, has always some falsehood concealed beneath the folds of its velvet robes, or the glitter of its diamonds."

"I," replied La Vallière, "I never tell a falsehood; when I cannot speak the truth, I remain silent."

"You will not long remain in favour," said Montalais; "it is not here as it was at Blois, where we told the dowager Madame all our little annoyances, and all our longings. There were certain days when Madame remembered that she herself had been young, and, on those days, whoever talked with her found in her a sincere friend. She related to us her flirtations with Monsieur, and we told her of the flirtations she had had with others, or, at least, the rumors of them that had spread abroad. Poor woman, so simple-minded! she laughed at them, as we did. Where is she now?"

"Ah, Montalais,—laughter-loving Montalais!" cried La Vallière; "you see you are sighing again: the woods inspire you, and you are almost reasonable this evening."

"You ought not, either of you," said Athenais, "to regret the court at Blois so much, unless you do not feel happy with us. A court is a place where men and women resort to talk of matters which mothers, guardians, and especially confessors, severely denounce."

"Oh, Athenais!" said Louise, blushing.

"Athenais is frank to-night," said Montalais; "let us avail ourselves of it."

"Yes, let us take advantage of it, for this evening I could divulge the softest secrets of my heart."

"Ah, if M. Montespan were here!" said Montalais.

"Do you think that I care for M. de Montespan?" murmured the beautiful young girl.

"He is handsome, I believe?"

"Yes. And that is no small advantage in my eyes."

"There now, you see—"

"I will go further, and say, that of all the men whom one sees here, he is the handsomest, and the most—"

"What was that?" said La Vallière, starting suddenly from the mossy bank.

"A deer hurrying by, perhaps."

"I am only afraid of men," said Athenais.

"When they do not resemble M. de Montespan."

"A truce to raillery. M. de Montespan is attentive to me, but that does not commit me in any way. Is not M. de Guiche here, he who is so devoted to Madame?"

"Poor fellow!" said La Vallière.

"Why to be pitied? Madame is sufficiently beautiful, and of high enough rank, I suppose."

La Vallière shook her head sorrowfully, saying, "When one loves, it is neither beauty nor rank;—when one loves it should be the heart, or the eyes only, of him, or of her whom one loves."

Montalais began to laugh loudly. "Heart, eyes," she said; "oh, sugar-plums!"

"I speak for myself," replied La Vallière.

"Noble sentiments," said Athenais, with an air of protection, but with indifference.

"Are they not your own?" asked Louise.

"Perfectly so; but to continue: how can one pity a man who bestows his attentions upon such a woman as Madame? If any disproportion exists, it is on the count's side."

"Oh! no, no," returned La Vallière; "it is on Madame's side."

"Explain yourself."

"I will. Madame has not even a wish to know what love is. She diverts herself with the feeling, as children do with fireworks, form which a spark might set a palace on fire. It makes a display, and that is all she cares about. Besides, pleasure forms the tissue of which she wishes her life to be woven. M. de Guiche loves this illustrious personage, but she will never love him."

Athenais laughed disdainfully. "Do people really ever love?" she said. "Where are the noble sentiments you just now uttered? Does not a woman's virtue consist in the uncompromising refusal of every intrigue that might compromise her? A properly regulated woman, endowed with a natural heart, ought to look at men, make herself loved—adored, even, by them, and say at the very utmost but once in her life, 'I begin to think that I ought not to have been what I am,—I should have detested this one less than others.'"

"Therefore," exclaimed La Vallière, "that is what M. de Montespan has to expect."

"Certainly; he, as well as every one else. What! have I not said that I admit he possesses a certain superiority, and would not that be enough? My dear child, a woman is a queen during the entire period nature permits her to enjoy sovereign power—from fifteen to thirty-five years of age. After that, we are free to have a heart, when we only have that left—"

"Oh, oh!" murmured La Vallière.

"Excellent," cried Montalais; "a very masterly woman; Athenais, you will make your way in the world."

"Do you not approve of what I say?"

"Completely," replied her laughing companion.

"You are not serious, Montalais?" said Louise.

"Yes, yes; I approve everything Athenais has just said; only—"

"Only *what*?"

"Well, I cannot carry it out. I have the firmest principles; I form resolutions beside which the laws of the Stadtholder and of the King of Spain are child's play; but when the moment arrives to put them into execution, nothing comes of them."

"Your courage fails?" said Athenais, scornfully.

"Miserably so."

"Great weakness of nature," returned Athenais. "But at least you make a choice."

"Why, no. It pleases fate to disappoint me in everything; I dream of emperors, and I find only—"

"Aure, Aure!" exclaimed La Vallière, "for pity's sake, do not, for the pleasure of saying something witty, sacrifice those who love you with such devoted affection."

"Oh, I do not trouble myself much about that; those who love me are sufficiently happy that I do not dismiss them altogether. So much the worse for myself if I have a weakness for any one, but so much the worse for others if I revenge myself upon them for it."

"You are right," said Athenais, "and, perhaps, you too will reach the goal. In other words, young ladies, that is termed being a coquette. Men, who are very silly in most things, are particularly so in confounding, under the term of coquetry, a woman's pride, and love of changing her sentiments as she does her dress. I, for instance, am proud; that is to say, impregnable. I treat my admirers harshly, but without any pretention to retain them. Men call me a coquette, because they are vain enough to think I care for them. Other women—Montalais, for instance—have allowed themselves to be influenced by flattery; they would be lost were it not for that most fortunate principle of instinct which urges them to change suddenly, and punish the man whose devotion they so recently accepted."

"A very learned dissertation," said Montalais, in the tone of thorough enjoyment.

"It is odious!" murmured Louise.

"Thanks to that sort of coquetry, for, indeed, that is genuine coquetry," continued Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; "the lover who, a little while since, was puffed up with pride, in a minute afterwards is suffering at every pore of his vanity and self-esteem. He was, perhaps, already beginning to assume the airs of a conqueror, but now he retreats defeated; he was about to assume an air of protection towards us, but he is obliged to prostrate himself once more. The result of all this is, that, instead of having a husband who is jealous and troublesome, free from restraint in his conduct towards us, we have a lover always trembling in our presence, always fascinated by our attractions, always submissive; and for this simple reason, that he finds the same woman never twice of the same mind. Be

convinced, therefore, of the advantages of coquetry. Possessing that, one reigns a queen among women in cases where Providence has withheld that precious faculty of holding one’s heart and mind in check.”

“How clever you are,” said Montalais, “and how well you understand the duty women owe themselves!”

“I am only settling a case of individual happiness,” said Athenais modestly; “and defending myself, like all weak, loving dispositions, against the oppressions of the stronger.”

“La Vallière does not say a word.”

“Does she not approve of what we are saying?”

“Nay; only I do not understand it,” said Louise. “You talk like people not called upon to live in this world of ours.”

“And very pretty your world is,” said Montalais.

“A world,” returned Athenais, “in which men worship a woman until she has fallen,—and insult her when she has fallen.”

“Who spoke to you of falling?” said Louise.

“Yours is a new theory, then; will you tell us how you intend to resist yielding to temptation, if you allow yourself to be hurried away by feelings of affection?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the young girl, raising towards the dark heavens her beautiful large eyes filled with tears, “if you did but know what a heart is, I would explain, and convince you; a loving heart is stronger than all your coquetry, more powerful than all your pride. A woman is never truly loved, I believe; a man never loves with idolatry, unless he feels sure he is loved in return. Let old men, whom we read of in comedies, fancy themselves adored by coquettes. A young man is conscious of, and knows them; if he has a fancy, or a strong desire, and an absorbing passion, for a coquette, he cannot mistake her; a coquette may drive him out of his senses, but will never make him fall in love. Love, such as I conceive it to be, is an incessant, complete, and perfect sacrifice; but it is not the sacrifice of one only of the two persons thus united. It is the perfect abnegation of two who are desirous of blending their beings into one. If ever I love, I shall implore my lover to leave me free and pure; I will tell him, and he will understand, that my heart was torn by my refusal, and he, in his love for me, aware of the magnitude of my sacrifice,—he, in his turn, I say, will store his devotion for me,—will respect me, and will not seek my ruin, to insult me when I shall have fallen, as you said just now, whilst uttering your blasphemies against love, such as I understand it. That is my idea of love. And now you will tell me, perhaps, that my love will despise me; I defy him to do so, unless he be the vilest of men, and my heart assures me that it is not such a man I would choose. A look from me will repay him for the sacrifices he makes, or will inspire him with the virtues which he would never think he possessed.”

“But, Louise,” exclaimed Montalais, “you tell us this, and do not carry it into practice.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are adored by Raoul de Bragelonne, who worships you on both knees. The poor fellow is made the victim of your virtue, just as he would be— nay, more than he would be, even—of my coquetry, or Athenais’s pride.”

“All this is simply a different shade of coquetry,” said Athenais; “and Louise, I perceive, is a coquette without knowing it.”

“Oh!” said La Vallière.

“Yes, you may call it instinct, if you please, keenest sensibility, exquisite refinement of feeling, perpetual play of restrained outbreaks of affection, which end in smoke. It is very artful too, and very effective. I should even, now that I reflect upon it, have preferred this system of tactics to my own pride, for waging war on members of the other sex, because it offers the advantage sometimes of thoroughly convincing them; but, at the present moment, without utterly condemning myself, I declare it to be superior to the non-complex coquetry of Montalais.” And the two young girls began to laugh.

La Vallière alone preserved silence, and quietly shook her head. Then, a moment after, she added, “If you were to tell me, in the presence of a man, but a fourth part of what you have just said, or even if I were assured that you think it, I should die of shame and grief where I am now.”

“Very well; die, poor tender little darling,” replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; “for if there are no men here, there are at least two women, your own friends, who declare you to be attained and convicted of being a coquette from instinct; in other words, the most dangerous kind of coquette the world possesses.”

“Oh! mesdemoiselles,” replied La Vallière, blushing, and almost ready to weep. Her two companions again burst out laughing.

“Very well! I will ask Bragelonne to tell me.”

“Bragelonne?” said Athenais.

“Yes! Bragelonne, who is as courageous as Caesar, and as clever and witty as M. Fouquet. Poor fellow! for twelve years he has known you, loved you, and yet—one can hardly believe it—he has never even kissed the tips of your fingers.”

“Tell us the reason of this cruelty, you who are all heart,” said Athenais to La Vallière.

“Let me explain it by a single word—virtue. You will perhaps deny the existence of virtue?”

“Come, Louise, tell us the truth,” said Aure, taking her by the hand.

“What do you wish me to tell you?” cried La Vallière.

“Whatever you like; but it will be useless for you to say anything, for I persist in my opinion of you. A coquette from instinct; in other words, as I have already said, and I say it again, the most dangerous of all coquettes.”

“Oh! no, no; for pity’s sake do not believe that!”

“What! twelve years of extreme severity.”

“How can that be, since twelve years ago I was only five years old? The frivolity of the child cannot surely be placed to the young girl’s account.”

“Well! you are now seventeen; three years instead of twelve. During those three years you have remained constantly and unchangeably cruel. Against you are arrayed the silent shades of Blois, the meetings when you diligently conned the stars together, the evening wanderings beneath the plantain-trees, his impassioned twenty years speaking to your fourteen summers, the fire of his glances addressed to yourself.”

“Yes, yes; but so it is!”

“Impossible!”

“But why impossible?”

“Tell us something credible and we will believe you.”

“Yet, if you were to suppose one thing.”

“What is that?”

“Suppose that I thought I was in love, and that I am not.”

“What! not in love!”

“Well, then! if I have acted in a different manner to what others do when they are in love, it is because I do not love; and because my hour has not yet come.”

“Louise, Louise,” said Montalais, “take care or I will remind you of the remark you made just now. Raoul is not here; do not overwhelm him while he is absent; be charitable, and if, on closer inspection, you think you do not love him, tell him so, poor fellow!” and she began to laugh.

“Louise pitied M. de Guiche just now,” said Athenais; “would it be possible to detect an explanation of her indifference for the one in this compassion for the other?”

“Say what you please,” said La Vallière, sadly; “upbraid me as you like, since you do not understand me.”

“Oh! oh!” replied Montalais, “temper, sorrow, tears; we are jesting, Louise, and are not, I assure you, quite the monsters you suppose. Look at the proud Athenais, as she is called; she does not love M. de Montespan, it is true, but she would be in despair if M. de Montespan did not continue to love her. Look at me; I laugh at M. Malicorne, but the poor fellow whom I laugh at knows precisely when he will be permitted to press his lips upon my hand. And yet the eldest of us is not twenty yet. What a future before us!”

“Silly, silly girls!” murmured Louise.

“You are quite right,” said Montalais; “and you alone have spoken words of wisdom.”

“Certainly.”

“I do not dispute it,” replied Athenais. “And so it is clear you do not love poor M. de Bragelonne?”

“Perhaps she does,” said Montalais; “she is not yet quite certain of it. But, in any case, listen, Athenais; if M. de Bragelonne is ever free, I will give you a little friendly advice.”

“What is that?”

“To look at him well before you decide in favour of M. de Montespan.”

“Oh! in that way of considering the subject, M. de Bragelonne is not the only one whom one could look at with pleasure; M. de Guiche, for instance, has his value also.”

“He did not distinguish himself this evening,” said Montalais; “and I know from very good authority that Madame thought him insupportable.”

“M. de Saint-Aignan produced a most brilliant effect, and I am sure that more than one person who saw him dance this evening will not soon forget him. Do you not think so, La Vallière?”

“Why do you ask me? I did not see him, nor do I know him.”

“What! you did not see M. de Saint-Aignan? Don’t you know him?”

“No.”

“Come, come, do not affect a virtue more extravagantly excessive than our vanity!—you have eyes, I suppose?”

“Excellent.”

“Then you must have seen all those who danced this evening.”

“Yes, nearly all.”

“That is a very impertinent ‘nearly all’ for somebody.”

“You must take it for what it is worth.”

“Very well; now, among all those gentlemen whom you saw, which do you prefer?”

“Yes,” said Montalais, “is it M. de Saint-Aignan, or M. de Guiche, or M.—”

“I prefer no one; I thought them all about the same.”

“Do you mean, then, that among that brilliant assembly, the first court in the world, no one pleased you?”

“I do not say that.”

“Tell us, then, who your ideal is?”

“It is not an ideal being.”

“He exists, then?”

“In very truth,” exclaimed La Vallière, aroused and excited; “I cannot understand you at all. What! you who have a heart as I have, eyes as I have, and yet you speak of M. de Guiche, of M. de Saint-Aignan, when the king was there.” These words, uttered in a precipitate manner, and in an agitated, fervid tone of voice, made her two companions, between whom she was seated, exclaim in a manner that terrified her, “*The king!*”

La Vallière buried her face in her hands. “Yes,” she murmured; “the king! the king! Have you ever seen any one to be compared to the king?”

“You were right just now in saying you had excellent eyes, Louise, for you see a great distance; too far, indeed. Alas! the king is not one upon whom our poor eyes have a right to hinge themselves.”

“That is too true,” cried La Vallière; “it is not the privilege of all eyes to gaze upon the sun; but I will look upon him, even were I to be blinded in doing so.” At this moment, and as though caused by the words which had just escaped La Vallière’s lips, a rustling of leaves, and of what sounded like some silken material, was heard behind the adjoining bushes. The young girls hastily rose, almost terrified out of their senses. They distinctly saw the leaves move, without being able to see what it was that stirred them.

"It is a wolf or a wild boar," cried Montalais; "fly! fly!" The three girls, in the extremity of terror, fled by the first path that presented itself, and did not stop until they had reached the verge of the wood. There, breathless, leaning against each other, feeling their hearts throb wildly, they endeavored to collect their senses, but could only succeed in doing so after the lapse of some minutes. Perceiving at last the lights from the windows of the chateau, they decided to walk towards them. La Vallière was exhausted with fatigue, and Aure and Athenais were obliged to support her.

"We have escaped well," said Montalais.

"I am greatly afraid," said La Vallière, "that it was something worse than a wolf. For my part, and I speak as I think, I should have preferred to have run the risk of being devoured alive by some wild animal than to have been listened to and overheard. Fool, fool that I am! How could I have thought, how could I have said what I did?" And saying this her head bowed like the water tossed plume of a bulrush; she felt her limbs fail, and her strength abandoning her, and, gliding almost inanimate from the arms of her companions, sank down upon the turf.

XLII. The King's Uneasiness.

Let us leave poor La Vallière, who had fainted in the arms of her two companions, and return to the precincts of the royal oak. The young girls had hardly run twenty paces, when the sound which had so much alarmed them was renewed among the branches. A man's figure might indistinctly be perceived, and putting the branches of the bushes aside, he appeared upon the verge of the wood, and perceiving that the place was empty, burst out into a peal of laughter. It is almost superfluous to add that the form in question was that of a young and handsome cavalier, who immediately made a sign to another, who thereupon made his appearance.

"What, sire," said the second figure, advancing timidly, "has your majesty put our young sentimentalists to flight?"

"It seems so," said the king, "and you can show yourself without fear."

"Take care, sire, you will be recognized."

"But I tell you they are flown."

"This is a most fortunate meeting, sire; and, if I dared offer an opinion to your majesty, we ought to follow them."

"They are far enough away by this time."

"They would quickly allow themselves to be overtaken, especially if they knew who were following them."

"What do you mean by that, coxcomb that you are?"

"Why, one of them seems to have taken a fancy to me, and another compared you to the sun."

"The greater reason why we should not show ourselves, Saint-Aignan. The sun never shows itself in the night-time."

"Upon my word, sire, your majesty seems to have very little curiosity. In your place, I should like to know who are the two nymphs, the two dryads, the two hamadryads, who have so good an opinion of us."

"I shall know them again very well, I assure you, without running after them."

"By what means?"

"By their voices, of course. They belong to the court, and the one who spoke of me had a remarkably sweet voice."

"Ah! your majesty permits yourself to be influenced by flattery."

"No one will ever say it is a means *you* make use of."

"Forgive my stupidity, sire."

"Come; let us go and look where I told you."

"Is the passion, then, which your majesty confided to me, already forgotten?"

"Oh! no, indeed. How is it possible to forget such beautiful eyes as Mademoiselle de la Vallière has?"

"Yet the other one has a beautiful voice."

"Which one?"

"The lady who has fallen in love with the sun."

"M. de Saint-Aignan!"

"Forgive me, sire."

"Well, I am not sorry you should believe me to be an admirer of sweet voices as well as of beautiful eyes. I know you to be a terrible talker, and to-morrow I shall have to pay for the confidence I have shown you."

"What do you mean, sire?"

"That to-morrow every one will know that I have designs upon this little La Vallière; but be careful, Saint-Aignan, I have confided my secret to no one but you, and if any one should speak to me about it, I shall know who has betrayed my secret."

"You are angry, sire."

"No; but you understand I do not wish to compromise the poor girl."

"Do not be afraid, sire."

"You promise me, then?"

"I give you my word of honour."

"Excellent," thought the king, laughing to himself; "now every one will know to-morrow that I have been running about after La Vallière to-night."

Then, endeavoring to see where he was, he said: "Why we have lost ourselves."

"Not quite so bad as that, sire."

"Where does that gate lead to?"

"To Rond-Point, sire."

"Where were we going when we heard the sound of women's voices?"

"Yes, sire, and the termination of a conversation in which I had the honour of hearing my own name pronounced by the side of your majesty's."

"You return to that subject too frequently, Saint-Aignan."

"Your majesty will forgive me, but I am delighted to know that a woman exists whose thoughts are occupied about me, without my knowledge, and without my having done anything to deserve it. Your majesty cannot comprehend this satisfaction, for your rank and merit attract attention, and compel regard."

"No, no, Saint-Aignan, believe me or not, as you like," said the king, leaning familiarly upon Saint-Aignan's arm and taking the path he thought would lead them to the chateau; "but this candid confession, this perfectly disinterested preference of one who will, perhaps, never attract my attention—in one word, the mystery of this adventure excites me, and the truth is, that if I were not so taken with La Vallière—"

"Do not let that interfere with your majesty's intentions: you have time enough before you."

"What do you mean?"

"La Vallière is said to be very strict in her ideas."

"You excite my curiosity and I am anxious to see her again. Come, let us walk on."

The king spoke untruly, for nothing, on the contrary, could make him less anxious, but he had a part to play, and so he walked on hurriedly. Saint-Aignan followed him at a short distance. Suddenly the king stopped; the courtier followed his example.

"Saint-Aignan," he said, "do you not hear some one moaning?"

"Yes, sire, and weeping, too, it seems."

"It is in this direction," said the king. "It sounds like the tears and sobs of a woman."

"Run," said the king; and, following a by-path, they ran across the grass. As they approached, the cries were more distinctly heard.

"Help, help," exclaimed two voices. The king and his companion redoubled their speed, and, as they approached nearer, the sighs they had heard were changed into loud sobs. The cry of "Help! help!" was again repeated; at the sound of which, the king and Saint-Aignan increased the rapidity of their pace. Suddenly at the other side of a ditch, under the branches of a willow, they perceived a woman on her knees, holding another in her arms who seemed to have fainted. A few paces from them, a third, standing in the middle of the path, was calling for assistance. Perceiving the two gentlemen, whose rank she could not tell, her cries for assistance were redoubled. The king, who was in advance of his companion, leaped across the ditch, and reached the group at the very moment when, from the end of the path which led to the chateau, a dozen persons were approaching, who had been drawn to the spot by the same cries that had attracted the attention of the king and M. de Saint-Aignan.

"What is the matter, young ladies?" said Louis.

"The king!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Montalais, in her astonishment, letting La Vallière's head fall upon the ground.

"Yes, it is the king; but that is no reason why you should abandon your companion. Who is she?"

"It is Mademoiselle de la Vallière, sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière!"

"Yes, sire, she has just fainted."

"Poor child!" said the king. "Quick, quick, fetch a surgeon." But however great the anxiety with which the king had pronounced these words may have seemed to others, he had not so carefully schooled himself but that they appeared, as well as the gesture which accompanied them, somewhat cold to Saint-Aignan, to whom the king had confided the sudden love with which she had inspired him.

"Saint-Aignan," continued the king, "watch over Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I beg. Send for a surgeon. I will hasten forward and inform Madame of the accident which has befallen one of her maids of honour." And, in fact, while M. de Saint-Aignan was busily engaged in making preparations for carrying Mademoiselle de la Vallière to the chateau, the king hurried forward, happy to have an opportunity of approaching Madame, and of speaking to her under a colourable pretext. Fortunately, a carriage was passing; the coachman was told to stop, and the persons who were inside, having been informed of the accident, eagerly gave up their seats to Mademoiselle de la Vallière. The current of fresh air produced by the rapid motion of the carriage soon recalled her to her senses. Having reached the chateau, she was able, though very weak, to alight from the carriage, and, with the assistance of Athenais and of Montalais, to reach the inner apartments. They made her sit down in one of the rooms of the ground floor. After a while, as the accident had not produced much effect upon those who had been walking, the promenade was resumed. During this time, the king had found Madame beneath a tree with overhanging branches, and had seated himself by her side.

"Take care, sire," said Henrietta to him, in a low tone, "you do not show yourself as indifferent as you ought to be."

"Alas!" replied the king, in the same tone, "I much fear we have entered into an agreement above our strength to keep." He then added aloud, "You have heard of the accident, I suppose?"

"What accident?"

"Oh! in seeing you I forgot I hurried here expressly to tell you of it. I am, however, painfully affected by it; one of your maids of honour, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, has just fainted."

"Indeed! poor girl," said the princess, quietly, "what was the cause of it?"

She then added in an undertone, "You forget, sire, that you wish others to believe in your passion for this girl, and yet you remain here while she is almost dying, perhaps, elsewhere."

"Ah! Madame," said the king, sighing, "how much more perfect you are in your part than I am, and how actively you think of everything."

He then rose, saying loud enough for every one to hear him, "Permit me to leave you, Madame; my uneasiness is very great, and I wish to be quite certain, myself, that proper attention has been given to Mademoiselle de la Vallière." And the king left again to return to La Vallière, while those who had been present commented upon the king's remark:—"My uneasiness is very great."

XLIII. The King's Secret.

On his way Louis met the Comte de Saint-Aignan. "Well, Saint-Aignan," he inquired, with affected interest, "how is the invalid."

"Really, sire," stammered Saint-Aignan, "to my shame, I confess I do not know."

"What! you do not know?" said the king, pretending to take in a serious manner this want of attention for the object of his predilection.

"Will your majesty pardon me; but I have just met one of our three loquacious wood-nymphs, and I confess that my attention has been taken away from other matters."

"Ah!" said the king, eagerly, "you have found, then—"

"The one who deigned to speak of me in such advantageous terms; and, having found mine, I was searching for yours, sire, when I had the happiness to meet your majesty."

"Very well; but Mademoiselle de la Vallière before everything else," said the king, faithful to the character he had assumed.

"Oh! our charming invalid!" said Saint-Aignan; "how fortunately her fainting fit came on, since your majesty had already occupied yourself about her."

"What is the name of your fair lady, Saint-Aignan? Is it a secret?"

"It ought to be a secret, and a very great one, even; but your majesty is well aware that no secret can possibly exist for you."

"Well, what is her name?"

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Is she pretty?"

"Exceedingly, sire; and I recognized the voice which pronounced my name in such tender accents. I accosted her, questioned her as well as I was able to do, in the midst of the crowd; and she told me, without suspecting anything, that a little while ago she was under the great oak, with her two friends, when the sound of a wolf or a robber had terrified them, and made them run away."

"But," inquired the king, anxiously, "what are the names of these two friends?"

"Sire," said Saint-Aignan, "will your majesty send me forthwith to the Bastille?"

"What for?"

"Because I am an egotist and a fool. My surprise was so great at such a conquest, and at so fortunate a discovery, that I went no further in my inquiries. Besides, I did not think that your majesty would attach any very great importance to what you heard, knowing how much your attention was taken up by Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and then, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente left me precipitately, to return to Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Let us hope, then, that I shall be as fortunate as yourself. Come, Saint-Aignan."

"Your majesty is ambitions, I perceive, and does not wish to allow any conquest to escape you. Well, I assure you that I will conscientiously set about my inquiries; and, moreover, from one or the other of those Three Graces we shall learn the names of the rest, and by the names their secrets."

"I, too," said the king, "only require to hear her voice to know it again. Come, let us say no more about it, but show me where poor La Vallière is."

"Well," thought Saint-Aignan, "the king's regard is beginning to display itself, and for that girl too. It is extraordinary; I should never have believed it." And with this thought passing through his mind, he showed the king the room to which La Vallière had been carried; the king entered, followed by Saint-Aignan. In a low chamber, near a large window looking out upon the gardens, La Vallière, reclining in a large armchair, was inhaling deep draughts of the perfumed evening breeze. From the loosened body of her dress, the lace fell in tumbled folds, mingling with the tresses of her beautiful fair hair, which lay scattered upon her shoulders. Her languishing eyes were filled with tears; she seemed as lifeless as those beautiful visions of our dreams, that pass before the mental eye of the sleeper, half-opening their wings without moving them, unclosing their lips without a sound escaping them. The pearl-like pallor of La Vallière possessed a charm it would be impossible to describe. Mental and bodily suffering had produced upon her features a soft and noble expression of grief; from the perfect passiveness of her arms and bust, she more resembled one whose soul had passed away, than a living being; she seemed not to hear either of the whisperings which arose from the court. She seemed to be communing within herself; and her beautiful, delicate hands trembled from time to time as though at the contact of some invisible touch. She was so completely absorbed in her reverie, that the king entered without her perceiving him. At a distance he gazed upon her lovely face, upon which the moon shed its pure silvery light.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, with a terror he could not control, "she is dead."

"No, sire," said Montalais, in a low voice; "on the contrary, she is better. Are you not better, Louise?"

But Louise did not answer. "Louise," continued Montalais, "the king has deigned to express his uneasiness on your account."

"The king!" exclaimed Louise, starting up abruptly, as if a stream of fire had started through her frame to her heart; "the king uneasy about me?"

"Yes," said Montalais.

"The king is here, then?" said La Vallière, not venturing to look round her.

"That voice! that voice!" whispered Louis, eagerly, to Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, it is so," replied Saint-Aignan; "your majesty is right; it is she who declared her love for the sun."

"Hush!" said the king. And then approaching La Vallière, he said, "You are not well, Mademoiselle de la Vallière? Just now, indeed, in the park, I saw that you had fainted. How were you attacked?"

"Sire," stammered out the poor child, pale and trembling, "I really do not know."

"You have been walking too far," said the king; "and fatigue, perhaps—"

"No, sire," said Montalais, eagerly, answering for her friend, "it could not be from fatigue, for we passed most of the evening seated beneath the royal oak."

"Under the royal oak?" returned the king, starting. "I was not deceived; it is as I thought." And he directed a look of intelligence at the comte.

"Yes," said Saint-Aignan, "under the royal oak, with Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"How do you know that?" inquired Montalais.

"In a very simple way. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente told me so."

"In that case, she probably told you the cause of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's fainting?"

"Why, yes; she told me something about a wolf or a robber. I forget precisely which." La Vallière listened, her eyes fixed, her bosom heaving, as if, gifted with an acuteness of perception, she foresaw a portion of the truth. Louis imagined this attitude and agitation to be the consequence of a terror only partially reassured. "Nay, fear nothing," he said, with a rising emotion which he could not conceal; "the wolf which terrified you so much was simply a wolf with two legs."

"It was a man, then!" said Louise; "it was a man who was listening?"

"Suppose it was so, mademoiselle, what great harm was there in his having listened? Is it likely that, even in your own opinion, you would have said anything which could not have been listened to?"

La Vallière wrung her hands, and hid her face in them, as if to hide her blushes. "In Heaven's name," she said, "who was concealed there? Who was listening?"

The king advanced towards her, to take hold of one of her hands. "It was I," he said, bowing with marked respect. "Is it likely I could have frightened you?" La Vallière uttered a loud cry; for the second time her strength forsook her; and moaning in utter despair, she again fell lifeless in her chair. The king had just time to hold out his arm; so that she was partially supported by him. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Montalais, who stood a few paces from the king and La Vallière, motionless and almost petrified at the recollection of their conversation with La Vallière, did not even think of offering their assistance, feeling restrained by the presence of the king, who, with one knee on the ground, held La Vallière round the waist with his arm.

"You heard, sire!" murmured Athenais. But the king did not reply; he remained with his eyes fixed upon La Vallière's half-closed eyes, and held her quiescent hand in his own.

"Of course," replied Saint-Aignan, who, on his side, hoping that Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, too, would faint, advancing towards her, holding his arms extended,—"of course; we did not even lose a single word." But the haughty Athenais was not a woman to faint easily; she darted a terrible look at Saint-Aignan, and fled. Montalais, with more courage, advanced hurriedly towards Louise, and received her from the king's hands, who was already fast losing his presence of mind, as he felt his face covered by the perfumed tresses of the seemingly dying girl. "Excellent," whispered Saint-Aignan. "This is indeed an adventure; and it will be my own fault if I am not the first to relate it."

The king approached him, and, with a trembling voice and a passionate gesture, said, "Not a syllable, comte."

The poor king forgot that, only an hour before, he had given him a similar recommendation, but with the very opposite intention; namely, that the comte should be indiscreet. It followed, as a matter of course, that he latter recommendation was quite as unnecessary as the former. Half an hour afterwards, everybody in Fontainebleau knew that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had had a conversation under the royal oak with Montalais and Tonnay-Charente, and that in this conversation she had confessed her affection for the king. It was known, also, that the king, after having manifested the uneasiness with which Mademoiselle de la Vallière's health had inspired him, had turned pale, and trembled very much as he received the beautiful girl fainting into his arms; so that it was quite agreed among the courtiers, that the greatest event of the period had just been revealed; that his majesty loved Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and that, consequently, Monsieur could now sleep in perfect tranquillity. It was this, even, that the queen-mother, as surprised as the others by the sudden change, hastened to tell the young queen and Philip d'Orleans. Only she set to work in a different manner, by attacking them in the following way:—To her daughter-in-law she said, "See, now, Therese, how very wrong you were to accuse the king; now it is said he is devoted to some other person; why should there be any greater truth in the report of to-day than in that of yesterday, or in that of yesterday than in that of to-day?" To Monsieur, in relating to him the adventure of the royal oak, she said, "Are you not very absurd in your jealousies, my dear Philip? It is asserted that the king is madly in love with that little La Vallière. Say nothing of it to your wife; for the queen will know all about it very soon." This latter confidential communication had an immediate result. Monsieur, who had regained his composure, went triumphantly to look after his wife, and it was not yet midnight and the fete was to continue until two in the morning, he offered her his hand for a promenade. At the end of a few paces, however, the first thing he did was to disobey his mother's injunctions.

"Do not tell any one, the queen least of all," he said mysteriously, "what people say about the king."

"What do they say about him?" inquired Madame.

"That my brother has suddenly fallen in love."

"With whom?"

"With Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

As it was dark, Madame could smile at her ease.

"Ah!" she said, "and how long is it since this has been the case?"

"For some days, it seems. But that was nothing but nonsense; it is only this evening that he has revealed his passion."

"The king shows his good taste," said Madame, "in my opinion she is a very charming girl."

"I verily believe you are jesting."

"! in what way?"

"In any case this passion will make some one very happy, even if it be only La Vallière herself."

"Really," continued the princess, "you speak as if you had read into the inmost recesses of La Vallière's heart. Who has told you that she agrees to return the king's affection?"

"And who has told you that she will not return it?"

"She loves the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"You think so?"

"She is even affianced to him."

"She was so."

"What do you mean?"

"When they went to ask the king's permission to arrange the marriage, he refused his permission."

"Refused?"

"Yes, although the request was preferred by the Comte de la Fere himself, for whom the king has the greatest regard, on account of the part he took in your royal brother's restoration, and in other events, also, which happened a long time ago."

"Well! the poor lovers must wait until the king is pleased to change his opinion; they are young, and there is time enough."

"But, dear me," said Philip, laughing, "I perceive you do not know the best part of the affair."

"No!"

"That by which the king was most deeply touched."

"The king, do you say, has been deeply touched?"

"To the very quick of his heart."

"But how?—in what manner?—tell me directly."

"By an adventure, the romance of which cannot be equalled."

"You know how I love to hear of such adventures, and yet you keep me waiting," said the princess, impatiently.

"Well, then—" and Monsieur paused.

"I am listening."

"Under the royal oak—you know where the royal oak is?"

"What can that matter? Under the royal oak, you were saying?"

"Well! Mademoiselle de la Vallière, fancying herself to be alone with her two friends, revealed to them her affection for the king."

"Ah!" said Madame, beginning to be uneasy, "her affection for the king?"

"Yes."

"When was this?"

"About an hour ago."

Madame started, and then said, "And no one knew of this affection?"

"No one."

"Not even his majesty?"

"Not even his majesty. The artful little puss kept her secret strictly to herself, when suddenly it proved stronger than herself, and so escaped her."

"And from whom did you get this absurd tale?"

"Why, as everybody else did, from La Vallière herself, who confessed her love to Montalais and Tonnay-Charente, who were her companions."

Madame stopped suddenly, and by a hasty movement let go her husband's hand.

"Did you say it was an hour ago she made this confession?" Madame inquired.

"About that time."

"Is the king aware of it?"

"Why, that is the very thing which constitutes the perfect romance of the affair, for the king was behind the royal oak with Saint-Aignan, and heard the whole of the interesting conversation without losing a single word of it."

Madame felt struck to the heart, saying incautiously, "But I have seen the king since, and he never told me a word about it."

"Of course," said Monsieur; "he took care not to speak of it to you himself, since he recommended every one not to say a word about it."

"What do you mean?" said Madame, growing angry.

"I mean that they wished to keep you in ignorance of the affair altogether."

"But why should they wish to conceal it from me?"

"From the fear that your friendship for the young queen might induce you to say something about it to her, nothing more."

Madame hung down her head; her feelings were grievously wounded. She could not enjoy a moment's repose until she had met the king. As a king is, most naturally, the very last person in his kingdom who knows what is said about him, in the same way that a lover is the only one who is kept in ignorance of what is said about his mistress, therefore, when the king perceived Madame, who was looking for him, he approached her in some perturbation, but still gracious and attentive in his manner. Madame waited for him to speak about La Vallière first; but as he did not speak of her, she said, "And the poor girl?"

"What poor girl?" said the king.

"La Vallière. Did you not tell me, sire, that she had fainted?"

"She is still very ill," said the king, affecting the greatest indifference.

"But surely that will prejudicially affect the rumor you were going to spread, sire?"

"What rumor?"

"That your attention was taken up by her."

"Oh!" said the king, carelessly, "I trust it will be reported all the same."

Madame still waited; she wished to know if the king would speak to her of the adventure of the royal oak. But the king did not say a word about it. Madame, on her side, did not open her lips about it; so that the king took leave of her without having reposed the slightest confidence in her. Hardly had she watched the king move away, than she set out in search of Saint-Aignan. Saint-Aignan was never very difficult to find; he was like the smaller vessels that always follow in the wake of, and as tenders to, the larger ships. Saint-Aignan was the very man whom Madame needed in her then state of mind. And as for him, he only looked for worthier ears than others he had found to have an opportunity of recounting the event in all its details. And so he did not spare Madame a single word of the whole affair. When he had finished, Madame said to him, "Confess, now, that is his all a charming invention."

"Invention, no; a true story, yes."

"Confess, whether invention or true story, that it was told to you as you have told it to me, but that you were not there."

"Upon my honour, Madame, I was there."

"And you think that these confessions may have made an impression on the king?"

"Certainly, as those of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did upon me," replied Saint-Aignan; "do not forget, Madame, that Mademoiselle de la Vallière compared the king to the sun; that was flattering enough."

"The king does not permit himself to be influenced by such flatteries."

"Madame, the king is just as much Adonis as Apollo; and I saw plain enough just now when La Vallière fell into his arms."

"La Vallière fell into the king's arms!"

"Oh! it was the most graceful picture possible; just imagine, La Vallière had fallen back fainting, and—"

"Well! what did you see?—tell me—speak!"

"I saw what ten other people saw at the same time as myself; I saw that when La Vallière fell into his arms, the king almost fainted himself."

Madame smothered a subdued cry, the only indication of her smothered anger.

"Thank you," she said, laughing in a convulsive manner, "you relate stories delightfully, M. de Saint-Aignan." And she hurried away, alone, and almost suffocated by painful emotion, towards the chateau.

XLIV. Courses de Nuit.

Monsieur quitted the princess in the best possible humor, and feeling greatly fatigued, retired to his apartments, leaving every one to finish the night as he chose. When in his room, Monsieur began to dress for the night with careful attention, which displayed itself from time to time in paroxysms of satisfaction. While his attendants were engaged in curling his hair, he sang the principal airs of the ballet which the violins had played, and to which the king had danced. He then summoned his tailors, inspected his costumes for the next day, and, in token of his extreme satisfaction, distributed various presents among them. As, however, the Chevalier de Lorraine, who had seen the prince return to the chateau, entered the room, Monsieur overwhelmed him with kindness. The former, after having saluted the prince, remained silent for a moment, like a sharpshooter who deliberates before deciding in what direction he will renew his fire; then, seeming to make up his mind, he said, "Have you remarked a very singular coincidence, my lord?"

"No; what is it?"

"The bad reception which his majesty, in appearance, gave the Comte de Guiche."

"In appearance?"

"Yes, certainly; since, in reality, he has restored him to favour."

"I did not notice it," said the prince.

"What, did you not remark, that, instead of ordering him to go away again into exile, as was natural, he encouraged him in his opposition by permitting him to resume his place in the ballet?"

"And you think the king was wrong, chevalier?" said the prince.

"Are you not of my opinion, prince?"

"Not altogether so, my dear chevalier; and I think the king was quite right not to have made a disturbance against a poor fellow whose want of judgment is more to be complained of than his intention."

"Really," said the chevalier, "as far as I am concerned, I confess that this magnanimity astonishes me to the highest degree."

"Why so?" inquired Philip.

"Because I should have thought the king had been more jealous," replied the chevalier, spitefully. During the last few minutes Monsieur had felt there was something of an irritating nature concealed under his favourite's remarks; this last word, however, ignited the powder.

"Jealous!" exclaimed the prince. "Jealous! what do you mean? Jealous of what, if you please—or jealous of whom?"

The chevalier perceived that he had allowed an excessively mischievous remark to escape him, as he was in the habit of doing. He endeavored, therefore, apparently to recall it while it was still possible to do so. "Jealous of his authority," he said, with an assumed frankness; "of what else would you have the king jealous?"

"Ah!" said the prince, "that's very proper."

"Did your royal highness," continued the chevalier, "solicit dear De Guiche's pardon?"

"No, indeed," said Monsieur. "De Guiche is an excellent fellow, and full of courage; but as I do not approve of his conduct with Madame, I wish him neither harm nor good."

The chevalier had assumed a bitterness with regard to De Guiche, as he had attempted to do with regard to the king; but he thought he perceived that the time for indulgence, and even for the utmost indifference, had arrived, and that, in order to throw some light on the question, it might be necessary for him to put the lamp, as the saying is, beneath the husband's very nose.

"Very well, very well," said the chevalier to himself, "I must wait for De Wardes; he will do more in one day than I in a month; for I verily believe he is even more envious than I. Then, again, it is not De Wardes I require so much as that some event or another should happen; and in the whole of this affair I see none. That De Guiche returned after he had been sent away is certainly serious enough, but all its seriousness disappears when I learn that De Guiche has returned at the very moment Madame troubles herself no longer about him. Madame, in fact, is occupied with the king, that is clear; but she will not be so much longer if, as it is asserted, the king has ceased to trouble his head about her. The moral of the whole matter is, to remain perfectly neutral, and await the arrival of some new caprice and let that decide the whole affair." And the chevalier thereupon settled himself resignedly in the armchair in which Monsieur permitted him to seat himself in his presence, and, having no more spiteful or malicious remarks to make, the consequence was that De Lorraine's wit seemed to have deserted him. Most fortunately Monsieur was in high good-humor, and he had enough for two, until the time arrived for dismissing his servants and gentlemen of the chamber, and he passed into his sleeping-apartment. As he withdrew, he desired the chevalier to present his compliments to Madame, and say that, as the night was cool, Monsieur, who was afraid of the toothache, would not venture out again into the park during the remainder of the evening. The chevalier entered the princess's apartments at the very moment she came in herself. He acquitted himself faithfully of the commission intrusted to him, and, in the first place, remarked all the indifference and annoyance with which Madame received her husband's communication—a circumstance which appeared to him fraught with something fresh. If Madame had been about to leave her apartments with that strangeness of manner, he would have followed her; but she was returning to them; there was nothing to be done, therefore he turned upon his heel like an unemployed heron, appearing to question earth, air, and water about it; shook his head, and walked away mechanically in the direction of the gardens. He had hardly gone a hundred paces when he met two young men, walking arm in arm, with their heads bent down, and idly kicking the small stones out of their path as they walked on, plunged in thought. It was De Guiche and De Bragelonne, the sight of whom, as it always did, produced upon the chevalier, instinctively, a feeling of repugnance. He did not, however, the less, on that account, salute them with a very low bow, which they returned with interest. Then, observing that the park was nearly deserted, that the illuminations began to burn out, and that the morning breeze was setting in, he turned to the left, and entered the chateau again, by one of the smaller courtyards. The others turned aside to the right, and continued on their way towards the large park. As the chevalier was ascending the side staircase, which led to the private entrance, he saw a woman, followed by another,



make her appearance under the arcade which led from the small to the large courtyard. The two women walked so fast that the rustling of their dresses could be distinguished through the silence of the night. The style of their mantles, their graceful figures, a mysterious yet haughty carriage which distinguished them both, especially the one who walked first, struck the chevalier.

"I certainly know those two," he said to himself, pausing upon the top step of the small staircase. Then, as with the instinct of a bloodhound he was about to follow them, one of the servants who had been running after him arrested his attention.

"Monsieur," he said, "the courier has arrived."

"Very well," said the chevalier, "there is time enough; to-morrow will do."

"There are some urgent letters which you would be glad to see, perhaps."

"Where from?" inquired the chevalier.

"One from England, and the other from Calais; the latter arrived by express, and seems of great importance."

"From Calais! Who the deuce can have to write to me from Calais?"

"I think I recognize the handwriting of Monsieur le Comte de Wardes."

"Oh!" cried the chevalier, forgetting his intention of acting the spy, "in that case I will come up at once." This he did, while the two unknown beings disappeared at the end of the court opposite to the one by which they had just entered. We shall now follow them, and leave the chevalier undisturbed to his correspondence. When they had arrived at the grove of trees, the foremost of the two halted, somewhat out of breath, and, cautiously raising her hood, said, "Are we still far from the tree?"

"Yes, Madame, more than five hundred paces; but pray rest awhile, you will not be able to walk much longer at this rate."

"You are right," said the princes, for it was she; and she leaned against a tree. "And now," she resumed, after having recovered her breath, "tell me the whole truth, and conceal nothing from me."

"Oh, Madame," cried the young girl, "you are already angry with me."

"No, my dear Athenais, reassure yourself, I am in no way angry with you. After all, these things do not concern me personally. You are anxious about what you may have said under the oak; you are afraid of having offended the king, and I wish to tranquillize you by ascertaining myself if it were possible you could have been overheard."

"Oh, yes, Madame, the king was close to us."

"Still, you were not speaking so loud that some of your remarks may not have been lost."

"We thought we were quite alone, Madame."

"There were three of you, you say?"

"Yes; La Vallière, Montalais, and myself."

"And *you*, individually, spoke in a light manner of the king?"

"I am afraid so. Should such be the case, will your highness have the kindness to make my peace with his majesty?"

"If there should be any occasion for it, I promise you I will do so. However, as I have already told you, it will be better not to anticipate evil. The night is now very dark, and the darkness is still greater under the trees. It is not likely you were recognized by the king. To inform him of it, by being the first to speak, is to denounce yourself."

"Oh, Madame, Madame! if Mademoiselle de la Vallière were recognized, I must have been recognized also. Besides, M. de Saint-Aignan left no doubt on the subject."

"Did you, then, say anything very disrespectful of the king?"

"Not at all; it was one of the others who made some very flattering speeches about the king; and my remarks must have been much in contrast with hers."

"Montalais is such a giddy girl," said Madame.

"It was not Montalais. Montalais said nothing; it was La Vallière."

Madame started as if she had not known it perfectly well already. "No, no," she said, "the king cannot have heard. Besides, we will now try the experiment for which we came out. Show me the oak. Do you know where it is?" she continued.

"Alas! Madame, yes."

"And you can find it again?"

"With my eyes shut."

"Very well; sit down on the bank where you were, where La Vallière was, and speak in the same tone and to the same effect as you did before; I will conceal myself in the thicket, and if I can hear you, I will tell you so."

"Yes, Madame."

"If, therefore, you really spoke loud enough for the king to have heard you, in that case—"

Athenais seemed to await the conclusion of the sentence with some anxiety.

"In that case," said Madame, in a suffocated voice, arising doubtless from her hurried progress, "in that case, I forbid you—" And Madame again increased her pace. Suddenly, however, she stopped.

"An idea occurs to me," she said.

"A good idea, no doubt, Madame," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente.

"Montalais must be as much embarrassed as La Vallière and yourself."

"Less so, for she is less compromised, having said less."

"That does not matter; she will help you, I dare say, by deviating a little from the exact truth."

"Especially if she knows that your highness is kind enough to interest yourself about me."

"Very well, I think I have discovered what it is best for you all to pretend."

"How delightful."

"You had better say that all three of you were perfectly well aware that the king was behind the tree, or behind the thicket, whichever it might have been; and that you knew M. de Saint-Aignan was there too."

"Yes, Madame."

"For you cannot disguise it from yourself, Athenais, Saint-Aignan takes advantage of some very flattering remarks you made about him."

"Well, Madame, you see very clearly that one can be overheard," cried Athenais, "since M. de Saint-Aignan overheard us."

Madame bit her lips, for she had thoughtlessly committed herself. "Oh, you know Saint-Aignan's character very well," she said, "the favour the king shows him almost turns his brain, and he talks at random; not only so, he very often invents. That is not the question; the fact remains, did or did not the king overhear?"

"Oh, yes, Madame, he certainly did," said Athenais, in despair.

"In that case, do what I said: maintain boldly that all three of you knew—mind, all three of you, for if there is a doubt about any one of you, there will be a doubt about all,—persist, I say, that you knew that the king and M. de Saint-Aignan were there, and that you wished to amuse yourself at the expense of those who were listening."

"Oh, Madame, at the *king's* expense; we shall never dare say that!"

"It is a simple jest; an innocent deception readily permitted in young girls whom men wish to take by surprise. In this manner everything explains itself. What Montalais said of Malicorne, a mere jest; what you said of M. de Saint-Aignan, a mere jest too; and what La Vallière might have said of—"

"And which she would have given anything to recall."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well, an additional reason. Say the whole affair was a mere joke. M. de Malicorne will have no occasion to get out of temper; M. de Saint-Aignan will be completely put out of countenance; *he* will be laughed at instead of you; and lastly, the king will be punished for a curiosity unworthy of his rank. Let people laugh a little at the king in this affair, and I do not think he will complain of it."

"Oh, Madame, you are indeed an angel of goodness and sense!"

"It is to my own advantage."

"In what way?"

"How can you ask me why it is to my advantage to spare my maids of honour the remarks, annoyances, perhaps even calumnies, that might follow? Alas! you well know that the court has no indulgence for this sort of peccadillo. But we have now been walking for some time, shall we be long before we reach it?"

"About fifty or sixty paces further; turn to the left, Madame, if you please."

"And you are sure of Montalais?" said Madame.

"Oh, certainly."

"Will she do what you ask her?"

"Everything. She will be delighted."

"And La Vallière—" ventured the princess.

"Ah, there will be some difficulty with her, Madame; she would scorn to tell a falsehood."

"Yet, when it is in her interest to do so—"

"I am afraid that that would not make the slightest difference in her ideas."

"Yes, yes," said Madame. "I have been already told that; she is one of those overnice and affectedly particular people who place heaven in the foreground in order to conceal themselves behind it. But if she refuses to tell a falsehood,—as she will expose herself to the jests of the whole court, as she will have annoyed the king by a confession as ridiculous as it was immodest,—Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière will think it but proper I should send her back again to her pigeons in the country, in order that, in Touraine yonder, or in Le Blaisois,—I know not where it may be,—she may at her ease study sentiment and pastoral life combined."

These words were uttered with a vehemence and harshness that terrified Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; and the consequence was, that, as far as she was concerned, she promised to tell as many falsehoods as might be necessary. It was in this frame of mind that Madame and her companion reached the precincts of the royal oak.

"Here we are," said Tonnay-Charente.

"We shall soon learn if one can overhear," replied Madame.

"Hush!" whispered the young girl, holding Madame back with a hurried gesture, entirely forgetful of her companion's rank. Madame stopped.

"You see that you can hear," said Athenais.

"How?"

"Listen."

Madame held her breath; and, in fact, the following words pronounced by a gentle and melancholy voice, floated towards them:

"I tell you, vicomte, I tell you I love her madly; I tell you I love her to distraction."

Madame started at the voice; and, beneath her hood, a bright joyous smile illumined her features. It was she who now held back her companion, and with a light step leading her some twenty paces away, that is to say, out of the reach of the voice, she said, "Remain here, my dear Athenais, and let no one surprise us. I think it must be you they are conversing about."

"Me, Madame?"

"Yes, yes,—or rather your adventure. I will go and listen; if we were both there, we should be discovered. Or, stay!—go and fetch Montalais, and then return and wait for me with her at the entrance of the forest." And then, as Athenais hesitated, she again said "Go!" in a voice which did not admit of reply. Athenais thereupon arranged her dress so as to prevent its rustling being heard; and, by a path beyond the group of trees, she regained the flower-garden. As for Madame, she concealed herself in the thicket, leaning her back against a gigantic chestnut-tree, one of the branches of which had

been cut in such a manner as to form a seat, and waited there, full of anxiety and apprehension. “Now,” she said, “since one can hear from this place, let us listen to what M. de Bragelonne and that other madly-in-love fool, the Comte de Guiche, have to say about me.”

XLV. In Which Madame Acquires a Proof that Listeners Hear What Is Said.

There was a moment’s silence, as if the mysterious sounds of night were hushed to listen, at the same time as Madame, to the youthful passionate disclosures of De Guiche. Raoul was about to speak. He leaned indolently against the trunk of the large oak, and replied in his sweet and musical voice, “Alas, my dear De Guiche, it is a great misfortune.”

“Yes,” cried the latter, “great indeed.”

“You do not understand me, De Guiche. I say that it is a great misfortune for you, not merely loving, but not knowing how to conceal your love.”

“What do you mean?” said De Guiche.

“Yes, you do not perceive one thing; namely, that it is no longer to the only friend you have,—in other words,—to a man who would rather die than betray you; you do not perceive, I say, that it is no longer to your only friend that you confide your passion, but to the first person that approaches you.”

“Are you mad, Bragelonne,” exclaimed De Guiche, “to say such a thing to me?”

“The fact stands thus, however.”

“Impossible! How, in what manner can I have ever been indiscreet to such an extent?”

“I mean, that your eyes, your looks, your sighs, proclaim, in spite of yourself, that exaggerated feeling which leads and hurries a man beyond his own control. In such a case he ceases to be master of himself; he is a prey to a mad passion, that makes him confide his grief to the trees, or to the air, from the very moment he has no longer any living being in reach of his voice. Besides, remember this: it very rarely happens that there is not always some one present to hear, especially the very things which ought *not* to be heard.” De Guiche uttered a deep sigh. “Nay,” continued Bragelonne, “you distress me; since your return here, you have a thousand times, and in a thousand different ways, confessed your love for her; and yet, had you not said one word, your return alone would have been a terrible indiscretion. I persist, then, in drawing this conclusion; that if you do not place a better watch over yourself than you have hitherto done, one day or other something will happen that will cause an explosion. Who will save you then? Answer me. Who will save her? for, innocent as she will be of your affection, your affection will be an accusation against her in the hands of her enemies.”

“Alas!” murmured De Guiche; and a deep sigh accompanied the exclamation.

“That is not answering me, De Guiche.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Well, what reply have you to make?”

“This, that when the day arrives I shall be no more a living being than I feel myself now.”

“I do not understand you.”

“So many vicissitudes have worn me out. At present, I am no more a thinking, acting being; at present, the most worthless of men is better than I am; my remaining strength is exhausted, my latest-formed resolutions have vanished, and I abandon myself to my fate. When a man is out campaigning, as we have been together, and he sets off alone and unaccompanied for a skirmish, it sometimes happens that he may meet with a party of five or six foragers, and although alone, he defends himself; afterwards, five or six others arrive unexpectedly, his anger is aroused and he persists; but if six, eight, or ten others should still be met with, he either sets spurs to his horse, if he should still happen to retain one, or lets himself be slain to save an ignominious flight. Such, indeed, is my own case: first, I had to struggle against myself; afterwards, against Buckingham; now, since the king is in the field, I will not contend against the king, nor even, I wish you to understand, will the king retire; nor even against the nature of that woman. Still I do not deceive myself; having devoted myself to the service of such a love, I will lose my life in it.”

“It is not the lady you ought to reproach,” replied Raoul; “it is yourself.”

“Why so?”

“You know the princess’s character,—somewhat giddy, easily captivated by novelty, susceptible to flattery, whether it come from a blind person or a child, and yet you allow your passion for her to eat your very life away. Look at her,—love her, if you will,—for no one whose heart is not engaged elsewhere can see her without loving her. Yet, while you love her, respect, in the first place, her husband’s rank, then herself, and lastly, your own safety.”

“Thanks, Raoul.”

“What for?”

“Because, seeing how much I suffer through this woman, you endeavor to console me, because you tell me all the good of her you think, and perhaps even that which you do not think.”

“Oh,” said Raoul, “there you are wrong, comte; what I think I do not always say, but in that case I say nothing; but when I speak, I know not how to feign or to deceive; and whoever listens to me may believe me.”

During this conversation, Madame, her head stretched forward with eager ear and dilated glance, endeavoring to penetrate the obscurity, thirstily drank in the faintest sound of their voices.

“Oh, I know her better than you do, then!” exclaimed Guiche. “She is not merely giddy, but frivolous; she is not only attracted by novelty, she is utterly oblivious, and is without faith; she is not simply susceptible to flattery, she is a practiced and cruel coquette. A thorough coquette! yes, yes, I am sure of it. Believe me, Bragelonne, I am suffering all the torments of hell; brave, passionately fond of danger, I meet a danger greater than my strength and my courage. But, believe me, Raoul, I reserve for myself a victory which shall cost her floods of tears.”

“A victory,” he asked, “and of what kind?”

“Of what kind, you ask?”

“Yes.”

“One day I will accost her, and will address her thus: ‘I was young— madly in love, I possessed, however, sufficient respect to throw myself at your feet, and to prostrate myself in the dust, if your looks had not raised me to your hand. I fancied I understood your looks, I rose, and then, without having done anything more towards you than love you yet more devotedly, if that were possible—you, a woman without heart, faith, or love, in very wantonness, dashed me down again from sheer caprice. You are unworthy, princess of the royal blood though you may be, of the love of a man of honour; I offer my life as a sacrifice for having loved you too tenderly, and I die despairing you.’”

“Oh!” cried Raoul, terrified at the accents of profound truth which De Guiche’s words betrayed, “I was right in saying you were mad, Guiche.”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed De Guiche, following out his own idea; “since there are no wars here now, I will flee yonder to the north, seek service in the Empire, where some Hungarian, or Croat, or Turk, will perhaps kindly put me out of my misery.” De Guiche did not finish, or rather as he finished, a sound made him start, and at the same moment caused Raoul to leap to his feet. As for De Guiche, buried in his own thoughts, he remained seated, with his head tightly pressed between his hands. The branches of the tree were pushed aside, and a woman, pale and much agitated, appeared before the two young men. With one hand she held back the branches, which would have struck her face, and, with the other, she raised the hood of the mantle which covered her shoulders. By her clear and lustrous glance, by her lofty carriage, by her haughty attitude, and, more than all that, by the throbbing of his own heart, De Guiche recognized Madame, and, uttering a loud cry, he removed his hands from his temple, and covered his eyes with them. Raoul, trembling and out of countenance, merely muttered a few words of respect.

“Monsieur de Bragelonne,” said the princess, “have the goodness, I beg, to see if my attendants are not somewhere yonder, either in the walks or in the groves; and you, M. de Guiche, remain here: I am tired, and you will perhaps give me your arm.”

Had a thunderbolt fallen at the feet of the unhappy young man, he would have been less terrified than by her cold and severe tone. However, as he himself had just said, he was brave; and as in the depths of his own heart he had just decisively made up his mind, De Guiche arose, and, observing Bragelonne’s hesitation, he turned towards him a glance full of resignation and grateful acknowledgement. Instead of immediately answering Madame, he even advanced a step towards the vicomte, and holding out the arm which the princess had just desired him to give her, he pressed his friend’s hand in his own, with a sigh, in which he seemed to give to friendship all the life that was left in the depths of his heart. Madame, who in her pride had never known what it was to wait, now waited until this mute colloquy was at an end. Her royal hand remained suspended in the air, and, when Raoul had left, it sank without anger, but not without emotion, in that of De Guiche. They were alone in the depths of the dark and silent forest, and nothing could be heard but Raoul’s hastily retreating footsteps along the obscure paths. Over their heads was extended the thick and fragrant vault of branches, through the occasional openings of which the stars could be seen glittering in their beauty. Madame softly drew De Guiche about a hundred paces away from that indiscreet tree which had heard, and had allowed so many things to be heard, during the evening, and, leading him to a neighboring glade, so that they could see a certain distance around them, she said in a trembling voice, “I have brought you here, because yonder where you were, everything can be overheard.”

“Everything can be overheard, did you say, Madame?” replied the young man, mechanically.

“Yes.”

“Which means—” murmured De Guiche.

“Which means that I have heard every syllable you have said.”

“Oh, Heaven! this only was wanting to destroy me,” stammered De Guiche; and he bent down his head, like an exhausted swimmer beneath the wave which engulfs him.

“And so,” she said, “you judge me as you have said?” De Guiche grew pale, turned his head aside, and was silent. He felt almost on the point of fainting.

“I do not complain,” continued the princess, in a tone of voice full of gentleness; “I prefer a frankness that wounds me, to flattery, which would deceive me. And so, according to your opinion, M. de Guiche, I am a coquette, an a worthless creature.”

“Worthless,” cried the young man; “you worthless! Oh, no; most certainly I did not say, I could not have said, that that which was the most precious object in life for me could be worthless. No, no; I did not say that.”

“A woman who sees a man perish, consumed by the fire she has kindled, and who does not allay that fire, is, in my opinion, a worthless woman.”

“What can it matter to you what I said?” returned the comte. “What am I compared to you, and why should you even trouble yourself to know whether I exist or not?”

“Monsieur de Guiche, both you and I are human beings, and, knowing you as I do, I do not wish you to risk your life; with you I will change my conduct and character. I will be, not frank, for I am always so, but truthful. I implore you, therefore, to love me no more, and to forget utterly that I have ever addressed a word or a glance towards you.”

De Guiche turned around, bending a look full of passionate devotion upon her. “You,” he said; “*you* excuse yourself, *you* implore me?”

“Certainly; since I have done evil, I ought to repair the evil I have done. And so, comte, this is what we will agree to. You will forgive my frivolity and my coquetry. Nay, do not interrupt me. I will forgive you for having said I was frivolous and a coquette, or something worse, perhaps; and you will renounce your idea of dying, and will preserve for your family, for the king, and for our sex, a cavalier whom every one esteems, and whom many hold dear.” Madame pronounced this last word in such an accent of frankness, and even of tenderness, that poor De Guiche’s heart felt almost bursting.

“Oh! Madame, Madame!” he stammered out.

“Nay, listen further,” she continued. “When you shall have renounced all thought of me forever, from necessity in the first place, and, next, because you will yield to my entreaty, then you will judge me more favourably, and I am convinced you will replace this love—forgive the frivolity of the expression—by a sincere friendship, which you will be ready to offer me, and which, I promise you, shall be cordially accepted.”

De Guiche, his forehead bedewed with perspiration, a feeling of death in his heart, and a trembling agitation through his whole frame, bit his lip, stamped his foot on the ground, and, in a word, devoured the bitterness of his grief. “Madame,” he said, “what you offer is impossible, and I cannot accept such conditions.”

“What!” said Madame, “do you refuse my friendship, then?”

“No, no! I do not need your friendship, Madame. I prefer to die from love, than to live for friendship.”

“Comte!”

“Oh! Madame,” cried De Guiche, “the present is a moment for me, in which no other consideration and no other respect exist, than the consideration and respect of a man of honour towards the woman he worships. Drive me away, curse me, denounce me, you will be perfectly right. I have uttered complaints against you, but their bitterness has been owing to my passion for you; I have said I wish to die, and die I will. If I lived, you would forget me; but dead, you would never forget me, I am sure.”

Henrietta, who was standing buried in thought, and nearly as agitated as De Guiche himself, turned aside her head as but a minute before he had turned aside his. Then, after a moment’s pause, she said, “And you love me, then, very much?”

“Madly; madly enough to die from it, whether you drive me from you, or whether you listen to me still.”

"It is a hopeless case," she said, in a playful manner; "a case which must be treated with soothing application. Give me your hand. It is as cold as ice." De Guiche knelt down, and pressed to his lips, not one, but both of Madame's hands.

"Love me, then," said the princess, "since it cannot be otherwise." And almost imperceptibly she pressed his fingers, raising him thus, partly in the manner of a queen, and partly as a fond and affectionate woman would have done. De Guiche trembled from head to foot, and Madame, who felt how passion coursed through every fiber of his being, knew that he indeed loved truly. "Give me your arm, comte," she said, "and let us return."

"Ah! Madame," said the comte, trembling and bewildered; "you have discovered a third way of killing me."

"But, happily, it is the slowest way, is it not?" she replied, as she led him towards the grove of trees they had so lately quitted.

XLVI. Aramis's Correspondence.

When De Guiche's affairs, which had been suddenly set to right without his having been able to guess the cause of their improvement, assumed the unexpected aspect we have seen, Raoul, in obedience to the request of the princess, had withdrawn in order not to interrupt an explanation, the results of which he was far from guessing; and he soon after joined the ladies of honour who were walking about in the flower-gardens. During this time, the Chevalier de Lorraine, who had returned to his own room, read De Wardes's latter with surprise, for it informed him by the hand of his valet, of the sword-thrust received at Calais, and of all the details of the adventure, and invited him to inform De Guiche and Monsieur, whatever there might be in the affair likely to be most disagreeable to both of them. De Wardes particularly endeavored to prove to the chevalier the violence of Madame's affection for Buckingham, and he finished his letter by declaring that he thought this feeling was returned. The chevalier shrugged his shoulders at the last paragraph, and, in fact, De Wardes was out of date, as we have seen. De Wardes was still only at Buckingham's affair. The chevalier threw the letter over his shoulder upon an adjoining table, and said in a disdainful tone, "It is really incredible; and yet poor De Wardes is not deficient in ability; but the truth is, it is not very apparent, so easy is it to grow rusty in the country. The deuce take the simpleton, who ought to have written to me about matters of importance, and yet he writes such silly stuff as that. If it had not been for that miserable letter, which has no meaning at all in it, I should have detected in the grove yonder a charming little intrigue, which would have compromised a woman, would have perhaps have been as good as a sword-thrust for a man, and have diverted Monsieur for many days to come."

He looked at his watch. "It is now too late," he said. "One o'clock in the morning; every one must have returned to the king's apartments, where the night is to be finished; well, the scent is lost, and unless some extraordinary chance—" And thus saying, as if to appeal to his good star, the chevalier, greatly out of temper, approached the window, which looked out upon a somewhat solitary part of the garden. Immediately, and as if some evil genius was at his orders, he perceived returning towards the chateau, accompanied by a man, a silk mantle of a dark colour, and recognized the figure which had struck his attention half an hour previously.

"Admirable!" he thought, striking his hands together, "this is my providential mysterious affair." And he started out precipitately, along the staircase, hoping to reach the courtyard in time to recognize the woman in the mantle, and her companion. But as he arrived at the door of the little court, he nearly knocked against Madame, whose radiant face seemed full of charming revelations beneath the mantle which protected without concealing her. Unfortunately, Madame was alone. The chevalier knew that since he had seen her, not five minutes before, with a gentleman, the gentleman in question could not be far off. Consequently, he hardly took time to salute the princess as he drew up to allow her to pass; then when she had advanced a few steps, with the rapidity of a woman who fears recognition, and when the chevalier perceived that she was too much occupied with her own thoughts to trouble herself about him, he darted into the garden, looked hastily round on every side, and embraced within his glance as much of the horizon as he possibly could. He was just in time; the gentleman who had accompanied Madame was still in sight; only he was hurrying towards one of the wings of the chateau, behind which he was on the point of disappearing. There was not an instant to lose; the chevalier darted in pursuit of him, prepared to slacken his pace as he approached the unknown; but in spite of the diligence he used, the unknown had disappeared behind the flight of steps before he approached.

It was evident, however, that as the man pursued was walking quietly, in a pensive manner, with his head bent down, either beneath the weight of grief or happiness, when once the angle was passed, unless, indeed, he were to enter by some door or another, the chevalier could not fail to overtake him. And this, certainly, would have happened, if, at the very moment he turned the angle, the chevalier had not run against two persons, who were themselves wheeling in the opposite direction. The chevalier was ready to seek a quarrel with these two troublesome intruders, when, looking up, he recognized the superintendent. Fouquet was accompanied by a person whom the chevalier now saw for the first time. This stranger was the bishop of Vannes. Checked by the important character of the individual, and obliged out of politeness to make his own excuses when he expected to receive them, the chevalier stepped back a few paces; and as Monsieur Fouquet possessed, if not the friendship, at least the respect of every one; as the king himself, although he was rather his enemy than his friend, treated M. Fouquet as a man of great consideration, the chevalier did what the king himself would have done, namely, he bowed to M. Fouquet, who returned his salutation with kindly politeness, perceiving that the gentleman had run against him by mistake and without any intention of being rude. Then, almost immediately afterwards, having recognized the Chevalier de Lorraine, he made a few civil remarks, to which the chevalier was obliged to reply. Brief as the conversation was, De Lorraine saw, with the most unfeigned displeasure, the figure of his unknown becoming dimmer in the distance, and fast disappearing in the darkness. The chevalier resigned himself, and, once resigned, gave his entire attention to Fouquet:—"You arrive late, monsieur," he said. "Your absence has occasioned great surprise, and I heard Monsieur express himself as much astonished that, having been invited by the king, you had not come."

"It was impossible for me to do so; but I came as soon as I was free."

"Is Paris quiet?"

"Perfectly so. Paris has received the last tax very well."

"Ah! I understand you wished to assure yourself of this good feeling before you came to participate in our *fetes*."

"I have arrived, however, somewhat late to enjoy them. I will ask you, therefore, to inform me if the king is in the chateau or not, if I am likely to be able to see him this evening, or if I shall have to wait until to-morrow."

"We have lost sight of his majesty during the last half-hour nearly," said the chevalier.

"Perhaps he is in Madame's apartments?" inquired Fouquet.

"Not in Madame's apartments, I should think, for I just now met Madame as she was entering by the small staircase; and unless the gentleman whom you a moment ago encountered was the king himself—" and the chevalier paused, hoping that, in this manner, he might learn who it was he had been hurrying after. But Fouquet, whether he had or had not recognized De Guiche, simply replied,

"No, monsieur, it was not the king."

The chevalier, disappointed in his expectation, saluted them; but as he did so, casting a parting glance around him, and perceiving M. Colbert in the center of a group, he said to the superintendent: "Stay, monsieur; there is some one under the trees yonder, who will be able to inform you better than myself."

"Who?" asked Fouquet, whose near-sightedness prevented him from seeing through the darkness.

"M. Colbert," returned the chevalier.

"Indeed! That person, then, who is speaking yonder to those men with torches in their hands, is M. Colbert?"

"M. Colbert himself. He is giving orders personally to the workmen who are arranging the lamps for the illuminations."

"Thank you," said Fouquet, with an inclination of the head, which indicated that he had obtained all the information he wished. The chevalier, on his side, having, on the contrary, learned nothing at all, withdrew with a profound salutation.

He had scarcely left when Fouquet, knitting his brows, fell into a deep reverie. Aramis looked at him for a moment with a mingled feeling of compassion and silence.

"What!" he said to him, "the fellow's name alone seemed to affect you. Is it possible that, full of triumph and delight as you were just now, the sight merely of that man is capable of dispiriting you? Tell me, have you faith in your good star?"

"No," replied Fouquet, dejectedly.

"Why not?"

"Because I am too full of happiness at this present moment," he replied, in a trembling voice. "You, my dear D'Herblay, who are so learned, will remember the history of a certain tyrant of Samos. What can I throw into the sea to avert approaching evil? Yes! I repeat it once more, I am too full of happiness! so happy that I wish for nothing beyond what I have... I have risen so high... You know my motto: *Quo non ascendam?* I have risen so high that nothing is left me but to descend from my elevation. I cannot believe in the progress of a success already more than human."

Aramis smiled as he fixed his kind and penetrating glance upon him. "If I were aware of the cause of your happiness," he said, "I should probably fear for your grace; but you regard me in the light of a true friend; I mean, you turn to me in misfortune, nothing more. Even that is an immense and precious boon, I know; but the truth is, I have a just right to beg you to confide in me, from time to time, any fortunate circumstances that befall you, in which I should rejoice, you know, more than if they had befallen myself."

"My dear prelate," said Fouquet, laughing, "my secrets are of too profane a character to confide them to a bishop, however great a worldling he may be."

"Bah! in confession."

"Oh! I should blush too much if you were my confessor." And Fouquet began to sigh. Aramis again looked at him without further betrayal of his thoughts than a placid smile.

"Well," he said, "discretion is a great virtue."

"Silence," said Fouquet; "yonder venomous reptile has recognized us, and is crawling this way."

"Colbert?"

"Yes; leave me, D'Herblay; I do not wish that fellow to see you with me, or he will take an aversion to you."

Aramis pressed his hand, saying, "What need have I of his friendship, while you are here?"

"Yes, but I may not always be here," replied Fouquet, dejectedly.

"On that day, then, if that day should ever dawn," said Aramis, tranquilly, "we will think over a means of dispensing with the friendship, or of braving the dislike of M. Colbert. But tell me, my dear Fouquet, instead of conversing with this reptile, as you did him the honour of styling him, a conversation the need for which I do not perceive, why do you not pay a visit, if not to the king, at least to Madame?"

"To Madame," said the superintendent, his mind occupied by his *souvenirs*. "Yes, certainly, to Madame."

"You remember," continued Aramis, "that we have been told that Madame stands high in favour during the last two or three days. It enters into your policy, and forms part of our plans, that you should assiduously devote yourself to his majesty's friends. It is a means of counteracting the growing influence of M. Colbert. Present yourself, therefore, as soon as possible to Madame, and, for our sakes, treat this ally with consideration."

"But," said Fouquet, "are you quite sure that it is upon her that the king has his eyes fixed at the present moment?"

"If the needle has turned, it must be since the morning. You know I have my police."

"Very well! I will go there at once, and, at all events, I shall have a means of introduction in the shape of a magnificent pair of antique cameos set with diamonds."

"I have seen them, and nothing could be more costly and regal."

At this moment they were interrupted by a servant followed by a courier. "For you, my lord," said the courier aloud, presenting a letter to Fouquet.

"For your grace," said the lackey in a low tone, handing Aramis a letter. And as the lackey carried a torch in his hand, he placed himself between the superintendent and the bishop of Vannes, so that both of them could read at the same time. As Fouquet looked at the fine and delicate writing on the envelope, he started with delight. Those who love, or who are beloved, will understand his anxiety in the first place, and his happiness in the next. He hastily tore open the letter, which, however, contained only these words: "It is but an hour since I quitted you, it is an age since I told you how much I love you." And that was all. Madame de Belliere had, in fact, left Fouquet about an hour previously, after having passed two days with him; and apprehensive lest his remembrance of her might be effaced for too long a period from the heart she regretted, she dispatched a courier to him as the bearer of this important communication. Fouquet kissed the letter, and rewarded the bearer with a handful of gold. As for Aramis, he, on his side, was engaged in reading, but with more coolness and reflection, the following letter:

"The king has this evening been struck with a strange fancy; a woman loves him. He learned it accidentally, as he was listening to the conversation of this young girl with her companions; and his majesty has entirely abandoned himself to his new caprice. The girl's name is Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and she is sufficiently pretty to warrant this caprice becoming a strong attachment. Beware of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

There was not a word about Madame. Aramis slowly folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Fouquet was still delightedly inhaling the perfume of his epistle.

"My lord," said Aramis, touching Fouquet's arm.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked.

“An idea has just occurred to me. Are you acquainted with a young girl of the name of La Vallière?”

“Not at all.”

“Reflect a little.”

“Ah! yes, I believe so; one of Madame’s maids of honour.”

“That must be the one.”

“Well, what then?”

“Well, my lord, it is to that young girl that you must pay your visit this evening.”

“Bah! why so?”

“Nay, more than that, it is to her you must present your cameos.”

“Nonsense.”

“You know, my lord, that my advice is not to be regarded lightly.”

“But this is unforeseen—”

“That is my affair. Pay your court in due form, and without loss of time, to Mademoiselle de la Vallière. I will be your guarantee with Madame de Belliere that your devotion is altogether politic.”

“What do you mean, my dear D’Herblay, and whose name have you just pronounced?”

“A name which ought to convince you that, as I am so well informed about yourself, I may possibly be just as well informed about others. Pay your court, therefore, to La Vallière.”

“I will pay my court to whomsoever you like,” replied Fouquet, his heart filled with happiness.

“Come, come, descend again to the earth, traveler in the seventh heaven,” said Aramis; “M. Colbert is approaching. He has been recruiting while we were reading; see, how he is surrounded, praised, congratulated; he is decidedly becoming powerful.” In fact, Colbert was advancing, escorted by all the courtiers who remained in the gardens, every one of whom complimented him upon the arrangements of the *fete*: all of which so puffed him up that he could hardly contain himself.

“If La Fontaine were here,” said Fouquet, smiling, “what an admirable opportunity for him to recite his fable of ‘The Frog that wanted to make itself as big as the Ox.’”

Colbert arrived in the center of the circle blazing with light; Fouquet awaited his approach, unmoved and with a slightly mocking smile. Colbert smiled too; he had been observing his enemy during the last quarter of an hour, and had been approaching him gradually. Colbert’s smile was a presage of hostility.

“Oh, oh!” said Aramis, in a low tone of voice to the superintendent; “the scoundrel is going to ask you again for more millions to pay for his fireworks and his coloured lamps.” Colbert was the first to salute them, and with an air which he endeavored to render respectful. Fouquet hardly moved his head.

“Well, my lord, what do your eyes say? Have we shown our good taste?”

“Perfect taste,” replied Fouquet, without permitting the slightest tone of raillery to be remarked in his words.

“Oh!” said Colbert, maliciously, “you are treating us with indulgence. We are poor, we servants of the king, and Fontainebleau is no way to be compared as a residence with Vaux.”

“Quite true,” replied Fouquet coolly.

“But what can we do, my lord?” continued Colbert, “we have done our best on slender resources.”

Fouquet made a gesture of assent.

“But,” pursued Colbert, “it would be only a proper display of your magnificence, my lord, if you were to offer to his majesty a *fete* in your wonderful gardens—in those gardens which have cost you sixty millions of francs.”

“Seventy-two,” said Fouquet.

“An additional reason,” returned Colbert; “it would, indeed, be truly magnificent.”

“But do you suppose, monsieur, that his majesty would deign to accept my invitation?”

“I have no doubt whatever of it,” cried Colbert, hastily; “I will guarantee that he does.”

“You are exceedingly kind,” said Fouquet. “I may depend on it, then?”

“Yes, my lord; yes, certainly.”

“Then I will consider the matter,” yawned Fouquet.

“Accept, accept,” whispered Aramis, eagerly.

“You will consider?” repeated Colbert.

“Yes,” replied Fouquet; “in order to know what day I shall submit my invitation to the king.”

“This very evening, my lord, this very evening.”

“Agreed,” said the superintendent. “Gentlemen, I should wish to issue my invitations; but you know that wherever the king goes, the king is in his own palace; it is by his majesty, therefore, that you must be invited.” A murmur of delight immediately arose. Fouquet bowed and left.

“Proud and dauntless man,” thought Colbert, “you accept, and yet you know it will cost you ten millions.”

“You have ruined me,” whispered Fouquet, in a low tone, to Aramis.

“I have saved you,” replied the latter, whilst Fouquet ascended the flight of steps and inquired whether the king was still visible.

XLVII. The Orderly Clerk.

The king, anxious to be again quite alone, in order to reflect well upon what was passing in his heart, had withdrawn to his own apartments, where M. de Saint-Aignan had, after his conversation with Madame, gone to meet him. This conversation has already been related. The favourite, vain of his twofold importance, and feeling that he had become, during the last two hours, the confidant of the king, began to treat the affairs of the court in a somewhat indifferent manner: and, from the position in which he had placed himself, or rather, where chance had placed him, he saw nothing but love and garlands of flowers around him. The king’s love for Madame, that of Madame for the king, that of Guiche for Madame, that of La Vallière for the king, that of Malicorne for Montalais, that of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente for himself, was not all this, truly, more than enough to turn the head of any courtier? Besides, Saint-Aignan was the model of courtiers, past, present, and to come; and, moreover, showed himself such an excellent narrator, and so discerningly appreciative that the king listened to him with an appearance of great interest, particularly when he described the excited manner with which Madame had sought for him to converse about the affair of Mademoiselle de la Vallière. While the king no longer experienced for Madame any remains of the passion he had once felt for her, there was, in this same eagerness of Madame to procure information about him, great gratification for his vanity, from which he could not free himself. He experienced this pleasure then, but nothing more, and his heart was not, for a single moment, alarmed at what Madame might, or might not, think of his adventure. When, however, Saint-Aignan had finished, the king, while preparing to retire to rest, asked, “Now, Saint-Aignan, you know what Mademoiselle de la Vallière is, do you not?”

“Not only what she is, but what she will be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that she is everything that woman can wish to be—that is to say, beloved by your majesty; I mean, that she will be everything your majesty may wish her to be.”

“That is not what I am asking. I do not wish to know what she is to-day, or what she will be to-morrow; as you have remarked, that is my affair. But tell me what others say of her.”

“They say she is well conducted.”

“Oh!” said the king, smiling, “that is mere report.”

“But rare enough, at court, sire, to believe when it is spread.”

“Perhaps you are right. Is she well born?”

“Excellently; the daughter of the Marquis de la Vallière, and step-daughter of that good M. de Saint-Remy.”

“Ah, yes! my aunt’s major-domo; I remember; and I remember now that I saw her as I passed through Blois. She was presented to the queens. I have even to reproach myself that I did not on that occasion pay her the attention she deserved.”

“Oh, sire! I trust that your majesty will now repair time lost.”

“And the report—you tell me—is, that Mademoiselle de la Vallière never had a lover.”

“In any case, I do not think your majesty would be much alarmed at the rivalry.”

“Yet, stay,” said the king, in a very serious tone of voice.

“Your majesty?”

“I remember.”

“Ah!”

“If she has no lover, she has, at least, a betrothed.”

“A betrothed!”

“What! Count, do you not know that?”

“No.”

“You, the man who knows all the news?”

“Your majesty will excuse me. You know this betrothed, then?”

“Assuredly! his father came to ask me to sign the marriage contract: it is—” The king was about to pronounce the Vicomte de Bragelonne’s name, when he stopped, and knitted his brows.

“It is—” repeated Saint-Aignan, inquiringly.

“I don’t remember now,” replied Louis XIV., endeavoring to conceal an annoyance he had some trouble to disguise.

“Can I put your majesty in the way?” inquired the Comte de Saint-Aignan.

“No; for I no longer remember to whom I intended to refer; indeed, I only remember very indistinctly, that one of the maids of honour was to marry—the name, however, has escaped me.”

“Was it Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente he was going to marry?” inquired Saint-Aignan.

“Very likely,” said the king.

“In that case, the intended was M. de Montespan; but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did not speak of it, it seemed to me, in such a manner as would frighten suitors away.”

“At all events,” said the king, “I know nothing, or almost nothing, about Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Saint-Aignan, I rely upon you to procure me every information about her.”

“Yes, sire, and when shall I have the honour of seeing your majesty again, to give you the latest news?”

“Whenever you have procured it.”

“I shall obtain it speedily, then, if the information can be as quickly obtained as my wish to see your majesty again.”

“Well said, count! By the by, has Madame displayed any ill-feeling against this poor girl?”

“None, sire.”

“Madame did not get angry, then?”

“I do not know; I only know that she laughed continually.”

“That’s well; but I think I hear voices in the ante-rooms—no doubt a courier has just arrived. Inquire, Saint-Aignan.” The count ran to the door and exchanged a few words with the usher; he returned to the king, saying, “Sire, it is M. Fouquet who has this moment arrived, by your majesty’s orders, he says. He presented himself, but, because of the lateness of the hour, he does not press for an audience this evening, and is satisfied to have his presence here formally announced.”

"M. Fouquet! I wrote to him at three o'clock, inviting him to be at Fontainebleau the following day, and he arrives at Fontainebleau at two o'clock in the morning! This is, indeed, zeal!" exclaimed the king, delighted to see himself so promptly obeyed. "On the contrary, M. Fouquet shall have his audience. I summoned him, and will receive him. Let him be introduced. As for you, count, pursue your inquiries, and be here to-morrow."

The king placed his finger on his lips; and Saint-Aignan, his heart brimful of happiness, hastily withdrew, telling the usher to introduce M. Fouquet, who, thereupon, entered the king's apartment. Louis rose to receive him.

"Good evening, M. Fouquet," he said, smiling graciously; "I congratulate you on your punctuality; and yet my message must have reached you late?"

"At nine in the evening, sire."

"You have been working very hard lately, M. Fouquet, for I have been informed that you have not left your rooms at Saint-Mande during the last three or four days."

"It is perfectly true, your majesty, that I have kept myself shut up for the past three days," replied Fouquet.

"Do you know, M. Fouquet, that I had a great many things to say to you?" continued the king, with a most gracious air.

"Your majesty overwhelms me, and since you are so graciously disposed towards me, will you permit me to remind you of the promise made to grant an audience?"

"Ah, yes! some church dignitary, who thinks he has to thank me for something, is it not?"

"Precisely so, sire. The hour is, perhaps, badly chosen; but the time of the companion whom I have brought with me is valuable, and as Fontainebleau is on the way to his diocese—"

"Who is it, then?"

"The bishop of Vannes, whose appointment your majesty, at my recommendation, deigned, three months since, to sign."

"That is very possible," said the king, who had signed without reading; "and he is here?"

"Yes, sire; Vannes is an important diocese; the flock belonging to this pastor needed his religious consolation; they are savages, whom it is necessary to polish, at the same time that he instructs them, and M. d'Herblay is unequalled in such kind of missions."

"M. d'Herblay!" said the king, musingly, as if his name, heard long since, was not, however, unknown to him.

"Oh!" said Fouquet, promptly, "your majesty is not acquainted with the obscure name of one of your most faithful and valuable servants?"

"No, I confess I am not. And so he wishes to set off again?"

"He has this very day received letters which will, perhaps, compel him to leave, so that, before setting off for that unknown region called Bretagne, he is desirous of paying his respects to your majesty."

"Is he waiting?"

"He is here, sire."

"Let him enter."

Fouquet made a sign to the usher in attendance, who was waiting behind the tapestry. The door opened, and Aramis entered. The king allowed him to finish the compliments which he addressed to him, and fixed a long look upon a countenance which no one could forget, after having once beheld it.

"Vannes!" he said: "you are bishop of Vannes, I believe?"

"Yes, sire."

"Vannes is in Bretagne, I think?" Aramis bowed.

"Near the coast?" Aramis again bowed.

"A few leagues from Bell-Isle, is it not?"

"Yes, sire," replied Aramis; "six leagues, I believe."

"Six leagues; a mere step, then," said Louis XIV.

"Not for us poor Bretons, sire," replied Aramis: "six leagues, on the contrary, is a great distance, if it be six leagues on land; and an immense distance, if it be leagues on the sea. Besides, I have the honour to mention to your majesty that there are six leagues of sea from the river to Belle-Isle."

"It is said that M. Fouquet has a very beautiful house there?" inquired the king.

"Yes, it is said so," replied Aramis, looking quietly at Fouquet.

"What do you mean by 'it is said so?'" exclaimed the king.

"He has, sire."

"Really, M. Fouquet, I must confess that one circumstance surprises me."

"What may that be, sire?"

"That you should have at the head of the diocese a man like M. d'Herblay, and yet should not have shown him Belle-Isle."

"Oh, sire," replied the bishop, without giving Fouquet time to answer, "we poor Breton prelates seldom leave our residences."

"M. de Vannes," said the king, "I will punish M. Fouquet for his indifference."

"In what way, sire?"

"I will change your bishopric."

Fouquet bit his lips, but Aramis only smiled.

"What income does Vannes bring you in?" continued the king.

"Sixty thousand livres, sire," said Aramis.

"So trifling an amount as that; but you possess other property, Monsieur de Vannes?"

"I have nothing else, sire; only M. Fouquet pays me one thousand two hundred livres a year for his pew in the church."

"Well, M. d'Herblay, I promise you something better than that."

"Sire—"

"I will not forget you."

Aramis bowed, and the king also bowed to him in a respectful manner, as he was accustomed to do towards women and members of the Church. Aramis gathered that his audience was at an end; he took his leave of the king in the simple, unpretending language of a country pastor, and disappeared.

"He is, indeed, a remarkable face," said the king, following him with his eyes as long as he could see him, and even to a certain degree when he was no longer to be seen.

"Sire," replied Fouquet, "if that bishop had been educated early in life, no prelate in the kingdom would deserve the highest distinctions better than he."

"His learning is not extensive, then?"

"He changed the sword for the crucifix, and that rather late in life. But it matters little, if your majesty will permit me to speak of M. de Vannes again on another occasion—"

"I beg you to do so. But before speaking of him, let us speak of yourself, M. Fouquet."

"Of me, sire?"

"Yes, I have to pay you a thousand compliments."

"I cannot express to your majesty the delight with which you overwhelm me."

"I understand you, M. Fouquet. I confess, however, to have had certain prejudices against you."

"In that case, I was indeed unhappy, sire."

"But they exist no longer. Did you not perceive—"

"I did, indeed, sire; but I awaited with resignation the day when the truth would prevail; and it seems that that day has now arrived."

"Ah! you knew, then, you were in disgrace with me?"

"Alas! sire, I perceived it."

"And do you know the reason?"

"Perfectly well; your majesty thought that I had been wastefully lavish in expenditure."

"Not so; far from that."

"Or, rather an indifferent administrator. In a word, you thought that, as the people had no money, there would be none for your majesty either."

"Yes, I thought so; but I was deceived."

Fouquet bowed.

"And no disturbances, no complaints?"

"And money enough," said Fouquet.

"The fact is that you have been profuse with it during the last month."

"I have more, not only for all your majesty's requirements, but for all your caprices."

"I thank you, Monsieur Fouquet," replied the king, seriously. "I will not put you to the proof. For the next two months I do not intend to ask you for anything."

"I will avail myself of the interval to amass five or six millions, which will be serviceable as money in hand in case of war."

"Five or six millions!"

"For the expenses of your majesty's household only, be it understood."

"You think war probable, M. Fouquet?"

"I think that if Heaven has bestowed on the eagle a beak and claws, it is to enable him to show his royal character."

The king blushed with pleasure.

"We have spent a great deal of money these few days past, Monsieur Fouquet; will you not scold me for it?"

"Sire, your majesty has still twenty years of youth to enjoy, and a thousand million francs to lavish in those twenty years."

"That is a great deal of money, M. Fouquet," said the king.

"I will economize, sire. Besides, your majesty as two valuable servants in M. Colbert and myself. The one will encourage you to be prodigal with your treasures—and this shall be myself, if my services should continue to be agreeable to your majesty; and the other will economize money for you, and this will be M. Colbert's province."

"M. Colbert?" returned the king, astonished.

"Certainly, sire; M. Colbert is an excellent accountant."

At this commendation, bestowed by the traduced on the traducer, the king felt himself penetrated with confidence and admiration. There was not, moreover, either in Fouquet's voice or look, anything which injuriously affected a single syllable of the remark he had made; he did not pass one eulogium, as it were, in order to acquire the right of making two reproaches. The king comprehended him, and yielding to so much generosity and address, he said, "You praise M. Colbert, then?"

"Yes, sire, I praise him; for, besides being a man of merit, I believe him to be devoted to your majesty's interests."

"Is that because he has often interfered with your own views?" said the king, smiling.

"Exactly, sire."

"Explain yourself."

"It is simple enough. I am the man who is needed to make the money come in; he is the man who is needed to prevent it leaving."

"Nay, nay, monsieur le surintendant, you will presently say something which will correct this good opinion."

"Do you mean as far as administrative abilities are concerned, sire?"

"Yes."

"Not in the slightest."

"Really?"

"Upon my honour, sire, I do not know throughout France a better clerk than M. Colbert."

This word "clerk" did not possess, in 1661, the somewhat subservient signification attached to it in the present day; but, as spoken by Fouquet, whom the king had addressed as the superintendent, it seemed to acquire an insignificant and petty character, that at this juncture served admirably to restore Fouquet to his place, and Colbert to his own.

"And yet," said Louis XIV., "it was Colbert, however, that, notwithstanding his economy, had the arrangement of my *fêtes* here at Fontainebleau; and I assure you, Monsieur Fouquet, that in no way has he checked the expenditure of money." Fouquet bowed, but did not reply.

"Is it not your opinion too?" said the king.

"I think, sire," he replied, "that M. Colbert has done what he had to do in an exceedingly orderly manner, and that he deserves, in this respect, all the praise your majesty may bestow upon him."

The word "orderly" was a proper accompaniment for the word "clerk." The king possessed that extreme sensitiveness of organization, that delicacy of perception, which pierced through and detected the regular order of feelings and sensations, before the actual sensations themselves, and he therefore comprehended that the clerk had, in Fouquet's opinion, been too full of method and order in his arrangements; in other words, that the magnificent *fêtes* of Fontainebleau might have been rendered more magnificent still. The king consequently felt that there was something in the amusements he had provided with which some person or another might be able to find fault; he experienced a little of the annoyance felt by a person coming from the provinces to Paris, dressed out in the very best clothes which his wardrobe can furnish, only to find that the fashionably dressed man there looks at him either too much or not enough. This part of the conversation, which Fouquet had carried on with so much moderation, yet with extreme tact, inspired the king with the highest esteem for the character of the man and the capacity of the minister. Fouquet took his leave at a quarter to three in the morning, and the king went to bed a little uneasy and confused at the indirect lesson he had received; and a good hour was employed by him in going over again in memory the embroideries, the tapestries, the bills of fare of the various banquets, the architecture of the triumphal arches, the arrangements for the illuminations and fireworks, all the offspring of the "Clerk Colbert's" invention. The result was, the king passed in review before him everything that had taken place during the last eight days, and decided that faults could be found in his *fêtes*. But Fouquet, by his politeness, his thoughtful consideration, and his generosity, had injured Colbert more deeply than the latter, by his artifice, his ill-will, and his persevering hatred, had ever yet succeeded in hurting Fouquet.

XLVIII. Fontainebleau at Two o'Clock in the Morning.

As we have seen, Saint-Aignan had quitted the king's apartment at the very moment the superintendent entered it. Saint-Aignan was charged with a mission that required dispatch, and he was going to do his utmost to turn his time to the best advantage. He whom we have introduced as the king's friend was indeed an uncommon personage; he was one of those valuable courtiers whose vigilance and acuteness of perception threw all other favourites into the shade, and counterbalanced, by his close attention, the servility of Dangeau, who was not the favourite, but the toady of the king. M. de Saint-Aignan began to think what was to be done in the present position of affairs. He reflected that his first information ought to come from De Guiche. He therefore set out in search of him, but De Guiche, whom we saw disappear behind one of the wings, and who seemed to have returned to his own apartments, had not entered the chateau. Saint-Aignan therefore went in quest of him, and after having turned, and twisted, and searched in every direction, he perceived something like a human form leaning against a tree. This figure was as motionless as a statue, and seemed deeply engaged in looking at a window, although its curtains were closely drawn. As this window happened to be Madame's, Saint-Aignan concluded that the form in question must be that of De Guiche. He advanced cautiously, and found he was not mistaken. De Guiche had, after his conversation with Madame, carried away such a weight of happiness, that all of his strength of mind was hardly sufficient to enable him to support it. On his side, Saint-Aignan knew that De Guiche had had something to do with La Vallière's introduction to Madame's household, for a courtier knows everything and forgets nothing; but he had never learned under what title or conditions De Guiche had conferred his protection upon La Vallière. But, as in asking a great many questions it is singular if a man does not learn something, Saint-Aignan reckoned upon learning much or little, as the case might be, if he questioned De Guiche with that extreme tact, and, at the same time, with that persistence in attaining an object, of which he was capable. Saint-Aignan's plan was as follows: If the information obtained was satisfactory, he would inform the king, with alacrity, that he had lighted upon a pearl, and claim the privilege of setting the pearl in question in the royal crown. If the information were unsatisfactory,—which, after all, might be possible,—he would examine how far the king cared about La Vallière, and make use of his information in such a manner as to get rid of the girl altogether, and thereby obtain all the merit of her banishment with all the ladies of the court who might have the least pretensions to the king's heart, beginning with Madame and finishing with the queen. In case the king should show himself obstinate in his fancy, then he would not produce the damaging information he had obtained, but would let La Vallière know that this damaging information was carefully preserved in a secret drawer of her confidant's memory. In this manner, he would be able to air his generosity before the poor girl's eyes, and so keep her in constant suspense between gratitude and apprehension, to such an extent as to make her a friend at court, interested, as an accomplice, in trying to make his fortune, while she was making her own. As far as concerned the day when the bombshell of the past should burst, if ever there were any occasion, Saint-Aignan promised himself that he would by that time have taken all possible precautions, and would pretend an entire ignorance of the matter to the king; while, with regard to La Vallière, he would still have an opportunity of being considered the personification of generosity. It was with such ideas as these, which the fire of covetousness had caused to dawn in half an hour, that Saint-Aignan, the son of earth, as La Fontaine would have said, determined to get De Guiche into conversation: in other words, to trouble him in his happiness—a happiness of which Saint-Aignan was quite ignorant. It was long past one o'clock in the morning when Saint-Aignan perceived De Guiche, standing, motionless, leaning against the trunk of a tree, with his eyes fastened upon the lighted window,—the sleepest hour of night-time, which painters crown with myrtles and budding poppies, the hour when eyes are heavy, hearts throb, and heads feel dull and languid—an hour which casts upon the day which has passed away a look of regret, while addressing a loving greeting to the dawning light. For De Guiche it was the dawn of unutterable happiness; he would have bestowed a treasure upon a beggar, had one stood before him, to secure him uninterrupted indulgence in his dreams. It was precisely at this hour that Saint-Aignan, badly advised,—selfishness always counsels badly,—came and struck him on the shoulder, at the very moment he was murmuring a word, or rather a name.

"Ah!" he cried loudly, "I was looking for you."

"For me?" said De Guiche, starting.

"Yes; and I find you seemingly moon-struck. Is it likely, my dear comte, you have been attacked by a poetical malady, and are making verses?"

The young man forced a smile upon his lips, while a thousand conflicting sensations were muttering defiance of Saint-Aignan in the deep recesses of his heart. "Perhaps," he said. "But by what happy chance—"

"Ah! your remark shows that you did not hear what I said."

"How so?"

"Why, I began by telling you I was looking for you."

"You were looking for me?"

"Yes: and I find you now in the very act."

"Of doing what, I should like to know?"

"Of singing the praises of Phyllis."

"Well, I do not deny it," said De Guiche, laughing. "Yes, my dear comte, I was celebrating Phyllis's praises."

"And you have acquired the right to do so."

"I?"

"You; no doubt of it. You; the intrepid protector of every beautiful and clever woman."

"In the name of goodness, what story have you got hold of now?"

"Acknowledged truths, I am well aware. But stay a moment; I am in love."

"You?"

"Yes."

"So much the better, my dear comte; tell me all about it." And De Guiche, afraid that Saint-Aignan might perhaps presently observe the window, where the light was still burning, took the comte's arm and endeavored to lead him away.

"Oh!" said the latter, resisting, "do not take me towards those dark woods, it is too damp there. Let us stay in the moonlight." And while he yielded to the pressure of De Guiche's arm, he remained in the flower-garden adjoining the chateau.

"Well," said De Guiche, resigning himself, "lead me where you like, and ask me what you please."

"It is impossible to be more agreeable than you are." And then, after a moment's silence, Saint-Aignan continued, "I wish you to tell me something about a certain person in who you have interested yourself."

"And with whom you are in love?"

"I will neither admit nor deny it. You understand that a man does not very readily place his heart where there is no hope of return, and that it is most essential he should take measures of security in advance."

"You are right," said De Guiche with a sigh; "a man's heart is a very precious gift."

"Mine particularly is very tender, and in that light I present it to you."

"Oh! you are well known, comte. Well?"

"It is simply a question of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Why, my dear Saint-Aignan, you are losing your senses, I should think."

"Why so?"

"I have never shown or taken any interest in Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Bah!"

"Never."

"Did you not obtain admission for Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente into Madame's household?"

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente—and you ought to know it better than any one else, my dear comte—is of a sufficiently good family to make her presence here desirable, and her admittance very easy."

"You are jesting."

"No; and upon my honour I do not know what you mean."

"And you had nothing, then, to do with her admission?"

"No."

"You do not know her?"

"I saw her for the first time the day she was presented to Madame. Therefore, as I have never taken any interest in her, as I do not know her, I am not able to give you the information you require." And De Guiche made a movement as though he were about to leave his questioner.

"Nay, nay, one moment, my dear comte," said Saint-Aignan; "you shall not escape me in this manner."

"Why, really, it seems to me that it is now time to return to our apartments."

"And yet you were not going in when I—did not meet, but found you."

"Therefore, my dear comte," said De Guiche, "as long as you have anything to say to me, I place myself entirely at your service."

"And you are quite right in doing so. What matters half an hour more or less? Will you swear that you have no injurious communications to make to me about her, and that any injurious communications you might possibly have to make are not the cause of your silence?"

"Oh! I believe the poor child to be as pure as crystal."



"You overwhelm me with joy. And yet I do not wish to have towards you the appearance of a man so badly informed as I seem. It is quite certain that you supplied the princess's household with the ladies of honour. Nay, a song has even been written about it."

"Oh! songs are written about everything."

"Do you know it?"

"No: sing it to me and I shall make its acquaintance."

"I cannot tell you how it begins; I only remember how it ends."

"Very well, at all events, that is something."

"When Maids of Honour happen to run short, Lo!—Guiche will furnish the entire Court."

"The idea is weak, and the rhyme poor," said De Guiche.

"What can you expect, my dear fellow? it is not Racine's or Moliere's, but La Feuillade's; and a great lord cannot rhyme like a beggarly poet."

"It is very unfortunate, though, that you only remember the termination."

"Stay, stay, I have just recollected the beginning of the second couplet."

"Why, there's the birdcage, with a pretty pair, The charming Montalais, and..."

"And La Vallière," exclaimed Guiche, impatiently, and completely ignorant besides of Saint-Aignan's object.

"Yes, yes, you have it. You have hit upon the word, 'La Vallière.'"

"A grand discovery indeed."

"Montalais and La Vallière, these, then, are the two young girls in whom you interest yourself," said Saint-Aignan, laughing.

"And so Mademoiselle de Tonny-Charente's name is not to be met with in the song?"

"No, indeed."

"And are you satisfied, then?"

"Perfectly; but I find Montalais there," said Saint-Aignan, still laughing.

"Oh! you will find her everywhere. She is a singularly active young lady."

"You know her?"

"Indirectly. She was the *protegee* of a man named Malicorne, who is a *protegee* of Manicamp's; Manicamp asked me to get the situation of maid of honour for Montalais in Madame's household, and a situation for Malicorne as an officer in Monsieur's household. Well, I asked for the appointments, for you know very well that I have a weakness for that droll fellow Manicamp."

"And you obtained what you sought?"

"For Montalais, yes; for Malicorne, yes and no; for as yet he is only on trial. Do you wish to know anything else?"

"The last word of the couplet still remains, La Vallière," said Saint-Aignan, resuming the smile that so tormented Guiche.

"Well," said the latter, "it is true that I obtained admission for her in Madame's household."

"Ah!" said Saint-Aignan.

"But," continued Guiche, assuming a great coldness of manner, "you will oblige me, comte, not to jest about that name. Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière is a young lady perfectly well-conducted."

"Perfectly well-conducted do you say?"

"Yes."

"Then you have not heard the last rumor?" exclaimed Saint-Aignan.

"No, and you will do me a service, my dear comte, in keeping this report to yourself and to those who circulate it."

"Ah! bah! you take the matter up very seriously."

"Yes; Mademoiselle de Vallière is beloved by one of my best friends."

Saint-Aignan started. "Aha!" he said.

"Yes, comte," continued Guiche; "and consequently, you, the most distinguished man in France for polished courtesy of manner, will understand that I cannot allow my friend to be placed in a ridiculous position."

Saint-Aignan began to bite his nails, partially from vexation, and partially from disappointed curiosity. Guiche made him a very profound bow.

"You send me away," said Saint-Aignan, who was dying to know the name of the friend.

"I do not send you away, my dear fellow. I am going to finish my lines to Phyllis."

"And those lines—"

"Are a *quatrain*. You understand, I trust, that a *quatrain* is a serious affair?"

"Of course."

"And as, of these four lines, of which it is composed, I have yet three and a half to make, I need my undivided attention."

"I quite understand. Adieu! comte. By the by—"

"What?"

"Are you quick at making verses?"

"Wonderfully so."

"Will you have quite finished the three lines and a half to-morrow morning?"

"I *hope* so."

"Adieu, then, until to-morrow."

"Adieu, adieu!"

Saint-Aignan was obliged to accept the notice to quit; he accordingly did so, and disappeared behind the hedge. Their conversation had led Guiche and Saint-Aignan a good distance from the chateau. Every mathematician, every poet, and every dreamer has his own subjects of interest. Saint-Aignan, on leaving Guiche, found himself at the extremity of the grove,—at the very spot where the outbuildings of the servants begin, and where, behind the thickets of acacias and chestnut-trees interlacing their branches, which were hidden by masses of clematis and young vines, the wall which separated the woods from the courtyard was erected. Saint-Aignan, alone, took the path which led towards these buildings; De Guiche going off in the opposite direction. The one proceeded to the flower-garden, while the other bent his steps towards the walls. Saint-Aignan walked on between rows of mountain-ash, lilac, and hawthorn, which formed an almost impenetrable roof above his head; his feet were buried in the soft gravel and thick moss. He was deliberating a means of taking his revenge, which seemed difficult for him to carry out, and was vexed with himself for not having learned more about La Vallière, notwithstanding the ingenious measures he had resorted to in order to acquire more information about her, when suddenly the murmur of a human voice attracted his attention. He heard whispers, the complaining tones of a woman's voice mingled with entreaties, smothered laughter, sighs, and half-stilted exclamations of surprise; but above them all, the woman's voice prevailed. Saint-Aignan stopped to look about him; he perceived from the greatest surprise that the voices proceeded, not from the ground, but from the branches of the trees. As he glided along under the covered walk, he raised his head, and observed at the top of the wall a woman perched upon a ladder, in eager conversation with a man seated on a branch of a chestnut-tree, whose head alone could be seen, the rest of his body being concealed in the thick covert of the chestnut.

5

XLIX. The Labyrinth.

Saint-Aignan, who had only been seeking for information, had met with an adventure. This was indeed a piece of good luck. Curious to learn why, and particularly what about, this man and woman were conversing at such an hour, and in such a singular position, Saint-Aignan made himself as small as he possibly could, and approached almost under the rounds of the ladder. And taking measures to make himself as comfortable as possible, he leaned his back against a tree and listened, and heard the following conversation. The woman was the first to speak.

"Really, Monsieur Manicamp," she said, in a voice which, notwithstanding the reproaches she addressed to him, preserved a marked tone of coquetry, "really your indiscretion is of a very dangerous character. We cannot talk long in this manner without being observed."

"That is very probable," said the man, in the calmest and coolest of tones.

"In that case, then, what would people say? Oh! if any one were to see me, I declare I should die of very shame."

"Oh! that would be very silly; I do not believe you would."

"It might have been different if there had been anything between us; but to injure myself gratuitously is really very foolish of me; so, adieu, Monsieur Manicamp."

"So far so good; I know the man, and now let me see who the woman is," said Saint-Aignan, watching the rounds of the ladder, on which were standing two pretty little feet covered with blue satin shoes.

"Nay, nay, for pity's sake, my dear Montalais," cried Manicamp, "deuce take it, do not go away; I have a great many things to say to you, of the greatest importance, still."

"Montalais," said Saint-Aignan to himself, "one of the three. Each of the three gossips had her adventure, only I imagined the hero of this one's adventure was Malicorne and not Manicamp."

At her companion's appeal, Montalais stopped in the middle of her descent, and Saint-Aignan could observe the unfortunate Manicamp climb from one branch of the chestnut-tree to another, either to improve his situation or to overcome the fatigue consequent upon his inconvenient position.

"Now, listen to me," said he; "you quite understand, I hope, that my intentions are perfectly innocent?"

"Of course. But why did you write me a letter stimulating my gratitude towards you? Why did you ask me for an interview at such an hour and in such a place as this?"

"I stimulated your gratitude in reminding you that it was I who had been the means of your becoming attached to Madame's household; because most anxiously desirous of obtaining the interview you have been kind enough to grant me, I employed the means which appeared to me most certain to insure it. And my reason for soliciting it, at such an hour and in such a locality, was, that the hour seemed to me to be the most prudent, and the locality the least open to observation. Moreover, I had occasion to speak to you upon certain subjects which require both prudence and solitude."

"Monsieur Manicamp!"

"But everything I wish to say is perfectly honourable, I assure you."

"I think, Monsieur Manicamp, it will be more becoming in me to take my leave."

"No, no!—listen to me, or I will jump from my perch here to yours; and be careful how you set me at defiance, for a branch of this chestnut-tree causes me a good deal of annoyance, and may provoke me to extreme measures. Do not follow the example of this branch, then, but listen to me."

"I am listening, and I agree to do so; but be as brief as possible, for if you have a branch of the chestnut-tree which annoys you, I wish you to understand that one of the rounds of the ladder is hurting the soles of my feet, and my shoes are being cut through."

"Do me the kindness to give me your hand."

"Why?"

"Will you have the goodness to do so?"

"There is my hand, then; but what are you going to do?"

"To draw you towards me."

"What for? You surely do not wish me to join you in the tree?"

"No; but I wish you to sit down upon the wall; there, that will do; there is quite room enough, and I would give a great deal to be allowed to sit down beside you."

"No, no; you are very well where you are; we should be seen."

"Do you really think so?" said Manicamp, in an insinuating voice.

"I am sure of it."

"Very well, I remain in my tree, then, although I cannot be worse placed."

"Monsieur Manicamp, we are wandering away from the subject."

"You are right, we are so."

"You wrote me a letter?"

"I did."

"Why did you write?"

"Fancy, at two o'clock to-day, De Guiche left."

"What then?"

"Seeing him set off, I followed him, as I usually do."

"Of course, I see that, since you are here now."

"Don't be in a hurry. You are aware, I suppose, that De Guiche is up to his very neck in disgrace?"

"Alas! yes."

"It was the very height of imprudence on his part, then, to come to Fontainebleau to seek those who had at Paris sent him away into exile, and particularly those from whom he had been separated."

"Monsieur Manicamp, you reason like Pythagoras."

"Moreover, De Guiche is as obstinate as a man in love can be, and he refused to listen to any of my remonstrances. I begged, I implored him, but he would not listen to anything. Oh, the deuce!"

"What's the matter?"

"I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle Montalais, but this confounded branch, about which I have already had the honour of speaking to you, has just torn a certain portion of my dress."

"It is quite dark," replied Montalais, laughing; "so, pray continue, M. Manicamp."

"De Guiche set off on horseback as hard as he could, I following him, at a slower pace. You quite understand that to throw one's self into the water, for instance, with a friend, at the same headlong rate as he himself would do it, would be the act either of a fool or a madman. I therefore allowed De Guiche to get in advance, and I proceeded on my way with a commendable slowness of pace, feeling quite sure that my unfortunate friend would not be received, or, if he had been, that he would ride off again at the very first cross, disagreeable answer; and that I should see him returning much faster than he went, without having, myself, gone much farther than Ris or Melun—and that even was a good distance you will admit, for it is eleven leagues to get there and as many to return."

Montalais shrugged her shoulders.

"Laugh as much as you like; but if, instead of being comfortably seated on the top of the wall as you are, you were sitting on this branch as if you were on horseback, you would, like Augustus, aspire to descend."

"Be patient, my dear M. Manicamp; a few minutes will soon pass away; you were saying, I think, that you had gone beyond Ris and Melun."

"Yes, I went through Ris and Melun, and I continued to go on, more and more surprised that I did not see him returning; and here I am at Fontainebleau; I look for and inquire after De Guiche everywhere, but no one has seen him, no one in the town has spoken to him; he arrived riding at full gallop, he entered the chateau; and there he has disappeared. I have been here at Fontainebleau since eight o'clock this evening inquiring for De Guiche in every direction, but no De Guiche can be found. I am dying with uneasiness. You understand that I have not been running my head into the lion's den, in entering the chateau, as my imprudent friend has done; I came at once to the servants' offices, and I succeeded in getting a letter conveyed to you; and now, for Heaven's sake, my dear young lady, relieve me from my anxiety."

"There will be no difficulty in that, my dear M. Manicamp; your friend De Guiche has been admirably received."

"Bah!"

"The king made quite a fuss over him."

"The king, who exiled him!"

"Madame smiled upon him, and Monsieur appears to like him better than ever."

"Ah! ah!" said Manicamp, "that explains to me, then, why and how he has remained. And did he not say anything about me?"

"Not a word."

"That is very unkind. What is he doing now?"

"In all probability he is asleep, or, if not asleep, dreaming."

"And what have they been doing all the evening?"

"Dancing."

"The famous ballet? How did De Guiche look?"

"Superb!"

"Dear fellow! And now, pray forgive me, Mademoiselle Montalais; but all I now have to do is pass from where I now am to your apartment."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot suppose that the door of the chateau will be opened for me at this hour; and as for spending the night upon this branch, I possibly might not object to do so, but I declare it is impossible for any other animal than a boa-constrictor to do it."

"But, M. Manicamp, I cannot introduce a man over the wall in that manner."

"Two, if you please," said a second voice, but in so timid a tone that it seemed as if its owner felt the utter impropriety of such a request.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Montalais, "who is that speaking to me?"

"Malicorne, Mademoiselle Montalais."

And as Malicorne spoke, he raised himself from the ground to the lowest branches, and thence to the height of the wall.

"Monsieur Malicorne! why, you are both mad!"

"How do you do, Mademoiselle Montalais?" inquired Malicorne.

"I needed but this!" said Montalais, in despair.

"Oh! Mademoiselle Montalais," murmured Malicorne; "do not be so severe, I beseech you."

"In fact," said Manicamp, "we are your friends, and you cannot possibly wish your friends to lose their lives; and to leave us to pass the night on these branches is in fact condemning us to death."

"Oh!" said Montalais, "Monsieur Malicorne is so robust that a night passed in the open air with the beautiful stars above him will not do him any harm, and it will be a just punishment for the trick he has played me."

"Be it so, then; let Malicorne arrange matters with you in the best way he can; I pass over," said Manicamp. And bending down the famous branch against which he had directed such bitter complaints, he succeeded, by the assistance of his hands and feet, in seating himself side by side with Montalais, who tried to push him back, while he endeavored to maintain his position, and, moreover, he succeeded. Having taken possession of the ladder, he stepped on it, and then gallantly offered his hand to his fair antagonist. While this was going on, Malicorne had installed himself in the chestnut-tree, in the very place Manicamp had just left, determining within himself to succeed him in the one he now occupied. Manicamp and Montalais descended a few rounds of the ladder, Manicamp insisting, and Montalais laughing and objecting.

Suddenly Malicorne's voice was heard in tones of entreaty:

"I entreat you, Mademoiselle Montalais, not to leave me here. My position is very insecure, and some accident will be certain to befall me, if I attempt unaided to reach the other side of the wall; it does not matter if Manicamp tears his clothes, for he can make use of M. de Guiche's wardrobe; but I shall not be able to use even those belonging to M. Manicamp, for they will be torn."

"My opinion," said Manicamp, without taking any notice of Malicorne's lamentations, "is that the best thing to be done is to go and look for De Guiche without delay, for, by and by, perhaps, I may not be able to get to his apartments."

"That is my own opinion, too," replied Montalais; "so, go at once, Monsieur Manicamp."

"A thousand thanks. Adieu Mademoiselle Montalais," said Manicamp, jumping to the ground; "your condescension cannot be repaid."

"Farewell, M. Manicamp; I am now going to get rid of M. Malicorne."

Malicorne sighed. Manicamp went away a few paces, but returning to the foot of the ladder, he said, "By the by, how do I get to M. de Guiche's apartments?"

"Nothing easier. You go along by the hedge until you reach a place where the paths cross."

"Yes."

"You will see four paths."

"Exactly."

"One of which you will take."

"Which of them?"

"That to the right."

"That to the right?"

"No, to the left."

"The deuce!"

"No, no, wait a minute—"

"You do not seem to be quite sure. Think again, I beg."

"You take the middle path."

"But there are *four*."

"So there are. All I know is, that one of the four paths leads straight to Madame's apartments; and that one I am well acquainted with."

"But M. de Guiche is not in Madame's apartments, I suppose?"

"No, indeed."

"Well, then the path which leads to Madame's apartments is of no use to me, and I would willingly exchange it for the one that leads to where M. de Guiche is lodging."

"Of course, and I know that as well; but as for indicating it from where we are, it is quite impossible."

"Well, let us suppose that I have succeeded in finding that fortunate path."

"In that case, you are almost there, for you have nothing else to do but cross the labyrinth."

"*Nothing* more than that? The deuce! so there is a labyrinth as well."

"Yes, and complicated enough too; even in daylight one may sometimes be deceived,—there are turnings and windings without end: in the first place, you must turn three times to the right, then twice to the left, then turn once—stay, is it once or twice, though? at all events, when you get clear of the labyrinth, you will see an avenue of sycamores, and this avenue leads straight to the pavilion in which M. de Guiche is lodging."

"Nothing could be more clearly indicated," said Manicamp; "and I have not the slightest doubt in the world that if I were to follow your directions, I should lose my way immediately. I have, therefore, a slight service to ask of you."

"What may that be?"

"That you will offer me your arm and guide me yourself, like another— like another—I used to know mythology, but other important matters have made me forget it; pray come with me, then?"

"And am I to be abandoned, then?" cried Malicorne.  
"It is quite impossible, monsieur," said Montalais to Manicamp; "if I were to be seen with you at such an hour, what would be said of me?"  
"Your own conscience would acquit you," said Manicamp, sententially.  
"Impossible, monsieur, impossible."

"In that case, let me assist Malicorne to get down; he is a very intelligent fellow, and possesses a very keen scent; he will guide me, and if we lose ourselves, both of us will be lost, and the one will save the other. If we are together, and should be met by any one, we shall look as if we had some matter of business in hand; whilst alone I should have the appearance either of a lover or a robber. Come, Malicorne, here is the ladder."  
Malicorne had already stretched out one of his legs towards the top of the wall, when Manicamp said, in a whisper, "Hush!"  
"What's the matter?" inquired Montalais.  
"I hear footsteps."  
"Good heavens!"

In fact the fancied footsteps soon became a reality; the foliage was pushed aside, and Saint-Aignan appeared, with a smile on his lips, and his hand stretched out towards them, taking every one by surprise; that is to say, Malicorne upon the tree with his head stretched out, Montalais upon the round of the ladder and clinging to it tightly, and Manicamp on the ground with his foot advanced ready to set off. "Good-evening, Manicamp," said the comte, "I am glad to see you, my dear fellow; we missed you this evening, and a good many inquiries have been made about you. Mademoiselle de Montalais, your most obedient servant."  
Montalais blushed. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed, hiding her face in both her hands.  
"Pray reassure yourself; I know how perfectly innocent you are, and I shall give a good account of you. Manicamp, do you follow me: the hedge, the cross-paths, and labyrinth, I am well acquainted with them all; I will be your Ariadne. There now, your mythological name is found at last."  
"Perfectly true, comte."

"And take M. Malicorne away with you at the same time," said Montalais.  
"No, indeed," said Malicorne; "M. Manicamp has conversed with you as long as he liked, and now it is my turn, if you please; I have a multitude of things to tell you about our future prospects."  
"You hear," said the comte, laughing; "stay with him, Mademoiselle Montalais. This is, indeed, a night for secrets." And, taking Manicamp's arm, the comte led him rapidly away in the direction of the road Montalais knew so well, and indicated so badly. Montalais followed them with her eyes as long as she could perceive them.  
L: How Malicorne Had Been Turned Out of the Hotel of the Beau Paon.

While Montalais was engaged in looking after the comte and Manicamp, Malicorne had taken advantage of the young girl's attention being drawn away to render his position somewhat more tolerable, and when she turned round, she immediately noticed the change which had taken place; for he had seated himself, like a monkey, upon the wall, the foliage of the wild vine and honeysuckle curled around his head like a faun, while the twisted ivy branches represented tolerably enough his cloven feet. Montalais required nothing to make her resemblance to a dryad as complete as possible. "Well," she said, ascending another round of the ladder, "are you resolved to render me unhappy? have you not persecuted me enough, tyrant that you are?"

"I a tyrant?" said Malicorne.  
"Yes, you are always compromising me, Monsieur Malicorne; you are a perfect monster of wickedness."  
"I?"

"What have you to do with Fontainebleau? Is not Orleans your place of residence?"  
"Do you ask me what I have to do here? I wanted to see you."

"Ah, great need of that."  
"Not as far as concerns yourself, perhaps, but as far as I am concerned, Mademoiselle Montalais, you know very well that I have left my home, and that, for the future, I have no other place of residence than that which you may happen to have. As you, therefore, are staying at Fontainebleau at the present moment, I have come to Fontainebleau."  
Montalais shrugged her shoulders. "You wished to see me, did you not?" she said.

"Of course."  
"Very well, you have seen me,—you are satisfied; so now go away."  
"Oh, no," said Malicorne; "I came to talk with you as well as to see you."  
"Very well, we will talk by and by, and in another place than this."  
"By and by! Heaven only knows if I shall meet you by and by in another place. We shall never find a more favourable one than this."  
"But I cannot this evening, nor at the present moment."  
"Why not?"

"Because a thousand things have happened to-night."  
"Well, then, my affair will make a thousand and one."  
"No, no; Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente is waiting for me in our room to communicate something of the very greatest importance."  
"How long has she been waiting?"  
"For an hour at least."

"In that case," said Malicorne, tranquilly, "she can wait a few minutes longer."  
"Monsieur Malicorne," said Montalais, "you are forgetting yourself."  
"You should rather say that it is you who are forgetting me, and that I am getting impatient at the part you make me play here indeed! For the last week I have been prowling about among the company, and you have not once deigned to notice my presence."  
"Have you been prowling about here for a week, M. Malicorne?"

"Like a wolf; sometimes I have been burnt by the fireworks, which have singed two of my wigs; at others, I have been completely drenched in the osiers by the evening damps, or the spray from the fountains,—half-famished, fatigued to death, with the view of a wall always before me, and the prospect of having to scale it perhaps. Upon my word, this is not the sort of life for any one to lead who is neither a squirrel, a salamander, nor an otter; and since you drive your inhumanity so far as to wish to make me renounce my condition as a man, I declare it openly. A man I am, indeed, and a man I will remain, unless by superior orders."

"Well, then, tell me, what do you wish,—what do you require,—what do you insist upon?" said Montalais, in a submissive tone.  
"Do you mean to tell me that you did not know I was at Fontainebleau?"

"I?"  
"Nay, be frank."  
"I suspected so."  
"Well, then, could you not have contrived during the last week to have seen me once a day, at least?"  
"I have always been prevented, M. Malicorne."  
"Fiddlesticks!"

"Ask my companion, if you do not believe me."  
"I shall ask no one to explain matters, I know better than any one."  
"Compose yourself, M. Malicorne: things will change."  
"They must indeed."

"You know that, whether I see you or not, I am thinking of you," said Montalais, in a coaxing tone of voice.  
"Oh, you are thinking of me, are you? well, and is there anything new?"  
"What about?"  
"About my post in Monsieur's household."

"Ah, my dear Malicorne, no one has ventured lately to approach his royal highness."  
"Well, but now?"

"Now it is quite a different thing; since yesterday he has left off being jealous."  
"Bah! how has his jealousy subsided?"  
"It has been diverted into another channel."  
"Tell me all about it."

"A report was spread that the king had fallen in love with some one else, and Monsieur was tranquillized immediately."  
"And who spread the report?"  
Montalais lowered her voice. "Between ourselves," she said, "I think that Madame and the king have come to a secret understanding about it."  
"Ah!" said Malicorne; "that was the only way to manage it. But what about poor M. de Guiche?"

"Oh, as for him, he is completely turned off."  
"Have they been writing to each other?"  
"No, certainly not; I have not seen a pen in either of their hands for the last week."  
"On what terms are you with Madame?"  
"The very best."  
"And with the king?"  
"The king always smiles at me whenever I pass him."  
"Good. Now tell me whom have the two lovers selected to serve as their screen?"  
"La Vallière."

"Oh, oh, poor girl! We must prevent that!"  
"Why?"  
"Because, if M. Raoul Bragelonne were to suspect it, he would either kill her or kill himself."  
"Raoul, poor fellow! do you think so?"  
"Women pretend to have a knowledge of the state of people's affections," said Malicorne, "and they do not even know how to read the thoughts of their own minds and hearts. Well, I can tell you that M. de Bragelonne loves La Vallière to such a degree that, if she deceived him, he would, I repeat, either kill himself or kill her."

"But the king is there to defend her," said Montalais.  
"The king!" exclaimed Malicorne; "Raoul would kill the king as he would a common thief."  
"Good heavens!" said Montalais; "you are mad, M. Malicorne."  
"Not in the least. Everything I have told you is, on the contrary, perfectly serious; and, for my own part, I know one thing."

"What is that?"

"That I shall quietly tell Raoul of the trick."

"Hush!" said Montalais, mounting another round of the ladder, so as to approach Malicorne more closely, "do not open your lips to poor Raoul."

"Why not?"

"Because, as yet you know nothing at all."

"What is the matter, then?"

"Why, this evening—but no one is listening, I hope?"

"No."

"This evening, then, beneath the royal oak, La Vallière said aloud, and innocently enough, 'I cannot conceive that when one has once seen the king, one can ever love another man.'"

Malicorne almost jumped off the wall. "Unhappy girl! did she really say that?"

"Word for word."

"And she thinks so?"

"La Vallière always thinks what she says."

"That positively cries aloud for vengeance. Why, women are the veriest serpents," said Malicorne.

"Compose yourself, my dear Malicorne, compose yourself."

"No, no; let us take the evil in time, on the contrary. There is time enough yet to tell Raoul of it."

"Blunderer, on the contrary, it is too late," replied Montalais.

"How so?"

"La Vallière's remark, which was intended for the king, reached its destination."

"The king knows it, then? The king was told of it, I suppose?"

"The king heard it."

"*Ahime!* as the cardinal used to say."

"The king was hidden in the thicket close to the royal oak."

"It follows, then," said Malicorne, "that for the future, the plan which the king and Madame have arranged, will go as easily as if it were on wheels, and will pass over poor Bragelonne's body."

"Precisely so."

"Well," said Malicorne, after a moment's reflection, "do not let us interpose our poor selves between a large oak-tree and a great king, for we should certainly be ground to pieces."

"The very thing I was going to say to you."

"Let us think of ourselves, then."

"My own idea."

"Open your beautiful eyes, then."

"And you your large ears."

"Approach your little mouth for a kiss."

"Here," said Montalais, who paid the debt immediately in ringing coin.

"Now let us consider. First, we have M. de Guiche, who is in love with Madame; then La Vallière, who is in love with the king; next, the king, who is in love both with Madame and La Vallière; lastly Monsieur, who loves no one but himself. Among all these loves, a noodle would make his fortune: a greater reason, therefore, for sensible people like ourselves to do so."

"There you are with your dreams again."

"Nay, rather with realities. Let me still lead you, darling. I do not think you have been very badly off hitherto?"

"No."

"Well, the future is guaranteed by the past. Only, since all here think of themselves before anything else, let us do so too."

"Perfectly right."

"But of ourselves only."

"Be it so."

"An offensive and defensive alliance."

"I am ready to swear it."

"Put out your hand, then, and say, 'All for Malicorne.'"

"All for Malicorne."

"And I, 'All for Montalais,'" replied Malicorne, stretching out his hand in his turn.

"And now, what is to be done?"

"Keep your eyes and ears constantly open; collect every means of attack which may be serviceable against others; never let anything lie about which can be used against ourselves."

"Agreed."

"Decided."

"Sworn to. And now the agreement entered into, good-bye."

"What do you mean by 'good-bye?'"

"Of course you can now return to your inn."

"To my inn?"

"Yes; are you not lodging at the sign of the Beau Paon?"

"Montalais, Montalais, you now betray that you were aware of my being at Fontainebleau."

"Well; and what does that prove, except that I occupy myself about you more than you deserve?"

"Hum!"

"Go back, then, to the Beau Paon."

"That is now quite out of the question."

"Have you not a room there?"

"I had, but have it no longer."

"Who has taken it from you, then?"

"I will tell you. Some little time ago I was returning there, after I had been running about after you; and having reached my hotel quite out of breath, I perceived a litter, upon which four peasants were carrying a sick monk."

"A monk?"

"Yes, an old gray-bearded Franciscan. As I was looking at the monk, they entered the hotel; and as they were carrying him up the staircase, I followed, and as I reached the top of the staircase I observed that they took him into my room."

"Into your room?"

"Yes, into my own apartment. Supposing it to be a mistake, I summoned the landlord, who said that the room which had been let to me for the past eight days was let to the Franciscan for the ninth."

"Oh, oh!"

"That was exactly what I said; nay, I did even more, for I was inclined to get out of temper. I went up-stairs again. I spoke to the Franciscan himself, and wished to prove to him the impropriety of the step; when this monk, dying though he seemed to be, raised himself upon his arm, fixed a pair of blazing eyes upon me, and, in a voice which was admirably suited for commanding a charge of cavalry, said, 'Turn this fellow out of doors;' which was done, immediately by the landlord and the four porters, who made me descend the staircase somewhat faster than was agreeable. This is how it happens, dearest, that I have no lodging."

"Who can this Franciscan be?" said Montalais. "Is he a general?"

"That is exactly the very title that one of the bearers of the litter gave him as he spoke to him in a low tone."

"So that—" said Montalais.

"So that I have no room, no hotel, no lodging; and I am as determined as my friend Manicamp was just now, not to pass the night in the open air."

"What is to be done, then?" said Montalais.

"Nothing easier," said a third voice; whereupon Montalais and Malicorne uttered a simultaneous cry, and Saint-Aignan appeared. "Dear Monsieur Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "a very lucky accident has brought me back to extricate you from your embarrassment. Come, I can offer you a room in my own apartments, which, I can assure you, no Franciscan will deprive you of. As for you, my dear lady, rest easy. I already knew Mademoiselle de la Vallière's secret, and that of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; your own you have just been kind enough to confide to me; for which I thank you. I can keep three quite as well as one." Malicorne and Montalais looked at each other, like children detected in a theft; but as Malicorne saw a great advantage in the proposition which had been made to him, he gave Montalais a sign of assent, which she returned. Malicorne then descended the ladder, round by round, reflecting at every step on the means of obtaining piecemeal from M. de Saint-Aignan all he might possibly know about the famous secret. Montalais had already darted away like a deer, and neither cross-road nor labyrinth was able to lead her wrong. As for Saint-Aignan, he carried off Malicorne with him to his apartments, showing him a thousand attentions, enchanted to have so close at hand the very two men who, even supposing De Guiche were to remain silent, could give him the best information about the maids of honour.

LI. What Actually Occurred at the Inn Called the Beau Paon.

In the first place, let us supply our readers with a few details about the inn called Beau Paon. It owed its name to its sign, which represented a peacock spreading its tail. But, in imitation of certain painters who bestowed the face of a handsome young man on the serpent which tempted Eve, the limner of the sign had conferred upon the peacock the features of a woman. This famous inn, an architectural epigram against that half of the human race which renders existence delightful, was situated at Fontainebleau, in the first turning on the left-hand side, which divides the road from Paris, the large artery that constitutes in itself alone the entire town of Fontainebleau. The side street in question was then known as the Rue de Lyon, doubtless because, geographically, it led in the direction of the second capital of the kingdom. The street itself was composed of two houses occupied by persons of the class of tradespeople, the houses being separated by two large gardens bordered with hedges running round them. Apparently, however, there were three houses in the street. Let us explain, notwithstanding appearances, how there were in fact only two. The inn of the Beau Paon had its principal front towards the main street; but upon the Rue de Lyon there were two ranges of buildings divided by courtyards, which comprised sets of apartments for the reception of all classes of travelers, whether on foot or on horseback, or even with their own carriages; and in which could be supplied, not only board and lodging, but also accommodation for exercise, or opportunities of solitude for even the wealthiest courtiers, whenever, after having received some check at the court, they wished to shut themselves up to their own society, either to devour an affront, or to brood on revenge. From the windows of this part of the building travelers could perceive, in the first place, the street with the grass growing between the stones, which were being gradually loosened by it; next the beautiful hedges of elder and thorn, which embraced, as though within two green and flowery arms, the house of which we have spoken; and then, in the spaces between those houses, forming the groundwork of the picture, and appearing an almost impassable barrier, a line of thick trees, the advanced sentinels of the vast forest which extends in front of Fontainebleau. It was therefore easy, provided one secured an apartment at the angle of the building, to obtain, by the main street from Paris, a view of, as well as to hear, the passers-by and the *fêtes*; and, by the Rue de Lyon, to look upon and to enjoy the calm of the country. And this without reckoning that, in cases of urgent necessity, at the very moment people might be knocking at the principal door in the Rue de Paris, one could make one's escape by the little door in the Rue de Lyon, and, creeping along the gardens of the private houses, attain the outskirts of the forest. Malicorne, who, it will be remembered, was the first to speak about

this inn, by way of deploring his being turned out of it, being then absorbed in his own affairs, had not told Montalais all that could be said about this curious inn; and we will try to repair the omission. With the exception of the few words he had said about the Franciscan friar, Malicorne had not given any particulars about the travelers who were staying in the inn. The manner in which they had arrived, the manner in which they had lived, the difficulty which existed for every one but certain privileged travelers, of entering the hotel without a password, or living there without certain preparatory precautions, must have struck Malicorne; and, we will venture to say, really did so. But Malicorne, as we have already said, had personal matters of his own to occupy his attention which prevented him from paying much attention to others. In fact, all the apartments of the hotel were engaged and retained by certain strangers, who never stirred out, who were incommunicative in their address, with countenances full of thoughtful preoccupation, and not one of whom was known to Malicorne. Every one of these travelers had reached the hotel after his own arrival there; each man had entered after having given a kind of password, which had at first attracted Malicorne's attention; but having inquired, in an indiscreet manner, about it, he had been informed that the host had given as a reason for this extreme vigilance, that, as the town was so full of wealthy noblemen, it must also be as full of clever and zealous pickpockets. The reputation of an honest inn like that of the Beau Paon was concerned in not allowing its visitors to be robbed. It occasionally happened that Malicorne asked himself, as he thought matters carefully over in his mind, and reflected upon his own position in the inn, how it was that they had allowed him to become an inmate of the hotel, when he had observed, since his residence there, admission refused to so many. He asked himself, too, how it was that Manicamp, who, in his opinion, must be a man to be looked upon with veneration by everybody, having wished to bait his horse at the Beau Paon, on arriving there, both horse and rider had been incontinently turned away with a *nescio vos* of the most positive character. All this for Malicorne, whose mind being fully occupied by his own love affair and personal ambition, was a problem he had not applied himself to solve. Had he wished to do so, we should hardly venture, notwithstanding the intelligence we have accorded as his due, to say he would have succeeded. A few words will prove to the reader that no one but Oedipus in person could have solved the enigma in question. During the week, seven travelers had taken up their abode in the inn, all of them having arrived there the day after the fortunate day on which Malicorne had fixed his choice on the Beau Paon. These seven persons, accompanied by a suitable retinue, were the following:—

First of all, a brigadier in the German army, his secretary, physician, three servants, and seven horses. The brigadier's name was the Comte de Wostpur.—A Spanish cardinal, with two nephews, two secretaries, an officer of his household, and twelve horses. The cardinal's name was My lord Herrebia.—A rich merchant of Bremen, with his man-servant and two horses. This merchant's name was Meinheer Bonstett.—A Venetian senator with his wife and daughter, both extremely beautiful. The senator's name was Signor Marini.—A Scottish laird, with seven highlanders of his clan, all on foot. The laird's name was MacCumnor.—An Austrian from Vienna without title or coat of arms, who had arrived in a carriage; a good deal of the priest, and something of the soldier. He was called the Councillor.—And, finally, a Flemish lady, with a man-servant, a lady's maid, and a female companion, a large retinue of servants, great display, and immense horses. She was called the Flemish lady. All these travelers had arrived on the same day, and yet their arrival had occasioned no confusion in the inn, no stoppage in the street; their apartments had been fixed upon beforehand, by their couriers or secretaries, who had arrived the previous evening or that very morning. Malicorne, who had arrived the previous day, riding an ill-conditioned horse, with a slender valise, had announced himself at the hotel of the Beau Paon as the friend of a nobleman desirous of witnessing the *fetes*, and who would himself arrive almost immediately. The landlord, on hearing these words, had smiled as if he were perfectly well acquainted either with Malicorne or his friend the nobleman, and had said to him, "Since you are the first arrival, monsieur, choose what apartment you please." And this was said with that obsequiousness of manners, so full of meaning with landlords, which means, "Make yourself perfectly easy, monsieur: we know with whom we have to do, and you will be treated accordingly." These words, and their accompanying gesture, Malicorne had thought very friendly, but rather obscure. However, as he did not wish to be very extravagant in his expenses, and as he thought that if he were to ask for a small apartment he would doubtless have been refused, on account of his want of consequence, he hastened to close at once with the innkeeper's remark, and deceive him with a cunning equal to his own. So, smiling as a man would do for whom whatever might be done was but simply his due, he said, "My dear host, I shall take the best and the gayest room in the house."

"With a stable?"

"Yes, with a stable."

"And when will you take it?"

"Immediately if it be possible."

"Quite so."

"But," said Malicorne, "I shall leave the large room unoccupied for the present."

"Very good!" said the landlord, with an air of intelligence.

"Certain reasons, which you will understand by and by, oblige me to take, at my own cost, this small room only."

"Yes, yes," said the host.

"When my friend arrives, he will occupy the large apartment: and as a matter of course, as this larger apartment will be his own affair, he will settle for it himself."

"Certainly," said the landlord, "certainly; let it be understood in that manner."

"It is agreed, then, that such shall be the terms?"

"Word for word."

"It is extraordinary," said Malicorne to himself. "You quite understand, then?"

"Yes."

"There is nothing more to be said. Since you understand,—for you do clearly understand, do you not?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well; and now show me to my room."

The landlord, cap in hand, preceded Malicorne, who installed himself in his room, and became more and more surprised to observe that the landlord, at every ascent or descent, looked and winked at him in a manner which indicated the best possible intelligence between them.

"There is some mistake here," said Malicorne to himself, "but until it is cleared up, I shall take advantage of it, which is the best thing I can possibly do." And he darted out of his room, like a hunting-dog following a scent, in search of all the news and curiosities of the court, getting himself burnt in one place and drowned in another, as he had told Mademoiselle de Montalais. The day after he had been installed in his room, he had noticed the seven travelers arrive successively, who speedily filled the whole hotel. When he saw this perfect multitude of people, of carriages, and retinue, Malicorne rubbed his hands delightedly, thinking that, one day later, he should not have found a bed to lie upon after his return from his exploring expeditions. When all the travelers were lodged, the landlord entered Malicorne's room, and with his accustomed courteousness, said to him, "You are aware, my dear monsieur, that the large room in the third detached building is still reserved for you?"

"Of course I am aware of it."

"I am really making you a present of it."

"Thank you."

"So that when your friend comes—"

"Well!"

"He will be satisfied with me, I hope: or, if he be not, he will be very difficult to please."

"Excuse me, but will you allow me to say a few words about my friend?"

"Of course, for you have a perfect right to do so."

"He intended to come, as you know."

"And he does so still."

"He may possibly have changed his opinion."

"No."

"You are quite sure, then?"

"Quite sure."

"But in case you should have some doubt."

"Well!"

"I can only say that I do not positively assure you that he will come."

"Yet he told you—"

"He certainly did tell me; but you know that man proposes and God disposes,—*verba volant, scripta manent*."

"Which is as much to say—"

"That what is spoken flies away, and what is written remains; and, as he did not write to me, but contented himself by saying to me, 'I will authorize you, yet without specifically instructing you,' you must feel that it places me in a very embarrassing position."

"What do you authorize me to do, then?"

"Why, to let your rooms if you find a good tenant for them."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"Never will I do such a thing, monsieur. If he has not written to you, he has written to me."

"Ah! what does he say? Let us see if his letter agrees with his words."

"These are almost his very words. 'To the landlord of the Beau Paon Hotel,—You will have been informed of the meeting arranged to take place in your inn between some people of importance; I shall be one of those who will meet with the others at Fontainebleau. Keep for me, then, a small room for a friend who will arrive either before or after me—' and you are the friend, I suppose," said the landlord, interrupting his reading of the letter. Malicorne bowed modestly. The landlord continued:

"And a large apartment for myself. The large apartment is my own affair, but I wish the price of the smaller room to be moderate, as it is destined for a fellow who is deucedly poor.' It is still you he is speaking of, is he not?" said the host.

"Oh, certainly," said Malicorne.

"Then we are agreed; your friend will settle for his apartment, and you for your own."

"May I be broken alive on the wheel," said Malicorne to himself, "if I understand anything at all about it," and then he said aloud, "Well, then, are you satisfied with the name?"

"With what name?"

"With the name at the end of the letter. Does it give you the guarantee you require?"

"I was going to ask you the name."

"What! was the letter not signed?"

"No," said the landlord, opening his eyes very wide, full of mystery and curiosity.

"In that case," said Malicorne, imitating his gesture and his mysterious look, "if he has not given you his name, you understand, he must have his reasons for it."

"Oh, of course."

"And, therefore, I, his friend, his confidant, must not betray him."

"You are perfectly right, monsieur," said the landlord, "and I do not insist upon it."

"I appreciate your delicacy. As for myself, as my friend told you, my room is a separate affair, so let us come to terms about it. Short accounts make long friends. How much is it?"

"There is no hurry."

"Never mind, let us reckon it all up all the same. Room, my own board, a place in the stable for my horse, and his feed. How much per day?"

"Four livres, monsieur."

"Which will make twelve livres for the three days I have been here?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Here are your twelve livres, then."

"But why settle now?"

"Because," said Malicorne, lowering his voice, and resorting to his former air of mystery, because he saw that the mysterious had succeeded, "because if I had to set off suddenly, to decamp at any moment, my account would be settled."

"You are right, monsieur."

"I may consider myself at home, then?"

"Perfectly."

"So far so well. Adieu!" And the landlord withdrew. Malicorne, left alone, reasoned with himself in the following manner: "No one but De Guiche or Manicamp could have written to this fellow; De Guiche, because he wishes to secure a lodging for himself beyond the precincts of the court, in the event of his success or failure, as the case might be; Manicamp, because De Guiche must have intrusted him with his commission. And De Guiche or Manicamp will have argued in this manner. The large apartment would serve for the reception, in a befitting manner, of a lady thickly veiled, reserving to the lady in question a double means of exit, either in a street somewhat deserted, or closely adjoining the forest. The smaller room might either shelter Manicamp for a time, who is De Guiche's confidant, and would be the vigilant keeper of the door, or De Guiche himself, acting, for greater safety, the part of a master and confidant at the same time. Yet," he continued, "how about this meeting which is to take place, and which has actually taken place, in this hotel? No doubt they are persons who are going to be presented to the king. And the 'poor devil,' for whom the smaller room is destined, is a trick, in order to better conceal De Guiche or Manicamp. If this be the case, as very likely it is, there is only half the mischief done, for there is simply the length of a purse string between Manicamp and Malicorne." After he had thus reasoned the matter out, Malicorne slept soundly, leaving the seven travelers to occupy, and in every sense of the word to walk up and down, their several lodgings in the hotel. Whenever there was nothing at court to put him out, when he had wearied himself with his excursions and investigations, tired of writing letters which he could never find an opportunity of delivering to the people they were intended for, he returned home to his comfortable little room, and leaning upon the balcony, which was filled with nasturtiums and white pinks, for whom Fontainebleau seemed to possess no attractions with all its illuminations, amusements, and *fêtes*.

Things went on in this manner until the seventh day, a day of which we have given such full details, with its night also, in the preceding chapters. On that night Malicorne was enjoying the fresh air, seated at his window, toward one o'clock in the morning, when Manicamp appeared on horseback, with a thoughtful and listless air.

"Good!" said Malicorne to himself, recognizing him at the first glance; "there's my friend, who is come to take possession of his apartment, that is to say, of my room." And he called to Manicamp, who looked up and immediately recognized Malicorne.

"Ah! by Jove!" said the former, his countenance clearing up, "glad to see you, Malicorne. I have been wandering about Fontainebleau, looking for three things I cannot find: De Guiche, a room, and a stable."

"Of M. de Guiche I cannot give you either good or bad news, for I have not seen him; but as far as concerns your room and a stable, that's another matter, for they have been retained here for you."

"Retained—and by whom?"

"By yourself, I presume."

"By *me*?"

"Do you mean to say you did not take lodgings here?"

"By no means," said Manicamp.

At this moment the landlord appeared on the threshold of the door.

"I want a room," said Manicamp.

"Did you engage one, monsieur?"

"No."

"Then I have no rooms to let."

"In that case, I have engaged a room," said Manicamp.

"A room simply, or lodgings?"

"Anything you please."

"By letter?" inquired the landlord.

Malicorne nodded affirmatively to Manicamp.

"Of course by letter," said Manicamp. "Did you not receive a letter from me?"

"What was the date of the letter?" inquired the host, in whom Manicamp's hesitation had aroused some suspicion.

Manicamp rubbed his ear, and looked up at Malicorne's window; but Malicorne had left his window and was coming down the stairs to his friend's assistance. At the very same moment, a traveler, wrapped in a large Spanish cloak, appeared at the porch, near enough to hear the conversation.

"I ask you what was the date of the letter you wrote to me to retain apartments here?" repeated the landlord, pressing the question.

"Last Wednesday was the date," said the mysterious stranger, in a soft and polished tone of voice, touching the landlord on the shoulder.

Manicamp drew back, and it was now Malicorne's turn, who appeared on the threshold, to scratch his ear. The landlord saluted the new arrival as a man who recognizes his true guest.

"Monsieur," he said to him, with civility, "your apartment is ready for you, and the stables too, only—" He looked round him and inquired, "Your horses?"

"My horses may or may not arrive. That, however, matters but little to you, provided you are paid for what has been engaged." The landlord bowed lower still.

"You have," continued the unknown traveler, "kept for me in addition, the small room I asked for?"

"Oh!" said Malicorne, endeavoring to hide himself.

"Your friend has occupied it during the last week," said the landlord, pointing to Malicorne, who was trying to make himself as small as possible. The traveler, drawing his cloak round him so as to cover the lower part of his face, cast a rapid glance at Malicorne, and said, "This gentleman is no friend of mine."

The landlord started violently.

"I am not acquainted with this gentleman," continued the traveler.

"What!" exclaimed the host, turning to Malicorne, "are you not this gentleman's friend, then?"

"What does it matter whether I am or not, provided you are paid?" said Malicorne, parodying the stranger's remark in a very majestic manner.

"It matters so far as this," said the landlord, who began to perceive that one person had been taken for another, "that I beg you, monsieur, to leave the rooms, which had been engaged beforehand, and by some one else instead of you."

"Still," said Malicorne, "this gentleman cannot require at the same time a room on the first floor and an apartment on the second. If this gentleman will take the room, I will take the apartment: if he prefers the apartment, I will be satisfied with the room."

"I am exceedingly distressed, monsieur," said the traveler in his soft voice, "but I need both the room and the apartment."

"At least, tell me for whom?" inquired Malicorne.

"The apartment I require for myself."

"Very well; but the room?"

"Look," said the traveler, pointing towards a sort of procession which was approaching.

Malicorne looked in the direction indicated, and observed borne upon a litter, the arrival of the Franciscan, whose installation in his apartment he had, with a few details of his own, related to Montalais, and whom he had so uselessly endeavored to convert to humbler views. The result of the arrival of the stranger, and of the sick Franciscan, was Malicorne's expulsion, without any consideration for his feelings, from the inn, by the landlord and the peasants who had carried the Franciscan. The details have already been given of what followed this expulsion; of Manicamp's conversation with Montalais; how Manicamp, with greater cleverness than Malicorne had shown, had succeeded in obtaining news of De Guiche, of the subsequent conversation of Montalais with Malicorne, and, finally, of the billets with which the Comte de Saint-Aignan had furnished Manicamp and Malicorne. It remains for us to inform our readers who was the traveler in the cloak—the principal tenant of the double apartment, of which Malicorne had only occupied a portion—and the Franciscan, quite as mysterious a personage, whose arrival, together with that of the stranger, unfortunately upset the two friends' plans.

LII. A Jesuit of the Eleventh Year.

In the first place, in order not to weary the reader's patience, we will hasten to answer the first question. The traveler with the cloak held over his face was Aramis, who, after he had left Fouquet, and taken from a portmanteau, which his servant had opened, a cavalier's complete costume, quitted the chateau, and went to the hotel of the Beau Paon, where, by letters, seven or eight days previously, he had, as the landlord had stated, directed a room and an apartment to be retained for him. Immediately after Malicorne and Manicamp had been turned out, Aramis approached the Franciscan, and asked him whether he would prefer the apartment or the room. The Franciscan inquired where they were both situated. He was told that the room was on the first, and the apartment on the second floor.

"The room, then," he said.

Aramis did not contradict him, but, with great submissiveness, said to the landlord: "The room." And bowing with respect he withdrew into the apartment, and the Franciscan was accordingly carried at once into the room. Now, is it not extraordinary that this respect should be shown by a prelate of the Church for a simple monk, for one, too, belonging to a mendicant order; to whom was given up, without a request for it even, a room which so many travelers were desirous of obtaining? How, too, can one explain the unexpected arrival of Aramis at the hotel—he who had entered the chateau with M. Fouquet, and could have remained at the chateau with M. Fouquet if he had liked? The Franciscan supported his removal up the staircase without uttering a complaint, although it was evident he suffered very much, and that every time the litter knocked against the wall or the railing of the staircase, he experienced a terrible shock throughout his frame. And finally, when he had arrived in the room, he said to those who carried him: "Help me to place myself in that armchair." The bearers of the litter placed it on the ground, and lifting the sick man up as gently as possible, carried him to the chair he had indicated, which was situated at the head of the bed. "Now," he added, with a marked benignity of gesture and tone, "desire the landlord to come."

They obeyed, and five minutes afterwards the landlord appeared at the door.

"Be kind enough," said the Franciscan to him, "to send these excellent fellows away; they are vassals of the Vicomte de Melun. They found me when I had fainted on the road overcome by the heat, and without thinking of whether they would be paid for their trouble, they wished to carry me to their own home. But I know at what cost to themselves is the hospitality which the poor extend to a sick monk, and I preferred this hotel, where, moreover, I was expected."

The landlord looked at the Franciscan in amazement, but the latter, with his thumb, made the sign of the cross in a peculiar manner upon his breast. The host replied by making a similar sign on his left shoulder. "Yes, indeed," he said, "we did expect you, but we hoped that you would arrive in a better state of health." And as the peasants were looking at the innkeeper, usually so supercilious, and saw how respectful he had become in the presence of a poor monk, the Franciscan drew from a deep pocket three or four pieces of gold which he held out.

"My friends," said he, "here is something to repay you for the care you have taken of me. So make yourselves perfectly easy, and do not be afraid of leaving me here. The order to which I belong, and for which I am traveling, does not require me to beg; only, as the attention you have shown me deserves to be rewarded, take these two louis and depart in peace."

The peasants did not dare to take them; the landlord took the two louis out of the monk's hand and placed them in that of one of the peasants, all four of whom withdrew, opening their eyes wider than ever. The door was then closed; and, while the innkeeper stood respectfully near it, the Franciscan collected himself for a moment. He then passed across his sallow face a hand which seemed dried up by fever, and rubbed his nervous and agitated fingers across his beard. His large eyes, hollowed by sickness and inquietude, seemed to peruse in the vague distance a mournful and fixed idea.

"What physicians have you at Fontainebleau?" he inquired, after a long pause.

"We have three, holy father."

"What are their names?"

"Luinquet first."



"The next one?"

"A brother of the Carmelite order, named Brother Hubert."

"The next?"

"A secular member, named Grisart."

"Ah! Grisart?" murmured the monk, "send for M. Grisart immediately."

The landlord moved in prompt obedience to the direction.

"Tell me what priests are there here?"

"What priests?"

"Yes; belonging to what orders?"

"There are Jesuits, Augustines, and Cordeliers; but the Jesuits are the closest at hand. Shall I send for a confessor belonging to the order of Jesuits?"

"Yes, immediately."

It will be imagined that, at the sign of the cross which they had exchanged, the landlord and the invalid monk had recognized each other as two affiliated members of the well-known Society of Jesus. Left to himself, the Franciscan drew from his pocket a bundle of papers, some of which he read over with the most careful attention. The violence of his disorder, however, overcame his courage; his eyes rolled in their sockets, a cold sweat poured down his face, and he nearly fainted, and lay with his head thrown backwards and his arms hanging down on both sides of his chair. For more than five minutes he remained without any movement, when the landlord returned, bringing with him the physician, whom he hardly allowed time to dress himself. The noise they made in entering the room, the current of air, which the opening of the door occasioned, restored the Franciscan to his senses. He hurriedly seized hold of the papers which were lying about, and with his long and bony hand concealed them under the cushions of the chair. The landlord went out of the room, leaving patient and physician together.

"Come here, Monsieur Grisart," said the Franciscan to the doctor; "approach closer, for there is no time to lose. Try, by touch and sound, and consider and pronounce your sentence."

"The landlord," replied the doctor, "told me I had the honour of attending an affiliated brother."

"Yes," replied the Franciscan, "it is so. Tell me the truth, then; I feel very ill, and I think I am about to die."

The physician took the monk's hand, and felt his pulse. "Oh, oh," he said, "a dangerous fever."

"What do you call a dangerous fever?" inquired the Franciscan, with an imperious look.

"To an affiliated member of the first or second year," replied the physician, looking inquiringly at the monk, "I should say—a fever that may be cured."

"But to me?" said the Franciscan. The physician hesitated.

"Look at my grey hair, and my forehead, full of anxious thought," he continued: "look at the lines in my face, by which I reckon up the trials I have undergone; I am a Jesuit of the eleventh year, Monsieur Grisart." The physician started, for, in fact, a Jesuit of the eleventh year was one of those men who had been initiated in all the secrets of the order, one of those for whom science has no more secrets, the society no further barriers to present—temporal obedience, no more trammels.

"In that case," said Grisart, saluting him with respect, "I am in the presence of a master?"

"Yes; act, therefore, accordingly."

"And you wish to know?"

"My real state."

"Well," said the physician, "it is a brain fever, which has reached its highest degree of intensity."

"There is no hope, then?" inquired the Franciscan, in a quick tone of voice.

"I do not say that," replied the doctor; "yet, considering the disordered state of the brain, the hurried respiration, the rapidity of the pulse, and the burning nature of the fever which is devouring you—"

"And which has thrice prostrated me since this morning," said the monk.

"All things considered, I shall call it a terrible attack. But why did you not stop on your road?"

"I was expected here, and I was obliged to come."

"Even at the risk of your life?"

"Yes, at the risk of dying on the way."

"Very well. Considering all the symptoms of your case, I must tell you that your condition is almost desperate."

The Franciscan smiled in a strange manner.

"What you have just told me is, perhaps, sufficient for what is due to an affiliated member, even of the eleventh year; but for what is due to me, Monsieur Grisart, it is too little, and I have a right to demand more. Come, then, let us be more candid still, and as frank as if you were making your own confession to Heaven. Besides, I have already sent for a confessor."

"Oh! I have hopes, however," murmured the doctor.

"Answer me," said the sick man, displaying with a dignified gesture a golden ring, the stone of which had until that moment been turned inside, and which bore engraved thereon the distinguishing mark of the Society of Jesus.

Grisart uttered loud exclamation. "The general!" he cried.

"Silence," said the Franciscan., "you can now understand that the whole truth is all important."

"My lord, my lord," murmured Grisart, "send for the confessor, for in two hours, at the next seizure, you will be attacked by delirium, and will pass away in its course."

"Very well," said the patient, for a moment contracting his eyebrows, "I have still two hours to live then?"

"Yes; particularly if you take the potion I will send you presently."

"And that will give me two hours of life?"

"Two hours."

"I would take it, were it poison, for those two hours are necessary not only for myself, but for the glory of the order."

"What a loss, what a catastrophe for us all!" murmured the physician.

"It is the loss of one man—nothing more," replied the Franciscan, "for Heaven will enable the poor monk, who is about to leave you, to find a worthy successor. Adieu, Monsieur Grisart; already even, through the goodness of Heaven, I have met with you. A physician who had not been one of our holy order, would have left me in ignorance of my condition; and, confident that existence would be prolonged a few days further, I should not have taken the necessary precautions. You are a learned man, Monsieur Grisart, and that confers an honour upon us all; it would have been repugnant to my feelings to have found one of our order of little standing in his profession. Adieu, Monsieur Grisart; send me the cordial immediately."

"Give me your blessing, at least, my lord."

"In my mind, I do; go, go; in my mind, I do so, I tell you—*animo*, Maitre Grisart, *viribus impossibile*." And he again fell back on the armchair, in an almost senseless state. M. Grisart hesitated, whether he should give him immediate assistance, or should run to prepare the cordial he had promised. He decided in favour of the cordial, for he darted out of the room and disappeared down the staircase. 6

LIII. The State Secret.

A few moments after the doctor's departure, the confessor arrived. He had hardly crossed the threshold of the door when the Franciscan fixed a penetrating look upon him, and, shaking his head, murmured—"A weak mind, I see; may Heaven forgive me if I die without the help of this living piece of human infirmity." The confessor, on his side, regarded the dying man with astonishment, almost with terror. He had never beheld eyes so burningly bright at the very moment they were about to close, nor looks so terrible at the moment they were about to be quenched in death. The Franciscan made a rapid and imperious movement of his hand. "Sit down, there, my father," he said, "and listen to me." The Jesuit confessor, a good priest, a recently initiated member of the order, who had merely seen the beginning of its mysteries, yielded to the superiority assumed by the penitent.

"There are several persons staying in this hotel," continued the Franciscan.

"But," inquired the Jesuit, "I thought I had been summoned to listen to a confession. Is your remark, then, a confession?"

"Why do you ask?"

"In order to know whether I am to keep your words secret."

"My remarks are part of my confession; I confide them to you in your character of a confessor."

"Very well," said the priest, seating himself on the chair which the Franciscan had, with great difficulty, just left, to lie down on the bed.

The Franciscan continued,—"I repeat, there are several persons staying in this inn."

"So I have heard."

"They ought to be eight in number."

The Jesuit made a sign that he understood him. "The first to whom I wish to speak," said the dying man, "is a German from Vienna, whose name is Baron de Wostpur. Be kind enough to go to him, and tell him the person he expected has arrived." The confessor, astounded, looked at his penitent; the confession seemed a singular one.

"Obey," said the Franciscan, in a tone of command impossible to resist. The good Jesuit, completely subdued, rose and left the room. As soon as he had gone, the Franciscan again took up the papers which a crisis of the fever had already, once before, obliged him to put aside.

"The Baron de Wostpur? Good!" he said; "ambitious, a fool, and straitened in means."

He folded up the papers, which he thrust under his pillow. Rapid footsteps were heard at the end of the corridor. The confessor returned, followed by the Baron de Wostpur, who walked along with his head raised, as if he were discussing with himself the possibility of touching the ceiling with the feather in his hat. Therefore, at the appearance of the Franciscan, at his melancholy look, and seeing the plainness of the room, he stopped, and inquired,—"Who has summoned me?"

"I," said the Franciscan, who turned towards the confessor, saying, "My good father, leave us for a moment together; when this gentleman leaves, you will return here." The Jesuit left the room, and, doubtless, availed himself of this momentary exile from the presence of the dying man to ask the host for some explanation about this strange penitent, who treated his confessor no better than he would a man servant. The baron approached the bed, and wished to speak, but the hand of the Franciscan imposed silence upon him.

"Every moment is precious," said the latter, hurriedly. "You have come here for the competition, have you not?"

"Yes, my father."

"You hope to be elected general of the order?"

"I hope so."

"You know on what conditions only you can possibly attain this high position, which makes one man the master of monarchs, the equal of popes?"

"Who are you," inquired the baron, "to subject me to these interrogations?"

"I am he whom you expected."

"The elector-general?"

"I am the elected."

"You are—"

The Franciscan did not give him time to reply; he extended his shrunken hand, on which glittered the ring of the general of the order. The baron drew back in surprise; and then, immediately afterwards, bowing with the profoundest respect, he exclaimed,—"Is it possible that you are here, my lord; you, in this wretched room; you, upon this miserable bed; you, in search of and selecting the future general, that is, your own successor?"

"Do not distress yourself about that, monsieur, but fulfil immediately the principal condition, of furnishing the order with a secret of importance, of such importance that one of the greatest courts of Europe will, by your instrumentality, forever be subjected to the order. Well! do you possess the secret which you promised, in your request, addressed to the grand council?"

"My lord—"

"Let us proceed, however, in due order," said the monk. "You are the Baron de Wostpur?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And this letter is from you?"

"Yes, my lord."

The general of the Jesuits drew a paper from his bundle, and presented it to the baron, who glanced at it, and made a sign in the affirmative, saying, "Yes, my lord, this letter is mine."

"Can you show me the reply which the secretary of the grand council returned to you?"

"Here it is," said the baron, holding towards the Franciscan a letter bearing simply the address, "To his excellency the Baron de Wostpur," and containing only this phrase, "From the 15th to the 22nd May, Fontainebleau, the hotel of the Beau Paon.—A. M. D. G." [7](#)

"Right," said the Franciscan, "and now speak."

"I have a body of troops, composed of 50,000 men; all the officers are gained over. I am encamped on the Danube. In four days I can overthrow the emperor, who is, as you are aware, opposed to the progress of our order, and can replace him by whichever of the princes of his family the order may determine upon." The Franciscan listened, unmoved.

"Is that all?" he said.

"A revolution throughout Europe is included in my plan," said the baron.

"Very well, Monsieur de Wostpur, you will receive a reply; return to your room, and leave Fontainebleau within a quarter of an hour." The baron withdrew backwards, as obsequiously as if he were taking leave of the emperor he was ready to betray.

"There is no secret there," murmured the Franciscan, "it is a plot. Besides," he added, after a moment's reflection, "the future of Europe is no longer in the hands of the House of Austria."

And with a pencil he held in his hand, he struck the Baron de Wostpur's name from the list.

"Now for the cardinal," he said; "we ought to get something more serious from the side of Spain."

Raising his head, he perceived the confessor, who was awaiting his orders as respectfully as a school-boy.

"Ah, ah!" he said, noticing his submissive air, "you have been talking with the landlord."

"Yes, my lord; and to the physician."

"To Grisart?"

"Yes."

"He is here, then?"

"He is waiting with the potion he promised."

"Very well; if I require him, I will call; you now understand the great importance of my confession, do you not?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then go and fetch me the Spanish Cardinal Herrebia. Make haste. Only, as you now understand the matter in hand, you will remain near me, for I begin to feel faint."

"Shall I summon the physician?"

"Not yet, not yet... the Spanish cardinal, no one else. Fly."

Five minutes afterwards, the cardinal, pale and disturbed, entered the little room.

"I am informed, my lord,—” stammered the cardinal.

"To the point," said the Franciscan, in a faint voice, showing the cardinal a letter which he had written to the grand council. "Is that your handwriting?"

"Yes, but—"

"And your summons?"

The cardinal hesitated to answer. His purple revolted against the mean garb of the poor Franciscan, who stretched out his hand and displayed the ring, which produced its effect, greater in proportion to the greatness of the person over whom the Franciscan exercised his influence.

"Quick, the secret, the secret!" said the dying man, leaning upon his confessor.

"*Coram isto?*" inquired the Spanish cardinal. [8](#)

"Speak in Spanish," said the Franciscan, showing the liveliest attention.

"You are aware, my lord," said the cardinal, continuing the conversation in Castilian, "that the condition of the marriage of the Infanta with the king of France was the absolute renunciation of the rights of the said Infanta, as well as of King Louis XIV., to all claim to the crown of Spain." The Franciscan made a sign in the affirmative.

"The consequence is," continued the cardinal, "that the peace and alliance between the two kingdoms depend upon the observance of that clause of the contract." A similar sign from the Franciscan.

"Not only France and Spain," continued the cardinal, "but the whole of Europe even, would be violently rent asunder by the faithlessness of either party." Another movement of the dying man's head.

"It further results," continued the speaker, "that the man who might be able to foresee events, and to render certain that which is no more than a vague idea floating in the mind of man, that is to say, the idea of a future good or evil, would preserve the world from a great catastrophe; and the event, which has no fixed certainty even in the brain of him who originated it, could be turned to the advantage of our order."

"*Pronto, pronto!*" murmured the Franciscan, in Spanish, who suddenly became paler, and leaned upon the priest. The cardinal approached the ear of the dying man, and said, "Well, my lord, I know that the king of France has determined that, at the very first pretext, a death for instance, either that of the king of Spain, or that of a brother of the Infanta, France will, arms in hand, claim the inheritance, and I have in my possession, already prepared, the plan of policy agreed upon by Louis XIV. for this occasion."

"And this plan?" said the Franciscan.

"Here it is," returned the cardinal.

"In whose handwriting is it?"

"My own."

"Have you anything further to say to me?"

"I think I have said a good deal, my lord," replied the cardinal.

"Yes, you have rendered the order a great service. But how did you procure the details, by the aid of which you have constructed your plan?"

"I have the under-servants of the king of France in my pay, and I obtain from them all the waste papers, which have been saved from being burnt."

"Very ingenious," murmured the Franciscan, endeavoring to smile; "you will leave this hotel, cardinal, in a quarter of an hour, and a reply shall be sent you." The cardinal withdrew.

"Call Grisart, and desire the Venetian Marini to come," said the sick man.

While the confessor obeyed, the Franciscan, instead of striking out the cardinal's name, as he had done the baron's, made a cross at the side of it. Then, exhausted by the effort, he fell back on his bed, murmuring the name of Dr. Grisart. When he returned to his senses, he had drunk about half of the potion, of which the remainder was left in the glass, and he found himself supported by the physician, while the Venetian and the confessor were standing close to the door. The Venetian submitted to the same formalities as his two predecessors, hesitated as they had done at the sight of the two strangers, but his confidence restored by the order of the general, he revealed that the pope, terrified at the power of the order, was weaving a plot for the general expulsion of the Jesuits, and was tampering with the different courts of Europe in order to obtain their assistance. He described the pontiff's auxiliaries, his means of action, and indicated the particular locality in the Archipelago where, by a sudden surprise, two cardinals, adepts of the eleventh year, and, consequently, high in authority, were to be transported, together with thirty-two of the principal affiliated members of Rome. The Franciscan thanked the Signor Marini. It was by no means a slight service he had rendered the society by denouncing this pontifical project. The Venetian thereupon received directions to set off in a quarter of an hour, and left as radiant as if he already possessed the ring, the sign of the supreme authority of the society. As, however, he was departing, the Franciscan murmured to himself: "All these men are either spies, or a sort of police, not one of them a general; they have all discovered a plot, but not one of them a secret. It is not by means of ruin, or war, or force, that the Society of Jesus is to be governed, but by that mysterious influence moral superiority alone confers. No, the man is not yet found, and to complete the misfortune, Heaven strikes me down, and I am dying. Oh! must the society indeed fall with me for want of a column to support it? Must death, which is waiting for me, swallow up with me the future of the order; that future which ten years more of my own life would have rendered eternal? for that future, with the reign of the new king, is opening radiant and full of splendor." These words, which had been half-reflected, half-pronounced aloud, were listened to by the Jesuit confessor with a terror similar to that with which one listens to the wanderings of a person attacked by fever, whilst Grisart, with a mind of higher order, devoured them as the revelations of an unknown world, in which his looks were plunged without ability to comprehend. Suddenly the Franciscan recovered himself.

"Let us finish this," he said; "death is approaching. Oh! just now I was dying resignedly, for I hoped... while now I sink in despair, unless those who remain... Grisart, Grisart, give me to live a single hour longer."

Grisart approached the dying monk, and made him swallow a few drops, not of the potion which was still left in the glass, but of the contents of a small bottle he had upon his person.

"Call the Scotchman!" exclaimed the Franciscan; "call the Bremen merchant. Call, call quickly. I am dying. I am suffocated."

The confessor darted forward to seek assistance, as if there had been any human strength which could hold back the hand of death, which was weighing down the sick man; but, at the threshold of the door, he found Aramis, who, with his finger on his lips, like the statue of Harpocrates, the god of silence, by a look motioned him back to the end of the apartment. The physician and the confessor, after having consulted each other by looks, made a movement as if to push Aramis aside, who, however, with two signs of the cross, each made in a different manner, transfixed them both in their places.

"A chieff!" they both murmured.

Aramis slowly advanced into the room where the dying man was struggling against the first attack of the agony which had seized him. As for the Franciscan, whether owing to the effect of the elixir, or whether the appearance of Aramis had restored his strength, he made a movement, and his eyes glaring, his mouth half open, and his hair damp with sweat, sat up upon the bed. Aramis felt that the air of the room was stifling; the windows were closed; the fire was burning upon the hearth; a pair of candles of yellow wax were guttering down in the copper candlesticks, and still further increased, by their thick smoke, the temperature of the room. Aramis opened the window, and fixing upon the dying man a look full of intelligence and respect, said to him: "My lord, pray forgive my coming in this manner, before you summoned me, but your state alarms me, and I thought you might possibly die before you had seen me, for I am but the sixth upon your list."

The dying man started and looked at the list.

"You are, therefore, he who was formerly called Aramis, and since, the Chevalier d'Herblay? You are the bishop of Vannes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I know you, I have seen you."

"At the last jubilee, we were with the Holy Father together."

"Yes, yes, I remember; and you place yourself on the list of candidates?"

"My lord, I have heard it said that the order required to become possessed of a great state secret, and knowing that from modesty you had in anticipation resigned your functions in favour of the person who should be the depositary of such a secret, I wrote to say that I was ready to compete, possessing alone a secret I believe to be important."

"Speak," said the Franciscan; "I am ready to listen to you, and to judge the importance of the secret."

"A secret of the value of that which I have the honour to confide to you cannot be communicated by word of mouth. Any idea which, when once expressed, has thereby lost its safeguard, and has become vulgarized by any manifestation or communication of it whatever, no longer is the property of him who gave it birth. My words may be overheard by some listener, or perhaps by an enemy; one ought not, therefore, to speak at random, for, in such a case, the secret would cease to be one."

"How do you propose, then, to convey your secret?" inquired the dying monk.

With one hand Aramis signed to the physician and the confessor to withdraw, and with the other he handed to the Franciscan a paper enclosed in a double envelope.

"Is not writing more dangerous still than language?"

"No, my lord," said Aramis, "for you will find within this envelope characters which you and I alone can understand." The Franciscan looked at Aramis with an astonishment which momentarily increased.

"It is a cipher," continued the latter, "which you used in 1655, and which your secretary, Juan Jujan, who is dead, could alone decipher, if he were restored to life."

"You knew this cipher, then?"

"It was I who taught it him," said Aramis, bowing with a gracefulness full of respect, and advancing towards the door as if to leave the room: but a gesture of the Franciscan accompanied by a cry for him to remain, restrained him.

"*Ecce homo!*" he exclaimed; then reading the paper a second time, he called out, "Approach, approach quickly!"

Aramis returned to the side of the Franciscan, with the same calm countenance and the same respectful manner, unchanged. The Franciscan, extending his arm, burnt by the flame of the candle the paper which Aramis had handed him. Then, taking hold of Aramis's hand, he drew him towards him, and inquired: "In what manner and by whose means could you possibly become acquainted with such a secret?"

"Through Madame de Chevreuse, the intimate friend and *confidante* of the queen."

"And Madame de Chevreuse—"

"Is dead."

"Did any others know it?"

"A man and a woman only, and they of the lower classes."

"Who are they?"

"Persons who had brought him up."

"What has become of them?"

"Dead also. This secret burns like vitriol."

"But you survive?"

"No one is aware that I know it."

"And for what length of time have you possessed this secret?"

"For the last fifteen years."

"And you have kept it?"

"I wished to live."

"And you give it to the order without ambition, without acknowledgement?"

"I give it to the order with ambition and with a hope of return," said Aramis; "for if you live, my lord, you will make of me, now you know me, what I can and ought to be."

"And as I am dying," exclaimed the Franciscan, "I constitute you my successor... Thus." And drawing off the ring, he passed it on Aramis's finger. Then, turning towards the two spectators of this scene, he said: "Be ye witnesses of this, and testify, if need be, that, sick in body, but sound in mind, I have freely and voluntarily bestowed this ring, the token of supreme authority, upon My lord d'Herblay, bishop of Vannes, whom I nominate my successor, and before whom I, an humble sinner, about to appear before Heaven, prostrate myself, as an example for all to follow." And the Franciscan bowed lowly and submissively, whilst the physician and the Jesuit fell on their knees. Aramis, even while he became paler than the dying man himself, bent his looks successively upon all the actors of this scene. Profoundly gratified ambition flowed with life-blood towards his heart.

"We must lose no time," said the Franciscan; "what I had still to do on earth was urgent. I shall never succeed in carrying it out."

"I will do it," said Aramis.

"It is well," said the Franciscan, and then turning towards the Jesuit and the doctor, he added, "Leave us alone," a direction they instantly obeyed.

"With this sign," he said, "you are the man needed to shake the world from one end to the other; with this sign you will overthrow; with this sign you will edify; *in hoc signo vinces!*" [9](#)

"Close the door," continued the Franciscan after a pause. Aramis shut and bolted the door, and returned to the side of the Franciscan.

"The pope is conspiring against the order," said the monk; "the pope must die."

"He shall die," said Aramis, quietly.

"Seven hundred thousand livres are owing to a Bremen merchant of the name of Bonstett, who came here to get the guarantee of my signature."

"He shall be paid," said Aramis.

"Six knights of Malta, whose names are written here, have discovered, by the indiscretion of one of the affiliated of the eleventh year, the three mysteries; it must be ascertained what else these men have done with the secret, to get it back again and bury it."

"It shall be done."

"Three dangerous affiliated members must be sent away into Tibet, there to perish; they stand condemned. Here are their names."

"I will see that the sentence be carried out."

"Lastly, there is a lady at Anvers, grand-niece of Ravaillac; she holds certain papers in her hands that compromise the order. There has been payable to the family during the last fifty-one years a pension of fifty thousand livres. The pension is a heavy one, and the order is not wealthy. Redeem the papers, for a sum of money paid down, or, in case of refusal, stop the pension—but run no risk."

"I will quickly decide what is best to be done," said Aramis.

"A vessel chartered from Lima entered the port of Lisbon last week; ostensibly it is laden with chocolate, in reality with gold. Every ingot is concealed by a coating of chocolate. The vessel belongs to the order; it is worth seventeen millions of livres; you will see that it is claimed; here are the bills of landing."

"To what port shall I direct it to be taken?"

"To Bayonne."

"Before three weeks are over it shall be there, wind and weather permitting. Is that all?" The Franciscan made a sign in the affirmative, for he could no longer speak; the blood rushed to his throat and his head, and gushed from his mouth, his nostrils, and his eyes. The dying man had barely time to press Aramis's hand, when he fell in convulsions from his bed upon the floor. Aramis placed his hand upon the Franciscan's heart, but it had ceased to beat. As he stooped down, Aramis observed that a fragment of the paper he had given the Franciscan had escaped being burnt. He picked it up, and burnt it to the last atom. Then, summoning the confessor and the physician, he said to the former: "Your penitent is in heaven; he needs nothing more than prayers and the burial bestowed upon the pious dead. Go and prepare what is necessary for a simple interment, such as a poor monk only would require. Go."

The Jesuit left the room. Then, turning towards the physician, and observing his pale and anxious face, he said, in a low tone of voice: "Monsieur Grisart, empty and clean this glass; *there is too much left in it of what the grand council desired you to put in.*"

Grisart, amazed, overcome, completely astounded, almost fell backwards in his extreme terror. Aramis shrugged his shoulders in sign of pity, took the glass, and poured out the contents among the ashes of the hearth. He then left the room, carrying the papers of the dead man with him.

#### LIV. A Mission.

The next day, or rather the same day (for the events we have just described were concluded only at three o'clock in the morning), before breakfast was served, and as the king was preparing to go to mass with the two queens; as Monsieur, with the Chevalier de Lorraine, and a few other intimate companions, was mounting his horse to set off for the river, to take one of those celebrated baths with which the ladies of the court were so infatuated, as, in fact, no one remained in the chateau, with the exception of Madame who, under the pretext of indisposition, would not leave her room; Montalais was seen, or rather not was not seen, to glide stealthily out of the room appropriated to the maids of honour, leading La Vallière after her, who tried to conceal herself as much as possible, and both of them, hurrying secretly through the gardens, succeeded, looking round them at every step they took, in reaching the thicket. The weather was cloudy, a warm breeze bowed the flowers and the shrubs, the burning dust, swept along in clouds by the wind, was whirled in eddies towards the trees. Montalais, who, during their progress, had discharged the functions of a clever scout, advanced a few steps further, and turning round again, to be quite sure that no one was either listening or approaching, said to her companion, "Thank goodness, we are quite alone! Since yesterday every one spies on us here, and a circle seems to be drawn round us, as if we were plague-stricken." La Vallière bent down her head and sighed. "It is positively unheard of," continued Montalais; "from M. Malicorne to M. de Saint-Aignan, every one wishes to get hold of our secret. Come, Louise, let us take counsel, you and I, together, in order that I may know what to do."

La Vallière lifted towards her companion her beautiful eyes, pure and deep as the azure of a spring sky, "And I," she said, "will ask you why we have been summoned to Madame's own room? Why have we slept close to her apartment, instead of sleeping as usual in our own? Why did you return so late, and whence are these measures of strict supervision which have been adopted since this morning, with respect to us both?"

"My dear Louise, you answer my question by another, or rather, by ten others, which is not answering me at all. I will tell you all you want to know later, and as it is of secondary importance, you can wait. What I ask you—for everything will depend upon that—is, whether there is or is not any secret?"

"I do not know if there is any secret," said La Vallière; "but I do know, for my part at least, that there has been great imprudence committed. Since the foolish remark I made, and my still more silly fainting yesterday, every one here is making remarks about us."

"Speak for yourself," said Montalais, laughing, "speak for yourself and for Tonnay-Charente; for both of you made your declarations of love to the skies, which unfortunately were intercepted."

La Vallière hung down her head. "Really you overwhelm me," she said.

"I?"

"Yes, you torture me with your jests."

"Listen to me, Louise. These are no jests, for nothing is more serious; on the contrary, I did not drag you out of the chateau; I did not miss attending mass; I did not pretend to have a cold, as Madame did, which she has no more than I have; and, lastly, I did not display ten times more diplomacy than M. Colbert inherited from M. de Mazarin, and makes use of with respect to M. Fouquet, in order to find means of confiding my perplexities to you, for the sole end and purpose that, when at last we were alone, with no one to listen to us, you should deal hypocritically with me. No, no; believe me, that when I ask you a question, it is not from curiosity alone, but really because the position is a critical one. What you said yesterday is now known,—it is a text on which every one is discoursing. Every one embellishes it to the utmost, and according to his own fancy; you had the honour last night, and you have it still to-day, of occupying the whole court, my dear Louise; and the number of tender and witty remarks which have been ascribed to you, would make Mademoiselle de Scudery and her brother burst from very spite, if they were faithfully reported."

"But, dearest Montalais," said the poor girl, "you know better than any one exactly what I said, since you were present when I said it."

"Yes, I know. But that is not the question. I have not forgotten a single syllable you uttered, but did you think what you were saying?"

Louise became confused. "What," she exclaimed, "more questions still! Oh, heavens! when I would give the world to forget what I did say, how does it happen that every one does all he possibly can to remind me of it? Oh, this is indeed terrible!"

"What is?"

"To have a friend who ought to spare me, who might advise me and help me to save myself, and yet who is undoing me—is killing me."

"There, there, that will do," said Montalais; "after having said too little, you now say too much. No one thinks of killing you, nor even of robbing you, even of your secret; I wish to have it voluntarily, and in no other way; for the question does not concern your own affairs only, but ours also; and Tonnay-Charente would tell you as I do, if she were here. For, the fact is, that last evening she wished to have some private conversation in our room, and I was going there after the Manicamp and Malicorne colloquies terminated, when I learned, on my return, rather late, it is true, that Madame had sequestered her maids of honour, and that we were to sleep in her apartments, instead of our own. Moreover, Madame has shut up her maids of honour in order that they should not have the time to concert any measures together, and this morning she was closeted with Tonnay-Charente with the same object. Tell me, then, to what extent Athenais and I can rely upon you, as we will tell you in what way you can rely upon us?"

"I do not clearly understand the question you have put," said Louise, much agitated.

"Hum! and yet, on the contrary, you seem to understand me very well. However, I will put my questions in a more precise manner, in order that you may not be able, in the slightest degree, to evade them. Listen to me: *Do you love M. de Bragelonne?* That is plain enough, is it not?"

At this question, which fell like the first bombshell of a besieging army into a doomed town, Louise started. "You ask me," she exclaimed, "if I love Raoul, the friend of my childhood,—my brother almost?"



"No, no, no! Again you evade me, or rather, you wish to escape me. I do not ask if you love Raoul, your childhood's friend,—your brother; but I ask if you love the Vicomte de Bragelonne, your affianced husband?"

"Good heavens! dear Montalais," said Louise, "how severe your tone is!"

"You deserve no indulgence,—I am neither more nor less severe than usual. I put a question to you, so answer it."

"You certainly do not," said Louise, in a choking voice, "speak to me like a friend; but I will answer you as a true friend."

"Well, do so."

"Very well; my heart is full of scruples and silly feelings of pride, with respect to everything that a woman ought to keep secret, and in this respect no one has ever read into the bottom of my soul."

"That I know very well. If I had read it, I should not interrogate you as I have done; I should simply say,—'My good Louise, you have the happiness of an acquaintance with M. de Bragelonne, who is an excellent young man, and an advantageous match for a girl without fortune. M. de la Fere will leave something like fifteen thousand livres a year to his son. At a future day, then, you, as this son's wife, will have fifteen thousand livres a year; which is not bad. Turn, then, neither to the right hand nor to the left, but go frankly to M. de Bragelonne; that is to say, to the altar to which he will lead you. Afterwards, why— afterwards, according to his disposition, you will be emancipated or enslaved; in other words, you will have a right to commit any piece of folly people commit who have either too much liberty or too little.' That is, my dear Louise, what I should have told you at first, if I had been able to read your heart."

"And I should have thanked you," stammered out Louise, "although the advice does not appear to me to be altogether sound."

"Wait, wait. But immediately after having given you that advice, I should have added,—'Louise, it is very dangerous to pass whole days with your head drooping, your hands unoccupied, your eyes restless and full of thought; it is dangerous to prefer the least frequented paths, and no longer be amused with such diversions as gladden young girls' hearts; it is dangerous, Louise, to scrawl with the point of your foot, as you do, upon the gravel, certain letters it is useless for you to efface, but which appear again under your heel, particularly when those letters rather resemble the letter L than the letter B; and, lastly, it is dangerous to allow the mind to dwell on a thousand wild fancies, the fruits of solitude and heartache; these fancies, while they sink into a young girl's mind, make her cheeks sink in also, so that it is not unusual, on such occasions, to find the most delightful persons in the world become the most disagreeable, and the wittiest to become the dullest.'"

"I thank you, dearest Aure," replied La Vallière, gently; "it is like you to speak to me in this manner, and I thank you for it."

"It was only for the benefit of wild dreamers, such as I have just described, that I spoke; do not take any of my words, then, to yourself, except such as you think you deserve. Stay, I hardly know what story recurs to my memory of some silly or melancholy girl, who was gradually pining away because she fancied that the prince, or the king, or the emperor, whoever it was—and it does not matter much which—had fallen in love with her; while on the contrary, the prince, or the king, or the emperor, whichever you please, was plainly in love with some one else, and—a singular circumstance, one, indeed, which she could not perceive, although every one around and about her perceived it clearly enough— made use of her as a screen for his own love affair. You laugh as I do, at this poor silly girl, do you not, Louise?"

"I?—oh! of course," stammered Louise, pale as death.

"And you are right, too, for the thing is amusing enough. The story, whether true or false, amused me, and so I remembered it and told it to you. Just imagine then, my good Louise, the mischief that such a melancholy would create in anybody's brain,—a melancholy, I mean, of that kind. For my own part, I resolved to tell you the story; for if such a thing were to happen to either of us, it would be most essential to be assured of its truth; to-day it is a snare, to-morrow it would become a jest and mockery, the next day it would mean death itself." La Vallière started again, and became, if possible, still paler.

"Whenever a king takes notice of us," continued Montalais, "he lets us see it easily enough, and, if we happen to be the object he covets, he knows very well how to gain his object. You see, then, Louise, that, in such circumstances, between young girls exposed to such a danger as the one in question, the most perfect confidence should exist, in order that those hearts which are not disposed towards melancholy may watch over those likely to become so."

"Silence, silence!" said La Vallière; "some one approaches."

"Some one is approaching fast, in fact," said Montalais; "but who can it possibly be? Everybody is away, either at mass with the king, or bathing with Monsieur."

At the end of the walk the young girls perceived almost immediately, beneath the arching trees, the graceful carriage and noble stature of a young man, who, with his sword under his arm and a cloak thrown across his shoulders, booted and spurred besides, saluted them from the distance with a gentle smile. "Raoul!" exclaimed Montalais.

"M. de Bragelonne!" murmured Louise.

"A very proper judge to decide upon our difference of opinion," said Montalais.

"Oh! Montalais, Montalais, for pity's sake," exclaimed La Vallière, "after having been so cruel, show me a little mercy." These words, uttered with all the fervor of a prayer, effaced all trace of irony, if not from Montalais's heart, at least from her face.

"Why, you are as handsome as Amadis, Monsieur de Bragelonne," she cried to Raoul, "and armed and booted like him."

"A thousand compliments, young ladies," replied Raoul, bowing.

"But why, I ask, are you booted in this manner?" repeated Montalais, whilst La Vallière, although she looked at Raoul with a surprise equal to that of her companion, nevertheless uttered not a word.

"Why?" inquired Raoul.

"Yes!" ventured Louise.

"Because I am about to set off," said Bragelonne, looking at Louise.

The young girl seemed as though smitten by some superstitious feeling of terror, and tottered. "You are going away, Raoul!" she cried; "and where are you going?"

"Dearest Louise," he replied, with that quiet, composed manner which was natural to him, "I am going to England."

"What are you going to do in England?"

"The king has sent me there."

"The king!" exclaimed Louise and Aure together, involuntarily exchanging glances, the conversation which had just been interrupted recurring to them both. Raoul intercepted the glance, but could not understand its meaning, and, naturally enough, attributed it to the interest both the young girls took in him.

"His majesty," he said, "has been good enough to remember that the Comte de la Fere is high in favour with King Charles II. This morning, as he was on his way to attend mass, the king, seeing me as he passed, signed to me to approach, which I accordingly did. 'Monsieur de Bragelonne,' he said to me, 'you will call upon M. Fouquet, who has received from me letters for the king of Great Britain; you will be the bearer of them.' I bowed. 'Ah! his majesty added, 'before you leave, you will be good enough to take any commissions which Madame may have for the king her brother.'"

"Gracious heaven!" murmured Louise, much agitated, and yet full of thought at the same time.

"So quickly! You are desired to set off in such haste!" said Montalais, almost paralyzed by this unforeseen event.

"Properly to obey those whom we respect," said Raoul, "it is necessary to obey quickly. Within ten minutes after I had received the order, I was ready. Madame, already informed, is writing the letter which she is good enough to do me the honour of intrusting to me. In the meantime, learning from Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente that it was likely you would be in this direction, I came here, and am happy to find you both."

"And both of us very sad, as you see," said Montalais, going to Louise's assistance, whose countenance was visibly altered.

"Suffering?" responded Raoul, pressing Louise's hand with a tender curiosity. "Your hand is like ice."

"It is nothing."

"This coldness does not reach your heart, Louise, does it?" inquired the young man, with a tender smile. Louise raised her head hastily, as if the question had been inspired by some suspicion, and had aroused a feeling of remorse.

"Oh! you know," she said, with an effort, "that my heart will never be cold towards a friend like yourself, Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"Thank you, Louise. I know both your heart and your mind; it is not by the touch of the hand that one can judge of an affection like yours. You know, Louise, how devotedly I love you, with what perfect and unreserved confidence I reserve my life for you; will you not forgive me, then, for speaking to you with something like the frankness of a child?"

"Speak, Monsieur Raoul," said Louise, trembling painfully, "I am listening."

"I cannot part from you, carrying away with me a thought that tortures me; absurd I know it to be, and yet one which rends my very heart."

"Are you going away, then, for any length of time?" inquired La Vallière, with faltering utterance, while Montalais turned her head aside.

"No; probably I shall not be absent more than a fortnight." La Vallière pressed her hand upon her heart, which felt as though it were breaking.

"It is strange," pursued Raoul, looking at the young girl with a melancholy expression; "I have often left you when setting off on adventures fraught with danger. Then I started joyously enough—my heart free, my mind intoxicated by thoughts of happiness in store for me, hopes of which the future was full; and yet I was about to face the Spanish cannon, or the halberds of the Walloons. To-day, without the existence of any danger or uneasiness, and by the sunniest path in the world, I am going in search of a glorious recompense, which this mark of the king's favour seems to indicate, for I am, perhaps, going to win you, Louise. What other favour, more precious than yourself, could the king confer upon me? Yet, Louise, in very truth I know not how or why, but this happiness and this future seem to vanish before my very eyes like mist—like an idle dream; and I feel here, here at the very bottom of my heart, a deep-seated grief, a dejection I cannot overcome— something heavy, passionless, death-like,—resembling a corpse. Oh! Louise, too well do I know why; it is because I have never loved you so truly as now. God help me!"

At this last exclamation, which issued as it were from a broken heart, Louise burst into tears, and threw herself into Montalais's arms. The latter, although she was not easily moved, felt the tears rush to her eyes. Raoul noted only the tears Louise shed; his look, however, did not penetrate—nay, sought not to penetrate—beyond those tears. He bent his knee before her, and tenderly kissed her hand; and it was evident that in that kiss he poured out his whole heart.

"Rise, rise," said Montalais to him, ready to cry, "for Athenais is coming."

Raoul rose, brushed his knee with the back of his hand, smiled again upon Louise, whose eyes were fixed on the ground, and, having pressed Montalais's hand gratefully, he turned round to salute Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, the sound of whose silken robe was already heard upon the gravel walk. "Has Madame finished her letter?" he inquired, when the young girl came within reach of his voice.

"Yes, the letter is finished, sealed, and her royal highness is ready to receive you."

Raoul, at this remark, hardly gave himself time to salute Athenais, cast one look at Louise, bowed to Montalais, and withdrew in the direction of the chateau. As he withdrew he again turned round, but at last, at the end of the grand walk, it was useless to do so again, as he could no longer see them. The three young girls, on their side, had, with widely different feelings, watched him disappear.

"At last," said Athenais, the first to interrupt the silence, "at last we are alone, free to talk of yesterday's great affair, and to come to an understanding upon the conduct it is advisable for us to pursue. Besides, if you will listen to me," she continued, looking round on all sides, "I will explain to you, as briefly as possible, in the first place, our own duty, such as I imagine it to be, and, if you do not understand a hint, what is Madame's desire on the subject." And Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente pronounced these words in such a tone as to leave no doubt, in her companion's minds, upon the official character with which she was invested.

"Madame's desire!" exclaimed Montalais and La Vallière together.

"Her *ultimatum*," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, diplomatically.

"But," murmured La Vallière, "does Madame know, then—"

"Madame knows more about the matter than we said, even," said Athenais, in a formal, precise manner. "Therefore let us come to a proper understanding."

"Yes, indeed," said Montalais, "and I am listening in breathless attention."

"Gracious heavens!" murmured Louise, trembling, "shall I ever survive this cruel evening?"

"Oh! do not frighten yourself in that manner," said Athenais; "we have found a remedy." So, seating herself between her two companions, and taking each of them by the hand, which she held in her own, she began. The first words were hardly spoke, when they heard a horse galloping away over the stones of the public high-road, outside the gates of the chateau.

LV. Happy as a Prince.

At the very moment he was about entering the chateau, Bragelonne met De Guiche. But before having been met by Raoul, De Guiche had met Manicamp, who had met Malicorne. How was it that Malicorne had met Manicamp? Nothing more simple, for he had awaited his return from mass, where he had accompanied M. de Saint-Aignan. When they met, they congratulated each other upon their good fortune, and Manicamp availed himself of the circumstance to ask his friend if he had not a few crowns still remaining at the bottom of his pocket. The latter, without expressing any surprise

at the question, which he perhaps expected, answered that every pocket which is always being drawn upon without anything ever being put in it, resembles those wells which supply water during the winter, but which gardeners render useless by exhausting during the summer; that his, Malicorne's, pocket certainly was deep, and that there would be a pleasure in drawing on it in times of plenty, but that, unhappily, abuse had produced barrenness. To this remark, Manicamp, deep in thought, had replied, "Quite true!"

"The question, then, is how to fill it?" Malicorne added.

"Of course; but in what way?"

"Nothing easier, my dear Monsieur Manicamp."

"So much the better. How?"

"A post in Monsieur's household, and the pocket is full again."

"You have the post?"

"That is, I have the promise of being nominated."

"Well!"

"Yes; but the promise of nomination, without the post itself, is like a purse with no money in it."

"Quite true," Manicamp replied a second time.

"Let us try for the post, then," the candidate had persisted.

"My dear fellow," sighed Manicamp, "an appointment in his royal highness's household is one of the gravest difficulties of our position."

"Oh! oh!"

"There is no question that, at the present moment, we cannot ask Monsieur for anything."

"Why so?" "Because we are not on good terms with him."

"A great absurdity, too," said Malicorne, promptly.

"Bah! and if we were to show Madame any attention," said Manicamp, "frankly speaking, do you think we should please Monsieur?"

"Precisely; if we show Madame any attention, and do it adroitly, Monsieur ought to adore us."

"Hum!"

"Either that or we are great fools. Make haste, therefore, M. Manicamp, you who are so able a politician, and make M. de Guiche and his royal highness friendly again."

"Tell me, what did M. de Saint-Aignan tell you, Malicorne?"

"Tell me? nothing; he asked me several questions, and that was all."

"Well, was he less discreet, then, with me."

"What did he tell you?"

"That the king is passionately in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"We knew that already," replied Malicorne, ironically, "and everybody talks about it loud enough for all to know it; but in the meantime, do what I advise you; speak to M. de Guiche, and endeavor to get him to make advances to Monsieur. Deuce take it! he owes his royal highness that, at least."

"But we must see De Guiche, then?"

"There does not seem to be any great difficulty in that; try to see him in the same way I tried to see you; wait for him; you know that he is naturally very fond of walking."

"Yes; but whereabouts does he walk?"

"What a question to ask! Do you not know that he is in love with Madame?"

"So it is said."

"Very well; you will find him walking about on the side of the chateau where her apartments are."

"Stay, my dear Malicorne, you were not mistaken, for here he is coming."

"Why should I be mistaken? Have you ever noticed that I am in the habit of making a mistake? Come, we only need to understand each other. Are you in want of money?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Manicamp, mournfully.

"Well, I want my appointment. Let Malicorne have the appointment, and Manicamp shall have the money. There is no greater difficulty in the way than that."

"Very well; in that case make yourself easy. I will do my best."

"Do."

De Guiche approached, Malicorne stepped aside, and Manicamp caught hold of De Guiche, who was thoughtful and melancholy. "Tell me, my dear comte, what rhyme you were trying to find," said Manicamp. "I have an excellent one to match yours, particularly if yours ends in *ame*."

De Guiche shook his head, and recognizing a friend, he took him by the arm. "My dear Manicamp," he said, "I am in search of something very different from a rhyme."

"What is it you are looking for?"

"You will help me to find what I am in search of," continued the comte: "you who are such an idle fellow, in other words, a man with a mind full of ingenious devices."

"I am getting my ingenuity ready, then, my dear comte."

"This is the state of the case, then: I wish to approach a particular house, where I have some business."

"You must get near the house, then," said Manicamp.

"Very good; but in this house dwells a husband who happens to be jealous."

"Is he more jealous than the dog Cerberus?"

"Not more, but quite as much so."

"Has he three mouths, as that obdurate guardian of the infernal regions had? Do not shrug your shoulders, my dear comte: I put the question to you with an excellent reason, since poets pretend that, in order to soften Monsieur Cerberus, the visitor must take something enticing with him—a cake, for instance. Therefore, I, who view the matter in a prosaic light, that is to say in the light of reality, I say: one cake is very little for three mouths. If your jealous husband has three mouths, comte, get three cakes."

"Manicamp, I can get such advice as that from M. de Beautru."

"In order to get better advice," said Manicamp, with a comical seriousness of expression, "you will be obliged to adopt a more precise formula than you have used towards me."

"If Raoul were here," said De Guiche, "he would be sure to understand me."

"So I think, particularly if you said to him: 'I should very much like to see Madame a little nearer, but I fear Monsieur, because he is jealous.'"

"Manicamp!" cried the comte, angrily, and endeavoring to overwhelm his tormentor by a look, who did not, however, appear to be in the slightest degree disturbed by it.

"What is the matter now, my dear comte?" inquired Manicamp.

"What! is it thus you blaspheme the most sacred of names?"

"What names?"

"Monsieur! Madame! the highest names in the kingdom."

"You are very strangely mistaken, my dear comte. I never mentioned the highest names in the kingdom. I merely answered you in reference to the subject of a jealous husband, whose name you did not tell me, and who, as a matter of course, has a wife. I therefore replied to you, in order to see Madame, you must get a little more intimate with Monsieur."

"Double-dealer that you are," said the comte, smiling; "was that what you said?"

"Nothing else."

"Very good; what then?"

"Now," added Manicamp, "let the question be regarding the Duchess—or the Duke—; very well, I shall say: Let us get into the house in some way or other, for that is a tactic which cannot in any case be unfavourable to your love affair."

"Ah! Manicamp, if you could but find me a pretext, a good pretext."

"A pretext; I can find you a hundred, nay, a thousand. If Malicorne were here, he would have already hit upon a thousand excellent pretexts."

"Who is Malicorne?" replied De Guiche, half-shutting his eyes, like a person reflecting, "I seem to know the name."

"Know him! I should think so: you owe his father thirty thousand crowns."

"Ah, indeed! so it's that worthy fellow from Orleans."

"Whom you promised an appointment in Monsieur's household; not the jealous husband, but the other."

"Well, then, since your friend Malicorne is such an inventive genius, let him find me a means of being adored by Monsieur, and a pretext to make my peace with him."

"Very good: I'll talk to him about it."

"But who is that coming?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Raoul! yes, it is he," said De Guiche, as he hastened forward to meet him. "You here, Raoul?" said De Guiche.

"Yes: I was looking for you to say farewell," replied Raoul, warmly, pressing the comte's hand. "How do you do, Monsieur Manicamp?"

"How is this, vicomte, you are leaving us?"

"Yes, a mission from the king."

"Where are you going?"

"To London. On leaving you, I am going to Madame; she has a letter to give me for his majesty, Charles II."

"You will find her alone, for Monsieur has gone out; gone to bathe, in fact."

"In that case, you, who are one of Monsieur's gentlemen in waiting, will undertake to make my excuses to him. I would have waited in order to receive any directions he might have to give me, if the desire for my immediate departure had not been intimated to me by M. Fouquet on behalf of his majesty."

Manicamp touched De Guiche's elbow, saying, "There's a pretext for you."

"What?"

"M. de Bragelonne's excuses."

"A weak pretext," said De Guiche.

"An excellent one, if Monsieur is not angry with you; but a paltry one if he bears you ill-will."

"You are right, Manicamp; a pretext, however poor it may be, is all I require. And so, a pleasant journey to you, Raoul!" And the two friends took a warm leave of each other.

Five minutes afterwards Raoul entered Madame's apartments, as Mademoiselle de Montalais had begged him to do. Madame was still seated at the table where she had written her letter. Before her was still burning the rose-coloured taper she had used to seal it. Only in her deep reflection, for Madame seemed to be buried in thought, she had forgotten to extinguish the light. Bragelonne was a very model of elegance in every way; it was impossible to see him once without always remembering him; and not only had Madame seen him once, but it will not be forgotten he was one of the very first who had gone to meet her, and had accompanied her from Le Havre to Paris. Madame preserved therefore an excellent recollection of him.

"Ah! M. de Bragelonne," she said to him, "you are going to see my brother, who will be delighted to pay to the son a portion of the debt of gratitude he contracted with the father."

"The Comte de la Fere, Madame, has been abundantly recompensed for the little service he had the happiness to render the king, by the kindness manifested towards him, and it is I who will have to convey to his majesty the assurance of the respect, devotion, and gratitude of both father and son."

"Do you know my brother?"

"No, your highness; I shall have the honour of seeing his majesty for the first time."

"You require no recommendation to him. At all events, however, if you have any doubt about your personal merit, take me unhesitatingly for your surety."

"Your royal highness overwhelms me with kindness."

"No! M. de Bragelonne, I well remember that we were fellow-travelers once, and that I remarked your extreme prudence in the midst of the extravagant absurdities committed, on both sides, by two of the greatest simpletons in the world,—M. de Guiche and the Duke of Buckingham. Let us not speak of them, however; but of yourself. Are you going to England to remain there permanently? Forgive my inquiry: it is not curiosity, but a desire to be of service to you in anything I can."

"No, Madame; I am going to England to fulfil a mission which his majesty has been kind enough to confide to me—nothing more."

"And you propose to return to France?"

"As soon as I have accomplished my mission; unless, indeed, his majesty, King Charles II., should have other orders for me."

"He well beg you, at the very least, I am sure, to remain near him as long as possible."

"In that case, as I shall not know how to refuse, I will now beforehand entreat your royal highness to have the goodness to remind the king of France that one of his devoted servants is far away from him."

"Take care that when you *are* recalled, you do not consider his command an abuse of power."

"I do not understand you, Madame."

"The court of France is not easily matched, I am aware, but yet we have some pretty women at the court of England also."

Raoul smiled.

"Oh!" said Madame, "yours is a smile which portends no good to my countrywomen. It is as though you were telling them, Monsieur de Bragelonne: 'I visit you, but I leave my heart on the other side of the Channel.' Did not your smile indicate that?"

"Your highness is gifted with the power of reading the inmost depths of the soul, and you will understand, therefore, why, at present, any prolonged residence at the court of England would be a matter of the deepest regret."

"And I need not inquire if so gallant a knight is recompensed in return?"

"I have been brought up, Madame, with her whom I love, and I believe our affection is mutual."

"In that case, do not delay your departure, Monsieur de Bragelonne, and delay not your return, for on your return we shall see two persons happy; for I hope no obstacle exists to your felicity."

"There is a great obstacle, Madame."

"Indeed! what is it?"

"The king's wishes on the subject."

"The king opposes your marriage?"

"He postpones it, at least. I solicited his majesty's consent through the Comte de la Fere, and, without absolutely refusing it, he positively said it must be deferred."

"Is the young lady whom you love unworthy of you, then?"

"She is worthy of a king's affection, Madame."

"I mean, she is not, perhaps, of birth equal to your own."

"Her family is excellent."

"Is she young, beautiful?"

"She is seventeen, and, in my opinion, exceedingly beautiful."

"Is she in the country, or at Paris?"

"She is here at Fontainebleau, Madame."

"At the court?"

"Yes."

"Do I know her?"

"She has the honour to form one of your highness's household."

"Her name?" inquired the princess, anxiously; "if indeed," she added, hastily, "her name is not a secret."

"No, Madame, my affection is too pure for me to make a secret of it to any one, and with still greater reason to your royal highness, whose kindness towards me has been so extreme. It is Mademoiselle Louise de la Vallière."

Madame could not restrain an exclamation, in which a feeling stronger than surprise might have been detected. "Ah!" she said, "La Vallière—she who yesterday—" she paused, and then continued, "she who was taken ill, I believe."

"Yes, Madame; it was only this morning that I heard of the accident that had befallen her."

"Did you see her before you came to me?"

"I had the honour of taking leave of her."

"And you say," resumed Madame, making a powerful effort over herself, "that the king has—deferred your marriage with this young girl."

"Yes, Madame, deferred it."

"Did he assign any reason for this postponement?"

"None."

"How long is it since the Comte de la Fere preferred his request to the king?"

"More than a month, Madame."

"It is very singular," said the princess, as something like a film clouded her eyes.

"A month?" she repeated.

"About a month."

"You are right, vicomte," said the princess, with a smile, in which De Bragelonne might have remarked a kind of restraint; "my brother must not keep you too long in England; set off at once, and in the first letter I write to England, I will claim you in the king's name." And Madame rose to place her letter in Bragelonne's hands. Raoul understood that his audience was at an end; he took the letter, bowed lowly to the princess, and left the room.

"A month!" murmured the princess; "could I have been blind, then, to so great an extent, and could he have loved her for this last month?" And as Madame had nothing to do, she sat down to begin a letter to her brother, the postscript of which was a summons for Bragelonne to return.

The Comte de Guiche, as we have seen, had yielded to the pressing persuasions of Manicamp, and allowed himself to be led to the stables, where they desired their horses to be got ready for them; then, by one of the side paths, a description of which has already been given, they advanced to meet Monsieur, who, having just finished bathing, was returning towards the chateau, wearing a woman's veil to protect his face from getting burnt by the sun, which was shining very brightly. Monsieur was in one of those fits of good humor to which the admiration of his own good looks sometimes gave occasion. As he was bathing he had been able to compare the whiteness of his body with that of the courtiers, and, thanks to the care which his royal highness took of himself, no one, not even the Chevalier de Lorraine, was able to stand the comparison. Monsieur, moreover, had been tolerably successful in swimming, and his muscles having been exercised by the healthy immersion in the cool water, he was in a light and cheerful state of mind and body. So that, at the sight of Guiche, who advanced to meet him at a hand gallop, mounted upon a magnificent white horse, the prince could not restrain an exclamation of delight.

"I think matters look well," said Manicamp, who fancied he could read this friendly disposition upon his royal highness's countenance.

"Good day, De Guiche, good day," exclaimed the prince.

"Long life to your royal highness!" replied De Guiche, encouraged by the tone of Philip's voice; "health, joy, happiness, and prosperity to your highness."

"Welcome, De Guiche, come on my right side, but keep your horse in hand, for I wish to return at a walking pace under the cool shade of these trees."

"As you please, my lord," said De Guiche, taking his place on the prince's right as he had been invited to do.

"Now, my dear De Guiche," said the prince, "give me a little news of that De Guiche whom I used to know formerly, and who used to pay attentions to my wife."

Guiche blushed to the very whites of his eyes, while Monsieur burst out laughing, as though he had made the wittiest remark in the world. The few privileged courtiers who surrounded Monsieur thought it their duty to follow his example, although they had not heard the remark, and a noisy burst of laughter immediately followed, beginning with the first courtier, passing on through the whole company, and only terminating with the last. De Guiche, although blushing scarlet, put a good countenance on the matter; Manicamp looked at him.

"Ah! my lord," replied De Guiche, "show a little charity towards such a miserable fellow as I am: do not hold me up to the ridicule of the Chevalier de Lorraine."

"How do you mean?"

"If he hears you ridicule me, he will go beyond your highness, and will show no pity."

"About your passion and the princess, do you mean?"

"For mercy's sake, my lord."

"Come, come, De Guiche, confess that you *did* get a little sweet upon Madame."

"I will never confess such a thing, my lord."

"Out of respect for me, I suppose; but I release you from your respect, De Guiche. Confess, as if it were simply a question about Mademoiselle de Chalais or Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

Then breaking off, he said, beginning to laugh again, "Comte, that wasn't at all bad!—a remark like a sword, which cuts two ways at once. I hit you and my brother at the same time, Chalais and La Vallière, your affianced bride and his future lady love."

"Really, my lord," said the comte, "you are in a most brilliant humor to-day."

"The fact is, I feel well, and then I am pleased to see you again. But you were angry with me, were you not?"

"I, my lord? Why should I have been so?"

"Because I interfered with your sarabands and your other Spanish amusements. Nay, do not deny it. On that day you left the princess's apartments with your eyes full of fury; that brought you ill-luck, for you danced in the ballet yesterday in a most wretched manner. Now don't get sulky, De Guiche, for it does you no good, but makes you look like a tame bear. If the princess did not look at you attentively yesterday, I am quite sure of one thing."

"What is that, my lord? Your highness alarms me."

"She has quite forsworn you now," said the prince, with a burst of loud laughter.

"Decidedly," thought Manicamp, "rank has nothing to do with it, and all men are alike."

The prince continued: "At all events, you have now returned, and it is to be hoped that the chevalier will become amiable again."

"How so, my lord: and by what miracle can I exercise such an influence over M. de Lorraine?"

"The matter is very simple, he is jealous of you."

"Bah! it is not possible."

"It is the case, though."

"He does me too much honour."



"The fact is, that when you are here, he is full of kindness and attention, but when you are gone he makes me suffer a perfect martyrdom. I am like a see-saw. Besides, you do not know the idea that has struck me?"

"I do not even suspect it."

"Well, then; when you were in exile—for you really were exiled, my poor De Guiche—"

"I should think so, indeed; but whose fault was it?" said De Guiche, pretending to speak in an angry tone.

"Not mine, certainly, my dear comte," replied his royal highness, "upon my honour, I did not ask for the king to exile you—"

"No, not you, my lord, I am well aware; but—"

"But Madame; well, as far as that goes, I do not say it was not the case. Why, what the deuce did you do or say to Madame?"

"Really, my lord—"

"Women, I know, have their grudges, and my wife is not free from caprices of that nature. But if she were the cause of your being exiled I bear you no ill-will."

"In that case, my lord," said De Guiche. "I am not altogether unhappy."

Manicamp, who was following closely behind De Guiche and who did not lose a word of what the prince was saying, bent down to his very shoulders over his horse's neck, in order to conceal the laughter he could not repress.

"Besides, your exile started a project in my head."

"Good."

"When the chevalier—finding you were no longer here, and sure of reigning undisturbed—began to bully me, I, observing that my wife, in the most perfect contrast to him, was most kind and amiable towards me who had neglected her so much, the idea occurred to me of becoming a model husband—a rarity, a curiosity, at the court; and I had an idea of getting very fond of my wife."

De Guiche looked at the prince with a stupefied expression of countenance, which was not assumed.

"Oh! my lord," De Guiche stammered out; "surely, that never seriously occurred to you."

"Indeed it did. I have some property that my brother gave me on my marriage; she has some money of her own, and not a little either, for she gets money from her brother and brother-in-law of England and France at the same time. Well! we should have left the court. I should have retired to my chateau at Villers-Cotterets, situated in the middle of a forest, in which we should have led a most sentimental life in the very same spot where my grandfather, Henry IV., sojourned with La Belle Gabrielle. What do you think of that idea, De Guiche?"

"Why, it is enough to make one shiver, my lord," replied De Guiche, who shuddered in reality.

"Ah! I see you would never be able to endure being exiled a second time."

"I, my lord?"

"I will not carry you off with us, as I had first intended."

"What, with you, my lord?"

"Yes; if the idea should occur to me again of taking a dislike to the court."

"Oh! do not let that make any difference, my lord; I would follow your highness to the end of the world."

"Clumsy fellow that you are!" said Manicamp, grumblingly, pushing his horse towards De Guiche, so as almost to unseat him, and then, as he passed close to him, as if he had lost command over the horse, he whispered, "For goodness' sake, think what you are saying."

"Well, it is agreed, then," said the prince; "since you are so devoted to me, I shall take you with me."

"Anywhere, my lord," replied De Guiche in a joyous tone, "whenever you like, and at once, too. Are you ready?"

And De Guiche, laughingly, gave his horse the rein, and galloped forward a few yards.

"One moment," said the prince. "Let us go to the chateau first."

"What for?"

"Why, to take my wife, of course."

"What for?" asked De Guiche.

"Why, since I tell you that it is a project of conjugal affection, it is necessary I should take my wife with me."

"In that case, my lord," replied the comte, "I am greatly concerned, but no De Guiche for you."

"Bah!"

"Yes.—Why do you take Madame with you?"

"Because I begin to fancy I love her," said the prince.

De Guiche turned slightly pale, but endeavored to preserve his seeming cheerfulness.

"If you love Madame, my lord," he said, "that ought to be quite enough for you, and you have no further need of your friends."

"Not bad, not bad," murmured Manicamp.

"There, your fear of Madame has begun again," replied the prince.

"Why, my lord, I have experienced that to my cost; a woman who was the cause of my being exiled!"

"What a revengeful disposition you have, De Guiche, how virulently you bear malice."

"I should like the case to be your own, my lord."

"Decidedly, then, that was the reason why you danced so badly yesterday; you wished to revenge yourself, I suppose, by trying to make Madame make a mistake in her dancing; ah! that is very paltry, De Guiche, and I will tell Madame of it."

"You may tell her whatever you please, my lord, for her highness cannot hate me more than she does."

"Nonsense, you are exaggerating; and this because merely of the fortnight's sojourn in the country she imposed on you."

"My lord, a fortnight is a fortnight; and when the time is passed in getting sick and tired of everything, a fortnight is an eternity."

"So that you will not forgive her?"

"Never!"

"Come, come, De Guiche, be a better disposed fellow than that. I wish to make your peace with her; you will find, in conversing with her, that she has no malice or unkindness in her nature, and that she is very talented."

"My lord—"

"You will see that she can receive her friends like a princess, and laugh like a citizen's wife; you will see that, when she pleases, she can make the pleasant hours pass like minutes. Come, De Guiche, you must really make up your differences with my wife."

"Upon my word," said Manicamp to himself, "the prince is a husband whose wife's name will bring him ill-luck, and King Candaules, of old, was a tiger beside his royal highness."

"At all events," added the prince, "I am sure you will make it up with my wife: I guarantee you will do so. Only, I must show you the way now. There is nothing commonplace about her: it is not every one who takes her fancy."

"My lord—"

"No resistance, De Guiche, or I shall get out of temper," replied the prince.

"Well, since he will have it so," murmured Manicamp, in Guiche's ear, "do as he wants you to do."

"Well, my lord," said the comte, "I obey."

"And to begin," resumed the prince, "there will be cards, this evening, in Madame's apartment; you will dine with me, and I will take you there with me."

"Oh! as for that, my lord," objected De Guiche, "you will allow me to object."

"What, again! this is positive rebellion."

"Madame received me too indifferently, yesterday, before the whole court."

"Really!" said the prince, laughing.

"Nay, so much so, indeed, that she did not even answer me when I addressed her; it may be a good thing to have no self-respect at all, but to have too little is not enough, as the saying is."

"Comte! after dinner, you will go to your own apartments and dress yourself, and then you will come to fetch me. I shall wait for you."

"Since your highness absolutely commands it."

"Positively."

"He will not lose his hold," said Manicamp; "these are the things to which husbands cling most obstinately. Ah! what a pity M. Moliere could not have heard this man; he would have turned him into verse if he had."

The prince and his court, chatting in this manner, returned to the coolest apartments of the chateau.

"By the by," said De Guiche, as they were standing by the door, "I had a commission for your royal highness."

"Execute it, then."

"M. de Bragelonne has, by the king's order, set off for London, and he charged me with his respects for you; my lord."

"A pleasant journey to the vicomte, whom I like very much. Go and dress yourself, De Guiche, and come back for me. If you don't come back—"

"What will happen, my lord?"

"I will have you sent to the Bastille."

"Well," said De Guiche, laughing, "his royal highness, my lord, is decidedly the counterpart of her royal highness, Madame. Madame gets me sent into exile, because she does not care for me sufficiently; and my lord gets me imprisoned, because he cares for me too much. I thank my lord, and I thank Madame."

"Come, come," said the prince, "you are a delightful companion, and you know I cannot do without you. Return as soon as you can."

"Very well; but I am in the humor to prove myself difficult to be pleased, in *my* turn, my lord."

"Bah!"

"So, I will not return to your royal highness, except upon one condition."

"Name it."

"I want to oblige the friend of one of my friends."

"What's his name?"

"Malicorne."

"An ugly name."

"But very well borne, my lord."

"That may be. Well?"

"Well, I owe M. Malicorne a place in your household, my lord."

"What kind of a place?"

"Any kind of a place; a supervision of some sort or another, for instance."

"That happens very fortunately, for yesterday I dismissed my chief usher of the apartments."

"That will do admirably. What are his duties?"

"Nothing, except to look about and make his report."

"A sort of interior police?"

"Exactly."

"Ah, how excellently that will suit Malicorne," Manicamp ventured to say.

"You know the person we are speaking of, M. Manicamp?" inquired the prince.

"Intimately, my lord. He is a friend of mine."

"And your opinion is?"

"That your highness could never get a better usher of the apartments than he will make."

"How much does the appointment bring in?" inquired the comte of the prince.

"I don't know at all, only I have always been told that he could make as much as he pleased when he was thoroughly in earnest."

"What do you call being thoroughly in earnest, prince?"

"It means, of course, when the functionary in question is a man who has his wits about him."

"In that case I think your highness will be content, for Malicorne is as sharp as the devil himself."

"Good! the appointment will be an expensive one for me, in that case," replied the prince, laughing. "You are making me a positive present, comte."

"I believe so, my lord."

"Well, go and announce to your M. Melicorne—"

"Malicorne, my lord."

"I shall never get hold of that name."

"You say Manicamp very well, my lord."

"Oh, I ought to say Malicorne very well, too. The alliteration will help me."

"Say what you like, my lord, I can promise you your inspector of apartments will not be annoyed; he has the very happiest disposition that can be met with."

"Well, then, my dear De Guiche, inform him of his nomination. But, stay—"

"What is it, my lord?"

"I wish to see him beforehand; if he be as ugly as his name, I retract every word I have said."

"Your highness knows him, for you have already seen him at the Palais Royal; nay, indeed, it was I who presented him to you."

"Ah, I remember now—not a bad-looking fellow."

"I know you must have noticed him, my lord."

"Yes, yes, yes. You see, De Guiche, I do not wish that either my wife or myself should have ugly faces before our eyes. My wife will have all her maids of honour pretty; I, all the gentlemen about me good-looking. In this way, De Guiche, you see, that any children we may have will run a good chance of being pretty, if my wife and myself have handsome models before us."

"Most magnificently argued, my lord," said Manicamp, showing his approval by look and voice at the same time.

As for De Guiche, he very probably did not find the argument so convincing, for he merely signified his opinion by a gesture, which, moreover, exhibited in a marked manner some indecision of mind on the subject. Manicamp went off to inform Malicorne of the good news he had just learned. De Guiche seemed very unwilling to take his departure for the purpose of dressing himself. Monsieur, singing, laughing, and admiring himself, passed away the time until the dinner-hour, in a frame of mind that justified the proverb of "Happy as a prince."

LVI. Story of a Dryad and a Naiad.

Every one had partaken of the banquet at the chateau, and afterwards assumed their full court dresses. The usual hour for the repast was five o'clock. If we say, then, that the repast occupied an hour, and the toilette two hours, everybody was ready about eight o'clock in the evening. Towards eight o'clock, then, the guests began to arrive at Madame's, for we have already intimated that it was Madame who "received" that evening. And at Madame's *soirees* no one failed to be present; for the evenings passed in her apartments always had that perfect charm about them which the queen, that pious and excellent princess, had not been able to confer upon her *reunions*. For, unfortunately, one of the advantages of goodness of disposition is that it is far less amusing than wit of an ill-natured character. And yet, let us hasten to add, that such a style of wit could not be assigned to Madame, for her disposition of mind, naturally of the very highest order, comprised too much true generosity, too many noble impulses and high-souled thoughts, to warrant her being termed ill-natured. But Madame was endowed with a spirit of resistance—a gift frequently fatal to its possessor, for it breaks where another disposition would have bent; the result was that that blows did not become deadened upon her as upon what might be termed the cotton-wadded feelings of Maria Theresa. Her heart rebounded at each attack, and therefore, whenever she was attacked, even in a manner that almost stunned her, she returned blow for blow to any one imprudent enough to tilt against her.

Was this really maliciousness of disposition or simply waywardness of character? We regard those rich and powerful natures as like the tree of knowledge, producing good and evil at the same time; a double branch, always blooming and fruitful, of which those who wish to eat know how to detect the good fruit, and from which the worthless and frivolous die who have eaten of it—a circumstance which is by no means to be regarded as a great misfortune. Madame, therefore, who had a well-disguised plan in her mind of constituting herself the second, if not even the principal, queen of the court, rendered her receptions delightful to all, from the conversation, the opportunities of meeting, and the perfect liberty she allowed every one of making any remark he pleased, on the condition, however, that the remark was amusing or sensible. And it will hardly be believed, that, by that means, there was less talking among the society Madame assembled together than elsewhere. Madame hated people who talked much, and took a remarkably cruel revenge upon them, for she allowed them to talk. She disliked pretension, too, and never overlooked that defect, even in the king himself. It was more than a weakness of Monsieur, and the princess had undertaken the amazing task of curing him of it. As for the rest, poets, wits, beautiful women, all were received by her with the air of a mistress superior to her slaves. Sufficiently meditative in her liveliest humors to make even poets meditate; sufficiently pretty to dazzle by her attractions, even among the prettiest; sufficiently witty for the most distinguished persons who were present, to be listened to with pleasure—it will easily be believed that the *reunions* held in Madame's apartments must naturally have proved very attractive. All who were young flocked there, and when the king himself happens to be young, everybody at court is so too. And so, the older ladies of the court, the strong-minded women of the regency, or of the last reign, pouted and sulked at their ease; but others only laughed at the fits of sulkiness in which these venerable individuals indulged, who had carried the love of authority so far as even to take command of bodies of soldiers in the wars of the Fronde, in order, as Madame asserted, not to lose their influence over men altogether. As eight o'clock struck her royal highness entered the great drawing-room accompanied by her ladies in attendance, and found several gentlemen belonging to the court already there, having been waiting for some minutes. Among those who had arrived before the hour fixed for the reception she looked round for one who, she thought, ought to have been first in attendance, but he was not there. However, almost at the very moment she completed her investigation, Monsieur was announced. Monsieur looked splendid. All the precious stones and jewels of Cardinal Mazarin, which of course that minister could not do otherwise than leave; all the queen-mother's jewels as well as a few belonging to his wife—Monsieur wore them all, and he was as dazzling as the rising sun. Behind him followed De Guiche, with hesitating steps and an air of contrition admirably assumed; De Guiche wore a costume of French-gray velvet, embroidered with silver, and trimmed with blue ribbons: he wore also Mechlin lace as rare and beautiful in its own way as the jewels of Monsieur in theirs. The plume in his hat was red. Madame, too, wore several colours, and preferred red for embroidery, gray for dress, and blue for flowers. M. de Guiche, dressed as we have described, looked so handsome that he excited every one's observation. An interesting pallor of complexion, a languid expression of the eyes, his white hands seen through the masses of lace that covered them, the melancholy expression of his mouth—it was only necessary, indeed, to see M. de Guiche to admit that few men at the court of France could hope to equal him. The consequence was that Monsieur, who was pretentious enough to fancy he could eclipse a star even, if a star had adorned itself in a similar manner to himself, was, on the contrary, completely eclipsed in all imaginations, which are silent judges certainly, but very positive and firm in their convictions. Madame looked at De Guiche lightly, but light as her look had been, it brought a delightful colour to his face. In fact, Madame found De Guiche so handsome and so admirably dressed, that she almost ceased regretting the royal conquest she felt she was on the point of escaping her. Her heart, therefore, sent the blood to her face. Monsieur approached her. He had not noticed the princess's blush, or if he had seen it, he was far from attributing it to its true cause.

"Madame," he said, kissing his wife's hand, "there is some one present here, who has fallen into disgrace, an unhappy exile whom I venture to recommend to your kindness. Do not forget, I beg, that he is one of my best friends, and that a gentle reception of him will please me greatly."

"What exile? what disgraced person are you speaking of?" inquired Madame, looking all round, and not permitting her glance to rest more on the count than on the others.

This was the moment to present De Guiche, and the prince drew aside and let De Guiche pass him, who, with a tolerably well-assumed awkwardness of manner, approached Madame and made his reverence to her.

"What!" exclaimed Madame, as if she were greatly surprised, "is M. de Guiche the disgraced individual you speak of, the exile in question?"

"Yes, certainly," returned the duke.

"Indeed," said Madame, "he seems almost the only person here!"

"You are unjust, Madame," said the prince.

"I?"

"Certainly. Come, forgive the poor fellow."

"Forgive him what? What have I to forgive M. de Guiche?"

"Come, explain yourself, De Guiche. What do you wish to be forgiven?" inquired the prince.

"Alas! her royal highness knows very well what it is," replied the latter, in a hypocritical tone.

"Come, come, give him your hand, Madame," said Philip.

"If it will give you any pleasure, Monsieur," and, with a movement of her eyes and shoulders, which it would be impossible to describe, Madame extended towards the young man her beautiful and perfumed hand, upon which he pressed his lips. It was evident that he did so for some little time, and that Madame did not withdraw her hand too quickly, for the duke added:

"De Guiche is not wickedly disposed, Madame; so do not be afraid, he will not bite you."

A pretext was given in the gallery by the duke's remark, which was not, perhaps, very laughable, for every one to laugh excessively. The situation was odd enough, and some kindly disposed persons had observed it. Monsieur was still enjoying the effect of his remark, when the king was announced. The appearance of the room at that moment was as follows:—in the center, before the fireplace, which was filled with flowers, Madame was standing up, with her maids of honour formed in two wings, on either side of her; around whom the butterflies of the court were fluttering. Several other groups were formed in the recesses of the windows, like soldiers stationed in their different towers who belong to the same garrison. From their respective places they could pick up the remarks which fell from the principal group. From one of these groups, the nearest to the fireplace, Malicorne, who had been at once raised to the dignity, through Manicamp and De Guiche, of the post of master of the apartments, and whose official costume had been ready for the last two months, was brilliant with gold lace, and shone upon Montalais, standing on Madame's extreme left, with all the fire of his eyes and splendor of his velvet. Madame was conversing with Mademoiselle de Chatillon and Mademoiselle de Crequy, who were next to her, and addressed a few words to Monsieur, who drew aside as soon as the king was announced. Mademoiselle de la Vallière, like Montalais, was on Madame's left hand, and the last but one on the line, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente being on her right. She was stationed as certain bodies of troops are, whose weakness is suspected, and who are placed between two experienced regiments. Guarded in this manner by the companions who had shared her adventure, La Vallière, whether from regret at Raoul's departure, or still suffering from the emotion caused by recent events, which had begun to render her name familiar on the lips of the courtiers, La Vallière, we repeat, hid her eyes, red with weeping, behind her fan, and seemed to give the greatest attention to the remarks which Montalais and Athenais, alternately, whispered to her from time to time. As soon as the king's name was announced a general movement took place in the apartment. Madame, in her character as hostess, rose to receive the royal visitor; but as she rose, notwithstanding her preoccupation of mind, she glanced hastily towards her right; her glance, which the presumptuous De Guiche regarded as intended for himself, rested, as it swept over the whole circle, upon La Vallière, whose warm blush and restless emotion it instantly perceived.

The king advanced to the middle of the group, which had now become a general one, by a movement which took place from the circumference to the center. Every head bowed low before his majesty, the ladies bending like frail, magnificent lilies before King Aquilo. There was nothing very severe, we will even say, nothing very royal that evening about the king, except youth and good looks. He wore an air of animated jousouness and good-humor which set all imaginations at work, and, thereupon, all present promised themselves a delightful evening, for no other reason than from having remarked the desire his majesty had to amuse himself in Madame's apartments. If there was any one in particular whose high spirits and good-humor equalled the king's, it was M. de Saint-Aignan, who was dressed in a rose-coloured costume, with face and ribbons of the same colour, and, in addition, particularly rose-coloured in his ideas, for that evening M. de Saint-Aignan was prolific in jests. The

circumstance which had given a new expansion to the numerous ideas germinating in his fertile brain was, that he had just perceived that Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was, like himself, dressed in rose-colour. We would not wish to say, however, that the wily courtier had not know beforehand that the beautiful Athenais was to wear that particular colour; for he very well knew the art of unlocking the lips of a dress-maker or a lady's maid as to her mistress's intentions. He cast as many killing glances at Mademoiselle Athenais as he had bows of ribbons on his stockings and doublet; in other words he discharged a prodigious number. The king having paid Madame the customary compliments, and Madame having requested him to be seated, the circle was immediately formed. Louis inquired of Monsieur the particulars of the day's bathing; and stated, looking at the ladies present while he spoke, that certain poets were engaged turning into verse the enchanting diversion of the baths of Vulaines, and that one of them particularly, M. Loret, seemed to have been intrusted with the confidence of some water-nymph, as he had in his verses recounted many circumstances that were actually true—at which remark more than one lady present felt herself bound to blush. The king at this moment took the opportunity of looking round him at more leisure; Montalais was the only one who did not blush sufficiently to prevent her looking at the king, and she saw him fix his eyes devouringly on Mademoiselle de la Vallière. This undaunted maid of honour, Mademoiselle de Montalais, be it understood, forced the king to lower his gaze, and so saved Louise de la Vallière from a sympathetic warmth of feeling this gaze might possibly have conveyed. Louis was appropriated by Madame, who overwhelmed him with inquiries, and no one in the world knew how to ask questions better than she did. He tried, however, to render the conversation general, and, with the view of effecting this, he redoubled his attention and devotion to her. Madame coveted complimentary remarks, and, determined to procure them at any cost, she addressed herself to the king, saying:

"Sire, your majesty, who is aware of everything which occurs in your kingdom, ought to know beforehand the verses confided to M. Loret by this nymph; will your majesty kindly communicate them to us?"

"Madame," replied the king, with perfect grace of manner, "I dare not—you, personally, might be in no little degree confused at having to listen to certain details—but Saint-Aignan tells a story well, and has a perfect recollection of the verses. If he does not remember them, he will invent. I can certify he is almost a poet himself." Saint-Aignan, thus brought prominently forward, was compelled to introduce himself as advantageously as possible. Unfortunately, however, for Madame, he thought of his own personal affairs only; in other words, instead of paying Madame the compliments she so much desired and relished, his mind was fixed upon making as much display as possible of his own good fortune. Again glancing, therefore, for the hundredth time at the beautiful Athenais, who carried into practice her previous evening's theory of not even deigning to look at her adorer, he said:—

"Your majesty will perhaps pardon me for having too indifferently remembered the verses which the nymph dictated to Loret; but if the king has not retained any recollection of them, how could I possibly remember?"

Madame did not receive this shortcoming of the courtier very favourably.

"Ah! madame," added Saint-Aignan, "at present it is no longer a question what the water-nymphs have to say; and one would almost be tempted to believe that nothing of any interest now occurs in those liquid realms. It is upon earth, madame, important events happen. Ah! Madame, upon the earth, how many tales are there full of—"

"Well," said Madame, "and what is taking place upon the earth?"

"That question must be asked of the Dryads," replied the comte; "the Dryads inhabit the forest, as your royal highness is aware."

"I am aware also, that they are naturally very talkative, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan."

"Such is the case, Madame; but when they say such delightful things, it would be ungracious to accuse them of being too talkative."

"Do they talk so delightfully, then?" inquired the princess, indifferently. "Really, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, you excite my curiosity; and, if I were the king, I would require you immediately to tell us what the delightful things are these Dryads have been saying, since you alone seem to understand their language."

"I am at his majesty's orders, Madame, in that respect," replied the comte, quickly.

"What a fortunate fellow this Saint-Aignan is to understand the language of the Dryads," said Monsieur.

"I understand it perfectly, my lord, as I do my own language."

"Tell us all about them, then," said Madame.

The king felt embarrassed, for his confidant was, in all probability, about to embark in a difficult matter. He felt that it would be so, from the general attention excited by Saint-Aignan's preamble, and aroused too by Madame's peculiar manner. The most reserved of those who were present seemed ready to devour every syllable the comte was about to pronounce. They coughed, drew closer together, looked curiously at some of the maids of honour, who, in order to support with greater propriety, or with more steadiness, the fixity of the inquisitorial looks bent upon them, adjusted their fans accordingly, and assumed the bearing of a duelist about to be exposed to his adversary's fire. At this epoch, the fashion of ingeniously constructed conversations, and hazardingly dangerous recitals, so prevailed, that, where, in modern times, a whole company assembled in a drawing-room would begin to suspect some scandal, or disclosure, or tragic event, and would hurry away in dismay, Madame's guests quietly settled themselves in their places, in order not to lose a word or gesture of the comedy composed by Monsieur de Saint-Aignan for their benefit, and the termination of which, whatever the style and the plot might be, must, as a matter of course, be marked by the most perfect propriety. The comte as known as a man of extreme refinement, and an admirable narrator. He courageously began, then, amidst a profound silence, which would have been formidable to any one but himself:—"Madame, by the king's permission, I address myself, in the first place, to your royal highness, since you admit yourself to be the person present possessing the greatest curiosity. I have the honour, therefore, to inform your royal highness that the Dryad more particularly inhabits the hollows of oaks; and, as Dryads are mythological creatures of great beauty, they inhabit the most beautiful trees, in other words, the largest to be found."

At this exordium, which recalled, under a transparent veil, the celebrated story of the royal oak, which had played so important a part in the last evening, so many hearts began to beat, both from joy and uneasiness, that, if Saint-Aignan had not had a good and sonorous voice, their throbbings might have been heard above the sound of his voice.

"There must surely be Dryads at Fontainebleau, then," said Madame, in a perfectly calm voice; "for I have never, in all my life, seen finer oaks than in the royal park." And as she spoke, she directed towards De Guiche a look of which he had no reason to complain, as he had of the one that preceded it; which, as we have already mentioned, had reserved a certain amount of indefiniteness most painful for so loving a heart as his.

"Precisely, Madame, it is of Fontainebleau I was about to speak to your royal highness," said Saint-Aignan; "for the Dryad whose story is engaging our attention, lives in the park belonging to the chateau of his majesty."

The affair was fairly embarked on; the action was begun, and it was no longer possible for auditory or narrator to draw back.

"It will be worth listening to," said Madame; "for the story not only appears to me to have all the interest of a national incident, but still more, seems to be a circumstance of very recent occurrence."

"I ought to begin at the beginning," said the comte. "In the first place, then, there lived at Fontainebleau, in a cottage of modest and unassuming appearance, two shepherds. The one was the shepherd Tyrcis, the owner of extensive domains transmitted to him from his parents, by right of inheritance. Tyrcis was young and handsome, and, from his many qualifications, he might be pronounced to be the first and foremost among the shepherds in the whole country; one might even boldly say he was the king of shepherds." A subdued murmur of approbation encouraged the narrator, who continued:—"His strength equals his courage; no one displays greater address in hunting wild beasts, nor greater wisdom in matters where judgment is required. Whenever he mounts and exercises his horse in the beautiful plains of his inheritance, or whenever he joins with the shepherds who owe him allegiance, in different games of skill and strength, one might say that it is the god Mars hurling his lance on the plains of Thrace, or, even better, that it was Apollo himself, the god of day, radiant upon earth, bearing his flaming darts in his hand." Every one understood that this allegorical portrait of the king was not the worst exordium the narrator could have chosen; and consequently it did not fail to produce its effect, either upon those who, from duty or inclination, applauded it to the very echo, or on the king himself, to whom flattery was very agreeable when delicately conveyed, and whom, indeed, it did not always displease, even when it was a little too broad. Saint-Aignan then continued:—"It is not in games of glory only, ladies, that the shepherd Tyrcis had acquired that reputation by which he was regarded as the king of the shepherds."

"Of the shepherds of Fontainebleau," said the king, smilingly, to Madame.

"Oh!" exclaimed Madame, "Fontainebleau is selected arbitrarily by the poet; but I should say, of the shepherds of the whole world." The king forgot his part of a passive auditor, and bowed.

"It is," paused Saint-Aignan, amidst a flattering murmur of applause, "it is with ladies fair especially that the qualities of this king of the shepherds are most prominently displayed. He is a shepherd with a mind as refined as his heart is pure; he can pay a compliment with a charm of manner whose fascination it is impossible to resist; and in his attachments he is so discreet, that beautiful and happy conquests may regard their lot as more than enviable. Never a syllable of disclosure, never a moment's forgetfulness. Whoever has seen and heard Tyrcis must love him; whoever loves and is beloved by him, has indeed found happiness." Saint-Aignan here paused; he was enjoying the pleasure of all these compliments; and the portrait he had drawn, however grotesquely inflated it might be, had found favour in certain ears, in which the perfections of the shepherd did not seem to have been exaggerated. Madame begged the orator to continue. "Tyrcis," said the comte, "had a faithful companion, or rather a devoted servant, whose name was—Amyntas."

"Ah!" said Madame, archly, "now for the portrait of Amyntas; you are such an excellent painter, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan."

"Madame—"

"Oh! comte, do not, I entreat you, sacrifice poor Amyntas; I should never forgive you."

"Madame, Amyntas is of too humble a position, particularly beside Tyrcis, for his person to be honoured by a parallel. There are certain friends who resemble those followers of ancient times, who caused themselves to be buried alive at their masters' feet. Amyntas's place, too, is at the feet of Tyrcis; he cares for no other; and if, sometimes, the illustrious hero—"

"Illustrious shepherd, you mean?" said Madame, pretending to correct M. de Saint-Aignan.

"Your royal highness is right; I was mistaken," returned the courtier; "if, I say, the shepherd Tyrcis deigns occasionally to call Amyntas his friend, and to open his heart to him, it is an unparalleled favour, which the latter regards as the most unbounded felicity."

"All that you say," interrupted Madame, "establishes the extreme devotion of Amyntas to Tyrcis, but does not furnish us with the portrait of Amyntas. Comte, do not flatter him, if you like; but describe him to us. I will have Amyntas's portrait." Saint-Aignan obeyed, after having bowed profoundly to his majesty's sister-in-law.

"Amyntas," he said, "is somewhat older than Tyrcis; he is not an ill-favoured shepherd; it is even said that the muses condescended to smile upon him at his birth, even as Hebe smiled upon youth. He is not ambitious of display, but he is ambitious of being loved; and he might not, perhaps, be found unworthy of it, if he were only sufficiently well-known."

This latter paragraph, strengthened by a killing glance, was directed straight to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who received them both unmoved. But the modesty and tact of the allusion had produced a good effect; Amyntas reaped the benefit of it in the applause bestowed upon him: Tyrcis's head even gave the signal for it by a consenting bow, full of good feeling.

"One evening," continued Saint-Aignan, "Tyrcis and Amyntas were walking together in the forest, talking of their love disappointments. Do not forget, ladies, that the story of the Dryad is now beginning, otherwise it would be easy to tell you what Tyrcis and Amyntas, the two most discreet shepherds of the whole earth, were talking about. They reached the thickest part of the forest, for the purpose of being quite alone, and of confiding their troubles more freely to each other, when suddenly the sound of voices struck upon their ears."

"Ah, ah!" said those who surrounded the narrator. "Nothing can be more interesting."

At this point, Madame, like a vigilant general inspecting his army, glanced at Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who could not help wincing as they drew themselves up.

"These harmonious voices," resumed Saint-Aignan, "were those of certain shepherdesses, who had been likewise desirous of enjoying the coolness of the shade, and who, knowing the isolated and almost unapproachable situation of the place, had betaken themselves there to interchange their ideas upon—" A loud burst of laughter occasioned by this remark of Saint-Aignan, and an imperceptible smile of the king, as he looked at Tonnay-Charente, followed this sally.

"The Dryad affirms positively," continued Saint-Aignan, "that the shepherdesses were three in number, and that all three were young and beautiful."

"What were their names?" said Madame, quickly.

"Their names?" said Saint-Aignan, who hesitated from fear of committing an indiscretion.

"Of course; you call your shepherds Tyrcis and Amyntas; give your shepherdesses names in a similar manner."

"Oh! Madame, I am not an inventor; I relate simply what took place as the Dryad related it to me."

"What did your Dryad, then, call these shepherdesses? You have a very treacherous memory, I fear. This Dryad must have fallen out with the goddess Mnemosyne."

"These shepherdesses, Madame? Pray remember that it is a crime to betray a woman's name."

"From which a woman absolves you, comte, on the condition that you will reveal the names of the shepherdesses."

"Their names were Phyllis, Amaryllys, and Galatea."

"Exceedingly well!—they have not lost by the delay," said Madame, "and now we have three charming names. But now for their portraits."

Saint-Aignan again made a slight movement.

"Nay, comte, let us proceed in due order," returned Madame. "Ought we not, sire, to have the portraits of the shepherdesses?"

The king, who expected this determined perseverance, and who began to feel some uneasiness, did not think it safe to provoke so dangerous an interrogator. He thought, too, that Saint-Aignan, in drawing the portraits, would find a means of insinuating some flattering allusions which would be agreeable to the ears of one his majesty was interested in pleasing. It was with this hope and with this fear that Louis authorized Saint-Aignan to sketch the portraits of the shepherdesses, Phyllis, Amaryllis, and Galatea.

"Very well, then; be it so," said Saint-Aignan, like a man who has made up his mind, and he began.

LVIII. Conclusion of the Story of a Naiad and of a Dryad.

"Phyllis," said Saint-Aignan, with a glance of defiance at Montalais, such as a fencing-master would give who invites an antagonist worthy of him to place himself on guard, "Phyllis is neither fair nor dark, neither tall nor short, neither too grave nor too gay; though but a shepherdess, she is as witty as a princess, and as coquettish as the most finished flirt that ever lived. Nothing can equal her excellent vision. Her heart yearns for everything her gaze embraces. She is like a bird, which, always warbling, at one moment skims the ground, at the next rises fluttering in pursuit of a butterfly, then rests itself upon the topmost branch of a tree, where it defies the bird-catchers either to come and seize it or to entrap it in their nets." The portrait bore such a strong resemblance to Montalais, that all eyes were directed towards her; she, however, with her head raised, and with a steady, unmoved look, listened to Saint-Aignan, as if he were speaking of an utter stranger.

"Is that all, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan?" inquired the princess.

"Oh! your royal highness, the portrait is but a mere sketch, and many more additions could be made, but I fear to weary your patience, or offend the modesty of the shepherdess, and I shall therefore pass on to her companion, Amaryllis."

"Very well," said Madame, "pass on to Amaryllis, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, we are all attention."

"Amaryllis is the eldest of the three, and yet," Saint-Aignan hastened to add, "this advanced age does not reach twenty years."

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who had slightly knitted her brows at the commencement of the description, unbent them with a smile.

"She is tall, with an astonishing abundance of beautiful hair, which she fastens in the manner of the Grecian statues; her walk is full of majesty, her attitude haughty; she has the air, therefore, rather of a goddess than a mere mortal, and among the goddesses, she most resembles Diana the huntress; with this sole difference, however, that the cruel shepherdess, having stolen the quiver of young love, while poor Cupid was sleeping in a thicket of roses, instead of directing her arrows against the inhabitants of the forest, discharges them pitilessly against all poor shepherds who pass within reach of her bow and of her eyes."

"Oh! what a wicked shepherdess!" said Madame. "She may some day wound herself with one of those arrows she discharges, as you say, so mercilessly on all sides."

"It is the hope of shepherds, one and all!" said Saint-Aignan.

"And that of the shepherd Amyntas in particular, I suppose?" said Madame.

"The shepherd Amyntas is so timid," said Saint-Aignan, with the most modest air he could assume, "that if he cherishes such a hope as that, no one has ever known anything about it, for he conceals it in the very depths of his heart." A flattering murmur of applause greeted this profession of faith on behalf of the shepherd.

"And Galatea?" inquired Madame. "I am impatient to see a hand so skillful as yours continue the portrait where Virgil left it, and finish it before our eyes."

"Madame," said Saint-Aignan, "I am indeed a poor dumb post beside the mighty Virgil. Still, encouraged by your desire, I will do my best."

Saint-Aignan extended his foot and hand, and thus began:—"White as milk, she casts upon the breeze the perfume of her fair hair tinged with golden hues, as are the ears of corn. One is tempted to inquire if she is not the beautiful Europa, who inspired Jupiter with a tender passion as she played with her companions in the flower-spangled meadows. From her exquisite eyes, blue as azure heaven on the clearest summer day, emanates a tender light, which reverie nurtures, and love dispenses. When she frowns, or bends her looks towards the ground, the sun is veiled in token of mourning. When she smiles, on the contrary, nature resumes her jollity, and the birds, for a brief moment silenced, recommence their songs amid the leafy covert of the trees. Galatea," said Saint-Aignan, in conclusion, "is worthy of the admiration of the whole world; and if she should ever bestow her heart upon another, happy will that man be to whom she consecrates her first affections."

Madame, who had attentively listened to the portrait Saint-Aignan had drawn, as, indeed, had all the others, contented herself with accentuating her approbation of the most poetic passage by occasional inclinations of her head; but it was impossible to say if these marks of assent were accorded to the ability of the narrator of the resemblance of the portrait. The consequence, therefore, was, that as Madame did not openly exhibit any approbation, no one felt authorized to applaud, not even Monsieur, who secretly thought that Saint-Aignan dwelt too much upon the portraits of the shepherdesses, and had somewhat slightly passed over the portraits of the shepherds. The whole assembly seemed suddenly chilled. Saint-Aignan, who had exhausted his rhetorical skill and his palette of artistic tints in sketching the portrait of Galatea, and who, after the favour with which his other descriptions had been received, already imagined he could hear the loudest applause allotted to this last one, was himself more disappointed than the king and the rest of the company. A moment's silence followed, which was at last broken by Madame.

"Well, sir," she inquired, "What is your majesty's opinion of these three portraits?"

The king, who wished to relieve Saint-Aignan's embarrassment without compromising himself, replied, "Why, Amaryllis, in my opinion, is beautiful."

"For my part," said Monsieur, "I prefer Phyllis; she is a capital girl, or rather a good-sort-of-fellow of a nymph."

A gentle laugh followed, and this time the looks were so direct, that Montalais felt herself blushing almost scarlet.

"Well," resumed Madame, "what were those shepherdesses saying to each other?"

Saint-Aignan, however, whose vanity had been wounded, did not feel himself in a position to sustain an attack of new and refreshed troops, and merely said, "Madame, the shepherdesses were confiding to one another their little preferences."

"Nay, nay! Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, you are a perfect stream of pastoral poesy," said Madame, with an amiable smile, which somewhat comforted the narrator.

"They confessed that love is a mighty peril, but that the absence of love is the heart's sentence of death."

"What was the conclusion they came to?" inquired Madame.

"They came to the conclusion that love was necessary."

"Very good! Did they lay down any conditions?"

"That of choice, simply," said Saint-Aignan. "I ought even to add,—remember it is the Dryad who is speaking,—that one of the shepherdesses, Amaryllis, I believe, was completely opposed to the necessity of loving, and yet she did not positively deny that she had allowed the image of a certain shepherd to take refuge in her heart."

"Was it Amyntas or Tyrcis?"

"Amyntas, Madame," said Saint-Aignan, modestly. "But Galatea, the gentle and soft-eyed Galatea, immediately replied, that neither Amyntas, nor Alpheisiboeus, nor Tityrus, nor indeed any of the handsomest shepherds of the country, were to be compared to Tyrcis; that Tyrcis was as superior to all other men, as the oak to all other trees, as the lily in its majesty to all other flowers. She drew even such a portrait of Tyrcis that Tyrcis himself, who was listening, must have felt truly flattered at it, notwithstanding his rank as a shepherd. Thus Tyrcis and Amyntas had been distinguished by Phyllis and Galatea; and thus had the secrets of two hearts revealed beneath the shades of evening, and amid the recesses of the woods. Such, Madame, is what the Dryad related to me; she who knows all that takes place in the hollows of oaks and grassy dells; she who knows the loves of the birds, and all they wish to convey by their songs; she who understands, in fact, the language of the wind among the branches, the humming of the insect with its gold and emerald wings in the corolla of the wild-flowers; it was she who related the particulars to me, and I have repeated them."

"And now you have finished, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, have you not?" said Madame, with a smile that made the king tremble.

"Quite finished," replied Saint-Aignan, "and but too happy if I have been able to amuse your royal highness for a few moments."

"Moments which have been too brief," replied the princess; "for you have related most admirably all you know; but, my dear Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, you have been unfortunate enough to obtain your information from one Dryad only, I believe?"

"Yes, Madame, only from one, I confess."

"The fact was, that you passed by a little Naiad, who pretended to know nothing at all, and yet knew a great deal more than your Dryad, my dear comte."

"A Naiad!" repeated several voices, who began to suspect that the story had a continuation.

"Of course close beside the oak you are speaking of, which, if I am not mistaken, is called the royal oak—is it not so, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan?"

Saint-Aignan and the king exchanged glances.

"Yes, Madame," the former replied.

"Well, close beside the oak there is a pretty little spring, which runs murmuringly over the pebbles, between banks of forget-me-nots and daffodils."

"I believe you are correct," said the king, with some uneasiness, and listening with some anxiety to his sister-in-law's narrative.

"Oh! there is one, I can assure you," said Madame; "and the proof of it is, that the Naiad who resides in that little stream stopped me as I was about to come."

"Ah?" said Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, indeed," continued the princess, "and she did so in order to communicate to me many particulars Monsieur de Saint-Aignan has omitted in his recital."

"Pray relate them yourself, then," said Monsieur, "you can relate stories in such a charming manner." The princess bowed at the conjugal compliment paid her.

"I do not possess the poetical powers of the comte, nor his ability to bring to light the smallest details."

"You will not be listened to with less interest on that account," said the king, who already perceived that something hostile was intended in his sister-in-law's story.

"I speak, too," continued Madame, "in the name of that poor little Naiad, who is indeed the most charming creature I ever met. Moreover, she laughed so heartily while she was telling me her story, that, in pursuance of that medical axiom that laughter is the finest physic in the world, I ask permission to laugh a little myself when I recollect her words."

The king and Saint-Aignan, who noticed spreading over many of the faces present a distant and prophetic ripple of the laughter Madame announced, finished by looking at each other, as if asking themselves whether there was not some little conspiracy concealed beneath these words. But Madame was determined to turn the knife in the wound over and over again; she therefore resumed with the air of the most perfect candor, in other words, with the most dangerous of all her airs: "Well, then, I passed that way," she said, "and as I found beneath my steps many fresh flowers newly blown, no doubt Phyllis, Amaryllis, Galatea, and all your shepherdesses had passed the same way before me."

The king bit his lips, for the recital was becoming more and more threatening. "My little Naiad," continued Madame, "was cooing over her quaint song in the bed of the rivulet; as I perceived that she accosted me by touching the hem of my dress, I could not think of receiving her advances ungraciously, and more particularly so, since, after all, a divinity, even though she be of a second grade, is always of greater importance than a mortal, though a princess. I thereupon accosted the Naiad, and bursting into laughter, this is what she said to me:

"'Fancy, princess...' You understand, sire, it is the Naiad who is speaking?"

The king bowed assentingly; and Madame continued:—"Fancy, princess, the banks of my little stream have just witnessed a most amusing scene. Two shepherds, full of curiosity, even indiscreetly so, have allowed themselves to be mystified in a most amusing manner by three nymphs, or three shepherdesses,—I beg your pardon, but I do not now remember if it was nymphs or shepherdesses she said; but it does not much matter, so we will continue."

The king, at this opening, coloured visibly, and Saint-Aignan, completely losing countenance, began to open his eyes in the greatest possible anxiety.

"The two shepherds,' pursued my nymph, still laughing, 'followed in the wake of the three young ladies,'—no, I mean, of the three nymphs; forgive me, I ought to say, of the three shepherdesses. It is not always wise to do that, for it may be awkward for those who are followed. I appeal to all the ladies present, and not one of them, I am sure, will contradict me."

The king, who was much disturbed by what he suspected was about to follow, signified his assent by a gesture.

"'But,' continued the Naiad, 'the shepherdesses had noticed Tyrcis and Amyntas gliding into the wood, and, by the light of the moon, they had recognized them through the grove of the trees.' Ah, you laugh!" interrupted Madame; "wait, wait, you are not yet at the end."

The king turned pale; Saint-Aignan wiped his forehead, now dewed with perspiration. Among the groups of ladies present could be heard smothered laughter and stealthy whispers.

"The shepherdesses, I was saying, noticing how indiscreet the two shepherds were, proceeded to sit down at the foot of the royal oak; and, when they perceived that their over-curious listeners were sufficiently near, so that not a syllable of what they might say could be lost, they addressed towards them very innocently, in the most artless manner in the world indeed, a passionate declaration, which from the vanity natural to all men, and even to the most sentimental of shepherds, seemed to the two listeners as sweet as honey."

The king, at these words, which the assembly was unable to hear without laughing, could not restrain a flash of anger darting from his eyes. As for Saint-Aignan, he let his head fall upon his breast, and concealed, under a silly laugh, the extreme annoyance he felt.

"Oh," said the king, drawing himself up to his full height, "upon my word, that is a most amusing jest, certainly; but, really and truly, are you sure you quite understood the language of the Naiads?"

"The comte, sire, pretends to have perfectly understood that of the Dryads," retorted Madame, icily.

"No doubt," said the king; "but you know the comte has the weakness to aspire to become a member of the Academy, so that, with this object in view, he has learnt all sorts of things of which very happily you are ignorant; and it might possibly happen that the language of the Nymph of the Waters might be among the number of things you have not studied."

"Of course, sire," replied Madame, "for facts of that nature one does not altogether rely upon one's self alone; a woman's ear is not infallible, so says Saint Augustine; and I, therefore, wished to satisfy myself by other opinions beside my own, and as my Naiad, who, in her character of a goddess, is polyglot,—is not that the expression, M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"I believe so," said the latter, quite out of countenance.

"Well," continued the princess, "as my Naiad, who, in her character of a goddess, had, at first spoken to me in English, I feared, as you suggest, that I might have misunderstood her, and I requested Mesdemoiselles de Montalais, de Tonnay-Charente, and de la Vallière, to come to me, begging my Naiad to repeat to me in the French language, the recital she had already communicated to me in English."

"And did she do so?" inquired the king.

"Oh, she is the most polite divinity it is possible to imagine! Yes, sire, she did so; so that no doubt whatever remains on the subject. Is it not so, young ladies?" said the princess, turning towards the left of her army; "did not the Naiad say precisely what I have related, and have I, in any one particular, exceeded the truth, Phyllis? I beg your pardon, I mean Mademoiselle Aure de Montalais?"

"Precisely as you have stated, Madame," articulated Mademoiselle de Montalais, very distinctly.

"Is it true, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente?"

"The perfect truth," replied Athenais, in a voice quite as firm, but not yet so distinct.

"And you, La Vallière?" asked Madame.

The poor girl felt the king's ardent look fixed upon her,—she dared not deny—she dared not tell a falsehood; she merely bowed her head; and everybody took it for a token of assent. Her head, however, was not raised again, chilled as she was by a coldness more bitter than that of death. This triple testimony overwhelmed the king. As for Saint-Aignan, he did not even attempt to dissemble his despair, and, hardly knowing what he said, he stammered out, "An excellent jest! admirably played!"

"A just punishment for curiosity," said the king, in a hoarse voice. "Oh! who would think, after the chastisement that Tyrcis and Amyntas had suffered, of endeavoring to surprise what is passing in the heart of shepherdesses? Assuredly I shall not, for one; and, you, gentlemen?"

"Nor ! nor !!" repeated, in a chorus, the group of courtiers.

Madame was filled with triumph at the king's annoyance; and was full of delight, thinking that her story had been, or was to be, the termination of the whole affair. As for Monsieur, who had laughed at the two stories without comprehending anything about them, he turned towards De Guiche, and said to him, "Well, comte, you say nothing; can you not find something to say? Do you pity M. Tyrcis and M. Amyntas, for instance?"

"I pity them with all my soul," replied De Guiche; "for, in very truth, love is so sweet a fancy, that to lose it, fancy though it may be, is to lose more than life itself. If, therefore, these two shepherds thought themselves beloved,—if they were happy in that idea, and if, instead of that happiness, they meet not only that empty void which resembles death, but jeers and jests at love itself, which is worse than a thousand deaths,—in that case, I say that Tyrcis and Amyntas are the two most unhappy men I know."

"And you are right, too, Monsieur de Guiche," said the king; "for, in fact, the injury in question is a very hard return for a little harmless curiosity."

"That is as much to say, then, that the story of my Naiad has displeased the king?" asked Madame, innocently.

"Nay, Madame, undeceive yourself," said Louis, taking the princess by the hand; "your Naiad, on the contrary, has pleased me, and the more so, because she was so truthful, and because her tale, I ought to add, is confirmed by the testimony of unimpeachable witnesses."

These words fell upon La Vallière, accompanied by a look that on one, from Socrates to Montaigne, could have exactly defined. The look and the king's remark succeeded in overpowering the unhappy girl, who, with her head upon Montalais's shoulder, seemed to have fainted away. The king rose, without remarking this circumstance, of which no one, moreover, took any notice, and, contrary to his usual custom, for generally he remained late in Madame's apartments, he took his leave, and retired to his own side of the palace. Saint-Aignan followed him, leaving the rooms in as much despair as he had entered them with delight. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, less sensitive than La Vallière, was not much frightened, and did not faint. However, it may be that the last look of Saint-Aignan had hardly been so majestic as the king's.

#### LVIII. Royal Psychology.

The king returned to his apartments with hurried steps. The reason he walked as fast as he did was probably to avoid tottering in his gait. He seemed to leave behind him as he went along a trace of a mysterious sorrow. That gayety of manner, which every one had remarked in him on his arrival, and which they had been delighted to perceive, had not perhaps been understood in its true sense: but his stormy departure, his disordered countenance, all knew, or at least thought they could tell the reason of. Madame's levity of manner, her somewhat bitter jests,—bitter for persons of a sensitive disposition, and particularly for one of the king's character; the great resemblance which naturally existed between the king and an ordinary mortal, were among the reasons assigned for the precipitate and unexpected departure of his majesty. Madame, keen-sighted enough in other respects, did not, however, at first see anything extraordinary in it. It was quite sufficient for her to have inflicted some slight wound upon the vanity or self-esteem of one who, so soon forgetting the engagements he had contracted, seemed to have undertaken to disdain, without cause, the noblest and highest prize in France. It was not an unimportant matter for Madame, in the present position of affairs, to let the king perceive the difference which existed between the bestowal of his affections on one in a high station, and the running after each passing fancy, like a youth fresh from the provinces. With regard to those higher placed affections, recognizing their dignity and their illimitable influence, acknowledging in them a certain etiquette and display—a monarch not only did not act in a manner derogatory to his high position, but found even repose, security, mystery, and general respect therein. On the contrary, in the debasement of a common or humble attachment, he would encounter, even among his meanest subjects, carping and sarcastic remarks; he would forfeit his character of infallibility and inviolability. Having descended to the region of petty human miseries, he would be subjected to paltry contentions. In one word, to convert the royal divinity into a mere mortal by striking at his heart, or rather even at his face, like the meanest of his subjects, was to inflict a terrible blow upon the pride of that generous nature. Louis was more easily captivated by vanity than affection. Madame had wisely calculated her vengeance, and it has been seen, also, in what manner she carried it out. Let it not be supposed, however, that Madame possessed such terrible passions as the heroines of the middle ages, or that she regarded things from a pessimistic point of view; on the contrary, Madame, young, amiable, of cultivated intellect, coquettish, loving in her nature, but rather from fancy, or imagination, or ambition, than from her heart—Madame, we say, on the contrary, inaugurated that epoch of light and fleeting amusements, which distinguished the hundred and twenty years that intervened between the middle of the seventeenth century, and the last quarter of the eighteenth. Madame saw, therefore, or rather fancied she saw, things under their true aspect; she knew that the king, her august brother-in-law, had been the first to ridicule the humble La Vallière, and that, in accordance with his usual custom, it was hardly probable he would ever love the person who had excited his laughter, even had it been only for a moment. Moreover, was not her vanity ever present, that evil influence which plays so important a part in that comedy of dramatic incidents called the life of a woman? Did not her vanity tell her, aloud, in a subdued voice, in a whisper, in every variety of tone, that she could not, in reality, she a princess, young, beautiful, and rich, be compared to the poor La Vallière, as youthful as herself it is true, but far less pretty, certainly, and utterly without money, protectors, or position? And surprise need not be excited with respect to Madame; for it is known that the greatest characters are those who flatter themselves the most in the comparisons they draw between themselves and others, between others and themselves. It may perhaps be asked what was Madame's motive for an attack so skillfully conceived and executed. Why was there such a display of forces, if it were not seriously her intention to dislodge the king from a heart that had never been occupied before, in which he seemed disposed to take refuge? Was there any necessity, then, for Madame to attach so great an importance to La Vallière, if she did not fear her? Yet Madame did not fear La Vallière in that direction in which an historian, who knows everything, sees into the future, or rather, the past. Madame was neither a prophetess nor a sibyl; nor could she, any more than another, read what was written in that terrible and fatal book of the future, which records in its most secret pages the most serious events. No, Madame desired simply to punish the king for having availed himself of secret means altogether feminine in their nature; she wished to prove to him that if he made use of offensive weapons of that nature, she, a woman of ready wit and high descent, would assuredly discover in the arsenal of her imagination defensive weapons proof even against the thrusts of a monarch. Moreover, she wished him to learn that, in a war of that description, kings are held of no account, or, at all events, that kings who fight on their own behalf, like ordinary individuals, may witness the fall of their crown in the first encounter; and that, in fact, if he had expected to be adored by all the ladies of the court from the very first, from a confident reliance on his mere appearance, it was a pretension which was most preposterous and insulting even, for certain persons who filled a higher position than others, and that a lesson taught in season to this royal personage, who assumed too high and haughty a carriage, would be rendering him a great service. Such, indeed, were Madame's reflections with respect to the king. The sequel itself was not thought of. And in this manner, it will be seen that she had exercised all her influence over the minds of her maids of honour, and with all its accompanying details, had arranged the comedy which had just been acted. The king was completely bewildered by it; for the first time since he had escaped from the trammels of M. de Mazarin, he found himself treated as a man. Similar severity from any of his subjects would have been at once resisted by him. Strength comes with battle. But to match one's self with women, to be attacked by them, to have been imposed upon by mere girls from the country, who had come from Blois expressly for that purpose; it was the depth of dishonour for a young sovereign full of the pride his personal advantages and royal power inspired him with. There was nothing he could do—neither reproaches, nor exile—nor could he even show the annoyance he felt. To manifest vexation would have been to admit that he had been touched, like Hamlet, by a sword from which the button had been removed—the sword of ridicule. To show animosity against women—humiliation! especially when the women in question have laughter on their side, as a means of vengeance. If, instead of leaving all the responsibility of the affair to these women, one of the courtiers had had anything to do with the intrigue, how delightedly would Louis have seized the opportunity of turning the Bastille to personal account. But there, again, the king's anger paused, checked by reason. To be the master of armies, of prisons, of an almost divine authority, and to exert such majesty and might in the service of a petty grudge, would be unworthy not only of a monarch, but even of a man. It was necessary, therefore, simply to swallow the affront in silence, and to wear his usual gentleness and graciousness of expression. It was essential to treat Madame as a friend. As a friend!—Well, and why not? Either Madame had been the instigator of the affair, or the affair itself had found her passive. If she had been the instigator of it, it certainly was a bold measure on her part, but, at all events, it was but natural in her. Who was it that had sought her in the earliest moments of her married life to whisper words of love in her ear? Who was it that had dared to calculate the possibility of committing a crime against the marriage vow—a crime, too, still more deplorable on account of the relationship between them? Who was it that, shielded behind his royal authority, had said to this young creature: be not afraid, love but the king of France, who is above all, and a movement of whose sceptered hand will protect you against all attacks, even from your own remorse? And she had listened to and obeyed the royal voice, had been influenced by his ensnaring tones; and when, morally speaking, she had sacrificed her honour in listening to him, she saw herself repaid for her sacrifice by an infidelity the more humiliating, since it was occasioned by a woman far beneath her in the world.

Had Madame, therefore, been the instigator of the revenge, she would have been right. If, on the contrary, she had remained passive in the whole affair, what grounds had the king to be angry with her on that account? Was it for her to restrain, or rather could she restrain, the chattering of a few country girls? and was it for her, by an excess of zeal that might have been misinterpreted, to check, at the risk of increasing it, the impertinence of their conduct? All these various reasonings were like so many actual stings to the king's pride; but when he had carefully, in his own mind, gone over all the various causes of complaint, Louis was surprised, upon due reflection—in other words, after the wound has been dressed—to find that there were other causes of suffering, secret, unendurable, and unrevealed. There was one circumstance he dared not confess, even to himself; namely, that the acute pain from which he was suffering had its seat in his heart. The fact is, he had permitted his heart to be gratified by La Vallière's innocent confusion. He had dreamed of a pure affection—of an affection for Louis the man, and not the sovereign—of an affection free from all self-interest; and his heart, simpler and more youthful than he had imagined it to be, had to meet that other heart that had revealed itself to him by its aspirations. The commonest thing in the complicated history of love, is the double inoculation of love to which any two hearts are subjected; the one loves nearly always before the other, in the same way that the latter finishes nearly always by loving after the other. In this way, the electric current is established, in proportion to the intensity of the passion which is first kindled. The more Mademoiselle de la Vallière showed her affection, the more the king's affection had increased. And it was precisely that which had annoyed his majesty. For it was now fairly demonstrated to him, that no sympathetic current had been the means of hurrying his heart away in its course, because there had been no confession of love in the case—because the confession was, in fact, an insult towards the man and towards the sovereign; and finally, because—and the word, too, burnt like a hot iron—because, in fact, it was nothing but a mystification after all. This girl, therefore, who, in strictness, could not lay claim to beauty, or birth, or great intelligence—who had been selected by Madame herself, on account of her unpretending position, had not only aroused the king's regard, but had, moreover, treated him with disdain—he, the king, a man who, like an eastern potentate, had but to bestow a glance, to indicate with his finger, to throw his handkerchief. And, since the previous evening, his mind had been so absorbed with this girl that he could think and dream of nothing else. Since the previous evening his imagination had been occupied by clothing her image with charms to which she could not lay claim. In very truth, he whom such vast interests summoned, and whom so many women smiled upon invitingly, had, since the previous evening, consecrated every moment of his time, every throb of his heart, to this sole dream. It was, indeed, either too much, or not sufficient. The indignation of the king, making him forget everything, and, among others, that Saint-Aignan was present, was poured out in the most violent imprecations. True it is, that Saint-Aignan had taken refuge in a corner of the room; and from his corner, regarded the tempest passing over. His own personal disappointment seemed contemptible, in comparison with the anger of the king. He compared with his own petty vanity the prodigious pride of offended majesty; and, being well read in the hearts of kings in general, and in those of powerful kings in particular, he began to ask himself if this weight of anger, as yet held in suspense, would not soon terminate by falling upon his own head, for the very reason that others were guilty, and he innocent. In point of fact, the king, all at once, did arrest his hurried pace; and, fixing a look full of anger upon Saint-Aignan, suddenly cried out: "And you, Saint-Aignan?"

Saint-Aignan made a sign which was intended to signify, “Well, sire?”

“Yes; you have been as silly as myself, I think.”

“Sire,” stammered out Saint-Aignan.

“You permitted us to be deceived by this shameless trick.”

“Sire,” said Saint-Aignan, whose agitation was such as to make him tremble in every limb, “let me entreat your majesty not to exasperate yourself. Women, you know, are characters full of imperfections, created for the misfortune of mankind: to expect anything good from them is to require them to perform impossibilities.”

The king, who had the greatest consideration for himself, and who had begun to acquire over his emotions that command which he preserved over them all his life, perceived that he was doing an outrage to his own dignity in displaying so much animosity about so trifling an object. “No,” he said, hastily; “you are mistaken, Saint-Aignan; I am not angry; I can only wonder that we should have been turned into ridicule so cleverly and with such audacity by these young girls. I am particularly surprised that, although we might have informed ourselves accurately on the subject, we were silly enough to leave the matter for our own hearts to decide.”

“The heart, sire, is an organ which requires positively to be reduced to its material functions, but which, for the sake of humanity’s peace of mind, should be deprived of all its metaphysical inclinations. For my own part, I confess, when I saw that your majesty’s heart was so taken up by this little—”

“My heart taken up! I! My mind might, perhaps, have been so; but as for my heart, it was—” Louis again perceived that, in order to fill one gulf, he was about to dig another. “Besides,” he added, “I have no fault to find with the girl. I was quite aware that she was in love with some one else.”

“The Vicomte de Bragelonne. I informed your majesty of the circumstance.”

“You did so: but you were not the first who told me. The Comte de la Fere had solicited from me Mademoiselle de la Vallière’s hand for his son. And, on his return from England, the marriage shall be celebrated, since they love each other.”

“I recognize your majesty’s great generosity of disposition in that act.”

“So, Saint-Aignan, we will cease to occupy ourselves with these matters any longer,” said Louis.

“Yes, we will digest the affront, sire,” replied the courtier, with resignation.

“Besides, it will be an easy matter to do so,” said the king, checking a sigh.

“And, by way of a beginning, I will set about the composition of an epigram upon all three of them. I will call it ‘The Naiad and Dryad,’ which will please Madame.”

“Do so, Saint-Aignan, do so,” said the king, indifferently. “You shall read me your verses; they will amuse me. Ah! it does not signify, Saint-Aignan,” added the king, like a man breathing with difficulty, “the blow requires more than human strength to support in a dignified manner.” As the king thus spoke, assuming an air of the most angelic patience, one of the servants in attendance knocked gently at the door. Saint-Aignan drew aside, out of respect.

“Come in,” said the king. The servant partially opened the door. “What is it?” inquired Louis.

The servant held out a letter of a triangular shape. “For your majesty,” he said.

“From whom?”

“I do not know. One of the officers on duty gave it to me.”

The valet, in obedience to a gesture of the king, handed him the letter. The king advanced towards the candles, opened the note, read the signature, and uttered a loud cry. Saint-Aignan was sufficiently respectful not to look on; but, without looking on, he saw and heard all, and ran towards the king, who with a gesture dismissed the servant. “Oh, heavens!” said the king, as he read the note.

“Is your majesty unwell?” inquired Saint-Aignan, stretching forward his arms.

“No, no, Saint-Aignan—read!” and he handed him the note.

Saint-Aignan’s eyes fell upon the signature. “La Vallière!” he exclaimed. “Oh, sire!”

“Read, *read!*”

And Saint-Aignan read:

“Forgive my importunity, sire; and forgive, also, the absence of the formalities which may be wanting in this letter. A note seems to be more speedy and more urgent than a dispatch. I venture, therefore, to address this note to your majesty. I have retired to my own room, overcome with grief and fatigue, sire; and I implore your majesty to grant me the favour of an audience, which will enable me to confess the *truth* to my sovereign.

“LOUISE de la VALLIÈRE.”

“Well?” asked the king, taking the letter from Saint-Aignan’s hands, who was completely bewildered by what he had just read.

“Well!” repeated Saint-Aignan.

“What do you think of it?”

“I hardly know.”

“Still, what is your opinion?”

“Sire, the young lady must have heard the muttering of the thunder, and has got frightened.”

“Frightened at what?” asked Louis with dignity.

“Why, your majesty has a thousand reasons to be angry with the author or authors of so hazardous a joke; and, if your majesty’s memory were to be awakened in a disagreeable sense, it would be a perpetual menace hanging over the head of this imprudent girl.”

“Saint-Aignan, I do not think as you do.”

“Your majesty doubtless sees more clearly than myself.”

“Well! I see affliction and restraint in these lines; more particularly since I recall some of the details of the scene which took place this evening in Madame’s apartments—” The king suddenly stopped, leaving his meaning unexpressed.

“In fact,” resumed Saint-Aignan, “your majesty will grant an audience; nothing is clearer than that.”

“I will do better, Saint-Aignan.”

“What is that, sire?”

“Put on your cloak.”

“But, sire—”

“You know the suite of rooms where Madame’s maids of honour are lodged?”

“Certainly.”

“You know some means of obtaining an entrance there.”

“As far as that is concerned, I do not.”

“At all events, you must be acquainted with some one there.”

“Really, your majesty is the source of every good idea.”

“You do know some one, then. Who is it?”

“I know a certain gentleman, who is on very good terms with a certain young lady there.”

“One of the maids of honour?”

“Yes, sire.”

“With Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, I suppose?” said the king, laughing.

“Fortunately, no, sire; with Montalais.”

“What is his name?”

“Malicorne.”

“And you can depend on him?”

“I believe so, sire. He ought to have a key of some sort in his possession; and if he should happen to have one, as I have done him a service, why, he will let us have it.”

“Nothing could be better. Let us set off immediately.”

The king threw his cloak over Saint-Aignan’s shoulders, asked him for his, and both went out into the vestibule.

LIX. Something That neither Naiad nor Dryad Foresaw.

Saint-Aignan stopped at the foot of the staircase leading to the *entresol*, where the maids of honour were lodged, and to the first floor, where Madame’s apartments were situated. Then, by means of one of the servants who was passing, he sent to apprise Malicorne, who was still with Monsieur. After having waited ten minutes, Malicorne arrived, full of self-importance. The king drew back towards the darkest part of the vestibule. Saint-Aignan, on the contrary, advanced to meet him, but at the first words, indicating his wish, Malicorne drew back abruptly.

“Oh, oh!” he said, “you want me to introduce you into the rooms of the maids of honour?”

“Yes.”

“You know very well that I cannot do anything of the kind, without being made acquainted with your object.”

“Unfortunately, my dear Monsieur Malicorne, it is quite impossible for me to give you any explanation; you must therefore confide in me as in a friend who got you out of a great difficulty yesterday, and who now begs you to draw him out of one to-day.”

“Yet I told you, monsieur, what my object was; which was, not to sleep out in the open air, and any man might express the same wish, whilst you, however, admit nothing.”

“Believe me, my dear Monsieur Malicorne,” Saint-Aignan persisted, “that if I were permitted to explain myself, I would do so.”

“In that case, my dear monsieur, it is impossible for me to allow you to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais’s apartment.”

“Why so?”

“You know why, better than any one else, since you caught me on the wall paying my addresses to Mademoiselle de Montalais; it would, therefore, be an excess of kindness on my part, you will admit, since I am paying my attentions to her, to open the door of her room to you.”

“But who told you it was on her account I asked you for the key?”

“For whom, then?”

“She does not lodge there alone, I suppose?”

“No, certainly; for Mademoiselle de la Vallière shares her rooms with her; but, really, you have nothing more to do with Mademoiselle de la Vallière than with Mademoiselle de Montalais, and there are only two men to whom I would give this key; to M. de Bragelonne, if he begged me to give it to him, and to the king, if he commanded me.”

“In that case, give me the key, monsieur: I order you to do so,” said the king, advancing from the obscurity, and partially opening his cloak. “Mademoiselle de Montalais will step down to talk with you, while we go up-stairs to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, for, in fact, it is she only whom we desire to see.”

“The king!” exclaimed Malicorne, bowing to the very ground.

“Yes, the king,” said Louis, smiling: “the king, who is as pleased with your resistance as with your capitulation. Rise, monsieur, and render us the service we request of you.”

“I obey, your majesty,” said Malicorne, leading the way up the staircase.

“Get Mademoiselle de Montalais to come down,” said the king, “and do not breathe a word to her of my visit.”

Malicorne bowed in token of obedience, and proceeded up the staircase. But the king, after a hasty reflection, followed him, and that, too, with such rapidity, that, although Malicorne was already more than half-way up the staircase, the king reached the room at the same moment. He then observed, by the door which remained half-opened behind Malicorne, La Vallière, sitting in an armchair with



her head thrown back, and in the opposite corner Montalais, who, in her dressing-gown, was standing before a looking-glass, engaged in arranging her hair, and parleying the while with Malicorne. The king hurriedly opened the door and entered the room. Montalais called out at the noise made by the opening of the door, and, recognizing the king, made her escape. La Vallière rose from her seat, like a dead person galvanized, and then fell back in her armchair. The king advanced slowly towards her.

"You wished for an audience, I believe," he said coldly. "I am ready to hear you. Speak."

Saint-Aignan, faithful to his character of being deaf, blind, and dumb, had stationed himself in a corner of the door, upon a stool which by chance he found there. Concealed by the tapestry which covered the doorway, and leaning his back against the wall, he could thus listen without being seen; resigning himself to the post of a good watch-dog, who patiently waits and watches without ever getting in his master's way.

La Vallière, terror-stricken at the king's irritated aspect, rose a second time, and assuming a posture full of humility and entreaty, murmured, "Forgive me, sire."

"What need is there for my forgiveness?" asked Louis.

"Sire, I have been guilty of a great fault; nay, more than a great fault, a great crime."

"You?"

"Sire, I have offended your majesty."

"Not in the slightest degree in the world," replied Louis XIV.

"I implore you, sire, not to maintain towards me that terrible seriousness of manner which reveals your majesty's just anger. I feel I have offended you, sire; but I wish to explain to you how it was that I have not offended you of my own accord."

"In the first place," said the king, "in what way can you possibly have offended me? I cannot perceive how. Surely not on account of a young girl's harmless and very innocent jest? You turned the credulity of a young man into ridicule—it was very natural to do so: any other woman in your place would have done the same."

"Oh! your majesty overwhelms me by your remark."

"Why so?"

"Because, if I had been the author of the jest, it would not have been innocent."

"Well, is that all you had to say to me in soliciting an audience?" said the king, as though about to turn away.

Thereupon La Vallière, in an abrupt and a broken voice, her eyes dried up by the fire of her tears, made a step towards the king, and said, "Did your majesty hear everything?"

"Everything, what?"

"Everything I said beneath the royal oak."

"I did not lose a syllable."

"And now, after your majesty really heard all, are you able to think I abused your credibility?"

"Credulity; yes, indeed, you have selected the very word."

"And your majesty did not suppose that a poor girl like myself might possibly be compelled to submit to the will of others?"

"Forgive me," returned the king; "but I shall never be able to understand that she, who of her own free will could express herself so unreservedly beneath the royal oak, would allow herself to be influenced to such an extent by the direction of others."

"But the threat held out against me, sire."

"Threat! who threatened you—who dared to threaten you?"

"Those who have the right to do so, sire."

"I do not recognize any one as possessing the right to threaten the humblest of my subjects."

"Forgive me, sire, but near your majesty, even, there are persons sufficiently high in position to have, or to believe that they possess, the right of injuring a young girl, without fortune, and possessing only her reputation."

"In what way injure her?"

"In depriving her of her reputation, by disgracefully expelling her from the court."

"Oh! Mademoiselle de la Vallière," said the king bitterly, "I prefer those persons who exculpate themselves without incriminating others."

"Sire!"

"Yes; and I confess that I greatly regret to perceive, that an easy justification, as your own would have been, is now complicated in my presence by a tissue of reproaches and imputations against others."

"And which you do not believe?" exclaimed La Vallière. The king remained silent.

"Nay, but tell me!" repeated La Vallière, vehemently.

"I regret to confess it," repeated the king, bowing coldly.

The young girl uttered a deep groan, striking her hands together in despair. "You do not believe me, then," she said to the king, who still remained silent, while poor La Vallière's features became visibly changed at his continued silence. "Therefore, you believe," she said, "that I pre-arranged this ridiculous, this infamous plot, of trifling, in so shameless a manner, with your majesty."

"Nay," said the king, "it was neither ridiculous nor infamous; it was not even a plot; merely a jest, more or less amusing, and nothing more."

"Oh!" murmured the young girl, "the king does not, and will not believe me, then?"

"No, indeed, I will not believe you," said the king. "Besides, in point of fact, what can be more natural? The king, you argue, follows me, listens to me, watches me; the king wishes perhaps to amuse himself at my expense, I will amuse myself at his, and as the king is very tender-hearted, I will take his heart by storm."

La Vallière hid her face in her hands, as she stifled her sobs. The king continued pitilessly; he was revenging himself upon the poor victim before him for all he had himself suffered.

"Let us invent, then, this story of my loving him and preferring him to others. The king is so simple and so conceited that he will believe me; and then we can go and tell others how credulous the king is, and can enjoy a laugh at his expense."

"Oh!" exclaimed La Vallière, "you think that, you believe that!—it is frightful."

"And," pursued the king, "that is not all; if this self-conceited prince take our jest seriously, if he should be imprudent enough to exhibit before others anything like delight at it, well, in that case, the king will be humiliated before the whole court; and what a delightful story it will be, too, for him to whom I am really attached, in fact part of my dowry for my husband, to have the adventure to relate of the monarch who was so amusingly deceived by a young girl."

"Sire!" exclaimed La Vallière, her mind bewildered, almost wandering, indeed, "not another word, I implore you; do you not see that you are killing me?"

"A jest, nothing but a jest," murmured the king, who, however, began to be somewhat affected.

La Vallière fell upon her knees, and that so violently, that the sound could be heard upon the hard floor. "Sire," she said, "I prefer shame to disloyalty."

"What do you mean?" inquired the king, without moving a step to raise the young girl from her knees.

"Sire, when I shall have sacrificed my honour and my reason both to you, you will perhaps believe in my loyalty. The tale which was related to you in Madame's apartments, and by Madame herself, is utterly false; and that which I said beneath the great oak—"

"Well!"

"That is the only truth."

"What!" exclaimed the king.

"Sire," exclaimed La Vallière, hurried away by the violence of her emotions, "were I to die of shame on the very spot where my knees are fixed, I would repeat it until my latest breath; I said that I loved you, and it is true; I do love you."

"You!"

"I have loved you, sire, from the very first day I ever saw you; from the moment when at Blois, where I was pining away my existence, your royal looks, full of light and life, were first bent upon me. I love you still, sire; it is a crime of high treason, I know, that a poor girl like myself should love her sovereign, and should presume to tell him so. Punish me for my audacity, despise me for my shameless immodesty; but do not ever say, do not ever think, that I have jested with or deceived you. I belong to a family whose loyalty has been proved, sire, and I, too, love my king."

Suddenly her strength, voice, and respiration ceased, and she fell forward, like the flower Virgil alludes to, which the scythe of the reaper severed in the midst of the grass. The king, at these words, at this vehement entreaty, no longer retained any ill-will or doubt in his mind: his whole heart seemed to expand at the glowing breath of an affection which proclaimed itself in such noble and courageous language. When, therefore, he heard the passionate confession, his strength seemed to fail him, and he hid his face in his hands. But when he felt La Vallière's hands clinging to his own, when their warm pressure fired his blood, he bent forward, and passing his arm round La Vallière's waist, he raised her from the ground and pressed her against his heart. But she, her drooping head fallen forward on her bosom, seemed to have ceased to live. The king, terrified, called out for Saint-Aignan. Saint-Aignan, who had carried his discretion so far as to remain without stirring in his corner, pretending to wipe away a tear, ran forward at the king's summons. He then assisted Louis to seat the young girl upon a couch, slapped her hands, sprinkled some Hungary water over her face, calling out all the while, "Come, come, it is all over; the king believes you, and forgives you. There, there now! take care, or you will agitate his majesty too much; his majesty is so sensitive, so tender-hearted. Now, really, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, you must pay attention, for the king is very pale."

The fact was, the king was visibly losing colour. But La Vallière did not move.

"Do pray recover," continued Saint-Aignan. "I beg, I implore you; it is really time you should; think only of one thing, that if the king should become unwell, I should be obliged to summon his physician. What a state of things that would be! So do pray rouse yourself; make an effort, pray do, and do so at once, my dear."

It was difficult to display more persuasive eloquence than Saint-Aignan did, but something still more powerful, and of a more energetic nature than this eloquence, aroused La Vallière. The king, who was kneeling before her, covered the palms of her hands with those burning kisses which are to the hands what a kiss upon the lips is to the face. La Vallière's senses returned to her; she languidly opened her eyes and, with a dying look, murmured, "Oh! sire, has your majesty pardoned me, then?"

The king did not reply, for he was still too much overcome. Saint-Aignan thought it was his duty again to retire, for he observed the passionate devotion which was displayed in the king's gaze. La Vallière rose.

"And now, sire, that I have justified myself, at least I trust so, in your majesty's eyes, grant me leave to retire into a convent. I shall bless your majesty all my life, and I shall die thanking and loving Heaven for having granted me one hour of perfect happiness."

"No, no," replied the king, "you will live here blessing Heaven, on the contrary, but loving Louis, who will make your existence one of perfect felicity—Louis who loves you—Louis who swears it."

"Oh! sire, sire!"

And upon this doubt of La Vallière, the king's kisses became so warm that Saint-Aignan thought it was his duty to retire behind the tapestry. These kisses, however, which she had not the strength at first to resist, began to intimidate the young girl.

"Oh! sire," she exclaimed, "do not make me repeat my loyalty, for this would show me that your majesty despises me still."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière," said the king, suddenly, drawing back with an air full of respect, "there is nothing in the world that I love and honour more than yourself, and nothing in my court, I call Heaven to witness, shall be so highly regarded as you shall be henceforward. I entreat your forgiveness for my transport; it arose from an excess of affection, but I can prove to you that I love you more than ever by respecting you as much as you can possibly desire or deserve." Then, bending before her, and taking her by the hand, he said to her, "Will you honour me by accepting the kiss I press upon your hand?" And the king's lips were pressed respectfully and lightly upon the young girl's trembling hand. "Henceforth," added Louis, rising and bending his glance upon La Vallière, "henceforth you are under my safeguard. Do not speak to any one of the injury I have done you, forgive others that which they may have attempted. For the future, you shall be so far above all those, that, far from inspiring you with fear, they shall be even beneath your pity." And he bowed as reverently as though he were leaving a place of worship. Then calling to Saint-Aignan, who approached with great humility, he said, "I hope, comte, that Mademoiselle de la Vallière will kindly confer a little of her friendship upon you, in return for that which I have vowed to her eternally."

Saint-Aignan bent his knee before La Vallière, saying, "How happy, indeed, would such an honour make me!"

"I will send your companion back to you," said the king. "Farewell! or, rather, adieu till we meet again; do not forget me in your prayers, I entreat."

"Oh!" cried La Vallière, "be assured that you and Heaven are in my heart together."

These words of Louise elated the king, who, full of happiness, hurried Saint-Aignan down the stairs. Madame had not anticipated this *denouement*; and neither the Naiad nor the Dryad had breathed a word about it.

LX. The New General of the Jesuits.

While La Vallière and the king were mingling, in their first confession of love, all the bitterness of the past, the happiness of the present, and hopes of the future, Fouquet had retired to the apartments which had been assigned to him in the chateau, and was conversing with Aramis precisely upon the very subjects which the king at that moment was forgetting.

"Now tell me," said Fouquet, after having installed his guest in an armchair and seated himself by his side, "tell me, Monsieur d'Herblay, what is our position with regard to the Belle-Isle affair, and whether you have received any news about it."

"Everything is going on in that direction as we wish," replied Aramis; "the expenses have been paid, and nothing has transpired of our designs."

"But what about the soldiers the king wished to send there?"

"I have received news this morning they arrived there fifteen days ago."

"And how have they been treated?"

"In the best manner possible."

"What has become of the former garrison?"

"The soldiers were landed at Sarzeau, and then transferred immediately to Quimper."

"And the new garrison?"

"Belongs to us from this very moment."

"Are you sure of what you say, my dear Monsieur de Vannes?"

"Quite sure, and, moreover, you will see by and by how matters have turned out."

"Still you are very well aware, that, of all the garrison towns, Belle-Isle is precisely the very worst."

"I know it, and have acted accordingly; no space to move about, no gayety, no cheerful society, no gambling permitted: well, it is a great pity," added Aramis, with one of those smiles so peculiar to him, "to see how much young people at the present day seek amusement, and how much, consequently, they incline to the man who procures and pays for their favourite pastimes."

"But if they amuse themselves at Bell-Isle?"

"If they amuse themselves through the king's means, they will attach themselves to the king; but if they get bored to death through the king's means, and amuse themselves through M. Fouquet, they will attach themselves to M. Fouquet."

"And you informed my intendant, of course?—so that immediately on their arrival—"

"By no means; they were left alone a whole week, to weary themselves at their ease; but, at the end of the week, they cried out, saying that former officers amused themselves much better. Whereupon they were told that the old officers had been able to make a friend of M. Fouquet, and that M. Fouquet, knowing them to be friends of his, had from that moment done all he possibly could to prevent their getting wearied or bored upon his estates. Upon this they began to reflect. Immediately afterwards, however, the intendant added, that without anticipating M. Fouquet's orders, he knew his master sufficiently well to be aware that he took an interest in every gentleman in the king's service, and that, although he did not know the new-comers, he would do as much for them as he had done for the others."

"Excellent! and I trust that the promises were followed up; I desire, as you know, that no promise should ever be made in my name without being kept."

"Without a moment's loss of time, our two privateers, and your own horses, were placed at the disposal of the officers; the keys of the principal mansion were handed over to them, so that they made up hunting-parties, and walking excursions with such ladies as are to be found in Belle-Isle; and such other as they are enabled to enlist from the neighborhood, who have no fear of sea-sickness."

"And there is a fair sprinkling to be met with at Sarzeau and Vannes, I believe, your eminence?"

"Yes; in fact all along the coast," said Aramis, quietly.

"And now, how about the soldiers?"

"Everything precisely the same, in a relative degree, you understand; the soldiers have plenty of wine, excellent provisions, and good pay."

"Very good; so that—"

"So that this garrison can be depended upon, and it is a better one than the last."

"Good."

"The result is, if Fortune favours us, so that the garrisons are changed in this manner, only every two months, that, at the end of every three years, the whole army will, in its turn, have been there; and, therefore, instead of having one regiment in our favour, we shall have fifty thousand men."

"Yes, yes; I knew perfectly well," said Fouquet, "that no friend could be more incomparable and invaluable than yourself, my dear Monsieur d'Herblay; but," he added, laughing, "all this time we are forgetting our friend, Du Vallon; what has become of him? During the three days I spent at Saint-Mande, I confess I have forgotten him completely."

"I do not forget him, however," returned Aramis. "Porthos is at Saint-Mande; his joints are kept well greased, the greatest care is being taken care of him with regard to the food he eats, and the wines he drinks; I advise him to take daily airings in the small park, which you have kept for your own use, and he makes us of it accordingly. He begins to walk again, he exercises his muscular powers by bending down young elm-trees, or making the old oaks fly into splinters, as Milo of Crotona used to do; and, as there are no lions in the park, it is not unlikely we shall find him alive. Porthos is a brave fellow."

"Yes, but in the mean time he will get bored to death."

"Oh, no; he never does that."

"He will be asking questions?"

"He sees no one."

"At all events, he is looking or hoping for something or another."

"I have inspired in him a hope which we will realize some fine morning, and on that he subsists."

"What is it?"

"That of being presented to the king."

"Oh! in what character?"

"As the engineer of Belle-Isle, of course."

"Is it possible?"

"Quite true."

"Shall we not be obliged, then, to send him back to Belle-Isle?"

"Most certainly; I am even thinking of sending him as soon as possible. Porthos is very fond of display; he is man whose weakness D'Artagnan, Athos, and myself are alone acquainted with; he never commits himself in any way; he is dignity himself; to the officers there, he would seem like a Paladin of the time of the Crusades. He would make the whole staff drunk, without getting tipsy in the least himself, and every one will regard him with admiration and sympathy; if, therefore, it should happen that we have any orders requiring to be carried out, Porthos is an incarnation of the order itself, and whatever he chose to do others would find themselves obliged to submit to."

"Send him back, then."

"That is what I intend to do; but only in a few days; for I must not omit to tell you one thing."

"What is it?"

"I begin to mistrust D'Artagnan. He is not at Fontainebleau, as you may have noticed, and D'Artagnan is never absent, or apparently idle, without some object in view. And now that my own affairs are settled, I am going to try and ascertain what the affairs are in which D'Artagnan is engaged."

"Your own affairs are settled, you say?"

"Yes."

"You are very fortunate in that case, then, and I should like to be able to say the same."

"I hope you do not make yourself uneasy."

"Hum!"

"Nothing could be better than the king's reception of you."

"True."

"And Colbert leaves you in peace."

"Nearly so."

"In that case," said Aramis, with that connection of ideas which marked him, "in that case, then, we can bestow a thought upon the young girl I was speaking to you about yesterday."

"Whom do you mean?"

"What, have you forgotten already? I mean La Vallière."

"Ah! of course, of course."

"Do you object, then, to try and make a conquest of her?"

"In one respect only; my heart is engaged in another direction, and I positively do not care about the girl in the least."

"Oh, oh!" said Aramis, "your heart is engaged, you say. The deuce! we must take care of that."

"Why?"

"Because it is terrible to have the heart occupied, when others, besides yourself, have so much need of the head."

"You are right. So you see, at your first summons, I left everything. But to return to this girl. What good do you see in my troubling myself about her?"

"This.—The king, it is said, has taken a fancy to her; at least, so it is supposed."

"But you, who know everything, know very differently."

"I know that the king is greatly and suddenly changed; that the day before yesterday he was crazy over Madame; that a few days ago, Monsieur complained of it, even to the queen-mother; and that some conjugal misunderstandings and maternal scoldings were the consequence."

"How do you know all that?"

"I do know it; at all events, since these misunderstandings and scoldings, the king has not addressed a word, has not paid the slightest attention, to her royal highness."

"Well, what next?"

"Since then, he has been taken up with Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Now, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is one of Madame's maids of honour. You happen to know, I suppose, what is called a *chaperon* in matters of love. Well, then, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is Madame's *chaperon*. It is for you to take advantage of this state of things. You have no occasion for me to tell you that. But, at all events, wounded vanity will render the conquest an easier one; the girl will get hold of the king, and Madame's secret, and you can scarcely predict what a man of intelligence can do with a secret."

"But how to get at her?"

"Nay, you, of all men, to ask me such a question!" said Aramis.

"Very true. I shall not have any time to take any notice of her."

"She is poor and unassuming, you will create a position for her, and whether she tames the king as his lady confessor, or his sweetheart, you will have enlisted a new and valuable ally."

"Very good," said Fouquet. "What is to be done, then, with regard to this girl?"

"Whenever you have taken a fancy to any lady, Monsieur Fouquet, what course have you generally pursued?"

"I have written to her, protesting my devotion to her. I have added, how happy I should be to render her any service in my power, and have signed 'Fouquet,' at the end of the letter."

"And has any one offered resistance?"

"One person only," replied Fouquet. "But, four days ago, she yielded, as the others had done."

"Will you take the trouble to write?" said Aramis, holding a pen towards him, which Fouquet took, saying:

"I will write at your dictation. My head is so taken up in another direction, that I should not be able to write a couple lines."

"Very well," said Aramis, "write."

And he dictated, as follows: "Mademoiselle—I have seen you—and you will not be surprised to learn, I think you very beautiful. But, for want of the position you merit at court, your presence there is a waste of time. The devotion of a man of honour, should ambition of any kind inspire you, might possibly serve as a means of display for your talent and beauty. I place my devotion at your feet; but, as an affection, however reserved and unpresuming it may be, might possibly compromise the object of its worship, it would ill become a person of your merit running the risk of being compromised, without her future being assured. If you would deign to accept, and reply to my affection, my affection shall prove its gratitude to you in making you free and independent forever."

Having finished writing, Fouquet looked at Aramis.

"Sign it," said the latter.

"Is it absolutely necessary?"

"Your signature at the foot of that letter is worth a million; you forget that." Fouquet signed.

"Now, by whom do you intend to send this letter?" asked Aramis.

"By an excellent servant of mine."

"Can you rely on him?"

"He is a man who has been with me all my life."

"Very well. Besides, in this case, we are not playing for very heavy stakes."

"How so? For if what you say be true of the accommodating disposition of this girl for the king and Madame, the king will give her all the money she can ask for."

"The king has money, then?" asked Aramis.

"I suppose so, for he has not asked me for any more."

"Be easy, he will ask for some, soon."

"Nay, more than that, I had thought he would have spoken to me about the *fete* at Vaux, but he never said a word about it."

"He will be sure to do so, though."

"You must think the king's disposition a very cruel one, Monsieur d'Herblay."

"It is not he who is so."

"He is young, and therefore his disposition is a kind one."

"He is young, and either he is weak, or his passions are strong; and Monsieur Colbert holds his weakness and his passions in his villainous grasp."

"You admit that you fear him?"

"I do not deny it."

"I that case I am lost."

"Why so?"

"My only influence with the king has been through the money I commanded, and now I am a ruined man."

"Not so."

"What do you mean by 'not so?' Do you know my affairs better than myself?"

"That is not unlikely."

"If he were to request this *fete* to be given?"

"You would give it, of course."

"But where is the money to come from?"

"Have you ever been in want of any?"

"Oh! if you only knew at what a cost I procured the last supply."

"The next shall cost you nothing."

"But who will give it me?"

"I will."

"What, give me six millions?"

"Ten, if necessary."

"Upon my word, D'Herblay," said Fouquet, "your confidence alarms me more than the king's displeasure. Who can you possibly be, after all?"

"You know me well enough, I should think."

"Of course; but what is it you are aiming at?"

"I wish to see upon the throne of France a king devoted to Monsieur Fouquet, and I wish Monsieur Fouquet to be devoted to me."

"Oh!" exclaimed Fouquet, pressing his hand,—“as for being devoted to you, I am yours, entirely; but believe me, my dear D'Herblay, you are deceiving yourself."

"In what respect?"

"The king will never become devoted to me."

"I do not remember to have said that King Louis would ever become devoted to you."

"Why, on the contrary, you have this moment said so."

"I did not say *the* king; I said *a* king."

"Is it not all the same?"

"No, on the contrary, it is altogether different."

"I do not understand you."

"You will do so, shortly, then; suppose, for instance, the king in question were to be a very different person to Louis XIV."

"Another person."

"Yes, who is indebted for everything to you."

"Impossible."

"His very throne, even."

"You are mad, D'Herblay. There is no man living besides Louis XIV. who can sit on the throne of France. I know of none, not one."

*"But* I know one."

"Unless it be Monsieur," said Fouquet, looking at Aramis uneasily; "yet Monsieur—"

"It is *not* Monsieur."

"But how can it be, that a prince not of the royal line, that a prince without any right—"

"My king, or rather your king, will be everything that is necessary, be assured of that."

"Be careful, Monsieur d'Herblay, you make my blood run cold, and my head swim."

Aramis smiled. "There is but little occasion for that," he replied.

"Again, I repeat, you terrify me," said Fouquet. Aramis smiled.

"You laugh," said Fouquet.

"The day will come when you will laugh too; only at the present moment I must laugh alone."

"But explain yourself."

"When the proper time comes, I will explain all. Fear nothing. Have faith in me, and doubt nothing."

"The fact is, I cannot but doubt, because I do not see clearly, or even at all."

"That is because of your blindness; but a day will come when you will be enlightened."

"Oh!" said Fouquet, "how willingly would I believe."

"You, without belief! you, who, through my means, have ten times crossed the abyss yawning at your feet, and in which, had you been alone, you would have been irretrievably swallowed; you, without belief; you, who from procureur-general attained the rank of intendant, from the rank of intendant, that of the first minister of the crown, and who from the rank of first minister will pass to that of mayor of the palace. But no," he said, with the same unaltered smile, "no, no, you cannot see, and consequently cannot believe—what I tell you." And Aramis rose to withdraw.

"One word more," said Fouquet; "you have never yet spoken to me in this manner, you have never yet shown yourself so confident, I should rather say so daring."

"Because it is necessary, in order to speak confidently, to have the lips unfettered."

"And that is now your case?"

"Yes."

"Since a very short time, then?"

"Since yesterday, only."

"Oh! Monsieur d'Herblay, take care, your confidence is becoming audacity."

"One can well be audacious when one is powerful."

"And you are powerful?"

"I have already offered you ten millions; I repeat the offer."

Fouquet rose, profoundly agitated.

"Come," he said, "come; you spoke of overthrowing kings and replacing them by others. If, indeed, I am not really out of my senses, is or is not that what you said just now?"

"You are by no means out of your senses, for it is perfectly true I did say all that just now."

"And why did you say so?"

"Because it is easy to speak in this manner of thrones being cast down, and kings being raised up, when one is, one's self, far above all kings and thrones, of this world at least."

"Your power is infinite, then?" cried Fouquet.

"I have told you so already, and I repeat it," replied Aramis, with glistening eyes and trembling lips.

Fouquet threw himself back in his chair, and buried his face in his hands. Aramis looked at him for a moment, as the angel of human destinies might have looked upon a simple mortal. "Adieu," he said to him, "sleep undisturbed, and send your letter to La Vallière. To-morrow we shall see each other again." "Yes, to-morrow," said Fouquet, shaking his hands like a man returning to his senses. "But where shall we see each other?" "At the king's promenade, if you like." "Agreed." And they separated.

LXI. The Storm.

The dawn of the following day was dark and gloomy, and as every one knew that the promenade was down in the royal programme, every one's gaze, as his eyes were opened, was directed towards the sky. Just above the tops of the trees a thick, suffocating vapor seemed to remain suspended, with barely sufficient power to rise thirty feet above the ground under the influence of the sun's rays, which was scarcely visible as a faint spot of lesser darkness through the veil of heavy mist. No dew had fallen in the morning; the turf was dried up for want of moisture, the flowers withered. The birds sang less inspiringly than usual upon the boughs, which remained motionless as the limbs of corpses. The strange confused and animated murmurs, which seemed born and to exist in virtue of the sun, that respiration of nature which is unceasingly heard amidst all other sounds, could not be heard now, and never had the silence been so profound.

The king had noticed the cheerless aspect of the heavens as he approached the window immediately upon rising. But as all the necessary directions had been given respecting the promenade, and every preparation had been made accordingly, and as, which was far more imperative than anything else, Louis relied upon this promenade to satisfy the cravings of his imagination, and we will even already say, the clamorous desires of his heart—the king unhesitatingly decided that the appearance of the heavens had nothing whatever to do with the matter; that the promenade was arranged, and that, whatever the state of the weather, the promenade should take place. Besides, there are certain terrestrial sovereigns who seem to have accorded them privileged existences, and there are certain times when it might almost be supposed that the expressed wish of an earthly monarch has its influence over the Divine will. It was Virgil who observed of Augustus: *Nocte pluit tota redeunt spectacula mane.* 10

Louis attended mass as usual, but it was evident that his attention was somewhat distracted from the presence of the Creator by the remembrance of the creature. His mind was occupied during the service in reckoning more than once the number of minutes, then of seconds, which separated him from the blissful moment when the promenade would begin, that is to say, the moment when Madame would set out with her maids of honour. Besides, as a matter of course, everybody at the chateau was ignorant of the interview which had taken place between La Vallière and the king. Montalais, perhaps, with her usual chattering propensity, might have been disposed to talk about it; but Montalais on this occasion was held in check by Malicorne, who had securely fastened on her pretty lips the golden padlock of mutual interest. As for Louis XIV., his happiness was so extreme that he had forgiven Madame, or nearly so, her little piece of malice of the previous evening. In fact, he had occasion to congratulate himself rather than to complain of it. Had it not been for her ill-natured action, he would not have received the letter from La Vallière; had it not been for the letter, he would have had no interview; and had it not been for the interview he would have remained undecided. His heart was filled with too much happiness for any ill-feeling to remain in it, at that moment at least. Instead, therefore, of knitting his brows into a frown when he perceived his sister-in-law, Louis resolved to receive her in a more friendly and gracious manner than usual. But on one condition only, that she would be ready to set out early. Such was the nature of Louis's thoughts during mass; which made him, during the ceremony, forget matters which, in his character of Most Christian King and of the eldest son of the Church, ought to have occupied his attention. He returned to the chateau, and as the promenade was fixed for midday, and it was at present just ten o'clock, he set to work desperately with Colbert and Lyonne. But even while he worked Louis went from the table to the window, inasmuch as the window looked out upon Madame's pavilion: he could see M. Fouquet in the courtyard, to whom the courtiers, since the favour shown towards him on the previous evening, paid greater attention than ever. The king, instinctively, on noticing Fouquet, turned towards Colbert, who was smiling, and seemed full of benevolence and delight, a state of feeling which had arisen from the very moment one of his secretaries had entered and handed him a pocket-book, which he had put unopened into his pocket. But, as there was always something sinister at the bottom of any delight expressed by Colbert, Louis preferred, of the smiles of the two men, that of Fouquet. He beckoned to the superintendent to come up, and turning towards Lyonne and Colbert, he said:—"Finish this matter, place it on my desk, and I will read it at my leisure." And he left the room. At the sign the king had made to him, Fouquet had hastened up the staircase, while Aramis, who was with the superintendent, quietly retired among the group of courtiers and disappeared without having been even observed by the king. The king and Fouquet met at the top of the staircase.

"Sire," said Fouquet, remarking the gracious manner in which Louis was about to receive him, "your majesty has overwhelmed me with kindness during the last few days. It is not a youthful monarch, but a being of higher order, who reigns over France, one whom pleasure, happiness, and love acknowledge as their master." The king coloured. The compliment, although flattering, was not the less somewhat pointed. Louis conducted Fouquet to a small room that divided his study from his sleeping-apartment.

"Do you know why I summoned you?" said the king as he seated himself upon the edge of the window, so as not to lose anything that might be passing in the gardens which fronted the opposite entrance to Madame's pavilion.

"No, sire," replied Fouquet, "but I am sure for something agreeable, if I am to judge from your majesty's gracious smile."

"You are mistaken, then."

"I, sire?"

"For I summoned you, on the contrary, to pick a quarrel with you."

"With me, sire?"

"Yes: and that a serious one."

"Your majesty alarms me—and yet I was most confident in your justice and goodness."

"Do you know I am told, Monsieur Fouquet, that you are preparing a grand *fête* at Vaux."

Fouquet smiled, as a sick man would do at the first shiver of a fever which has left him but returns again.

"And that you have not invited me!" continued the king.

"Sire," replied Fouquet, "I have not even thought of the *fête* you speak of, and it was only yesterday evening that one of my *friends*," Fouquet laid a stress upon the word, "was kind enough to make me think of it."

"Yet I saw you yesterday evening, Monsieur Fouquet, and you said nothing to me about it."

"How dared I hope that your majesty would so greatly descend from your own exalted station as to honour my dwelling with your royal presence?"

"Excuse me, Monsieur Fouquet, you did not speak to me about your *fête*."

"I did not allude to the *fête* to your majesty, I repeat, in the first place, because nothing had been decided with regard to it, and, secondly, because I feared a refusal."

"And something made you fear a refusal, Monsieur Fouquet? You see I am determined to push you hard."

"The profound wish I had that your majesty should accept my invitation—"

"Well, Monsieur Fouquet, nothing is easier, I perceive, than our coming to an understanding. Your wish is to invite me to your *fête*, my own is to be present at it; invite me and I will go."

"Is it possible that your majesty will deign to accept?" murmured the superintendent.

"Why, really, monsieur," said the king, laughing, "I think I do more than accept; I rather fancy I am inviting myself."

"Your majesty overwhelms me with honour and delight," exclaimed Fouquet, "but I shall be obliged to repeat what M. Vieuville said to your ancestor, Henry IV., *Domine non sum dignus*." 11

"To which I reply, Monsieur Fouquet, that if you give a *fête*, I will go, whether I am invited or not."

"I thank your majesty deeply," said Fouquet, as he raised his head beneath this favour, which he was convinced would be his ruin.

"But how could your majesty have been informed of it?"

"By a public rumor, Monsieur Fouquet, which says such wonderful things of yourself and the marvels of your house. Would you become proud, Monsieur Fouquet, if the king were to be jealous of you?"

"I should be the happiest man in the world, sire, since the very day on which your majesty were to be jealous of Vaux, I should possess something worthy of being offered to you."

"Very well, Monsieur Fouquet, prepare your *fête*, and open the door of your house as wide as possible."

"It is for your majesty to fix the day."

"This day month, then."

"Has your majesty any further commands?"

"Nothing, Monsieur Fouquet, except from the present moment until then to have you near me as much as possible."

"I have the honour to form one of your majesty's party for the promenade."

"Very good; indeed, I am now setting out; for there are the ladies, I see, who are going to start."

With this remark, the king, with all the eagerness, not only of a young man, but of a young man in love, withdrew from the window, in order to take his gloves and cane, which his valet held ready for him. The neighing of the horses and the crunching of the wheels on the gravel of the courtyard could be distinctly heard. The king descended the stairs, and at the moment he appeared upon the flight of steps, every one stopped. The king walked straight up to the young queen. The queen-mother, who was still suffering more than ever from the illness with which she was afflicted, did not wish to go out. Maria Theresa accompanied Madame in her carriage, and asked the king in what direction he wished the promenade to drive. The king, who had just seen La Vallière, still pale from the event of the previous evening, get into a carriage with three of her companions, told the queen that he had no preference, and wherever she would like to go, there would he be with her. The queen then desired that the outriders should proceed in the direction of Apremont. The outriders set off accordingly before the others. The king rode on horseback, and for a few minutes accompanied the carriage of the queen and Madame. The weather had cleared up a little, but a kind of veil of dust, like a thick gauze, was still spread over the surface of the heavens, and the sun made every atom glisten within the circuit of its rays. The heat was stifling; but, as the king did not seem to pay any attention to the appearance of the heavens, no one made himself uneasy about it, and the promenade, in obedience to the orders given by the queen, took its course in the direction of Apremont. The courtiers who followed were in the very highest spirits; it was evident that every one tried to forget, and to make others forget, the bitter discussions of the previous evening. Madame, particularly, was delightful. In fact, seeing the king at the door of her carriage, as she did not suppose he would be there for the queen's sake, she hoped that her prince had returned to her. Hardly, however, had they proceeded a quarter of a mile on the road, when the king, with a gracious smile, saluted them and drew up his horse, leaving the queen's carriage to pass on, then that of the principal ladies of honour, and then all the others in succession, who, seeing the king stop, wished in their turn to stop too; but the king made a sign to them to continue their progress. When La Vallière's carriage passed, the king approached it, saluted the ladies who were inside, and was preparing to accompany the carriage containing the maids of honour, in the same way he had followed that in which Madame was, when suddenly the whole file of carriages stopped. It was probable that Madame, uneasy at the king having left her, had just given directions for the performance of this maneuver, the direction in which the promenade was to take place having been left to her. The king, having sent to inquire what her object was in stopping the cavalcade, was informed in reply, that she wished to walk. She most likely hoped that the king, who was following the carriages of the maids of honour on horseback, would not venture to follow the maids of honour themselves on foot. They had arrived in the middle of the forest.

The promenade, in fact, was not ill-timed, especially for those who were dreamers or lovers. From the little open space where the halt had taken place, three beautiful long walks, shady and undulating, stretched out before them. These walks were covered with moss or with leaves that formed a carpet from the loom of nature; and each walk had its horizon in the distance, consisting of about a hand-breadth of sky, apparent through the interlacing of the branches of the trees. At the end of almost every walk, evidently in great tribulation and uneasiness, the startled deer were seen hurrying to and fro, first stopping for a moment in the middle of the path, and then raising their heads they fled with the speed of an arrow or bounded into the depths of the forest, where they disappeared from view; now and then a rabbit, of philosophical mien, might be noticed quietly sitting upright, rubbing his muzzle with his fore paws, and looking about inquiringly, as though wondering whether all these people, who were approaching in his direction, and who had just disturbed him in his meditations and his meal, were not followed by their dogs, or had not their guns under their arms. All alighted from their carriages as soon as they observed that the queen was doing so. Maria Theresa took the arm of one of her ladies of honour, and, with a side glance towards the king, who did not perceive that he was in the slightest degree the object of the queen's attention, entered the forest by the first path before her. Two of the outriders preceded her majesty with long poles, which they used for the purpose of putting the branches of the trees aside, or removing the bushes that might impede her progress. As soon as Madame alighted, she found the Comte de Guiche at her side, who bowed and placed himself at her disposal. Monsieur, delighted with his bath of the two previous days, had announced his preference for the river, and, having given De Guiche leave of absence, remained at the chateau with the Chevalier de Lorraine and Manicamp. He was not in the slightest degree jealous. He had been looked for to no purpose among those present; but as Monsieur was a man who thought a great deal of himself, and usually added very little to the general pleasure, his absence was rather a subject of satisfaction than regret. Every one had followed the example which the queen and Madame had set, doing just as they pleased, according as chance or fancy influenced them. The king, we have already observed, remained near La Vallière, and, throwing himself off his horse at the moment the door of her carriage was opened, he offered her his hand to alight. Montalais and Tonnay-Charente immediately drew back and kept at a distance; the former from calculated, the latter from natural

motives. There was this difference, however, between the two, that the one had withdrawn from a wish to please the king, the other for a very opposite reason. During the last half-hour the weather also had undergone a change; the veil which had been spread over the sky, as if driven by a blast of heated air, had become massed together in the western part of the heavens; and afterwards, as if driven by a current of air from the opposite direction, was now advancing slowly and heavily towards them. The approach of the storm could be felt, but as the king did not perceive it, no one thought it proper to do so. The promenade was therefore continued; some of the company, with minds ill at ease on the subject, raised their eyes from time to time towards the sky; others, even more timid still, walked about without wandering too far from the carriages, where they relied upon taking shelter in case the storm burst. The greater number of these, however, observing that the king fearlessly entered the wood with La Vallière, followed his majesty. The king, noticing this, took La Vallière’s hand, and led her to a lateral forest-alley; where no one this time ventured to follow him.

LXII. The Shower of Rain.

At this moment, and in the same direction, too, that the king and La Vallière had taken, except that they were in the wood itself instead of following the path, two men were walking together, utterly indifferent to the appearance of the heavens. Their heads were bent down in the manner of people occupied with matters of great moment. They had not observed either De Guiche or Madame, the king or La Vallière. Suddenly something fell through the air like a colossal sheet of flame, followed by a loud but distant rumbling noise.

"Ah!" said one of them, raising his head, "here comes the storm. Let us reach our carriages, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis looked inquiringly at the heavens. "There is no occasion to hurry yet," he said; and then resuming the conversation where it had doubtless been interrupted, he said, "You were observing that the letter we wrote last evening must by this time have reached its destination?"

"I was saying that she certainly has it."

"Whom did you send it by?"

"By my own servant, as I have already told you."

"Did he bring back an answer?"

"I have not seen him since; the young girl was probably in attendance on Madame, or was in her own room dressing, and he may have had to wait. Our time for leaving arrived, and we set off, of course; I cannot, therefore, know what is going on yonder."

"Did you see the king before leaving?"

"Yes."

"How did he seem?"

"Nothing could have passed off better, or worse; according as he be sincere or hypocritical."

"And the *fête*?"

"Will take place in a month."

"He invited himself, you say?"

"With a pertinacity in which I detected Colbert's influence. But has not last night removed your illusions?"

"What illusions?"

"With respect to the assistance you may be able to give me under these circumstances."

"No; I have passed the night writing, and all my orders are given."

"Do not conceal it from yourself, D'Herblay, but the *fête* will cost some millions."

"I will supply six; do you on your side get two or three."

"You are a wonderful man, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis smiled.

"But," inquired Fouquet, with some remaining uneasiness, "how is it that while you are now squandering millions in this manner, a few days ago you did not pay the fifty thousand francs to Baisemeaux out of your own pocket?"

"Because a few days ago I was as poor as Job."

"And to-day?"

"To-day I am wealthier than the king himself."

"Very well," said Fouquet; "I understand men pretty well; I know you are incapable of forfeiting your word; I do not wish to wrest your secret from you, and so let us talk no more about it."

At this moment a dull, heavy rumbling was heard, which suddenly developed into a violent clap of thunder.

"Oh, oh!" said Fouquet, "I was quite right in what I said."

"Come," said Aramis, "let us rejoin the carriages."

"We shall not have time," said Fouquet, "for here comes the rain."

In fact, as he spoke, and as if the heavens were opened, a shower of large drops of rain was suddenly heard pattering on the leaves about them.

"We shall have time," said Aramis, "to reach the carriages before the foliage becomes saturated."

"It will be better," said Fouquet, "to take shelter somewhere—in a grotto, for instance."

"Yes, but where are we to find a grotto?" inquired Aramis.

"I know one," said Fouquet, smiling, "not ten paces from here." Then looking round him, he added: "Yes, we are quite right."

"You are very fortunate to have so good a memory," said Aramis, smiling in his turn, "but are you not afraid that your coachman, finding we do not return, will suppose we have taken another road back, and that he will not follow the carriages belonging to the court?"

"Oh, there is no fear of that," said Fouquet; "whenever I place my coachman and my carriage in any particular spot, nothing but an express order from the king could stir them; and more than that, too, it seems that we are not the only ones who have come so far, for I hear footsteps and the sound of voices."

As he spoke, Fouquet turned round, and opened with his cane a mass of foliage which hid the path from his view. Aramis's glance as well as his own plunged at the same moment through the aperture he had made.

"A woman," said Aramis.

"And a man," said Fouquet.

"It is La Vallière and the king," they both exclaimed together.

"Oh, oh!" said Aramis, "is his majesty aware of your cavern as well? I should not be astonished if he were, for he seems to be on very good terms with the dryads of Fontainebleau."

"Never mind," said Fouquet; "let us get there. If he is not aware of it, we shall see what he will do if he should know it, as it has two entrances, so that whilst he enters by one, we can leave by the other."

"Is it far?" asked Aramis, "for the rain is beginning to penetrate."

"We are there now," said Fouquet, as he pushed aside a few branches, and an excavation in the solid rock could be observed, hitherto concealed by heaths, ivy, and a thick covert of small shrubs.

Fouquet led the way, followed by Aramis; but as the latter entered the grotto, he turned round, saying: "Yes, they are entering the wood; and, see, they are bending their steps this way."

"Very well; let us make room for them," said Fouquet, smiling and pulling Aramis by his cloak; "but I do not think the king knows of my grotto."

"Yes," said Aramis, "they are looking about them, but it is only for a thicker tree."

Aramis was not mistaken, the king's looks were directed upward, and not around him. He held La Vallière's arm within his own, and held her hand in his. La Vallière's feet began to sleep on the damp grass. Louis again looked round him with greater attention than before, and perceiving an enormous oak with wide-spreading branches, he hurriedly drew La Vallière beneath its protecting shelter. The poor girl looked round her on all sides, and seemed half afraid, half desirous of being followed. The king made her lean back against the trunk of the tree, whose vast circumference, protected by the thickness of the foliage, was as dry as if at that moment the rain had not been falling in torrents. He himself remained standing before her with his head uncovered. After a few minutes, however, some drops of rain penetrated through the branches of the tree and fell on the king's forehead, who did not pay any attention to them.

"Oh, sire!" murmured La Vallière, pushing the king's hat towards him. But the king simply bowed, and determinedly refused to cover his head.

"Now or never is the time to offer your place," said Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Now or never is the time to listen, and not lose a syllable of what they may have to say to each other," replied Aramis in Fouquet's ear.

In fact they both remained perfectly silent, and the king's voice reached them where they were.

"Believe me," said the king, "I perceive, or rather I can imagine your uneasiness; believe me, I sincerely regret having isolated you from the rest of the company, and brought you, also, to a spot where you will be inconvenienced by the rain. You are wet already, and perhaps cold too?"

"No, sire."

"And yet you tremble?"

"I am afraid, sire, that my absence may be misinterpreted; at a moment, too, when all the others are reunited."

"I would not hesitate to propose returning to the carriages, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, but pray look and listen, and tell me if it be possible to attempt to make the slightest progress at present?"

In fact the thunder was still rolling, and the rain continued to fall in torrents.

"Besides," continued the king, "no possible interpretation can be made which would be to your discredit. Are you not with the king of France; in other words, with the first gentleman of the kingdom?"

"Certainly, sire," replied La Vallière, "and it is a very distinguished honour for me; it is not, therefore, for myself that I fear any interpretations that may be made."

"For whom, then?"

"For you, sire."

"For *me*?" said the king, smiling, "I do not understand you."

"Has your majesty already forgotten what took place yesterday evening in her royal highness's apartments?"

"Oh! forget that, I beg, or allow me to remember it for no other purpose than to thank you once more for your letter, and—"

"Sire," interrupted La Vallière, "the rain is falling, and your majesty's head is uncovered."

"I entreat you not to think of anything but yourself."

"Oh! I," said La Vallière, smiling, "I am a country girl, accustomed to roaming through the meadows of the Loire and the gardens of Blois, whatever the weather may be. And, as for my clothes," she added, looking at her simple muslin dress, "your majesty sees there is but little room for injury."

"Indeed, I have already noticed, more than once, that you owed nearly everything to yourself and nothing to your toilette. Your freedom from coquetry is one of your greatest charms in my eyes."

"Sire, do not make me out better than I am, and say merely, 'You cannot possibly be a coquette.'"

"Why so?"

"Because," said La Vallière, smiling, "I am not rich."

"You admit, then," said the king, quickly, "that you have a love for beautiful things?"

"Sire, I only regard those things as beautiful which are within my reach. Everything which is too highly placed for me—"

"You are indifferent to?"

"Is foreign to me, as being prohibited."

"And I," said the king, "do not find that you are at my court on the footing you should be. The services of your family have not been sufficiently brought under my notice. The advancement of your family was cruelly neglected by my uncle."

"On the contrary, sire. His royal highness, the Duke of Orleans, was always exceedingly kind towards M. de Saint-Remy, my step-father. The services rendered were humble, and, properly speaking, our services have been adequately recognized. It is not every one who is happy enough to find opportunities of serving his sovereign with distinction. I have no doubt at all, that, if ever opportunities had been met with, my family's actions would have been as lofty as their loyalty was firm: but that happiness was never ours."

"In that case, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, it belongs to kings to repair the want of opportunity, and most delightedly do I undertake to repair, in your instance, and with the least possible delay, the wrongs of fortune towards you."

"Nay, sire," cried La Vallière, eagerly; "leave things, I beg, as they are now."

"Is it possible! you refuse what I ought, and what I wish to do for you?"

"All I desired has been granted me, when the honour was conferred upon me of forming one of Madame's household."

"But if you refuse for yourself, at least accept for your family."

"Your generous intentions, sire, bewilder me and make me apprehensive, for, in doing for my family what your kindness urges you to do, your majesty will raise up enemies for us, and enemies for yourself, too. Leave me in the ranks of middle life, sire; of all the feelings and sentiments I experience, leave me to enjoy the pleasing instinct of disinterestedness."

"The sentiments you express," said the king, "are indeed admirable."

"Quite true," murmured Aramis in Fouquet's ear, "and he cannot be accustomed to them."

"But," replied Fouquet, "suppose she were to make a similar reply to my letter."

"True!" said Aramis, "let us not anticipate, but wait the conclusion."

"And then, dear Monsieur d'Herblay," added the superintendent, hardly able to appreciate the sentiments which La Vallière had just expressed, "it is very often sound calculation to seem disinterested with monarchs."

"Exactly what I was thinking this very minute," said Aramis. "Let us listen."

The king approached nearer to La Vallière, and as the rain dripped more and more through the foliage of the oak, he held his hat over the head of the young girl, who raised her beautiful blue eyes towards the royal hat which sheltered her, and shook her head, sighing deeply as she did so.

"What melancholy thought," said the king, "can possibly reach your heart when I place mine as a rampart before it?"

"I will tell you, sire. I had already once before broached this question, which is so difficult for a young girl of my age to discuss, but your majesty imposed silence on me. Your majesty belongs not to yourself alone: you are married; and every sentiment which would separate your majesty from the queen, in leading you to take notice of me, will be a source of profoundest sorrow for the queen." The king endeavored to interrupt the young girl, but she continued with a suppliant gesture. "The Queen Maria, with an attachment which can be well understood, follows with her eyes every step of your majesty which separates you from her. Happy enough in having had her fate united to your own, she weepingly implores Heaven to preserve you to her, and is jealous of the faintest thro of your heart bestowed elsewhere." The king again seemed anxious to speak, but again did La Vallière venture to prevent him.—"Would it not, therefore, be a most blamable action," she continued, "if your majesty, a witness of this anxious and disinterested affection, gave the queen any cause for jealousy? Forgive me, sire, for the expressions I have used. I well know it is impossible, or rather that it would be impossible, that the greatest queen of the whole world could be jealous of a poor girl like myself. But though a queen, she is still a woman, and her heart, like that of the rest of her sex, cannot close itself against the suspicions which such as are evilly disposed, insinuate. For Heaven's sake, sire, think no more of me; I am unworthy of your regard."

"Do you not know that in speaking as you have done, you change my esteem for you into the profoundest admiration?"

"Sire, you assume my words to be contrary to the truth; you suppose me to be better than I really am, and attach a greater merit to me than God ever intended should be the case. Spare me, sire; for, did I not know that your majesty was the most generous man in your kingdom, I should believe you were jesting."

"You do not, I know, fear such a thing; I am quite sure of that," exclaimed Louis.

"I shall be obliged to believe it, if your majesty continues to hold such language towards me."

"I am most unhappy, then," said the king, in a tone of regret which was not assumed; "I am the unhappiest prince in the Christian world, since I am powerless to induce belief in my words, in one whom I love the best in the wide world, and who almost breaks my heart by refusing to credit my regard for her."

"Oh, sire!" said La Vallière, gently putting the king aside, who had approached nearer to her, "I think the storm has passed away now, and the rain has ceased." At the very moment, however, as the poor girl, fleeing as it were from her own heart, which doubtless throbbed but too well in unison with the king's, uttered these words, the storm undertook to contradict her. A dead-white flash of lightning illumined the forest with a weird glare, and a peal of thunder, like a discharge of artillery, burst over their heads, as if the height of the oak that sheltered them had attracted the storm. The young girl could not repress a cry of terror. The king with one hand drew her towards his heart, and stretched the other above her head, as though to shield her from the lightning. A moment's silence ensued, as the group, delightful as everything young and loving is delightful, remained motionless, while Fouquet and Aramis contemplated it in attitudes as motionless as La Vallière and the king. "Oh, sire!" murmured La Vallière, "do you hear?" and her head fell upon his shoulder.

"Yes," said the king. "You see, the storm has not passed away."

"*It is a warning, sire.*" The king smiled. "Sire, it is the voice of Heaven in anger."

"Be it so," said the king. "I agree to accept that peal of thunder as a warning, and even as a menace, if, in five minutes from the present moment, it is renewed with equal violence; but if not, permit me to think that the storm is a storm simply, and nothing more." And the king, at the same moment, raised his head, as if to interrogate the heavens. But, as if the remark had been heard and accepted, during the five minutes which elapsed after the burst of thunder which had alarmed them, no renewed peal was heard; and, when the thunder was again heard, it was passing as plainly as if, during those same five minutes, the storm, put to flight, had traversed the heavens with the wings of the wind. "Well, Louise," said the king, in a low tone of voice, "do you still threaten me with the anger of Heaven? and, since you wished to regard the storm as a warning, do you still believe it bodes misfortune?"

The young girl looked up, and saw that while they had been talking, the rain had penetrated the foliage above them, and was trickling down the king's face. "Oh, sire, sire!" she exclaimed, in accents of eager apprehensions, which greatly agitated the king. "Is it for me," she murmured, "that the king remains thus uncovered, and exposed to the rain? What am I, then?"

"You are, you perceive," said the king, "the divinity who dissipates the storm, and brings back fine weather." In fact, even as the king spoke, a ray of sunlight streamed through the forest, and caused the rain-drops which rested upon the leaves, or fell vertically among the openings in the branches of the trees, to glisten like diamonds.

"Sire," said La Vallière, almost overcome, but making a powerful effort over herself, "think of the anxieties your majesty will have to submit to on my account. At this very moment, they are seeking you in every direction. The queen must be full of uneasiness; and Madame—oh, Madame!" the young girl exclaimed, with an expression almost resembling terror.

This name had a certain effect upon the king. He started, and disengaged himself from La Vallière, whom he had, till that moment, held pressed against his heart. He then advanced towards the path, in order to look round, and returned, somewhat thoughtfully, to La Vallière. "Madame, did you say?" he remarked.

"Yes, Madame; she, too, is jealous," said La Vallière, with a marked tone of voice; and her eyes, so timorous in their expression, and so modestly fugitive in their glance, for a moment, ventured to look inquiringly into the king's.

"Still," returned Louis, making an effort over himself, "it seems to me that Madame has no reason, no right to be jealous of me."

"Alas!" murmured La Vallière.

"Are you, too," said the king, almost in a tone of reproach, "are you among those who think the sister has a right to be jealous of the brother?"

"It is not for me, sire, to seek to penetrate your majesty's secrets."

"You *do* believe it, then?" exclaimed the king.

"I believe Madame is jealous, sire," La Vallière replied, firmly.

"Is it possible," said the king with some anxiety, "that you have perceived it, then, from her conduct towards you? Have her manners in any way been such towards you that you can attribute them to the jealousy you speak of?"

"Not at all, sire; I am of so little importance."

"Oh! if it were really the case—" exclaimed Louis, violently.

"Sire," interrupted the young girl, "it has ceased raining; some one is coming, I think." And, forgetful of all etiquette, she had seized the king by the arm.

"Well," replied the king, "let them come. Who is there who would venture to think I had done wrong in remaining alone with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"For pity's sake, sire! they will think it strange to see you wet through, in this manner, and that you should have run such risk for me."

"I have simply done my duty as a gentleman," said Louis; "and woe to him who may fail in his, in criticising his sovereign's conduct." In fact, at this moment a few eager and curious faces were seen in the walk, as if engaged in a search. Catching glimpses at last of the king and La Vallière, they seemed to have found what they were seeking. They were some of the courtiers who had been sent by the queen and Madame, and uncovered themselves, in token of having perceived his majesty. But Louis, notwithstanding La Vallière's confusion, did not quit his respectful and tender attitude. Then, when all the courtiers were assembled in the walk—when every one had been able to perceive the extraordinary mark of deference with which he had treated the young girl, by remaining standing and bare-headed during the storm—he offered her his arm, led her towards the group who were waiting, recognized by an inclination of the head the respectful salutations which were paid him on all sides; and, still holding his hat in his hand, he conducted her to her carriage. And, as a few sparse drops of rain continued to fall—a last adieu of the vanishing storm—the other ladies, whom respect had prevented from getting into their carriages before the king, remained altogether unprotected by hood or cloak, exposed to the rain from which the king was protecting, as well as he was able, the humblest among them. The queen and Madame must, like the others, have witnessed this exaggerated courtesy of the king. Madame was so disconcerted at it, that she touched the queen with her elbow, saying at the same time, "Look there, look there."

The queen closed her eyes as if she had been suddenly seized with a fainting-spell. She lifted her hands to her face and entered her carriage, Madame following her. The king again mounted his horse, and without showing a preference for any particular carriage door, he returned to Fontainebleau, the reins hanging over his horse's neck, absorbed in thought. As soon as the crowd had disappeared, and the sound of the horses and carriages grew fainter in the distance, and when they were certain, in fact, that no one could see them, Aramis and Fouquet came out of their grotto, and both of them in silence passed slowly on towards the walk. Aramis looked most narrowly not only at the whole extent of the open space stretching out before and behind him, but even into the very depth of the wood.

"Monsieur Fouquet," he said, when he had quite satisfied himself that they were alone, "we must get back, at any cost, that letter you wrote to La Vallière."

"That will be easy enough," said Fouquet, "if my servant has not given it to her."

"In any case it must be had, do you understand?"

"Yes. The king is in love with the girl, you mean?"

"Deeply, and what is worse is, that on her side, the girl is passionately attached to him."

"As much as to say that we must change our tactics, I suppose?"

"Not a doubt of it; you have no time to lose. You must see La Vallière, and, without thinking any more of becoming her lover, which is out of the question, must declare yourself her most devoted friend and her most humble servant."

"I will do so," replied Fouquet, "and without the slightest feeling of disinclination, for she seems a good-hearted girl."

"Or a very clever one," said Aramis; "but in that case, all the greater reason." Then he added, after a moment's pause, "If I am not mistaken, that girl will become the strongest passion of the king's life. Let us return to our carriage, and, as fast as possible, to the chateau."

LXIII. Toby.

Two hours after the superintendent's carriage had set off by Aramis's directions, conveying them both towards Fontainebleau with the fleetness of the clouds the last breath of the tempest was hurrying across the face of heaven, La Vallière was closeted in her own apartment, with a simple muslin wrapper round her, having just finished a slight repast, which was placed upon a marble table. Suddenly the door was opened, and a servant entered to announce M. Fouquet, who had called to request permission to pay his respects to her. She made him repeat the message twice over, for the poor girl only knew M. Fouquet by name, and could not conceive what business she could possibly have with a superintendent of finances. However, as he might represent the king—and, after the conversation we have recorded, it was very likely—she glanced at her mirror, drew out still more the ringlets of her hair, and desired him to be admitted. La Vallière could not, however, refrain from a certain feeling of uneasiness. A visit from the superintendent was not an ordinary event in the life of any woman attached to the court. Fouquet, so notorious for his generosity, his gallantry, and his sensitive delicacy



of feeling with regard to women generally, had received more invitations than he had requested audiences. In many houses, the presence of the superintendent had been significant of fortune; in many hearts, of love. Fouquet entered the apartment with a manner full of respect, presenting himself with that ease and gracefulness of manner which was the distinctive characteristic of the men of eminence of that period, and which at the present day seems no longer to be understood, even through the interpretation of the portraits of the period, in which the painter has endeavored to recall them to being. La Vallière acknowledged the ceremonious salutation which Fouquet addressed to her by a gentle inclination of the head, and motioned him to a seat. But Fouquet, with a bow, said, "I will not sit down until you have pardoned me."

"I?" asked La Vallière, "pardon what?"

Fouquet fixed a most piercing look upon the young girl, and fancied he could perceive in her face nothing but the most unaffected surprise. "I observe," he said, "that you have as much generosity as intelligence, and I read in your eyes the forgiveness I solicit. A pardon pronounced by your lips is insufficient for me, and I need the forgiveness of your heart and mind."

"Upon my honour, monsieur," said La Vallière, "I assure you most positively I do not understand your meaning."

"Again, that is a delicacy on your part which charms me," replied Fouquet, "and I see you do not wish me to blush before you."

"Blush! blush before *me*! Why should you blush?"

"Can I have deceived myself," said Fouquet, "and can I have been happy enough not to have offended you by my conduct towards you?"

"Really, monsieur," said La Vallière, shrugging her shoulders, "you speak in enigmas, and I suppose I am too ignorant to understand you."

"Be it so," said Fouquet; "I will not insist. Tell me, only, I entreat you, that I may rely upon your full and complete forgiveness."

"I have but one reply to make to you, monsieur," said La Vallière, somewhat impatiently, "and I hope that will satisfy you. If I knew the wrong you have done me, I would forgive you, and I now do so with still greater reason since I am ignorant of the wrong you allude to."

Fouquet bit his lips, as Aramis would have done. "In that case," he said, "I may hope, that, notwithstanding what has happened, our good understanding will remain undisturbed, and that you will kindly confer the favour upon me of believing in my respectful friendship."

La Vallière fancied that she now began to understand, and said to herself, "I should not have believed M. Fouquet so eager to seek the source of a favour so very recent," and then added aloud, "Your friendship, monsieur! you offer me your friendship. The honour, on the contrary, is mine, and I feel overpowered by it."

"I am aware," replied Fouquet, "that the friendship of the master may appear more brilliant and desirable than that of the servant; but I assure you the latter will be quite as devoted, quite as faithful, and altogether disinterested."

La Vallière bowed, for, in fact, the voice of the superintendent seemed to convey both conviction and real devotion in its tone, and she held out her hand to him, saying, "I believe you."

Fouquet eagerly took hold of the young girl's hand. "You see no difficulty, therefore," he added, "in restoring me that unhappy letter."

"What letter?" inquired La Vallière.

Fouquet interrogated her with his most searching gaze, as he had already done before, but the same ingenious expressions, the same transparently candid look met his. "I am obliged to confess," he said, after this denial, "that your heart is the most delicate in the world, and I should not feel I was a man of honour and uprightness if I were to suspect anything from a woman so generous as yourself."

"Really, Monsieur Fouquet," replied La Vallière, "it is with profound regret I am obliged to repeat that I absolutely understand nothing of what you refer to."

"In fact, then, upon your honour, mademoiselle, you have not received any letter from me?"

"Upon my honour, none," replied La Vallière, firmly.

"Very well, that is quite sufficient; permit me, then, to renew the assurance of my utmost esteem and respect," said Fouquet. Then, bowing, he left the room to seek Aramis, who was waiting for him in his own apartment, and leaving La Vallière to ask herself whether the superintendent had not lost his senses.

"Well!" inquired Aramis, who was impatiently waiting Fouquet's return, "are you satisfied with the favourite?"

"Enchanted," replied Fouquet; "she is a woman full of intelligence and fine feeling."

"She did not get angry, then?"

"Far from that—she did not even seem to understand."

"To understand what?"

"To understand that I had written to her."

"She must, however, have understood you sufficiently to give the letter back to you, for I presume she returned it."

"Not at all."

"At least, you satisfied yourself that she had burnt it."

"My dear Monsieur d'Herblay, I have been playing at cross-purposes for more than an hour, and, however amusing it may be, I begin to have had enough of this game. So understand me thoroughly: the girl pretended not to understand what I was saying to her; she denied having received any letter; therefore, having positively denied its receipt, she was unable either to return or burn it."

"Oh, oh!" said Aramis, with uneasiness, "what is this you tell me?"

"I say that she swore most positively she had not received any letter."

"That is too much. And did you not insist?"

"On the contrary, I did insist, almost impertinently even."

"And she persisted in her denial?"

"Unhesitatingly."

"And did she not contradict herself?"

"Not once."

"But, in that case, then, you have left our letter in her hands?"

"How could I do otherwise?"

"Oh! it was a great mistake."

"What the deuce would you have done in my place?"

"One could not force her, certainly, but it is very embarrassing; such a letter ought not to remain in existence against us."

"Oh! the young girl's disposition is generosity itself; I looked at her eyes, and I can read eyes well."

"You think she can be relied upon?"

"From my heart I do."

"Well, I think we are mistaken."

"In what way?"

"I think that, in point of fact, as she herself told you, she did not receive the letter."

"What! do you suppose—"

"I suppose that, from some motive, of which we know nothing, your man did not deliver the letter to her."

Fouquet rang the bell. A servant appeared. "Send Toby here," he said. A moment afterwards a man made his appearance, with an anxious, restless look, shrewd expression of the mouth, with short arms, and his back somewhat bent. Aramis fixed a penetrating look upon him.

"Will you allow me to interrogate him myself?" inquired Aramis.

"Do so," said Fouquet.

Aramis was about to say something to the lackey, when he paused. "No," he said; "he would see that we attach too much importance to his answer; therefore question him yourself; I will pretend to be writing." Aramis accordingly placed himself at a table, his back turned towards the old attendant, whose every gesture and look he watched in a looking-glass opposite to him.

"Come here, Toby," said Fouquet to the valet, who approached with a tolerably firm step. "How did you execute my commission?" inquired Fouquet.

"In the usual way, my lord," replied the man.

"But how, tell me?"

"I succeeded in penetrating as far as Mademoiselle de la Vallière's apartment; but she was at mass, and so I placed the note on her toilette-table. Is not that what you told me to do?"

"Precisely; and is that all?"

"Absolutely all, my lord."

"No one was there?"

"No one."

"Did you conceal yourself as I told you?"

"Yes."

"And she returned?"

"Ten minutes afterwards."

"And no one could have taken the letter?"

"No one; for no one had entered the room."

"From the outside, but from the interior?"

"From the place where I was secreted, I could see to the very end of the room."

"Now listen to me," said Fouquet, looking fixedly at the lackey; "if this letter did not reach its proper destination, confess it; for, if a mistake has been made, your head shall be the forfeit."

Toby started, but immediately recovered himself. "My lord," he said, "I placed the letter on the very place I told you: and I ask only half an hour to prove to you that the letter is in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand, or to bring you back the letter itself."

Aramis looked at the valet scrutinizingly. Fouquet was ready in placing confidence in people, and for twenty years this man had served him faithfully. "Go," he said; "but bring me the proof you speak of." The lackey quitted the room.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired Fouquet of Aramis.

"I think that you must, by some means or another, assure yourself of the truth, either that the letter has, or has not, reached La Vallière; that, in the first case, La Vallière must return it to you, or satisfy you by burning it in your presence; that, in the second, you must have the letter back again, even were it to cost you a million. Come, is not that your opinion?"

"Yes; but still, my dear bishop, I believe you are exaggerating the importance of the affair."

"Blind, how blind you are!" murmured Aramis.

"La Vallière," returned Fouquet, "whom we assume to be a schemer of the first ability, is simply nothing more than a coquette, who hopes that I shall pay my court to her, because I have already done so, and who, now that she has received a confirmation of the king's regard, hopes to keep me in leading strings with the letter. It is natural enough."

Aramis shook his head.

"Is not that your opinion?" said Fouquet.

"She is not a coquette," he replied.

"Allow me to tell you—"

"Oh! I am well enough acquainted with women who are coquettes," said Aramis.

"My dear friend!"

"It is a long time ago since I finished my education, you mean. But women are the same, throughout the centuries."

"True; but men change, and you at the present day are far more suspicious than you formerly were." And then, beginning to laugh, he added, "Come, if La Vallière is willing to love me only to the extent of a third, and the king two-thirds, do you think the condition acceptable?"

Aramis rose impatiently. "La Vallière," he said, "has never loved, and never will love, any one but the king."

"At all events," said Fouquet, "what would you do?"

"Ask me rather what I would have done?"

"Well! what would you have done?"

"In the first place, I should not have allowed that man to depart."

"Toby?"

"Yes; Toby is a traitor. Nay, I am sure of it, and I would not have let him go until he had told me the truth."

"There is still time. I will recall him, and do you question him in your turn."

"Agreed."

"But I assure you it is useless. He has been with me for twenty years, and has never made the slightest mistake, and yet," added Fouquet, laughing, "it would have been easy enough for him to have done so."

"Still, call him back. This morning I fancy I saw that face, in earnest conversation with one of M. Colbert's men."

"Where was that?"

"Opposite the stables."

"Bah! all my people are at daggers drawn with that fellow."

"I saw him, I tell you, and his face, which should have been unknown to me when he entered just now, struck me as disagreeably familiar."

"Why did you not say something, then, while he was here?"

"Because it is only at this very minute that my memory is clear upon the subject."

"Really," said Fouquet, "you alarm me." And he again rang the bell.

"Provided that it is not already too late," said Aramis.

Fouquet once more rang impatiently. The valet usually in attendance appeared. "Toby!" said Fouquet, "send Toby." The valet again shut the door.

"You leave me at perfect liberty, I suppose?"

"Entirely so."

"I may employ all means, then, to ascertain the truth."

"All."

"Intimidation, even?"

"I constitute you public prosecutor in my place."

They waited ten minutes longer, but uselessly, and Fouquet, thoroughly out of patience, again rang loudly.

"Toby!" he exclaimed.

"My lord," said the valet, "they are looking for him."

"He cannot be far distant, I have not given him any commission to execute."

"I will go and see, my lord," replied the valet, as he closed the door. Aramis, during the interview, walked impatiently, but without a syllable, up and down the cabinet. They waited a further ten minutes. Fouquet rang in a manner to alarm the very dead. The valet again presented himself, trembling in a way to induce a belief that he was the bearer of bad news.

"My lord is mistaken," he said, before even Fouquet could interrogate him, "you must have given Toby some commission, for he has been to the stables and taken your lordship's swiftest horse, and saddled it himself."

"Well?"

"And he has gone off."

"Gone!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Let him be pursued, let him be captured."

"Nay, nay," whispered Aramis, taking him by the hand, "be calm, the evil is done."

The valet quietly went out.

"The evil is done, you say?"

"No doubt; I was sure of it. And now, let us give no cause for suspicion; we must calculate the result of the blow, and ward it off, if possible."

"After all," said Fouquet, "the evil is not great."

"You think so?" said Aramis.

"Of course. Surely a man is allowed to write a love-letter to a woman."

"A man, certainly; a subject, no; especially, too, when the woman in question is one with whom the king is in love."

"But the king was not in love with La Vallière a week ago! he was not in love with her yesterday, and the letter is dated yesterday; I could not guess the king was in love, when the king's affection was not even yet in existence."

"As you please," replied Aramis; "but unfortunately the letter is not dated, and it is that circumstance particularly which annoys me. If it had only been dated yesterday, I should not have the slightest shadow of uneasiness on your account."

Fouquet shrugged his shoulders.

"Am I not my own master," he said, "and is the king, then, king of my brain and of my flesh?"

"You are right," replied Aramis, "do not let us attach greater importance to matters than is necessary; and besides... Well! if we are menaced, we have means of defense."

"Oh! menaced!" said Fouquet, "you do not place this gnat bite, as it were, among the number of menaces which may compromise my fortune and my life, do you?"

"Do not forget, Monsieur Fouquet, that the bit of an insect can kill a giant, if the insect be venomous."

"But has this sovereign power you were speaking of, already vanished?"

"I am all-powerful, it is true, but I am not immortal."

"Come, then, the most pressing matter is to find Toby again, I suppose. Is not that your opinion?"

"Oh! as for that, you will not find him again," said Aramis, "and if he were of any great value to you, you must give him up for lost."

"At all events he is somewhere or another in the world," said Fouquet.

"You're right, let me act," replied Aramis.

LXIV. Madame's Four Chances.

Anne of Austria had begged the young queen to pay her a visit. For some time past suffering most acutely, and losing both her youth and beauty with that rapidity which signalizes the decline of women for whom life has been one long contest, Anne of Austria had, in addition to her physical sufferings, to experience the bitterness of being no longer held in any esteem, except as a surviving remembrance of the past, amidst the youthful beauties, wits, and influential forces of her court. Her physician's opinions, her mirror also, grieved her far less than the inexorable warnings which the society of the courtiers afforded, who, like rats in a ship, abandon the hold into which on the very next voyage the water will infallibly penetrate, owing to the ravages of decay. Anne of Austria did not feel satisfied with the time her eldest son devoted to her. The king, a good son, more from affectation than from affection, had at first been in the habit of passing an hour in the morning and one in the evening with his mother; but, since he had himself undertaken the conduct of state affairs, the duration of the morning and evening's visit had been reduced by one half; and then, by degrees, the morning visit had been suppressed altogether. They met at mass; the evening visit was replaced by a meeting, either at the king's assembly or at Madame's, which the queen attended obligingly enough, out of regard to her two sons.

The result of this was, that Madame gradually acquired an immense influence over the court, which made her apartments the true royal place of meeting. This, Anne of Austria perceived; knowing herself to be very ill, and condemned by her sufferings to frequent retirement, she was distressed at the idea that the greater part of her future days and evenings would pass away solitary, useless, and in despondency. She recalled with terror the isolation in which Cardinal Richelieu had formerly left her, those dreaded and insupportable evenings, during which, however, she had both youth and beauty, which are ever accompanied by hope, to console her. She next formed the project of transporting the court to her own apartments, and of attracting Madame, with her brilliant escort, to her gloomy and already sorrowful abode, where the widow of a king of France, and the mother of a king of France, was reduced to console, in her artificial widowhood, the weeping wife of a king of France. Anne began to reflect. She had intrigued a good deal in her life. In the good times past, when her youthful mind nursed projects that were, ultimately, invariably successful, she had by her side, to stimulate her ambition and her love, a friend of her own sex, more eager, more ambitious than herself,—a friend who had loved her, a rare circumstance at courts, and whom some petty considerations had removed from her forever. But for many years past—except Madame de Motteville, and La Molena, her Spanish nurse, a confidante in her character of countrywoman and woman too—who could boast of having given good advice to the queen? Who, too, among all the youthful heads there, could recall the past for her,—that past in which alone she lived? Anne of Austria remembered Madame de Chevreuse, in the first place exiled rather by her wish than the king's, and then dying in exile, the wife of a gentleman of obscure birth and position. She asked herself what Madame de Chevreuse would have advised her to do in similar circumstances, in their mutual difficulties arising from their intrigues; and after serious reflection, it seemed as if the clever, subtle mind of her friend, full of experience and sound judgment, answered her in the well-remembered ironical tones: "All the insignificant young people are poor and greedy of gain. They require gold and incomes to supply means of amusement; it is by interest you must gain them over." And Anne of Austria adopted this plan. Her purse was well filled, and she had at her disposal a considerable sum of money, which had been amassed by Mazarin for her, and lodged in a place of safety. She possessed the most magnificent jewels in France, and especially pearls of a size so large that they made the king sigh every time he saw them, because the pearls of his crown were like millet seed compared to them. Anne of Austria had neither beauty nor charms any longer at her disposal. She gave out, therefore, that her wealth was great, and as an inducement for others to visit her apartments she let it be known that there were good gold crowns to be won at play, or that handsome presents were likely to be made on days when all went well with her; or windfalls, in the shape of annuities which she had wrung from the king by entreaty, and thus she determined to maintain her credit. In the first place, she tried these means upon Madame; because to gain her consent was of more importance than anything else. Madame, notwithstanding the bold confidence which her wit and beauty inspired her, blindly ran head foremost into the net thus stretched out to catch her. Enriched by degrees by these presents and transfers of property, she took a fancy to inheritances by anticipation. Anne of Austria adopted the same means towards Monsieur, and even towards the king himself. She instituted lotteries in her apartments. The day on which the present opens, invitations had been issued for a late supper in the queen-mother's apartments, as she intended that two beautiful diamond bracelets of exquisite workmanship should be put into a lottery. The medallions were antique cameos of the greatest value; the diamonds, in point of intrinsic value, did not represent a very considerable amount, but the originality and rarity of the workmanship were such, that every one at court not only wished to possess the bracelets, but even to see the queen herself wear them; for, on the days she wore them, it was considered as a favour to be admitted to admire them in kissing her hands. The courtiers had, even with regard to this subject, adopted various expressions of gallantry to establish the aphorism, that the bracelets would have been priceless in value if they had not been unfortunate enough to be placed in contact with arms as beautiful as the queen's. This compliment had been honoured by a translation into all the languages of Europe, and numerous verses in Latin and French had been circulated on the subject. The day that Anne of Austria had selected for the lottery was a decisive moment; the king had not been near his mother for a couple of days; Madame, after the great scene of the Dryads and Naiads, was sulking by herself. It is true, the king's fit of resentment was over, but his mind was absorbingly occupied by a circumstance that raised him above the stormy disputes and giddy pleasures of the court.

Anne of Austria effected a diversion by the announcement of the famous lottery to take place in her apartments on the following evening. With this object in view, she saw the young queen, whom, as we have already seen, she had invited to pay her a visit in the morning. "I have good news to tell you," she said to her; "the king has been saying the most tender things about you. He is young, you

know, and easily drawn away; but so long as you keep near me, he will not venture to keep away from you, to whom, besides, he is most warmly and affectionately attached. I intend to have a lottery this evening and shall expect to see you."

"I have heard," said the young queen, with a sort of timid reproach, "that your majesty intends to put in the lottery those lovely bracelets whose rarity is so great that we ought not to allow them to pass out of the custody of the crown, even were there no other reason than that they had once belonged to you."

"My daughter," said Anne of Austria, who read the young queen's thoughts, and wished to console her for not having received the bracelets as a present, "it is positively necessary that I should induce Madame to pass her time in my apartments."

"Madame!" said the young queen, blushing.

"Of course: would you not prefer to have a rival near you, whom you could watch and influence, to knowing the king is with her, always as ready to flirt as to be flirted with by her? The lottery I have proposed is my means of attraction for that purpose; do you blame me?"

"Oh, no!" returned Maria Theresa, clapping her hands with a childlike expression of delight.

"And you no longer regret, then, that I did not give you these bracelets, as I at first intended to do?"

"Oh, no, no!"

"Very well; make yourself look as beautiful as possible that our supper may be very brilliant; the gayer you seem, the more charming you appear, and you will eclipse all the ladies present as much by your brilliancy as by your rank."

Maria Theresa left full of delight. An hour afterwards, Anne of Austria received a visit from Madame, whom she covered with caresses, saying, "Excellent news! the king is charmed with my lottery."

"But I," replied Madame, "am not so greatly charmed: to see such beautiful bracelets on any one's arms but yours or mine, is what I cannot reconcile myself to."

"Well, well," said Anne of Austria, concealing by a smile a violent pang she had just experienced, "do not look at things in the worst light immediately."

"Ah, Madame, Fortune is blind, and I am told there are two hundred tickets."

"Quite as many as that; but you cannot surely forget that there can only be one winner."

"No doubt. But who will that be? Can you tell?" said Madame, in despair.

"You remind me that I had a dream last night; my dreams are always good,—I sleep so little."

"What was your dream?—but are you suffering?"

"No," said the queen, stifling with wonderful command the torture of a renewed attack of shooting pains in her bosom; "I dreamed that the king won the bracelets."

"The king!"

"You are going to ask me, I think, what the king could possibly do with the bracelets?"

"Yes."

"And you would not add, perhaps, that it would be very fortunate if the king were really to win, for he would be obliged to give the bracelets to some one else."

"To restore them to you, for instance."

"In which case I should immediately give them away; for you do not think, I suppose," said the queen, laughing, "that I have put these bracelets up to a lottery from necessity. My object was to give them without arousing any one's jealousy; but if Fortune will not get me out of my difficulty—well, I will teach Fortune a lesson—and I know very well to whom I intend to offer the bracelets." These words were accompanied by so expressive a smile, that Madame could not resist paying her by a grateful kiss.

"But," added Anne of Austria, "do you not know, as well as I do, that if the king were to win the bracelets, he would not restore them to me?"

"You mean he would give them to the queen?"

"No; and for the very same reason that he would not give them back again to me; since, if I had wished to make the queen a present of them, I had no need of him for that purpose."

Madame cast a side glance upon the bracelets, which, in their casket, were dazzlingly exposed to view upon a table close beside her.

"How beautiful they are," she said, sighing. "But stay," Madame continued, "we are quite forgetting that your majesty's dream was nothing but a dream."

"I should be very much surprised," returned Anne of Austria, "if my dream were to deceive me; that has happened to me very seldom."

"We may look upon you as a prophetess, then."

"I have already said, that I dream but very rarely; but the coincidence of my dream about this matter, with my own ideas, is extraordinary! it agrees so wonderfully with my own views and arrangements."

"What arrangements do you allude to?"

"That you will get the bracelets, for instance."

"In that case, it will not be the king."

"Oh!" said Anne of Austria, "there is not such a very great distance between his majesty's heart and your own; for, are you not his sister, for whom he has a great regard? There is not, I repeat, so very wide a distance, that my dream can be pronounced false on that account. Come, let us reckon up the chances in its favour."

"I will count them."

"In the first place, we will begin with the dream. If the king wins, he is sure to give you the bracelets."

"I admit that is one."

"If you win them, they are yours."

"Naturally; that may be admitted also."

"Lastly,—if Monsieur were to win them!"

"Oh!" said Madame, laughing heartily, "he would give them to the Chevalier de Lorraine."

Anne of Austria laughed as heartily as her daughter-in-law; so much so, indeed, that her sufferings again returned, and made her turn suddenly pale in the very midst of her enjoyment.

"What is the matter?" inquired Madame, terrified.

"Nothing, nothing; a pain in my side. I have been laughing too much. We were at the fourth chance, I think."

"I cannot see a fourth."

"I beg your pardon; I am not excluded from the chance of winning, and if I be the winner, you are sure of me."

"Oh! thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Madame.

"I hope that you look upon yourself as one whose chances are good, and that my dream now begins to assure the solid outlines of reality."

"Yes, indeed: you give me both hope and confidence," said Madame, "and the bracelets, won in this manner, will be a hundred times more precious to me."

"Well! then, good-bye, until this evening." And the two princesses separated. Anne of Austria, after her daughter-in-law had left her, said to herself, as she examined the bracelets, "They are, indeed, precious; since, by their means, this evening, I shall have won over a heart to my side, at the same time, fathomed an important secret."

Then turning towards the deserted recess in her room, she said, addressing vacancy,—*"Is it not thus that you would have acted, my poor Chevreuse? Yes, yes; I know it is."*

And, like a perfume of other, fairer days, her youth, her imagination, and her happiness seemed to be wafted towards the echo of this invocation.

LXV. The Lottery.

By eight o'clock in the evening, every one had assembled in the queen-mother's apartments. Anne of Austria, in full dress, beautiful still, from former loveliness, and from all the resources coquetry can command at the hands of clever assistants, concealed, or rather pretended to conceal, from the crowd of courtiers who surrounded her, and who still admired her, thanks to the combination of circumstances which we have indicated in the preceding chapter, the ravages, which were already visible, of the acute suffering to which she finally yielded a few years later. Madame, almost as great a coquette as Anne of Austria, and the queen, simple and natural as usual, were seated beside her, each contending for her good graces. The ladies of honour, united in a body, in order to resist with greater effect, and consequently with more success, the witty and lively conversations which the young men held about them, were enabled, like a battalion formed in a square, to offer each other the means of attack and defense which were thus at their command. Montalais, learned in that species of warfare which consists of sustained skirmishing, protected the whole line by a sort of rolling fire she directed against the enemy. Saint-Aignan, in utter despair at the rigor, which became almost insulting from the very fact of her persisting in it, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente displayed, tried to turn his back upon her; but, overcome by the irresistible brilliancy of her eyes, he, every moment, returned to consecrate his defeat by new submissions, to which Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did not fail to reply by fresh acts of impertinence. Saint-Aignan did not know which way to turn. La Vallière had about her, not exactly a court, but sprinklings of courtiers. Saint-Aignan, hoping by this maneuver to attract Athenais's attention towards him, approached the young girl, and saluted her with a respect that induced some to believe that he wished to balance Athenais by Louise. But these were persons who had neither been witnesses of the scene during the shower, nor had heard it spoken of. As the majority was already informed, and well informed, too, on the matter, the acknowledged favour with which she was regarded had attracted to her side some of the most astute, as well as the least sensible, members of the court. The former, because they said with Montaigne, "How do I know?" and the latter, who said with Rabelais, "Perhaps." The greatest number had followed in the wake of the latter, just as in hunting five or six of the best hounds alone follow the scent of the animal hunted, whilst the remainder of the pack follow only the scent of the hounds. The two queens and Madame examined with particular attention the toilettes of their ladies and maids of honour; and they condescended to forget they were queens in recollecting that they were women. In other words, they pitilessly picked to pieces every person present who wore a petticoat. The looks of both princesses simultaneously fell upon La Vallière, who, as we have just said, was completely surrounded at that moment. Madame knew not what pity was, and said to the queen-mother, as she turned towards her, "If Fortune were just, she would favour that poor La Vallière."

"That is not possible," said the queen-mother, smiling.

"Why not?"

"There are only two hundred tickets, so that it was not possible to inscribe every one's name on the list."

"And hers is not there, then?"

"No!"

"What a pity! she might have won them, and then sold them."

"Sold them!" exclaimed the queen.

"Yes; it would have been a dowry for her, and she would not have been obliged to marry without her *trousseau*, as will probably be the case."

"Really," answered the queen-mother, "poor little thing: has she no dresses, then?"

And she pronounced these words like a woman who has never been able to understand the inconveniences of a slenderly filled purse.

"Stay, look at her. Heaven forgive me, if she is not wearing the very same petticoat this evening that she had on this morning during the promenade, and which she managed to keep clean, thanks to the care the king took of her, in sheltering her from the rain."

At the very moment Madame uttered these words the king entered the room. The two queens would not perhaps have observed his arrival, so completely were they occupied in their ill-natured remarks, had not Madame noticed that, all at once, La Vallière, who was standing up facing the gallery, exhibited certain signs of confusion, and then said a few words to the courtiers who surrounded her, who immediately dispersed. This movement induced Madame to look towards the door, and at that moment, the captain of the guards announced the king. At this moment La Vallière, who had hitherto kept her eyes fixed upon the gallery, suddenly cast them down as the king entered. His majesty was dressed magnificently and in the most perfect taste; he was conversing with Monsieur and the Duc de Roquelaure, Monsieur on his right, and the Duc de Roquelaure on his left. The king advanced, in the first place, towards the queens, to whom he bowed with an air full of graceful respect. He took his mother's hand and kissed it, addressed a few compliments to Madame upon the beauty of her toilette, and then began to make the round of the assembly. La Vallière was saluted in the same manner as the others, but with neither more nor less attention. His majesty then returned to his mother and his wife. When the courtiers noticed that the king had only addressed some ordinary remark to the young girl who had been so particularly noticed in the morning, they immediately drew their own conclusion to account for this coldness of manner; this conclusion being, that although the king may have taken a sudden fancy to her, that fancy had already disappeared. One thing, however, must be remarked, that close beside La Vallière, among the number of the courtiers, M. Fouquet was to be seen; and his respectfully attentive manner served to sustain the young girl in the midst of the varied emotions that visibly agitated her.

M. Fouquet was just on the point, moreover, of speaking in a more friendly manner with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, when M. Colbert approached, and after having bowed to Fouquet with all the formality of respectful politeness, he seemed to take up a post beside La Vallière, for the purpose of entering into conversation with her. Fouquet immediately quitted his place. These proceedings were eagerly devoured by the eyes of Montalais and Malicorne, who mutually exchanged their observations on the subject. De Guiche, standing within the embrasure of one of the windows, saw no one but Madame. But as Madame, on her side, frequently glanced at La Vallière, De Guiche’s eyes, following Madame’s, were from time to time cast upon the young girl. La Vallière instinctively felt herself sinking beneath the weight of all these different looks, inspired, some by interest, others by envy. She had nothing to compensate her for her sufferings, not a kind word from her companions, nor a look of affection from the king. No one could possibly express the misery the poor girl was suffering. The queen-mother next directed the small table to be brought forward, on which the lottery-tickets were placed, two hundred in number, and begged Madame de Motteville to read the list of the names. It was a matter of course that this list had been drawn out in strict accordance with the laws of etiquette. The king’s name was first on the list, next the queen-mother, then the queen, Monsieur, Madame, and so on. All hearts throbbed anxiously as the list was read out; more than three hundred persons had been invited, and each of them was anxious to learn whether his or her name was to be found in the number of privileged names. The king listened with as much attention as the others, and when the last name had been pronounced, he noticed that La Vallière had been omitted from the list. Every one, of course, remarked this omission. The king flushed as if much annoyed; but La Vallière, gentle and resigned, as usual, exhibited nothing of the sort. While the list was being read, the king had not taken his eyes off the young girl, who seemed to expand, as it were, beneath the happy influence she felt was shed around her, and who was delighted and too pure in spirit for any other thought than that of love to find an entrance either to her mind or her heart. Acknowledging this touching self-denial by the fixity of his attention, the king showed La Vallière how much he appreciated its delicacy. When the list was finished, the different faces of those who had been omitted or forgotten fully expressed their disappointment. Malicorne was also left out from amongst the men; and the grimace he made plainly said to Montalais, who was also forgotten, “Cannot we contrive to arrange matters with Fortune in such a manner that she shall not forget us?” to which a smile full of intelligence from Mademoiselle Aure, replied: “Certainly we can.”

The tickets were distributed to each according to the number listed. The king received his first, next the queen-mother, then Monsieur, then the queen and Madame, and so on. After this, Anne of Austria opened a small Spanish leather bag, containing two hundred numbers engraved upon small balls of mother-of-pearl, and presented the open sack to the youngest of her maids of honour, for the purpose of taking one of the balls out of it. The eager expectation of the throng, amidst all the tediously slow preparations, was rather that of cupidity than curiosity. Saint-Aignan bent towards Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente to whisper to her, “Since we have each a number, let us unite our two chances. The bracelet shall be yours if I win, and if you are successful, deign to give me but one look of your beautiful eyes.”

“No,” said Athenais, “if you win the bracelet, keep it, every one for himself.”

“You are without any pity,” said Saint-Aignan, “and I will punish you by a quatrain:—

“Beautiful Iris, to my vows You are too opposed—”

“Silence,” said Athenais, “you will prevent me hearing the winning number.”

“Number one,” said the young girl who had drawn the mother-of-pearl from the Spanish leather bag.

“The king!” exclaimed the queen-mother.

“The king has won,” repeated the queen, delightedly.

“Oh! the king! your dream!” said Madame, joyously, in the ear of Anne of Austria.

The king was the only one who did not exhibit any satisfaction. He merely thanked Fortune for what she had done for him, in addressing a slight salutation to the young girl who had been chosen as her proxy. Then receiving from the hands of Anne of Austria, amid the eager desire of the whole assembly, the casket inclosing the bracelets, he said, “Are these bracelets really beautiful, then?”

“Look at them,” said Anne of Austria, “and judge for yourself.”

The king looked at them, and said, “Yes, indeed, an admirable medallion. What perfect finish!”

Queen Maria Theresa easily saw, and that, too at the very first glance, that the king would not offer the bracelets to her; but, as he did not seem the least degree in the world disposed to offer them to Madame, she felt almost satisfied, or nearly so. The king sat down. The most intimate among the courtiers approached, one by one, for the purpose of admiring more closely the beautiful piece of workmanship, which soon, with the king’s permission, was handed about from person to person. Immediately, every one, connoisseurs or not, uttered various exclamations of surprise, and overwhelmed the king with congratulations. There was, in fact, something for everybody to admire—the brilliance for some, and the cutting for others. The ladies present visibly displayed their impatience to see such a treasure monopolized by the gentlemen.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said the king, who nothing escaped, “one would almost think that you wore bracelets as the Sabines used to do; hand them round for a while for the inspection of the ladies, who seem to have, and with far greater right, an excuse for understanding such matters!”

These words appeared to Madame the commencement of a decision she expected. She gathered, besides, this happy belief from the glances of the queen-mother. The courtier who held them at the moment the king made this remark, amidst the general agitation, hastened to place the bracelets in the hands of the queen, Maria Theresa, who, knowing too well, poor woman, that they were not designed for her, hardly looked at them, and almost immediately passed them on to Madame. The latter, and even more minutely, Monsieur, gave the bracelets a long look of anxious and almost covetous desire. She then handed the jewels to those ladies who were near her, pronouncing this single word, but with an accent which was worth a long phrase, “Magnificent!”

The ladies who had received the bracelets from Madame’s hands looked at them as long as they chose to examine them, and then made them circulate by passing them on towards the right. During this time the king was tranquilly conversing with De Guiche and Fouquet, rather passively letting them talk than himself listening. Accustomed to the set form of ordinary phrases, his ear, like that of all men who exercise an incontestable superiority over others, merely selected from the conversations held in various directions the indispensable word which requires reply. His attention, however, was now elsewhere, for it wandered as his eyes did.

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was the last of the ladies inscribed for tickets; and, as if she had ranked according to her name upon the list, she had only Montalais and La Vallière near her. When the bracelets reached these two latter, no one appeared to take any further notice of them. The humble hands which for a moment touched these jewels, deprived them, for the time, of their importance—a circumstance which did not, however, prevent Montalais from starting with joy, envy, and covetous desire, at the sight of the beautiful stones still more than at their magnificent workmanship. It is evident that if she were compelled to decide between the pecuniary value and the artistic beauty, Montalais would unhesitatingly have preferred diamonds to cameos, and her disinclination, therefore, to pass them on to her companion, La Vallière, was very great. La Vallière fixed a look almost of indifference upon the jewels.

“Oh, how beautiful, how magnificent these bracelets are!” exclaimed Montalais; “and yet you do not go into ecstasies about them, Louise! You are no true woman, I am sure.”

“Yes, I am, indeed,” replied the young girl, with an accent of the most charming melancholy, “but why desire that which can never, by any possibility, be ours?”

The king, his head bent forward, was listening to what Louise was saying. Hardly had the vibration of her voice reached his ear than he rose, radiant with delight, and passing across the whole assembly, from the place where he stood, to La Vallière, “You are mistaken, mademoiselle,” he said, “you are a woman, and every woman has a right to wear jewels, which are a woman’s appurtenance.”

“Oh, sire!” said La Vallière, “your majesty will not absolutely believe in my modesty?”

“I believe you possess every virtue, mademoiselle; frankness as well as every other, I entreat you, therefore, to say frankly what you think of these bracelets?”

“That they are beautiful, sire, and cannot be offered to any other than a queen.”

“I am delighted that such is your opinion, mademoiselle; the bracelets are yours, and the king begs your acceptance of them.”

And as, with a movement almost resembling terror, La Vallière eagerly held out the casket to the king, the king gently pushed back her trembling hand.

A silence of astonishment, more profound than that of death, reigned in the assembly.

And yet, from the side where the queens were, no one had heard what he had said, nor understood what he had done. A charitable friend, however, took upon herself to spread the news; it was Tonnay-Charente, to whom Madame had made a sign to approach.

“Good heavens!” explained Tonnay-Charente, “how happy that La Vallière is! the king has just given her the bracelets.”

Madame bit her lips to such a degree that the blood appeared upon the surface of the skin. The young queen looked first at La Vallière and then at Madame, and began to laugh. Anne of Austria rested her chin upon her beautiful white hand, and remained for a long time absorbed by a presentiment that disturbed her mind, and by a terrible pang which stung her heart. De Guiche, observing Madame turn pale, and guessing the cause of her change of colour, abruptly quitted the assembly and disappeared. Malicorne was then able to approach Montalais very quietly, and under cover of the general din of conversation, said to her:

“Aure, your fortune and our future are standing at your elbow.”

“Yes,” was her reply, as she tenderly embraced La Vallière, whom, inwardly, she was tempted to strangle.

Malaga.

During all these long and noisy debates between the opposite ambitions of politics and love, one of our characters, perhaps the one least deserving of neglect, was, however, very much neglected, very much forgotten, and exceedingly unhappy. In fact, D’Artagnan—D’Artagnan, we say, for we must call him by his name, to remind our readers of his existence—D’Artagnan, we repeat, had absolutely nothing whatever to do, amidst these brilliant butterflies of fashion. After following the king during two whole days at Fontainebleau, and critically observing the various pastoral fancies and heroi-comic transformations of his sovereign, the musketeer felt that he needed something more than this to satisfy the cravings of his nature. At every moment assailed by people asking him, “How do you think this costume suits me, Monsieur d’Artagnan?” he would reply to them in quiet, sarcastic tones, “Why, I think you are quite as well-dressed as the best-dressed monkey to be found in the fair at Saint-Laurent.” It was just such a compliment D’Artagnan would choose where he did not feel disposed to pay any other: and, whether agreeable or not, the inquirer was obliged to be satisfied with it. Whenever any one asked him, “How do you intend to dress yourself this evening?” he replied, “I shall undress myself;” at which the ladies all laughed, and a few of them blushed. But after a couple of days passed in this manner, the musketeer, perceiving that nothing serious was likely to arise which would concern him, and that the king had completely, or, at least, appeared to have completely forgotten Paris, Saint-Mande, and Belle-Ile—that M. Colbert’s mind was occupied with illuminations and fireworks—that for the next month, at least, the ladies had plenty of glances to bestow, and also to receive in exchange—D’Artagnan asked the king for leave of absence for a matter of private business. At the moment D’Artagnan made his request, his majesty was on the point of going to bed, quite exhausted from dancing.

“You wish to leave me, Monsieur d’Artagnan?” inquired the king, with an air of astonishment; for Louis XIV. could never understand why any one who had the distinguished honour of being near him could wish to leave him.

“Sire,” said D’Artagnan, “I leave you simply because I am not of the slightest service to you in anything. Ah! if I could only hold the balancing-pole while you were dancing, it would be a very different affair.”

“But, my dear Monsieur d’Artagnan,” said the king, gravely, “people dance without balancing-poles.”

“Ah! indeed,” said the musketeer, continuing his imperceptible tone of irony, “I had no idea such a thing was possible.”

“You have not seen me dance, then?” inquired the king.

“Yes; but I always thought dancers went from easy to difficult acrobatic feats. I was mistaken; all the more greater reason, therefore, that I should leave for a time. Sire, I repeat, you have no present occasion for my services; besides, if your majesty should have any need of me, you would know where to find me.”

“Very well,” said the king, and he granted him leave of absence.

We shall not look for D’Artagnan, therefore, at Fontainebleau, for to do so would be useless; but, with the permission of our readers, follow him to the Rue des Lombards, where he was located at the sign of the Pilon d’Or, in the house of our old friend Planchet. It was about eight o’clock in the evening, and the weather was exceedingly warm; there was only one window open, and that one belonging to a room on the *entresol*. A perfume of spices, mingled with another perfume less exotic, but more penetrating, namely, that which arose from the street, ascended to salute the nostrils of the musketeer. D’Artagnan, reclining in an immense straight-backed chair, with his legs not stretched out, but simply placed upon a stool, formed an angle of the most obtuse form that could possibly be seen. Both his arms were crossed over his head, his head reclining upon his left shoulder, like Alexander the Great. His eyes, usually so quick and intelligent in their expression, were now half-closed, and seemed fastened, as it were, upon a small corner of blue sky that was visible behind the opening of the chimneys; there was just enough blue, and no more, to fill one of the sacks of lentils, or haricots, which formed the principal furniture of the shop on the ground floor. Thus extended at his ease, and sheltered in his place of observation behind the window, D’Artagnan seemed as if he had ceased to be a soldier, as if he were no longer an officer belonging to the palace, but was, on the contrary, a quiet, easy-going citizen in a state of stagnation between his dinner and supper, or between his supper and his bed; one of those strong, ossified brains, which have no more room for a single idea, so fiercely does animal matter keep watch at the doors of intelligence, narrowly inspecting the contraband trade which might result from the introduction into the brain of a symptom of thought. We have already said night was closing in, the shops were being lighted, while the windows of the upper apartments were being closed, and the rhythmic steps of a patrol of soldiers forming the night watch could be heard retreating. D’Artagnan continued, however, to think of nothing, except the blue corner of the

sky. A few paces from him, completely in the shade, lying on his stomach, upon a sack of Indian corn, was Planchet, with both his arms under his chin, and his eyes fixed on D'Artagnan, who was either thinking, dreaming, or sleeping, with his eyes open. Planchet had been watching him for a tolerably long time, and, by way of interruption, he began by exclaiming, "Hum! hum!" But D'Artagnan did not stir. Planchet then saw that it was necessary to have recourse to more effectual means still: after a prolonged reflection on the subject, the most ingenious means that suggested itself to him under the present circumstances, was to let himself roll off the sack on to the floor, murmuring, at the same time, against himself, the word "stupid." But, notwithstanding the noise produced by Planchet's fall, D'Artagnan, who had in the course of his existence heard many other, and very different falls, did not appear to pay the least attention to the present one. Besides, an enormous cart, laden with stones, passing from the Rue Saint-Mederic, absorbed, in the noise of its wheels, the noise of Planchet's tumble. And yet Planchet fancied that, in token of tacit approval, he saw him imperceptibly smile at the word "stupid." This emboldened him to say, "Are you asleep, Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"No, Planchet, I am not *even* asleep," replied the musketeer.

"I am in despair," said Planchet, "to hear such a word as *even*."

"Well, and why not; is it not a grammatical word, Monsieur Planchet?"

"Of course, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Well!"

"Well, then, the word distresses me beyond measure."

"Tell me why you are distressed, Planchet," said D'Artagnan.

"If you say that you are not *even* asleep, it is as much as to say that you have not even the consolation of being able to sleep; or, better still, it is precisely the same as telling me that you are getting bored to death."

"Planchet, you know that I am never bored."

"Except to-day, and the day before yesterday."

"Bah!"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, it is a week since you returned here from Fontainebleau; in other words, you have no longer your orders to issue, or your men to review and maneuver. You need the sound of guns, drums, and all that din and confusion; I, who have myself carried a musket, can easily believe that."

"Planchet," replied D'Artagnan, "I assure you I am not bored in the least in the world."

"In that case, what are you doing, lying there, as if you were dead?"

"My dear Planchet, there was, once upon a time, at the siege of La Rochelle, when I was there, when you were there, when we both were there, a certain Arab, who was celebrated for the manner in which he adjusted culverins. He was a clever fellow, although of a very odd complexion, which was the same colour as your olives. Well, this Arab, whenever he had done eating or working, used to sit down to rest himself, as I am resting myself now, and smoked I cannot tell you what sort of magical leaves, in a large amber-mouthed tube; and if any officers, happening to pass, reproached him for being always asleep, he used quietly to reply: 'Better to sit down than to stand up, to lie down than to sit down, to be dead than to lie down.' He was an acutely melancholy Arab, and I remember him perfectly well, form the colour of his skin, and the style of his conversation. He used to cut off the heads of Protestants with the most singular gusto!"

"Precisely; and then used to embalm them, when they were worth the trouble; and when he was thus engaged with his herbs and plants about him, he looked like a basket-maker making baskets."

"You are quite right, Planchet, he did."

"Oh! I can remember things very well, at times!"

"I have no doubt of it; but what do you think of his mode of reasoning?"

"I think it good in one sense, but very stupid in another."

"Expound your meaning, M. Planchet."

"Well, monsieur, in point of fact, then, 'better to sit down than to stand up,' is plain enough, especially when one may be fatigued," and Planchet smiled in a roguish way; "as for 'better to be lying down,' let that pass, but as for the last proposition, that it is 'better to be dead than alive,' it is, in my opinion, very absurd, my own undoubted preference being for my bed; and if you are not of my opinion, it is simply, as I have already had the honour of telling you, because you are boring yourself to death."

"Planchet, do you know M. La Fontaine?"

"The chemist at the corner of the Rue Saint-Mederic?"

"No, the writer of fables."

"Oh! *Maitre Corbeau!*"

"Exactly; well, then, I am like his hare."

"He has got a hare also, then?"

"He has all sorts of animals."

"Well, what does his hare do, then?"

"M. La Fontaine's hare thinks."

"Ah, ah!"

"Planchet, I am like that hare—I am thinking."

"You are thinking, you say?" said Planchet, uneasily.

"Yes; your house is dull enough to drive people to think; you will admit that, I hope."

"And yet, monsieur, you have a look-out upon the street."

"Yes; and wonderfully interesting that is, of course."

"But it is no less true, monsieur, that, if you were living at the back of the house, you would bore yourself—I mean, you would think—more than ever."

"Upon my word, Planchet, I hardly know that."

"Still," said the grocer, "if your reflections are at all like those which led you to restore King Charles II.—" and Planchet finished by a little laugh which was not without its meaning.

"Ah! Planchet, my friend," returned D'Artagnan, "you are getting ambitious."

"Is there no other king to be restored, M. d'Artagnan—no second Monk to be packed up, like a salted hog, in a deal box?"

"No, my dear Planchet; all the kings are seated on their respective thrones; less comfortably so, perhaps, than I am upon this chair; but, at all events, there they are." And D'Artagnan sighed deeply.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said Planchet, "you are making me very uneasy."

"You are very good, Planchet."

"I begin to suspect something."

"What is it?"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, you are getting thin."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, striking his chest which sounded like an empty cuirass, "it is impossible, Planchet."

"Ah!" said Planchet, slightly overcome; "if you were to get thin in my house—"

"Well?"

"I should do something rash."

"What would you do? Tell me."

"I should look out for the man who was the cause of all your anxieties."

"Ah! according to your account, I am anxious now."

"Yes, you are anxious; and you are getting thin, visibly getting thin. *Malaga!* if you go on getting thin, in this way, I will take my sword in my hand, and go straight to M. d'Herblay, and have it out with him."

"What!" said M. d'Artagnan, starting in his chair; "what's that you say? And what has M. d'Herblay's name to do with your groceries?"

"Just as you please. Get angry if you like, or call me names, if you prefer it; but, the deuce is in it. *I know what I know.*"

D'Artagnan had, during this second outburst of Planchet's, so placed himself as not to lose a single look of his face; that is, he sat with both his hands resting on both his knees, and his head stretched out towards the grocer. "Come, explain yourself," he said, "and tell me how you could possibly utter such a blasphemy. M. d'Herblay, your old master, my friend, an ecclesiastic, a musketeer turned bishop—do you mean to say you would raise your sword against him, Planchet?"

"I could raise my sword against my own father, when I see you in such a state as you are now."

"M. d'Herblay, a gentleman!"

"It's all the same to me whether he's a gentleman or not. He gives you the blue devils, that is all I know. And the blue devils make people get thin. *Malaga!* I have no notion of M. d'Artagnan leaving my house thinner than when he entered it."

"How does he give me the blue devils, as you call it? Come, explain, explain."

"You have had the nightmare during the last three nights."

"I?"

"Yes, you; and in your nightmare you called out, several times, 'Aramis, deceitful Aramis!'"

"Ah! I said that, did I?" murmured D'Artagnan, uneasily.

"Yes, those very words, upon my honour."

"Well, what else? You know the saying, Planchet, 'dreams go by contraries.'"

"Not so; for every time, during the last three days, when you went out, you have not once failed to ask me, on your return, 'Have you seen M. d'Herblay?' or else 'Have you received any letters for me from M. d'Herblay?'"

"Well, it is very natural I should take an interest in my old friend," said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; but not to such an extent as to get thin on that account."

"Planchet, I'll get fatter; I give you my word of honour I will."

"Very well, monsieur. I accept it; for I know that when you give your word of honour, it is sacred."

"I will not dream of Aramis any more; and I will never ask you again if there are any letters from M. d'Herblay; but on condition that you explain one thing to me."

"Tell me what it is, monsieur?"

"I am a great observer; and just now you made use of a very singular oath, which is unusual for you."

"You mean *Malaga!* I suppose?"

"Precisely."

"It is the oath I have used ever since I have been a grocer."

"Very proper, too; it is the name of a dried grape, or raisin, I believe?"

"It is my most ferocious oath; when I have once said *Malaga!* I am a man no longer."

"Still, I never knew you use that oath before."

"Very likely not, monsieur. I had a present made me of it," said Planchet; and, as he pronounced these words, he winked his eye with a cunning expression, which thoroughly awakened D'Artagnan's attention.

"Come, come, M. Planchet."

"Why, I am not like you, monsieur," said Planchet. "I don't pass my life in thinking."

"You do wrong, then."

"I mean in boring myself to death. We have but a very short time to live—why not make the best of it?"

"You are an Epicurean philosopher, I begin to think, Planchet."

"Why not? My hand is still as steady as ever; I can write, and can weigh out my sugar and spices; my foot is firm; I can dance and walk about; my stomach has its teeth still, for I eat and digest very well; my heart is not quite hardened. Well, monsieur?"

"Well, what, Planchet?"

"Why, you see—" said the grocer, rubbing his hands together.

D'Artagnan crossed one leg over the other, and said, "Planchet, my friend, I am unnerved with extreme surprise; for you are revealing yourself to me under a perfectly new light."

Planchet, flattered in the highest degree by this remark, continued to rub his hands very hard together. "Ah, ah," he said, "because I happen to be only slow, you think me, perhaps, a positive fool."

"Very good, Planchet; very well reasoned."

"Follow my idea, monsieur, if you please. I said to myself," continued Planchet, "that, without enjoyment, there is no happiness on this earth."

"Quite true, what you say, Planchet," interrupted D'Artagnan.

"At all events, if we cannot obtain pleasure—for pleasure is not so common a thing, after all—let us, at least, get consolations of some kind or another."

"And so you console yourself?"

"Exactly so."

"Tell me how you console yourself."

"I put on a buckler for the purpose of confronting *ennui*. I place my time at the direction of patience; and on the very eve of feeling I am going to get bored, I amuse myself."

"And you don't find any difficulty in that?"

"None."

"And you found it out quite by yourself?"

"Quite so."

"It is miraculous."

"What do you say?"

"I say, that your philosophy is not to be matched in the Christian or pagan world, in modern days or in antiquity!"

"You think so?—follow my example, then."

"It is a very tempting one."

"Do as I do."

"I could not wish for anything better; but all minds are not of the same stamp; and it might possibly happen that if I were required to amuse myself in the manner you do, I should bore myself horribly."

"Bah! at least try first."

"Well, tell me what you do."

"Have you observed that I leave home occasionally?"

"Yes."

"In any particular way?"

"Periodically."

"That's the very thing. You have noticed it, then?"

"My dear Planchet, you must understand that when people see each other every day, and one of the two absents himself, the other misses him. Do you not feel the want of my society when I am in the country?"

"Prodigiously; that is to say, I feel like a body without a soul."

"That being understood then, proceed."

"What are the periods when I absent myself?"

"On the fifteenth and thirtieth of every month."

"And I remain away?"

"Sometimes two, sometimes three, and sometimes four days at a time."

"Have you ever given it a thought, why I was absent?"

"To look after your debts, I suppose."

"And when I returned, how did you think I looked, as far as my face was concerned?"

"Exceedingly self-satisfied."

"You admit, you say, that I always look satisfied. And what have you attributed my satisfaction to?"

"That your business was going on very well; that your purchases of rice, prunes, raw sugar, dried apples, pears, and treacle were advantageous. You were always very picturesque in your notions and ideas, Planchet; and I was not in the slightest degree surprised to find you had selected grocery as an occupation, which is of all trades the most varied, and the very pleasantest, as far as the character is concerned; inasmuch as one handles so many natural and perfumed productions."

"Perfectly true, monsieur; but you are very greatly mistaken."

"In what way?"

"In thinking that I leave here every fortnight, to collect my money or to make purchases. Ho, ho! how could you possibly have thought such a thing? Ho, ho, ho!" And Planchet began to laugh in a manner that inspired D'Artagnan with very serious misgivings as to his sanity.

"I confess," said the musketeer, "that I do not precisely catch your meaning."

"Very true, monsieur."

"What do you mean by 'very true'?"

"It must be true, since you say it; but pray, be assured that it in no way lessens my opinion of you."

"Ah, that is lucky."

"No; you are a man of genius; and whenever the question happens to be of war, tactics, surprises, or good honest blows to be dealt with, why, kings are marionettes, compared to you. But for the consolations of the mind, the proper care of the body, the agreeable things of like, if one may say so—ah! monsieur, don't talk to me about men of genius; they are nothing short of executioners."

"Good," said D'Artagnan, really fidgety with curiosity, "upon my word you interest me in the highest degree."

"You feel already less bored than you did just now, do you not?"

"I was not bored; yet since you have been talking to me, I feel more animated."

"Very good, then; that is not a bad beginning. I will cure you, rely upon that."

"There is nothing I should like better."

"Will you let me try, then?"

"Immediately, if you like."

"Very well. Have you any horses here?"

"Yes; ten, twenty, thirty."

"Oh, there is no occasion for so many as that, two will be quite sufficient."

"They are quite at your disposal, Planchet."

"Very good; then I shall carry you off with me."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Where?"

"Ah, you are asking too much."

"You will admit, however, that it is important I should know where I am going."

"Do you like the country?"

"Only moderately, Planchet."

"In that case you like town better?"

"That is as may be."

"Very well; I am going to take you to a place, half town and half country."

"Good."

"To a place where I am sure you will amuse yourself."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes; and more wonderful still, to a place from which you have just returned for the purpose only, it would seem, of getting bored here."

"It is to Fontainebleau you are going, then?"

"Exactly; to Fontainebleau."

"And, in Heaven's name, what are you going to do at Fontainebleau?"

Planchet answered D'Artagnan by a wink full of sly humor.

"You have some property there, you rascal."

"Oh, a very paltry affair; a little bit of a house—nothing more."

"I understand you."

"But it is tolerable enough, after all."

"I am going to Planchet's country-seat!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Whenever you like."

"Did we not fix to-morrow?"

"Let us say to-morrow, if you like; and then, besides, to-morrow is the 14th, that is to say, the day before the one when I am afraid of getting bored; so we will look upon it as an understood thing."



"Agreed, by all means."

"You will lend me one of your horses?"

"The best I have."

"No; I prefer the gentlest of all; I never was a very good rider, as you know, and in my grocery business I have got more awkward than ever; besides—"

"Besides what?"

"Why," added Planchet, "I do not wish to fatigue myself."

"Why so?" D'Artagnan ventured to ask.

"Because I should lose half the pleasure I expect to enjoy," replied Planchet. And thereupon he rose from his sack of Indian corn, stretching himself, and making all his bones crack, one after the other, with a sort of harmony.

"Planchet! Planchet!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, "I do declare that there is no sybarite upon the face of the globe who can for a moment be compared to you. Oh, Planchet, it is very clear that we have never yet eaten a ton of salt together."

"Why so, monsieur?"

"Because, even now I can scarcely say I know you," said D'Artagnan, "and because, in point of fact, I return to the opinion which, for a moment, I had formed of you that day at Boulogne, when you strangled, or did so as nearly as possible, M. de Wardes's valet, Lubin; in plain language, Planchet, that you are a man of great resources."

Planchet began to laugh with a laugh full of self-conceit; bade the musketeer good-night, and went down to his back shop, which he used as a bedroom. D'Artagnan resumed his original position upon his chair, and his brow, which had been unruffled for a moment, became more pensive than ever. He had already forgotten the whims and dreams of Planchet. "Yes," said he, taking up again the thread of his thoughts, which had been broken by the whimsical conversation in which we have just permitted our readers to participate. "Yes, yes, those three points include everything: First, to ascertain what Baisemeaux wanted with Aramis; secondly, to learn why Aramis does not let me hear from him; and thirdly, to ascertain where Porthos is. The whole mystery lies in these three points. Since, therefore," continued D'Artagnan, "our friends tell us nothing, we must have recourse to our own poor intelligence. I must do what I can, *mordieux*, or rather *Malaga*, as Planchet would say."

#### II. A Letter from M. Baisemeaux.

D'Artagnan, faithful to his plan, went the very next morning to pay a visit to M. de Baisemeaux. It was cleaning up or tidying day at the Bastille; the cannons were refurbished up, the staircases scraped and cleaned; and the jailers seemed to be carefully engaged in polishing the very keys. As for the soldiers belonging to the garrison, they were walking about in different courtyards, under the pretense that they were clean enough. The governor, Baisemeaux, received D'Artagnan with more than ordinary politeness, but he behaved towards him with so marked a reserve of manner, that all D'Artagnan's tact and cleverness could not get a syllable out of him. The more he kept himself within bounds, the more D'Artagnan's suspicion increased. The latter even fancied he remarked that the governor was acting under the influence of a recent recommendation. Baisemeaux had not been at the Palais Royal with D'Artagnan the same cold and impenetrable man which the latter now found in the Baisemeaux of the Bastille. When D'Artagnan wished to make him talk about the urgent money matters which had brought Baisemeaux in search of D'Artagnan, and had rendered him expansive, notwithstanding what had passed on that evening, Baisemeaux pretended that he had some orders to give in the prison, and left D'Artagnan so long alone waiting for him, that our musketeer, feeling sure that he should not get another syllable out of him, left the Bastille without waiting until Baisemeaux returned from his inspection. But D'Artagnan's suspicions were aroused, and when once that was the case, D'Artagnan could not sleep or remain quiet for a moment. He was among men what the cat is among quadrupeds, the emblem of anxiety and impatience, at the same moment. A restless cat can no more remain the same place than a silk thread wafted idly to and fro with every breath of air. A cat on the watch is as motionless as death stationed at its place of observation, and neither hunger nor thirst can draw it from its meditations. D'Artagnan, who was burning with impatience, suddenly threw aside the feeling, like a cloak which he felt too heavy on his shoulders, and said to himself that that which they were concealing from him was the very thing it was important he should know; and, consequently, he reasoned that Baisemeaux would not fail to put Aramis on his guard, if Aramis had given him any particular recommendation, and this was, in fact, the very thing that happened.

Baisemeaux had hardly had time to return from the donjon, than D'Artagnan placed himself in ambuscade close to the Rue de Petit-Musc, so as to see every one who might leave the gates of the Bastille. After he had spent an hour on the look-out from the "Golden Portcullis," under the pent-house of which he could keep himself a little in the shade, D'Artagnan observed a soldier leave the Bastille. This was, indeed, the surest indication he could possibly have wished for, as every jailer or warder has certain days, and even certain hours, for leaving the Bastille, since all are alike prohibited from having either wives or lodgings in the castle, and can accordingly leave without exciting any curiosity; but a soldier once in barracks is kept there for four and twenty hours when on duty,—and no one knew this better than D'Artagnan. The guardsman in question, therefore, was not likely to leave his regimentals, except on an express and urgent order. The soldier, we were saying, left the Bastille at a slow and lounging pace, like a happy mortal, in fact, who, instead of mounting sentry before a wearisome guard-house, or upon a bastion no less wearisome, has the good luck to get a little liberty, in addition to a walk—both pleasures being luckily reckoned as part of his time on duty. He bent his steps towards the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, enjoying the fresh air and the warmth of the sun, and looking at all the pretty faces he passed. D'Artagnan followed him at a distance; he had not yet arranged his ideas as what was to be done. "I must, first of all," he thought, "see the fellow's face. A man seen is a man judged." D'Artagnan increased his pace, and, which was not very difficult, by the by, soon got in advance of the soldier. Not only did he observe that his face showed a tolerable amount of intelligence and resolution, but he noticed also that his nose was a little red. "He has a weakness for brandy, I see," said D'Artagnan to himself. At the same moment that he remarked his red nose, he saw that the soldier had a white paper in his belt.

"Good, he has a letter," added D'Artagnan. The only difficulty was to get hold of the letter. But a common soldier would, of course, be only too delighted at having been selected by M. de Baisemeaux as a special messenger, and would not be likely to sell his message. As D'Artagnan was biting his nails, the soldier continued to advance more and more into the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. "He is certainly going to Saint-Mande," he said to himself, "and I shall not be able to learn what the letter contains." It was enough to drive him wild. "If I were in uniform," said D'Artagnan to himself, "I would have this fellow seized, and his letter with him. I could easily get assistance at the very first guard-house; but the devil take me if I mention my name in an affair of this kind. If I were to treat him to something to drink, his suspicions would be roused; and besides, he might drink me drunk. *Mordieux!* my wits seem to have left me," said D'Artagnan; "it is all over with me. Yet, supposing I were to attack this poor devil, make him draw his sword and kill him for the sake of his letter? No harm in that, if it were a question of a letter from a queen to a nobleman, or a letter from a cardinal to a queen; but what miserable intrigues are those of Messieurs Aramis and Fouquet with M. Colbert. A man's life for the what? No, no, indeed; not even ten crowns." As he philosophized in this manner, biting first his nails, and then his mustaches, he perceived a group of archers and a commissary of the police engaged in carrying away a man of very gentlemanly exterior, who was struggling with all his might against them. The archers had torn his clothes, and were dragging him roughly away. He begged they would lead him along more respectfully, asserting that he was a gentleman and a soldier. And observing our soldier walking in the street, he called out, "Help, comrade."

The soldier walked on with the same step towards the man who had called out to him, followed by the crowd. An idea suddenly occurred to D'Artagnan; it was his first one, and we shall find it was not a bad one either. During the time the gentleman was relating to the soldier that he had just been seized in a house as a thief, when the truth was he was only there as a lover; and while the soldier was pitying him, and offering him consolation and advice with that gravity which a French soldier has always ready whenever his vanity or his *esprit de corps* is concerned, D'Artagnan glided behind the soldier, who was closely hemmed in by the crowd, and with a rapid sweep, like a sabre slash, snatched the letter from his belt. As at this moment the gentleman with the torn clothes was pulling about the soldier, to show how the commissary of police had pulled him about, D'Artagnan effected his pillage of the letter without the slightest interference. He stationed himself about ten paces distant, behind the pillar of an adjoining house, and read on the address, "To Monsieur du Vallon, at Monsieur Fouquet's, Saint-Mande."

"Good!" he said, and then he unsealed, without tearing the letter, drew out the paper, which was folded in four, from the inside; which contained only these words:

"DEAR MONSIEUR DU VALLON,—Will you be good enough to tell Monsieur d'Herblay that *he* has been to the Bastille, and has been making inquiries.

"Your devoted

"DE BAISEMEAUX."

"Very good! all right!" exclaimed D'Artagnan; "it is clear enough now. Porthos is engaged in it." Being now satisfied of what he wished to know: "*Mordieux!*" thought the musketeer, "what is to be done with that poor devil of a soldier? That hot-headed, cunning fellow, De Baisemeaux, will make him pay dearly for my trick,—if he returns without the letter, what will they do to him? Besides, I don't want the letter; when the egg has been sucked, what is the good of the shell?" D'Artagnan perceived that the commissary and the archers had succeeded in convincing the soldier, and went on their way with the prisoner, the latter being still surrounded by the crowd, and continuing his complaints. D'Artagnan advanced into the very middle of the crowd, let the letter fall, without any one having observed him, and then retreated rapidly. The soldier resumed his route towards Saint-Mande, his mind occupied with the gentleman who had implored his protection. Suddenly he thought of his letter, and, looking at his belt, saw that it was no longer there. D'Artagnan derived no little satisfaction from his sudden, terrified cry. The poor soldier in the greatest anguish of mind looked round him on every side, and at last, about twenty paces behind him, he perceived the lucky envelope. He pounced on it like a falcon on its prey. The envelope was certainly a little dirty, and rather crumpled, but at all events the letter itself was found. D'Artagnan observed that the broken seal attracted the soldier's attention a good deal, but he finished apparently by consoling himself, and returned the letter to his belt. "Go on," said D'Artagnan, "I have plenty of time before me, so you may precede me. It appears that Aramis is not in Paris, since Baisemeaux writes to Porthos. Dear Porthos, how delighted I shall be to see him again, and to have some conversation with him!" said the Gascon. And, regulating his pace according to that of the soldier, he promised himself to arrive a quarter of an hour after him at M. Fouquet's.

#### III. In Which the Reader will be Delighted to Find that Porthos Has Lost Nothing of His Muscularity.

D'Artagnan had, according to his usual style, calculated that every hour is worth sixty minutes, and every minute worth sixty seconds. Thanks to this perfectly exact calculation of minutes and seconds, he reached the superintendent's door at the very moment the soldier was leaving it with his belt empty. D'Artagnan presented himself at the door, which a porter with a profusely embroidered livery held half opened for him. D'Artagnan would very much have liked to enter without giving his name, but this was impossible, and so he gave it. Notwithstanding this concession, which ought to have removed every difficulty in the way, at least D'Artagnan thought so, the *conciergerie* hesitated; however, at the second repetition of the title, captain of the king's guards, the *conciergerie*, without quite leaving the passage clear for him, ceased to bar it completely. D'Artagnan understood that orders of the most positive character had been given. He decided, therefore, to tell a falsehood,—a circumstance, moreover, which did not seriously affect his peace of mind, when he saw that beyond the falsehood the safety of the state itself, or even purely and simply his own individual personal interest, might be at stake. He moreover added to the declarations he had already made, that the soldier sent to M. du Vallon was his own messenger, and that the only object that letter had in view was to announce his intended arrival. From that moment, no one opposed D'Artagnan's entrance any further, and he entered accordingly. A valet wished to accompany him, but he answered that it was useless to take that trouble on his account, inasmuch as he knew perfectly well where M. du Vallon was. There was nothing, of course, to say to a man so thoroughly and completely informed on all points, and D'Artagnan was permitted, therefore, to do as he liked. The terraces, the magnificent apartments, the gardens, were all reviewed and narrowly inspected by the musketeer. He walked for a quarter of an hour in this more than royal residence, which included as many wonders as articles of furniture, and as many servants as there were columns and doors. "Decidedly," he said to himself, "this mansion has no other limits than the pillars of the habitable world. Is it probable Porthos has taken it into his head to go back to Pierrefonds without even leaving M. Fouquet's house?" He finally reached a remote part of the chateau inclosed by a stone wall, which was covered with a profusion of thick plants, luxuriant in blossoms as large and solid as fruit. At equal distances on the top of this wall were placed various statues in timid or mysterious attitudes. These were vestals hidden beneath the long Greek peplum, with its thick, sinuous folds; agile nymphs, covered with their marble veils, and guarding the palace with their fugitive glances. A statue of Hermes, with his finger on his lips; one of Iris, with extended wings; another of Night, sprinkled all over with poppies, dominated the gardens and outbuildings, which could be seen through the trees. All these statues threw in white relief their profiles upon the dark ground of the tall cypresses, which darted their somber summits towards the sky. Around these cypresses were entwined climbing roses, whose flowering rings were fastened to every fork of the branches, and spread over the lower boughs and the various statues, showers of flowers of the rarest fragrance. These enchantments seemed to the musketeer the result of the greatest efforts of the human mind. He felt in a dreamy, almost poetical, frame of mind. The idea that Porthos was living in so perfect an Eden gave him a higher idea of Porthos, showing how tremendously true it is, that even the very highest orders of minds are not quite exempt from the influence of surroundings. D'Artagnan found the door, and on, or rather in the door, a kind of spring which he detected; having touched it, the door flew open. D'Artagnan entered, closed the door behind him, and advanced into a pavilion built in a circular form, in which no other sound could be heard but cascades and the songs of birds. At the door of the pavilion he met a lackey.

"It is here, I believe," said D'Artagnan, without hesitation, "that M. le Baron du Vallon is staying?"

"Yes, monsieur," answered the lackey.

"Have the goodness to tell him that M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of the king's musketeers, is waiting to see him."

D'Artagnan was introduced into the *salon*, and had not long to remain in expectation: a well-remembered step shook the floor of the adjoining room, a door opened, or rather flew open, and Porthos appeared and threw himself into his friend's arms with a sort of embarrassment which did not ill become him. "You here?" he exclaimed.

"And you?" replied D'Artagnan. "Ah, you sly fellow!"

"Yes," said Porthos, with a somewhat embarrassed smile; "yes, you see I am staying in M. Fouquet's house, at which you are not a little surprised, I suppose?"

"Not at all; why should you not be one of M. Fouquet's friends? M. Fouquet has a very large number, particularly among clever men."

Porthos had the modesty not to take the compliment to himself. "Besides," he added, "you saw me at Belle-Isle."

"A greater reason for my believing you to be one of M. Fouquet's friends."

"The fact is, I am acquainted with him," said Porthos, with a certain embarrassment of manner.

"Ah, friend Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how treacherously you have behaved towards me."

"In what way?" exclaimed Porthos.

"What! you complete so admirable a work as the fortifications of Belle-Isle, and you did not tell me of it!" Porthos coloured. "Nay, more than that," continued D'Artagnan, "you saw me out yonder, you know I am in the king's service, and yet you could not guess that the king, jealously desirous of learning the name of the man whose abilities had wrought a work of which he heard the most wonderful accounts,—you could not guess, I say, that the king sent me to learn who this man was?"

"What! the king sent you to learn—"

"Of course; but don't let us speak of that any more."

"Not speak of it!" said Porthos; "on the contrary, we will speak of it; and so the king knew that we were fortifying Belle-Isle?"

"Of course; does not the king know everything?"

"But he did not know who was fortifying it?"

"No, he only suspected, from what he had been told of the nature of the works, that it was some celebrated soldier or another."

"The devil!" said Porthos, "if I had only known that!"

"You would not have run away from Vannes as you did, perhaps?"

"No; what did you say when you couldn't find me?"

"My dear fellow, I reflected."

"Ah, indeed; you reflect, do you? Well, and what did that reflection lead to?"

"It led me to guess the whole truth."

"Come, then, tell me what did you guess after all?" said Porthos, settling himself into an armchair, and assuming the airs of a sphinx.

"I guessed, in the first place, that you were fortifying Belle-Isle."

"There was no great difficulty in that, for you saw me at work."

"Wait a minute; I also guessed something else,—that you were fortifying Belle-Isle by M. Fouquet's orders."

"That's true."

"But even that is not all. Whenever I feel myself in trim for guessing, I do not stop on my road; and so I guessed that M. Fouquet wished to preserve the most absolute secrecy respecting these fortifications."

"I believe that was his intention, in fact," said Porthos.

"Yes, but do you know why he wished to keep it secret?"

"In order it should not become known, perhaps," said Porthos.

"That was his principal reason. But his wish was subservient to a bit of generosity—"

"In fact," said Porthos, "I have heard it said that M. Fouquet was a very generous man."

"To a bit of generosity he wished to exhibit towards the king."

"Oh, oh!"

"You seem surprised at that?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't guess?"

"No."

"Well, I know it, then."

"You are a wizard."

"Not at all, I assure you."

"How do you know it, then?"

"By a very simple means. I heard M. Fouquet himself say so to the king."

"Say what to the king?"

"That he fortified Belle-Isle on his majesty's account, and that he had made him a present of Belle Isle."

"And you heard M. Fouquet say that to the king?"

"In those very words. He even added: 'Belle-Isle has been fortified by an engineer, one of my friends, a man of a great deal of merit, whom I shall ask your majesty's permission to present to you.'

"What is his name?" said the king.

"The Baron du Vallon," M. Fouquet replied.

"Very well," returned his majesty, 'you will present him to me.'

"The king said that?"

"Upon the word of a D'Artagnan!"

"Oh, oh!" said Porthos. "Why have I not been presented, then?"

"Have they not spoken to you about this presentation?"

"Yes, certainly; but I am always kept waiting for it."

"Be easy, it will be sure to come."

"Humph! humph!" grumbled Porthos, which D'Artagnan pretended not to hear; and, changing the conversation, he said, "You seem to be living in a very solitary place here, my dear fellow?"

"I always preferred retirement. I am of a melancholy disposition," replied Porthos, with a sigh.

"Really, that is odd," said D'Artagnan, "I never remarked that before."

"It is only since I have taken to reading," said Porthos, with a thoughtful air.

"But the labors of the mind have not affected the health of the body, I trust?"

"Not in the slightest degree."

"Your strength is as great as ever?"

"Too great, my friend, too great."

"Ah! I had heard that, for a short time after your arrival—"

"That I could hardly move a limb, I suppose?"

"How was it?" said D'Artagnan, smiling, "and why was it you could not move?"

Porthos, perceiving that he had made a mistake, wished to correct it. "Yes, I came from Belle-Isle upon very hard horses," he said, "and that fatigued me."

"I am no longer astonished, then, since I, who followed you, found seven or eight lying dead on the road."

"I am very heavy, you know," said Porthos.

"So that you were bruised all over."

"My marrow melted, and that made me very ill."

"Poor Porthos! But how did Aramis act towards you under those circumstances?"

"Very well, indeed. He had me attended to by M. Fouquet's own doctor. But just imagine, at the end of a week I could not breathe any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"The room was too small; I had absorbed every atom of air."

"Indeed?"

"I was told so, at least; and so I was removed into another apartment."

"Where you were able to breathe, I hope and trust?"

"Yes, more freely; but no exercise—nothing to do. The doctor pretended that I was not to stir; I, on the contrary, felt that I was stronger than ever; that was the cause of a very serious accident."

"What accident?"

"Fancy, my dear fellow, that I revolted against the directions of that ass of a doctor, and I resolved to go out, whether it suited him or not: and, consequently, I told the valet who waited on me to bring me my clothes."

"You were quite naked, then?"

"Oh, no! on the contrary, I had a magnificent dressing-gown to wear. The lackey obeyed; I dressed myself in my own clothes, which had become too large for me; but a strange circumstance had happened,—my feet had become too large."

"Yes, I quite understand."

"And my boots too small."

"You mean your feet were still swollen?"

"Exactly; you have hit it."

"*Pardieu!* And is that the accident you were going to tell me about?"

"Oh, yes; I did not make the same reflection you have done. I said to myself: 'Since my feet have entered my boots ten times, there is no reason why they should not go in the eleventh.'"

"Allow me to tell you, my dear Porthos, that on this occasion you failed in your logic."

"In short, then, they placed me opposite to a part of the room which was partitioned; I tried to get my boot on; I pulled it with my hands, I pushed with all the strength of the muscles of my leg, making the most unheard-of efforts, when suddenly the two tags of my boot remained in my hands, and my foot struck out like a ballista."

"How learned you are in fortification, dear Porthos."

"My foot darted out like a ballista, and came against the partition, which it broke in; I really thought that, like Samson, I had demolished the temple. And the number of pictures, the quantity of china, vases of flowers, carpets, and window-panes that fell down were really wonderful."

"Indeed!"

"Without reckoning that on the other side of the partition was a small table laden with porcelain—"

"Which you knocked over?"

"Which I dashed to the other side of the room," said Porthos, laughing.

"Upon my word, it is, as you say, astonishing," replied D'Artagnan, beginning to laugh also; whereupon Porthos laughed louder than ever.

"I broke," said Porthos, in a voice half-choked from his increasing mirth, "more than three thousand francs worth of china—ha, ha, ha!"

"Good!" said D'Artagnan.

"I smashed more than four thousand francs worth of glass!—ho, ho, ho!"

"Excellent."

"Without counting a luster, which fell on my head and was broken into a thousand pieces—ha, ha, ha!"

"Upon your head?" said D'Artagnan, holding his sides.

"On top."

"But your head was broken, I suppose?"

"No, since I tell you, on the contrary, my dear fellow, that it was the luster which was broken, like glass, which, in point of fact, it was."

"Ah! the luster was glass, you say."

"Venetian glass! a perfect curiosity, quite matchless, indeed, and weighed two hundred pounds."

"And it fell upon your head!"

"Upon my head. Just imagine, a globe of crystal, gilded all over, the lower part beautifully encrusted, perfumes burning at the top, with jets from which flame issued when they were lighted."

"I quite understand, but they were not lighted at the time, I suppose?"

"Happily not, or I should have been grilled prematurely."

"And you were only knocked down flat, instead?"

"Not at all."

"How, 'not at all?'"

"Why, the luster fell on my skull. It appears that we have upon the top of our heads an exceedingly thick crust."

"Who told you that, Porthos?"

"The doctor. A sort of dome which would bear Notre-Dame."

"Bah!"

"Yes, it seems that our skulls are made in that manner."

"Speak for yourself, my dear fellow, it is your own skull that is made in that manner, and not the skulls of other people."

"Well, that may be so," said Porthos, conceitedly, "so much, however, was that the case, in my instance, that no sooner did the luster fall upon the dome which we have at the top of our head, than there was a report like a cannon, the crystal was broken to pieces, and I fell, covered from head to foot."

"With blood, poor Porthos!"

"Not at all; with perfumes, which smelt like rich creams; it was delicious, but the odor was too strong, and I felt quite giddy from it; perhaps you have experienced it sometimes yourself, D'Artagnan?"

"Yes, in inhaling the scent of the lily of the valley; so that, my poor friend, you were knocked over by the shock and overpowered by the perfumes?"

"Yes; but what is very remarkable, for the doctor told me he had never seen anything like it—"

"You had a bump on your head I suppose?" interrupted D'Artagnan.

"I had five."

"Why five?"

"I will tell you; the luster had, at its lower extremity, five gilt ornaments; excessively sharp."

"Oh!"

"Well, these five ornaments penetrated my hair, which, as you see, I wear very thick."

"Fortunately so."

"And they made a mark on my skin. But just notice the singularity of it, these things seem really only to happen to me! Instead of making indentations, they made bumps. The doctor could never succeed in explaining that to me satisfactorily."

"Well, then, I will explain it to you."

"You will do me a great service if you will," said Porthos, winking his eyes, which, with him, was sign of the profoundest attention.

"Since you have been employing your brain in studies of an exalted character, in important calculations, and so on, the head has gained a certain advantage, so that your head is now too full of science."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. The result is, that, instead of allowing any foreign matter to penetrate the interior of the head, your bony box or skull, which is already too full, avails itself of the openings which are made in allowing this excess to escape."

"Ah!" said Porthos, to whom this explanation appeared clearer than that of the doctor.

"The five protuberances, caused by the five ornaments of the luster, must certainly have been scientific globules, brought to the surface by the force of circumstances."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the real truth is, that I felt far worse outside my head than inside. I will even confess, that when I put my hat upon my head, clapping it on my head with that graceful energy which we gentlemen of the sword possess, if my fist was not very gently applied, I experienced the most painful sensations."

"I quite believe you, Porthos."

"Therefore, my friend," said the giant, "M. Fouquet decided, seeing how slightly built the house was, to give me another lodging, and so they brought me here."

"It is the private park, I think, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Where the rendezvous are made; that park, indeed, which is so celebrated in some of those mysterious stories about the superintendent?"

"I don't know; I have had no rendezvous or heard mysterious stories myself, but they have authorized me to exercise my muscles, and I take advantage of the permission by rooting up some of the trees."

"What for?"

"To keep my hand in, and also to take some birds' nests; I find it more convenient than climbing."

"You are as pastoral as Tyrcis, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, I like the small eggs; I like them very much better than larger ones. You have no idea how delicate an *omelette* is, if made of four or five hundred eggs of linnets, chaffinches, starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes."

"But five hundred eggs is perfectly monstrous!"

"A salad-bowl will hold them easily enough," said Porthos.

D'Artagnan looked at Porthos admiringly for full five minutes, as if he had seen him for the first time, while Porthos spread his chest out joyously and proudly. They remained in this state several minutes, Porthos smiling, and D'Artagnan looking at him. D'Artagnan was evidently trying to give the conversation a new turn. "Do you amuse yourself much here, Porthos?" he asked at last, very likely after he had found out what he was searching for.

"Not always."

"I can imagine that; but when you get thoroughly bored, by and by, what do you intend to do?"

"Oh! I shall not be here for any length of time. Aramis is waiting until the last bump on my head disappears, in order to present me to the king, who I am told cannot endure the sight of a bump."

"Aramis is still in Paris, then?"

"No."

"Whereabouts is he, then?"

"At Fontainebleau."

"Alone?"

"With M. Fouquet."

"Very good. But do you happen to know one thing?"

"No, tell it me, and then I shall know."

"Well, then, I think Aramis is forgetting you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes; for at Fontainebleau yonder, you must know, they are laughing, dancing, banqueting, and drawing the corks of M. de Mazarin's wine in fine style. Are you aware that they have a ballet every evening there?"

"The deuce they have!"

"I assure you that your dear Aramis is forgetting you."

"Well, that is not at all unlikely, and I have myself thought so sometimes."

"Unless he is playing you a trick, the sly fellow!"

"Oh!"

"You know that Aramis is as sly as a fox."

"Yes, but to play *me* a trick—"

"Listen: in the first place, he puts you under a sort of sequestration."

"He sequestrates me! Do you mean to say I am sequestrated?"

"I think so."

"I wish you would have the goodness to prove that to me."

"Nothing easier. Do you ever go out?"

"Never."

"Do you ever ride on horseback?"

"Never."

"Are your friends allowed to come and see you?"

"Never."

"Very well, then; never to go out, never to ride on horseback, never to be allowed to see your friends, that is called being sequestrated."

"But why should Aramis sequestrate me?" inquired Porthos.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, "be frank, Porthos."

"As gold."

"It was Aramis who drew the plan of the fortifications at Belle-Isle, was it not?"

Porthos coloured as he said, "Yes; but that was all he did."

"Exactly, and my own opinion is that it was no very great affair after all."

"That is mine, too."

"Very good; I am delighted we are of the same opinion."

"He never even came to Belle-Isle," said Porthos.

"There now, you see."

"It was I who went to Vannes, as you may have seen."

"Say rather, as I did see. Well, that is precisely the state of the case, my dear Porthos. Aramis, who only drew the plans, wishes to pass himself off as the engineer, whilst you, who, stone by stone, built the wall, the citadel, and the bastions, he wishes to reduce to the rank of a mere builder."

"By builder, you mean mason, perhaps?"

"Mason; the very word."

"Plasterer, in fact?"

"Hodman?"

"Exactly."

"Oh, oh! my dear Aramis, you seem to think you are only five and twenty years of age still."

"Yes, and that is not all, for he believes you are fifty."

"I should have amazingly liked to have seen him at work."

"Yes, indeed."

"A fellow who has got the gout?"

"Yes."

"Who has lost three of his teeth?"

"Four."

"While I, look at mine." And Porthos, opening his large mouth very wide, displayed two rows of teeth not quite as white as snow, but even, hard, and sound as ivory.

"You can hardly believe, Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "what a fancy the king has for good teeth. Yours decide me; I will present you to the king myself."

"You?"

"Why not? Do you think I have less credit at court than Aramis?"

"Oh, no!"

"Do you think I have the slightest pretensions upon the fortifications at Belle-Isle?"

"Certainly not."

"It is your own interest alone which would induce me to do it."

"I don't doubt it in the least."

"Well, I am the intimate friend of the king; and a proof of that is, that whenever there is anything disagreeable to tell him, it is I who have to do it."

"But, dear D'Artagnan, if you present me—"

"Well!"

"Aramis will be angry."

"With me?"

"No, with *me*."

"Bah! whether he or I present you, since you are to be presented, what does it matter?"

"They were going to get me some clothes made."

"Your own are splendid."

"Oh! those I had ordered were far more beautiful."

"Take care: the king likes simplicity."

"In that case, I will be simple. But what will M. Fouquet say, when he learns that I have left?"

"Are you a prisoner, then, on parole?"

"No, not quite that. But I promised him I would not leave without letting him know."

"Wait a minute, we shall return to that presently. Have you anything to do here?"

"I, nothing: nothing of any importance, at least."

"Unless, indeed, you are Aramis's representative for something of importance."

"By no means."

"What I tell you—pray, understand that—is out of interest for you. I suppose, for instance, that you are commissioned to send messages and letters to him?"

"Ah! letters—yes. I send certain letters to him."

"Where?"

"To Fontainebleau."

"Have you any letters, then?"

"But—"

"Nay, let me speak. Have you any letters, I say?"

"I have just received one for him."

"Interesting?"

"I suppose so."

"You do not read them, then?"

"I am not at all curious," said Porthos, as he drew out of his pocket the soldier's letter which Porthos had not read, but D'Artagnan had.

"Do you know what to do with it?" said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; do as I always do, send it to him."

"Not so."

"Why not? Keep it, then?"

"Did they not tell you that this letter was important?"

"Very important."

"Well, you must take it yourself to Fontainebleau."

"To Aramis?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

"And since the king is there—"

"You will profit by that."

"I shall profit by the opportunity to present you to the king."

"Ah! D'Artagnan, there is no one like you for expedients."

"Therefore, instead of forwarding to our friend any messages, which may or may not be faithfully delivered, we will ourselves be the bearers of the letter."

"I had never even thought of that, and yet it is simple enough."

"And therefore, because it is urgent, Porthos, we ought to set off at once."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the sooner we set off the less chance there is of Aramis's letter being delayed."

"Porthos, your reasoning is always accurate, and, in your case, logic seems to serve as an auxiliary to the imagination."

"Do you think so?" said Porthos.

"It is the result of your hard reading," replied D'Artagnan. "So come along, let us be off."

"But," said Porthos, "my promise to M. Fouquet?"

"Which?"

"Not to leave Saint-Mande without telling him of it."

"Ah! Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how very young you still are."

"In what way?"

"You are going to Fontainebleau, are you not, where you will find M. Fouquet?"

"Yes."

"Probably in the king's palace?"

"Yes," repeated Porthos, with an air full of majesty.

"Well, you will accost him with these words: 'M. Fouquet, I have the honour to inform you that I have just left Saint-Mande.'"

"And," said Porthos, with the same majestic mien, "seeing me at Fontainebleau at the king's, M. Fouquet will not be able to tell me I am not speaking the truth."

"My dear Porthos, I was just on the point of opening my lips to make the same remark, but you anticipate me in everything. Oh! Porthos, how fortunately you are gifted! Years have made not the slightest impression on you."

"Not over-much, certainly."

"Then there is nothing more to say?"

"I think not."

"All your scruples are removed?"

"Quite so."

"In that case I shall carry you off with me."

"Exactly; and I will go and get my horse saddled."

"You have horses here, then?"

"I have five."

"You had them sent from Pierrefonds, I suppose?"

"No, M. Fouquet gave them to me."

"My dear Porthos, we shall not want five horses for two persons; besides, I have already three in Paris, which would make eight, and that will be too many."

"It would not be too many if I had some of my servants here; but, alas! I have not got them."

"Do you regret them, then?"

"I regret Mousqueton; I miss Mousqueton."

"What a good-hearted fellow you are, Porthos," said D'Artagnan; "but the best thing you can do is to leave your horses here, as you have left Mousqueton out yonder."

"Why so?"

"Because, by and by, it might turn out a very good thing if M. Fouquet had never given you anything at all."

"I don't understand you," said Porthos.

"It is not necessary you should understand."

"But yet—"

"I will explain to you later, Porthos."

"I'll wager it is some piece of policy or other."

"And of the most subtle character," returned D'Artagnan.

Porthos nodded his head at this word policy; then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "I confess, D'Artagnan, that I am no politician."

"I know that well."

"Oh! no one knows what you told me yourself, you, the bravest of the brave."

"What did I tell you, Porthos?"

"That every man has his day. You told me so, and I have experienced it myself. There are certain days when one feels less pleasure than others in exposing one's self to a bullet or a sword-thrust."

"Exactly my own idea."

"And mine, too, although I can hardly believe in blows or thrusts that kill outright."

"The deuce! and yet you have killed a few in your time."

"Yes; but I have never been killed."

"Your reason is a very good one."

"Therefore, I do not believe I shall ever die from a thrust of a sword or a gun-shot."

"In that case, then, you are afraid of nothing. Ah! water, perhaps?"

"Oh! I swim like an otter."

"Of a quartan fever, then?"

"I have never had one yet, and I don't believe I ever shall; but there is one thing I will admit," and Porthos dropped his voice.

"What is that?" asked D'Artagnan, adopting the same tone of voice as Porthos.

"I must confess," repeated Porthos, "that I am horribly afraid of politics."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Upon my word, it's true," said Porthos, in a stentorian voice. "I have seen his eminence Monsieur le Cardinal de Richelieu, and his eminence Monsieur le Cardinal de Mazarin; the one was a red politician, the other a black politician; I never felt very much more satisfied with the one than with the other; the first struck off the heads of M. de Marillac, M. de Thou, M. de Cinq-Mars, M. Chalais, M. de Bouteville, and M. de Montmorency; the second got a whole crowd of Frondeurs cut in pieces, and we belonged to them."

"On the contrary, we did not belong to them," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh! indeed, yes; for if I unsheathed my sword for the cardinal, I struck it for the king."

"My good Porthos!"

"Well, I have done. My dread of politics is such, that if there is any question of politics in the matter, I should greatly prefer to return to Pierrefonds."

"You would be quite right, if that were the case. But with me, my dear Porthos, no politics at all, that is quite clear. You have labored hard in fortifying Belle-Isle; the king wished to know the name of the clever engineer under whose directions the works were carried out; you are modest, as all men of true genius are; perhaps Aramis wishes to put you under a bushel. But I happen to seize hold of you; I make it known who you are; I produce you; the king rewards you; and that is the only policy I have to do with."

"And the only one I will have to do with either," said Porthos, holding out his hand to D'Artagnan.

But D'Artagnan knew Porthos's grasp; he knew that, once imprisoned within the baron's five fingers, no hand ever left it without being half-crushed. He therefore held out, not his hand, but his fist, and Porthos did not even perceive the difference. The servants talked a little with each other in an undertone, and whispered a few words, which D'Artagnan understood, but which he took very good care not to let Porthos understand. "Our friend," he said to himself, "was really and truly Aramis's prisoner. Let us now see what the result will be of the liberation of the captive."

IV. The Rat and the Cheese.

D'Artagnan and Porthos returned on foot, as D'Artagnan had set out. When D'Artagnan, as he entered the shop of the Pilon d'Or, announced to Planchet that M. du Vallon would be one of the privileged travelers, and as the plume in Porthos's hat made the wooden candles suspended over the front jingle together, a melancholy presentiment seemed to eclipse the delight Planchet had promised himself for the morrow. But the grocer had a heart of gold, ever mindful of the good old times—a trait that carries youth into old age. So Planchet, notwithstanding a sort of internal shiver, checked as soon as experienced, received Porthos with respect, mingled with the tenderest cordiality. Porthos, who was a little cold and stiff in his manners at first, on account of the social difference existing at that period between a baron and a grocer, soon began to soften when he perceived so much good-feeling and so many kind attentions in Planchet. He was particularly touched by the liberty which was permitted him to plunge his great palms into the boxes of dried fruits and preserves, into the sacks of nuts and almonds, and into the drawers full of sweetmeats. So that, notwithstanding Planchet's pressing invitations to go upstairs to the *entresol*, he chose as his favourite seat, during the evening which he had to spend at Planchet's house, the shop itself, where his fingers could always fish up whatever his nose detected. The delicious figs from Provence, filberts from the forest, Tours plums, were subjects of his uninterrupted attention for five consecutive hours. His teeth, like millstones, cracked heaps of nuts, the shells of which were scattered all over the floor, where they were trampled by every one who went in and out of the shop; Porthos pulled from the stalk with his lips, at one mouthful, bunches of the rich Muscatel raisins with their beautiful bloom, half a pound of which passed at one gulp from his mouth to his stomach. In one of the corners of the shop, Planchet's assistants, huddled together, looked at each other without venturing to open their lips. They did not know who Porthos was, for they had never seen him before. The race of those Titans who had worn the cuirasses of Hugh Capet, Philip Augustus, and Francis I. had already begun to disappear. They could hardly help thinking he might be the ogre of the fairy tale, who was going to turn the whole contents of Planchet's shop into his insatiable stomach, and that, too, without in the slightest degree displacing the barrels and chests that were in it. Cracking, munching, chewing, nibbling, sucking, and swallowing, Porthos occasionally said to the grocer:

"You do a very good business here, friend Planchet."

"He will very soon have none at all to do, if this sort of thing continues," grumbled the foreman, who had Planchet's word that he should be his successor. In the midst of his despair, he approached Porthos, who blocked up the whole of the passage leading from the back shop to the shop itself. He hoped that Porthos would rise and that this movement would distract his devouring ideas.

"What do you want, my man?" asked Porthos, affably.

"I should like to pass you, monsieur, if it is not troubling you too much."

"Very well," said Porthos, "it does not trouble me in the least."

At the same moment he took hold of the young fellow by the waistband, lifted him off the ground, and placed him very gently on the other side, smiling all the while with the same affable expression. As soon as Porthos had placed him on the ground, the lad's legs so shook under him that he fell back upon some sacks of corks. But noticing the giant's gentleness of manner, he ventured again, and said:

"Ah, monsieur! pray be careful."

"What about?" inquired Porthos.

"You are positively putting a fiery furnace into your body."

"How is that, my good fellow?"

"All those things are very heating to the system!"

"Which?"

"Raisins, nuts, and almonds."

"Yes; but if raisins, nuts, and almonds are heating—"

"There is no doubt at all of it, monsieur."

"Honey is very cooling," said Porthos, stretching out his hand toward a small barrel of honey which was open, and he plunged the scoop with which the wants of the customers were supplied into it, and swallowed a good half-pound at one gulp.

"I must trouble you for some water now, my man," said Porthos.

"In a pail, monsieur?" asked the lad, simply.

"No, in a water-bottle; that will be quite enough;" and raising the bottle to his mouth, as a trumpeter does his trumpet, he emptied the bottle at a single draught.

Planchet was agitated in every fibre of propriety and self-esteem. However, a worthy representative of the hospitality which prevailed in early days, he feigned to be talking very earnestly with D'Artagnan, and incessantly repeated:—"Ah! monsieur, what a happiness! what an honour!"

"What time shall we have supper, Planchet?" inquired Porthos, "I feel hungry."

The foreman clasped his hands together. The two others got under the counters, fearing Porthos might have a taste for human flesh.

"We shall only take a sort of snack here," said D'Artagnan; "and when we get to Planchet's country-seat, we will have supper."

"Ah, ah! so we are going to your country-house, Planchet," said Porthos; "so much the better."

"You overwhelm me, monsieur le baron."

The "monsieur le baron" had a great effect upon the men, who detected a personage of the highest quality in an appetite of that kind. This title, too, reassured them. They had never heard that an ogre was ever called "monsieur le baron".

"I will take a few biscuits to eat on the road," said Porthos, carelessly; and he emptied a whole jar of aniseed biscuits into the huge pocket of his doublet.

"My shop is saved!" exclaimed Planchet.

"Yes, as the cheese was," whispered the foreman.

"What cheese?"

"The Dutch cheese, inside which a rat had made his way, and we found only the rind left."

Planchet looked all round his shop, and observing the different articles which had escaped Porthos's teeth, he found the comparison somewhat exaggerated. The foreman, who remarked what was passing in his master's mind, said, "Take care; he is not gone yet."

"Have you any fruit here?" said Porthos, as he went upstairs to the *entresol*, where it had just been announced that some refreshment was prepared.

"Alas!" thought the grocer, addressing a look at D'Artagnan full of entreaty, which the latter half understood.

As soon as they had finished eating they set off. It was late when the three riders, who had left Paris about six in the evening, arrived at Fontainebleau. The journey passed very agreeably. Porthos took a fancy to Planchet's society, because the latter was very respectful in his manners, and seemed delighted to talk to him about his meadows, his woods, and his rabbit-warrens. Porthos had all

the taste and pride of a landed proprietor. When D'Artagnan saw his two companions in earnest conversation, he took the opposite side of the road, and letting his bridle drop upon his horse's neck, separated himself from the whole world, as he had done from Porthos and from Planchet. The moon shone softly through the foliage of the forest. The breezes of the open country rose deliciously perfumed to the horse's nostrils, and they snorted and pranced along delightedly. Porthos and Planchet began to talk about hay-crops. Planchet admitted to Porthos that in the advanced years of his life, he had certainly neglected agricultural pursuits for commerce, but that his childhood had been passed in Picardy in the beautiful meadows where the grass grew as high as the knees, and where he had played under the green apple-trees covered with red-cheeked fruit; he went on to say, that he had solemnly promised himself that as soon as he should have made his fortune, he would return to nature, and end his days, as he had begun them, as near as he possibly could to the earth itself, where all men must sleep at last.

"Eh, eh!" said Porthos; "in that case, my dear Monsieur Planchet, your retirement is not far distant."

"How so?"

"Why, you seem to be in the way of making your fortune very soon."

"Well, we are getting on pretty well, I must admit," replied Planchet.

"Come, tell me what is the extent of your ambition, and what is the amount you intend to retire upon?"

"There is one circumstance, monsieur," said Planchet, without answering the question, "which occasions me a good deal of anxiety."

"What is it?" inquired Porthos, looking all round him as if in search of the circumstance that annoyed Planchet, and desirous of freeing him from it.

"Why, formerly," said the grocer, "you used to call me Planchet quite short, and you would have spoken to me then in a much more familiar manner than you do now."

"Certainly, certainly, I should have said so formerly," replied the good-natured Porthos, with an embarrassment full of delicacy; "but formerly—"

"Formerly I was M. d'Artagnan's lackey; is not that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well if I am not quite his lackey, I am as much as ever I was his devoted servant; and more than that, since that time—"

"Well, Planchet?"

"Since that time, I have had the honour of being in partnership with him."

"Oh, oh!" said Porthos. "What, has D'Artagnan gone into the grocery business?"

"No, no," said D'Artagnan, whom these words had drawn out of his reverie, and who entered into the conversation with that readiness and rapidity which distinguished every operation of his mind and body. "It was not D'Artagnan who entered into the grocery business, but Planchet who entered into a political affair with me."

"Yes," said Planchet, with mingled pride and satisfaction, "we transacted a little business which brought me in a hundred thousand francs and M. d'Artagnan two hundred thousand."

"Oh, oh!" said Porthos, with admiration.

"So that, monsieur le baron," continued the grocer, "I again beg you to be kind enough to call me Planchet, as you used to do; and to speak to me as familiarly as in old times. You cannot possibly imagine the pleasure it would give me."

"If that be the case, my dear Planchet, I will do so, certainly," replied Porthos. And as he was quite close to Planchet, he raised his hand, as if to strike him on the shoulder, in token of friendly cordiality; but a fortunate movement of the horse made him miss his aim, so that his hand fell on the crupper of Planchet's horse, instead; which made the animal's legs almost give way.

D'Artagnan burst out laughing, as he said, "Take care, Planchet; for if Porthos begins to like you so much, he will caress you, and if he caresses you he will knock you as flat as a pancake. Porthos is still as strong as ever, you know."

"Oh," said Planchet, "Mousqueton is not dead, and yet monsieur le baron is very fond of him."

"Certainly," said Porthos, with a sigh which made all the three horses rear; "and I was only saying, this very morning, to D'Artagnan, how much I regretted him. But tell me, Planchet?"

"Thank you, monsieur le baron, thank you."

"Good lad, good lad! How many acres of park have you got?"

"Of park?"

"Yes; we will reckon up the meadows presently, and the woods afterwards."

"Whereabouts, monsieur?" "At your chateau."

"Oh, monsieur le baron, I have neither chateau, nor park, nor meadows, nor woods."

"What have you got, then?" inquired Porthos, "and why do you call it a country-seat?"

"I did not call it a country-seat, monsieur le baron," replied Planchet, somewhat humiliated, "but a country-box."

"Ah, ah! I understand. You are modest."

"No, monsieur le baron, I speak the plain truth. I have rooms for a couple of friends, that's all."

"But in that case, whereabouts do your friends walk?"

"In the first place, they can walk about the king's forest, which is very beautiful."

"Yes, I know the forest is very fine," said Porthos; "nearly as beautiful as my forest at Berry."

Planchet opened his eyes very wide. "Have you a forest of the same kind as the forest at Fontainebleau, monsieur le baron?" he stammered out.

"Yes; I have two, indeed, but the one at Berry is my favourite."

"Why so?" asked Planchet.

"Because I don't know where it ends; and, also, because it is full of poachers."

"How can the poachers make the forest so agreeable to you?"

"Because they hunt my game, and I hunt them—which, in these peaceful times, is for me a sufficiently pleasing picture of war on a small scale."

They had reached this turn of conversation, when Planchet, looking up, perceived the houses at the commencement of Fontainebleau, the lofty outlines of which stood out strongly against the misty visage of the heavens; whilst, rising above the compact and irregularly formed mass of buildings, the pointed roofs of the chateau were clearly visible, the slates of which glistened beneath the light of the moon, like the scales of an immense fish. "Gentlemen," said Planchet, "I have the honour to inform you that we have arrived at Fontainebleau."

#### V. Planchet's Country-House.

The cavaliers looked up, and saw that what Planchet had announced to them was true. Ten minutes afterwards they were in the street called the Rue de Lyon, on the opposite side of the hostelry of the Beau Paon. A high hedge of bushy elders, hawthorn, and wild hops formed an impenetrable fence, behind which rose a white house, with a high tiled roof. Two of the windows, which were quite dark, looked upon the street. Between the two, a small door, with a porch supported by a couple of pillars, formed the entrance to the house. The door was gained by a step raised a little from the ground. Planchet got off his horse, as if he intended to knock at the door; but, on second thoughts, he took hold of his horse by the bridle, and led it about thirty paces further on, his two companions following him. He then advanced about another thirty paces, until he arrived at the door of a cart-house, lighted by an iron grating; and, lifting up a wooden latch, pushed open one of the folding-doors. He entered first, leading his horse after him by the bridle, into a small courtyard, where an odor met them which revealed their close vicinity to a stable. "That smells all right," said Porthos, loudly, getting off his horse, "and I almost begin to think I am near my own cows at Pierrefonds."

"I have only one cow," Planchet hastened to say modestly.

"And I have thirty," said Porthos; "or rather, I don't exactly know how many I have."

When the two cavaliers had entered, Planchet fastened the door behind them. In the meantime, D'Artagnan, who had dismounted with his usual agility, inhaled the fresh perfumed air with the delight a Parisian feels at the sight of green fields and fresh foliage, plucked a piece of honeysuckle with one hand, and of sweet-briar with the other. Porthos clawed hold of some peas which were twined round poles stuck into the ground, and ate, or rather browsed upon them, shells and all: and Planchet was busily engaged trying to wake up an old and infirm peasant, who was fast asleep in a shed, lying on a bed of moss, and dressed in an old stable suit of clothes. The peasant, recognizing Planchet, called him "the master," to the grocer's great satisfaction. "Stable the horses well, old fellow, and you shall have something good for yourself," said Planchet.

"Yes, yes; fine animals they are too," said the peasant. "Oh! they shall have as much as they like."

"Gently, gently, my man," said D'Artagnan, "we are getting on a little too fast. A few oats and a good bed—nothing more."

"Some bran and water for my horse," said Porthos, "for it is very warm, I think."

"Don't be afraid, gentlemen," replied Planchet; "Daddy Celestin is an old gendarme, who fought at Ivry. He knows all about horses; so come into the house." And he led the way along a well-sheltered walk, which crossed a kitchen-garden, then a small paddock, and came out into a little garden behind the house, the principal front of which, as we have already noticed, faced the street. As they approached, they could see, through two open windows on the ground floor, which led into a sitting-room, the interior of Planchet's residence. This room, softly lighted by a lamp placed on the table, seemed, from the end of the garden, like a smiling image of repose, comfort, and happiness. In every direction where the rays of light fell, whether upon a piece of old china, or upon an article of furniture shining from excessive neatness, or upon the weapons hanging against the wall, the soft light was softly reflected; and its rays seemed to linger everywhere upon something or another, agreeable to the eye. The lamp which lighted the room, whilst the foliage of jasmine and climbing roses hung in masses from the window-frames, splendidly illuminated a damask table-cloth as white as snow. The table was laid for two persons. Amber-coloured wine sparkled in a long cut-glass bottle; and a large jug of blue china, with a silver lid, was filled with foaming cider. Near the table, in a high-backed armchair, reclined, fast asleep, a woman of about thirty years of age, her face the very picture of health and freshness. Upon her knees lay a large cat, with her paws folded under her, and her eyes half-closed, purring in that significant manner which, according to feline habits, indicates perfect contentment. The two friends paused before the window in complete amazement, while Planchet, perceiving their astonishment, was in no little degree secretly delighted at it.

"Ah! Planchet, you rascal," said D'Artagnan, "I now understand your absences."

"Oh, oh! there is some white linen!" said Porthos, in his turn, in a voice of thunder. At the sound of this gigantic voice, the cat took flight, the housekeeper woke up with a start, and Planchet, assuming a gracious air, introduced his two companions into the room, where the table was already laid.

"Permit me, my dear," he said, "to present to you Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan, my patron." D'Artagnan took the lady's hand in his in the most courteous manner, and with precisely the same chivalrous air as he would have taken Madame's.

"Monsieur le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," added Planchet. Porthos bowed with a reverence which Anne of Austria would have approved of.

It was then Planchet's turn, and he unhesitatingly embraced the lady in question, not, however, until he had made a sign as if requesting D'Artagnan's and Porthos's permission, a permission as a matter of course frankly conceded. D'Artagnan complimented Planchet, and said, "You are indeed a man who knows how to make life agreeable."

"Life, monsieur," said Planchet, laughing, "is capital which a man ought to invest as sensibly as he possibly can."

"And you get very good interest for yours," said Porthos, with a burst of laughter like a peal of thunder.

Planchet turned to his housekeeper. "You have before you," he said to her, "the two gentlemen who influenced the greatest, gayest, grandest portion of my life. I have spoken to you about them both very frequently."

"And about two others as well," said the lady, with a very decided Flemish accent.

"Madame is Dutch?" inquired D'Artagnan. Porthos curled his mustache, a circumstance which was not lost upon D'Artagnan, who noticed everything.

"I am from Antwerp," said the lady.

"And her name is Madame Getcher," said Planchet.

"You should not call her madame," said D'Artagnan.

"Why not?" asked Planchet.

"Because it would make her seem older every time you call her so."

"Well, I call her Truchen."

"And a very pretty name too," said Porthos.



"Truchen," said Planchet, "came to me from Flanders with her virtue and two thousand florins. She ran away from a brute of a husband who was in the habit of beating her. Being myself a Picard born, I was always very fond of the Artesian women, and it is only a step from Artois to Flanders; she came crying bitterly to her godfather, my predecessor in the Rue des Lombards; she placed her two thousand florins in my establishment, which I have turned to very good account, and which have brought her in ten thousand."

"Bravo, Planchet."

"She is free and well off; she has a cow, a maid servant and old Celestin at her orders; she mends my linen, knits my winter stockings; she only sees me every fortnight, and seems to make herself in all things tolerably happy.

"And indeed, gentlemen, I *am* very happy and comfortable," said Truchen, with perfect ingenuousness.

Porthos began to curl the other side of his mustache. "The deuce," thought D'Artagnan, "can Porthos have any intentions in that quarter?"

In the meantime Truchen had set her cook to work, had laid the table for two more, and covered it with every possible delicacy that could convert a light supper into a substantial meal, a meal into a regular feast. Fresh butter, salt beef, anchovies, tunny, a shopful of Planchet's commodities, fowls, vegetables, salad, fish from the pond and the river, game from the forest—all the produce, in fact, of the province. Moreover, Planchet returned from the cellar, laden with ten bottles of wine, the glass of which could hardly be seen for the thick coating of dust which covered them. Porthos's heart began to expand as he said, "I am hungry," and he sat himself beside Madame Truchen, whom he looked at in the most killing manner. D'Artagnan seated himself on the other side of her, while Planchet, discreetly and full of delight, took his seat opposite.

"Do not trouble yourselves," he said, "if Truchen should leave the table now and then during supper; for she will have to look after your bedrooms."

In fact, the housekeeper made her escape quite frequently, and they could hear, on the first floor above them, the creaking of the wooden bedsteads and the rolling of the castors on the floor. While this was going on, the three men, Porthos especially, ate and drank gloriously,—it was wonderful to see them. The ten full bottles were ten empty ones by the time Truchen returned with the cheese. D'Artagnan still preserved his dignity and self-possession, but Porthos had lost a portion of his; and the mirth soon began to grow somewhat uproarious. D'Artagnan recommended a new descent into the cellar, and, as Planchet no longer walked with the steadiness of a well-trained foot-soldier, the captain of the musketeers proposed to accompany him. They set off, humming songs wild enough to frighten anybody who might be listening. Truchen remained behind at table with Porthos. While the two wine-bibbers were looking behind the firewood for what they wanted, a sharp report was heard like the impact of a pair of lips on a lady's cheek.

"Porthos fancies himself at La Rochelle," thought D'Artagnan, as they returned freighted with bottles. Planchet was singing so loudly that he was incapable of noticing anything. D'Artagnan, whom nothing ever escaped, remarked how much redder Truchen's left cheek was than her right. Porthos was sitting on Truchen's left, and was curling with both his hands both sides of his mustache at once, and Truchen was looking at him with a most bewitching smile. The sparkling wine of Anjou very soon produced a remarkable effect upon the three companions. D'Artagnan had hardly strength enough left to take a candlestick to light Planchet up his own staircase. Planchet was pulling Porthos along, who was following Truchen, who was herself jovial enough. It was D'Artagnan who found out the rooms and the beds. Porthos threw himself into the one destined for him, after his friend had undressed him. D'Artagnan got into his own bed, saying to himself, "*Mordieux!* I had made up my mind never to touch that light-coloured wine, which brings my early camp days back again. Fie! fie! if my musketeers were only to see their captain in such a state." And drawing the curtains of his bed, he added, "Fortunately enough, though, they will not see me."

"The country is very amusing," said Porthos, stretching out his legs, which passed through the wooden footboard, and made a tremendous crash, of which, however, no one in the house was capable of taking the slightest notice. By two o'clock in the morning every one was fast asleep.

#### VI. Showing What Could Be Seen from Planchet's House.

The next morning found the three heroes sleeping soundly. Truchen had closed the outside blinds to keep the first rays of the sun from the leaden-lidded eyes of her guests, like a kind, good housekeeper. It was still perfectly dark, then, beneath Porthos's curtains and under Planchet's canopy, when D'Artagnan, awakened by an indiscreet ray of light which made its way through a peek-hole in the shutters, jumped hastily out of bed, as if he wished to be the first at a forlorn hope. He took by assault Porthos's room, which was next to his own. The worthy Porthos was sleeping with a noise like distant thunder; in the dim obscurity of the room his gigantic frame was prominently displayed, and his swollen fist hung down outside the bed upon the carpet. D'Artagnan awoke Porthos, who rubbed his eyes in a tolerably good humor. In the meantime Planchet was dressing himself, and met at their bedroom doors his two guests, who were still somewhat unsteady from their previous evening's entertainment. Although it was yet very early, the whole household was already up. The cook was mercilessly slaughtering in the poultry-yard; Celestin was gathering white cherries in the garden. Porthos, brisk and lively as ever, held out his hand to Planchet's, and D'Artagnan requested permission to embrace Madame Truchen. The latter, to show that she bore no ill-will, approached Porthos, upon whom she conferred the same favour. Porthos embraced Madame Truchen, heaving an enormous sigh. Planchet took both his friends by the hand.

"I am going to show you over the house," he said; "when we arrived last night it was as dark as an oven, and we were unable to see anything; but in broad daylight, everything looks different, and you will be satisfied, I hope."

"If we begin by the view you have here," said D'Artagnan, "that charms me beyond everything; I have always lived in royal mansions, you know, and royal personages have tolerably sound ideas upon the selection of points of view."

"I am a great stickler for a good view myself," said Porthos. "At my Chateau de Pierrefonds, I have had four avenues laid out, and at the end of each is a landscape of an altogether different character from the others."

"You shall see *my* prospect," said Planchet; and he led his two guests to a window.

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, "this is the Rue de Lyon."

"Yes, I have two windows on this side, a paltry, insignificant view, for there is always that bustling and noisy inn, which is a very disagreeable neighbor. I had four windows here, but I bricked up two."

"Let us go on," said D'Artagnan.

They entered a corridor leading to the bedrooms, and Planchet pushed open the outside blinds.

"Hollo! what is that out yonder?" said Porthos.

"The forest," said Planchet. "It is the horizon,—a thick line of green, which is yellow in the spring, green in the summer, red in the autumn, and white in the winter."

"All very well, but it is like a curtain, which prevents one seeing a greater distance."

"Yes," said Planchet; "still, one can see, at all events, everything that intervenes."

"Ah, the open country," said Porthos. "But what is that I see out there,—crosses and stones?"

"Ah, that is the cemetery," exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Precisely," said Planchet; "I assure you it is very curious. Hardly a day passes that some one is not buried there; for Fontainebleau is by no means an inconsiderable place. Sometimes we see young girls clothed in white carrying banners; at others, some of the town-council, or rich citizens, with choristers and all the parish authorities; and then, too, we see some of the officers of the king's household."

"I should not like that," said Porthos.

"There is not much amusement in it, at all events," said D'Artagnan.

"I assure you it encourages religious thoughts," replied Planchet.

"Oh, I don't deny that."

"But," continued Planchet, "we must all die one day or another, and I once met with a maxim somewhere which I have remembered, that the thought of death is a thought that will do us all good."

"I am far from saying the contrary," said Porthos.

"But," objected D'Artagnan, "the thought of green fields, flowers, rivers, blue horizons, extensive and boundless plains, is not likely to do us good."

"If I had any, I should be far from rejecting them," said Planchet; "but possessing only this little cemetery, full of flowers, so moss-grown, shady, and quiet, I am contented with it, and I think of those who live in town, in the Rue des Lombards, for instance, and who have to listen to the rumbling of a couple of thousand vehicles every day, and to the soulless tramp, tramp, tramp of a hundred and fifty thousand foot-passengers."

"But living," said Porthos; "living, remember that."

"That is exactly the reason," said Planchet, timidly, "why I feel it does me good to contemplate a few dead."

"Upon my word," said D'Artagnan, "that fellow Planchet is born a philosopher as well as a grocer."

"Monsieur," said Planchet, "I am one of those good-humored sort of men whom Heaven created for the purpose of living a certain span of days, and of considering all good they meet with during their transitory stay on earth."

D'Artagnan sat down close to the window, and as there seemed to be something substantial in Planchet's philosophy, he mused over it.

"Ah, ah!" exclaimed Planchet, "if I am not mistaken, we are going to have a representation now, for I think I heard something like chanting."

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "I hear singing too."

"Oh, it is only a burial of a very poor description," said Planchet, disdainfully; "the officiating priest, the beadle, and only one chorister boy, nothing more. You observe, messieurs, that the defunct lady or gentleman could not have been of very high rank."

"No; no one seems to be following the coffin."

"Yes," said Porthos; "I see a man."

"You are right; a man wrapped in a cloak," said D'Artagnan.

"It's not worth looking at," said Planchet.

"I find it interesting," said D'Artagnan, leaning on the window-sill.

"Come, come, you are beginning to take a fancy to the place already," said Planchet, delightedly; "it is exactly my own case. I was so melancholy at first that I could do nothing but make the sign of the cross all day, and the chants were like so many nails being driven into my head; but now, they lull me to sleep, and no bird I have ever seen or heard can sing better than those which are to be met with in this cemetery."

"Well," said Porthos, "this is beginning to get a little dull for me, and I prefer going downstairs."

Planchet with one bound was beside his guest, whom he offered to lead into the garden.

"What!" said Porthos to D'Artagnan, as he turned round, "are you going to remain here?"

"Yes, I will join you presently."

"Well, M. D'Artagnan is right, after all," said Planchet: "are they beginning to bury yet?"

"Not yet."

"Ah! yes, the grave-digger is waiting until the cords are fastened round the bier. But, see, a woman has just entered the cemetery at the other end."

"Yes, yes, my dear Planchet," said D'Artagnan, quickly, "leave me, leave me; I feel I am beginning already to be much comforted by my meditations, so do not interrupt me."

Planchet left, and D'Artagnan remained, devouring with his eager gaze from behind the half-closed blinds what was taking place just before him. The two bearers of the corpse had unfastened the straps by which they carried the litter, and were letting their burden glide gently into the open grave. At a few paces distant, the man with the cloak wrapped round him, the only spectator of this melancholy scene, was leaning with his back against a large cypress-tree, and kept his face and person entirely concealed from the grave-diggers and the priests; the corpse was buried in five minutes. The grave having been filled up, the priests turned away, and the grave-digger having addressed a few words to them, followed them as they moved away. The man in the mantle bowed as they passed him, and put a piece of gold into the grave-digger's hand.

"*Mordieux!*" murmured D'Artagnan; "it is Aramis himself."

Aramis, in fact, remained alone, on that side at least; for hardly had he turned his head when a woman's footsteps, and the rustling of her dress, were heard in the path close to him. He immediately turned round, and took off his hat with the most ceremonious respect; he led the lady under the shelter of some walnut and lime trees, which overshadowed a magnificent tomb.

"Ah! who would have thought it," said D'Artagnan; "the bishop of Vannes at a rendezvous! He is still the same Abbe Aramis as he was at Noisy-le-Sec. Yes," he added, after a pause; "but as it is in a cemetery, the rendezvous is sacred." But he almost laughed.

The conversation lasted for fully half an hour. D'Artagnan could not see the lady's face, for she kept her back turned towards him; but he saw perfectly well, by the erect attitude of both the speakers, by their gestures, by the measured and careful manner with which they glanced at each other, either by way of attack or defense, that they must be conversing about any other subject than of love. At the end of the conversation the lady rose, and bowed profoundly to Aramis.

"Oh, oh," said D'Artagnan; "this rendezvous finishes like one of a very tender nature though. The cavalier kneels at the beginning, the young lady by and by gets tamed down, and then it is she who has to supplicate. Who is this lady? I would give anything to ascertain."

This seemed impossible, however, for Aramis was the first to leave; the lady carefully concealed her head and face, and then immediately departed. D'Artagnan could hold out no longer; he ran to the window which looked out on the Rue de Lyon, and saw Aramis entering the inn. The lady was proceeding in quite an opposite direction, and seemed, in fact, to be about to rejoin an equipage, consisting of two led horses and a carriage, which he could see standing close to the borders of the forest. She was walking slowly, her head bent down, absorbed in the deepest meditation.

"*Mordioux! Mordioux!* I must and will learn who that woman is," said the musketeer again; and then, without further deliberation, he set off in pursuit of her. As he was going along, he tried to think how he could possibly contrive to make her raise her veil. "She is not young," he said, "and is a woman of high rank in society. I ought to know that figure and peculiar style of walk." As he ran, the sound of his spurs and of his boots upon the hard ground of the street made a strange jingling noise; a fortunate circumstance in itself, which he was far from reckoning upon. The noise disturbed the lady; she seemed to fancy she was being either followed or pursued, which was indeed the case, and turned round. D'Artagnan started as if he had received a charge of small shot in his legs, and then turning suddenly round as if he were going back the same way he had come, he murmured, "Madame de Chevreuse!" D'Artagnan would not go home until he had learnt everything. He asked Celestin to inquire of the grave-digger whose body it was they had buried that morning.

"A poor Franciscan mendicant friar," replied the latter, "who had not even a dog to love him in this world, and to accompany him to his last resting-place."

"If that were really the case," thought D'Artagnan, "we should not have found Aramis present at his funeral. The bishop of Vannes is not precisely a dog as far as devotion goes: his scent, however, is quite as keen, I admit."

#### VII. How Porthos, Truchen, and Planchet Parted with Each Other on Friendly Terms, Thanks to D'Artagnan.

There was good living in Planchet's house. Porthos broke a ladder and two cherry-trees, stripped the raspberry-bushes, and was only unable to succeed in reaching the strawberry-beds on account, as he said, of his belt. Truchen, who had become quite sociable with the giant, said that it was not the belt so much as his corporation; and Porthos, in a state of the highest delight, embraced Truchen, who gathered him a painful of the strawberries, and made him eat them out of her hands. D'Artagnan, who arrived in the midst of these little innocent flirtations, scolded Porthos for his indolence, and silently pitied Planchet. Porthos breakfasted with a very good appetite, and when he had finished, he said, looking at Truchen, "I could make myself very happy here." Truchen smiled at his remark, and so did Planchet, but not without embarrassment.

D'Artagnan then addressed Porthos: "You must not let the delights of Capua make you forget the real object of our journey to Fontainebleau."

"My presentation to the king?"

"Certainly. I am going to take a turn in the town to get everything ready for that. Do not think of leaving the house, I beg."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Porthos.

Planchet looked at D'Artagnan nervously.

"Will you be away long?" he inquired.

"No, my friend; and this very evening I will release you from two troublesome guests."

"Oh! Monsieur d'Artagnan! can you say—"

"No, no; you are a noble-hearted fellow, but your house is very small. Such a house, with half a dozen acres of land, would be fit for a king, and make him very happy, too. But you were not born a great lord."

"No more was M. Porthos," murmured Planchet.

"But he has become so, my good fellow; his income has been a hundred thousand francs a year for the last twenty years, and for the last fifty years Porthos has been the owner of a couple of fists and a backbone, which are not to be matched throughout the whole realm of France. Porthos is a man of the very greatest consequence compared to you, and... well, I need say no more, for I know you are an intelligent fellow."

"No, no, monsieur, explain what you mean."

"Look at your orchard, how stripped it is, how empty your larder, your bedstead broken, your cellar almost exhausted, look too... at Madame Truchen—"

"Oh! my goodness gracious!" said Planchet.

"Madame Truchen is an excellent person," continued D'Artagnan, "but keep her for yourself, do you understand?" and he slapped him on the shoulder.

Planchet at this moment perceived Porthos and Truchen sitting close together in an arbor; Truchen, with a grace of manner peculiarly Flemish, was making a pair of earrings for Porthos out of a double cherry, while Porthos was laughing as amorously as Samson in the company of Delilah. Planchet pressed D'Artagnan's hand, and ran towards the arbor. We must do Porthos the justice to say that he did not move as they approached, and, very likely, he did not think he was doing any harm. Nor indeed did Truchen move either, which rather put Planchet out; but he, too, had been so accustomed to see fashionable folk in his shop, that he found no difficulty in putting a good countenance on what seemed disagreeable or rude. Planchet seized Porthos by the arm, and proposed to go and look at the horses, but Porthos pretended he was tired. Planchet then suggested that the Baron du Vallon should taste some noyau of his own manufacture, which was not to be equaled anywhere; an offer the baron immediately accepted; and, in this way, Planchet managed to engage his enemy's attention during the whole of the day, by dint of sacrificing his cellar, in preference to his *amour propre*. Two hours afterwards D'Artagnan returned.

"Everything is arranged," he said; "I saw his majesty at the very moment he was setting off for the chase; the king expects us this evening."

"The king expects *me!*" cried Porthos, drawing himself up. It is a sad thing to have to confess, but a man's heart is like an ocean billow; for, from that very moment Porthos ceased to look at Madame Truchen in that touching manner which had so softened her heart. Planchet encouraged these ambitious leanings as best as he could. He talked over, or rather gave exaggerated accounts of all the splendors of the last reign, its battles, sieges, and grand court ceremonies. He spoke of the luxurious display which the English made; the prizes the three brave companions carried off; and how D'Artagnan, who at the beginning had been the humblest of the four, finished by becoming the leader. He fired Porthos with a generous feeling of enthusiasm by reminding him of his early youth now passed away; he boasted as much as he could of the moral life this great lord had led, and how religiously he respected the ties of friendship; he was eloquent, and skillful in his choice of subjects. He tickled Porthos, frightened Truchen, and made D'Artagnan think. At six o'clock, the musketeer ordered the horses to be brought round, and told Porthos to get ready. He thanked Planchet for his kind hospitality, whispered a few words about a post he might succeed in obtaining for him at court, which immediately raised Planchet in Truchen's estimation, where the poor grocer—so good, so generous, so devoted—had become much lowered ever since the appearance and comparison with him of the two great gentlemen. Such, however, is a woman's nature; they are anxious to possess what they have not got, and disdain it as soon as it is acquired. After having rendered this service to his friend Planchet, D'Artagnan said in a low tone of voice to Porthos: "That is a very beautiful ring you have on your finger."

"It is worth three hundred pistoles," said Porthos.

"Madame Truchen will remember you better if you leave her that ring," replied D'Artagnan, a suggestion which Porthos seemed to hesitate to adopt.

"You think it is not beautiful enough, perhaps," said the musketeer. "I understand your feelings; a great lord such as you would not think of accepting the hospitality of an old servant without paying him most handsomely for it: but I am sure that Planchet is too good-hearted a fellow to remember that you have an income of a hundred thousand francs a year."

"I have more than half a mind," said Porthos, flattered by the remark, "to make Madame Truchen a present of my little farm at Bracieux; it has twelve acres."

"It is too much, my good Porthos, too much just at present... Keep it for a future occasion." He then took the ring off Porthos's finger, and approaching Truchen, said to her:—"Madame, monsieur le baron hardly knows how to entreat you, out of your regard for him, to accept this little ring. M. du Vallon is one of the most generous and discreet men of my acquaintance. He wished to offer you a farm that he has at Bracieux, but I dissuaded him from it."

"Oh!" said Truchen, looking eagerly at the diamond.

"Monsieur le baron!" exclaimed Planchet, quite overcome.

"My good friend," stammered out Porthos, delighted at having been so well represented by D'Artagnan. These several exclamations, uttered at the same moment, made quite a pathetic winding-up of a day which might have finished in a very ridiculous manner. But D'Artagnan was there, and, on every occasion, wheresoever D'Artagnan exercised any control, matters ended only just in the very way he wished and willed. There were general embracings; Truchen, whom the baron's munificence had restored to her proper position, very timidly, and blushing all the while, presented her forehead to the great lord with whom she had been on such very pretty terms the evening before. Planchet himself was overcome by a feeling of genuine humility. Still, in the same generosity of disposition, Porthos would have emptied his pockets into the hands of the cook and of Celestin; but D'Artagnan stopped him.

"No," he said, "it is now my turn." And he gave one pistole to the woman and two to the man; and the benedictions which were showered down upon them would have rejoiced the heart of Harpagon himself, and have rendered even him a prodigal.

D'Artagnan made Planchet lead them to the chateau, and introduced Porthos into his own apartment, where he arrived safely without having been perceived by those he was afraid of meeting.

#### VIII. The Presentation of Porthos at Court.

At seven o'clock the same evening, the king gave an audience to an ambassador from the United Provinces, in the grand reception-room. The audience lasted a quarter of an hour. His majesty afterwards received those who had been recently presented, together with a few ladies, who paid their respects first. In one corner of the salon, concealed behind a column, Porthos and D'Artagnan were conversing together, waiting until their turn arrived.

"Have you heard the news?" inquired the musketeer of his friend.

"No!"

"Well, look, then." Porthos raised himself on tiptoe, and saw M. Fouquet in full court dress, leading Aramis towards the king.

"Aramis!" said Porthos.

"Presented to the king by M. Fouquet."

"Ah!" ejaculated Porthos.

"For having fortified Belle-Isle," continued D'Artagnan.

"And I?"

"You—oh, you! as I have already had the honour of telling you, are the good-natured, kind-hearted Porthos; and so they begged you to take care of Saint-Mande a little."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"But, happily, I was there," said D'Artagnan, "and presently it will be *my* turn."

At this moment Fouquet addressed the king.

"Sire," he said, "I have a favour to solicit of your majesty. M. d'Herblay is not ambitious, but he knows when he can be of service. Your majesty needs a representative at Rome, who would be able to exercise a powerful influence there; may I request a cardinal's hat for M. d'Herblay?" The king started. "I do not often solicit anything of your majesty," said Fouquet.

"That is a reason, certainly," replied the king, who always expressed any hesitation he might have in that manner, and to which remark there was nothing to say in reply.

Fouquet and Aramis looked at each other. The king resumed: "M. d'Herblay can serve us equally well in France; an archbishopric, for instance."

"Sire," objected Fouquet, with a grace of manner peculiarly his own, "your majesty overwhelms M. d'Herblay; the archbishopric may, in your majesty's extreme kindness, be conferred in addition to the hat; the one does not exclude the other."

The king admired the readiness which he displayed, and smiled, saying: "D'Artagnan himself could not have answered better." He had no sooner pronounced the name than D'Artagnan appeared.

"Did your majesty call me?" he said.

Aramis and Fouquet drew back a step, as if they were about to retire.

"Will your majesty allow me," said D'Artagnan quickly, as he led forward Porthos, "to present to your majesty M. le Baron du Vallon, one of the bravest gentlemen of France?"

As soon as Aramis saw Porthos, he turned as pale as death, while Fouquet clenched his hands under his ruffles. D'Artagnan smiled blandly at both of them, while Porthos bowed, visibly overcome before the royal presence.

"Porthos here?" murmured Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Hush! deep treachery at work," hissed the latter.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "it is more than six years ago I ought to have presented M. du Vallon to your majesty; but certain men resemble stars, they move not one inch unless their satellites accompany them. The Pleiades are never disunited, and that is the reason I have selected, for the purpose of presenting him to you, the very moment when you would see M. d'Herblay by his side."

Aramis almost lost countenance. He looked at D'Artagnan with a proud, haughty air, as though willing to accept the defiance the latter seemed to throw down.

"Ah! these gentlemen are good friends, then?" said the king.

"Excellent friends, sire; the one can answer for the other. Ask M. de Vannes now in what manner Belle-Isle was fortified?" Fouquet moved back a step.

"Belle-Isle," said Aramis, coldly, "was fortified by that gentleman," and he indicated Porthos with his hand, who bowed a second time. Louis could not withhold his admiration, though at the same time his suspicions were aroused.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "but ask monsieur le baron whose assistance he had in carrying the works out?"

"Aramis's," said Porthos, frankly; and he pointed to the bishop.

"What the deuce does all this mean?" thought the bishop, "and what sort of a termination are we to expect to this comedy?"

"What!" exclaimed the king, "is the cardinal's, I mean this bishop's, name *Aramis*?"

"His *nom de guerre*," said D'Artagnan.

"My nickname," said Aramis.

"A truce to modesty!" exclaimed D'Artagnan; "beneath the priest's robe, sire, is concealed the most brilliant officer, a gentleman of the most unparalleled intrepidity, and the wisest theologian in your kingdom."

Louis raised his head. "And an engineer, also, it appears," he said, admiring Aramis's calm, imperturbable self-possession.

"An engineer for a particular purpose, sire," said the latter.

"My companion in the musketeers, sire," said D'Artagnan, with great warmth of manner, "the man who has more than a hundred times aided your father's ministers by his advice—M. d'Herblay, in a word, who, with M. du Vallon, myself, and M. le Comte de la Fere, who is known to your majesty, formed that quartette which was a good deal talked about during the late king's reign, and during your majesty's minority."

"And who fortified Belle-Isle?" the king repeated, in a significant tone.

Aramis advanced and bowed: "In order to serve the son as I served the father."

D'Artagnan looked very narrowly at Aramis while he uttered these words, which displayed so much true respect, so much warm devotion, such entire frankness and sincerity, that even he, D'Artagnan, the eternal doubter, he, the almost infallible in judgment, was deceived by it. "A man who lies cannot speak in such a tone as that," he said.

Louis was overcome by it. "In that case," he said to Fouquet, who anxiously awaited the result of this proof, "the cardinal's hat is promised. Monsieur d'Herblay, I pledge you my honour that the first promotion shall be yours. Thank M. Fouquet for it." Colbert overheard these words; they stung him to the quick, and he left the salon abruptly. "And you, Monsieur du Vallon," said the king, "what have you to ask? I am truly pleased to have it in my power to acknowledge the services of those who were faithful to my father."

"Sire—" began Porthos, but he was unable to proceed with what he was going to say.

"Sire," exclaimed D'Artagnan, "this worthy gentleman is utterly overpowered by your majesty's presence, he who so valiantly sustained the looks and the fire of a thousand foes. But, knowing what his thoughts are, I—who am more accustomed to gaze upon the sun—can translate them: he needs nothing, absolutely nothing; his sole desire is to have the happiness of gazing upon your majesty for a quarter of an hour."

"You shall sup with me this evening," said the king, saluting Porthos with a gracious smile.

Porthos became crimson from delight and pride. The king dismissed him, and D'Artagnan pushed him into the adjoining apartment, after he had embraced him warmly.

"Sit next to me at table," said Porthos in his ear.

"Yes, my friend."

"Aramis is annoyed with me, I think."

"Aramis has never liked you so much as he does now. Fancy, it was I who was the means of his getting the cardinal's hat."

"Of course," said Porthos. "By the by, does the king like his guests to eat much at his table?"

"It is a compliment to himself if you do," said D'Artagnan, "for he himself possesses a royal appetite."

#### IX. Explanations.

Aramis cleverly managed to effect a diversion for the purpose of finding D'Artagnan and Porthos. He came up to the latter, behind one of the columns, and, as he pressed his hand, said, "So you have escaped from my prison?"

"Do not scold him," said D'Artagnan; "it was I, dear Aramis, who set him free."

"Ah! my friend," replied Aramis, looking at Porthos, "could you not have waited with a little more patience?"

D'Artagnan came to the assistance of Porthos, who already began to breathe hard, in sore perplexity.

"You see, you members of the Church are great politicians; we mere soldiers come at once to the point. The facts are these: I went to pay Baisemeaux a visit—"

Aramis pricked up his ears at this announcement.

"Stay!" said Porthos; "you make me remember that I have a letter from Baisemeaux for you, Aramis." And Porthos held out the bishop the letter we have already seen. Aramis begged to be allowed to read it, and read it without D'Artagnan feeling in the slightest degree embarrassed by the circumstance that he was so well acquainted with the contents of it. Besides, Aramis's face was so impenetrable, that D'Artagnan could not but admire him more than ever; after he had read it, he put the letter into his pocket with the calmest possible air.

"You were saying, captain?" he observed.

"I was saying," continued the musketeer, "that I had gone to pay Baisemeaux a visit on his majesty's service."

"On his majesty's service?" said Aramis.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "and, naturally enough, we talked about you and our friends. I must say that Baisemeaux received me coldly; so I soon took my leave of him. As I was returning, a soldier accosted me, and said (no doubt as he recognized me, notwithstanding I was in private clothes), 'Captain, will you be good enough to read me the name written on this envelope?' and I read, 'To Monsieur du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's house, Saint-Mande.' The deuce, I said to myself, Porthos has not returned, then, as I fancied, to Bell-Isle, or to Pierrefonds, but is at M. Fouquet's house, at Saint-Mande; and as M. Fouquet is not at Saint-Mande, Porthos must be quite alone, or, at all events, with Aramis; I will go and see Porthos, and I accordingly went to see Porthos."

"Very good," said Aramis, thoughtfully.

"You never told me that," said Porthos.

"I had no time, my friend."

"And you brought back Porthos with you to Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, to Planchet's house."

"Does Planchet live at Fontainebleau?" inquired Aramis.

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos, thoughtlessly.

"What do you mean by 'near the cemetery?'" said Aramis, suspiciously.

"Come," thought the musketeer, "since there is to be a squabble, let us take advantage of it."

"Yes, the cemetery," said Porthos. "Planchet is a very excellent fellow, who makes very excellent preserves; but his house has windows which look out upon the cemetery. And a confoundedly melancholy prospect it is! So this morning—"

"This morning?" said Aramis, more and more excited.

D'Artagnan turned his back to them, and walked to the window, where he began to play a march upon one of the panes of glass.

"Yes, this morning we saw a man buried there."

"Ah!"

"Very depressing, was it not? I should never be able to live in a house where burials can always be seen from the window. D'Artagnan, on the contrary, seems to like it very much."

"So D'Artagnan saw it as well?"

"Not simply saw it; he literally never took his eyes off the whole time."

Aramis started, and turned to look at the musketeer, but the latter was engaged in earnest conversation with Saint-Aignan. Aramis continued to question Porthos, and when he had squeezed all the juice out of this enormous lemon, he threw the peel aside. He turned towards his friend D'Artagnan, and clapping him on the shoulder, when Saint-Aignan had left him, the king's supper having been announced, said, "D'Artagnan."

"Yes, my dear fellow," he replied.

"We do not sup with his majesty, I believe?"

"Well?—*we* do."

"Can you give me ten minutes' conversation?"

"Twenty, if you like. His majesty will take quite that time to get properly seated at table."

"Where shall we talk, then?"

"Here, upon these seats if you like; the king has left, we can sit down, and the apartment is empty."

"Let us sit down, then."

They sat down, and Aramis took one of D'Artagnan's hands in his.

"Tell me, candidly, my dear friend, whether you have not counseled Porthos to distrust me a little?"

"I admit, I have, but not as you understand it. I saw that Porthos was bored to death, and I wished, by presenting him to the king, to do for him, and for you, what you would never do for yourselves."

"What is that?"

"Speak in your own praise."

"And you have done it most nobly; I thank you."

"And I brought the cardinal's hat a little nearer, just as it seemed to be retreating from you."

"Ah! I admit that," said Aramis, with a singular smile, "you are, indeed, not to be matched for making your friends' fortunes for them."

"You see, then, that I only acted with the view of making Porthos's fortune for him."

"I meant to have done that myself; but your arm reaches farther than ours."

It was now D'Artagnan's turn to smile.

"Come," said Aramis, "we ought to deal truthfully with each other. Do you still love me, D'Artagnan?"

"The same as I used to do," replied D'Artagnan, without compromising himself too much by this reply.

"In that case, thanks; and now, for the most perfect frankness," said Aramis; "you visited Belle-Isle on behalf of the king?"

"Pardieu!"

"You wished to deprive us of the pleasure of offering Bell-Isle completely fortified to the king."

"But before I could deprive you of that pleasure, I ought to have been made acquainted with your intention of doing so."

"You came to Belle-Isle without knowing anything?"

"Of you! yes. How the devil could I imagine that Aramis had become so clever an engineer as to be able to fortify like Polybius, or Archimedes?"

"True. And yet you smelt me out over yonder?"

"Oh! yes."

"And Porthos, too?"

"I did not divine that Aramis was an engineer. I was only able to guess that Porthos might have become one. There is a saying, one becomes an orator, one is born a poet; but it has never been said, one is born Porthos, and one becomes an engineer."

"Your wit is always amusing," said Aramis, coldly.

"Well, I will go on."

"Do. When you found out our secret, you made all the haste you could to communicate it to the king."

"I certainly made as much haste as I could, since I saw that you were making still more. When a man weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, as Porthos does, rides post; when a gouty prelate—I beg your pardon, but you yourself told me you were so—when a prelate scours the highway—I naturally suppose that my two friends, who did not wish to be communicative with me, had certain matters of the highest importance to conceal from me, and so I made as much haste as my leanness and the absence of gout would allow."

"Did it not occur to you, my dear friend, that you might be rendering Porthos and myself a very sad service?"

"Yes, I thought it not unlikely; but you and Porthos made me play a very ridiculous part at Belle-Isle."

"I beg your pardon," said Aramis.

"Excuse me," said D'Artagnan.

"So that," pursued Aramis, "you now know everything?"

"No, indeed."

"You know I was obliged to inform M. Fouquet of what had happened, in order that he would be able to anticipate what you might have to tell the king?"

"That is rather obscure."

"Not at all: M. Fouquet has his enemies—you will admit that, I suppose."

"Certainly."

"And one in particular."

"A dangerous one?"

"A mortal enemy. Well, in order to counteract that man's influence, it was necessary that M. Fouquet should give the king a proof of his great devotion to him, and of his readiness to make the greatest sacrifices. He surprised his majesty by offering him Belle-Isle. If you had been the first to reach Paris, the surprise would have been destroyed, it would have looked as if we had yielded to fear."

"I understand."

"That is the whole mystery," said Aramis, satisfied that he had at last quite convinced the musketeer.

"Only," said the latter, "it would have been more simple to have taken me aside, and said to me, 'My dear D'Artagnan, we are fortifying Belle-Isle, and intend to offer it to the king. Tell us frankly, for whom you are acting. Are you a friend of M. Colbert, or of M. Fouquet?' Perhaps I should not have answered you, but you would have added,—'Are you my friend?' I should have said 'Yes.'" Aramis hung down his head. "In this way," continued D'Artagnan, "you would have paralyzed my movements, and I should have gone to the king, and said, 'Sire, M. Fouquet is fortifying Belle-Isle, and exceedingly well, too; but here is a note, which the governor of Belle-Isle gave me for your majesty;' or, 'M. Fouquet is about to wait upon your majesty to explain his intentions with regard to it.' I should not have been placed in an absurd position; you would have enjoyed the surprise so long planned, and we should not have had any occasion to look askant at each other when we met."

"While, on the contrary," replied Aramis, "you have acted altogether as one friendly to M. Colbert. And you really are a friend of his, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, indeed!" exclaimed the captain. "M. Colbert is a mean fellow, and I hate him as I used to hate Mazarin, but without fearing him."

"Well, then," said Aramis, "I love M. Fouquet, and his interests are mine. You know my position. I have no property or means whatever. M. Fouquet gave me several livings, a bishopric as well; M. Fouquet has served and obliged me like the generous-hearted man he is, and I know the world sufficiently well to appreciate a kindness when I meet with one. M. Fouquet has won my regard, and I have devoted myself to his service."

"You could not possibly do better. You will find him a very liberal master."

Aramis bit his lips; and then said, "The best a man could possibly have." He then paused for a minute, D'Artagnan taking good care not to interrupt him.

"I suppose you know how Porthos got mixed up in all this?"

"No," said D'Artagnan; "I am curious, of course, but I never question a friend when he wishes to keep a secret from me."

"Well, then, I will tell you."

"It is hardly worth the trouble, if the confidence is to bind me in any way."

"Oh! do not be afraid.; there is no man whom I love better than Porthos, because he is so simple-minded and good-natured. Porthos is so straightforward in everything. Since I have become a bishop, I have looked for these primeval natures, which make me love truth and hate intrigue."

D'Artagnan stroked his mustache, but said nothing.

"I saw Porthos and again cultivated his acquaintance; his own time hanging idly on his hands, his presence recalled my earlier and better days without engaging me in any present evil. I sent for Porthos to come to Vannes. M. Fouquet, whose regard for me is very great, having learnt that Porthos and I were attached to each other by old ties of friendship, promised him increase of rank at the earliest promotion, and that is the whole secret."

"I shall not abuse your confidence," said D'Artagnan.

"I am sure of that, my dear friend; no one has a finer sense of honour than yourself."

"I flatter myself that you are right, Aramis."

"And now"—and here the prelate looked searchingly and scrutinizingly at his friend—"now let us talk of ourselves and for ourselves; will you become one of M. Fouquet's friends? Do not interrupt me until you know what that means."

"Well, I am listening."

"Will you become a marechal of France, peer, duke, and the possessor of a duchy, with a million of francs?"

"But, my friend," replied D'Artagnan, "what must one do to get all that?"

"Belong to M. Fouquet."

"But I already belong to the king."

"Not exclusively, I suppose."

"Oh! a D'Artagnan cannot be divided."

"You have, I presume, ambitions, as noble hearts like yours have."

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Well?"

"Well! I wish to be a marechal; the king will make me marechal, duke, peer; the king will make me all that."

Aramis fixed a searching look upon D'Artagnan.

"Is not the king master?" said D'Artagnan.

"No one disputes it; but Louis XIII. was master also."

"Oh! my dear friend, between Richelieu and Louis XIII. stood no D'Artagnan," said the musketeer, very quietly.

"There are many stumbling-blocks round the king," said Aramis.

"Not for the king's feet."

"Very likely not; still—"

"One moment, Aramis; I observe that every one thinks of himself, and never of his poor prince; I will maintain myself maintaining him."

"And if you meet with ingratitude?"

"The weak alone are afraid of that."

"You are quite certain of yourself?"

"I think so."

"Still, the king may some day have no further need for you!"

"On the contrary, I think his need of me will soon be greater than ever; and hearken, my dear fellow, if it became necessary to arrest a new Conde, who would do it? This—this alone in France!" and D'Artagnan struck his sword, which clanked sullenly on the tessellated floor.

"You are right," said Aramis, turning very pale; and then he rose and pressed D'Artagnan's hand.

"That is the last summons for supper," said the captain of the musketeers; "will you excuse me?"

Aramis threw his arm round the musketeer's neck, and said, "A friend like you is the brightest jewel in the royal crown." And they immediately separated.

"I was right," mused D'Artagnan; "there is, indeed, something strangely serious stirring."

"We must hasten the explosion," breathed the coming cardinal, "for D'Artagnan has discovered the existence of a plot."

X. Madame and De Guiche.

It will not be forgotten how Comte de Guiche left the queen-mother's apartments on the day when Louis XIV. presented La Vallière with the beautiful bracelets he had won in the lottery. The comte walked to and fro for some time outside the palace, in the greatest distress, from a thousand suspicions and anxieties with which his mind was beset. Presently he stopped and waited on the terrace opposite the grove of trees, watching for Madame's departure. More than half an hour passed away; and as he was at that moment quite alone, the comte could hardly have had any very diverting ideas at his command. He drew his tables from his pocket, and, after hesitating over and over again, determined to write these words:—"Madame, I implore you to grant me one moment's conversation. Do not be alarmed at this request, which contains nothing in any way opposed to the profound respect with which I subscribe myself, etc., etc." He had signed and folded this singular love-letter, when he suddenly observed several ladies leaving the chateau, and afterwards several courtiers too; in fact, almost every one that formed the queen's circle. He saw La Vallière herself, then Montalais talking with Malicorne; he watched the departure of the very last of the numerous guests that had a short time before thronged the queen-mother's cabinet.

Madame herself had not yet passed; she would be obliged, however, to cross the courtyard in order to enter her own apartments; and, from the terrace where he was standing, De Guiche could see all that was going on in the courtyard. At last he saw Madame leave, attended by a couple of pages, who were carrying torches before her. She was walking very quickly; as soon as she reached the door, she said:

"Let some one go and look for De Guiche: he has to render an account of a mission he had to discharge for me; if he should be disengaged, request him to be good enough to come to my apartment."

De Guiche remained silent, hidden in the shade; but as soon as Madame had withdrawn, he darted from the terrace down the steps and assumed a most indifferent air, so that the pages who were hurrying towards his rooms might meet him.

“Ah! it is Madame, then, who is seeking me!” he said to himself, quite overcome; and he crushed in his hand the now worse than useless letter.

“M. le comte,” said one of the pages, approaching him, “we are indeed most fortunate in meeting you.”

“Why so, messieurs?”

“A command from Madame.”

“From Madame!” said De Guiche, looking surprised.

“Yes, M. le comte, her royal highness has been asking for you; she expects to hear, she told us, the result of a commission you had to execute for her. Are you at liberty?”

“I am quite at her royal highness’s orders.”

“Will you have the goodness to follow us, then?”

When De Guiche entered the princess’s apartments, he found her pale and agitated. Montalais was standing at the door, evidently uneasy about what was passing in her mistress’s mind. De Guiche appeared.

“Ah! is that you, Monsieur de Guiche?” said Madame; “come in, I beg. Mademoiselle de Montalais, I do not require your attendance any longer.”

Montalais, more puzzled than ever, courtesied and withdrew. De Guiche and the princess were left alone. The comte had every advantage in his favour; it was Madame who had summoned him to a rendezvous. But how was it possible for the comte to make use of this advantage? Madame was so whimsical, and her disposition so changeable. She soon allowed this to be perceived, for, suddenly, opening the conversation, she said: “Well! have you nothing to say to me?”

He imagined she must have guessed his thoughts; he fancied (for those who are in love are thus constituted, being as credulous and blind as poets or prophets), he fancied she knew how ardent was his desire to see her, and also the subject uppermost in his mind.

“Yes, Madame,” he said, “and I think it very singular.”

“The affair of the bracelets,” she exclaimed, eagerly, “you mean that, I suppose?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“And you think the king is in love; do you not?”

Guiche looked at her for some time; her eyes sank under his gaze, which seemed to read her very heart.

“I think,” he said, “that the king may possibly have had an idea of annoying some one; were it not for that, the king would hardly show himself so earnest in his attentions as he is; he would not run the risk of compromising, from mere thoughtlessness of disposition, a young girl against whom no one has been hitherto able to say a word.”

“Indeed! the bold, shameless girl,” said the princess, haughtily.

“I can positively assure your royal highness,” said De Guiche, with a firmness marked by great respect, “that Mademoiselle de la Vallière is beloved by a man who merits every respect, for he is a brave and honourable gentleman.”

“Bragelonne?”

“My friend; yes, Madame.”

“Well, and though he is your friend, what does that matter to the king?”

“The king knows that Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and as Raoul has served the king most valiantly, the king will not inflict an irreparable injury upon him.”

Madame began to laugh in a manner that produced a sinister impression upon De Guiche.

“I repeat, Madame, I do not believe the king is in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and the proof that I do not believe it is, that I was about to ask you whose *amour propre* it is likely the king is desirous of wounding? You, who are well acquainted with the whole court, can perhaps assist me in ascertaining that; and assuredly, with greater certainty, since it is everywhere said that your royal highness is on very friendly terms with the king.”

Madame bit her lips, and, unable to assign any good and sufficient reasons, changed the conversation. “Prove to me,” she said, fixing on him one of those looks in which the whole soul seems to pass into the eyes, “prove to me, I say, that you intended to interrogate me at the very moment I sent for you.”

De Guiche gravely drew from his pocket the now crumpled note that he had written, and showed it to her.

“Sympathy,” she said.

“Yes,” said the comte, with an indescribable tenderness of tone, “sympathy. I have explained to you how and why I sought you; you, however, have yet to tell me, Madame, why you sent for me.”

“True,” replied the princess. She hesitated, and then suddenly exclaimed, “Those bracelets will drive me mad.”

“You expected the king would offer them to you,” replied De Guiche.

“Why not?”

“But before you, Madame, before you, his sister-in-law, was there not the queen herself to whom the king should have offered them?”

“Before La Vallière,” cried the princess, wounded to the quick, “could he not have presented them to me? Was there not the whole court, indeed, to choose from?”

“I assure you, Madame,” said the comte, respectfully, “that if any one heard you speak in this manner, if any one were to see how red your eyes are, and, Heaven forgive me, to see, too, that tear trembling on your eyelids, it would be said that your royal highness was jealous.”

“Jealous!” said the princess, haughtily, “jealous of La Vallière!”

She expected to see De Guiche yield beneath her scornful gesture and her proud tone; but he simply and boldly replied, “Jealous of La Vallière; yes, Madame.”

“Am I to suppose, monsieur,” she stammered out, “that your object is to insult me?”

“It is not possible, Madame,” replied the comte, slightly agitated, but resolved to master that fiery nature.

“Leave the room!” said the princess, thoroughly exasperated, De Guiche’s coolness and silent respect having made her completely lose her temper.

De Guiche fell back a step, bowed slowly, but with great respect, drew himself up, looking as white as his lace cuffs, and, in a voice slightly trembling, said, “It was hardly worth while to have hurried here to be subjected to this unmerited disgrace.” And he turned away with hasty steps.

He had scarcely gone half a dozen paces when Madame darted like a tigress after him, seized him by the cuff, and making him turn round again, said, trembling with passion as she did so, “The respect you pretend to have is more insulting than the insult itself. Insult me, if you please, but at least speak.”

“Madame,” said the comte, gently, as he drew his sword, “thrust this blade into my heart, rather than kill me by degrees.”

At the look he fixed upon her,—a look full of love, resolution, and despair, even,—she knew how readily the comte, so outwardly calm in appearance, would pass his sword through his own breast if she added another word. She tore the blade from his hands, and, pressing his arm with a feverish impatience, which might pass for tenderness, said, “Do not be too hard upon me, comte. You see how I am suffering, and yet you have no pity for me.”

Tears, the cries of this strange attack, stifled her voice. As soon as De Guiche saw her weep, he took her in his arms and carried her to an armchair; in another moment she would have been suffocated. “Oh, why,” he murmured, as he knelt by her side, “why do you conceal your troubles from me? Do you love any one—tell me? It would kill me, I know, but not until I should have comforted, consoled, and served you even.”

“And do you love me to that extent?” she replied, completely conquered.

“I do indeed love you to that extent, Madame.”

She placed both her hands in his. “My heart is indeed another’s,” she murmured in so low a tone that her voice could hardly be heard; but he heard it, and said, “Is it the king you love?”

She gently shook her head, and her smile was like a clear bright streak in the clouds, through which after the tempest has passed one almost fancies Paradise is opening. “But,” she added, “there are other passions in a high-born heart. Love is poetry; but the real life of the heart is pride. Comte, I was born on a throne, I am proud and jealous of my rank. Why does the king gather such unworthy objects round him?”

“Once more, I repeat,” said the comte, “you are acting unjustly towards that poor girl, who will one day be my friend’s wife.”

“Are you simple enough to believe that, comte?”

“If I did not believe it,” he said, turning very pale, “Bragelonne should be informed of it to-morrow; indeed he should, if I thought that poor La Vallière had forgotten the vows she had exchanged with Raoul. But no, it would be cowardly to betray a woman’s secret; it would be criminal to disturb a friend’s peace of mind.”

“You think, then,” said the princess, with a wild burst of laughter, “that ignorance is happiness?”

“I believe it,” he replied.

“Prove it to me, then,” she said, hurriedly.

“It is easily done, Madame. It is reported through the whole court that the king loves you, and that you return his affection.”

“Well?” she said, breathing with difficulty.

“Well; admit for a moment that Raoul, my friend, had come and said to me, ‘Yes, the king loves Madame, and has made an impression upon her heart,’ I possibly should have slain Raoul.”

“It would have been necessary,” said the princess, with the obstinacy of a woman who feels herself not easily overcome, “for M. de Bragelonne to have had proofs before he ventured to speak to you in that manner.”

“Such, however, is the case,” replied De Guiche, with a deep sigh, “that, not having been warned, I have never examined into the matter seriously; and I now find that my ignorance has saved my life.”

“So, then, you drive selfishness and coldness to that extent,” said Madame, “that you would let this unhappy young man continue to love La Vallière?”

“I would, until La Vallière’s guilt were revealed.”

“But the bracelets?”

“Well, Madame, since you yourself expected to receive them from the king, what can I possibly say?”

The argument was a telling one, and the princess was overwhelmed by it, and from that moment her defeat was assured. But as her heart and mind were instinct with noble and generous feelings, she understood De Guiche’s extreme delicacy. She saw that in his heart he really suspected that the king was in love with La Vallière, and that he did not wish to resort to the common expedient of ruining a rival in the mind of a woman, by giving the latter the assurance and certainty that this rival’s affections were transferred to another woman. She guessed that his suspicions of La Vallière were aroused, and that, in order to leave himself time for his convictions to undergo a change, so as not to ruin Louise utterly, he was determined to pursue a certain straightforward line of conduct. She could read so much real greatness of character, and such true generosity of disposition in her lover, that her heart really warmed with affection towards him, whose passion for her was so pure and delicate. Despite his fear of incurring her displeasure, De Guiche, by retaining his position as a man of proud independence of feeling and deep devotion, became almost a hero in her estimation, and reduced her to the state of a jealous and little-minded woman. She loved him for this so tenderly, that she could not refuse to give him a proof of her affection.

“See how many words we have wasted,” she said, taking his hand, “suspicions, anxieties, mistrust, sufferings—I think we have enumerated all those words.”

“Alas! Madame, yes.”

“Efface them from your heart as I drive them from mine. Whether La Vallière does or does not love the king, and whether the king does or does not love La Vallière—from this moment you and I will draw a distinction in the two characters I have to perform. You open your eyes so wide that I am sure you hardly understand me.”

“You are so impetuous, Madame, that I always tremble at the fear of displeasing you.”

“And see how he trembles now, poor fellow,” she said, with the most charming playfulness of manner. “Yes, monsieur, I have two characters to perform. I am the sister of the king, the sister-in-law of the king’s wife. In this character ought I not to take an interest in these domestic intrigues? Come, tell me what you think?”

“As little as possible, Madame.”

“Agreed, monsieur; but it is a question of dignity; and then, you know, I am the wife of the king’s brother.” De Guiche sighed. “A circumstance,” she added, with an expression of great tenderness, “which will remind you that I am always to be treated with the profoundest respect.” De Guiche fell at her feet, which he kissed, with the religious fervor of a worshipper. “And I begin to think that, really and truly, I have another character to perform. I was almost forgetting it.”

“Name it, oh! name it,” said De Guiche.

"I am a woman," she said, in a voice lower than ever, "and I love." He rose, she opened her arms, and their lips met. A footstep was heard behind the tapestry, and Mademoiselle de Montalais appeared. "What do you want?" said Madame.

"M. de Guiche is wanted," replied Montalais, who was just in time to see the agitation of the actors of these four characters; for De Guiche had consistently carried out his part with heroism.

XI. Montalais and Malicorne.

Montalais was right. M. de Guiche, thus summoned in every direction, was very much exposed, from such a multiplication of business, to the risk of not attending to any. It so happened that, considering the awkwardness of the interruption, Madame, notwithstanding her wounded pride, and secret anger, could not, for the moment at least, reproach Montalais for having violated, in so bold a manner, the semi-royal order with which she had been dismissed on De Guiche's entrance. De Guiche, also, lost his presence of mind, or, it would be more correct to say, had already lost it, before Montalais's arrival, for, scarcely had he heard the young girl's voice, than, without taking leave of Madame, as the most ordinary politeness required, even between persons equal in rank and station, he fled from her presence, his heart tumultuously throbbing, and his brain on fire, leaving the princess with one hand raised, as though to bid him adieu. Montalais was at no loss, therefore, to perceive the agitation of the two lovers—the one who fled was agitated, and the one who remained was equally so.

"Well," murmured the young girl, as she glanced inquisitively round her, "this time, at least, I think I know as much as the most curious woman could possibly wish to know." Madame felt so embarrassed by this inquisitorial look, that, as if she heard Montalais's muttered side remark, she did not speak a word to her maid of honour, but, casting down her eyes, retired at once to her bedroom. Montalais, observing this, stood listening for a moment, and then heard Madame lock and bolt her door. By this she knew that the rest of the evening was at her own disposal; and making, behind the door which had just been closed, a gesture which indicated but little real respect for the princess, she went down the staircase in search of Malicorne, who was very busily engaged at that moment in watching a courier, who, covered with dust, had just left the Comte de Guiche's apartments. Montalais knew that Malicorne was engaged in a matter of some importance; she therefore allowed him to look and stretch out his neck as much as he pleased; and it was only when Malicorne had resumed his natural position, that she touched him on the shoulder. "Well," said Montalais, "what is the latest intelligence you have?"

"M. de Guiche is in love with Madame."

"Fine news, truly! I know something more recent than that."

"Well, what do you know?"

"That Madame is in love with M. de Guiche."

"The one is the consequence of the other."

"Not always, my good monsieur."

"Is that remark intended for me?"

"Present company always excepted."

"Thank you," said Malicorne. "Well, and in the other direction, what is stirring?"

"The king wished, this evening, after the lottery, to see Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Well, and he has seen her?"

"No, indeed!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The door was shut and locked."

"So that—"

"So that the king was obliged to go back again, looking very sheepish, like a thief who has forgotten his crowbar."

"Good."

"And in the third place?" inquired Montalais.

"The courier who has just arrived for De Guiche came from M. de Bragelonne."

"Excellent," said Montalais, clapping her hands together.

"Why so?"

"Because we have work to do. If we get weary now, something unlucky will be sure to happen."

"We must divide the work, then," said Malicorne, "in order to avoid confusion."

"Nothing easier," replied Montalais. "Three intrigues, carefully nursed, and carefully encouraged, will produce, one with another, and taking a low average, three love letters a day."

"Oh!" exclaimed Malicorne, shrugging his shoulders, "you cannot mean what you say, darling; three letters a day, that may do for sentimental common people. A musketeer on duty, a young girl in a convent, may exchange letters with their lovers once a day, perhaps, from the top of a ladder, or through a hole in the wall. A letter contains all the poetry their poor little hearts have to boast of. But the cases we have in hand require to be dealt with very differently."

"Well, finish," said Montalais, out of patience with him. "Some one may come."

"Finish! Why, I am only at the beginning. I have still three points as yet untouched."

"Upon my word, he will be the death of me, with his Flemish indifference," exclaimed Montalais.

"And you will drive me mad with your Italian vivacity. I was going to say that our lovers here will be writing volumes to each other. But what are you driving at?"

"At this. Not one of our lady correspondents will be able to keep the letters they may receive."

"Very likely."

"M. de Guiche will not be able to keep his either."

"That is probable."

"Very well, then; I will take care of all that."

"That is the very thing that is impossible," said Malicorne.

"Why so?"

"Because you are not your own mistress; your room is as much La Vallière's as yours; and there are certain persons who will think nothing of visiting and searching a maid of honour's room; so that I am terribly afraid of the queen, who is as jealous as a Spaniard; of the queen-mother, who is as jealous as a couple of Spaniards; and, last of all, of Madame herself, who has jealousy enough for ten Spaniards."

"You forgot some one else."

"Who?"

"Monsieur."

"I was only speaking of the women. Let us add them up, then: we will call Monsieur, No. 1."

"De Guiche?"

"No. 2."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"No. 3."

"And the king, the king?"

"No. 4. Of course the king, who not only will be more jealous, but more powerful than all the rest put together. Ah, my dear!"

"Well?"

"Into what a wasp's nest you have thrust yourself!"

"And as yet not quite far enough, if you will follow me into it."

"Most certainly I will follow you where you like. Yet—"

"Well, yet—"

"While we have time, I think it will be prudent to turn back."

"But I, on the contrary, think the wisest course to take is to put ourselves at once at the head of all these intrigues."

"You will never be able to do it."

"With you, I could superintend ten of them. I am in my element, you must know. I was born to live at the court, as the salamander is made to live in the fire."

"Your comparison does not reassure me in the slightest degree in the world, my dear Montalais. I have heard it said, and by learned men too, that, in the first place, there are no salamanders at all, and that, if there had been any, they would have been infallibly baked or roasted on leaving the fire."

"Your learned men may be very wise as far as salamanders are concerned, but they would never tell you what I can tell you; namely, that Aure de Montalais is destined, before a month is over, to become the first diplomatist in the court of France."

"Be it so, but on condition that I shall be the second."

"Agreed; an offensive and defensive alliance, of course."

"Only be very careful of any letters."

"I will hand them to you as I receive them."

"What shall we tell the king about Madame?"

"That Madame is still in love with his majesty."

"What shall we tell Madame about the king?"

"That she would be exceedingly wrong not to humor him."

"What shall we tell La Vallière about Madame?"

"Whatever we choose, for La Vallière is in our power."

"How so?"

"Every way."

"What do you mean?"

"In the first place, through the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Explain yourself."

"You do not forget, I hope, that Monsieur de Bragelonne has written many letters to Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"I forget nothing."

"Well, then, it was I who received, and I who intercepted those letters."

"And, consequently, it is you who have them still?"

"Yes."

"Where,—here?"

"Oh, no; I have them safe at Blois, in the little room you know well enough."

"That dear little room,—that darling little room, the ante-chamber of the palace I intend you to live in one of these days. But, I beg your pardon, you said that all those letters are in that little room?"



“Yes.”

“Did you not put them in a box?”

“Of course; in the same box where I put all the letters I received from you, and where I put mine also when your business or your amusements prevented you from coming to our rendezvous.”

“Ah, very good,” said Malicorne.

“Why are you satisfied?”

“Because I see there is a possibility of not having to run to Blois after the letters, for I have them here.”

“You have brought the box away?”

“It was very dear to me, because it belonged to you.”

“Be sure and take care of it, for it contains original documents that will be of priceless value by and by.”

“I am perfectly well aware of that indeed, and that is the very reason why I laugh as I do, and with all my heart, too.”

“And now, one last word.”

“Why *last*?”

“Do we need any one to assist us?”

“No one.”

“Valets or maid-servants?”

“Bad policy. You will give the letters,—you will receive them. Oh! we must have no pride in this affair, otherwise M. Malicorne and Mademoiselle Aure, not transacting their own affairs themselves, will have to make up their minds to see them done by others.”

“You are quite right; but what is going on yonder in M. de Guiche’s room?”

“Nothing; he is only opening his window.”

“Let us be gone.” And they both immediately disappeared, all the terms of the contract being agreed on.

The window just opened was, in fact, that of the Comte de Guiche. It was not alone with the hope of catching a glimpse of Madame through her curtains that he seated himself by the open window for his preoccupation of mind had at that time a different origin. He had just received, as we have already stated, the courier who had been dispatched to him by Bragelonne, the latter having written to De Guiche a letter which had made the deepest impression upon him, and which he had read over and over again. “Strange, strange!” he murmured. “How irresponsible are the means by which destiny hurries men onward to their fate!” Leaving the window in order to approach nearer to the light, he once more read the letter he had just received:—

“CALAIS.

“MY DEAR COUNT,—I found M. de Wardes at Calais; he has been seriously wounded in an affair with the Duke of Buckingham. De Wardes is, as you know, unquestionably brave, but full of malevolent and wicked feelings. He conversed with me about yourself, for whom, he says, he has a warm regard, also about Madame, whom he considers a beautiful and amiable woman. He has guessed your affection for a certain person. He also talked to me about the lady for whom I have so ardent a regard, and showed the greatest interest on my behalf in expressing a deep pity for me, accompanied, however, by dark hints which alarmed me at first, but which I at last looked upon as the result of his usual love of mystery. These are the facts: he had received news of the court; you will understand, however, that it was only through M. de Lorraine. The report goes, so says the news, that a change has taken place in the king’s affections. You know whom that concerns. Afterwards, the news continues, people are talking about one of the maids of honour, respecting whom various slanderous reports are being circulated. These vague phrases have not allowed me to sleep. I have been deploring, ever since yesterday, that my diffidence and vacillation of purpose, notwithstanding a certain obstinacy of character I may possess, have left me unable to reply to these insinuations. In a word, M. de Wardes was setting off for Paris, and I did not delay his departure with explanations; for it seemed rather hard, I confess, to cross-examine a man whose wounds are hardly yet closed. In short, he travelled by short stages, as he was anxious to leave, he said, in order to be present at a curious spectacle the court cannot fail to offer within a short time. He added a few congratulatory words accompanied by vague sympathizing expressions. I could not understand the one any more than the other. I was bewildered by my own thoughts, and tormented by a mistrust of this man,—a mistrust which, you know better than any one else, I have never been able to overcome. As soon as he left, my perceptions seemed to become clearer. It is hardly possible that a man of De Wardes’s character should not have communicated something of his own malicious nature to the statements he made to me. It is not unlikely, therefore, that in the strange hints De Wardes threw out in my presence, there may be a mysterious signification, which I might have some difficulty in applying either to myself or to some one with whom you are acquainted. Being compelled to leave as soon as possible, in obedience to the king’s commands, the idea did not occur to me of running after De Wardes in order to ask him to explain his reserve; but I have dispatched a courier to you with this letter, which will explain in detail my various doubts. I regard you as myself; you have reflected and observed; it will be for you to act. M. de Wardes will arrive very shortly; endeavor to learn what he meant, if you do not already know. M. de Wardes, moreover, pretended that the Duke of Buckingham left Paris on the very best of terms with Madame. This was an affair which would have unhesitatingly made me draw my sword, had I not felt that I was under the necessity of dispatching the king’s mission before undertaking any quarrel whatsoever. Burn this letter, which Olivain will hand you. Whatever Olivain says, you may confidently rely on. Will you have the goodness, my dear comte, to recall me to the remembrance of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose hands I kiss with the greatest respect.

“Your devoted

“DE BRAGELONNE.

“P. S.—If anything serious should happen—we should be prepared for everything, dispatch a courier to me with this one single word, ‘come,’ and I will be in Paris within six and thirty hours after the receipt of your letter.”

De Guiche sighed, folded up the letter a third time, and, instead of burning it, as Raoul had recommended him to do, placed it in his pocket. He felt it needed reading over and over again.

“How much distress of mind, yet what sublime confidence, he shows!” murmured the comte; “he has poured out his whole soul in this letter. He says nothing of the Comte de la Fere, and speaks of his respect for Louise. He cautions me on my own account, and entreats me on his. Ah!” continued De Guiche, with a threatening gesture, “you interfere in my affairs, Monsieur de Wardes, do you? Very well, then; I will shortly occupy myself with yours. As for you, poor Raoul,—you who intrust your heart to my keeping, be assured I will watch over it.”

With this promise, De Guiche begged Malicorne to come immediately to his apartments, if possible. Malicorne acknowledged the invitation with an activity which was the first result of his conversation with Montalais. And while De Guiche, who thought that his motive was undiscovered, cross-examined Malicorne, the latter, who appeared to be working in the dark, soon guessed his questioner’s motives. The consequence was, that, after a quarter of an hour’s conversation, during which De Guiche thought he had ascertained the whole truth with regard to La Vallière and the king, he had learned absolutely nothing more than his own eyes had already acquainted him with, while Malicorne learned, or guessed, that Raoul, who was absent, was fast becoming suspicious, and that De Guiche intended to watch over the treasure of the Hesperides. Malicorne accepted the office of dragon. De Guiche fancied he had done everything for his friend, and soon began to think of nothing but his personal affairs. The next evening, De Wardes’s return and first appearance at the king’s reception were announced. When that visit had been paid, the convalescent waited on Monsieur; De Guiche taking care, however, to be at Monsieur’s apartments before the visit took place.

## XII. How De Wardes Was Received at Court.

Monsieur had received De Wardes with that marked favour light and frivolous minds bestow on every novelty that comes in their way. De Wardes, who had been absent for a month, was like fresh fruit to him. To treat him with marked kindness was an infidelity to old friends, and there is always something fascinating in that; moreover, it was a sort of reparation to De Wardes himself. Nothing, consequently, could exceed the favourable notice Monsieur took of him. The Chevalier de Lorraine, who feared this rival but a little, but who respected a character and disposition only too parallel to his own in every particular, with the addition of a bull-dog courage he did not himself possess, received De Wardes with a greater display of regard and affection than even Monsieur had done. De Guiche, as we have said, was there also, but kept in the background, waiting very patiently until all these interchanges were over. De Wardes, while talking to the others, and even to Monsieur himself, had not for a moment lost sight of De Guiche, who, he instinctively felt, was there on his account. As soon as he had finished with the others, he went up to De Guiche. They exchanged the most courteous compliments, after which De Wardes returned to Monsieur and the other gentlemen.

In the midst of these congratulations Madame was announced. She had been informed of De Wardes’s arrival, and knowing all the details of his voyage and duel, she was not sorry to be present at the remarks she knew would be made, without delay, by one who, she felt assured, was her personal enemy. Two or three of her ladies accompanied her. De Wardes saluted Madame in the most graceful and respectful manner, and, as a commencement of hostilities, announced, in the first place, that he could furnish the Duke of Buckingham’s friends with the latest news about him. This was a direct answer to the coldness with which Madame had received him. The attack was a vigorous one, and Madame felt the blow, but without appearing to have even noticed it. He rapidly cast a glance at Monsieur and at De Guiche,—the former coloured, and the latter turned very pale. Madame alone preserved an unmoved countenance; but, as she knew how many unpleasant thoughts and feelings her enemy could awaken in the two persons who were listening to him, she smilingly bent forward towards the traveler, as if to listen to the news he had brought—but he was speaking of other matters. Madame was brave, even to imprudence; if she were to retreat, it would be inviting an attack; so, after the first disagreeable impression had passed away, she returned to the charge.

“Have you suffered much from your wounds, Monsieur de Wardes?” she inquired, “for we have been told that you had the misfortune to get wounded.”

It was now De Wardes’s turn to wince; he bit his lips, and replied, “No, Madame, hardly at all.”

“Indeed! and yet in this terribly hot weather—”

“The sea-breezes were very fresh and cool, Madame, and then I had one consolation.”

“Indeed! What was it?”

“The knowledge that my adversary’s sufferings were still greater than my own.”

“Ah! you mean he was more seriously wounded than you were; I was not aware of that,” said the princess, with utter indifference.

“Oh, Madame, you are mistaken, or rather you pretend to misunderstand my remark. I did not say that he was a greater sufferer in body than myself; but his heart was very seriously affected.”

De Guiche comprehended instinctively from what direction the struggle was approaching; he ventured to make a sign to Madame, as if entreating her to retire from the contest. But she, without acknowledging De Guiche’s gesture, without pretending to have noticed it even, and still smiling, continued:

“Is it possible,” she said, “that the Duke of Buckingham’s heart was touched? I had no idea, until now, that a heart-wound could be cured.”

“Alas! Madame,” replied De Wardes, politely, “every woman believes that; and it is this belief that gives them that superiority to man which confidence begets.”

“You misunderstand altogether, dearest,” said the prince, impatiently, “M. de Wardes means that the Duke of Buckingham’s heart had been touched, not by the sword, but by something sharper.”

“Ah! very good, very good!” exclaimed Madame. “It is a jest of M. de Wardes’s. Very good; but I should like to know if the Duke of Buckingham would appreciate the jest. It is, indeed, a very great pity he is not here, M. de Wardes.”

The young man’s eyes seemed to flash fire. “Oh!” he said, as he clenched his teeth, “there is nothing I should like better.”

De Guiche did not move. Madame seemed to expect that he would come to her assistance. Monsieur hesitated. The Chevalier de Lorraine advanced and continued the conversation.

“Madame,” he said, “De Wardes knows perfectly well that for a Buckingham’s heart to be touched is nothing new, and what he has said has already taken place.”

“Instead of an ally, I have two enemies,” murmured Madame; “two determined enemies, and in league with each other.” And she changed the conversation. To change the conversation is, as every one knows, a right possessed by princes which etiquette requires all to respect. The remainder of the conversation was moderate enough in tone; the principal actors had rehearsed their parts. Madame withdrew easily, and Monsieur, who wished to question her on several matters, offered her his hand on leaving. The chevalier was seriously afraid that an understanding might be established between the husband and wife if he were to leave them quietly together. He therefore made his way to Monsieur’s apartments, in order to surprise him on his return, and to destroy with a few words all the good impressions Madame might have been able to sow in his heart. De Guiche advanced towards De Wardes, who was surrounded by a large number of persons, and thereby indicated his wish to converse with him; De Wardes, at the same time, showing by his looks and by a movement of his head that he perfectly understood him. There was nothing in these signs to enable strangers to suppose they were otherwise than upon the most friendly footing. De Guiche could therefore turn away from him, and wait until he was at liberty. He had not long to wait; for De Wardes, freed from his questioners, approached De Guiche, and after a fresh salutation, they walked side by side together.

“You have made a good impression since your return, my dear De Wardes,” said the comte.

“Excellent, as you see.”

“And your spirits are just as lively as ever?”

“Better.”

“And a very great happiness, too.”

“Why not? Everything is so ridiculous in this world, everything so absurd around us.”

“You are right.”

“You are of my opinion, then?”

“I should think so! And what news do you bring us from yonder?”

“I? None at all. I have come to look for news here.”

“But, tell me, you surely must have seen some people at Boulogne, one of our friends, for instance; it is no great time ago.”

“Some people—one of our friends—”

“Your memory is short.”

“Ah! true; Bragelonne, you mean.”

“Exactly so.”

“Who was on his way to fulfil a mission, with which he was intrusted to King Charles II.”

“Precisely. Well, then, did he not tell you, or did not you tell him—”

“I do not precisely know what I told him, I must confess: but I do know what I did *not* tell him.” De Wardes was *finesse* itself. He perfectly well knew from De Guiche’s tone and manner, which was cold and dignified, that the conversation was about to assume a disagreeable turn. He resolved to let it take what course it pleased, and to keep strictly on his guard.

“May I ask you what you did not tell him?” inquired De Guiche.

“All about La Vallière.”

“La Vallière... What is it? and what was that strange circumstance you seem to have known over yonder, which Bragelonne, who was here on the spot, was not acquainted with?”

“Do you really ask me that in a serious manner?”

“Nothing more so.”

“What! you, a member of the court, living in Madame’s household, a friend of Monsieur’s, a guest at their table, the favourite of our lovely princess?”

Guiche coloured violently from anger. “What princess are you alluding to?” he said.

“I am only acquainted with one, my dear fellow. I am speaking of Madame herself. Are you devoted to another princess, then? Come, tell me.”

De Guiche was on the point of launching out, but he saw the drift of the remark. A quarrel was imminent between the two young men. De Wardes wished the quarrel to be only in Madame’s name, while De Guiche would not accept it except on La Vallière’s account. From this moment, it became a series of feigned attacks, which would have continued until one of the two had been touched home. De Guiche therefore resumed all the self-possession he could command.

“There is not the slightest question in the world of Madame in this matter, my dear De Wardes.” said Guiche, “but simply of what you were talking about just now.”

“What was I saying?”

“That you had concealed certain things from Bragelonne.”

“Certain things which you know as well as I do,” replied De Wardes.

“No, upon my honour.”

“Nonsense.”

“If you tell me what they are, I shall know, but not otherwise, I swear.”

“What! I who have just arrived from a distance of sixty leagues, and you who have not stirred from this place, who have witnessed with your own eyes that which rumor informed me of at Calais! Do you now tell me seriously that you do not know what it is about? Oh! comte, this is hardly charitable of you.”

“As you like, De Wardes; but I again repeat, I know nothing.”

“You are truly discreet—well!—perhaps it is very prudent of you.”

“And so you will not tell me anything, will not tell me any more than you told Bragelonne?”

“You are pretending to be deaf, I see. I am convinced that Madame could not possibly have more command over herself than *you* have.”

“Double hypocrite,” murmured Guiche to himself, “you are again returning to the old subject.”

“Very well, then,” continued De Wardes, “since we find it so difficult to understand each other about La Vallière and Bragelonne let us speak about your own affairs.”

“Nay,” said De Guiche, “I have no affairs of my own to talk about. You have not said anything about me, I suppose, to Bragelonne, which you cannot repeat to my face?”

“No; but understand me, Guiche, that however much I may be ignorant of certain matters, I am quite as conversant with others. If, for instance, we were conversing about the intimacies of the Duke of Buckingham at Paris, as I did during my journey with the duke, I could tell you a great many interesting circumstances. Would you like me to mention them?”

De Guiche passed his hand across his forehead, which was covered in perspiration. “No, no,” he said, “a hundred times no! I have no curiosity for matters which do not concern me. The Duke of Buckingham is for me nothing more than a simple acquaintance, whilst Raoul is an intimate friend. I have not the slightest curiosity to learn what happened to the duke, while I have, on the contrary, the greatest interest in all that happened to Raoul.”

“In Paris?”

“Yes, in Paris, or Boulogne. You understand I am on the spot; if anything should happen, I am here to meet it; whilst Raoul is absent, and has only myself to represent him; so, Raoul’s affairs before my own.”

“But he will return?”

“Not, however, until his mission is completed. In the meantime, you understand, evil reports cannot be permitted to circulate about him without my looking into them.”

“And for a better reason still, that he will remain some time in London,” said De Wardes, chuckling.

“You think so,” said De Guiche, simply.

“Think so, indeed! do you suppose he was sent to London for no other purpose than to go there and return again immediately? No, no; he was sent to London to remain there.”

“Ah! De Wardes,” said De Guiche, grasping De Wardes’s hand, “that is a very serious suspicion concerning Bragelonne, which completely confirms what he wrote to me from Boulogne.”

De Wardes resumed his former coldness of manner: his love of rallery had led him too far, and by his own imprudence, he had laid himself open to attack.

“Well, tell me, what did he write to you about?” he inquired.

“He told me that you had artfully insinuated some injurious remarks against La Vallière, and that you had seemed to laugh at his great confidence in that young girl.”

“Well, it is perfectly true I did so,” said De Wardes, “and I was quite ready, at the time, to hear from the Vicomte de Bragelonne that which every man expects from another whenever anything may have been said to displease him. In the same way, for instance, if I were seeking a quarrel with you, I should tell you that Madame after having shown the greatest preference for the Duke of Buckingham, is at this moment supposed to have sent the handsome duke away for your benefit.”

“Oh! that would not wound me in the slightest degree, my dear De Wardes,” said De Guiche, smiling, notwithstanding the shiver that ran through his whole frame. “Why, such a favour would be too great a happiness.”

“I admit that, but if I absolutely wished to quarrel with you, I should try and invent a falsehood, perhaps, and speak to you about a certain arbor, where you and that illustrious princess were together—I should speak also of certain gratifications, of certain kissings of the hand; and you who are so secret on all occasions, so hasty, so punctilious—”

“Well,” said De Guiche, interrupting him, with a smile upon his lips, although he almost felt as if he were going to die; “I swear I should not care for that, nor should I in any way contradict you; for you must know, my dear marquis, that for all matters which concern myself I am a block of ice; but it is a very different thing when an absent friend is concerned, a friend, who, on leaving, confided his interests to my safe-keeping; for such a friend, De Wardes, believe me, I am like fire itself.”

“I understand you, Monsieur de Guiche. In spite of what you say, there cannot be any question between us, just now, either of Bragelonne or of this insignificant girl, whose name is La Vallière.”

At this moment some of the younger courtiers were crossing the apartment, and having already heard the few words which had just been pronounced, were able also to hear those which were about to follow. De Wardes observed this, and continued aloud:—“Oh! if La Vallière were a coquette like Madame, whose innocent flirtations, I am sure, were, first of all, the cause of the Duke of Buckingham being sent back to England, and afterwards were the reason of your being sent into exile; for you will not deny, I suppose, that Madame’s pretty ways really had a certain influence over you?”

The courtiers drew nearer to the speakers, Saint-Aignan at their head, and then Manicamp.

“But, my dear fellow, whose fault was that?” said De Guiche, laughing. “I am a vain, conceited fellow, I know, and everybody else knows it too. I took seriously that which was only intended as a jest, and got myself exiled for my pains. But I saw my error. I overcame my vanity, and I obtained my recall, by making the *amende honorable*, and by promising myself to overcome this defect; and the consequence is, that I am so thoroughly cured, that I now laugh at the very thing which, three or four days ago, would have almost broken my heart. But Raoul is in love, and is loved in return; he cannot laugh at the reports which disturb his happiness—reports which you seem to have undertaken to interpret, when you know, marquis, as I do, as these gentlemen do, as every one does in fact, that all such reports are pure calumny.”

“Calumny!” exclaimed De Wardes, furious at seeing himself caught in the snare by De Guiche’s coolness of temper.

“Certainly—calumny. Look at this letter from him, in which he tells me you have spoken ill of Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and where he asks me, if what you reported about this young girl is true or not. Do you wish me to appeal to these gentlemen, De Wardes, to decide?” And with admirable coolness, De Guiche read aloud the paragraph of the letter which referred to La Vallière. “And now,” continued De Guiche, “there is no doubt in the world, as far as I am concerned, that you wished to disturb Bragelonne’s peace of mind, and that your remarks were maliciously intended.”

De Wardes looked round him, to see if he could find support from any one; but, at the idea that De Wardes had insulted, either directly or indirectly, the idol of the day, every one shook his head; and De Wardes saw that he was in the wrong.

“Messieurs,” said De Guiche, intuitively divining the general feeling, “my discussion with Monsieur de Wardes refers to a subject so delicate in its nature, that it is most important no one should hear more than you have already heard. Close the doors, then, I beg you, and let us finish our conversation in the manner which becomes two gentlemen, one of whom has given the other the lie.”

“Messieurs, messieurs!” exclaimed those who were present.

“Is it your opinion, then, that I was wrong in defending Mademoiselle de la Vallière?” said De Guiche. “In that case, I pass judgment upon myself, and am ready to withdraw the offensive words I may have used to Monsieur de Wardes.”

“The deuce! certainly not!” said Saint-Aignan. “Mademoiselle de la Vallière is an angel.”

“Virtue and purity itself,” said Manicamp.

“You see, Monsieur de Wardes,” said De Guiche, “I am not the only one who undertakes the defense of that poor girl. I entreat you, therefore, messieurs, a second time, to leave us. You see, it is impossible we could be more calm and composed than we are.”

It was the very thing the courtiers wished; some went out at one door, and the rest at the other, and the two young men were left alone.

“Well played,” said De Wardes, to the comte.

“Was it not?” replied the latter.

“How can it be wondered at, my dear fellow; I have got quite rusty in the country, while the command you have acquired over yourself, comte, confounds me; a man always gains something in women’s society; so, pray accept my congratulations.”

“I do accept them.”

“And I will make Madame a present of them.”

“And now, my dear Monsieur de Wardes, let us speak as loud as you please.”

“Do not defy me.”

“I do defy you, for you are known to be an evil-minded man; if you do that, you will be looked upon as a coward, too; and Monsieur would have you hanged, this evening, at his window-casement. Speak, my dear De Wardes, speak.”

"I have fought already."

"But not quite enough, yet."

"I see, you would not be sorry to fight with me while my wounds are still open."

"No; better still."

"The deuce! you are unfortunate in the moment you have chosen; a duel, after the one I have just fought, would hardly suit me; I have lost too much blood at Boulogne; at the slightest effort my wounds would open again, and you would really have too good a bargain."

"True," said De Guiche; "and yet, on your arrival here, your looks and your arms showed there was nothing the matter with you."

"Yes, my arms are all right, but my legs are weak; and then, I have not had a foil in my hand since that devil of a duel; and you, I am sure, have been fencing every day, in order to carry your little conspiracy against me to a successful issue."

"Upon my honour, monsieur," replied De Guiche, "it is six months since I last practiced."

"No, comte, after due reflection, I will not fight, at least, with you. I will await Bragelonne's return, since you say it is Bragelonne who finds fault with me."

"Oh no, indeed! You shall not wait until Bragelonne's return," exclaimed the comte, losing all command over himself, "for you have said that Bragelonne might, possibly, be some time before he returns; and, in the meanwhile, your wicked insinuations would have had their effect."

"Yet, I shall have my excuse. So take care."

"I will give you a week to finish your recovery."

"That is better. We will wait a week."

"Yes, yes, I understand; a week will give time to my adversary to make his escape. No, no; I will not give you one day, even."

"You are mad, monsieur," said De Wardes, retreating a step.

"And you are a coward, if you do not fight willingly. Nay, what is more, I will denounce you to the king, as having refused to fight, after having insulted La Vallière."

"Ah!" said De Wardes, "you are dangerously treacherous, though you pass for a man of honour."

"There is nothing more dangerous than the treachery, as you term it, of the man whose conduct is always loyal and upright."

"Restore me the use of my legs, then, or get yourself bled, till you are as white as I am, so as to equalize our chances."

"No, no; I have something better than that to propose."

"What is it?"

"We will fight on horseback, and will exchange three pistol-shots each. You are a first rate marksman. I have seen you bring down swallows with single balls, and at full gallop. Do not deny it, for I have seen you myself."

"I believe you are right," said De Wardes; "and as that is the case, it is not unlikely I might kill you."

"You would be rendering me a very great service, if you did."

"I will do my best."

"Is it agreed? Give me your hand upon it."

"There it is: but on one condition, however."

"Name it."

"That not a word shall be said about it to the king."

"Not a word, I swear."

"I will go and get my horse, then."

"And I, mine."

"Where shall we meet?"

"In the plain; I know an admirable place."

"Shall we go together?"

"Why not?"

And both of them, on their way to the stables, passed beneath Madame's windows, which were faintly lighted; a shadow could be seen behind the lace curtains. "There is a woman," said De Wardes, smiling, "who does not suspect that we are going to fight—to die, perhaps, on her account."

XIII. The Combat.

De Wardes and De Guiche selected their horses, and saddled them with their own hands, with holster saddles. De Guiche, having two pairs of pistols, went to his apartments to get them; and after having loaded them, gave the choice to De Wardes, who selected the pair he had made use of twenty times before—the same, indeed, with which De Guiche had seen him kill swallows flying. "You will not be surprised," he said, "if I take every precaution. You know the weapons well, and, consequently, I am only making the chances equal."

"Your remark was quite useless," replied De Guiche, "and you have done no more than you are entitled to do."

"Now," said De Wardes, "I beg you to have the goodness to help me to mount; for I still experience a little difficulty in doing so."

"In that case, we had better settle the matter on foot."

"No; once in the saddle, I shall be all right."

"Very good, then; we will not speak of it again," said De Guiche, as he assisted De Wardes to mount his horse.

"And now," continued the young man, "in our eagerness to murder one another, we have neglected one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That it is quite dark, and we shall almost be obliged to grope about, in order to kill."

"Oh!" said De Guiche, "you are as anxious as I am that everything should be done in proper order."

"Yes; but I do not wish people to say that you have assassinated me, any more than, supposing I were to kill you, I should myself like to be accused of such a crime."

"Did any one make a similar remark about your duel with the Duke of Buckingham?" said De Guiche; "it took place precisely under the same conditions as ours."

"Very true; but there was still light enough to see by; and we were up to our middles almost, in the water; besides, there were a good number of spectators on shore, looking at us."

De Guiche reflected for a moment; and the thought which had already presented itself to him became more confirmed—that De Wardes wished to have witnesses present, in order to bring back the conversation about Madame, and to give a new turn to the combat. He avoided saying a word in reply, therefore; and, as De Wardes once more looked at him interrogatively, he replied, by a movement of the head, that it would be best to let things remain as they were. The two adversaries consequently set off, and left the chateau by the same gate, close to which we may remember to have seen Montalais and Malcomre together. The night, as if to counteract the extreme heat of the day, had gathered the clouds together in masses which were moving slowly along from the west to the east. The vault above, without a clear spot anywhere visible, or without the faintest indication of thunder, seemed to hang heavily over the earth, and soon began, by the force of the wind, to split into streamers, like a huge sheet torn to shreds. Large and warm drops of rain began to fall heavily, and gathered the dust into globules, which rolled along the ground. At the same time, the hedges, which seemed conscious of the approaching storm, the thirsty plants, the drooping branches of the trees, exhaled a thousand aromatic odors, which revived in the mind tender recollections, thoughts of youth, endless life, happiness, and love. "How fresh the earth smells," said De Wardes; "it is a piece of coquetry to draw us to her."

"By the by," replied De Guiche, "several ideas have just occurred to me; and I wish to have your opinion upon them."

"Relative to—"

"Relative to our engagement."

"It is quite some time, in fact, that we should begin to arrange matters."

"Is it to be an ordinary combat, and conducted according to established custom?"

"Let me first know what your established custom is."

"That we dismount in any particular open space that may suit us, fasten our horses to the nearest object, meet, each without our pistols in our hands, and afterwards retire for a hundred and fifty paces, in order to advance on each other."

"Very good; that is precisely the way in which I killed poor Follivent, three weeks ago, at Saint-Denis."

"I beg your pardon, but you forgot one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That in your duel with Follivent you advanced towards each other on foot, your swords between your teeth, and your pistols in your hands."

"True."

"While now, on the contrary, as you cannot walk, you yourself admit that we shall have to mount our horses again, and charge; and the first who wishes to fire will do so."

"That is the best course, no doubt; but it is quite dark; we must make allowances for more missed shots than would be the case in the daytime."

"Very well; each will fire three times; the pair of pistols already loaded, and one reload."

"Excellent! Where shall our engagement take place?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No."

"You see that small wood which lies before us?"

"The wood which is called Rochin?"

"Exactly."

"You know it?"

"Perfectly."

"You know that there is an open glade in the center?"

"Yes."

"Well, this glade is admirably adapted for such a purpose, with a variety of roads, by-places, paths, ditches, windings, and avenues. We could not find a better spot."

"I am perfectly satisfied, if you are so. We are at our destination, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes. Look at the beautiful open space in the center. The faint light which the stars afford seems concentrated in this spot; the woods which surround it seem, with their barriers, to form its natural limits."

"Very good. Do as you say."

"Let us first settle the conditions."

"These are mine; if you have any objection to make you will state it."

"I am listening."

"If the horse be killed, its rider will be obliged to fight on foot."

"That is a matter of course, since we have no change of horses here."

"But that does not oblige his adversary to dismount."

"His adversary will, in fact, be free to act as he likes."

"The adversaries, having once met in close contact, cannot quit each other under any circumstances, and may, consequently, fire muzzle to muzzle."

"Agreed."

"Three shots and no more will do, I suppose?"

"Quite sufficient, I think. Here are powder and balls for your pistols; measure out three charges, take three balls, I will do the same; then we will throw the rest of the powder and balls away."

"And we will solemnly swear," said De Wardes, "that we have neither balls nor powder about us?"

"Agreed; and I swear it," said De Guiche, holding his hand towards heaven, a gesture which De Wardes imitated.

"And now, my dear comte," said De Wardes, "allow me to tell you that I am in no way your dupe. You already are, or soon will be, the accepted lover of Madame. I have detected your secret, and you are afraid I shall tell others of it. You wish to kill me, to insure my silence; that is very clear; and in your place, I should do the same." De Guiche hung down his head. "Only," continued De Wardes, triumphantly, "was it really worth while, tell me, to throw this affair of Bragelonne's on my shoulders? But, take care, my dear fellow; in bringing the wild boar to bay, you enrage him to madness; in running down the fox, you endow him with the ferocity of the jaguar. The consequence is, that brought to bay by you, I shall defend myself to the very last."

"You will be quite right to do so."

"Yes; but take care; I shall work more harm than you think. In the first place, as a beginning, you will readily suppose that I have not been absurd enough to lock up my secret, or your secret rather, in my own breast. There is a friend of mine, who resembles me in every way, a man whom you know very well, who shares my secret with me; so, pray understand, that if you kill me, my death will not have been of much service to you; whilst, on the contrary, if I kill you—and everything is possible, you know—you understand?" De Guiche shuddered. "If I kill you," continued De Wardes, "you will have secured two mortal enemies to Madame, who will do their very utmost to ruin her."

"Oh! monsieur," exclaimed De Guiche, furiously, "do not reckon upon my death so easily. Of the two enemies you speak of, I trust most heartily to dispose of one immediately, and the other at the earliest opportunity."

The only reply De Wardes made was a burst of laughter, so diabolical in its sound, that a superstitious man would have been terrified. But De Guiche was not so impressionable as that. "I think," he said, "that everything is now settled. Monsieur de Wardes; so have the goodness to take your place first, unless you would prefer me to do so."

"By no means," said De Wardes. "I shall be delighted to save you the slightest trouble." And spurring his horse to a gallop, he crossed the wide open space, and took his stand at that point of the circumference of the cross-road immediately opposite to where De Guiche was stationed. De Guiche remained motionless. At this distance of a hundred paces, the two adversaries were absolutely invisible to each other, being completely concealed by the thick shade of elms and chestnuts. A minute elapsed amidst the profoundest silence. At the end of the minute, each of them, in the deep shade in which he was concealed, heard the double click of the trigger, as they put the pistols on full cock. De Guiche, adopting the usual tactics, put his horse to a gallop, persuaded that he should render his safety doubly sure by the movement, as well as by the speed of the animal. He directed his course in a straight line towards the point where, in his opinion, De Wardes would be stationed; and he expected to meet De Wardes about half-way; but in this he was mistaken. He continued his course, presuming that his adversary was impatiently awaiting his approach. When, however, he had gone about two-thirds of the distance, he beheld the trees suddenly illuminated and a ball flew by, cutting the plume of his hat in two. Nearly at the same moment, and as if the flash of the first shot had served to indicate the direction of the other, a second report was heard, and a second ball passed through the head of De Guiche's horse, a little below the ear. The animal fell. These two reports, proceeding from the very opposite direction in which he expected to find De Wardes, surprised him a great deal; but as he was a man of amazing self-possession, he prepared himself for his horse falling, but not so completely, however, that the toe of his boot escaped being caught under the animal as it fell. Very fortunately the horse in its dying agonies moved so as to enable him to release the leg which was less entangled than the other. De Guiche rose, felt himself all over, and found that he was not wounded. At the very moment he had felt the horse tottering under him, he placed his pistols in the holsters, afraid that the force of the fall might explode one at least, if not both of them, by which he would have been disarmed, and left utterly without defense. Once on his feet, he took the pistols out of the holsters, and advanced towards the spot where, by the light of the flash, he had seen De Wardes appear. De Wardes had, at the first shot, accounted for the maneuver, than which nothing could have been simpler. Instead of advancing to meet De Guiche, or remaining in his place to await his approach, De Wardes had, for about fifteen paces, followed the circle of the shadow which hid him from his adversary's observation, and at the very moment when the latter presented his flank in his career, he had fired from the place where he stood, carefully taking aim, and assisted instead of being inconvenienced by the horse's gallop. It has been seen that, notwithstanding the darkness, the first ball passed hardly more than an inch above De Guiche's head. De Wardes had so confidently relied upon his aim, that he thought he had seen De Guiche fall; his astonishment was extreme when he saw he still remained erect in his saddle. He hastened to fire his second shot, but his hand trembled, and he killed the horse instead. It would be a most fortunate chance for him if De Guiche were to remain held fast under the animal. Before he could have freed himself, De Wardes would have loaded his pistol and had De Guiche at his mercy. But De Guiche, on the contrary, was up, and had three shots to fire. De Guiche immediately understood the position of affairs. It would be necessary to exceed De Wardes in rapidity of execution. He advanced, therefore, so as to reach him before he should have had time to reload his pistol. De Wardes saw him approaching like a tempest. The ball was rather tight, and offered some resistance to the ramrod. To load carelessly would be simply to lose his last chance; to take the proper care in loading meant fatal loss of time, or rather, throwing away his life. He made his horse bound on one side. De Guiche turned round also, and, at the moment the horse was quiet again, fired, and the ball carried off De Wardes's hat from his head. De Wardes now knew that he had a moment's time at his own disposal; he availed himself of it in order to finish loading his pistol. De Guiche, noticing that his adversary did not fall, threw the pistol he had just discharged aside, and walked straight towards De Wardes, elevating the second pistol as he did so. He had hardly proceeded more than two or three paces, when De Wardes took aim at him as he was walking, and fired. An exclamation of anger was De Guiche's answer; the comte's arm contracted and dropped motionless by his side, and the pistol fell from his grasp. His anxiety was excessive. "I am lost," murmured De Wardes, "he is not mortally wounded." At the very moment, however, De Guiche was about to raise his pistol against De Wardes, the head, shoulders, and limbs of the comte seemed to collapse. He heaved a deep-drawn sigh, tottered, and fell at the feet of De Wardes's horse.

"That is all right," said De Wardes, and gathering up the reins, he struck his spurs into the horse's sides. The horse cleared the comte's motionless body, and bore De Wardes rapidly back to the chateau. When he arrived there, he remained a quarter of an hour deliberating within himself as to the proper course to be adopted. In his impatience to leave the field of battle, he had omitted to ascertain whether De Guiche were dead or not. A double hypothesis presented itself to De Wardes's agitated mind; either De Guiche was killed, or De Guiche was wounded only. If he were killed, why should he leave his body in that manner to the tender mercies of the wolves; it was a perfectly useless piece of cruelty, for if De Guiche were dead, he certainly could not breathe a syllable of what had passed; if he were not killed, why should he, De Wardes, in leaving him there uncared for, allow himself to be regarded as a savage, incapable of one generous feeling? This last consideration determined his line of conduct.

De Wardes immediately instituted inquires after Manicamp. He was told that Manicamp had been looking after De Guiche, and, not knowing where to find him, had retired to bed. De Wardes went and awoke the sleeper, without any delay, and related the whole affair to him, which Manicamp listened to in perfect silence, but with an expression of momentarily increasing energy, of which his face could hardly have been supposed capable. It was only when De Wardes had finished, that Manicamp uttered the words, "Let us go."

As they proceeded, Manicamp became more and more excited, and in proportion as De Wardes related the details of the affair to him, his countenance assumed every moment a darker expression.

"And so," he said, when De Wardes had finished, "you think he is dead?"

"Alas, I do."

"And you fought in that manner, without witnesses?"

"He insisted upon it."

"It is very singular."

"What do you mean by saying it is singular?"

"That it is very unlike Monsieur de Guiche's disposition."

"You do not doubt my word, I suppose?"

"Hum! hum!"

"You do doubt it, then?"

"A little. But I shall doubt it more than ever, I warn you, if I find the poor fellow is really dead."

"Monsieur Manicamp!"

"Monsieur de Wardes!"

"It seems you intend to insult me."

"Just as you please. The fact is, I never did like people who come and say, 'I have killed such and such a gentleman in a corner; it is a great pity, but I killed him in a perfectly honourable manner.' It has an ugly appearance, M. de Wardes."

"Silence! we have arrived."

In fact, the glade could now be seen, and in the open space lay the motionless body of the dead horse. To the right of the horse, upon the dark grass, with his face against the ground, the poor comte lay, bathed in his blood. He had remained in the same spot, and did not even seem to have made the slightest movement. Manicamp threw himself on his knees, lifted the comte in his arms, and found him quite cold, and steeped in blood. He let him gently fall again. Then, stretching out his hand and feeling all over the ground close to where the comte lay, he sought until he found De Guiche's pistol.

"By Heaven!" he said, rising to his feet, pale as death and with the pistol in his hand, "you are not mistaken, he is quite dead."

"Dead!" repeated De Wardes.

"Yes; and his pistol is still loaded," added Manicamp, looking into the pan.

"But I told you that I took aim as he was walking towards me, and fired at him at the very moment he was going to fire at me."

"Are you quite sure that you fought with him, Monsieur de Wardes? I confess that I am very much afraid it has been a foul assassination. Nay, nay, no exclamations! You have had your three shots, and his pistol is still loaded. You have killed his horse, and he, De Guiche, one of the best marksmen in France, has not touched even either your horse or yourself. Well, Monsieur de Wardes, you have been very unlucky in bringing me here; all the blood in my body seems to have mounted to my head; and I verily believe that since so good an opportunity presents itself, I shall blow your brains out on the spot. So, Monsieur de Wardes, recommend yourself to Heaven."

"Monsieur Manicamp, you cannot think of such a thing!"

"On the contrary, I am thinking of it very strongly."

"Would you assassinate me?"

"Without the slightest remorse, at least for the present."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I have given a great many proofs of that."

"Let me defend my life, then, at least."

"Very likely; in order, I suppose, that you may do to me what you have done to poor De Guiche."

And Manicamp slowly raised his pistol to the height of De Wardes's breast, and with arm stretched out, and a fixed, determined look on his face, took a careful aim.

De Wardes did not attempt a flight; he was completely terrified. In the midst, however, of this horrible silence, which lasted about a second, but which seemed an age to De Wardes, a faint sigh was heard.

"Oh," exclaimed De Wardes, "he still lives! Help, De Guiche, I am about to be assassinated!"

Manicamp fell back a step or two, and the two young men saw the comte raise himself slowly and painfully upon one hand. Manicamp threw the pistol away a dozen paces, and ran to his friend, uttering a cry of delight. De Wardes wiped his forehead, which was covered with a cold perspiration.

"It was just in time," he murmured.

"Where are you hurt?" inquired Manicamp of De Guiche, "and whereabouts are you wounded?"

De Guiche showed him his mutilated hand and his chest covered with blood.

"Comte," exclaimed De Wardes, "I am accused of having assassinated you; speak, I implore you, and say that I fought loyally."

"Perfectly so," said the wounded man, "Monsieur de Wardes fought quite loyally, and whoever says the contrary will make an enemy of me."

"Then, sir," said Manicamp, "assist me, in the first place, to carry this gentleman home, and I will afterwards give you every satisfaction you please; or, if you are in a hurry, we can do better still; let us stanch the blood from the comte's wounds here, with your pocket-handkerchief and mine, and then, as there are two shots left, we can have them between us."

"Thank you," said De Wardes. "Twice already, in one hour, I have seen death too close at hand to be agreeable; I don't like his look at all, and I prefer your apologies."

Manicamp burst out laughing, and Guiche, too, in spite of his sufferings. The two young men wished to carry him, but he declared he felt quite strong enough to walk alone. The ball had broken his ring-finger and his little finger, and then had glanced along his side, but without penetrating deeply into his chest. It was the pain rather than the seriousness of the wound, therefore, which had overcome De Guiche. Manicamp passed his arm under one of the count's shoulders, and De Wardes did the same with the other, and in this way they brought him back to Fontainebleau, to the house of the same doctor who had been present at the death of the Franciscan, Aramis's predecessor.

XIV. The King's Supper.

The king, while these matters were being arranged, was sitting at the supper-table, and the not very large number of guests for that day had taken their seats too, after the usual gesture intimating the royal permission. At this period of Louis XIV.'s reign, although etiquette was not governed by the strict regulations subsequently adopted, the French court had entirely thrown aside the traditions of good-fellowship and patriarchal affability existing in the time of Henry IV., which the suspicious mind of Louis XIII. had gradually replaced with pompous state and ceremony, which he despaired of being able fully to realize.

The king, therefore, was seated alone at a small separate table, which, like the desk of a president, overlooked the adjoining tables. Although we say a small table, we must not omit to add that this small table was the largest one there. Moreover, it was the one on which were placed the greatest number and quantity of dishes, consisting of fish, game, meat, fruit, vegetables, and preserves. The king was young and full of vigor and energy, very fond of hunting, addicted to all violent exercises of the body, possessing, besides, like all the members of the Bourbon family, a rapid digestion and an appetite speedily renewed. Louis XIV. was a formidable table-companion; he delighted in criticising his cooks; but when he honoured them by praise and commendation, the honour was overwhelming. The king began by eating several kinds of soup, either mixed together or taken separately. He intermixed, or rather separated, each of the soups by a glass of old wine. He ate quickly and somewhat greedily. Porthos, who from the beginning had, out of respect, been waiting for a jog of D'Artagnan's arm, seeing the king make such rapid progress, turned to the musketeer and said in a low voice:

"It seems as if one might go on now; his majesty is very encouraging, from the example he sets. Look."

"The king eats," said D'Artagnan, "but he talks at the same time; try and manage matters in such a manner that, if he should happen to address a remark to you, he will not find you with your mouth full—which would be very disrespectful."

"The best way, in that case," said Porthos, "is to eat no supper at all; and yet I am very hungry, I admit, and everything looks and smells most invitingly, as if appealing to all my senses at once."

"Don't think of not eating for a moment," said D'Artagnan; "that would put his majesty out terribly. The king has a saying, 'that he who works well, eats well,' and he does not like people to eat indifferently at his table."

"How can I avoid having my mouth full if I eat?" said Porthos.

"All you have to do," replied the captain of the musketeers, "is simply to swallow what you have in it, whenever the king does you the honour to address a remark to you."

"Very good," said Porthos; and from that moment he began to eat with a certain well-bred enthusiasm.

The king occasionally looked at the different persons who were at table with him, and, *en connoisseur*, could appreciate the different dispositions of his guests.

"Monsieur du Vallon!" he said.

Porthos was enjoying a *salmi de lievre*, and swallowed half of the back. His name, pronounced in such a manner, made him start, and by a vigorous effort of his gullet he absorbed the whole mouthful.

"Sire," replied Porthos, in a stifled voice, but sufficiently intelligible, nevertheless.

"Let those *filets d'agneau* be handed to Monsieur du Vallon," said the king; "do you like brown meats, M. du Vallon?"

"Sire, I like everything," replied Porthos.

D'Artagnan whispered: "Everything your majesty sends me."

Porthos repeated: "Everything your majesty sends me," an observation which the king apparently received with great satisfaction.

"People eat well who work well," replied the king, delighted to have *en tete-a-tete* a guest who could eat as Porthos did. Porthos received the dish of lamb, and put a portion of it on his plate.

"Well?" said the king.

"Exquisite," said Porthos, calmly.

"Have you as good mutton in your part of the country, Monsieur du Vallon?" continued the king.

"Sire, I believe that from my own province, as everywhere else, the best of everything is sent to Paris for your majesty's use; but, on the other hand, I do not eat lamb in the same way your majesty does."

"Ah, ah! and how do you eat it?"

"Generally, I have a lamb dressed whole."

"*Whole?*"

"Yes, sire."

"In what manner, Monsieur du Vallon?"

"In this, sire: my cook, who is a German, first stuffs the lamb in question with small sausages he procures from Strasburg, force-meat balls from Troyes, and larks from Pithiviers; by some means or other, which I am not acquainted with, he bones the lamb as he would do a fowl, leaving the skin on, however, which forms a brown crust all over the animal; when it is cut in beautiful slices, in the same way as an enormous sausage, a rose-coloured gravy pours forth, which is as agreeable to the eye as it is exquisite to the palate." And Porthos finished by smacking his lips.

The king opened his eyes with delight, and, while cutting some of the *faisan en daube*, which was being handed to him, he said:

"That is a dish I should very much like to taste, Monsieur du Vallon. Is it possible! a whole lamb!"

"Absolutely an entire lamb, sire."

"Pass those pheasants to M. du Vallon; I perceive he is an amateur."

The order was immediately obeyed. Then, continuing the conversation, he said: "And you do not find the lamb too fat?"

"No, sire, the fat falls down at the same time as the gravy does, and swims on the surface; then the servant who carves removes the fat with a spoon, which I have had expressly made for that purpose."

"Where do you reside?" inquired the king.

"At Pierrefonds, sire."

"At Pierrefonds; where is that, M. du Vallon—near Belle-Isle?"

"Oh, no, sire! Pierrefonds is in the Soissonnais."

"I thought you alluded to the lamb on account of the salt marshes."

"No, sire, I have marshes which are not salt, it is true, but which are not the less valuable on that account."

The king had now arrived at the *entremets*, but without losing sight of Porthos, who continued to play his part in the best manner.

"You have an excellent appetite, M. du Vallon," said the king, "and you make an admirable guest at table."

"Ah! sire, if your majesty were ever to pay a visit to Pierrefonds, we would both of us eat our lamb together; for your appetite is not an indifferent one by any means."

D'Artagnan gave Porthos a kick under the table, which made Porthos colour up.

"At your majesty's present happy age," said Porthos, in order to repair the mistake he had made, "I was in the musketeers, and nothing could ever satisfy me then. Your majesty has an excellent appetite, as I have already had the honour of mentioning, but you select what you eat with quite too much refinement to be called for one moment a great eater."

The king seemed charmed at his guest's politeness.

"Will you try some of these creams?" he said to Porthos.

"Sire, you majesty treats me with far too much kindness to prevent me speaking the whole truth."

"Pray do so, M. du Vallon."

"Will, sire, with regard to sweet dishes I only recognize pastry, and even that should be rather solid; all these frothy substances swell the stomach, and occupy a space which seems to me to be too precious to be so badly tenanted."

"Ah! gentlemen," said the king, indicating Porthos by a gesture, "here is indeed a model of gastronomy. It was in such a manner that our fathers, who so well knew what good living was, used to *eat*, while we," added his majesty, "do nothing but tantalize with our stomachs." And as he spoke, he took the breast of a chicken with ham, while Porthos attacked a dish of partridges and quails. The cup-bearer filled his majesty's glass. "Give M. du Vallon some of my wine," said the king. This was one of the greatest honours of the royal table. D'Artagnan pressed his friend's knee. "If you could only manage to swallow the half of that boar's head I see yonder," said he to Porthos, "I shall believe you will be a duke and peer within the next twelvemonth."

"Presently," said Porthos, phlegmatically; "I shall come to that by and by."

In fact it was not long before it came to the boar's turn, for the king seemed to take pleasure in urging on his guest; he did not pass any of the dishes to Porthos until he had tasted them himself, and he accordingly took some of the boar's head. Porthos showed that he could keep pace with his sovereign; and, instead of eating the half, as D'Artagnan had told him, he ate three-fourths of it. "It is impossible," said the king in an undertone, "that a gentleman who eats so good a supper every day, and who has such beautiful teeth, can be otherwise than the most straightforward, upright man in my kingdom."

"Do you hear?" said D'Artagnan in his friend's ear.

"Yes; I think I am rather in favour," said Porthos, balancing himself on his chair.

"Oh! you are in luck's way."

The king and Porthos continued to eat in the same manner, to the great satisfaction of the other guests, some of whom, from emulation, had attempted to follow them, but were obliged to give up half-way. The king soon began to get flushed and the reaction of the blood to his face announced that the moment of repletion had arrived. It was then that Louis XIV., instead of becoming gay and cheerful, as most good livers generally do, became dull, melancholy, and taciturn. Porthos, on the contrary, was lively and communicative. D'Artagnan's foot had more than once to remind him of this peculiarity of the king. The dessert now made its appearance. The king had ceased to think anything further of Porthos; he turned his eyes anxiously towards the entrance-door, and he was heard occasionally to inquire how it happened that Monsieur de Saint-Aignan was so long in arriving. At last, at the moment when his majesty was finishing a pot of preserved plums with a deep sigh, Saint-Aignan appeared. The king's eyes, which had become somewhat dull, immediately began to sparkle. The comte advanced towards the king's table, and Louis rose at his approach. Everybody got up at the same time, including Porthos, who was just finishing an almond-cake capable of making the jaws of a crocodile stick together. The supper was over.

XV. After Supper.

The king took Saint-Aignan by the arm, and passed into the adjoining apartment. "What has detained you, comte?" said the king.

"I was bringing the answer, sire," replied the comte.

"She has taken a long time to reply to what I wrote her."

"Sire, your majesty deigned to write in verse, and Mademoiselle de la Vallière wished to repay your majesty in the same coin; that is to say, in gold."

"Verses! Saint-Aignan," exclaimed the king in ecstasy. "Give them to me at once." And Louis broke the seal of a little letter, inclosing the verses which history has preserved entire for us, and which are more meritorious in invention than in execution. Such as they were, however, the king was enchanted with them, and exhibited his satisfaction by unequivocal transports of delight; but the universal silence which reigned in the rooms warned Louis, so sensitively particular with regard to good breeding, that his delight must give rise to various interpretations. He turned aside and put the note in his pocket, and then advancing a few steps, which brought him again to the threshold of the door close to his guests, he said, "M. du Vallon, I have seen you to-day with the greatest pleasure, and my pleasure will be equally great to see you again." Porthos bowed as the Colossus of Rhodes would have done, and retired from the room with his face towards the king. "M. d'Artagnan," continued the king, "you will await my orders in the gallery; I am obliged to you for having made me acquainted with M. du Vallon. Gentlemen," addressing himself to the other guests, "I return to Paris to-morrow on account of the departure of the Spanish and Dutch ambassadors. Until to-morrow then."

The apartment was immediately cleared of the guests. The king took Saint-Aignan by the arm, made him read La Vallière’s verses over again, and said, “What do you think of them?”

“Charming, sire.”

“They charm me, in fact, and if they were known—”

“Oh! the professional poets would be jealous of them; but it is not likely they will know anything about them.”

“Did you give her mine?”

“Oh! sire, she positively devoured them.”

“They were very weak, I am afraid.”

“That is not what Mademoiselle de la Vallière said of them.”

“Do you think she was pleased with them?”

“I am sure of it, sire.”

“I must answer, then.”

“Oh! sire, immediately after supper? Your majesty will fatigue yourself.”

“You are quite right; study after eating is notoriously injurious.”

“The labor of a poet especially so; and besides, there is great excitement prevailing at Mademoiselle de la Vallière’s.”

“What do you mean?”

“With her as with all the ladies of the court.”

“Why?”

“On account of poor De Guiche’s accident.”

“Has anything serious happened to De Guiche, then?”

“Yes, sire, he has one hand nearly destroyed, a hole in his breast; in fact, he is dying.”

“Good heavens! who told you that?”

“Manicamp brought him back just now to the house of a doctor here in Fontainebleau, and the rumor soon reached us all.”

“Brought back! Poor De Guiche; and how did it happen?”

“Ah! that is the very question,—how did it happen?”

“You say that in a very singular manner, Saint-Aignan. Give me the details. What does he say himself?”

“He says nothing, sire; but others do.”

“What others?”

“Those who brought him back, sire.”

“Who are they?”

“I do not know, sire; but M. de Manicamp knows. M. de Manicamp is one of his friends.”

“As everybody is, indeed,” said the king.

“Oh! no!” returned Saint-Aignan, “you are mistaken sire; every one is not precisely a friend of M. de Guiche.”

“How do you know that?”

“Does your majesty require me to explain myself?”

“Certainly I do.”

“Well, sire, I believe I have heard something said about a quarrel between two gentlemen.”

“When?”

“This very evening, before your majesty’s supper was served.”

“That can hardly be. I have issued such stringent and severe ordinances with respect to duelling, that no one, I presume, would dare to disobey them.”

“In that case, Heaven preserve me from excusing any one!” exclaimed Saint-Aignan. “Your majesty commanded me to speak, and I spoke accordingly.”

“Tell me, then, in what way the Comte de Guiche has been wounded?”

“Sire, it is said to have been at a boar-hunt.”

“This evening?”

“Yes, sire.”

“One of his hands shattered, and a hole in his breast. Who was at the hunt with M. de Guiche?”

“I do not know, sire; but M. de Manicamp knows, or ought to know.”

“You are concealing something from me, Saint-Aignan.”

“Nothing, sire, I assure you.”

“Then, explain to me how the accident happened; was it a musket that burst?”

“Very likely, sire. But yet, on reflection, it could hardly have been that, for De Guiche’s pistol was found close by him still loaded.”

“His pistol? But a man does not go to a boar-hunt with a pistol, I should think.”

“Sire, it is also said that De Guiche’s horse was killed and that the horse is still to be found in the wide open glade in the forest.”

“His horse?—Guiche go on horseback to a boar-hunt?—Saint-Aignan, I do not understand a syllable of what you have been telling me. Where did this affair happen?”

“At the Rond-point, in that part of the forest called the Bois-Rochin.”

“That will do. Call M. d’Artagnan.” Saint-Aignan obeyed, and the musketeer entered.

“Monsieur d’Artagnan,” said the king, “you will leave this place by the little door of the private staircase.”

“Yes, sire.”

“You will mount your horse.”

“Yes, sire.”

“And you will proceed to the Rond-point du Bois-Rochin. Do you know the spot?”

“Yes, sire. I have fought there twice.”

“What!” exclaimed the king, amazed at the reply.

“Under the edicts, sire, of Cardinal Richelieu,” returned D’Artagnan, with his usual impassability.

“That is very different, monsieur. You will, therefore, go there, and will examine the locality very carefully. A man has been wounded there, and you will find a horse lying dead. You will tell me what your opinion is upon the whole affair.”

“Very good, sire.”

“As a matter of course, it is your own opinion I require, and not that of any one else.”

“You shall have it in an hour’s time, sire.”

“I prohibit your speaking with any one, whoever it may be.”

“Except with the person who must give me a lantern,” said D’Artagnan.

“Oh! that is a matter of course,” said the king, laughing at the liberty, which he tolerated in no one but his captain of the musketeers. D’Artagnan left by the little staircase.

“Now, let my physician be sent for,” said Louis. Ten minutes afterwards the king’s physician arrived, quite out of breath.

“You will go, monsieur,” said the king to him, “and accompany M. de Saint-Aignan wherever he may take you; you will render me an account of the state of the person you may see in the house you will be taken to.” The physician obeyed without a remark, as at that time people began to obey Louis XIV., and left the room preceding Saint-Aignan.

“Do you, Saint-Aignan, send Manicamp to me, before the physician can possibly have spoken to him.” And Saint-Aignan left in his turn.

#### XVI. Showing in What Way D’Artagnan Discharged the Mission with Which the King Had Intrusted Him.

While the king was engaged in making these last-mentioned arrangements in order to ascertain the truth, D’Artagnan, without losing a second, ran to the stable, took down the lantern, saddled his horse himself, and proceeded towards the place his majesty had indicated. According to the promise he had made, he had not accosted any one; and, as we have observed, he had carried his scruples so far as to do without the assistance of the stable-helpers altogether. D’Artagnan was one of those who in moments of difficulty pride themselves on increasing their own value. By dint of hard galloping, he in less than five minutes reached the wood, fastened his horse to the first tree he came to, and penetrated to the broad open space on foot. He then began to inspect most carefully, on foot and with his lantern in his hand, the whole surface of the Rond-point, went forward, turned back again, measured, examined, and after half an hour’s minute inspection, he returned silently to where he had left his horse, and pursued his way in deep reflection and at a foot-pace to Fontainebleau. Louis was waiting in his cabinet; he was alone, and with a pencil was scribbling on paper certain lines which D’Artagnan at the first glance recognized as unequal and very much touched up. The conclusion he arrived at was, that they must be verses. The king raised his head and perceived D’Artagnan. “Well, monsieur,” he said, “do you bring me any news?”

“Yes, sire.”

“What have you seen?”

“As far as probability goes, sire—” D’Artagnan began to reply.

“It was certainty I requested of you.”

“I will approach it as near as I possibly can. The weather was very well adapted for investigations of the character I have just made; it has been raining this evening, and the roads were wet and muddy—”

“Well, the result, M. d’Artagnan?”

“Sire, your majesty told me that there was a horse lying dead in the cross-road of the Bois-Rochin, and I began, therefore, by studying the roads. I say the roads, because the center of the cross-road is reached by four separate roads. The one that I myself took was the only one that presented any fresh traces. Two horses had followed it side by side; their eight feet were marked very distinctly in the clay. One of the riders was more impatient than the other, for the footprints of the one were invariably in advance of the other about half a horse’s length.”

“Are you quite sure they were traveling together?” said the king.

“Yes sire. The horses are two rather large animals of equal pace,—horses well used to maneuvers of all kinds, for they wheeled round the barrier of the Rond-point together.”

“Well—and after?”

“The two cavaliers paused there for a minute, no doubt to arrange the conditions of the engagement; the horses grew restless and impatient. One of the riders spoke, while the other listened and seemed to have contented himself by simply answering. His horse pawed the ground, which proves that his attention was so taken up by listening that he let the bridle fall from his hand.”

“A hostile meeting did take place then?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Continue; you are a very accurate observer.”



"One of the two cavaliers remained where he was standing, the one, in fact, who had been listening; the other crossed the open space, and at first placed himself directly opposite to his adversary. The one who had remained stationary traversed the Rond-point at a gallop, about two-thirds of its length, thinking that by this means he would gain upon his opponent; but the latter had followed the circumference of the wood."

"You are ignorant of their names, I suppose?"

"Completely so, sire. Only he who followed the circumference of the wood was mounted on a black horse."

"How do you know that?"

"I found a few hairs of his tail among the brambles which bordered the sides of the ditch."

"Go on."

"As for the other horse, there can be no trouble in describing him, since he was left dead on the field of battle."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"A ball which had passed through his brain."

"Was the ball that of a pistol or a gun?"

"It was a pistol-bullet, sire. Besides, the manner in which the horse was wounded explained to me the tactics of the man who had killed it. He had followed the circumference of the wood in order to take his adversary in flank. Moreover, I followed his foot-tracks on the grass."

"The tracks of the black horse, do you mean?"

"Yes, sire."

"Go on, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"As your majesty now perceives the position of the two adversaries, I will, for a moment, leave the cavalier who had remained stationary for the one who started off at a gallop."

"Do so."

"The horse of the cavalier who rode at full speed was killed on the spot."

"How do you know that?"

"The cavalier had not time even to throw himself off his horse, and so fell with it. I observed the impression of his leg, which, with a great effort, he was enabled to extricate from under the horse. The spur, pressed down by the weight of the animal, had plowed up the ground."

"Very good; and what did he do as soon as he rose up again?"

"He walked straight up to his adversary."

"Who still remained upon the verge of the forest?"

"Yes, sire. Then, having reached a favourable distance, he stopped firmly, for the impression of both his heels are left in the ground quite close to each other, fired, and missed his adversary."

"How do you know he did not hit him?"

"I found a hat with a ball through it."

"Ah, a proof, then!" exclaimed the king.

"Insufficient, sire," replied D'Artagnan, coldly; "it is a hat without any letters indicating its ownership, without arms; a red feather, as all hats have; the lace, even, had nothing particular in it."

"Did the man with the hat through which the bullet had passed fire a second time?"

"Oh, sire, he had already fired twice."

"How did you ascertain that?"

"I found the waddings of the pistol."

"And what became of the bullet which did not kill the horse?"

"It cut in two the feather of the hat belonging to him against whom it was directed, and broke a small birch at the other end of the open glade."

"In that case, then, the man on the black horse was disarmed, whilst his adversary had still one more shot to fire?"

"Sire, while the dismounted rider was extricating himself from his horse, the other was reloading his pistol. Only, he was much agitated while he was loading it, and his hand trembled greatly."

"How do you know that?"

"Half the charge fell to the ground, and he threw the ramrod aside, not having time to replace it in the pistol."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, this is marvellous you tell me."

"It is only close observation, sire, and the commonest highwayman could tell as much."

"The whole scene is before me from the manner in which you relate it."

"I have, in fact, reconstructed it in my own mind, with merely a few alterations."

"And now," said the king, "let us return to the dismounted cavalier. You were saying that he walked towards his adversary while the latter was loading his pistol."

"Yes; but at the very moment he himself was taking aim, the other fired."

"Oh!" said the king; "and the shot?"

"The shot told terribly, sire; the dismounted cavalier fell upon his face, after having staggered forward three or four paces."

"Where was he hit?"

"In two places; in the first place, in his right hand, and then, by the same bullet, in his chest."

"But how could you ascertain that?" inquired the king, full of admiration.

"By a very simple means; the butt end of the pistol was covered with blood, and the trace of the bullet could be observed, with fragments of a broken ring. The wounded man, in all probability, had the ring-finger and the little finger carried off."

"As far as the hand goes, I have nothing to say; but the chest?"

"Sire, there were two small pools of blood, at a distance of about two feet and a half from each other. At one of these pools of blood the grass was torn up by the clenched hand; at the other, the grass was simply pressed down by the weight of the body."

"Poor De Guiche!" exclaimed the king.

"Ah! it was M. de Guiche, then?" said the musketeer, quietly. "I suspected it, but did not venture to mention it to your majesty."

"And what made you suspect it?"

"I recognized the De Gramont arms upon the holsters of the dead horse."

"And you think he is seriously wounded?"

"Very seriously, since he fell immediately, and remained a long time in the same place; however, he was able to walk, as he left the spot, supported by two friends."

"You met him returning, then?"

"No; but I observed the footprints of three men; the one on the right and the one on the left walked freely and easily, but the one in the middle dragged his feet as he walked; besides, he left traces of blood at every step he took."

"Now, monsieur, since you saw the combat so distinctly that not a single detail seems to have escaped you, tell me something about De Guiche's adversary."

"Oh, sire, I do not know him."

"And yet you see everything very clearly."

"Yes, sire, I see everything; but I do not tell all I see; and, since the poor devil has escaped, your majesty will permit me to say that I do not intend to denounce him."

"And yet he is guilty, since he has fought a duel, monsieur."

"Not guilty in my eyes, sire," said D'Artagnan, coldly.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the king, "are you aware of what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, sire; but, according to my notions, a man who fights a duel is a brave man; such, at least, is my own opinion; but your majesty may have another, it is but natural, for you are master here."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, I ordered you, however—"

D'Artagnan interrupted the king by a respectful gesture. "You ordered me, sire, to gather what particulars I could, respecting a hostile meeting that had taken place; those particulars you have. If you order me to arrest M. de Guiche's adversary, I will do so; but do not order me to denounce him to you, for in that case I will not obey."

"Very well! Arrest him, then."

"Give me his name, sire."

The king stamped his foot angrily; but after a moment's reflection, he said, "You are right—ten times, twenty times, a hundred times right."

"That is my opinion, sire: I am happy that, this time, it accords with your majesty's."

"One word more. Who assisted Guiche?"

"I do not know, sire."

"But you speak of two men. There was a person present, then, as second."

"There was no second, sire. Nay, more than that, when M. de Guiche fell, his adversary fled without giving him any assistance."

"The miserable coward!" exclaimed the king.

"The consequence of your ordinances, sire. If a man has fought well, and fairly, and has already escaped one chance of death, he naturally wishes to escape a second. M. de Bouteville cannot be forgotten very easily."

"And so, men turn cowards."

"No, they become prudent."

"And he has fled, then, you say?"

"Yes; and as fast as his horse could possibly carry him."

"In what direction?"

"In the direction of the chateau."

"Well, and after that?"

"Afterwards, as I have had the honour of telling your majesty, two men on foot arrived, who carried M. de Guiche back with them."

"What proof have you that these men arrived after the combat?"

"A very evident proof, sire; at the moment the encounter took place, the rain had just ceased, the ground had not had time to imbibe the moisture, and was, consequently, soaked; the footsteps sank in the ground; but while M. de Guiche was lying there in a fainting condition, the ground became firm again, and the footsteps made a less sensible impression."

Louis clapped his hands together in sign of admiration. "Monsieur d'Artagnan," he said, "you are positively the cleverest man in my kingdom."

"The identical thing M. de Richelieu thought, and M. de Mazarin said, sire."

"And now, it remains for us to see if your sagacity is at fault."

"Oh! sire, a man may be mistaken; *humanum est errare*," said the musketeer, philosophically. <sup>1</sup>

"In that case, you are not human, Monsieur d'Artagnan, for I believe you are never mistaken."

"Your majesty said that we were going to see whether such was the case, or not."  
"Yes."  
"In what way, may I venture to ask?"  
"I have sent for M. de Manicamp, and M. de Manicamp is coming."  
"And M. de Manicamp knows the secret?"  
"De Guiche has no secrets from M. de Manicamp."  
D'Artagnan shook his head. "No one was present at the combat, I repeat; and unless M. de Manicamp was one of the two men who brought him back—" "Hush!" said the king, "he is coming; remain, and listen attentively."  
"Very good, sire."  
And, at the very same moment, Manicamp and Saint-Aignan appeared at the threshold of the door.

XVII. The Encounter.

The king signified with an imperious gesture, first to the musketeer, then to Saint-Aignan, "On your lives, not a word." D'Artagnan withdrew, like a sentinel, to a corner of the room; Saint-Aignan, in his character of a favourite, leaned over the back of the king's chair. Manicamp, with his right foot properly advanced, a smile upon his lips, and his white and well-formed hands gracefully disposed, advanced to make his reverence to the king, who returned the salutation by a bow. "Good evening, M. de Manicamp," he said.  
"Your majesty did me the honour to send for me," said Manicamp.  
"Yes, in order to learn from you all the details of the unfortunate accident which has befallen the Comte de Guiche."  
"Oh! sire, it is grievous indeed."  
"You were there?"  
"Not precisely, sire."  
"But you arrived on the scene of the accident, a few minutes after it took place?"  
"Sire, about half an hour afterwards."  
"And where did the accident happen?"  
"I believe, sire, the place is called the Rond-point du Bois-Rochin."  
"Oh! the rendezvous of the hunt."  
"The very spot, sire."  
"Good; give me all the details you are acquainted with, respecting this unhappy affair, Monsieur de Manicamp."  
"Perhaps your majesty has already been informed of them, and I fear to fatigue you with useless repetition."  
"No, do not be afraid of that."

Manicamp looked round him; he saw only D'Artagnan leaning with his back against the wainscot—D'Artagnan, calm, kind, and good-natured as usual—and Saint-Aignan whom he had accompanied, and who still leaned over the king's armchair with an expression of countenance equally full of good feeling. He determined, therefore, to speak out. "Your majesty is perfectly aware," he said, "that accidents are very frequent in hunting."  
"In hunting, do you say?"  
"I mean, sire, when an animal is brought to bay."  
"Ah, ah!" said the king, "it was when the animal was brought to bay, then, that the accident happened?"  
"Alas! sire, unhappily it was."  
The king paused for a moment before he said: "What animal was being hunted?"  
"A wild boar, sire."

"And what could possibly have possessed De Guiche to go to a wild boar-hunt by himself; that is but a clownish idea of sport, only fit for that class of people who, unlike the Marechal de Gramont, have no dogs and huntsmen, to hunt as gentlemen should do."  
Manicamp shrugged his shoulders. "Youth is very rash," he said, sententiously.  
"Well, go on," said the king.  
"At all events," continued Manicamp, not venturing to be too precipitate and hasty, and letting his words fall very slowly one by one, "at all events, sire, poor De Guiche went hunting—all alone."  
"Quite alone? indeed?—What a sportsman! And is not M. de Guiche aware that the wild boar always stands at bay?"

"That is the very thing that really happened, sire."  
"He had some idea, then, of the beast being there?"  
"Yes, sire, some peasants had seen it among their potatoes." 2

"And what kind of animal was it?"  
"A short, thick beast."  
"You may as well tell me, monsieur, that De Guiche had some idea of committing suicide; for I have seen him hunt, and he is an active and vigorous hunter. Whenever he fires at an animal brought to bay and held in check by the dogs, he takes every possible precaution, and yet he fires with a carbine, and on this occasion he seems to have faced the boar with pistols only."  
Manicamp started.  
"A costly pair of pistols, excellent weapons to fight a duel with a man and not a wild boar. What an absurdity!"  
"There are some things, sire, which are difficult of explanation."  
"You are quite right, and the event which we are now discussing is certainly one of them. Go on."  
During the recital, Saint-Aignan, who probably would have made a sign to Manicamp to be careful what he was about, found that the king's glance was constantly fixed upon himself, so that it was utterly impossible to communicate with Manicamp in any way. As for D'Artagnan, the statue of Silence at Athens was far more noisy and far more expressive than he. Manicamp, therefore, was obliged to continue in the same way he had begun, and so contrived to get more and more entangled in his explanation. "Sire," he said, "this is probably how the affair happened. Guiche was waiting to receive the boar as it rushed towards him."  
"On foot or on horseback?" inquired the king.  
"On horseback. He fired upon the brute and missed his aim, and then it dashed upon him."  
"And the horse was killed."  
"Ah! your majesty knows that, then."  
"I have been told that a horse has been found lying dead in the cross-roads of the Bois-Rochin, and I presume it was De Guiche's horse."  
"Perfectly true, sire, it was his."  
"Well, so much for the horse, and now for De Guiche?"  
"De Guiche, once down, was attacked and worried by the wild boar, and wounded in the hand and in the chest."  
"It is a horrible accident, but it must be admitted it was De Guiche's own fault. How could he possibly have gone to hunt such an animal merely armed with pistols; he must have forgotten the fable of Adonis?"

Manicamp rubbed his ear in seeming perplexity. "Very true," he said, "it was very imprudent."  
"Can you explain it, Monsieur Manicamp?"  
"Sire, what is written is written!"  
"Ah! you are a fatalist."  
Manicamp looked very uncomfortable and ill at ease.  
"I am angry with you, Monsieur Manicamp," continued the king.  
"With me, sire?"  
"Yes. How was it that you, who are De Guiche's intimate friend, and who know that he is subject to such acts of folly, did not stop him in time?"  
Manicamp no longer knew what to do; the tone in which the king spoke was anything but that of a credulous man. On the other hand, it did not indicate any particular severity, nor did he seem to care very much about the cross-examination. There was more of raillery in it than menace. "And you say, then," continued the king, "that it was positively De Guiche's horse that was found dead?"  
"Quite positive, sire."  
"Did that astonish you?"  
"No, sire; for your majesty will remember that, at the last hunt, M. de Saint-Maure had a horse killed under him, and in the same way."

"Yes, but that one was ripped open."  
"Of course, sire."  
"Had Guiche's horse been ripped open like M. de Saint-Maure's horse, I should not have been astonished."  
Manicamp opened his eyes very wide.  
"Am I mistaken," resumed the king, "was it not in the frontal bone that De Guiche's horse was struck? You must admit, Monsieur de Manicamp, that that is a very singular place for a wild boar to attack."  
"You are aware, sire, that the horse is a very intelligent animal, and he doubtless endeavoured to defend himself."  
"But a horse defends himself with his heels and not with his head."  
"In that case, the terrified horse may have slipped or fallen down," said Manicamp, "and the boar, you understand sire, the boar—" "Oh! I understand that perfectly, as far as the horse is concerned; but how about his rider?"  
"Well! that, too, is simple enough; the boar left the horse and attacked the rider; and, as I have already had the honour of informing your majesty, shattered De Guiche's hand at the very moment he was about to discharge his second pistol at him, and then, with a gouge of his tusk, made that terrible hole in his chest."  
"Nothing is more likely; really, Monsieur de Manicamp, you are wrong in placing so little confidence in your own eloquence, and you can tell a story most admirably."  
"Your majesty is exceedingly kind," said Manicamp, saluting him in the most embarrassed manner.  
"From this day henceforth, I will prohibit any gentleman attached to my court going out to a similar encounter. Really, one might just as well permit duelling."  
Manicamp started, and moved as if he were about to withdraw. "Is your majesty satisfied?"  
"Delighted; but do not withdraw yet, Monsieur de Manicamp," said Louis, "I have something to say to you."  
"Well, well!" thought D'Artagnan, "there is another who is not up to the mark;" and he uttered a sigh which might signify, "Oh! the men of *our* stamp, where are they *now*?"  
At this moment an usher lifted up the curtain before the door, and announced the king's physician.  
"Ah!" exclaimed Louis, "here comes Monsieur Valot, who has just been to see M. de Guiche. We shall now hear news of the man maltreated by the boar."  
Manicamp felt more uncomfortable than ever.  
"In this way, at least," added the king, "our conscience will be quite clear." And he looked at D'Artagnan, who did not seem in the slightest degree discomposed.

XVIII. The Physician.

M. Valot entered. The position of the different persons present was precisely the same: the king was seated, Saint-Aignan leaning over the back of his armchair, D'Artagnan with his back against the wall, and Manicamp still standing.

"Well, M. Valot," said the king, "did you obey my directions?"

"With the greatest alacrity, sire."

"You went to the doctor's house in Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, sire."

"And you found M. de Guiche there?"

"I did, sire."

"What state was he in?—speak unreservedly."

"In a very sad state indeed, sire."

"The wild boar did not quite devour him, however?"

"Devour whom?"

"De Guiche."

"What wild boar?"

"The boar that wounded him."

"M. de Guiche wounded by a boar?"

"So it is said, at least."

"By a poacher, rather, or by a jealous husband, or an ill-used lover, who, in order to be revenged, fired upon him."

"What is it that you say, Monsieur Valot? Were not M. de Guiche's wounds produced by defending himself against a wild boar?"

"M. de Guiche's wounds are the result of a pistol-bullet that broke his ring-finger and the little finger of the right hand, and afterwards buried itself in the intercostal muscles of the chest."

"A bullet! Are you sure Monsieur de Guiche was wounded by a *bullet*?" exclaimed the king, pretending to look much surprised.

"Indeed, I am, sire; so sure, in fact, that here it is." And he presented to the king a half-flattened bullet, which the king looked at, but did not touch.

"Did he have that in his chest, poor fellow?" he asked.

"Not precisely. The ball did not penetrate, but was flattened, as you see, either upon the trigger of the pistol or upon the right side of the breast-bone."

"Good heavens!" said the king, seriously, "you said nothing to me about this, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Sire—"

"What does all this mean, then, this invention about hunting a wild boar at nightfall? Come, speak, monsieur."

"Sire—"

"It seems, then, that you are right," said the king, turning round towards his captain of musketeers, "and that a duel actually took place."

The king possessed, to a greater extent than any one else, the faculty enjoyed by the great in power or position, of compromising and dividing those beneath him. Manicamp darted a look full of reproaches at the musketeer. D'Artagnan understood the look at once, and not wishing to remain beneath the weight of such an accusation, advanced a step forward, and said: "Sire, your majesty commanded me to go and explore the place where the cross-roads meet in the Bois-Rochin, and to report to you, according to my own ideas, what had taken place there. I submitted my observations to you, but without denouncing any one. It was your majesty yourself who was the first to name the Comte de Guiche."

"Well, monsieur, well," said the king, haughtily; "you have done your duty, and I am satisfied with you. But you, Monsieur de Manicamp, have failed in yours, for you have told me a falsehood."

"A falsehood, sire. The expression is a hard one."

"Find a more accurate, then."

"Sire, I will not attempt to do so. I have already been unfortunate enough to displease your majesty, and it will, in every respect, be far better for me to accept most humbly any reproaches you may think proper to address to me."

"You are right, monsieur, whoever conceals the truth from me, risks my displeasure."

"Sometimes, sire, one is ignorant of the truth."

"No further falsehood, monsieur, or I double the punishment."

Manicamp bowed and turned pale. D'Artagnan again made another step forward, determined to interfere, if the still increasing anger of the king attained certain limits.

"You see, monsieur," continued the king, "that it is useless to deny the thing any longer. M. de Guiche has fought a duel."

"I do not deny it, sire, and it would have been truly generous on your majesty's part not to have forced me to tell a falsehood."

"Forced? Who forced you?"

"Sire, M. de Guiche is my friend. Your majesty has forbidden duels under pain of death. A falsehood might save my friend's life, and I told it."

"Good!" murmured D'Artagnan, "an excellent fellow, upon my word."

"Instead of telling a falsehood, monsieur, you should have prevented him from fighting," said the king.

"Oh! sire, your majesty, who is the most accomplished gentleman in France, knows quite as well as any of us other gentlemen that we have never considered M. de Bouteville dishonoured for having suffered death on the Place de Greve. That which does in truth dishonour a man is to avoid meeting his enemy—not to avoid meeting his executioner!"

"Well, monsieur, that may be so," said Louis XIV.: "I am desirous of suggesting a means of your repairing all."

"If it be a means of which a gentleman may avail himself, I shall most eagerly seize the opportunity."

"The name of M. de Guiche's adversary?"

"Oh, oh!" murmured D'Artagnan, "are we going to take Louis XIII. as a model?"

"Sire!" said Manicamp, with an accent of reproach.

"You will not name him, then?" said the king.

"Sire, I do not know him."

"Bravo!" murmured D'Artagnan.

"Monsieur de Manicamp, hand your sword to the captain."

Manicamp bowed very gracefully, unbuckled his sword, smiling as he did so, and handed it for the musketeer to take. But Saint-Aignan advanced hurriedly between him and D'Artagnan. "Sire," he said,

"will your majesty permit me to say a word?"

"Do so," said the king, delighted, perhaps, at the bottom of his heart, for some one to step between him and the wrath he felt he had carried him too far.

"Manicamp, you are a brave man, and the king will appreciate your conduct; but to wish to serve your friends too well, is to destroy them. Manicamp, you know the name the king asks you for?"

"It is perfectly true—I do know it."

"You will give it up then?"

"If I felt I ought to have mentioned it, I should have already done so."

"Then I will tell it, for I am not so extremely sensitive on such points of honour as you are."

"You are at liberty to do so, but it seems to me, however—"

"Oh! a truce to magnanimity; I will not permit you to go to the Bastille in that way. Do you speak; or I will."

Manicamp was keen-witted enough, and perfectly understood that he had done quite sufficient to produce a good opinion of his conduct; it was now only a question of persevering in such a manner as to regain the good graces of the king. "Speak, monsieur," he said to Saint-Aignan; "I have on my own behalf done all that my conscience told me to do; and it must have been very importunate," he added, turning towards the king, "since its mandates led me to disobey your majesty's commands; but your majesty will forgive me, I hope, when you learn that I was anxious to preserve the honour of a lady."

"Of a lady?" said the king, with some uneasiness.

"Yes, sire."

"A lady was the cause of this duel?"

Manicamp bowed.

"If the position of the lady in question warrants it," he said, "I shall not complain of your having acted with so much circumspection; on the contrary, indeed."

"Sire, everything which concerns your majesty's household, or the household of your majesty's brother, is of importance in my eyes."

"In my brother's household," repeated Louis XIV., with a slight hesitation. "The cause of the duel was a lady belonging to my brother's household, do you say?"

"Or to Madame's."

"Ah! to Madame's?"

"Yes, sire."

"Well—and this lady?"

"Is one of the maids of honour of her royal highness Madame la Duchesse d'Orleans."

"For whom M. de Guiche fought—do you say?"

"Yes, sire, and, this time, I tell no falsehood."

Louis seemed restless and anxious. "Gentlemen," he said, turning towards the spectators of this scene, "will you have the goodness to retire for a moment. I wish to be alone with M. de Manicamp; I know he has some important communication to make for his own justification, and which he will not venture before witnesses.... Put up your sword, M. de Manicamp."

Manicamp returned his sword to his belt.

"The fellow decidedly has his wits about him," murmured the musketeer, taking Saint-Aignan by the arm, and withdrawing with him.

"He will get out of it," said the latter in D'Artagnan's ear.

"And with honour, too, comte."

Manicamp cast a glance of recognition at Saint-Aignan and the captain, which luckily passed unnoticed by the king.

"Come, come," said D'Artagnan, as he left the room, "I had an indifferent opinion of the new generation. Well, I was mistaken after all. There is some good in them, I perceive."

Valot preceded the favourite and the captain, leaving the king and Manicamp alone in the cabinet.

XIX. Wherein D'Artagnan Perceives that It Was He Who Was Mistaken, and Manicamp Who Was Right.

The king, determined to be satisfied that no one was listening, went himself to the door, and then returned precipitately and placed himself opposite Manicamp.

"And now we are alone, Monsieur de Manicamp, explain yourself."

"With the greatest frankness, sire," replied the young man.

"And in the first place, pray understand," added the king, "that there is nothing to which I personally attach a greater importance than the honour of *any* lady."

"That is the very reason, sire, why I endeavored to study your delicacy of sentiment and feeling."

"Yes, I understand it all now. You say that it was one of the maids of honour of my sister-in-law who was the subject of dispute, and that the person in question, De Guiche's adversary, the man, in point of fact, whom you will not name—"

"But whom M. de Saint-Aignan will name, monsieur."  
"Yes, you say, however, that this man insulted some one belonging to the household of Madame."  
"Yes, sire. Mademoiselle de la Vallière."  
"Ah!" said the king, as if he had expected the name, and yet as if its announcement had caused him a sudden pang; "ah! it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière who was insulted."  
"I do not say precisely that she was insulted, sire."  
"But at all events—"

"I merely say that she was spoken of in terms far enough from respectful."  
"A man dares to speak in disrespectful terms of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and yet you refuse to tell me the name of the insulter?"  
"Sire, I thought it was quite understood that your majesty had abandoned the idea of making me denounce him."

"Perfectly true, monsieur," returned the king, controlling his anger; "besides, I shall know in good time the name of this man whom I shall feel it my duty to punish."  
Manicamp perceived that they had returned to the question again. As for the king, he saw he had allowed himself to be hurried away a little too far, and therefore continued:—"And I will punish him—not because there is any question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, although I esteem her very highly—but because a lady was the object of the quarrel. And I intend that ladies shall be respected at my court, and that quarrels shall be put a stop to altogether."

Manicamp bowed.  
"And now, Monsieur de Manicamp," continued the king, "what was said about Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"  
"Cannot your majesty guess?"  
"I?"

"Your majesty can imagine the character of the jest in which young men permit themselves to indulge."  
"They very probably said that she was in love with some one?" the king ventured to remark.  
"Probably so."

"But Mademoiselle de la Vallière has a perfect right to love any one she pleases," said the king.  
"That is the very point De Guiche maintained."

"And on account of which he fought, do you mean?"  
"Yes, sire, the sole and only cause."  
The king coloured. "And you do not know anything more, then?"  
"In what respect, sire?"  
"In the very interesting respect which you are now referring to."

"What does your majesty wish to know?"  
"Why, the name of the man with whom La Vallière is in love, and whom De Guiche's adversary disputed her right to love."  
"Sire, I know nothing—I have heard nothing—and have learnt nothing, even accidentally; but De Guiche is a noble-hearted fellow, and if, momentarily, he substituted himself in the place or stead of La Vallière's protector, it was because that protector was himself of too exalted a position to undertake her defense."  
These words were more than transparent; they made the king blush, but this time with pleasure. He struck Manicamp gently on the shoulder. "Well, well, Monsieur de Manicamp, you are not only a ready, witty fellow, but a brave gentleman besides, and your friend De Guiche is a paladin quite after my own heart; you will express that to him from me."  
"Your majesty forgives me, then?"  
"Completely."

"And I am free?"  
The king smiled and held out his hand to Manicamp, which he took and kissed respectfully. "And then," added the king, "you relate stories so charmingly."  
"I, sire!"

"You told me in the most admirable manner the particulars of the accident which happened to Guiche. I can see the wild boar rushing out of the wood—I can see the horse fall down fighting with his head, and the boar rush from the horse to the rider. You do not simply relate a story well: you positively paint its incidents."  
"Sire, I think your majesty condescends to laugh at my expense," said Manicamp.  
"On the contrary," said Louis, seriously, "I have so little intention of laughing, Monsieur de Manicamp, that I wish you to relate this adventure to every one."

"The adventure of the hunt?"  
"Yes; in the same manner you told it to me, without changing a single word—*you understand?*"  
"Perfectly, sire."  
"And you will relate it, then?"  
"Without losing a minute."

"Very well! and now summon M. d'Artagnan; I hope you are no longer afraid of him."  
"Oh, sire, from the very moment I am sure of your majesty's kind disposition, I no longer fear anything!"  
"Call him, then," said the king.

Manicamp opened the door, and said, "Gentlemen, the king wishes you to return."  
D'Artagnan, Saint-Aignan, and Valot entered.  
"Gentlemen," said the king, "I summoned you for the purposes of saying that Monsieur de Manicamp's explanation has entirely satisfied me."  
D'Artagnan glanced at Valot and Saint-Aignan, as much as to say, "Well! did I not tell you so?"  
The king led Manicamp to the door, and then in a low tone of voice said: "See that M. de Guiche takes good care of himself, and particularly that he recovers as soon as possible; I am very desirous of thanking him in the name of every lady, but let him take special care that he does not begin again."  
"Were he to die a hundred times, sire, he would begin again if your majesty's honour were in any way called in question."  
This remark was direct enough. But we have already said that the incense of flattery was very pleasing to the king, and, provided he received it, he was not very particular as to its quality.  
"Very well, very well," he said, as he dismissed Manicamp, "I will see De Guiche myself, and make him listen to reason." And as Manicamp left the apartment, the king turned round towards the three spectators of this scene, and said, "Tell me, Monsieur d'Artagnan, how does it happen that your sight is so imperfect?—you, whose eyes are generally so very good."

"My sight bad, sire?"  
"Certainly."  
"It must be the case since your majesty says so; but in what respect, may I ask?"  
"Why, with regard to what occurred in the Bois-Rochin."

"Ah! ah!"  
"Certainly. You pretended to have seen the tracks of two horses, to have detected the footprints of two men; and have described the particulars of an engagement, which you assert took place. Nothing of the sort occurred; pure illusion on your part."

"Ah! ah!" said D'Artagnan.  
"Exactly the same thing with the galloping to and fro of the horses, and the other indications of a struggle. It was the struggle of De Guiche against the wild boar, and absolutely nothing else; only the struggle was a long and a terrible one, it seems."  
"Ah! ah!" continued D'Artagnan.

"And when I think that I almost believed it for a moment—but, then, you told it with such confidence."  
"I admit, sire, that I must have been very short-sighted," said D'Artagnan, with a readiness of humor which delighted the king.  
"You do admit it, then?"

"Admit it, sire, most assuredly I do."  
"So now that you see the thing—"  
"In quite a different light from that in which I saw it half an hour ago."

"And to what, then, do you attribute this difference in your opinion?"  
"Oh! a very simple thing, sire; half an hour ago I returned from Bois-Rochin, where I had nothing to light me but a stupid stable lantern—"

"While now?"  
"While now I have all the wax-lights of your cabinet, and more than that, your majesty's own eyes, which illuminate everything, like the blazing sun at noonday."

The king began to laugh; and Saint-Aignan broke out into convulsions of merriment.  
"It is precisely like M. Valot," said D'Artagnan, resuming the conversation where the king had left off; "he has been imagining all along, that not only was M. de Guiche wounded by a bullet, but still more, that he extracted it, even, from his chest."  
"Upon my word," said Valot, "I assure you—"  
"Now, did you not believe that?" continued D'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Valot; "not only did I believe it, but, at this very moment, I would swear it."  
"Well, my dear doctor, you have dreamt it."

"I have dreamt it!"  
"M. de Guiche's wound—a mere dream; the bullet, a dream. So, take my advice, and prate no more about it."  
"Well said," returned the king, "M. d'Artagnan's advice is sound. Do not speak of your dream to any one, Monsieur Valot, and, upon the word of a gentleman, you will have no occasion to repent it. Good evening, gentlemen; a very sad affair, indeed, is a wild boar-hunt!"

"A very serious thing, indeed," repeated D'Artagnan, in a loud voice, "is a wild boar-hunt!" and he repeated it in every room through which he passed; and left the chateau, taking Valot with him.  
"And now we are alone," said the king to Saint-Aignan, "what is the name of De Guiche's adversary?"

Saint-Aignan looked at the king.  
"Oh! do not hesitate," said the king; "you know that I am bound beforehand to forgive."  
"De Wardes," said Saint-Aignan.

"Very good," said Louis XIV.; and then, retiring to his own room, added to himself, "To forgive is not to forget."

XX. Showing the Advantage of Having Two Strings to One's Bow.  
Manicamp quitted the king's apartment, delighted at having succeeded so well, when, just as he reached the bottom of the staircase and was passing a doorway, he felt that some one suddenly pulled him by the sleeve. He turned round and recognized Montalais, who was waiting for him in the passage, and who, in a very mysterious manner, with her body bent forward, and in a low tone of voice, said to him, "Follow me, monsieur, and without any delay, if you please."  
"Where to, mademoiselle?" inquired Manicamp.  
"In the first place, a true knight would not have asked such a question, but would have followed me without requiring any explanation."

"Well, mademoiselle, I am quite ready to conduct myself as a true knight."

"No; it is too late, and you cannot take the credit of it. We are going to Madame's apartment, so come at once."

"Ah, ah!" said Manicamp. "Lead on, then."

And he followed Montalais, who ran before him as light as Galatea.

"This time," said Manicamp, as he followed his guide, "I do not think that stories about hunting expeditions would be acceptable. We will try, however, and if need be—well, if there should be any occasion for it, we must try something else."

Montalais still ran on.

"How fatiguing it is," thought Manicamp, "to have need of one's head and legs at the same time."

At last, however, they arrived. Madame had just finished undressing, and was in a most elegant *deshabille*, but it must be understood that she had changed her dress before she had any idea of being subjected to the emotions now agitating her. She was waiting with the most restless impatience; and Montalais and Manicamp found her standing near the door. At the sound of their approaching footsteps, Madame came forward to meet them.

"Ah!" she said, "at last!"

"Here is M. Manicamp," replied Montalais.

Manicamp bowed with the greatest respect; Madame signed to Montalais to withdraw, and she immediately obeyed. Madame followed her with her eyes, in silence, until the door closed behind her, and then, turning towards Manicamp, said, "What is the matter?—and is it true, as I am told, Monsieur de Manicamp, that some one is lying wounded in the chateau?"

"Yes, Madame, unfortunately so—Monsieur de Guiche."

"Yes, Monsieur de Guiche," repeated the princess. "I had, in fact, heard it rumored, but not confirmed. And so, in truth, it is Monsieur de Guiche who has been thus unfortunate?"

"M. de Guiche himself, Madame."

"Are you aware, M. de Manicamp," said the princess, hastily, "that the king has the strongest antipathy to duels?"

"Perfectly so, Madame; but a duel with a wild beast is not answerable."

"Oh, you will not insult me by supposing that I credit the absurd fable, with what object I cannot tell, respecting M. de Guiche having been wounded by a wild boar. No, no, monsieur; the real truth is known, and, in addition to the inconvenience of his wound, M. de Guiche runs the risk of losing his liberty if not his life."

"Alas! Madame, I am well aware of that, but what is to be done?"

"You have seen the king?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him how M. de Guiche went to the chase, and how a wild boar rushed forth out of the Bois-Rochin; how M. de Guiche fired at it, and how, in fact, the furious brute dashed at De Guiche, killed his horse, and grievously wounded himself."

"And the king believed that?"

"Implicitly."

"Oh, you surprise me, Monsieur de Manicamp; you surprise me very much."

And Madame walked up and down the room, casting a searching look from time to time at Manicamp, who remained motionless and impassible in the same place. At last she stopped.

"And yet," she said, "every one here seems unanimous in giving another cause for this wound."

"What cause, Madame?" said Manicamp; "may I be permitted, without indiscretion, to ask your highness?"

"You ask such a question! You, M. de Guiche's intimate friend, his confidant, indeed!"

"Oh, Madame! his intimate friend—yes; confidant—no. De Guiche is a man who can keep his own secrets, who has some of his own certainly, but who never breathes a syllable about them. De Guiche is discretion itself, Madame."

"Very well, then; those secrets which M. de Guiche keeps so scrupulously, I shall have the pleasure of informing you of," said the princess, almost spitefully; "for the king may possibly question you a second time, and if, on the second occasion, you were to repeat the same story to him, he possibly might not be very well satisfied with it."

"But, Madame, I think your highness is mistaken with regard to the king. His majesty was perfectly satisfied with me, I assure you."

"In that case, permit me to assure you, Monsieur de Manicamp, it only proves one thing, which is, that his majesty is very easily satisfied."

"I think your highness is mistaken in arriving at such an opinion; his majesty is well known not to be contented except with very good reason."

"And do you suppose that he will thank you for your officious falsehood, when he will learn to-morrow that M. de Guiche had, on behalf of his friend M. de Bragelonne, a quarrel which ended in a hostile meeting?"

"A quarrel on M. de Bragelonne's account," said Manicamp, with the most innocent expression in the world; "what does your royal highness do me the honour to tell me?"

"What is there astonishing in that? M. de Guiche is susceptible, irritable, and easily loses his temper."

"On the contrary, Madame, I know M. de Guiche to be very patient, and never susceptible or irritable except upon very good grounds."

"But is not friendship a just ground?" said the princess.

"Oh, certainly, Madame; and particularly for a heart like his."

"Very good; you will not deny, I suppose, that M. de Bragelonne is M. de Guiche's good friend?"

"A great friend."

"Well, then, M. de Guiche has taken M. de Bragelonne's part; and as M. de Bragelonne was absent and could not fight, he fought for him."

Manicamp began to smile, and moved his head and shoulders very slightly, as much as to say, "Oh, if you will positively have it so—"

"But speak, at all events," said the princess, out of patience; "speak!"

"I?"

"Of course; it is quite clear you are not of my opinion, and that you have something to say."

"I have only one thing to say, Madame."

"Name it!"

"That I do not understand a single word of what you have just been telling me."

"What!—you do not understand a single word about M. de Guiche's quarrel with M. de Wardes," exclaimed the princess, almost out of temper.

Manicamp remained silent.

"A quarrel," she continued, "which arose out of a conversation scandalous in its tone and purport, and more or less well founded, respecting the virtue of a certain lady."

"Ah! of a certain lady,—this is quite another thing," said Manicamp.

"You begin to understand, do you not?"

"Your highness will excuse me, but I dare not—"

"You dare not," said Madame, exasperated; "very well, then, wait one moment, I will dare."

"Madame, Madame!" exclaimed Manicamp, as if in great dismay, "be careful of what you are going to say."

"It would seem, monsieur, that, if I happened to be a man, you would challenge me, notwithstanding his majesty's edicts, as Monsieur de Guiche challenged M. de Wardes; and that, too, on account of the virtue of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Of Mademoiselle de la Vallière!" exclaimed Manicamp, starting backwards, as if that was the very last name he expected to hear pronounced.

"What makes you start in that manner, Monsieur de Manicamp?" said Madame, ironically; "do you mean to say you would be impertinent enough to suspect that young lady's honour?"

"Madame, in the whole course of this affair there has not been the slightest question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's honour."

"What! when two men have almost blown each other's brains out on a woman's behalf, do you mean to say she has had nothing to do with the affair, and that her name has not been called in question at all? I did not think you so good a courtier, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Pray forgive me, Madame," said the young man, "but we are very far from understanding one another. You do me the honour to speak one language while I am speaking altogether another."

"I beg your pardon, but I do not understand your meaning."

"Forgive me, then; but I fancied I understood your highness to remark that De Guiche and De Wardes had fought on Mademoiselle de la Vallière's account?"

"Certainly."

"On account of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I think you said?" repeated Manicamp.

"I do not say that M. de Guiche personally took an interest in Mademoiselle de la Vallière, but I say that he did so as representing or acting on behalf of another."

"On behalf of another?"

"Come, do not always assume such a bewildered look. Does not every one here know that M. de Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and that before he went on the mission with which the king intrusted him, he charged his friend M. de Guiche to watch over that interesting young lady?"

"There is nothing more for me to say, then. Your highness is well-informed."

"Of everything. I beg you to understand that clearly."

Manicamp began to laugh, which almost exasperated the princess, who was not, as we know, of a very patient disposition.

"Madame," resumed the discreet Manicamp, saluting the princess, "let us bury this affair altogether in forgetfulness, for it will probably never be quite cleared up."

"Oh, as far as that goes there is nothing more to do, and the information is complete. The king will learn that M. de Guiche has taken up the cause of this little adventuress, who gives herself all the airs of a grand lady; he will learn that Monsieur de Bragelonne, having nominated his friend M. de Guiche his guardian-in-ordinary, the latter immediately fastened, as he was required to do, upon the Marquis de Wardes, who ventured to trench upon his privileges. Moreover, you cannot pretend to deny, Monsieur Manicamp—you who know everything so well—that the king on his side casts a longing eye upon this famous treasure, and that he will bear no slight grudge against M. de Guiche for constituting himself its defender. Are you sufficiently well informed now, or do you require anything further? If so, speak, monsieur."

"No, Madame, there is nothing more I wish to know."

"Learn, however—for you ought to know it, Monsieur de Manicamp—learn that his majesty's indignation will be followed by terrible consequences. In princes of a similar temperament to that of his majesty, the passion which jealousy causes sweeps down like a whirlwind."

"Which you will temper, Madame."

"I!" exclaimed the princess, with a gesture of indescribable irony; "I! and by what title, may I ask?"

"Because you detest injustice, Madame."

"And according to your account, then, it would be an injustice to prevent the king arranging his love affairs as he pleases."

"You will intercede, however, in M. de Guiche's favour?"

"You are mad, monsieur," said the princess, in a haughty tone of voice.

"On the contrary, I am in the most perfect possession of my senses; and I repeat, you will defend M. de Guiche before the king."

"Why should I?"

"Because the cause of M. de Guiche is your own, Madame," said Manicamp, with ardor kindling in his eyes.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Madame, that, with respect to the defense which Monsieur de Guiche undertook in M. de Bragelonne's absence, I am surprised that your highness has not detected a pretext in La Vallière's name having been brought forward."

"A pretext? But a pretext for what?" repeated the princess, hesitatingly, for Manicamp's steady look had just revealed something of the truth to her.

"I trust, Madame," said the young man, "I have said sufficient to induce your highness not to overwhelm before his majesty my poor friend, De Guiche, against whom all the malevolence of a party bitterly opposed to your own will now be directed."

"You mean, on the contrary, I suppose, that all those who have no great affection for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and even, perhaps, a few of those who have some regard for her, will be angry with the comte?"

"Oh, Madame! why will you push your obstinacy to such an extent, and refuse to open your ears and listen to the counsel of one whose devotion to you is unbounded? Must I expose myself to the risk of your displeasure,—am I really to be called upon to name, contrary to my own wish, the person who was the real cause of this quarrel?"

"The person?" said Madame, blushing.

"Must I," continued Manicamp, "tell you how poor De Guiche became irritated, furious, exasperated beyond all control, at the different rumors now being circulated about this person? Must I, if you persist in this willful blindness, and if respect should continue to prevent me naming her,—must I, I repeat, recall to your recollection the various scenes which Monsieur had with the Duke of Buckingham, and the insinuations which were reported respecting the duke's exile? Must I remind you of the anxious care the comte always took in his efforts to please, to watch, to protect that person for whom alone he lives,—for whom alone he breathes? Well! I will do so; and when I shall have made you recall all the particulars I refer to, you will perhaps understand how it happened that the comte, having lost all control over himself, and having been for some time past almost harassed to death by De Wardes, became, at the first disrespectful expression which the latter pronounced respecting the person in question, inflamed with passion, and panted only for an opportunity of avenging the affront."

The princess concealed her face with her hands. "Monsieur, monsieur!" she exclaimed; "do you know what you are saying, and to whom you are speaking?"

"And so, Madame," pursued Manicamp, as if he had not heard the exclamations of the princess, "nothing will astonish you any longer,—neither the comte's ardor in seeking the quarrel, nor his wonderful address in transferring it to a quarter foreign to your own personal interests. That latter circumstance was, indeed, a marvelous instance of tact and perfect coolness, and if the person in whose behalf the comte so fought and shed his blood does, in reality, owe some gratitude to the poor wounded sufferer, it is not on account of the blood he has shed, or the agony he has suffered, but for the steps he has taken to preserve from comment or reflection an honour which is more precious to him than his own."

"Oh!" cried Madame, as if she had been alone, "is it possible the quarrel was on my account!"

Manicamp felt he could now breathe for a moment—and gallantly had he won the right to do so. Madame, on her side, remained for some time plunged in a painful reverie. Her agitation could be seen by her quick respiration, by her drooping eyelids, by the frequency with which she pressed her hand upon her heart. But, in her, coquetry was not so much a passive quality, as, on the contrary, a fire which sought for fuel to maintain itself, finding anywhere and everywhere what it required.

"If it be as you assert," she said, "the comte will have obliged two persons at the same time; for Monsieur de Bragelonne also owes a deep debt of gratitude to M. de Guiche—and with far greater reason, indeed, because everywhere, and on every occasion, Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be regarded as having been defended by this generous champion."

Manicamp perceived that there still remained some lingering doubt in the princess's heart. "A truly admirable service, indeed," he said, "is the one he has rendered to Mademoiselle de la Vallière! A truly admirable service to M. de Bragelonne! The duel has created a sensation which, in some respects, casts a dishonourable suspicion upon that young girl; a sensation, indeed, which will embroil her with the vicomte. The consequence is that De Wardes's pistol-bullet has had three results instead of one; it destroys at the same time the honour of a woman, the happiness of a man, and, perhaps, it has wounded to death one of the best gentlemen in France. Oh, Madame! your logic is cold—even calculating; it always condemns—it never absolves."

Manicamp's concluding words scattered to the winds the last doubt which lingered, not in Madame's heart, but in her mind. She was no longer a princess full of scruples, nor a woman with her ever-returning suspicions, but one whose heart has just felt the mortal chill of a wound. "Wounded to death!" she murmured, in a faltering voice, "oh, Monsieur de Manicamp! did you not say, wounded to death?"

Manicamp returned no other answer than a deep sigh.

"And so you said that the comte is dangerously wounded?" continued the princess.

"Yes, Madame; one of his hands is shattered, and he has a bullet lodged in his breast."

"Gracious heavens!" resumed the princess, with a feverish excitement, "this is horrible! Monsieur de Manicamp! a hand shattered, do you say, and a bullet in his breast? And that coward! that wretch! that assassin, De Wardes, did it!"

Manicamp seemed overcome by a violent emotion. He had, in fact, displayed no little energy in the latter part of his speech. As for Madame, she entirely threw aside all regard for the formal observances of propriety society imposes; for when, with her, passion spoke in accents either of anger or sympathy, nothing could restrain her impulses. Madame approached Manicamp, who had subsided in a chair, as if his grief were a sufficiently powerful excuse for his infraction of the laws of etiquette. "Monsieur," she said, seizing him by the hand, "be frank with me."

Manicamp looked up.

"Is M. de Guiche in danger of death?"

"Doubly so, Madame," he replied; "in the first place on account of the hemorrhage which has taken place, an artery having been injured in the hand; and next, in consequence of the wound in his breast, which may, the doctor is afraid, at least, have injured some vital part."

"He may die, then?"

"Die, yes, Madame; and without even having had the consolation of knowing that you have been told of his devotion."

"You will tell him."

"I?"

"Yes; are you not his friend?"

"I? oh, no, Madame; I will only tell M. de Guiche—if, indeed, he is still in a condition to hear me—I will only tell him what I have seen; that is, your cruelty to him."

"Oh, monsieur, you will not be guilty of such barbarity!"

"Indeed, Madame, I shall speak the truth, for nature is very energetic in a man of his age. The physicians are clever men, and if, by chance, the poor comte should survive his wound, I should not wish him to die of a wound of the heart, after surviving one of the body." Manicamp rose, and with an expression of profoundest respect, seemed to be desirous of taking leave.

"At least, monsieur," said Madame, stopping him with almost a suppliant air, "you will be kind enough to tell me in what state your wounded friend is, and who is the physician who attends him?"

"As regards the state he is in, Madame, he is seriously ill; his physician is M. Valot, his majesty's private medical attendant. M. Valot is moreover assisted by a professional friend, to whose house M. de Guiche has been carried."

"What! he is not in the chateau?" said Madame.

"Alas, Madame! the poor fellow was so ill, that he could not even be conveyed thither."

"Give me the address, monsieur," said the princess, hurriedly; "I will send to inquire after him."

"Rue du Feurre; a brick-built house, with white outside blinds. The doctor's name is on the door."

"You are returning to your wounded friend, Monsieur de Manicamp?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You will be able, then, to do me a service."

"I am at your highness's orders."

"Do what you intended to do; return to M. de Guiche, send away all those whom you may find there, and have the kindness yourself to go away too."

"Madame—"

"Let us waste no time in useless explanations. Accept the fact as I present it to you; see nothing in it beyond what is really there, and ask nothing further than what I tell you. I am going to send one of my ladies, perhaps two, because it is now getting late; I do not wish them to see you, or rather I do not wish you to see them. These are scruples you can understand—you particularly, Monsieur de Manicamp, who seem capable of divining so much."

"Oh, Madame, perfectly; I can even do better still,—I will precede, or rather walk, in advance of your attendants; it will, at the same time, be the means of showing them the way more accurately, and of protecting them, if occasion arises, though there is no probability of their needing protection."

"And, by this means, then, they would be sure of entering without difficulty, would they not?"

"Certainly, Madame; for as I should be the first to pass, I thus remove any difficulties that might chance to be in the way."

"Very well. Go, go, Monsieur de Manicamp, and wait at the bottom of the staircase."

"I go at once, Madame."

"Stay."

Manicamp paused.

"When you hear the footsteps of two women descending the stairs, go out, and, without once turning round, take the road which leads to where the poor count is lying."

"But if, by any mischance, two other persons were to descend, and I were to be mistaken?"

"You will hear one of the two clap her hands together softly. Go."

Manicamp turned round, bowed once more, and left the room, his heart overflowing with joy. In fact, he knew very well that the presence of Madame herself would be the best balm to apply to his friend's wounds. A quarter of an hour had hardly elapsed when he heard the sound of a door opened softly, and closed with like precaution. He listened to the light footfalls gliding down the staircase, and then heard the signal agreed upon. He immediately went out, and, faithful to his promise, bent his way, without once turning his head, through the streets of Fontainebleau, towards the doctor's dwelling.

XXI. M. Malicorne the Keeper of the Records of France.

Two women, their figures completely concealed by their mantles, and whose masks effectually hid the upper portion of their faces, timidly followed Manicamp's steps. On the first floor, behind curtains of red damask, the soft light of a lamp placed upon a low table faintly illumined the room, at the other extremity of which, on a large bedstead supported by spiral columns, around which curtains of the same colour as those which deadened the rays of the lamp had been closely drawn, lay De Guiche, his head supported by pillows, his eyes looking as if the mists of death were gathering; his long black hair, scattered over the pillow, set off the young man's hollow temples. It was easy to see that fever was the chief tenant of the chamber. De Guiche was dreaming. His wandering mind was pursuing, through gloom and mystery, one of those wild creations delirium engenders. Two or three drops of blood, still liquid, stained the floor. Manicamp hurriedly ran up the stairs, but paused at the threshold of the door, looked into the room, and seeing that everything was perfectly quiet, he advanced towards the foot of the large leathern armchair, a specimen of furniture of the reign of Henry IV., and seeing that the nurse, as a matter of course, had dropped off to sleep, he awoke her, and begged her to pass into the adjoining room.

Then, standing by the side of the bed, he remained for a moment deliberating whether it would be better to awaken Guiche, in order to acquaint him with the good news. But, as he began to hear behind the door the rustling of silk dresses and the hurried breathing of his two companions, and as he already saw that the curtain screening the doorway seemed on the point of being impatiently drawn aside, he passed round the bed and followed the nurse into the next room. As soon as he had disappeared the curtain was raised, and his two female companions entered the room he had just left. The one who entered first made a gesture to her companion, which riveted her to the spot where she stood, close to the door, and then resolutely advanced towards the bed, drew back the curtains along the iron rod, and threw them in thick folds behind the head of the bed. She gazed upon the comte's pallid face; remarked his right hand enveloped in linen whose dazzling whiteness was emphasized by the counterpane patterned with dark leaves thrown across the couch. She shuddered as she saw a stain of blood growing larger and larger upon the bandages. The young man's breast was uncovered, as though for the cool night air to assist his respiration. A narrow bandage fastened the dressings of the wound, around which a purplish circle of extravasated blood was gradually increasing in size. A deep sigh broke from her lips. She leaned against one of the columns of the bed, and gazed, through the apertures in her mask, upon the harrowing spectacle before her. A hoarse harsh groan passed like a death-rattle through the comte's clenched teeth. The masked lady seized his left hand, which scorched like burning coals. But at the very moment she placed her icy hand



upon it, the action of the cold was such that De Guiche opened his eyes, and by a look in which revived intelligence was dawning, seemed as though struggling back again into existence. The first thing upon which he fixed his gaze was this phantom standing erect by his bedside. At that sight, his eyes became dilated, but without any appearance of consciousness in them. The lady thereupon made a sign to her companion, who had remained at the door; and in all probability the latter had already received her lesson, for in a clear tone of voice, and without any hesitation whatever, she pronounced these words:—"Monsieur le comte, her royal highness Madame is desirous of knowing how you are able to bear your wound, and to express to you, by my lips, her great regret at seeing you suffer." As she pronounced the word Madame, Guiche started; he had not as yet remarked the person to whom the voice belonged, and he naturally turned towards the direction whence it preceded. But, as he felt the cold hand still resting on his own, he again turned towards the motionless figure beside him. "Was it you who spoke, madame?" he asked, in a weak voice, "or is there another person in beside you in the room?"

"Yes," replied the figure, in an almost unintelligible voice, as she bent down her head.

"Well," said the wounded man, with a great effort, "I thank you. Tell Madame that I no longer regret to die, since she has remembered me."

At the words "to die," pronounced by one whose life seemed to hang on a thread, the masked lady could not restrain her tears, which flowed under the mask, and appeared upon her cheeks just where the mask left her face bare. If De Guiche had been in fuller possession of his senses, he would have seen her tears roll like glistening pearls, and fall upon his bed. The lady, forgetting that she wore her mask, raised her hand as though to wipe her eyes, and meeting the rough velvet, she tore away her mask in anger, and threw it on the floor. At the unexpected apparition before him, which seemed to issue from a cloud, De Guiche uttered a cry and stretched his arms towards her; but every word perished on his lips, and his strength seemed utterly abandoning him. His right hand, which had followed his first impulse, without calculating the amount of strength he had left, fell back again upon the bed, and immediately afterwards the white linen was stained with a larger spot than before. In the meantime, the young man's eyes became dim, and closed, as if he were already struggling with the messenger of death; and then, after a few involuntary movements, his head fell back motionless on his pillow; his face grew livid. The lady was frightened; but on this occasion, contrary to what is usually the case, fear attracted. She leaned over the young man, gazed earnestly, fixedly at his pale, cold face, which she almost touched, then imprinted a rapid kiss upon De Guiche's left hand, who, trembling as if an electric shock had passed through him, awoke a second time, opened his large eyes, incapable of recognition, and again fell into a state of complete insensibility. "Come," she said to her companion, "we must not remain here any longer; I shall be committing some folly or other."

"Madame, Madame, your highness is forgetting your mask!" said her vigilant companion.

"Pick it up," replied her mistress, as she tottered almost senseless towards the staircase, and as the outer door had been left only half-closed, the two women, light as birds, passed through it, and with hurried steps returned to the palace. One of them ascended towards Madame's apartments, where she disappeared; the other entered the rooms belonging to the maids of honour, namely, on the *entresol*, and having reached her own room, she sat down before a table, and without giving herself time even to breathe, wrote the following letter:

"This evening Madame has been to see M. de Guiche. Everything is going well on this side. See that your news is equally exemplary, and do not forget to burn this paper."

She folded the letter, and leaving her room with every possible precaution, crossed a corridor which led to the apartments appropriated to the gentlemen attached to Monsieur's service. She stopped before a door, under which, having previously knocked twice in a short, quick manner, she thrust the paper, and fled. Then, returning to her own room, she removed every trace of her having gone out, and also of having written the letter. Amid the investigations she was so diligently pursuing she perceived on the table the mask which belonged to Madame, and which, according to her mistress's directions, she had brought back but had forgotten to restore to her. "Oh, oh!" she said, "I must not forget to do to-morrow what I have forgotten to-day."

And she took hold of the velvet mask by that part which covered the cheeks, and feeling that her thumb was wet, looked at it. It was not only wet, but reddened. The mask had fallen upon one of the spots of blood which, we have already said, stained the floor, and from that black velvet outside which had accidentally come into contact with it, the blood had passed through to the inside, and stained the white cambric lining. "Oh, oh!" said Montalais, for doubtless our readers have already recognized her by these various maneuvers, "I shall not give back this mask; it is far too precious now."

And rising from her seat, she ran towards a box made of maple wood, which inclosed different articles of toilette and perfumery. "No, not here," she said, "such a treasure must not be abandoned to the slightest chance of detection."

Then, after a moment's silence, and with a smile that was peculiarly her own, she added:—"Beautiful mask, stained with the blood of that brave knight, you shall go and join that collection of wonders, La Vallière's and Raoul's letters, that loving collection, indeed, which will some day or other form part of the history of France, of European royalty. You shall be placed under M. Malicorne's care," said the laughing girl, as she began to undress herself, "under the protection of that worthy M. Malicorne," she said, blowing out the taper, "who thinks he was born only to become the chief usher of Monsieur's apartments, and whom I will make keeper of the records and historiographer of the house of Bourbon, and of the first houses in the kingdom. Let him grumble now, that discontented Malicorne," she added, as she drew the curtains and fell asleep.

## XXII. The Journey.

The next day being agreed upon for the departure, the king, at eleven o'clock precisely, descended the grand staircase with the two queens and Madame, in order to enter his carriage drawn by six horses, that were pawing the ground in impatience at the foot of the staircase. The whole court awaited the royal appearance in the *Fer-a-cheval* crescent, in their travelling costumes; the large number of saddled horses and carriages of ladies and gentlemen of the court, surrounded by their attendants, servants, and pages, formed a spectacle whose brilliancy could scarcely be equalled. The king entered his carriage with the two queens; Madame was in the same one with Monsieur. The maids of honour followed their example, and took their seats, two by two, in the carriages destined for them. The weather was exceedingly warm; a light breeze, which, early in the morning, all had thought would have proved sufficient to cool the air, soon became fiercely heated by the rays of the sun, although it was hidden behind the clouds, and filtered through the heated vapor which rose from the ground like a scorching wind, bearing particles of fine dust against the faces of the travelers. Madame was the first to complain of the heat. Monsieur's only reply was to throw himself back in the carriage as though about to faint, and to inundate himself with scents and perfumes, uttering the deepest sighs all the while; whereupon Madame said to him, with her most amiable expression:—"Really, Monsieur, I fancied that you would have been polite enough, on account of the terrible heat, to have left me my carriage to myself, and to have performed the journey yourself on horseback."

"Ride on horseback!" cried the prince, with an accent of dismay which showed how little idea he had of adopting this unnatural advice; "you cannot suppose such a thing, Madame! My skin would peel off if I were to expose myself to such a burning breeze as this."

Madame began to laugh.

"You can take my parasol," she said.

"But the trouble of holding it!" replied Monsieur, with the greatest coolness; "besides, I have no horse."

"What, no horse?" replied the princess, who, if she did not secure the solitude she required, at least obtained the amusement of teasing. "No horse! You are mistaken, Monsieur; for I see your favourite bay out yonder."

"My bay horse!" exclaimed the prince, attempting to lean forward to look out of the door; but the movement he was obliged to make cost him so much trouble that he soon hastened to resume his immobility.

"Yes," said Madame; "your horse, led by M. de Malicorne."

"Poor beast," replied the prince; "how warm it must be!"

And with these words he closed his eyes, like a man on the point of death. Madame, on her side, reclined indolently in the other corner of the carriage, and closed her eyes also, not, however, to sleep, but to think more at her ease. In the meantime the king, seated in the front seat of his carriage, the back of which he had yielded up to the two queens, was a prey to that feverish contrariety experienced by anxious lovers, who, without being able to quench their ardent thirst, are ceaselessly desirous of seeing the loved object, and then go away partially satisfied, without perceiving they have acquired a more insatiable thirst than ever. The king, whose carriage headed the procession, could not from the place he occupied perceive the carriages of the ladies and maids of honour, which followed in a line behind it. Besides, he was obliged to answer the eternal questions of the young queen, who, happy to have with her "*her dear husband*," as she called him in utter forgetfulness of royal etiquette, invested him with all her affection, stifled him with her attentions, afraid that some one might come to take him from her, or that he himself might suddenly take a fancy to quit her society. Anne of Austria, whom nothing at that moment occupied except the occasional cruel throbbings in her bosom, looked pleased and delighted, and although she perfectly realized the king's impatience, tantalizingly prolonged his sufferings by unexpectedly resuming the conversation at the very moment the king, absorbed in his own reflections, began to muse over his secret attachment. Everything seemed to combine—not alone the little teasing attentions of the queen, but also the queen-mother's interruptions—to make the king's position almost insupportable; for he knew not how to control the restless longings of his heart. At first, he complained of the heat—a complaint merely preliminary to others, but with sufficient tact to prevent Maria Theresa guessing his real object. Understanding the king's remark literally, she began to fan him with her ostrich plumes. But the heat passed away, and the king then complained of cramps and stiffness in his legs, and as the carriages at that moment stopped to change horses, the queen said:—"Shall I get out with you? I too feel tired of sitting. We can walk on a little distance; the carriage will overtake us, and we can resume our places presently."

The king frowned; it is a hard trial a jealous woman makes her husband submit to whose fidelity she suspects, when, although herself a prey to jealousy, she watches herself so narrowly that she avoids giving any pretext for an angry feeling. The king, therefore, in the present case, could not refuse; he accepted the offer, alighted from the carriage, gave his arm to the queen, and walked up and down with her while the horses were being changed. As he walked along, he cast an envious glance upon the courtiers, who were fortunate enough to be on horseback. The queen soon found out that the promenade she had suggested afforded the king as little pleasure as he had experienced from driving. She accordingly expressed a wish to return to her carriage, and the king conducted her to the door, but did not get in with her. He stepped back a few paces, and looked along the file of carriages for the purpose of recognizing the one in which he took so strong an interest. At the door of the sixth carriage he saw La Vallière's fair countenance. As the king thus stood motionless, wrapt in thought, without perceiving that everything was ready, and that he alone was causing the delay, he heard a voice close beside him, addressing him in the most respectful manner. It was M. Malicorne, in a complete costume of an equerry, holding over his left arm the bridles of a couple of horses.

"Your majesty asked for a horse, I believe," he said.

"A horse? Have you one of my horses here?" inquired the king, trying to remember the person who addressed him, and whose face was not as yet familiar to him.

"Sire," replied Malicorne, "at all events I have a horse here which is at your majesty's service."

And Malicorne pointed at Monsieur's bay horse, which Madame had observed. It was a beautiful creature royally caparisoned.

"This is not one of my horses, monsieur," said the king.

"Sire, it is a horse out of his royal highness's stables; but he does not ride when the weather is as hot as it is now."

Louis did not reply, but approached the horse, which stood pawing the ground with its foot. Malicorne hastened to hold the stirrup for him, but the king was already in the saddle. Restored to good-humor by this lucky accident, the king hastened towards the queen's carriage, where he was anxiously expected; and notwithstanding Maria Theresa's thoughtful and preoccupied air, he said: "I have been fortunate enough to find this horse, and I intend to avail myself of it. I felt stifled in the carriage. Adieu, ladies."

Then bending gracefully over the arched neck of his beautiful steed, he disappeared in a second. Anne of Austria leaned forward, in order to look after him as he rode away; he did not get very far, for when he reached the sixth carriage, he reined in his horse suddenly and took off his hat. He saluted La Vallière, who uttered a cry of surprise as she saw him, blushing at the same time with pleasure. Montalais, who occupied the other seat in the carriage, made the king a most respectful bow. And then, with all the tact of a woman, she pretended to be exceedingly interested in the landscape, and withdrew herself into the left-hand corner. The conversation between the king and La Vallière began, as all lovers' conversations generally do, namely, by eloquent looks and by a few words utterly devoid of common sense. The king explained how warm he had felt in his carriage, so much so indeed that he could almost regard the horse he then rode as a blessing thrown in his way. "And," he added, "my benefactor is an exceedingly intelligent man, for he seemed to guess my thoughts intuitively. I have now only one wish, that of learning the name of the gentleman who so cleverly assisted his king out of his dilemma, and extricated him from his cruel position."

Montalais, during this colloquy, the first words of which had awakened her attention, had slightly altered her position, and contrived so as to meet the king's look as he finished his remark. It followed very naturally that the king looked inquiringly as much at her as at La Vallière; she had every reason to suppose that it was herself who was appealed to, and consequently might be permitted to answer. She therefore said: "Sire, the horse which your majesty is riding belongs to Monsieur, and was being led by one of his royal highness's gentlemen."

"And what is that gentleman's name, may I ask, mademoiselle?"

"M. de Malicorne, sire."

The name produced its usual effect, for the king repeated it smilingly.

"Yes, sire," replied Aure. "Stay, it is the gentleman who is galloping on my left hand;" and she pointed out Malicorne, who, with a very sanctified expression, was galloping by the side of the carriage, knowing perfectly well that they were talking of him at that very moment, but sitting in his saddle as if he were deaf and dumb.

"Yes," said the king, "that is the gentleman; I remember his face, and will not forget his name;" and the king looked tenderly at La Vallière.

Aure had now nothing further to do; she had let Malicorne's name fall; the soil was good; all that was now left to be done was to let the name take root, and the event would bear fruit in due season. She consequently threw herself back in her corner, feeling perfectly justified in making as many agreeable signs of recognition as she liked to Malicorne, since the latter had had the happiness of

pleasing the king. As will readily be believed, Montalais was not mistaken; and Malicorne, with his quick ear and his sly look, seemed to interpret her remark as “All goes on well,” the whole being accompanied by a pantomimic action, which he fancied conveyed something resembling a kiss.

“Alas! mademoiselle,” said the king, after a moment’s pause, “the liberty and freedom of the country is soon about to cease; your attendance on Madame will be more strictly enforced, and we shall see each other no more.”

“Your majesty is too much attached to Madame,” replied Louise, “not to come and see her very frequently; and whenever your majesty may chance to pass across the apartments—”

“Ah!” said the king, in a tender voice, which was gradually lowered in its tone, “to perceive is not to see, and yet it seems that it would be quite sufficient for you.”

Louise did not answer a syllable; a sigh filled her heart almost to bursting, but she stifled it.

“You exercise a great control over yourself,” said the king to Louise, who smiled upon him with a melancholy expression. “Exert the strength you have in loving fondly,” he continued, “and I will bless Heaven for having bestowed it on you.”

La Vallière still remained silent, but raised her eyes, brimful of affection, toward the king. Louis, as if overcome by this burning glance, passed his hand across his forehead, and pressing the sides of his horse with his knees, made him bound several paces forward. La Vallière, leaning back in her carriage, with her eyes half closed, gazed fixedly upon the king, whose plumes were floating in the air; she could not but admire his graceful carriage, his delicate and nervous limbs which pressed his horse’s sides, and the regular outline of his features, which his beautiful curling hair set off to great advantage, revealing occasionally his small and well-formed ear. In fact the poor girl was in love, and she reveled in her innocent affection. In a few moments the king was again by her side.

“Do you not perceive,” he said, “how terribly your silence affects me? Oh! mademoiselle, how pitilessly inexorable you would become if you were ever to resolve to break off all acquaintance with any one; and then, too, I think you changeable; in fact—in fact, I dread this deep affection which fills my whole being.”

“Oh! sire, you are mistaken,” said La Vallière; “if ever I love, it will be for all my life.”

“If you love, you say,” exclaimed the king; “you do *not* love now, then?”

She hid her face in her hands.

“You see,” said the king, “that I am right in accusing you; you must admit you are changeable, capricious, a coquette, perhaps.”

“Oh, no! sire, be perfectly satisfied as to that. No, I say again; no, no!”

“Promise me, then, that to me you will always be the same.”

“Oh! always, sire.”

“That you will never show any of that severity which would break my heart, none of that fickleness of manner which would be worse than death to me.”

“Oh! no, no.”

“Very well, then! but listen. I like promises, I like to place under the guarantee of an oath, under the protection of Heaven, in fact, everything which interests my heart and my affections. Promise me, or rather swear to me, that if in the life we are about to commence, a life which will be full of sacrifice, mystery, anxiety, disappointment, and misunderstanding; swear to me that if we should in any way deceive, or misunderstand each other, or should judge each other unjustly, for that indeed would be criminal in love such as ours; swear to me, Louise—”

She trembled with agitation to the very depths of her heart; it was the first time she had heard her name pronounced in that manner by her royal lover. As for the king, taking off his glove, and placing his hand within the carriage, he continued:—“Swear, that never in all our quarrels will we allow one night even to pass by, if any misunderstanding should arise between us, without a visit, or at least a message, from either, in order to convey consolation and repose to the other.”

La Vallière took her lover’s burning hand between her own cool palms, and pressed it softly, until a movement of the horse, frightened by the proximity of the wheels, obliged her to abandon her happiness. She had vowed as he desired.

“Return, sire,” she said, “return to the queen. I foresee a storm yonder, which threatens my peace of mind and yours.”

Louis obeyed, saluted Mademoiselle de Montalais, and set off at a gallop to rejoin the queen. As he passed Monsieur’s carriage, he observed that he was fast asleep, although Madame, on her part, was wide awake. As the king passed her she said, “What a beautiful horse, sire! Is it not Monsieur’s bay horse?”

The young queen kindly asked, “Are you better now, sire?” 3

XXIII. Triumpheminate.

On the king’s arrival in Paris, he sat at the council which had been summoned, and worked for a certain portion of the day. The queen remained with the queen-mother, and burst into tears as soon as she had taken leave of the king. “Ah, madame!” she said, “the king no longer loves me! What will become of me?”

“A husband always loves his wife when she is like you,” replied Anne of Austria.

“A time may come when he will love another woman instead of me.”

“What do you call loving?”

“Always thinking of a person—always seeking her society.”

“Do you happen to have remarked,” said Anne of Austria, “that the king has ever done anything of the sort?”

“No, madame,” said the young queen, hesitatingly.

“What is there to complain of, then, Marie?”

“You will admit that the king leaves me?”

“The king, my daughter, belongs to his people.”

“And that is the very reason why he no longer belongs to me; and that is the reason, too, why I shall find myself, as so many queens before me, forsaken and forgotten, whilst glory and honours will be reserved for others. Oh, my mother! the king is so handsome! how often will others tell him that they love him, and how much, indeed, they must do so!”

“It is very seldom, indeed, that women love the man in loving the king. But if such a thing happened, which I doubt, you would do better to wish, Marie, that such women should really love your husband. In the first place, the devoted love of a mistress is a rapid element of the dissolution of a lover’s affection; and then, by dint of loving, the mistress loses all influence over her lover, whose power of wealth she does not covet, caring only for his affection. Wish, therefore, that the king should love but lightly, and that his mistress should love with all her heart.”

“Oh, my mother, what power may not a deep affection exercise over him!”

“And yet you say you are resigned?”

“Quite true, quite true; I speak absurdly. There is a feeling of anguish, however, which I can never control.”

“And that is?”

“The king may make a happy choice—may find a home, with all the tender influences of home, not far from that we can offer him,—a home with children round him, the children of another woman. Oh, madame! I should die if I were but to see the king’s children.”

“Marie, Marie,” replied the queen-mother with a smile, and she took the young queen’s hand in her own, “remember what I am going to say, and let it always be a consolation to you: the king cannot have a Dauphin without *you*.”

With this remark the queen-mother quitted her daughter-in-law, in order to meet Madame, whose arrival in the grand cabinet had just been announced by one of the pages. Madame had scarcely taken time to change her dress. Her face revealed her agitation, which betrayed a plan, the execution of which occupied, while the result disturbed, her mind.

“I came to ascertain,” she said, “if your majesties are suffering any fatigue from our journey.”

“None at all,” said the queen-mother.

“A little,” replied Maria Theresa.

“I have suffered from annoyance more than anything else,” said Madame.

“How was that?” inquired Anne of Austria.

“The fatigue the king undergoes in riding about on horseback.”

“That does the king good.”

“And it was I who advised him,” said Maria Theresa, turning pale.

Madame said not a word in reply; but one of those smiles which were peculiarly her own flitted for a moment across her lips, without passing over the rest of her face; then, immediately changing the conversation, she continued, “We shall find Paris precisely the Paris we quitted; the same intrigues, plots, and flirtations going on.”

“Intrigues! What intrigues do you allude to?” inquired the queen-mother.

“People are talking a good deal about M. Fouquet and Madame Plessis-Belliere.”

“Who makes up the number to about ten thousand,” replied the queen-mother. “But what are the plots you speak of?”

“We have, it seems, certain misunderstandings with Holland to settle.”

“What about?”

“Monsieur has been telling me the story of the medals.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the young queen, “you mean those medals struck in Holland, on which a cloud is seen passing across the sun, which is the king’s device. You are wrong in calling that a plot—it is an insult.”

“But so contemptible that the king can well despise it,” replied the queen-mother. “Well, what are the flirtations which are alluded to? Do you mean that of Madame d’Olonne?”

“No, no; nearer ourselves than that.”

“*Casa de usted,*” murmured the queen-mother, and without moving her lips, in her daughter-in-law’s ear, without being overheard by Madame, who thus continued:—“You know the terrible news?” 4

“Oh, yes; M. de Guiche’s wound.”

“And you attribute it, I suppose, as every one else does, to an accident which happened to him while hunting?”

“Yes, of course,” said both the queens together, their interest awakened.

Madame drew closer to them, as she said, in a low tone of voice, “It was a duel.”

“Ah!” said Anne of Austria, in a severe tone; for, in her ears, the word “duel,” which had been forbidden in France all the time she reigned over it, had a strange sound.

“A most deplorable duel, which has nearly cost Monsieur two of his best friends, and the king two of his best servants.”

“What was the cause of the duel?” inquired the young queen, animated by a secret instinct.

“Flirtation,” repeated Madame, triumphantly. “The gentlemen in question were conversing about the virtue of a particular lady belonging to the court. One of them thought that Pallas was a very second-rate person compared to her; the other pretended that the lady in question was an imitation of Venus alluring Mars; and thereupon the two gentlemen fought as fiercely as Hector and Achilles.”

“Venus alluring Mars?” said the young queen in a low tone of voice without venturing to examine into the allegory very deeply.

“Who is the lady?” inquired Anne of Austria abruptly. “You said, I believe, she was one of the ladies of honour?”

“Did I say so?” replied Madame.

“Yes; at least I thought I heard you mention it.”

“Are you not aware that such a woman is of ill-omen to a royal house?”

“Is it not Mademoiselle de la Vallière?” said the queen-mother.

“Yes, indeed, that plain-looking creature.”

“I thought she was affianced to a gentleman who certainly is not, at least so I have heard, either M. de Guiche or M. de Wardes?”

“Very possibly, madame.”

The young queen took up a piece of tapestry, and began to broider with an affectation of tranquillity her trembling fingers contradicted.

“What were you saying about Venus and Mars?” pursued the queen-mother. “Is there a Mars also?”

"She boasts of that being the case."  
"Did you say she boasts of it?"  
"That was the cause of the duel."  
"And M. de Guiche upheld the cause of Mars?"  
"Yes, certainly; like the devoted servant he is."  
"The devoted servant of whom?" exclaimed the young queen, forgetting her reserve in allowing her jealous feeling to escape.  
"Mars, not to be defended except at the expense of Venus," replied Madame. "M. de Guiche maintained the perfect innocence of Mars, and no doubt affirmed that it was all a mere boast."  
"And M. de Wardes," said Anne of Austria, quietly, "spread the report that Venus was within her rights, I suppose?"  
"Oh, De Wardes," thought Madame, "you shall pay dearly for the wound you have given that noblest—best of men!" And she began to attack De Wardes with the greatest bitterness; thus discharging her own and De Guiche's debt, with the assurance that she was working the future ruin of her enemy. She said so much, in fact, that had Manicamp been there, he would have regretted he had shown such firm regard for his friend, inasmuch as it resulted in the ruin of his unfortunate foe.  
"I see nothing in the whole affair but *one* cause of mischief, and that is La Vallière herself," said the queen-mother.  
The young queen resumed her work with perfect indifference of manner, while Madame listened eagerly.  
"I do not yet quite understand what you said just now about the danger of coquetry," resumed Anne of Austria.  
"It is quite true," Madame hastened to say, "that if the girl had not been a coquette, Mars would not have thought at all about her."  
The repetition of this word Mars brought a passing colour to the queen's face; but she still continued her work.  
"I will not permit that, in my court, gentlemen should be set against each other in this manner," said Anne of Austria, calmly. "Such manners were useful enough, perhaps, in days when the divided nobility had no other rallying-point than mere gallantry. At that time women, whose sway was absolute and undivided, were privileged to encourage men's valor by frequent trials of their courage. But now, thank Heaven, there is but one master in France, and to him every instinct of the mind, every pulse of the body are due. I will not allow my son to be deprived of any single one of his servants." And she turned towards the young queen, saying, "What is to be done with this La Vallière?"  
"La Vallière?" said the queen, apparently surprised, "I do not even know the name;" and she accompanied this remark by one of those cold, fixed smiles only to be observed on royal lips.  
Madame was herself a princess great in every respect, great in intelligence, great by birth, by pride; the queen's reply, however, completely astonished her, and she was obliged to pause for a moment in order to recover herself. "She is one of my maids of honour," she replied, with a bow.  
"In that case," retorted Maria Theresa, in the same tone, "it is your affair, my sister, and not ours."  
"I beg your pardon," resumed Anne of Austria, "it is my affair. And I perfectly well understand," she pursued, addressing a look full of intelligence at Madame, "Madame's motive for saying what she has just said."  
"Everything which emanates from you, madame," said the English princess, "proceeds from the lips of Wisdom."  
"If we send this girl back to her own family," said Maria Theresa, gently, "we must bestow a pension upon her."  
"Which I will provide for out of my income," exclaimed Madame.  
"No, no," interrupted Anne of Austria, "no disturbance, I beg. The king dislikes that the slightest disrespectful remark should be made of any lady. Let everything be done quietly. Will you have the kindness, Madame, to send for this girl here; and you, my daughter, will have the goodness to retire to your own room."  
The dowager queen's entreaties were commands, and as Maria Theresa rose to return to her apartments, Madame rose in order to send a page to summon La Vallière.

XXIV. The First Quarrel.

La Vallière entered the queen-mother's apartments without in the least suspecting that a serious plot was being concerted against her. She thought it was for something connected with her duties, and never had the queen-mother been unkind to her when such was the case. Besides, not being immediately under the control or direction of Anne of Austria, she could only have an official connection with her, to which her own gentleness of disposition, and the rank of the august princess, made her yield on every occasion with the best possible grace. She therefore advanced towards the queen-mother with that soft and gentle smile which constituted her principal charm, and as she did not approach sufficiently close, Anne of Austria signed to her to come nearer. Madame then entered the room, and with a perfectly calm air took her seat beside her mother-in-law, and continued the work which Maria Theresa had begun. When La Vallière, instead of the direction which she expected to receive immediately on entering the room, perceived these preparations, she looked with curiosity, if not with uneasiness, at the two princesses. Anne seemed full of thought, while Madame maintained an affectation of indifference that would have alarmed a less timid person even than Louise.  
"Mademoiselle," said the queen-mother suddenly, without attempting to moderate or disguise her Spanish accent, which she never failed to do except when she was angry, "come closer; we were talking of you, as every one else seems to be doing."  
"Of me!" exclaimed La Vallière, turning pale.  
"Do you pretend to be ignorant of it; are you not aware of the duel between M. de Guiche and M. de Wardes?"  
"Oh, madame! I heard of it yesterday," said La Vallière, clasping her hands together.  
"And did you not foresee this quarrel?"  
"Why should I, madame?"  
"Because two men never fight without a motive, and because you must be aware of the motive which awakened the animosity of the two in question."  
"I am perfectly ignorant of it, madame."  
"A persevering denial is a very commonplace mode of defense, and you, who have great pretensions to be witty and clever, ought to avoid commonplaces. What else have you to say?"  
"Oh! madame, your majesty terrifies me with your cold severity of manner; but I do not understand how I can have incurred your displeasure, or in what respect people concern themselves about me."  
"Then I will tell you. M. de Guiche has been obliged to undertake your defense."  
"My defense?"  
"Yes. He is a gallant knight, and beautiful adventuresses like to see brave knights couch lances in their honour. But, for my part, I hate fields of battle, and above all I hate adventures, and—take my remark as you please."  
La Vallière sank at the queen's feet, who turned her back upon her. She stretched out her hands towards Madame, who laughed in her face. A feeling of pride made her rise to her feet.  
"I have begged your majesty to tell me what is the crime I am accused of—I can claim this at your hands; and I see I am condemned before I am even permitted to justify myself."  
"Eh! indeed," cried Anne of Austria, "listen to her beautiful phrases, Madame, and to her fine sentiments; she is an inexhaustible well of tenderness and heroic expressions. One can easily see, young lady, that you have cultivated your mind in the society of crowned heads."  
La Vallière felt struck to the heart; she became, not whiter, but as white as a lily, and all her strength forsook her.  
"I wished to inform you," interrupted the queen, disdainfully, "that if you continue to nourish such feelings, you will humiliate us to such a degree that we shall be ashamed of appearing before you. Be simple in your manners. By the by, I am informed that you are affianced; is it the case?"  
La Vallière pressed her hand over her heart, which was wrung with a fresh pang.  
"Answer when you are spoken to!"  
"Yes, madame."  
"To a gentleman?"  
"Yes, madame."  
"His name?"  
"The Vicomte de Bragelonne."  
"Are you aware that it is an exceedingly fortunate circumstance for you, mademoiselle, that such is the case, and without fortune or position, as you are, or without any very great personal advantages, you ought to bless Heaven for having procured you such a future as seems to be in store for you?"  
La Vallière did not reply. "Where is the Vicomte de Bragelonne?" pursued the queen.  
"In England," said Madame, "where the report of this young lady's success will not fail to reach him."  
"Oh, Heaven!" murmured La Vallière in despair.  
"Very well, mademoiselle!" said Anne of Austria, "we will get this young gentleman to return, and send you away somewhere with him. If you are of a different opinion—for girls have strange views and fancies at times—trust to me, I will put you in a proper path again. I have done as much for girls who are not as good as you are, probably."  
La Vallière ceased to hear the queen, who pitilessly added: "I will send you somewhere, by yourself, where you will be able to indulge in a little serious reflection. Reflection calms the ardor of the blood, and swallows up the illusions of youth. I suppose you understand what I have been saying?"  
"Madame!"  
"Not a word?"  
"I am innocent of everything your majesty supposes. Oh, madame! you are a witness of my despair. I love, I respect your majesty so much."  
"It would be far better not to respect me at all," said the queen, with a chilling irony of manner. "It would be far better if you were not innocent. Do you presume to suppose that I should be satisfied simply to leave you unpunished if you had committed the fault?"  
"Oh, madame! you are killing me."  
"No acting, if you please, or I will precipitate the *denouement* of this *play*; leave the room; return to your own apartment, and I trust my lesson may be of service to you."  
"Madame!" said La Vallière to the Duchess d'Orleans, whose hands she seized in her own, "do you, who are so good, intercede for me?"  
"It!" replied the latter, with an insulting joy, "I—good!—Ah, mademoiselle, you think nothing of the kind;" and with a rude, hasty gesture she repulsed the young girl's grasp.  
La Vallière, instead of giving way, as from her extreme pallor and her tears the two princesses possibly expected, suddenly resumed her calm and dignified air; she bowed profoundly, and left the room.  
"Well!" said Anne of Austria to Madame, "do you think she will begin again?"  
"I always suspect those gentle, patient characters," replied Madame. "Nothing is more full of courage than a patient heart, nothing more self-reliant than a gentle spirit."  
"I feel I may almost venture to assure you she will think twice before she looks at the god Mars again."  
"So long as she does not obtain the protection of his buckler I do not care," retorted Madame.  
A proud, defiant look of the queen-mother was the reply to this objection, which was by no means deficient in finesse; and both of them, almost sure of their victory, went to look for Maria Theresa, who had been waiting for them with impatience.  
It was about half-past six in the evening, and the king had just partaken of refreshment. He lost no time; but the repast finished, and business matters settled, he took Saint-Aignan by the arm, and desired him to lead the way to La Vallière's apartments. The courtier uttered an exclamation.  
"Well, what is that for? It is a habit you will have to adopt, and in order to adopt a habit, one must make a beginning."  
"Oh, sire!" said Saint-Aignan, "it is hardly possible: for every one can be seen entering or leaving those apartments. If, however, some pretext or other were made use of—if your majesty, for instance, would wait until Madame were in her own apartments—"  
"No pretext; no delays. I have had enough of these impediments and mysteries; I cannot perceive in what respect the king of France dishonours himself by conversing with an amiable and clever girl. Evil be to him who evil thinks."  
"Will your majesty forgive an excess of zeal on my part?"  
"Speak freely."  
"How about the queen?"

"True, true; I always wish the most entire respect to be shown to her majesty. Well, then, this evening only will I pay Mademoiselle de la Vallière a visit, and after to-day I will make use of any pretext you like. To-morrow we will devise all sorts of means; to-night I have no time."

Saint-Aignan made no reply; he descended the steps, preceding the king, and crossed the different courtyards with a feeling of shame, which the distinguished honour of accompanying the king did not remove. The reason was that Saint-Aignan wished to stand well with Madame, as well as with the queens, and also, that he did not, on the other hand, want to displease Mademoiselle de la Vallière: and in order to carry out so many promising affairs, it was difficult to avoid jostling against some obstacle or other. Besides, the windows of the young queen's rooms, those of the queen-mother's, and of Madame herself, looked out upon the courtyard of the maids of honour. To be seen, therefore, accompanying the king, would be effectually to quarrel with three great and influential princesses—whose authority was unbounded—for the purpose of supporting the ephemeral credit of a mistress. The unhappy Saint-Aignan, who had not displayed a very great amount of courage in taking La Vallière's part in the park of Fontainebleau, did not feel any braver in the broad day-light, and found a thousand defects in the poor girl which he was most eager to communicate to the king. But his trial soon finished,—the courtyards were crossed; not a curtain was drawn aside, nor a window opened. The king walked hastily, because of his impatience, and the long legs of Saint-Aignan, who preceded him. At the door, however, Saint-Aignan wished to retire, but the king desired him to remain; a delicate consideration, on the king's part, which the courtier could very well have dispensed with. He had to follow Louis into La Vallière's apartment. As soon as the king arrived the young girl dried her tears, but so precipitately that the king perceived it. He questioned her most anxiously and tenderly, and pressed her to tell him the cause of her emotion.

"Nothing is the matter, sire," she said.

"And yet you were weeping?"

"Oh, no, indeed, sire."

"Look, Saint-Aignan, and tell me if I am mistaken."

Saint-Aignan ought to have answered, but he was too much embarrassed.

"At all events your eyes are red, mademoiselle," said the king.

"The dust of the road merely, sire."

"No, no; you no longer possess the air of supreme contentment which renders you so beautiful and so attractive. You do not look at me. Why avoid my gaze?" he said, as she turned aside her head.

"In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he inquired, beginning to lose command over himself.

"Nothing at all, sire; and I am perfectly ready to assure your majesty that my mind is as free from anxiety as you could possibly wish."

"Your mind at ease, when I see you are embarrassed at the slightest thing. Has any one annoyed you?"

"No, no, sire."

"I insist upon knowing if such really be the case," said the prince, his eyes sparkling.

"No one, sire, no one has in any way offended me."

"In that case, pray resume your gentle air of gayety, or that sweet melancholy look which I so loved in you this morning; for pity's sake, do so."

"Yes, sire, yes."

The king tapped the floor impatiently with his foot, saying, "Such a change is positively inexplicable." And he looked at Saint-Aignan, who had also remarked La Vallière's peculiar lethargy, as well as the king's impatience.

It was futile for the king to entreat, and as useless for him to try to overcome her depression: the poor girl was completely overwhelmed,—the appearance of an angel would hardly have awakened her from her torpor.

The king saw in her repeated negative replies a mystery full of unkindness; he began to look round the apartment with a suspicious air. There happened to be in La Vallière's room a miniature of Athos. The king remarked that this portrait bore a strong resemblance to Bragelonne, for it had been taken when the count was quite a young man. He looked at it with a threatening air. La Vallière, in her misery far indeed from thinking of this portrait, could not conjecture the cause of the king's preoccupation. And yet the king's mind was occupied with a terrible remembrance, which had more than once taken possession of his mind, but which he had always driven away. He recalled the intimacy existing between the two young people from their birth, their engagement, and that Athos himself had come to solicit La Vallière's hand for Raoul. He therefore could not but suppose that on her return to Paris, La Vallière had found news from London awaiting her, and that this news had counterbalanced the influence he had been enabled to exert over her. He immediately felt himself stung, as it were, by feelings of the wildest jealousy; and again questioned her, with increased bitterness. La Vallière could not reply, unless she were to acknowledge everything, which would be to accuse the queen, and Madame also; and the consequence would be, that she would have to enter into an open warfare with these two great and powerful princesses. She thought within herself that as she made no attempt to conceal from the king what was passing in her own mind, the king ought to be able to read in her heart, in spite of her silence; and that, had he really loved her, he would have understood and guessed everything. What was sympathy, then, if not that divine flame which possesses the property of enlightening the heart, and of saving lovers the necessity of an expression of their thoughts and feelings? She maintained her silence, therefore, sighing, and concealing her face in her hands. These sighs and tears, which had at first distressed, then terrified Louis XIV., now irritated him. He could not bear opposition,—the opposition which tears and sighs exhibited, any more than opposition of any other kind. His remarks, therefore, became bitter, urgent, and openly aggressive in their nature. This was a fresh cause of distress for the poor girl. From that very circumstance, therefore, which she regarded as an injustice on her lover's part, she drew sufficient courage to bear, not only her other troubles, but this one also.

The king next began to accuse her in direct terms. La Vallière did not even attempt to defend herself; she endured all his accusations without according any other reply than that of shaking her head; without any other remark than that which escapes the heart in deep distress—a prayerful appeal to Heaven for help. But this ejaculation, instead of calming the king's displeasure, rather increased it. He, moreover, saw himself seconded by Saint-Aignan, for Saint-Aignan, as we have observed, having seen the storm increasing, and not knowing the extent of the regard of which Louis XIV. was capable, felt, by anticipation, all the collected wrath of the three princesses, and the near approach of poor La Vallière's downfall, and he was not true knight enough to resist the fear that he himself might be dragged down in the impending ruin. Saint-Aignan did not reply to the king's questions except by short, dry remarks, pronounced half-aloud; and by abrupt gestures, whose object was to make things worse, and bring about a misunderstanding, the result of which would be to free him from the annoyance of having to cross the courtyards in open day, in order to follow his illustrious companion to La Vallière's apartments. In the meantime the king's anger momentarily increased; he made two or three steps towards the door as if to leave the room, but returned. The young girl did not, however, raise her head, although the sound of his footsteps might have warned her that her lover was leaving her. He drew himself up, for a moment, before her, with his arms crossed.

"For the last time, mademoiselle," he said, "will you speak? Will you assign a reason for this change, this fickleness, for this caprice?"

"What can I say?" murmured La Vallière. "Do you not see, sire, that I am completely overwhelmed at this moment; that I have no power of will, or thought, or speech?"

"Is it so difficult, then, to speak the truth? You could have told me the whole truth in fewer words than those in which you have expressed yourself."

"But the truth about what, sire?"

"About everything."

La Vallière was just on the point of revealing the truth to the king, her arms made a sudden movement as if they were about to open, but her lips remained silent, and her hands again fell listlessly by her side. The poor girl had not yet endured sufficient unhappiness to risk the necessary revelation. "I know nothing," she stammered out.

"Oh!" exclaimed the king, "this is no longer mere coquetry, or caprice, it is treason."

And this time nothing could restrain him. The impulse of his heart was not sufficient to induce him to turn back, and he darted out of the room with a gesture full of despair. Saint-Aignan followed him, wishing for nothing better than to quit the place.

Louis XIV. did not pause until he reached the staircase, and grasping the balustrade, said: "You see how shamefully I have been duped."

"How, sire?" inquired the favourite.

"De Guiche fought on the Vicomte de Bragelonne's account, and this Bragelonne... oh! Saint-Aignan, she still loves him. I vow to you, Saint-Aignan, that if, in three days from now, there were to remain but an atom of affection for her in my heart, I should die from very shame." And the king resumed his way to his own apartments.

"I told your majesty how it would be," murmured Saint-Aignan, continuing to follow the king, and timidly glancing up at the different windows.

Unfortunately their return was not, like their arrival, unobserved. A curtain was suddenly drawn aside; Madame was behind it. She had seen the king leave the apartments of the maids of honour, and as soon as she observed that his majesty had passed, she left her own apartments with hurried steps, and ran up the staircase that led to the room the king had just left.

XXV. Despair.

As soon as the king was gone La Vallière raised herself from the ground, and stretched out her arms, as if to follow and detain him, but when, having violently closed the door, the sound of his retreating footsteps could be heard in the distance, she had hardly sufficient strength left to totter towards and fall at the foot of her crucifix. There she remained, broken-hearted, absorbed, and overwhelmed by her grief, forgetful and indifferent to everything but her profound sorrow;—a grief she only vaguely realized—as though by instinct. In the midst of this wild tumult of thoughts, La Vallière heard her door open again; she started, and turned round, thinking it was the king who had returned. She was deceived, however, for it was Madame who appeared at the door. What did she now care for Madame! Again she sank down, her head supported by her *prie-Dieu* chair. It was Madame, agitated, angry, and threatening. But what was that to her? "Mademoiselle," said the princess, standing before La Vallière, "this is very fine, I admit, to kneel and pray, and make a pretense of being religious; but however submissive you may be in your address to Heaven, it is desirable that you should pay some little attention to the wishes of those who reign and rule here below."

La Vallière raised her head painfully in token of respect.

"Not long since," continued Madame, "a certain recommendation was addressed to you, I believe."

La Vallière's fixed and wild gaze showed how complete her forgetfulness or ignorance was.

"The queen recommended you," continued Madame, "to conduct yourself in such a manner that no one could be justified in spreading any reports about you."

La Vallière darted an inquiring look towards her.

"I will not," continued Madame, "allow my household, which is that of the first princess of the blood, to set an evil example to the court; you would be the cause of such an example. I beg you to understand, therefore, in the absence of any witness of your shame—for I do not wish to humiliate you—that you are from this moment at perfect liberty to leave, and that you can return to your mother at Blois."

La Vallière could not sink lower, nor could she suffer more than she had already suffered. Her countenance did not even change, but she remained kneeling with her hands clasped, like the figure of the Magdalen.

"Did you hear me?" said Madame.

A shiver, which passed through her whole frame, was La Vallière's only reply. And as the victim gave no other signs of life, Madame left the room. And then, her very respiration suspended, and her blood almost congealed, as it were, in her veins, La Vallière by degrees felt that the pulsation of her wrists, her neck, and temples, began to throb more and more painfully. These pulsations, as they gradually increased, soon changed into a species of brain fever, and in her temporary delirium she saw the figures of her friends contending with her enemies, floating before her vision. She heard, too, mingled together in her deafened ears, words of menace and words of fond affection; she seemed raised out of her existence as though it were upon the wings of a mighty tempest, and in the dim horizon of the path along which her delirium hurried her, she saw the stone which covered her tomb upraised, and the grim, appalling texture of eternal night revealed to her distracted gaze. But the horror of the dream which possessed her senses faded away, and she was again restored to the habitual resignation of her character. A ray of hope penetrated her heart, as a ray of sunlight streams into the dungeon of some unhappy captive. Her mind reverted to the journey from Fontainebleau, she saw the king riding beside her carriage, telling her that he loved her, asking for her love in return, requiring her to swear, and himself to swear too, that never should an evening pass by, if ever a misunderstanding were to arise between them, without a visit, a letter, a sign of some kind, being sent, to replace the troubled anxiety of the evening with the calm repose of the night. It was the king who had suggested that, who had imposed a promise on her, and who had sworn to it himself. It was impossible, therefore, she reasoned, that the king should fail in keeping the promise which he had himself exacted from her, unless, indeed, Louis was a despot who enforced love as he enforced obedience; unless, too, the king were so indifferent that the first obstacle in his way was sufficient to arrest his further progress. The king, that kind protector, who by a word, a single word, could relieve her distress of mind, the king even joined her persecutors. Oh! his anger could not possibly last. Now that he was alone, he would be suffering all that she herself was a prey to. But he was not tied hand and foot as she was; he could act, could move about, could come to her, while she could do nothing but wait. And the poor girl waited and waited, with breathless anxiety—for she could not believe it possible that the king would not come.

It was now about half-past ten. He would either come to her, or write to her, or send some kind word by M. de Saint-Aignan. If he were to come, oh! how she would fly to meet him; how she would thrust aside that excess of delicacy which she now discovered was misunderstood; how eagerly she would explain: "It is not I who do not love you—it is the fault of others who will not allow me to love you." And then it must be confessed that she reflected upon it, and also the more she reflected, Louis appeared to her to be less guilty. In fact, he was ignorant of everything. What must he have thought of the obstinacy with which she remained silent? Impatient and irritable as the king was known to be, it was extraordinary that he had been able to preserve his temper so long. And yet, had it been her own case, she undoubtedly would not have acted in such a manner; she would have understood—have guessed everything. Yes, but she was nothing but a poor simple-minded girl, and not a great and powerful monarch. Oh! if he would but come, if he would but come!—how eagerly she would forgive him for all he had just made her suffer! how much more tenderly she would love him because she had so cruelly suffered! And so she sat, with her head bent forward in eager expectation towards the door, her lips slightly parted, as if—and Heaven forgive her for the mental exclamation!—they were awaiting the kiss which the king's lips had in the morning so sweetly indicated, when he pronounced the word *love*! If the king did not come, at least he would write; it was a second chance; a chance less delightful certainly than the other, but which would show an affection just as strong, only more timid in its nature. Oh! how she would devour his letter, how eager she would be to answer it! and when the messenger who had brought it had left her, how she would kiss it, read it over and over again, press to her heart the lucky paper which would have brought her ease of mind, tranquillity, and perfect happiness. At all events, if the king did not come, if the king did not write, he could not do otherwise than send Saint-Aignan, or Saint-Aignan could not do otherwise than come of his own accord. Even if it were a third person, how openly she would speak to him; the royal presence would not be there to freeze her words upon her tongue, and then no suspicious feeling would remain a moment longer in the king's heart.

Everything with La Vallière, heart and look, body and mind, was concentrated in eager expectation. She said to herself that there was an hour left in which to indulge hope; that until midnight struck, the king might come, or write or send; that at midnight only would every expectation vanish, every hope be lost. Whenever she heard any stir in the palace, the poor girl fancied she was the cause of it; whenever she heard any one pass in the courtyard below she imagined they were messengers of the king coming to her. Eleven o'clock struck, then a quarter-past eleven; then half-past. The minutes dragged slowly on in this anxiety, and yet they seemed to pass too quickly. And now, it struck a quarter to twelve. Midnight—midnight was near, the last, the final hope that remained. With the last stroke of the clock, the last ray of light seemed to fade away; and with the last ray faded her final hope. And so, the king himself had deceived her; it was he who had been the first to fail in keeping the oath which he had sworn that very day; twelve hours only between his oath and his perjured vow; it was not long, alas! to have preserved the illusion. And so, not only did the king not love her, but he despised her whom every one ill-treated, he despised her to the extent even of abandoning her to the shame of an expulsion which was equivalent to having an ignominious sentence passed on her; and yet, it was he, the king himself, who was the first cause of this ignominy. A bitter smile, the only symptom of anger which during this long conflict had passed across the angelic face, appeared upon her lips. What, in fact, now remained on earth for her, after the king was lost to her? Nothing. But Heaven still remained, and her thoughts flew thither. She prayed that the proper course for her to follow might be suggested. "It is from Heaven," she thought, "that I expect everything; it is from Heaven I ought to expect everything." And she looked at her crucifix with a devotion full of tender love. "There," she said, "hangs before me a Master who never forgets and never abandons those who neither forget nor abandon Him; it is to Him alone that we must sacrifice ourselves." And, thereupon, could any one have gazed into the recesses of that chamber, they would have seen the poor despairing girl adopt a final resolution, and determine upon one last plan in her mind. Then, as her knees were no longer able to support her, she gradually sank down upon the *prie-Dieu*, and with her head pressed against the wooden cross, her eyes fixed, and her respiration short and quick, she watched for the earliest rays of approaching daylight. At two o'clock in the morning she was still in the same bewilderment of mind, or rather the same ecstasy of feeling. Her thoughts had almost ceased to hold communion with things of the world. And when she saw the pale violet tints of early dawn visible over the roofs of the palace, and vaguely revealing the outlines of the ivory crucifix which she held embraced, she rose from the ground with a new-born strength, kissed the feet of the divine martyr, descended the staircase leading from the room, and wrapped herself from head to foot in a mantle as she went along. She reached the wicket at the very moment the guard of the musketeers opened the gate to admit the first relief-guard belonging to one of the Swiss regiments. And then, gliding behind the soldiers, she reached the street before the officer in command of the patrol had even thought of asking who the young girl was who was making her escape from the palace at so early an hour.

#### XXVI. The Flight.

La Vallière followed the patrol as it left the courtyard. The patrol bent its steps towards the right, by the Rue St. Honore, and mechanically La Vallière turned to the left. Her resolution was taken—her determination fixed; she wished to betake herself to the convent of the Carmelites at Chaillot, the superior of which enjoyed a reputation for severity which made the worldly-minded people of the court tremble. La Vallière had never seen Paris, she had never gone out on foot, and so would have been unable to find her way even had she been in a calmer frame of mind than was then the case; and this may explain why she ascended, instead of descending, the Rue St. Honore. Her only thought was to get away from the Palais Royal, and this she was doing; she had heard it said that Chaillot looked out upon the Seine, and she accordingly directed her steps towards the Seine. She took the Rue de Coq, and not being able to cross the Louvre, bore towards the church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, proceeding along the site of the colonnade which was subsequently built there by Perrault. In a very short time she reached the quays. Her steps were rapid and agitated; she scarcely felt the weakness which reminded her of having sprained her foot when very young, and which obliged her to limp slightly. At any other hour in the day her countenance would have awakened the suspicions of the least clear-sighted, attracted the attention of the most indifferent. But at half-past two in the morning, the streets of Paris are almost, if not quite, deserted, and scarcely is any one to be seen but the hard-working artisan on his way to earn his daily bread or the roistering idlers of the streets, who are returning to their homes after a night of riot and debauchery; for the former the day was beginning, and for the latter it was just closing. La Vallière was afraid of both faces, in which her ignorance of Parisian types did not permit her to distinguish the type of probity from that of dishonesty. The appearance of misery alarmed her, and all she met seemed either vile or miserable. Her dress, which was the same she had worn during the previous evening, was elegant even in its careless disorder; for it was the one in which she had presented herself to the queen-mother; and, moreover, when she drew aside the mantle which covered her face, in order to enable her to see the way she was going, her pallor and her beautiful eyes spoke an unknown language to the men she met, and, unconsciously, the poor fugitive seemed to invite the brutal remarks of the one class, or to appeal to the compassion of the other. La Vallière still walked on in the same way, breathless and hurried, until she reached the top of the Place de Greve. She stopped from time to time, placed her hand upon her heart, leaned against a wall until she could breathe freely again, and then continued on her course more rapidly than before. On reaching the Place de Greve La Vallière suddenly came upon a group of three drunken men, reeling and staggering along, who were just leaving a boat which they had made fast to the quay; the boat was freighted with wines, and it was apparent that they had done ample justice to the merchandise. They were celebrating their convivial exploits in three different keys, when suddenly, as they reached the end of the railing leading down to the quay, they found an obstacle in their path, in the shape of this young girl. La Vallière stopped; while they, on their part, at the appearance of the young girl dressed in court costume, also halted, and seizing each other by the hand, they surrounded La Vallière, singing,—

"Oh! all ye weary wights, who mope alone, Come drink, and sing and laugh, round Venus' throne."

La Vallière at once understood that the men were insulting her, and wished to prevent her passing; she tried to do so several times, but her efforts were useless. Her limbs failed her; she felt she was on the point of falling, and uttered a cry of terror. At the same moment the circle which surrounded her was suddenly broken through in a most violent manner. One of her insulters was knocked to the left, another fell rolling over and over to the right, close to the water's edge, while the third could hardly keep his feet. An officer of the musketeers stood face to face with the young girl, with threatening brow and hand raised to carry out his threat. The drunken fellows, at sight of the uniform, made their escape with what speed their staggering limbs could lend them, all the more eagerly for the proof of strength which the wearer of the uniform had just afforded them.

"Is it possible," exclaimed the musketeer, "that it can be Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

La Vallière, bewildered by what had just happened, and confounded by hearing her name pronounced, looked up and recognized D'Artagnan. "Oh, M. d'Artagnan! it is indeed I;" and at the same moment she seized his arm. "You will protect me, will you not?" she added, in a tone of entreaty.

"Most certainly I will protect you; but, in Heaven's name, where are you going at this hour?"

"I am going to Chaillot."

"You are going to Chaillot by way of La Rapee! why, mademoiselle, you are turning your back upon it."

"In that case, monsieur, be kind enough to put me in the right way, and to go with me a short distance."

"Most willingly."

"But how does it happen that I have found you here? By what merciful intervention were you sent to my assistance? I almost seem to be dreaming, or to be losing my senses."

"I happened to be here, mademoiselle, because I have a house in the Place de Greve, at the sign of the Notre-Dame, the rent of which I went to receive yesterday, and where I, in fact, passed the night. And I also wished to be at the palace early, for the purposes of inspecting my posts."

"Thank you," said La Vallière.

"That is what *I* was doing," said D'Artagnan to himself, "but what is *she* doing, and why is she going to Chaillot at such an hour?" And he offered her his arm, which she took, and began to walk with increased precipitation, which ill-concealed, however, her weakness. D'Artagnan perceived it, and proposed to La Vallière that she should take a little rest, which she refused.

"You are ignorant, perhaps, where Chaillot is?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Quite so."

"It is a great distance."

"That matters very little."

"It is at least a league."

"I can walk it."

D'Artagnan did not reply; he could tell, merely by the tone of a voice, when a resolution was real or not. He rather bore along rather than accompanied La Vallière, until they perceived the elevated ground of Chaillot.

"What house are you going to, mademoiselle?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"To the Carmelites, monsieur."

"To the Carmelites?" repeated D'Artagnan, in amazement.

"Yes; and since Heaven has directed you towards me to give me your support on my road, accept both my thanks and my adieux."

"To the Carmelites! Your adieux! Are you going to become a nun?" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Yes, monsieur."

"What, you!!!!" There was in this "you," which we have marked by three notes of exclamation in order to render it as expressive as possible,—there was, we repeat, in this "you" a complete poem; it recalled to La Vallière her old recollections of Blois, and her new recollections of Fontainebleau; it said to her, "*You*, who might be happy with Raoul; *you*, who might be powerful with Louis; *you* about to become a nun!"

"Yes, monsieur," she said, "I am going to devote myself to the service of Heaven; and to renounce the world entirely."

"But are you not mistaken with regard to your vocation,—are you not mistaken in supposing it to be the will of Heaven?"

"No, since Heaven has been pleased to throw you in my way. Had it not been for you, I should certainly have sunk from fatigue on the road, and since Heaven, I repeat, has thrown you in my way, it is because it has willed that I should carry out my intention."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, doubtingly, "that is a rather subtle distinction, I think."

"Whatever it may be," returned the young girl, "I have acquainted you with the steps I have taken, and with my fixed resolution. And, now, I have one last favour to ask of you, even while I return you my thanks. The king is entirely ignorant of my flight from the Palais Royal, and is ignorant also of what I am about to do."

"The king ignorant, you say!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Take care, mademoiselle; you are not aware of what you are doing. No one ought to do anything with which the king is unacquainted, especially those who belong to the court."

"I no longer belong to the court, monsieur."

D'Artagnan looked at the young girl with increasing astonishment.

"Do not be uneasy, monsieur," she continued: "I have well calculated everything; and were it not so, it would now be too late to reconsider my resolution,—all is decided."

"Well, mademoiselle, what do you wish me to do?"

"In the name of that sympathy which misfortune inspires, by your generous feeling, and by your honour as a gentleman, I entreat you to promise me one thing."

"Name it."



“Swear to me, Monsieur d’Artagnan, that you will not tell the king that you have seen me, and that I am at the Carmelites.”

“I will not swear that,” said D’Artagnan, shaking his head.

“Why?”

“Because I know the king, I know you, I know myself even, nay, the whole human race, too well; no, no, I will not swear that!”

“In that case,” cried La Vallière, with an energy of which one would hardly have thought her capable, “instead of the blessing which I should have implored for you until my dying day, I will invoke a curse, for you are rendering me the most miserable creature that ever lived.”

We have already observed that D’Artagnan could easily recognize the accents of truth and sincerity, and he could not resist this last appeal. He saw by her face how bitterly she suffered from a feeling of degradation, he remarked her trembling limbs, how her whole slight and delicate frame was violently agitated by some internal struggle, and clearly perceived that resistance might be fatal. “I will do as you wish, then,” he said. “Be satisfied, mademoiselle, I will say nothing to the king.”

“Oh! thanks, thanks,” exclaimed La Vallière, “you are the most generous man breathing.”

And in her extreme delight she seized hold of D’Artagnan’s hands and pressed them between her own. D’Artagnan, who felt himself quite overcome, said: “This is touching, upon my word; she begins where others leave off.”

And La Vallière, who, in the bitterness of her distress, had sunk upon the ground, rose and walked towards the convent of the Carmelites, which could now, in the dawning light, be perceived just before them. D’Artagnan followed her at a distance. The entrance-door was half-open; she glided in like a shadow, and thanking D’Artagnan by a parting gesture, disappeared from his sight. When D’Artagnan found himself quite alone, he reflected very profoundly upon what had just taken place. “Upon my word,” he said, “this looks very much like what is called a false position. To keep such a secret as that, is to keep a burning coal in one’s breeches-pocket, and trust that it may not burn the stuff. And yet, not to keep it when I have sworn to do so is dishonourable. It generally happens that some bright idea or other occurs to me as I am going along; but I am very much mistaken if I shall not, now, have to go a long way in order to find the solution of this affair. Yes, but which way to go? Oh! towards Paris, of course; that is the best way, after all. Only one must make haste, and in order to make haste four legs are better than two, and I, unhappily, only have two. ‘A horse, a horse,’ as I heard them say at the theatre in London, ‘my kingdom for a horse!’ And now I think of it, it need not cost me so much as that, for at the Barriere de la Conference there is a guard of musketeers, and instead of the one horse I need, I shall find ten there.”

So, in pursuance of this resolution, which he adopted with his usual rapidity, D’Artagnan immediately turned his back upon the heights of Chaillot, reached the guard-house, took the fastest horse he could find there, and was at the palace in less than ten minutes. It was striking five as he reached the Palais Royal. The king, he was told, had gone to bed at his usual hour, having been long engaged with M. Colbert, and, in all probability, was still sound asleep. “Come,” said D’Artagnan, “she spoke the truth; the king is ignorant of everything; if he only knew one-half of what has happened, the Palais Royal by this time would be turned upside down.” <sup>5</sup>

XXVII. Showing How Louis, on His Part, Had Passed the Time from Ten to Half-Past Twelve at Night.

When the king left the apartments of the maids of honour, he found Colbert awaiting him to take directions for the next day’s ceremony, as the king was then to receive the Dutch and Spanish ambassadors. Louis XIV. had serious causes of dissatisfaction with the Dutch; the States had already been guilty of many mean shifts and evasions with France, and without perceiving or without caring about the chances of a rupture, they again abandoned the alliance with his Most Christian Majesty, for the purpose of entering into all kinds of plots with Spain. Louis XIV. at his accession, that is to say, at the death of Cardinal Mazarin, had found this political question roughly sketched out; the solution was difficult for a young man, but as, at that time, the king represented the whole nation, anything that the head resolved upon, the body would be found ready to carry out. Any sudden impulse of anger, the reaction of young hot blood upon the brain, would be quite sufficient to change an old form of policy and create another system altogether. The part that diplomatists had to play in those days was that of arranging among themselves the different *coups-d’etat* which their sovereign masters might wish to effect. Louis was not in that calm frame of mind which was necessary to enable him to determine on a wise course of policy. Still much agitated from the quarrel he had just had with La Vallière, he walked hastily into his cabinet, dimly desirous of finding an opportunity of producing an explosion after he had controlled himself for so long a time. Colbert, as he saw the king enter, knew the position of affairs at a glance, understood the king’s intentions, and resolved therefore to maneuver a little. When Louis requested to be informed what it would be necessary to say on the morrow, Colbert began by expressing his surprise that his majesty had not been properly informed by M. Fouquet. “M. Fouquet,” he said, “is perfectly acquainted with the whole of this Dutch affair—he received the dispatches himself direct.”

The king, who was accustomed to hear M. Colbert speak in not over-scrupulous terms of M. Fouquet, allowed this remark to pass unanswered, and merely listened. Colbert noticed the effect it had produced, and hastened to back out, saying that M. Fouquet was not on all occasions as blamable as at the first glance might seem to be the case, inasmuch as at that moment he was greatly occupied. The king looked up. “What do you allude to?” he said.

“Sire, men are but men, and M. Fouquet has his defects as well as his great qualities.”

“Ah! defects, who is without them, M. Colbert?”

“Your majesty, hardly,” said Colbert, boldly; for he knew how to convey a good deal of flattery in a light amount of blame, like the arrow which cleaves the air notwithstanding its weight, thanks to the light feathers which bear it up.

The king smiled. “What defect has M. Fouquet, then?” he said.

“Still the same, sire; it is said he is in love.”

“In love! with whom?”

“I am not quite sure, sire; I have very little to do with matters of gallantry.”

“At all events you know, since you speak of it.”

“I have heard a name mentioned.”

“Whose?”

“I cannot now remember whose, but I think it is one of Madame’s maids of honour.”

The king started. “You know more than you like to say, M. Colbert,” he murmured.

“I assure you, no, sire.”

“At all events, Madame’s maids of honour are all known, and in mentioning their names to you, you will perhaps recollect the one you allude to.”

“No, sire.”

“At least, try.”

“It would be useless, sire. Whenever the name of any lady who runs the risk of being compromised is concerned, my memory is like a coffer of bronze, the key of which I have lost.”

A dark cloud seemed to pass over the mind as well as across the face of the king; then, wishing to appear as if he were perfect master of himself and his feelings, he said, “And now for the affair concerning Holland.”

“In the first place, sire, at what hour will your majesty receive the ambassadors?”

“Early in the morning.”

“Eleven o’clock?”

“That is too late—say nine o’clock.”

“That will be too early, sire.”

“For friends, that would be a matter of no importance; one does what one likes with one’s friends; but for one’s enemies, in that case nothing could be better than if they *were* to feel hurt. I should not be sorry, I confess, to have to finish altogether with these marsh-birds, who annoy me with their cries.”

“It shall be precisely as your majesty desires. At nine o’clock, therefore—I will give the necessary orders. Is it to be a formal audience?”

“No. I wish to have an explanation with them, and not to embitter matters, as is always the case when many persons are present, but, at the same time, I wish to clear up everything with them, in order not to have to begin over again.”

“Your majesty will inform me of the persons whom you wish to be present at the reception.”

“I will draw out a list. Let us speak of the ambassadors; what do they want?”

“Allies with Spain, they gain nothing; allies with France, they lose much.”

“How is that?”

“Allied with Spain, they see themselves bounded and protected by the possessions of their allies; they cannot touch them, however anxious they may be to do so. From Antwerp to Rotterdam is but a step, and that by the way of the Scheldt and the Meuse. If they wish to make a bite at the Spanish cake, you, sire, the son-in-law of the king of Spain, could with your cavalry sweep the earth from your dominions to Brussels in a couple of days. Their design is, therefore, only to quarrel so far with you, and only to make you suspect Spain so far, as will be sufficient to induce you not to interfere with their own affairs.”

“It would be far more simple, I should imagine,” replied the king, “to form a solid alliance with me, by means of which I should gain something, while they would gain everything.”

“Not so; for if, by chance, they were to have you, or France rather, as a boundary, your majesty is not an agreeable neighbor. Young, ardent, warlike, the king of France might inflict some serious mischief on Holland, especially if he were to get near her.”

“I perfectly understand, M. Colbert, and you have explained it very clearly; but be good enough to tell me the conclusion you have arrived at.”

“Your majesty’s own decisions are never deficient in wisdom.”

“What will these ambassadors say to me?”

“They will tell your majesty that they are ardently desirous of forming an alliance with you, which will be a falsehood: they will tell Spain that the three powers ought to unite so as to check the prosperity of England, and that will equally be a falsehood; for at present, the natural ally of your majesty is England, who has ships while we have none; England, who can counteract Dutch influence in India; England, in fact, a monarchical country, to which your majesty is attached by ties of relationship.”

“Good; but how would you answer?”

“I should answer, sire, with the greatest possible moderation of tone, that the disposition of Holland does not seem friendly towards the Court of France; that the symptoms of public feeling among the Dutch are alarming as regards your majesty; that certain medals have been struck with insulting devices.”

“Towards me?” exclaimed the young king, excitedly.

“Oh, no! sire, no; insulting is not the word; I was mistaken, I ought to have said immeasurably flattering to the Dutch.”

“Oh! if that be so, the pride of the Dutch is a matter of indifference to me,” said the king, sighing.

“Your majesty is right, a thousand times right. However, it is never a mistake in politics, your majesty knows better than myself, to exaggerate a little in order to obtain a concession in your own favour. If your majesty were to complain as if your susceptibility were offended, you would stand in a far higher position with them.”

“What are these medals you speak of?” inquired Louis; “for if I allude to them, I ought to know what to say.”

“Upon my word, sire, I cannot very well tell you—some overweeningly conceited device—that is the sense of it; the words have little to do with the thing itself.”

“Very good! I will mention the word ‘medal,’ and they can understand it if they like.”

“Oh! they will understand without any difficulty. Your majesty can also slip in a few words about certain pamphlets which are being circulated.”

“Never! Pamphlets befoul those who write them much more than those against whom they are written. M. Colbert, I thank you. You can leave now. Do not forget the hour I have fixed, and be there yourself.”

“Sire, I await your majesty’s list.”

“True,” returned the king; and he began to meditate; he had not thought of the list in the least. The clock struck half-past eleven. The king’s face revealed a violent conflict between pride and love. The political conversation had dispelled a good deal of the irritation which Louis had felt, and La Vallière’s pale, worn features, in his imagination, spoke a very different language from that of the Dutch medals, or the Batavian pamphlets. He sat for ten minutes debating within himself whether he should or should not return to La Vallière; but Colbert having with some urgency respectfully requested



that the list might be furnished him, the king was ashamed to be thinking of mere matters of affection where important state affairs required his attention. He therefore dictated: the queen-mother, the queen, Madame, Madame de Motteville, Madame de Chatillon, Madame de Navailles; and, for the men, M. le Prince, M. de Gramont, M. de Manicamp, M. de Saint-Aignan, and the officers on duty. "The ministers?" asked Colbert.

"As a matter of course, and the secretaries also."

"Sire, I will leave at once in order to get everything prepared; the orders will be at the different residences to-morrow."

"Say rather to-day," replied Louis mournfully, as the clock struck twelve. It was the very hour when poor La Vallière was almost dying from anguish and bitter suffering. The king's attendants entered, it being the hour of his retirement to his chamber; the queen, indeed, had been waiting for more than an hour. Louis accordingly retreated to his bedroom with a sigh; but, as he sighed, he congratulated himself on his courage, and applauded himself for having been as firm in love as in affairs of state.

XXVIII. The Ambassadors.

D'Artagnan had, with very few exceptions, learned almost all of the particulars of what we have just been relating; for among his friends he reckoned all the useful, serviceable people in the royal household,—officious attendants who were proud of being recognized by the captain of the musketeers, for the captain's influence was very great; and then, in addition to any ambitious views they may have imagined he could promote, they were proud of being regarded as worth being spoken to by a man as brave as D'Artagnan. In this manner D'Artagnan learned every morning what he had not been able either to see or to ascertain the night before, from the simple fact of his not being ubiquitous; so that, with the information he had been able by his own means to pick up during the day, and with what he had gathered from others, he succeeded in making up a bundle of weapons, which he was in the prudent habit of using only when occasion required. In this way, D'Artagnan's two eyes rendered him the same service as the hundred eyes of Argus. Political secrets, bedside revelations, hints or scraps of conversation dropped by the courtiers on the threshold of the royal ante-chamber, in this way D'Artagnan managed to ascertain, and to store away everything in the vast and impenetrable mausoleum of his memory, by the side of those royal secrets so dearly bought and faithfully preserved. He therefore knew of the king's interview with Colbert, and of the appointment made for the ambassadors in the morning, and, consequently, that the question of the medals would be brought up for debate; and, while he was arranging and constructing the conversation upon a few chance words which had reached his ears, he returned to his post in the royal apartments, so as to be there at the very moment the king awoke. It happened that the king rose very early,—proving thereby that he, too, on his side, had slept but indifferently. Towards seven o'clock, he half-opened his door very gently. D'Artagnan was at his post. His majesty was pale, and seemed wearied; he had not, moreover, quite finished dressing.

"Send for M. de Saint-Aignan," he said.

Saint-Aignan was probably awaiting a summons, for the messenger, when he reached his apartment, found him already dressed. Saint-Aignan hastened to the king in obedience to the summons. A moment afterwards the king and Saint-Aignan passed by together—the king walking first. D'Artagnan went to the window which looked out upon the courtyard; he had no need to put himself to the trouble of watching in what direction the king went, for he had no difficulty in guessing beforehand where his majesty was going. The king, in fact, bent his steps towards the apartments of the maids of honour,—a circumstance which in no way astonished D'Artagnan, for he more than suspected, although La Vallière had not breathed a syllable on the subject, that the king had some kind of reparation to make. Saint-Aignan followed him as he had done the previous evening, rather less uneasy in his mind, though still slightly agitated, for he fervently trusted that at seven o'clock in the morning there might be only himself and the king awake amongst the august guests at the palace. D'Artagnan stood at the window, careless and perfectly calm in his manner. One could almost have sworn that he noticed nothing, and was utterly ignorant who were these two hunters after adventures, passing like shadows across the courtyard, wrapped up in their cloaks. And yet, all the while that D'Artagnan appeared not to be looking at them at all, he did not for one moment lose sight of them, and while he whistled that old march of the musketeers, which he rarely recalled except under great emergencies, he conjectured and prophesied how terrible would be the storm which would be raised on the king's return. In fact, when the king entered La Vallière's apartment and found the room empty and the bed untouched, he began to be alarmed, and called out to Montalais, who immediately answered the summons; but her astonishment was equal to the king's. All that she could tell his majesty was, that she had fancied she had heard La Vallière's weeping during a portion of the night, but, knowing that his majesty had paid her a visit, she had not dared to inquire what was the matter.

"But," inquired the king, "where do you suppose she is gone?"

"Sire," replied Montalais, "Louise is of a very sentimental disposition, and as I have often seen her rise at daybreak in order to go out into the garden, she may, perhaps, be there now."

This appeared probable, and the king immediately ran down the staircase in search of the fugitive. D'Artagnan saw him grow very pale, and talking in an excited manner with his companion, as he went towards the gardens; Saint-Aignan following him, out of breath. D'Artagnan did not stir from the window, but went on whistling, looking as if he saw nothing, yet seeing everything. "Come, come," he murmured, when the king disappeared, "his majesty's passion is stronger than I thought; he is now doing, I think, what he never did for Mademoiselle de Mancini." 6

In a quarter of an hour the king again appeared: he had looked everywhere, was completely out of breath, and, as a matter of course, had not discovered anything. Saint-Aignan, who still followed him, was fanning himself with his hat, and in a gasping voice, asking for information about La Vallière from such of the servants as were about, in fact from every one he met. Among others he came across Manicamp, who had arrived from Fontainebleau by easy stages; for whilst others had performed the journey in six hours, he had taken four and twenty.

"Have you seen Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" Saint-Aignan asked him.

Whereupon Manicamp, dreamy and absent as usual, answered, thinking that some one was asking him about De Guiche, "Thank you, the comte is a little better."

And he continued on his way until he reached the ante-chamber where D'Artagnan was, whom he asked to explain how it was that the king looked, as he thought, so bewildered; to which D'Artagnan replied that he was quite mistaken, that the king, on the contrary, was as lively and merry as he could possibly be.

In the midst of all this, eight o'clock struck. It was usual for the king to take his breakfast at this hour, for the code of etiquette prescribed that the king should always be hungry at eight o'clock. His breakfast was laid upon a small table in his bedroom, and he ate very fast. Saint-Aignan, of whom he would not lose sight, waited on the king. He then disposed of several military audiences, during which he dispatched Saint-Aignan to see what he could find out. Then, still occupied, full of anxiety, still watching Saint-Aignan's return, who had sent out the servants in every direction, to make inquires, and who had also gone himself, the hour of nine struck, and the king forthwith passed into his large cabinet.

As the clock was striking nine the ambassadors entered, and as it finished, the two queens and Madame made their appearance. There were three ambassadors from Holland, and two from Spain. The king glanced at them, and then bowed; and, at the same moment, Saint-Aignan entered,—an entrance which the king regarded as far more important, in a different sense, however, than that of ambassadors, however numerous they might be, and from whatever country they came; and so, setting everything aside, the king made a sign of interrogation to Saint-Aignan, which the latter answered by a most decisive negative. The king almost entirely lost his courage; but as the queens, the members of the nobility who were present, and the ambassadors, had their eyes fixed upon him, he overcame his emotion by a violent effort, and invited the latter to speak. Whereupon one of the Spanish deputies made a long oration, in which he boasted the advantages which the Spanish alliance would offer.

The king interrupted him, saying, "Monsieur, I trust that whatever is best for France must be exceedingly advantageous for Spain."

This remark, and particularly the peremptory tone in which it was pronounced, made the ambassadors pale, and brought the colour into the cheeks of the two queens, who, being Spanish, felt wounded in their pride of relationship and nationality by this reply.

The Dutch ambassador then began to address himself to the king, and complained of the injurious suspicions which the king exhibited against the government of his country.

The king interrupted him, saying, "It is very singular, monsieur, that you should come with any complaint, when it is I rather who have reason to be dissatisfied; and yet, you see, I do not complain."

"Complain, sire, and in what respect?"

The king smiled bitterly. "Will you blame me, monsieur," he said, "if I should happen to entertain suspicions against a government which authorizes and protects international impertinence?"

"Sire!"

"I tell you," resumed the king, exciting himself by a recollection of his own personal annoyance, rather than from political grounds, "that Holland is a land of refuge for all who hate me, and especially for all who malign me."

"Oh, sire!"

"You wish for proofs, perhaps? Very good; they can be had easily enough. Whence proceed all those vile and insolent pamphlets which represent me as a monarch without glory and without authority? your printing-presses groan under their number. If my secretaries were here, I would mention the titles of the works as well as the names of the printers."

"Sire," replied the ambassador, "a pamphlet can hardly be regarded as the work of a whole nation. Is it just, is it reasonable, that a great and powerful monarch like your majesty should render a whole nation responsible for the crime of a few madmen, who are, perhaps, only scribbling in a garret for a few sous to buy bread for their family?"

"That may be the case, I admit. But when the mint itself, at Amsterdam, strikes off medals which reflect disgrace upon me, is that also the crime of a few madmen?"

"Medals!" stammered out the ambassador.

"Medals," repeated the king, looking at Colbert.

"Your majesty," the ambassador ventured, "should be quite sure—"

The king still looked at Colbert; but Colbert appeared not to understand him, and maintained an unbroken silence, notwithstanding the king's repeated hints. D'Artagnan then approached the king, and taking a piece of money out of his pocket, he placed it in the king's hands, saying, "*This* is the medal your majesty alludes to."

The king looked at it, and with a look which, ever since he had become his own master, was ever piercing as the eagle's, observed an insulting device representing Holland arresting the progress of the sun, with this inscription: "*In conspectu meo stetit sol.*"

"In my presence the sun stands still," exclaimed the king, furiously. "Ah! you will hardly deny it now, I suppose."

"And the sun," said D'Artagnan, "is this," as he pointed to the panels of the cabinet, where the sun was brilliantly represented in every direction, with this motto, "*Nec pluribus impar.*" 7

Louis's anger, increased by the bitterness of his own personal sufferings, hardly required this additional circumstance to foment it. Every one saw, from the kindling passion in the king's eyes, that an explosion was imminent. A look from Colbert kept postponed the bursting of the storm. The ambassador ventured to frame excuses by saying that the vanity of nations was a matter of little consequence; that Holland was proud that, with such limited resources, she had maintained her rank as a great nation, even against powerful monarchs, and that if a little smoke had intoxicated his countrymen, the king would be kindly disposed, and would even excuse this intoxication. The king seemed as if he would be glad of some suggestion; he looked at Colbert, who remained impassible; then at D'Artagnan, who simply shrugged his shoulders, a movement which was like the opening of the flood-gates, whereby the king's anger, which he had restrained for so long a period, now burst forth. As no one knew what direction his anger might take, all preserved a dead silence. The second ambassador took advantage of it to begin his excuses also. While he was speaking, and while the king, who had again gradually returned to his own personal reflections, was automatically listening to the voice, full of nervous anxiety, with the air of an absent man listening to the murmuring of a cascade, D'Artagnan, on whose left hand Saint-Aignan was standing, approached the latter, and, in a voice which was loud enough to reach the king's ears, said: "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" said Saint-Aignan.

"About La Vallière."

The king started, and advanced his head.

"What has happened to La Vallière?" inquired Saint-Aignan, in a tone which can easily be imagined.

"Ah! poor girl! she is going to take the veil."

"The veil!" exclaimed Saint-Aignan.

"The veil!" cried the king, in the midst of the ambassador's discourse; but then, mindful of the rules of etiquette, he mastered himself, still listening, however, with rapt attention.

"What order?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"The Carmelites of Chaillot."

"Who the deuce told you that?"

"She did herself."

"You have seen her, then?"

"Nay, I even went with her to the Carmelites."

The king did not lose a syllable of this conversation; and again he could hardly control his feelings.

"But what was the cause of her flight?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"Because the poor girl was driven away from the court yesterday," replied D'Artagnan.

He had no sooner said this, than the king, with an authoritative gesture, said to the ambassador, "Enough, monsieur, enough." Then, advancing towards the captain, he exclaimed:

"Who says Mademoiselle de la Vallière is going to take the religious vows?"

"M. d'Artagnan," answered the favourite.

"Is it true what you say?" said the king, turning towards the musketeer.

"As true as truth itself."

The king clenched his hands, and turned pale.

"You have something further to add, M. d'Artagnan?" he said.

"I know nothing more, sire."

"You added that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had been driven away from the court."

"Yes, sire."

"Is that true, also?"

"Ascertain for yourself, sire."

"And from whom?"

"Ah!" sighed D'Artagnan, like a man who is declining to say anything further.

The king almost bounded from his seat, regardless of ambassadors, ministers, courtiers, queens, and politics. The queen-mother rose; she had heard everything, or, if she had not heard everything, she had guessed it. Madame, almost fainting from anger and fear, endeavored to rise as the queen-mother had done; but she sank down again upon her chair, which by an instinctive movement she made roll back a few paces.

"Gentlemen," said the king, "the audience is over; I will communicate my answer, or rather my will, to Spain and to Holland;" and with a proud, imperious gesture, he dismissed the ambassadors.

"Take care, my son," said the queen-mother, indignantly, "you are hardly master of yourself, I think."

"Ah! madame," returned the young lion, with a terrible gesture, "if I am not master of myself, I will be, I promise you, of those who do me a deadly injury; come with me, M. d'Artagnan, come." And he quitted the room in the midst of general stupefaction and dismay. The king hastily descended the staircase, and was about to cross the courtyard.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "your majesty mistakes the way."

"No; I am going to the stables."

"That is useless, sire, for I have horses ready for your majesty."

The king's only answer was a look, but this look promised more than the ambition of three D'Artagnans could have dared to hope.

XXIX. Chaillot.

Although they had not been summoned, Manicamp and Malicorne had followed the king and D'Artagnan. They were both exceedingly intelligent men; except that Malicorne was too precipitate, owing to ambition, while Manicamp was frequently too tardy, owing to indolence. On this occasion, however, they arrived at precisely the proper moment. Five horses were in readiness. Two were seized upon by the king and D'Artagnan, two others by Manicamp and Malicorne, while a groom belonging to the stables mounted the fifth. The cavalcade set off at a gallop. D'Artagnan had been very careful in his selection of the horses; they were the very animals for distressed lovers—horses which did not simply run, but flew. Within ten minutes after their departure, the cavalcade, amidst a cloud of dust, arrived at Chaillot. The king literally threw himself off his horse; but notwithstanding the rapidity with which he accomplished this maneuver, he found D'Artagnan already holding his stirrup. With a sign of acknowledgement to the musketeer, he threw the bridle to the groom, and darted into the vestibule, violently pushed open the door, and entered the reception-room. Manicamp, Malicorne, and the groom remained outside, D'Artagnan alone following him. When he entered the reception-room, the first object which met his gaze was Louise herself, not simply on her knees, but lying at the foot of a large stone crucifix. The young girl was stretched upon the damp flag-stones, scarcely visible in the gloom of the apartment, which was lighted only by means of a narrow window, protected by bars and completely shaded by creeping plants. When the king saw her in this state, he thought she was dead, and uttered a loud cry, which made D'Artagnan hurry into the room. The king had already passed one of his arms round her body, and D'Artagnan assisted him in raising the poor girl, whom the torpor of death seemed already to have taken possession of. D'Artagnan seized hold of the alarm-bell and rang with all his might. The Carmelite sisters immediately hastened at the summons, and uttered loud exclamations of alarm and indignation at the sight of the two men holding a woman in their arms. The superior also hurried to the scene of action, but far more a creature of the world than any of the female members of the court, notwithstanding her austerity of manners, she recognized the king at the first glance, by the respect which those present exhibited for him, as well as by the imperious and authoritative way in which he had thrown the whole establishment into confusion. As soon as she saw the king, she retired to her own apartments, in order to avoid compromising her dignity. But by one of the nuns she sent various cordials, Hungary water, etc., etc., and ordered that all the doors should immediately be closed, a command which was just in time, for the king's distress was fast becoming of a most clamorous and despairing character. He had almost decided to send for his own physician, when La Vallière exhibited signs of returning animation. The first object which met her gaze, as she opened her eyes, was the king at her feet; in all probability she did not recognize him, for she uttered a deep sigh full of anguish and distress. Louis fixed his eyes devouringly upon her face; and when, in the course of a few moments, she recognized Louis, she endeavored to tear herself from his embrace.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured, "is not the sacrifice yet made?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the king, "and it shall *not* be made, I swear."

Notwithstanding her weakness and utter despair, she rose from the ground, saying, "It must be made, however; it must be; so do not stay me in my purpose."

"I leave you to sacrifice yourself! !! never, never!" exclaimed the king.

"Well," murmured D'Artagnan, "I may as well go now. As soon as they begin to speak, we may as well prevent there being any listeners." And he quitted the room, leaving the lovers alone.

"Sire," continued La Vallière, "not another word, I implore you. Do not destroy the only future I can hope for—my salvation; do not destroy the glory and brightness of your own future for a mere caprice."

"A caprice?" cried the king.

"Oh, sire! it is now, only, that I can see clearly into your heart."

"You, Louise, what mean you?"

"An inexplicable impulse, foolish and unreasonable in its nature, may ephemerally appear to offer a sufficient excuse for your conduct; but there are duties imposed upon you which are incompatible with your regard for a poor girl such as I am. So, forget me."

"I forget you!"

"You have already done so, once."

"Rather would I die."

"You cannot love one whose peace of mind you hold so lightly, and whom you so cruelly abandoned, last night, to the bitterness of death."

"What can you mean? Explain yourself, Louise."

"What did you ask me yesterday morning? To love you. What did you promise me in return? Never to let midnight pass without offering me an opportunity of reconciliation, if, by any chance, your anger should be roused against me."

"Oh! forgive me, Louise, forgive me! I was mad from jealousy."

"Jealousy is a sentiment unworthy of a king—a man. You may become jealous again, and will end by killing me. Be merciful, then, and leave me now to die."

"Another word, mademoiselle, in that strain, and you will see me expire at your feet."

"No, no, sire, I am better acquainted with my own demerits; and believe me, that to sacrifice yourself for one whom all despise, would be needless."

"Give me the names of those you have cause to complain of."

"I have no complaints, sire, to prefer against any one; no one but myself to accuse. Farewell, sire; you are compromising yourself in speaking to me in such a manner."

"Oh! be careful, Louise, in what you say; for you are reducing me to the darkness of despair."

"Oh! sire, sire, leave me at least the protection of Heaven, I implore you."

"No, no; Heaven itself shall not tear you from me."

"Save me, then," cried the poor girl, "from those determined and pitiless enemies who are thirsting to annihilate my life and honour too. If you have courage enough to love me, show at least that you have power enough to defend me. But no; she whom you say you love, others insult and mock, and drive shamelessly away." And the gentle-hearted girl, forced, by her own bitter distress to accuse others, wrung her hands in an uncontrollable agony of tears.

"You have been driven away!" exclaimed the king. "This is the second time I have heard that said."

"I have been driven away with shame and ignominy, sire. You see, then, that I have no other protector but Heaven, no consolation but prayer, and this cloister is my only refuge."

"My palace, my whole court, shall be your park of peace. Oh! fear nothing further now, Louise; those—be they men or women—who yesterday drove you away, shall to-morrow tremble before you—to-morrow, do I say? nay, this very day I have already shown my displeasure—have already threatened. It is in my power, even now, to hurl the thunderbolt I have hitherto withheld. Louise, Louise, you shall be bitterly revenged; tears of blood shall repay you for the tears you have shed. Give me only the names of your enemies."

"Never, never."

"How can I show any anger, then?"

"Sire, those upon whom your anger would be prepared to fall, would force you to draw back your hand upraised to punish."

"Oh! you do not know me," cried the king, exasperated. "Rather than draw back, I would sacrifice my kingdom, and would abjure my family. Yes, I would strike until this arm had utterly destroyed all those who had ventured to make themselves the enemies of the gentlest and best of creatures." And, as he said these words, Louis struck his fist violently against the oaken wainscoting with a force which alarmed La Vallière; for his anger, owing to his unbounded power, had something imposing and threatening in it, like the lightning, which may at any time prove deadly. She, who thought that her own sufferings could not be surpassed, was overwhelmed by a suffering which revealed itself by menace and by violence.

"Sire," she said, "for the last time I implore you to leave me; already do I feel strengthened by the calm seclusion of this asylum; and the protection of Heaven has reassured me; for all the pretty human meanness of this world are forgotten beneath the Divine protection. Once more, then, sire, and for the last time, I again implore you to leave me."

"Confess, rather," cried Louis, "that you have never loved me; admit that my humility and my repentance are flattering to your pride, but that my distress affects you not; that the king of this wide realm is no longer regarded as a lover whose tenderness of devotion is capable of working out your happiness, but as a despot whose caprice has crushed your very heart beneath his iron heel. Do not say you are seeking Heaven, say rather you are fleeing from the king."

Louise's heart was wrung within her, as she listened to his passionate utterance, which made the fever of hope course once more through her every vein.

"But did you not hear me say that I have been driven away, scorned, despised?"

"I will make you the most respected, and most adored, and the most envied of my whole court."

"Prove to me that you have not ceased to love me."

"In what way?"

"By leaving me."

"I will prove it to you by never leaving you again."

"But do you imagine, sire, that I shall allow that; do you imagine that I will let you come to an open rupture with every member of your family; do you imagine that, for my sake, you could abandon mother, wife and sister?"

"Ah! you have named them, then, at last; it is they, then, who have wrought this grievous injury? By the heaven above us, then, upon them shall my anger fall."

"That is the reason why the future terrifies me, why I refuse everything, why I do not wish you to revenge me. Tears enough have already been shed, sufficient sorrow and affliction have already been occasioned. I, at least, will never be the cause of sorrow, or affliction, or distress to whomsoever it may be, for I have mourned and suffered, and wept too much myself."

"And do you count *my* sufferings, *my* tears, as nothing?"

"In Heaven's name, sire, do not speak to me in that manner. I need all my courage to enable me to accomplish the sacrifice."

"Louise, Louise, I implore you! whatever you desire, whatever you command, whether vengeance or forgiveness, your slightest wish shall be obeyed, but do not abandon me."

"Alas! sire, we must part."

"You do not love me, then!"

"Heaven knows I do!"

"It is false, Louise; it is false."

"Oh! sire, if I did not love you, I should let you do what you please; I should let you revenge me, in return for the insult which has been inflicted on me; I should accept the brilliant triumph to my pride which you propose; and yet, you cannot deny that I reject even the sweet compensation which your affection affords, that affection which for me is life itself, for I wished to die when I thought that you loved me no longer."

"Yes, yes; I now know, I now perceive it; you are the sweetest, best, and purest of women. There is no one so worthy as yourself, not alone of my respect and devotion, but also of the respect and devotion of all who surround me; and therefore no one shall be loved like yourself; no one shall ever possess the influence over me that you wield. You wish me to be calm, to forgive?—be it so, you shall find me perfectly unmoved. You wish to reign by gentleness and clemency?—I will be clement and gentle. Dictate for me the conduct you wish me to adopt, and I will obey blindly."

"In Heaven's name, no, sire; what am I, a poor girl, to dictate to so great a monarch as yourself?"

"You are my life, the very spirit and principle of my being. Is it not the spirit that rules the body?"

"You love me, then, sire?"

"On my knees, yes; with my hands upraised to you, yes; with all the strength and power of my being, yes; I love you so deeply, that I would lay down my life for you, gladly, at your merest wish."

"Oh! sire, now I know you love me, I have nothing to wish for in the world. Give me your hand, sire; and then, farewell! I have enjoyed in this life all the happiness I was ever meant for."

"Oh! no, no! your happiness is not a happiness of yesterday, it is of to-day, of to-morrow, ever enduring. The future is yours, everything which is mine is yours, too. Away with these ideas of separation, away with these gloomy, despairing thoughts. You will live for me, as I will live for you, Louise." And he threw himself at her feet, embracing her knees with the wildest transports of joy and gratitude.

"Oh! sire, sire! all that is but a wild dream."

"Why, a wild dream?"

"Because I cannot return to the court. Exiled, how can I see you again? Would it not be far better to bury myself in a cloister for the rest of my life, with the rich consolation that your affection gives me, with the pulses of your heart beating for me, and your latest confession of attachment still ringing in my ears?"

"Exiled, you!" exclaimed Louis XIV., "and who dares to exile, let me ask, when I recall?"

"Oh! sire, something which is greater than and superior to the kings even—the world and public opinion. Reflect for a moment; you cannot love a woman who has been ignominiously driven away—love one whom your mother has stained with suspicions; one whom your sister has threatened with disgrace; such a woman, indeed, would be unworthy of you."

"Unworthy! one who belongs to me?"

"Yes, sire, precisely on that account; from the very moment she belongs to you, the character of your mistress renders her unworthy."

"You are right, Louise; every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours. Very well, you shall not be exiled."

"Ah! from the tone in which you speak, you have not heard Madame, that is very clear."

"I will appeal from her to my mother."

"Again, sire, you have not seen your mother."

"She, too!—my poor Louise! every one's hand, then, is against you."

"Yes, yes, poor Louise, who was already bending beneath the fury of the storm, when you arrived and crushed her beneath the weight of your displeasure."

"Oh! forgive me."

"You will not, I know, be able to make either of them yield; believe me, the evil cannot be repaired, for I will not allow you to use violence, or to exercise your authority."

"Very well, Louise, to prove to you how fondly I love you, I will do one thing, I will see Madame; I will make her revoke her sentence, I will compel her to do so."

"Compel? Oh! no, no!"

"True; you are right. I will bend her."

Louise shook her head.

"I will entreat her, if it be necessary," said Louis. "Will you believe in my affection after that?"

Louise drew herself up. "Oh, never, never shall you humiliate yourself on my account; sooner, a thousand times, would I die."

Louis reflected; his features assumed a dark expression. "I will love you as much as you have loved; I will suffer as keenly as you have suffered; this shall be my expiation in your eyes. Come, mademoiselle, put aside these paltry considerations; let us show ourselves as great as our sufferings, as strong as our affection for each other." And, as he said this, he took her in his arms, and encircled her waist with both his hands, saying, "My own love! my own dearest and best beloved, follow me."

She made a final effort, in which she concentrated, no longer all of her firmness of will, for that had long since been overcome, but all her physical strength. "No!" she replied, weakly, "no! no! I should die from shame."

"No! you shall return like a queen. No one knows of your having left—except, indeed, D'Artagnan."

"He has betrayed me, then?"

"In what way?"

"He promised faithfully—"

"I promised not to say anything to the king," said D'Artagnan, putting his head through the half-opened door, "and I kept my word; I was speaking to M. de Saint-Aignan, and it was not my fault if the king overheard me; was it, sire?"

"It is quite true," said the king; "forgive him."

La Vallière smiled, and held out her small white hand to the musketeer.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the king, "be good enough to see if you can find a carriage for Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Sire," said the captain, "the carriage is waiting at the gate."

"You are a magic mould of forethought," exclaimed the king.

"You have taken a long time to find it out," muttered D'Artagnan, notwithstanding he was flattered by the praise bestowed upon him.

La Vallière was overcome: after a little further hesitation, she allowed herself to be led away, half fainting, by her royal lover. But, as she was on the point of leaving the room, she tore herself from the king's grasp, and returned to the stone crucifix, which she kissed, saying, "Oh, Heaven! it was thou who drewest me hither! thou, who has rejected me; but thy grace is infinite. Whenever I shall again return, forget that I have ever separated myself from thee, for, when I return it will be—never to leave thee again."

The king could not restrain his emotion, and D'Artagnan, even, was overcome. Louis led the young girl away, lifted her into the carriage, and directed D'Artagnan to seat himself beside her, while he, mounting his horse, spurred violently towards the Palais Royal, where, immediately on his arrival, he sent to request an audience of Madame.

XXX. Madame.

From the manner in which the king had dismissed the ambassadors, even the least clear-sighted persons belonging to the court imagined war would ensue. The ambassadors themselves, but slightly acquainted with the king's domestic disturbances, had interpreted as directed against themselves the celebrated sentence: "If I be not master of myself, I, at least, will be so of those who insult me." Happily for the destinies of France and Holland, Colbert had followed them out of the king's presence for the purpose of explaining matters to them; but the two queens and Madame, who were perfectly aware of every particular that had taken place in their several households, having heard the king's remark, so full of dark meaning, retired to their own apartments in no little fear and chagrin. Madame, especially, felt that the royal anger might fall upon her, and, as she was brave and exceedingly proud, instead of seeking support and encouragement from the queen-mother, she had returned to her own apartments, if not without some uneasiness, at least without any intention of avoiding an encounter. Anne of Austria, from time to time at frequent intervals, sent messages to learn if the king had returned. The silence which the whole palace preserved upon the matter, and upon Louise's disappearance, was indicative of a long train of misfortunes to all those who knew the haughty and irritable humor of the king. But Madame, unmoved in spite of all the flying rumors, shut herself up in her apartments, sent for Montalais, and, with a voice as calm as she could possibly command, desired her to relate all she knew about the event itself. At the moment that the eloquent Montalais was concluding, with all kinds of oratorical precautions, and was recommending, if not in actual language, at least in spirit, that she should show forbearance towards La Vallière, M. Malicorne made his appearance to beg an audience of Madame, on behalf of the king. Montalais's worthy friend bore upon his countenance all the signs of the very liveliest emotion. It was impossible to be mistaken; the interview which the king requested would be one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the hearts of kings and of men. Madame was disturbed by her brother-in-law's arrival; she did not expect it so soon, nor had she, indeed, expected any direct step on Louis's part. Besides, all women who wage war successfully by indirect means, are invariably neither very skillful nor very strong when it becomes a question of accepting a pitched battle. Madame, however, was not one who ever drew back; she had the very opposite defect or qualification, in whichever light it may be considered; she took an exaggerated view of what constituted real courage; and therefore the king's message, of which Malicorne had been the bearer, was regarded by her as the bugle-note proclaiming the commencement of hostilities. She, therefore, boldly accepted the gage of battle. Five minutes afterwards the king ascended the staircase. His colour was heightened from having ridden hard. His dusty and disordered clothes formed a singular contrast with the fresh and perfectly arranged toilette of Madame, who, notwithstanding the rouge on her cheeks, turned pale as Louis entered the room. Louis lost no time in approaching the object of his visit; he sat down, and Montalais disappeared.

"My dear sister," said the king, "you are aware that Mademoiselle de la Vallière fled from her own room this morning, and that she has retired to a cloister, overwhelmed by grief and despair." As he pronounced these words, the king's voice was singularly moved.

"Your majesty is the first to inform me of it," replied Madame.

"I should have thought that you might have learned it this morning, during the reception of the ambassadors," said the king.

"From your emotion, sire, I imagined that something extraordinary had happened, but without knowing what."

The king, with his usual frankness, went straight to the point. "Why did you send Mademoiselle de la Vallière away?"

"Because I had reason to be dissatisfied with her conduct," she replied, dryly.

The king became crimson, and his eyes kindled with a fire which it required all Madame's courage to support. He mastered his anger, however, and continued: "A stronger reason than that is surely requisite, for one so good and kind as you are, to turn away and dishonour, not only the young girl herself, but every member of her family as well. You know that the whole city has its eyes fixed upon the conduct of the female portion of the court. To dismiss a maid of honour is to attribute a crime to her—at the very least a fault. What crime, what fault has Mademoiselle de la Vallière been guilty of?"

"Since you constitute yourself the protector of Mademoiselle de la Vallière," replied Madame, coldly, "I will give you those explanations which I should have a perfect right to withhold from every one."

"Even from the king!" exclaimed Louis, as, with a sudden gesture, he covered his head with his hat.

"You have called me your sister," said Madame, "and I am in my own apartments."

"It matters not," said the youthful monarch, ashamed at having been hurried away by his anger; "neither you, nor any one else in this kingdom, can assert a right to withhold an explanation in my presence."

"Since that is the way you regard it," said Madame, in a hoarse, angry tone of voice, "all that remains for me to do is bow submission to your majesty, and to be silent."

"Not so. Let there be no equivocation between us."

"The protection with which you surround Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not impose any respect."

"No equivocation, I repeat; you are perfectly aware that, as the head of the nobility in France, I am accountable to all for the honour of every family. You dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière, or whoever else it may be—" Madame shrugged her shoulders. "Or whoever else it may be, I repeat," continued the king; "and as, acting in that manner, you cast a dishonourable reflection upon that person, I ask you for an explanation, in order that I may confirm or annul the sentence."

"Annul my sentence!" exclaimed Madame, haughtily. "What! when I have discharged one of my attendants, do you order me to take her back again?" The king remained silent.

"This would be a sheer abuse of power, sire; it would be indecorous and unseemly."

"Madame!"

"As a woman, I should revolt against an abuse so insulting to me; I should no longer be able to regard myself as a princess of your blood, a daughter of a monarch; I should be the meanest of creatures, more humbled and disgraced than the servant I had sent away."

The king rose from his seat with anger. "It cannot be a heart," he cried, "you have beating in your bosom; if you act in such a way with me, I may have reason to act with corresponding severity."

It sometimes happens that in a battle a chance ball may reach its mark. The observation which the king had made without any particular intention, struck Madame home, and staggered her for a moment; some day or other she might indeed have reason to dread reprisals. "At all events, sire," she said, "explain what you require."

"I ask, madame, what has Mademoiselle de la Vallière done to warrant your conduct toward her?"

"She is the most cunning fomentor of intrigues I know; she was the occasion of two personal friends engaging in mortal combat; and has made people talk of her in such shameless terms that the whole court is indignant at the mere sound of her name."

"She! she!" cried the king.

"Under her soft and hypocritical manner," continued Madame, "she hides a disposition full of foul and dark conceit."

"She!"

"You may possibly be deceived, sire, but I know her right well; she is capable of creating dispute and misunderstanding between the most affectionate relatives and the most intimate friends. You see that she has already sown discord betwixt us two."

"I do assure you—" said the king.

"Sire, look well into the case as it stands; we were living on the most friendly understanding, and by the artfulness of her tales and complaints, she has set your majesty against me."

"I swear to you," said the king, "that on no occasion has a bitter word ever passed her lips; I swear that, even in my wildest bursts of passion, she would not allow me to menace any one; and I swear, too, that you do not possess a more devoted and respectful friend than she is."

"Friend!" said Madame, with an expression of supreme disdain.

"Take care, Madame!" said the king; "you forget that you now understand me, and that from this moment everything is equalized. Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be whatever I may choose her to become; and to-morrow, if I were determined to do so, I could seat her on a throne."

"She was not born to a throne, at least, and whatever you may do can affect the future alone, but cannot affect the past."

"Madame, towards you I have shown every kind consideration, and every eager desire to please you; do not remind me that I am master."

"It is the second time, sire, that you have made that remark, and I have already informed you I am ready to submit."

"In that case, then, you will confer upon me the favour of receiving Mademoiselle de la Vallière back again."

"For what purpose, sire, since you have a throne to bestow upon her? I am too insignificant to protect so exalted a personage."

"Nay, a truce to this bitter and disdainful spirit. Grant me her forgiveness."

"*Never!*"

"You drive me, then, to open warfare in my own family."

"I, too, have a family with whom I can find refuge."

"Do you mean that as a threat, and could you forget yourself so far? Do you believe that, if you push the affront to that extent, your family would encourage you?"

"I hope, sire, that you will not force me to take any step which would be unworthy of my rank."

"I hoped that you would remember our recent friendship, and that you would treat me as a brother."

Madame paused for a moment. "I do not disown you for a brother," she said, "in refusing your majesty an injustice."

"An injustice!"

"Oh, sire! if I informed others of La Vallière's conduct; if the queen knew—"

"Come, come, Henrietta, let your heart speak; remember that, for however brief a time, you once loved me; remember, too, that human hearts should be as merciful as the heart of a sovereign Master. Do not be inflexible with others; forgive La Vallière."

"I cannot; she has offended me."

"But for my sake."

"Sire, it is for your sake I would do anything in the world, except that."

"You will drive me to despair—you compel me to turn to the last resource of weak people, and seek counsel of my angry and wrathful disposition."

"I advise you to be reasonable."

"Reasonable!—I can be so no longer."

"Nay, sire! I pray you—"

"For pity's sake, Henrietta; it is the first time I entreated any one, and I have no hope in any one but in you."

"Oh, sire! you are weeping."

"From rage, from humiliation. That I, the king, should have been obliged to descend to entreaty. I shall hate this moment during my whole life. You have made me suffer in one moment more distress and more degradation than I could have anticipated in the greatest extremity in life." And the king rose and gave free vent to his tears, which, in fact, were tears of anger and shame.

Madame was not touched exactly—for the best women, when their pride is hurt, are without pity; but she was afraid that the tears the king was shedding might possibly carry away every soft and tender feeling in his heart.

"Give what commands you please, sire," she said; "and since you prefer my humiliation to your own—although mine is public and yours has been witnessed but by myself alone—speak, I will obey your majesty."

"No, no, Henrietta!" exclaimed Louis, transported with gratitude, "you will have yielded to a brother's wishes."

"I no longer have any brother, since I obey."

"All that I have would be too little in return."

"How passionately you love, sire, when you do love!"

Louis did not answer. He had seized upon Madame's hand and covered it with kisses. "And so you will receive this poor girl back again, and will forgive her; you will find how gentle and pure-hearted she is."

"I will maintain her in my household."

"No, you will give her your friendship, my sister."

"I never liked her."

"Well, for my sake, you will treat her kindly, will you not, Henrietta?"

"I will treat her as your—*mistress*."

The king rose suddenly to his feet. By this word, which had so infelicitously escaped her, Madame had destroyed the whole merit of her sacrifice. The king felt freed from all obligations. Exasperated beyond measure, and bitterly offended, he replied:

"I thank you, Madame; I shall never forget the service you have rendered me." And, saluting her with an affectation of ceremony, he took his leave of her. As he passed before a glass, he saw that his eyes were red, and angrily stamped his foot on the ground. But it was too late, for Malicorne and D'Artagnan, who were standing at the door, had seen his eyes.

"The king has been crying," thought Malicorne. D'Artagnan approached the king with a respectful air, and said in a low tone of voice:

"Sire, it would be better to return to your own apartments by the small staircase."

"Why?"

"Because the dust of the road has left its traces on your face," said D'Artagnan. "By heavens!" he thought, "when the king has given way like a child, let those look to it who may make the lady weep for whom the king sheds tears."

XXXI. Mademoiselle de la Vallière's Pocket-Handkerchief.

Madame was not bad-hearted—she was only hasty and impetuous. The king was not imprudent—he was simply in love. Hardly had they entered into this compact, which terminated in La Vallière's recall, when they both sought to make as much as they could by their bargain. The king wished to see La Vallière every moment of the day, while Madame, who was sensible of the king's annoyance ever since he had so entreated her, would not relinquish her revenge on La Vallière without a contest. She planted every conceivable difficulty in the king's path; he was, in fact, obliged, in order to get a glimpse of La Vallière, to be exceedingly devoted in his attentions to his sister-in-law, and this, indeed, was Madame's plan of policy. As she had chosen some one to second her efforts, and as this person was our old friend Montalais, the king found himself completely hemmed in every time he paid Madame a visit; he was surrounded, and was never left a moment alone. Madame displayed in her conversation a charm of manner and brilliancy of wit which dazzled everybody. Montalais followed her, and soon rendered herself perfectly insupportable to the king, which was, in fact, the very thing she expected would happen. She then set Malicorne at the king, who found means of informing his majesty that there was a young person belonging to the court who was exceedingly miserable; and on the king inquiring who this person was, Malicorne replied that it was Mademoiselle de Montalais. To this the king answered that it was perfectly just that a person should be unhappy when she rendered others so. Whereupon Malicorne explained how matters stood; for he had received his directions from Montalais. The king began to open his eyes; he remarked that, as soon as he made his appearance, Madame made hers too; that she remained in the corridors until after he had left; that she accompanied him back to his own apartments, fearing that he might speak in the ante-chambers to one of her maids of honour. One evening she went further still. The king was seated, surrounded by the ladies who were present, and holding in his hand, concealed by his lace ruffle, a small note which he wished to slip into La Vallière's hand. Madame guessed both his intention and the letter too. It was difficult to prevent the king going wherever he pleased, and yet it was necessary to prevent his going near La Vallière, or speaking to her, as by so doing he could let the note fall into her lap behind her fan, or into her pocket-handkerchief. The king, who was also on the watch, suspected that a snare was being laid for him. He rose and pushed his chair, without affectation, near Mademoiselle de Chatillon, with whom he began to talk in a light tone. They were amusing themselves making rhymes; from Mademoiselle de Chatillon he went to Montalais, and then to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. And thus, by this skillful maneuver, he found himself seated opposite to La Vallière, whom he completely concealed. Madame pretended to be greatly occupied, altering a group of flowers that she was working in tapestry. The king showed the corner of his letter to La Vallière, and the latter held out her handkerchief with a look that signified, "Put the letter inside." Then, as the king had placed his own handkerchief upon his chair, he was adroit enough to let it fall on the ground, so that La Vallière slipped her handkerchief on the chair. The king took it up quietly, without any one observing what he did, placed the letter within it, and returned the handkerchief to the place he had taken it from. There was only just time for La Vallière to stretch out her hand to take hold of the handkerchief with its valuable contents.

But Madame, who had observed everything that had passed, said to Mademoiselle de Chatillon, "Chatillon, be good enough to pick up the king's handkerchief, if you please; it has fallen on the carpet."

The young girl obeyed with the utmost precipitation, the king having moved from his seat, and La Vallière being in no little degree nervous and confused.

"Ah! I beg your majesty's pardon," said Mademoiselle de Chatillon; "you have two handkerchiefs, I perceive."

And the king was accordingly obliged to put into his pocket La Vallière's handkerchief as well as his own. He certainly gained that souvenir of Louise, who lost, however, a copy of verses which had cost the king ten hours' hard labor, and which, as far as he was concerned, was perhaps as good as a long poem. It would be impossible to describe the king's anger and La Vallière's despair; but shortly afterwards a circumstance occurred which was more than remarkable. When the king left, in order to retire to his own apartments, Malicorne, informed of what had passed, one can hardly tell how, was waiting in the ante-chamber. The ante-chambers of the Palais Royal are naturally very dark, and, in the evening, they were but indifferently lighted. Nothing pleased the king more than this dim light. As a general rule, love, whose mind and heart are constantly in a blaze, contemns all light, except the sunshine of the soul. And so the ante-chamber was dark; a page carried a torch before the king, who walked on slowly, greatly annoyed at what had recently occurred. Malicorne passed close to the king, almost stumbled against him in fact, and begged his forgiveness with the profoundest humility; but the king, who was in an exceedingly ill-temper, was very sharp in his reproof to Malicorne, who disappeared as soon and as quietly as he possibly could. Louis retired to rest, having had a misunderstanding with the queen; and the next day, as soon as he entered the cabinet, he wished to have La Vallière's handkerchief in order to press his lips to it. He called his valet.

"Fetch me," he said, "the coat I wore yesterday evening, but be very sure you do not touch anything it may contain."

The order being obeyed, the king himself searched the pocket of the coat; he found only one handkerchief, and that his own; La Vallière's had disappeared. Whilst busied with all kinds of conjectures and suspicions, a letter was brought to him from La Vallière; it ran thus:

"How good and kind of you to have sent me those beautiful verses; how full of ingenuity and perseverance your affection is; how is it possible to help loving you so dearly!"

"What does this mean?" thought the king; "there must be some mistake. Look well about," said he to the valet, "for a pocket-handkerchief must be in one of my pockets; and if you do not find it, or if you have touched it—" He reflected for a moment. To make a state matter of the loss of the handkerchief would be to act absurdly, and he therefore added, "There was a letter of some importance inside the handkerchief, which had somehow got among the folds of it."

"Sire," said the valet, "your majesty had only one handkerchief, and that is it."

"True, true," replied the king, setting his teeth hard together. "Oh, poverty, how I envy you! Happy is the man who can empty his own pockets of letters and handkerchiefs!"

He read La Vallière's letter over again, endeavoring to imagine in what conceivable way his verses could have reached their destination. There was a postscript to the letter:

"I send you back by your messenger this reply, so unworthy of what you sent me."

"So far so good; I shall find out something now," he said delightedly. "Who is waiting, and who brought me this letter?"

"M. Malicorne," replied the *valet de chambre*, timidly.

"Desire him to come in."

Malicorne entered.

"You come from Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the king, with a sigh.

"Yes, sire."

"And you took Mademoiselle de la Vallière something from me?"

"I, sire?"

"Yes, you."

"Oh, no, sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière says so, distinctly."

"Oh, sire, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is mistaken."

The king frowned. "What jest is this?" he said; "explain yourself. Why does Mademoiselle de la Vallière call you my messenger? What did you take to that lady? Speak, monsieur, and quickly."

"Sire, I merely took Mademoiselle de la Vallière a pocket-handkerchief, that was all."

"A handkerchief,—what handkerchief?"

"Sire, at the very moment when I had the misfortune to stumble against your majesty yesterday—a misfortune which I shall deplore to the last day of my life, especially after the dissatisfaction which you exhibited—I remained, sire, motionless with despair, your majesty being at too great a distance to hear my excuses, when I saw something white lying on the ground."

"Ah!" said the king.

"I stooped down,—it was a pocket-handkerchief. For a moment I had an idea that when I stumbled against your majesty I must have been the cause of the handkerchief falling from your pocket; but as I felt it all over very respectfully, I perceived a cipher at one of the corners, and, on looking at it closely, I found that it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière's cipher. I presumed that on her way to Madame's apartment in the earlier part of the evening she had let her handkerchief fall, and I accordingly hastened to restore it to her as she was leaving; and that is all I gave to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I entreat your majesty to believe." Malicorne's manner was so simple, so full of contrition, and marked with such extreme humility, that the king was greatly amused in listening to him. He was as pleased with him for what he had done as if he had rendered him the greatest service.

"This is the second fortunate meeting I have had with you, monsieur," he said; "you may count upon my good intentions."

The plain and sober truth was, that Malicorne had picked the king's pocket of the handkerchief as dexterously as any of the pickpockets of the good city of Paris could have done. Madame never knew of this little incident, but Montalais gave La Vallière some idea of the manner in which it had really happened, and La Vallière afterwards told the king, who laughed exceedingly at it and pronounced Malicorne to be a first rate politician. Louis XIV. was right, and it is well known that he was tolerably well acquainted with human nature.

XXXII. Which Treats of Gardeners, of Ladders, and Maids of Honour.

Miracles, unfortunately, could not be always happening, whilst Madame's ill-humor still continued. In a week's time, matters had reached such a point, that the king could no longer look at La Vallière without a look full of suspicion crossing his own. Whenever a promenade was proposed, Madame, in order to avoid the recurrence of similar scenes to that of the thunder-storm, or the royal oak, had a variety of indispositions ready prepared; and, thanks to them, she was unable to go out, and her maids of honour were obliged to remain indoors also. There was not the slightest chance of means of paying a nocturnal visit; for in this respect the king had, on the very first occasion, experienced a severe check, which happened in the following manner. As at Fontainebleau, he had taken Saint-Aignan with him one evening when he wished to pay La Vallière a visit; but he had found no one but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who had begun to call out "Fire!" and "Thieves!" in such a manner that a perfect legion of chamber-maids, attendants, and pages, ran to her assistance; so that Saint-Aignan, who had remained behind in order to save the honour of his royal master, who had fled precipitately, was obliged to submit to a severe scolding from the queen-mother, as well as from Madame herself. In addition, he had, the next morning, received two challenges from the De Mortemart family, and the king had been obliged to interfere. This mistake had been owing to the circumstance of Madame having suddenly ordered a change in the apartments of her maids of honour, and directed La Vallière and Montalais to sleep in her own cabinet. No gateway, therefore, was any longer open—not even communication by letter; to write under the eyes of so ferocious an Argus as Madame, whose temper and disposition were so uncertain, was to run the risk of exposure to the greatest danger; and it can well be conceived into what a state of continuous irritation, and ever increasing anger, all these petty annoyances threw the young lion. The king almost tormented himself to death endeavoring to discover a means of communication; and, as he did not think proper to call in the aid of Malicorne or D'Aragnan, the means were not discovered at all. Malicorne had, indeed, occasional brilliant flashes of imagination, with which he tried to inspire the king with confidence; but, whether from shame or suspicion, the king, who had at first begun to nibble at the bait, soon abandoned the hook. In this way, for instance, one evening, while the king was crossing the garden, and looking up at Madame's windows, Malicorne stumbled over a ladder lying beside a border of box, and said to Manicamp, then walking with him behind the king, "Did you not see that I just now stumbled against a ladder, and was nearly thrown down?"

"No," said Manicamp, as usual very absent-minded, "but it appears you did not fall."

"That doesn't matter; but it is not on that account the less dangerous to leave ladders lying about in that manner."

"True, one might hurt one's self, especially when troubled with fits of absence of mind."

"I don't mean that; what I did mean, was that it is dangerous to allow ladders to lie about so near the windows of the maids of honour." Louis started imperceptibly.

"Why so?" inquired Manicamp.

"Speak louder," whispered Malicorne, as he touched him with his arm.

"Why so?" said Manicamp, louder. The king listened.

"Because, for instance," said Malicorne, "a ladder nineteen feet high is just the height of the cornice of those windows." Manicamp, instead of answering, was dreaming of something else.

"Ask me, can't you, what windows I mean," whispered Malicorne.

"But what windows are you referring to?" said Manicamp, aloud.

"The windows of Madame's apartments."

"Eh!"

"Oh! I don't say that any one would ever venture to go up a ladder into Madame's room; but in Madame's cabinet, merely separated by a partition, sleep two exceedingly pretty girls, Mesdemoiselles de la Vallière and de Montalais."

"By a partition?" said Manicamp.

"Look; you see how brilliantly lighted Madame's apartments are—well, do you see those two windows?"

"Yes."

"And that window close to the others, but more dimly lighted?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is the room of the maids of honour. Look, there is Mademoiselle de la Vallière opening the window. Ah! how many soft things could an enterprising lover say to her, if he only suspected that there was lying here a ladder nineteen feet long, which would just reach the cornice."

"But she is not alone; you said Mademoiselle de Montalais is with her."

"Mademoiselle de Montalais counts for nothing; she is her oldest friend, and exceedingly devoted to her—a positive well, into which can be thrown all sorts of secrets one might wish to get rid of."

The king did not lose a single syllable of this conversation. Malicorne even remarked that his majesty slackened his pace, in order to give him time to finish. So, when they arrived at the door, Louis dismissed every one, with the exception of Malicorne—a circumstance which excited no surprise, for it was known that the king was in love; and they suspected he was going to compose some verses by moonlight; and, although there was no moon that evening, the king might, nevertheless, have some verses to compose. Every one, therefore, took his leave; and, immediately afterwards, the king turned towards Malicorne, who respectfully waited until his majesty should address him. "What were you saying, just now, about a ladder, Monsieur Malicorne?" he asked.

"Did I say anything about ladders, sire?" said Malicorne, looking up, as if in search of words which had flown away.

"Yes, of a ladder nineteen feet long."

"Oh, yes, sire, I remember; but I spoke to M. Manicamp, and I should not have said a word had I known your majesty was near enough to hear us."

"And why would you not have said a word?"

"Because I should not have liked to get the gardener into a scrape who left it there—poor fellow!"

"Don't make yourself uneasy on that account. What is this ladder like?"

"If your majesty wishes to see it, nothing is easier, for there it is."

"In that box hedge?"

"Exactly."

"Show it to me."

Malicorne turned back, and led the king up to the ladder, saying, "This is it, sire."

"Pull it this way a little."

When Malicorne had brought the ladder on to the gravel walk, the king began to step its whole length. "Hum!" he said; "you say it is nineteen feet long?"

"Yes, sire."

"Nineteen feet—that is rather long; I hardly believe it can be so long as that."

"You cannot judge very correctly with the ladder in that position, sire. If it were upright, against a tree or a wall, for instance, you would be better able to judge, because the comparison would assist you a good deal."

"Oh! it does not matter, M. Malicorne; but I can hardly believe that the ladder is nineteen feet high."

"I know how accurate your majesty's glance is, and yet I would wager."

The king shook his head. "There is one unanswerable means of verifying it," said Malicorne.

"What is that?"

"Every one knows, sire, that the ground-floor of the palace is eighteen feet high."

"True, that is very well known."



"Well, sire, if I place the ladder against the wall, we shall be able to ascertain."

"True."

Malicorne took up the ladder, like a feather, and placed it upright against the wall. And, in order to try the experiment, he chose, or chance, perhaps, directed him to choose, the very window of the cabinet where La Vallière was. The ladder just reached the edge of the cornice, that is to say, the sill of the window; so that, by standing upon the last round but one of the ladder, a man of about the middle height, as the king was, for instance, could easily talk with those who might be in the room. Hardly had the ladder been properly placed, when the king, dropping the assumed part he had been playing in the comedy, began to ascend the rounds of the ladder, which Malicorne held at the bottom. But hardly had he completed half the distance when a patrol of Swiss guards appeared in the garden, and advanced straight towards them. The king descended with the utmost precipitation, and concealed himself among the trees. Malicorne at once perceived that he must offer himself as a sacrifice; for if he, too, were to conceal himself, the guard would search everywhere until they had found either himself or the king, perhaps both. It would be far better, therefore, that he alone should be discovered. And, consequently, Malicorne hid himself so clumsily that he was the only one arrested. As soon as he was arrested, Malicorne was taken to the guard-house, and there he declared who he was, and was immediately recognized. In the meantime, by concealing himself first behind one clump of trees and then behind another, the king reached the side door of his apartment, very much humiliated, and still more disappointed. More than that, the noise made in arresting Malicorne had drawn La Vallière and Montalais to their window; and even Madame herself had appeared at her own, with a pair of wax candles, one in each hand, clamorously asking what was the matter.

In the meantime, Malicorne sent for D'Artagnan, who did not lose a moment in hurrying to him. But it was in vain he attempted to make him understand his reasons, and in vain also that D'Artagnan did understand them; and, further, it was equally in vain that both their sharp and intuitive minds endeavored to give another turn to the adventure; there was no other resource left for Malicorne but to let it be supposed that he had wished to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment, as Saint-Aignan had passed for having wished to force Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's door. Madame was inflexible; in the first place, because, if Malicorne had, in fact, wished to enter her apartment at night through the window, and by means of the ladder, in order to see Montalais, it was a punishable offense on Malicorne's part, and he must be punished accordingly; and, in the second place, if Malicorne, instead of acting in his own name, had acted as an intermediary between La Vallière and a person whose name it was superfluous to mention, his crime was in that case even greater, since love, which is an excuse for everything, did not exist in the case as an excuse. Madame therefore made the greatest possible disturbance about the matter, and obtained his dismissal from Monsieur's household, without reflecting, poor blind creature, that both Malicorne and Montalais held her fast in their clutches in consequence of her visit to De Guiche, and in a variety of other ways equally delicate. Montalais, who was perfectly furious, wished to revenge herself immediately, but Malicorne pointed out to her that the king's countenance would repay them for all the disgraces in the world, and that it was a great thing to have to suffer on his majesty's account.

Malicorne was perfectly right, and, therefore, although Montalais had the spirit of ten women in her, he succeeded in bringing her round to his own opinion. And we must not omit to state that the king helped them to console themselves, for, in the first place, he presented Malicorne with fifty thousand francs as a compensation for the post he had lost, and, in the next place, he gave him an appointment in his own household, delighted to have an opportunity of revenging himself in such a manner upon Madame for all she had made him and La Vallière suffer. But as Malicorne could no longer carry significant handkerchiefs for him or plant convenient ladders, the royal lover was in a terrible state. There seemed to be no hope, therefore, of ever getting near La Vallière again, so long as she should remain at the Palais Royal. All the dignities and all the money in the world could not remedy that. Fortunately, however, Malicorne was on the lookout, and this so successfully that he met Montalais, who, to do her justice, it must be admitted, was doing her best to meet Malicorne. "What do you do during the night in Madame's apartment?" he asked the young girl.

"Why, I go to sleep, of course," she replied.

"But it is very wrong to sleep; it can hardly be possible that, with the pain you are suffering, you can manage to do so."

"And what am I suffering from, may I ask?"

"Are you not in despair at my absence?"

"Of course not, since you have received fifty thousand francs and an appointment in the king's household."

"That is a matter of no moment; you are exceedingly afflicted at not seeing me as you used to see me formerly, and more than all, you are in despair at my having lost Madame's confidence; come now, is not that true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Very good; your distress of mind prevents you sleeping at night, and so you sob, and sigh, and blow your nose ten times every minute as loud as possible."

"But, my dear Malicorne, Madame cannot endure the slightest noise near her."

"I know that perfectly well; of course she can't endure anything; and so, I tell you, when she hears your deep distress, she will turn you out of her rooms without a moment's delay."

"I understand."

"Very fortunate you do."

"Well, and what will happen next?"

"The next thing that will happen will be, that La Vallière, finding herself alone without you, will groan and utter such loud lamentations, that she will exhibit despair enough for two."

"In that case she will be put into *another* room, don't you see?"

"Precisely so."

"Yes, but which?"

"Which?"

"Yes, that will puzzle you to say, Mr. Inventor-General."

"Not at all; whenever and whatever the room may be, it will always be preferable to Madame's own room."

"That is true."

"Very good, so begin your lamentations to-night."

"I certainly will not fail to do so."

"And give La Vallière a hint also."

"Oh! don't fear her, she cries quite enough already to herself."

"Very well! all she has to do is cry out loudly."

And they separated.

### XXXIII. Which Treats of Carpentry Operations, and Furnishes Details upon the Mode of Constructing Staircases.

The advice which had been given to Montalais was communicated by her to La Vallière, who could not but acknowledge that it was by no means deficient in judgment, and who, after a certain amount of resistance, rising rather from timidity than indifference to the project, resolved to put it into execution. This story of the two girls weeping, and filling Madame's bedroom with the noisiest lamentations, was Malicorne's *chef-d'oeuvre*. As nothing is so probable as improbability, so natural as romance, this kind of Arabian Nights story succeeded perfectly with Madame. The first thing she did was to send Montalais away, and then, three days, or rather three nights afterwards, she had La Vallière removed. She gave the latter one of the small rooms on the top story, situated immediately over the apartments allotted to the gentlemen of Monsieur's suite. One story only, that is to say, a mere flooring separated the maids of honour from the officers and gentlemen of her husband's household. A private staircase, which was placed under Madame de Navailles's surveillance, was the only means of communication. For greater safety, Madame de Navailles, who had heard of his majesty's previous attempts, had the windows of the rooms and the openings of the chimneys carefully barred. There was, therefore, every possible security provided for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose room now bore more resemblance to a cage than to anything else. When Mademoiselle de la Vallière was in her own room, and she was there very frequently, for Madame scarcely ever had any occasion for her services, since she once knew she was safe under Madame de Navailles's inspection, Mademoiselle de la Vallière had no better means of amusing herself than looking through the bars of her windows. It happened, therefore, that one morning, as she was looking out as usual, she perceived Malicorne at one of the windows exactly opposite to her own. He held a carpenter's rule in his hand, was surveying the buildings, and seemed to be adding up some figures on paper. La Vallière recognized Malicorne and nodded to him; Malicorne, in his turn, replied by a formal bow, and disappeared from the window. She was surprised at this marked coolness, so different from his usual unfailing good-humor, but she remembered that he had lost his appointment on her account, and that he could hardly be very amiably disposed towards her, since, in all probability, she would never be in a position to make him any recompense for what he had lost. She knew how to forgive offenses, and with still more readiness could she sympathize with misfortune. La Vallière would have asked Montalais her opinion, if she had been within hearing, but she was absent, it being the hour she commonly devoted to her own correspondence. Suddenly La Vallière observed something thrown from the window where Malicorne had been standing, pass across the open space which separated the iron bars, and roll upon the floor. She advanced with no little curiosity towards this object, and picked it up; it was a wooden reel for silk, only, in this instance, instead of silk, a piece of paper was rolled round it. La Vallière unrolled it and read as follows:

"MADEMOISELLE,—I am exceedingly anxious to learn two things: the first is, to know if the flooring of your apartment is wood or brick; the second, to ascertain at what distance your bed is placed from the window. Forgive my importunity, and will you be good enough to send me an answer by the same way you receive this letter—that is to say, by means of the silk winder; only, instead of throwing into my room, as I have thrown it into yours, which will be too difficult for you to attempt, have the goodness merely to let it fall. Believe me, mademoiselle, your most humble, most respectful servant,

"MALICORNE.

"Write the reply, if you please, upon the letter itself."

"Ah! poor fellow," exclaimed La Vallière, "he must have gone out of his mind;" and she directed towards her correspondent—of whom she caught but a faint glimpse, in consequence of the darkness of the room—a look full of compassionate consideration. Malicorne understood her, and shook his head, as if he meant to say, "No, no, I am not out of my mind; be quite satisfied."

She smiled, as if still in doubt.

"No, no," he signified by a gesture, "my head is right," and pointed to his head, then, after moving his hand like a man who writes very rapidly, he put his hands together as if entreating her to write.

La Vallière, even if he were mad, saw no impropriety in doing what Malicorne requested her; she took a pencil and wrote "Wood," and then walked slowly from her window to her bed, and wrote, "Six paces," and having done this, she looked out again at Malicorne, who bowed to her, signifying that he was about to descend. La Vallière understood that it was to pick up the silk winder. She approached the window, and, in accordance with Malicorne's instructions, let it fall. The winder was still rolling along the flag-stones as Malicorne started after it, overtook and picked it up, and beginning to peel it as a monkey would do with a nut, he ran straight towards M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment. Saint-Aignan had chosen, or rather solicited, that his rooms might be as near the king as possible, as certain plants seek the sun's rays in order to develop themselves more luxuriantly. His apartment consisted of two rooms, in that portion of the palace occupied by Louis XIV. himself. M. de Saint-Aignan was very proud of this proximity, which afforded easy access to his majesty, and, more than that, the favour of occasional unexpected meetings. At the moment we are now referring to, he was engaged in having both his rooms magnificently carpeted, with expectation of receiving the honour of frequent visits from the king; for his majesty, since his passion for La Vallière, had chosen Saint-Aignan as his confidant, and could not, in fact, do without him, either night or day. Malicorne introduced himself to the comte, and met with no difficulties, because he had been favourably noticed by the king; and also, because the credit which one man may happen to enjoy is always a bait for others. Saint-Aignan asked his visitor if he brought any news with him.

"Yes; great news," replied the latter.

"Ah! ah!" said Saint-Aignan, "what is it?"

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière has changed her quarters."

"What do you mean?" said Saint-Aignan, opening his eyes very wide. "She was living in the same apartments as Madame."

"Precisely so; but Madame got tired of her proximity, and has installed her in a room which is situated exactly above your future apartment."

"What! up there," exclaimed Saint-Aignan, with surprise, and pointing at the floor above him with his finger.

"No," said Malicorne, "yonder," indicating the building opposite.

"What do you mean, then, by saying that her room is above my apartment?"

"Because I am sure that your apartment *ought*, providentially, to be under Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

Saint-Aignan, at this remark, gave poor Malicorne a look, similar to one of those La Vallière had already given a quarter of an hour before, that is to say, he thought he had lost his senses.

"Monsieur," said Malicorne to him, "I wish to answer what you are thinking about."

"What do you mean by 'what I am thinking about'?"



"My reason is, that you have not clearly understood what I want to convey."  
"I admit it."

"Well, then, you are aware that underneath the apartments set for Madame's maids of honour, the gentlemen in attendance on the king and on Monsieur are lodged."

"Yes, I know that, since Manicamp, De Wardes, and others are living there."

"Precisely. Well, monsieur, admire the singularity of the circumstance; the two rooms destined for M. de Guiche are exactly the very two rooms situated underneath those which Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de la Vallière occupy."

"Well; what then?"

"What then, ' do you say? Why, these two rooms are empty, since M. de Guiche is now lying wounded at Fontainebleau."

"I assure you, my dear fellow, I cannot grasp your meaning."

"Well! if I had the happiness to call myself Saint-Aignan, I should guess immediately."

"And what would you do then?"

"I should at once change the rooms I am occupying here, for those which M. de Guiche is not using yonder."

"Can you suppose such a thing?" said Saint-Aignan, disdainfully. "What! abandon the chief post of honour, the proximity to the king, a privilege conceded only to princes of the blood, to dukes, and peers! Permit me to tell you, my dear Monsieur de Malicorne, that you must be out of your senses."

"Monsieur," replied the young man, seriously, "you commit two mistakes. My name is Malicorne, simply; and I am in perfect possession of all my senses." Then, drawing a paper from his pocket, he said, "Listen to what I am going to say; and afterwards, I will show you this paper."

"I am listening," said Saint-Aignan.

"You know that Madame looks after La Vallière as carefully as Argus did after the nymph Io."

"I do."

"You know that the king has sought for an opportunity, but uselessly, of speaking to the prisoner, and that neither you nor myself have yet succeeded in procuring him this piece of good fortune."

"You certainly ought to know something about the subject, my poor Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, smiling.

"Very good; what do you suppose would happen to the man whose imagination devised some means of bringing the lovers together?"

"Oh! the king would set no bounds to his gratitude."

"Let me ask you, then, M. de Saint-Aignan, whether you would not be curious to taste a little of this royal gratitude?"

"Certainly," replied Saint-Aignan, "any favour of my master, as a recognition of the proper discharge of my duty, would assuredly be most precious."

"In that case, look at this paper, monsieur le comte."

"What is it—a plan?"

"Yes; a plan of M. de Guiche's two rooms, which, in all probability, will soon be your two rooms."

"Oh! no, whatever may happen."

"Why so?"

"Because my rooms are the envy of too many gentlemen, to whom I certainly shall not give them up; M. de Roquelaure, for instance, M. de la Ferte, and M. de Dangeau, would all be anxious to get them."

"In that case I shall leave you, monsieur le comte, and I shall go and offer to one of those gentlemen the plan I have just shown you, together with the advantages annexed to it."

"But why do you not keep them for yourself?" inquired Saint-Aignan, suspiciously.

"Because the king would never do me the honour of paying me a visit openly, whilst he would readily go and see any one of those gentlemen."

"What! the king would go and see any one of those gentlemen?"

"Go! most certainly he would ten times instead of once. Is it possible you can ask me if the king would go to an apartment which would bring him nearer to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes, indeed, delightfully near her, with a floor between them."

Malicorne unfolded the piece of paper which had been wrapped round the bobbin. "Monsieur le comte," he said, "have the goodness to observe that the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room is merely a wooden flooring."

"Well?"

"Well! all you would have to do would be to get hold of a journeyman carpenter, lock him up in your apartments, without letting him know where you have taken him to, and let him make a hole in your ceiling, and consequently in the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Saint-Aignan, as if dazzled.

"What is the matter?" said Malicorne.

"Nothing, except that you have hit upon a singular, bold idea, monsieur."

"It will seem a very trifling one to the king, I assure you."

"Lovers never think of the risk they run."

"What danger do you apprehend, monsieur le comte?"

"Why, effecting such an opening as that will make a terrible noise: it could be heard all over the palace."

"Oh! monsieur le comte, I am quite sure that the carpenter I shall select will not make the slightest noise in the world. He will saw an opening three feet square, with a saw covered with tow, and no one, not even those adjoining, will know that he is at work."

"My dear Monsieur Malicorne, you astound, you positively bewilder me."

"To continue," replied Malicorne, quietly, "in the room, the ceiling of which you will have cut through, you will put up a staircase, which will either allow Mademoiselle de la Vallière to descend into your room, or the king to ascend into Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"But the staircase will be seen."

"No; for in your room it will be hidden by a partition, over which you will throw a tapestry similar to that which covers the rest of the apartment; and in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room it will not be seen, for the trapdoor, which will be a part of the flooring itself, will be made to open under the bed."

"Of course," said Saint-Aignan, whose eyes began to sparkle with delight.

"And now, monsieur le comte, there is no occasion to make you admit that the king will frequently come to the room where such a staircase is constructed. I think that M. Dangeau, particularly, will be struck by my idea, and I shall now go and explain to him."

"But, my dear Monsieur Malicorne, you forget that you spoke to me about it the first, and that I have consequently the right of priority."

"Do you wish for the preference?"

"Do I wish it? Of course I do."

"The fact is, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, I am presenting you with a Jacob's ladder, which is better than the promise of an additional step in the peerage—perhaps, even with a good estate to accompany your dukedom."

"At least," replied Saint-Aignan, "it will give me an opportunity of showing the king that he is not mistaken in occasionally calling me his friend; an opportunity, dear M. Malicorne, for which I am indebted to you."

"And which you will not forget to remember?" inquired Malicorne, smiling.

"Nothing will delight me more, monsieur."

"But I am not the king's friend; I am simply his attendant."

"Yes; and if you imagine that that staircase is as good as a dukedom for myself, I think there will certainly be letters of nobility at the top of it for you."

Malicorne bowed.

"All I have to do now," said Saint-Aignan, "is to move as soon as possible."

"I do not think the king will object to it. Ask his permission, however."

"I will go and see him this very moment."

"And I will run and get the carpenter I was speaking of."

"When will he be here?"

"This very evening."

"Do not forget your precautions."

"He shall be brought with his eyes bandaged."

"And I will send you one of my carriages."

"Without arms."

"And one of my servants without livery. But stay, what will La Vallière say if she sees what is going on?"

"Oh! I can assure you she will be very much interested in the operation, and I am equally sure that if the king has not courage enough to ascend to her room, she will have sufficient curiosity to come down to him."

"We will live in hope," said Saint-Aignan; "and now I am off to his majesty. At what time will the carpenter be here?"

"At eight o'clock."

"How long do you suppose he will take to make this opening?"

"About a couple of hours; only afterwards he must have sufficient time to construct what may be called the hyphen between the two rooms. One night and a portion of the following day will do; we must not reckon upon less than two days, including putting up the staircase."

"Two days, that is a very long time."

"Nay; when one undertakes to open up communications with paradise itself, we must at least take care that the approaches are respectable."

"Quite right; so farewell for a short time, dear M. Malicorne. I shall begin to remove the day after to-morrow, in the evening."

#### XXXIV. The Promenade by Torchlight.

Saint-Aignan, delighted with what he had just heard, and rejoiced at what the future foreshadowed for him, bent his steps towards De Guiche's two rooms. He who, a quarter of an hour previously, would hardly yield up his own rooms for a million francs, was now ready to expend a million, if it were necessary, upon the acquisition of the two happy rooms he coveted so eagerly. But he did not meet with so many obstacles. M. de Guiche did not yet know where he was to lodge, and, besides, was still too far ill to trouble himself about his lodgings; and so Saint-Aignan obtained De Guiche's two rooms without difficulty. As for M. Dangeau, he was so immeasurably delighted, that he did not even give himself the trouble to think whether Saint-Aignan had any particular reason for removing. Within an hour after Saint-Aignan's new resolution, he was in possession of the two rooms; and ten minutes later Malicorne entered, followed by the upholsterers. During this time, the king asked for Saint-Aignan; the valet ran to his late apartments and found M. Dangeau there; Dangeau sent him on to De Guiche's, and Saint-Aignan was found there; but a little delay had of course taken place, and the king had already exhibited once or twice evident signs of impatience, when Saint-Aignan entered his royal master's presence, quite out of breath.

"You, too, abandon me, then," said Louis XIV., in a similar tone of lamentation to that with which Caesar, eighteen hundred years previously, had pronounced the *Et tu quoque*.

"Sire, I am far from abandoning you, for, on the contrary, I am busily occupied in changing my lodgings."

“What do you mean? I thought you had finished moving three days ago.”

“Yes, sire. But I don’t find myself comfortable where I am, so I am going to change to the opposite side of the building.”

“Was I not right when I said you were abandoning me?” exclaimed the king. “Oh! this exceeds all endurance. But so it is: there was only one woman for whom my heart cared at all, and all my family is leagued together to tear her from me; and my friend, to whom I confided my distress, and who helped me to bear up under it, has become wearied of my complaints and is going to leave me without even asking my permission.”

Saint-Aignan began to laugh. The king at once guessed there must be some mystery in this want of respect. “What is it?” cried the king, full of hope.

“This, sire, that the friend whom the king calumniates is going to try if he cannot restore to his sovereign the happiness he has lost.”

“Are you going to let me see La Vallière?” said Louis XIV.

“I cannot say so, positively, but I hope so.”

“How—how?—tell me that, Saint-Aignan. I wish to know what your project is, and to help you with all my power.”

“Sire,” replied Saint-Aignan, “I cannot, even myself, tell very well how I must set about attaining success; but I have every reason to believe that from to-morrow—”

“To-morrow, do you say! What happiness! But why are you changing your rooms?”

“In order to serve your majesty to better advantage.”

“How can your moving serve me?”

“Do you happen to know where the two rooms destined for De Guiche are situated?”

“Yes.”

“Well, your majesty now knows where I am going.”

“Very likely; but that does not help me.”

“What! is it possible that you do not understand, sire, that above De Guiche’s lodgings are two rooms, one of which is Mademoiselle Montalais’s, and the other—”

“La Vallière’s, is it not so, Saint-Aignan? Oh! yes, yes. It is a brilliant idea, Saint-Aignan, a true friend’s idea, a poet’s idea. By bringing me nearer her from whom the world seems to unite to separate me—you are far more than Pylades was for Orestes, or Patroclus for Achilles.”

“Sire,” said Aignan, with a smile, “I question whether, if your majesty were to know my projects in their full extent, you would continue to pronounce such a pompous eulogium upon me. Ah! sire, I know how very different are the epithets which certain Puritans of the court will not fail to apply to me when they learn of what I intend to do for your majesty.”

“Saint-Aignan, I am dying with impatience; I am in a perfect fever; I shall never be able to wait until to-morrow—to-morrow! why, to-morrow is an eternity!”

“And yet, sire, I shall require you, if you please, to go out presently and divert your impatience by a good walk.”

“With you—agreed; we will talk about your projects, we will talk of her.”

“Nay, sire; I remain here.”

“Whom shall I go out with, then?”

“With the queen and all the ladies of the court.”

“Nothing shall induce me to do that, Saint-Aignan.”

“And yet, sire, you must.”

“*Must?*—no, no—a thousand times no! I will never again expose myself to the horrible torture of being close to her, of seeing her, of touching her dress as I pass by her, and yet not be able to say a word to her. No, I renounce a torture which you suppose will bring me happiness, but which consumes and eats away my very life; to see her in the presence of strangers, and not to tell her that I love her, when my whole being reveals my affection and betrays me to every one; no! I have sworn never to do it again, and I will keep my oath.”

“Yet, sire, pray listen to me for a moment.”

“I will listen to nothing, Saint-Aignan.”

“In that case, I will continue; it is most urgent, sire—pray understand me, it is of the greatest importance—that Madame and her maids of honour should be absent for two hours from the palace.”

“I cannot understand your meaning at all, Saint-Aignan.”

“It is hard for me to give my sovereign directions what to do; but under the circumstances I do give you directions, sire; and either a hunting or a promenade party must be got up.”

“But if I were to do what you wish, it would be a caprice, a mere whim. In displaying such an impatient humor I show my whole court that I have no control over my own feelings. Do not people already say that I am dreaming of the conquest of the world, but that I ought previously to begin by achieving a conquest over myself?”

“Those who say so, sire, are as insolent as they would like to be thought facetious; but whomever they may be, if your majesty prefers to listen to them, I have nothing further to say. In such a case, that which we have fixed to take place to-morrow must be postponed indefinitely.”

“Nay, Saint-Aignan, I will go out this evening—I will go by torchlight to Saint-Germain: I will breakfast there to-morrow, and will return to Paris by three o’clock. Will that do?”

“Admirably.”

“In that case I will set out this evening at eight o’clock.”

“Your majesty has fixed upon the exact minute.”

“And you positively will tell me nothing more?”

“It is because I have nothing more to tell you. Industry counts for something in this world, sire; but still, chance plays so important a part in it that I have been accustomed to leave her the sidewalk, confident that she will manage so as to always take the street.”

“Well, I abandon myself entirely to you.”

“And you are quite right.”

Comforted in this manner, the king went immediately to Madame, to whom he announced the intended expedition. Madame fancied at the first moment that she saw in this unexpectedly arranged party a plot of the king’s to converse with La Vallière, either on the road under cover of the darkness, or in some other way, but she took especial care not to show any of her fancies to her brother-in-law, and accepted the invitation with a smile upon her lips. She gave directions aloud that her maids of honour should accompany her, secretly intending in the evening to take the most effectual steps to interfere with his majesty’s attachment. Then, when she was alone, and at the very moment the poor lover, who had issued orders for the departure, was reveling in the idea that Mademoiselle de la Vallière would form one of the party,—luxuriating in the sad happiness persecuted lovers enjoy of realizing through the sense of sight alone all the transports of possession,—Madame, who was surrounded by her maids of honour, was saying:—“Two ladies will be enough for me this evening, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais.”

La Vallière had anticipated her own omission, and was prepared for it: but persecution had rendered her courageous, and she did not give Madame the pleasure of seeing on her face the impression of the shock her heart received. On the contrary, smiling with that ineffable gentleness which gave an angelic expression to her features—“In that case, Madame, I shall be at liberty this evening, I suppose?” she said.

“Of course.”

“I shall be able to employ it, then, in progressing with that piece of tapestry which your highness has been good enough to notice, and which I have already had the honour of offering to you.”

And having made a respectful obeisance she withdrew to her own apartment; Mesdemoiselles de Tonnay-Charente and de Montalais did the same. The rumor of the intended promenade soon spread all over the palace; ten minutes afterwards Malicorne learned Madame’s resolution, and slipped under Montalais’s door a note, in the following terms:

“L. V. must positively pass the night the night with Madame.”

Montalais, in pursuance of the compact she had entered into, began by burning the letter, and then sat down to reflect. Montalais was a girl full of expedients, and so she very soon arranged her plan. Towards five o’clock, which was the hour for her to repair to Madame’s apartment, she was running across the courtyard, and had reached within a dozen paces of a group of officers, when she uttered a cry, fell gracefully on one knee, rose again, with difficulty, and walked on limpingly. The gentlemen ran forward to her assistance; Montalais had sprained her foot. Faithful to the discharge of her duty, she insisted, however, notwithstanding her accident, upon going to Madame’s apartments.

“What is the matter, and why do you limp so?” she inquired; “I mistook you for La Vallière.”

Montalais related how it had happened, that in hurrying on, in order to arrive as quickly as possible, she had sprained her foot. Madame seemed to pity her, and wished to have a surgeon sent for immediately, but she, assuring her that there was nothing really serious in the accident, said: “My only regret, Madame, is, that it will preclude my attendance on you, and I should have begged Mademoiselle de la Vallière to take my place with your royal highness, but—” seeing that Madame frowned, she added—“I have not done so.”

“Why did you not do so?” inquired Madame.

“Because poor La Vallière seemed so happy to have her liberty for a whole evening and night too, that I did not feel courageous enough to ask her to take my place.”

“What, is she so delighted as that?” inquired madame, struck by these words.

“She is wild with delight; she, who is always so melancholy, was singing like a bird. Besides, your highness knows how much she detests going out, and also that her character has a spice of wildness in it.”

“So!” thought Madame, “this extreme delight hardly seems natural to me.”

“She has already made all her preparations for dining in her own room *tete-a-tete* with one of her favourite books. And then, as your highness has six other young ladies who would be delighted to accompany you, I did not make my proposal to La Vallière.” Madame did not say a word in reply.

“Have I acted properly?” continued Montalais, with a slight fluttering of the heart, seeing the little success that seemed to attend the *ruse de guerre* which she had relied upon with so much confidence that she had not thought it even necessary to try and find another. “Does Madame approve of what I have done?” she continued.

Madame was reflecting that the king could very easily leave Saint-Germain during the night, and that, as it was only four leagues and a half from Paris to Saint-Germain, he might readily be in Paris in an hour’s time. “Tell me,” she said, “whether La Vallière, when she heard of your accident, offered at least to bear you company?”

“Oh! she does not yet know of my accident; but even did she know of it, I most certainly should not ask her to do anything that might interfere with her own plans. I think she wishes this evening to realize quietly by herself that amusement of the late king, when he said to M. de Cinq-Mars, ‘Let us amuse ourselves by doing nothing, and making ourselves miserable.’”

Madame felt convinced that some mysterious love adventure lurked behind this strong desire for solitude. The secret *might* be Louis’s return during the night; it could not be doubted any longer La Vallière had been informed of his intended return, and that was the reason for her delight at having to remain behind at the Palais Royal. It was a plan settled and arranged beforehand.

“I will not be their dupe though,” said Madame, and she took a decisive step. “Mademoiselle de Montalais,” she said, “will you have the goodness to inform your friend, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, that I am exceedingly sorry to disarrange her projects of solitude, but that instead of becoming *ennuyee* by remaining behind alone as she wished, she will be good enough to accompany us to Saint-Germain and get *ennuyee* there.”

“Ah! poor La Vallière,” said Montalais, compassionately, but with her heart throbbing with delight; “oh, Madame, could there not be some means—”

“Enough,” said Madame; “I desire it. I prefer Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc’s society to that of any one else. Go, and send her to me, and take care of your foot.”

Montalais did not wait for the order to be repeated; she returned to her room, almost forgetting to feign lameness, wrote an answer to Malicorne, and slipped it under the carpet. The answer simply said:

“She shall.” A Spartan could not have written more laconically.

“By this means,” thought Madame, “I will look narrowly after all on the road; she shall sleep near me during the night, and his majesty must be very clever if he can exchange a single word with Mademoiselle de la Vallière.”

La Vallière received the order to set off with the same indifferent gentleness with which she had received the order to play Cinderella. But, inwardly, her delight was extreme, and she looked upon this change in the princess’s resolution as a consolation which Providence had sent her. With less penetration than Madame possessed, she attributed all to chance. While every one, with the exception of those in disgrace, of those who were ill, and those who were suffering from sprains, were being driven towards Saint-Germain, Malicorne smuggled his workman into the palace in one of M. de Saint-Aignan’s carriages, and led him into the room corresponding to La Vallière’s. The man set to work with a will, tempted by the splendid reward which had been promised him. As the very best tools and implements had been selected from the reserve stock belonging to the engineers attached to the king’s household—and among others, a saw with teeth so sharp and well tempered that it was able,

under water even, to cut through oaken joists as hard as iron—the work in question advanced very rapidly, and a square portion of the ceiling, taken from between two of the joists, fell into the arms of the delighted Saint-Aignan, Malicorne, the workman, and a confidential valet, the latter being one brought into the world to see and hear everything, but to repeat nothing. In accordance with a new plan indicated by Malicorne, the opening was effected in an angle of the room—and for this reason. As there was no dressing-closet adjoining La Vallière's room, she had solicited, and had that very morning obtained, a large screen intended to serve as a partition. The screen that had been allotted her was perfectly sufficient to conceal the opening, which would, besides, be hidden by all the artifices skilled cabinet-makers would have at their command. The opening having been made, the workman glided between the joists, and found himself in La Vallière's room. When there, he cut a square opening in the flooring, and out of the boards he manufactured a trap so accurately fitting into the opening that the most practised eye could hardly detect the necessary interstices made by its lines of juncture with the floor. Malicorne had provided for everything: a ring and a couple of hinges which had been bought for the purpose, were affixed to the trap-door; and a small circular stair-case, packed in sections, had been bought ready made by the industrious Malicorne, who had paid two thousand francs for it. It was higher than what was required, but the carpenter reduced the number of steps, and it was found to suit exactly. This staircase, destined to receive so illustrious a burden, was merely fastened to the wall by a couple of iron clamps, and its base was fixed into the floor of the comte's room by two iron pegs screwed down tightly, so that the king, and all his cabinet councilors too, might pass up and down the staircase without any fear. Every blow of the hammer fell upon a thick pad or cushion, and the saw was not used until the handle had been wrapped in wool, and the blade steeped in oil. The noisiest part of the work, moreover, had taken place during the night and early in the morning, that is to say, when La Vallière and Madame were both absent. When, about two o'clock in the afternoon, the court returned to the Palais Royal, La Vallière went up into her own room. Everything was in its proper place—not the smallest particle of sawdust, not the smallest chip, was left to bear witness to the violation of her domicile. Saint-Aignan, however, wishing to do his utmost in forwarding the work, had torn his fingers and his shirt too, and had expended no ordinary amount of perspiration in the king's service. The palms of his hands were covered with blisters, occasioned by his having held the ladder for Malicorne. He had, moreover, brought up, one by one, the seven pieces of the staircase, each consisting of two steps. In fact, we can safely assert that, if the king had seen him so ardently at work, his majesty would have sworn an eternal gratitude towards his faithful attendant. As Malicorne anticipated, the workman had completely finished the job in twenty-four hours; he received twenty-four louis, and left, overwhelmed with delight, for he had gained in one day as much as six months' hard work would have procured him. No one had the slightest suspicion of what had taken place in the room under Mademoiselle de la Vallière's apartment. But in the evening of the second day, at the very moment La Vallière had just left Madame's circle and returned to her own room, she heard a slight creaking sound in one corner. Astonished, she looked to see whence it proceeded, and the noise began again. "Who is there?" she said, in a tone of alarm. "It is I, Louise," replied the well-known voice of the king. "You! you!" cried the young girl, who for a moment fancied herself under the influence of a dream. "But where? You, sire?" "Here," replied the king, opening one of the folds of the screen, and appearing like a ghost at the end of the room. La Vallière uttered a loud cry, and fell trembling into an armchair, as the king advanced respectfully towards her.

XXXV. The Apparition.

La Vallière very soon recovered from her surprise, for, owing to his respectful bearing, the king inspired her with more confidence by his presence than his sudden appearance had deprived her of. But, as he noticed that which made La Vallière most uneasy was the means by which he had effected an entrance into her room, he explained to her the system of the staircase concealed by the screen, and strongly disavowed the notion of his being a supernatural appearance.

"Oh, sire!" said La Vallière, shaking her fair head with a most engaging smile, "present or absent, you do not appear to my mind more at one time than at another."

"Which means, Louise—"

"Oh, what you know so well, sire; that there is not one moment in which the poor girl whose secret you surprised at Fontainebleau, and whom you came to snatch from the foot of the cross itself, does not think of you."

"Louise, you overwhelm me with joy and happiness."

La Vallière smiled mournfully, and continued: "But, sire, have you reflected that your ingenious invention could not be of the slightest service to us?"

"Why so? Tell me,—I am waiting most anxiously."

"Because this room may be subject to being searched at any moment of the day. Madame herself may, at any time, come here accidentally; my companions run in at any moment they please. To fasten the door on the inside, is to denounce myself as plainly as if I had written above, 'No admittance,—the king is within!' Even now, sire, at this very moment, there is nothing to prevent the door opening, and your majesty being seen here."

"In that case," said the king, laughingly, "I should indeed be taken for a phantom, for no one can tell in what way I came here. Besides, it is only spirits that can pass through brick walls, or floors and ceilings."

"Oh, sire, reflect for a moment how terrible the scandal would be! Nothing equal to it could ever have been previously said about the maids of honour, poor creatures! whom evil report, however, hardly ever spares."

"And your conclusion from all this, my dear Louise,—come, explain yourself."

"Alas! it is a hard thing to say—but your majesty must suppress staircase plots, surprises and all; for the evil consequences which would result from your being found here would be far greater than our happiness in seeing each other."

"Well, Louise," replied the king, tenderly, "instead of removing this staircase by which I have ascended, there is a far more simple means, of which you have not thought."

"A means—another means!"

"Yes, another. Oh, you do not love me as I love you, Louise, since my invention is quicker than yours."

She looked at the king, who held out his hand to her, which she took and gently pressed between her own.

"You were saying," continued the king, "that I shall be detected coming here, where any one who pleases can enter."

"Stay, sire; at this very moment, even while you are speaking about it, I tremble with dread of your being discovered."

"But you would not be found out, Louise, if you were to descend the staircase which leads to the room underneath."

"Oh, sire! what do you say?" cried Louise, in alarm.

"You do not quite understand me, Louise, since you get offended at my very first word; first of all, do you know to whom the apartments underneath belong?"

"To M. de Guiche, sire, I believe."

"Not at all; they are M. de Saint-Aignan's."

"Are you sure?" cried La Vallière; and this exclamation which escaped from the young girl's joyous heart made the king's heart throb with delight.

"Yes, to Saint-Aignan, *our friend*," he said.

"But, sire," returned La Vallière, "I cannot visit M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms any more than I could M. de Guiche's. It is impossible—impossible."

"And yet, Louise, I should have thought that, under the safe-conduct of the king, you would venture anything."

"Under the safe-conduct of the king," she said, with a look full of tenderness.

"You have faith in my word, I hope, Louise?"

"Yes, sire, when you are not present; but when you are present,—when you speak to me,—when I look upon you, I have faith in nothing."

"What can possibly be done to reassure you?"

"It is scarcely respectful, I know, to doubt the king, but—for me—you are *not* the king."

"Thank Heaven!—I, at least, hope so most devoutly; you see how anxiously I am trying to find or invent a means of removing all difficulty. Stay; would the presence of a third person reassure you?"

"The presence of M. de Saint-Aignan would, certainly."

"Really, Louise, you wound me by your suspicions."

Louise did not answer, she merely looked steadfastly at him with that clear, piercing gaze which penetrates the very heart, and said softly to herself, "Alas! alas! it is not you of whom I am afraid,—it is not you upon whom my doubts would fall."

"Well," said the king, sighing, "I agree; and M. de Saint-Aignan, who enjoys the inestimable privilege of reassuring you, shall always be present at our interviews, I promise you."

"You promise that, sire?"

"Upon my honour as a gentleman; and you, on your side—"

"Oh, wait, sire, that is not all yet; for such conversations ought, at least, to have a reasonable motive of some kind for M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Dear Louise, every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours, and my only study is to equal you on that point. It shall be just as you wish: therefore our conversations shall have a reasonable motive, and I have already hit upon one; so that from to-morrow, if you like—"

"To-morrow?"

"Do you meant that that is not soon enough?" exclaimed the king, caressing La Vallière's hand between his own.

At this moment the sound of steps was heard in the corridor.

"Sire! sire!" cried La Vallière, "some one is coming; do you hear? Oh, fly! fly! I implore you."

The king made but one bound from the chair where he was sitting to his hiding-place behind the screen. He had barely time; for as he drew one of the folds before him, the handle of the door was turned, and Montalais appeared at the threshold. As a matter of course she entered quite naturally, and without any ceremony, for she knew perfectly well that to knock at the door beforehand would be showing a suspicion towards La Vallière which would be displeasing to her. She accordingly entered, and after a rapid glance round the room, in the brief course of which she observed two chairs very close to each other, she was so long in shutting the door, which seemed to be difficult to close, one can hardly tell how or why, that the king had ample time to raise the trap-door, and to descend again to Saint-Aignan's room.

"Louise," she said to her, "I want to talk to you, and seriously, too."

"Good heavens! my dear Aure, what is the matter now?"

"The matter is, that Madame suspects *everything*."

"Explain yourself."

"Is there any occasion for us to enter into explanations, and do you not understand what I mean? Come, you must have noticed the fluctuations in Madame's humor during several days past; you must have noticed how she first kept you close beside her, then dismissed you, and then sent for you again."

"Yes, I have noticed it, of course."

"Well, it seems Madame has now succeeded in obtaining sufficient information, for she has now gone straight to the point, as there is nothing further left in France to withstand the torrent which sweeps away all obstacles before it; you know what I mean by the torrent?"

La Vallière hid her face in her hands.

"I mean," continued Montalais, pitilessly, "that torrent which burst through the gates of the Carmelites of Chaillot, and overthrew all the prejudices of the court, as well at Fontainebleau as at Paris."

"Alas! alas!" murmured La Vallière, her face still covered by her hands, and her tears streaming through her fingers.

"Oh, don't distress yourself in that manner, or you have only heard half of your troubles."

"In Heaven's name," exclaimed the young girl, in great anxiety, "what is the matter?"

"Well, then, this is how the matter stands: Madame, who can no longer rely upon any further assistance in France; for she has, one after the other, made use of the two queens, of Monsieur, and the whole court, too, now bethinks herself of a certain person who has certain pretended rights over you."

La Vallière became as white as a marble statue.

"This person," continued Madame, "is not in Paris at this moment; but, if I am not mistaken, is, just now, in England."

"Yes, yes," breathed La Vallière, almost overwhelmed with terror.

"And is to be found, I think, at the court of Charles II.; am I right?"

“Yes.”

“Well, this evening a letter has been dispatched by Madame to Saint James’s, with directions for the courier to go straight to Hampton Court, which I believe is one of the royal residences, situated about a dozen miles from London.”

“Yes, well?”

“Well; as Madame writes regularly to London once a fortnight, and as the ordinary courier left for London not more than three days ago, I have been thinking that some serious circumstance alone could have induced her to write again so soon, for you know she is a very indolent correspondent.”

“Yes.”

“This letter has been written, therefore, something tells me so, at least, on your account.”

“On my account?” repeated the unhappy girl, mechanically.

“And I, who saw the letter lying on Madame’s desk before she sealed it, fancied I could read—”

“What did you fancy you could read?”

“I might possibly have been mistaken, though—”

“Tell me,—what was it?”

“The name of Bragelonne.”

La Vallière rose hurriedly from her chair, a prey to the most painful agitation. “Montalais,” she said, her voice broken by sobs, “all my smiling dreams of youth and innocence have fled already. I have nothing now to conceal, either from you or any one else. My life is exposed to every one’s inspection, and can be opened like a book, in which all the world can read, from the king himself to the first passer-by. Aure, dearest Aure, what can I do—what will become of me?”

Montalais approached close to her, and said, “Consult your own heart, of course.”

“Well; I do not love M. de Bragelonne; when I say I do not love him, understand that I love him as the most affectionate sister could love the best of brothers, but that is not what he requires, nor what I promised him.”

“In fact, you love the king,” said Montalais, “and that is a sufficiently good excuse.”

“Yes, I do love the king,” hoarsely murmured the young girl, “and I have paid dearly enough for pronouncing those words. And now, Montalais, tell me—what can you do either for me, or against me, in my position?”

“You must speak more clearly still.”

“What am I to say, then?”

“And so you have nothing very particular to tell me?”

“No!” said Louise, in astonishment.

“Very good; and so all you have to ask me is my advice respecting M. Raoul?”

“Nothing else.”

“It is a very delicate subject,” replied Montalais.

“No, it is nothing of the kind. Ought I to marry him in order to keep the promise I made, or ought I continue to listen to the king?”

“You have really placed me in a very difficult position,” said Montalais, smiling; “you ask me if you ought to marry Raoul, whose friend I am, and whom I shall mortally offend in giving my opinion against him; and then, you ask me if you should cease to listen to the king, whose subject I am, and whom I should offend if I were to advise you in a particular way. Ah, Louise, you seem to hold a difficult position at a very cheap rate.”

“You have not understood me, Aure,” said La Vallière, wounded by the slightly mocking tone of her companion; “if I were to marry M. de Bragelonne, I should be far from bestowing on him the happiness he deserves; but, for the same reason, if I listen to the king he would become the possessor of one indifferent in very many aspects, I admit, but one whom his affection confers an appearance of value. What I ask you, then, is to tell me some means of disengaging myself honourably either from the one or from the other; or rather, I ask you, from which side you think I can free myself most honourably.”

“My dear Louise,” replied Montalais, after a pause, “I am not one of the seven wise men of Greece, and I have no perfectly invariable rules of conduct to govern me; but, on the other hand, I have a little experience, and I can assure you that no woman ever asks for advice of the nature which you have just asked me, without being in a terrible state of embarrassment. Besides, you have made a solemn promise, which every principle of honour requires you to fulfil; if, therefore, you are embarrassed, in consequence of having undertaken such an engagement, it is not a stranger’s advice (every one is a stranger to a heart full of love), it is not my advice, I repeat, that can extricate you from your embarrassment. I shall not give it you, therefore; and for a greater reason still—because, were I in your place, I should feel much more embarrassed after the advice than before it. All I can do is, to repeat what I have already told you; shall I assist you?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Very well; that is all. Tell me in what way you wish me to help you; tell me for and against whom,—in this way we shall not make any blunders.”

“But first of all,” said La Vallière, pressing her companion’s hand, “for whom or against whom do you decide?”

“For you, if you are really and truly my friend.”

“Are you not Madame’s confidant?”

“A greater reason for being of service to you; if I were not to know what is going on in that direction I should not be of any service at all, and consequently you would not obtain any advantage from my acquaintance. Friendships live and thrive upon a system of reciprocal benefits.”

“The result is, then, that you will remain at the same time Madame’s friend also?”

“Evidently. Do you complain of that?”

“I hardly know,” sighed La Vallière, thoughtfully, for this cynical frankness appeared to her an offense both to the woman and the friend.

“All well and good, then,” said Montalais, “for if you did, you would be very foolish.”

“You wish to serve me, then?”

“Devotedly—if you will serve me in return.”

“One would almost say that you do not know my heart,” said La Vallière, looking at Montalais with her eyes wide open.

“Why, the fact is, that since we have belonged to the court, my dear Louise, we are very much changed.”

“In what way?”

“It is very simple. Were you the second queen of France yonder, at Blois?”

La Vallière hung down her head, and began to weep. Montalais looked at her in an indefinable manner, and murmured “Poor girl!” and then, adding, “Poor king!” she kissed Louise on the forehead, and returned to her apartment, where Malicorne was waiting for her.

XXXVI. The Portrait.

In that malady which is termed love the paroxysms succeed each other at intervals, ever accelerating from the moment the disease declares itself. By and by, the paroxysms are less frequent, in proportion as the cure approaches. This being laid down as a general axiom, and as the leading article of a particular chapter, we will now proceed with our recital. The next day, the day fixed by the king for the first conversation in Saint-Aignan’s room, La Vallière, on opening one of the folds of the screen, found upon the floor a letter in the king’s handwriting. The letter had been passed, through a slit in the floor, from the lower apartment to her own. No indiscreet hand or curious gaze could have brought or did bring this single paper. This, too, was one of Malicorne’s ideas. Having seen how very serviceable Saint-Aignan would become to the king on account of his apartment, he did not wish that the courtier should become still more indispensable as a messenger, and so he had, on his own private account, reserved this last post for himself. La Vallière most eagerly read the letter, which fixed two o’clock that same afternoon for the rendezvous, and which indicated the way of raising the trap-door which was constructed out of the flooring. “Make yourself look as beautiful as you can,” added the postscript of the letter, words which astonished the young girl, but at the same time reassured her.

The hours passed away very slowly, but the time fixed, however, arrived at last. As punctual as the priestess Hero, Louise lifted up the trap-door at the last stroke of the hour of two, and found the king on the steps, waiting for her with the greatest respect, in order to give her his hand to descend. The delicacy and deference shown in this attention affected her very powerfully. At the foot of the staircase the two lovers found the comte, who, with a smile and a low reverence distinguished by the best taste, expressed his thanks to La Vallière for the honour she conferred upon him. Then turning towards the king, he said:

“Sire, our man is here.” La Vallière looked at the king with some uneasiness.

“Mademoiselle,” said the king, “if I have begged you to do me the honour of coming down here, it was from an interested motive. I have procured a most admirable portrait painter, who is celebrated for the fidelity of his likenesses, and I wish you to be kind enough to authorize him to paint yours. Besides, if you positively wish it, the portrait shall remain in your own possession.” La Vallière blushed.

“You see,” said the king to her, “we shall not be three as you wished, but four instead. And, so long as we are not alone, there can be as many present as you please.” La Vallière gently pressed her royal lover’s hand.

“Shall we pass into the next room, sire?” said Saint-Aignan, opening the door to let his guests precede him. The king walked behind La Vallière, and fixed his eyes lingeringly and passionately upon that neck as white as snow, upon which her long fair ringlets fell in heavy masses. La Vallière was dressed in a thick silk robe of pearl gray colour, with a tinge of rose, with jet ornaments, which displayed to greater effect the dazzling purity of her skin, holding in her slender and transparent hands a bouquet of heartsease, Bengal roses, and clematis, surrounded with leaves of the tenderest green, above which uprose, like a tiny goblet spilling magic influence a Haarlem tulip of gray and violet tints of a pure and beautiful species, which had cost the gardener five years’ toil of combinations, and the king five thousand francs. Louis had placed this bouquet in La Vallière’s hand as he saluted her. In the room, the door of which Saint-Aignan had just opened, a young man was standing, dressed in a purple velvet jacket, with beautiful black eyes and long brown hair. It was the painter; his canvas was quite ready, and his palette prepared for use.

He bowed to La Vallière with the grave curiosity of an artist who is studying his model, saluted the king discreetly, as if he did not recognize him, and as he would, consequently, have saluted any other gentleman. Then, leading Mademoiselle de la Vallière to the seat he had arranged for her, he begged her to sit down.

The young girl assumed an attitude graceful and unrestrained, her hands occupied and her limbs reclining on cushions; and in order that her gaze might not assume a vague or affected expression, the painter begged her to choose some kind of occupation, so as to engage her attention; whereupon Louis XIV., smiling, sat down on the cushions at La Vallière’s feet; so that she, in the reclining posture she had assumed, leaning back in the armchair, holding her flowers in her hand, and he, with his eyes raised towards her and fixed devouringly on her face—they, both together, formed so charming a group, that the artist contemplated painting it with professional delight, while on his side, Saint-Aignan regarded them with feelings of envy. The painter sketched rapidly; and very soon, beneath the earliest touches of the brush, there started into life, out of the gray background, the gentle, poetry-breathing face, with its soft calm eyes and delicately tinted cheeks, enframed in the masses of hair which fell about her neck. The lovers, however, spoke but little, and looked at each other a great deal; sometimes their eyes became so languishing in their gaze, that the painter was obliged to interrupt his work in order to avoid representing an Erycina instead of La Vallière. It was on such occasions that Saint-Aignan came to the rescue, and recited verses, or repeated one of those little tales such as Patru related, and Tallemant des Reaux wrote so cleverly. Or, it might be that La Vallière was fatigued, and the sitting was, therefore, suspended for awhile; and, immediately, a tray of precious porcelain laden with the most beautiful fruits which could be obtained, and rich wines distilling their bright colours in silver goblets, beautifully chased, served as accessories to the picture of which the painter could but retrace the most ephemeral resemblance.

Louis was intoxicated with love, La Vallière with happiness, Saint-Aignan with ambition, and the painter was storing up recollections for his old age. Two hours passed away in this manner, and four o’clock having struck, La Vallière rose, and made a sign to the king. Louis also rose, approached the picture, and addressed a few flattering remarks to the painter. Saint-Aignan also praised the picture, which, as he pretended, was already beginning to assume an accurate resemblance. La Vallière in her turn, blushing thanked the painter and passed into the next room, where the king followed her, after having previously summoned Saint-Aignan.

“Will you not come to-morrow?” he said to La Vallière.

“Oh! sire, pray think that some one will be sure to come to my room, and will not find me there.”

“Well?”

"What will become of me in that case?"

"You are very apprehensive, Louise."

"But at all events, suppose Madame were to send for me?"

"Oh!" replied the king, "will the day never come when you yourself will tell me to brave everything so that I may not have to leave you again?"

"On that day, sire, I shall be quite out of my mind, and you must not believe me."

"To-morrow, Louise."

La Vallière sighed, but, without the courage to oppose her royal lover's wish, she repeated, "To-morrow, then, since you desire it, sire," and with these words she ran lightly up the stairs, and disappeared from her lover's gaze.

"Well, sire?" inquired Saint-Aignan, when she had left.

"Well, Saint-Aignan, yesterday I thought myself the happiest of men."

"And does your majesty, then, regard yourself to-day," said the comte, smiling, "as the unhappiest of men?"

"No; but my love for her is an unquenchable thirst; in vain do I drink, in vain do I swallow the drops of water which your industry procures for me; the more I drink, the more unquenchable it becomes."

"Sire, that is in some degree your own fault, and your majesty alone has made the position such as it is."

"You are right."

"In that case, therefore, the means to be happy, is to fancy yourself satisfied, and to wait."

"Wait! you know that word, then?"

"There, there, sire—do not despair: I have already been at work on your behalf—I have still other resources in store." The king shook his head in a despairing manner.

"What, sire! have you not been satisfied hitherto?"

"Oh! yes, indeed, yes, my dear Saint-Aignan; but invent, for Heaven's sake, invent some further project yet."

"Sire, I undertake to do my best, and that is all that any one can do."

The king wished to see the portrait again, as he was unable to see the original. He pointed out several alterations to the painter and left the room, and then Saint-Aignan dismissed the artist. The easel, paints, and painter himself, had scarcely gone, when Malicorne showed his head in the doorway. He was received by Saint-Aignan with open arms, but still with a little sadness, for the cloud which had passed across the royal sun, veiled, in its turn, the faithful satellite, and Malicorne at a glance perceived the melancholy that brooded on Saint-Aignan's face.

"Oh, monsieur le comte," he said, "how sad you seem!"

"And good reason too, my dear Monsieur Malicorne. Will you believe that the king is still dissatisfied?"

"With his staircase, do you mean?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, he is delighted with the staircase."

"The decorations of the apartments, I suppose, don't please him."

"Oh! he has not even thought of that. No, indeed, it seems that what has dissatisfied the king—"

"I will tell you, monsieur le comte,—he is dissatisfied at finding himself the fourth person at a rendezvous of this kind. How is it possible you could not have guessed that?"

"Why, how is it likely I could have done so, dear M. Malicorne, when I followed the king's instructions to the very letter?"

"Did his majesty really insist on your being present?"

"Positively."

"And also required that the painter, whom I met downstairs just now, should be here, too?"

"He insisted upon it."

"In that case, I can easily understand why his majesty is dissatisfied."

"What! dissatisfied that I have so punctually and so literally obeyed his orders? I don't understand you."

Malicorne began to scratch his ear, as he asked, "What time did the king fix for the rendezvous in your apartments?"

"Two o'clock."

"And you were waiting for the king?"

"Ever since half-past one; it would have been a fine thing, indeed, to have been unpunctual with his majesty."

Malicorne, notwithstanding his respect for Saint-Aignan, could not help smiling. "And the painter," he said, "did the king wish him to be here at two o'clock, also?"

"No; but I had him waiting here from midday. Far better, you know, for a painter to be kept waiting a couple of hours than the king a single minute."

Malicorne began to laugh aloud. "Come, dear Monsieur Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "laugh less at me, and speak a little more freely, I beg."

"Well, then, monsieur le comte, if you wish the king to be a little more satisfied the next time he comes—"

""*Ventre saint-gris!*" as his grandfather used to say; of course I wish it."

"Well, all you have to do is, when the king comes to-morrow, to be obliged to go away on a most pressing matter of business, which cannot possibly be postponed, and stay away for twenty minutes."

"What! leave the king alone for twenty minutes?" cried Saint-Aignan, in alarm.

"Very well, do as you like; don't pay any attention to what I say," said Malicorne, moving towards the door.

"Nay, nay, dear Monsieur Malicorne; on the contrary, go on—I begin to understand you. But the painter—"

"Oh! the painter must be half an hour late."

"Half an hour—do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do, decidedly."

"Very well, then, I will do as you tell me."

"And my opinion is, that you will be doing perfectly right. Will you allow me to call upon you for the latest news to-morrow?"

"Of course."

"I have the honour to be your most respectful servant, M. de Saint-Aignan," said Malicorne, bowing profoundly and retiring from the room backwards.

"There is no doubt that fellow has more invention than I have," said Saint-Aignan, as if compelled by his conviction to admit it.

XXXVII. Hampton Court.

The revelation we have witnessed, that Montalais made to La Vallière, in a preceding chapter, very naturally makes us return to the principal hero of this tale, a poor wandering knight, roving about at the king's caprice. If our readers will be good enough to follow us, we will, in his company, cross that strait, more stormy than the Euripus, which separates Calais from Dover; we will speed across that green and fertile country, with its numerous little streams; through Maidstone, and many other villages and towns, each prettier than the other; and, finally, arrive at London. From thence, like bloodhounds following a track, after having ascertained that Raoul had made his first stay at Whitehall, his second at St. James's, and having learned that he had been warmly received by Monk, and introduced to the best society of Charles II.'s court, we will follow him to one of Charles II.'s summer residences near the lively little village of Kingston, at Hampton Court, situated on the Thames. The river is not, at that spot, the boastful highway which bears upon its broad bosom its thousands of travelers; nor are its waters black and troubled as those of Cocytus, as it boastfully asserts, "I, too, am cousin of the old ocean." No, at Hampton Court it is a soft and murmuring stream, with moss-fringed banks, reflecting, in its broad mirror, the willows and beeches which ornament its sides, and on which may occasionally be seen a light bark indolently reclining among the tall reeds, in a little creek formed of alders and forget-me-nots. The surrounding country on all sides smiled in happiness and wealth; the brick cottages from whose chimneys the blue smoke was slowly ascending in wreaths, peeped forth from the belts of green holly which environed them; children dressed in red frocks appeared and disappeared amidst the high grass, like poppies bowed by the gentler breath of the passing breeze. The sheep, ruminating with half-closed eyes, lay lazily about under the shadow of the stunted aspens, while, far and near, the kingfishers, plumed with emerald and gold, skimmed swiftly along the surface of the water, like a magic ball heedlessly touching, as he passed, the line of his brother angler, who sat watching in his boat the fish as they rose to the surface of the sparkling stream. High above this paradise of dark shadows and soft light, rose the palace of Hampton Court, built by Wolsey—a residence the haughty cardinal had been obliged, timid courtier that he was, to offer to his master, Henry VIII., who had glowered with envy and cupidity at the magnificent new home. Hampton Court, with its brick walls, its large windows, its handsome iron gates, as well as its curious bell turrets, its retired covered walks, and interior fountains, like those of the Alhambra, was a perfect bower of roses, jasmine, and clematis. Every sense, sight and smell particularly, was gratified, and the reception-rooms formed a very charming framework for the pictures of love which Charles II. unrolled among the voluptuous paintings of Titian, of Pordenone and of Van Dyck; the same Charles whose father's portrait—the martyr king—was hanging in his gallery, and who could show upon the wainscots of the various apartments the holes made by the balls of the puritanical followers of Cromwell, when on the 24th of August, 1648, at the time they had brought Charles I. prisoner to Hampton Court. There it was that the king, intoxicated with pleasure and adventure, held his court—he, who, a poet in feeling, thought himself justified in redeeming, by a whole day of voluptuousness, every minute which had been formerly passed in anguish and misery. It was not the soft green sward of Hampton Court—so soft that it almost resembled the richest velvet in the thickness of its texture—nor was it the beds of flowers, with their variegated hues which encircled the foot of every tree with rose-trees many feet in height, embracing most lovingly their trunks—nor even the enormous lime-trees, whose branches swept the earth like willows, offering a ready concealment for love or reflection beneath the shade of their foliage—it was none of these things for which Charles II. loved his palace of Hampton Court. Perhaps it might have been that beautiful sheet of water, which the cool breeze rippled like the wavy undulations of Cleopatra's hair, waters bedecked with cresses and white water-lilies, whose chaste bulbs coyly unfolding themselves beneath the sun's warm rays, reveal the golden gems which lie concealed within their milky petals—murmuring waters, on the bosom of which black swans majestically floated, and the graceful water-fowl, with their tender broods covered with silken down, darted restlessly in every direction, in pursuit of the insects among the reeds, or the fogs in their mossy retreats. Perhaps it might have been the enormous hollies, with their dark and tender green foliage; or the bridges uniting the banks of the canals in their embrace; or the fawns browsing in the endless avenues of the park; or the innumerable birds that hopped about the gardens, or flew from branch to branch, amidst the emerald foliage. It might well have been any of these charms—for Hampton Court had them all; and possessed, too, almost forests of white roses, which climbed and trailed along the lofty trellises, showering down upon the ground their snowy leaves rich with soft perfumery. But no, what Charles II. most loved in Hampton Court were the charming figures who, when midday was past, flitted to and fro along the broad terraces of the gardens; like Louis XIV., he had their wealth of beauties painted for his gallery by one of the great artists of the period—an artist who well knew the secret of transferring to canvas the rays of light which escaped from beaming eyes heavy laden with love and love's delights.

The day of our arrival at Hampton Court is almost as clear and bright as a summer's day in France; the atmosphere is heavy with the delicious perfume of geraniums, sweet-peas, seringas, and heliotrope scattered in profusion around. It is past midday, and the king, having dined after his return from hunting, paid a visit to Lady Castlemaine, the lady who was reputed at the time to hold his heart in bondage; and this proof of his devotion discharged, he was readily permitted to pursue his infidelities until evening arrived. Love and amusement ruled the entire court; it was the period when ladies would seriously interrogate their ruder companions as to their opinions upon a foot more or less captivating, according to whether it wore a pink or lilac silk stocking—for it was the period when Charles II. had declared that there was no hope of safety for a woman who wore green silk stockings, because Miss Lucy Stewart wore them of that colour. While the king is endeavoring in all directions to inculcate others with his preferences on this point, we will ourselves bend our steps towards an avenue of beech-trees opposite the terrace, and listen to the conversation of a young girl in a dark-coloured dress, who is walking with another of about her own age dressed in blue. They crossed a beautiful lawn, from the center of which sprang a fountain, with the figure of a siren executed in bronze, and strolled on, talking as they went, towards the terrace, along which, looking out upon the park and interspersed at frequent intervals, were erected summer-houses, diverse in form and ornament; these summer-houses were nearly all occupied; the two young women passed on, the one blushing deeply, while the other seemed dreamily silent. At last, having reached the end of the terrace which looks on the river, and finding there a cool retreat, they sat down close to each other.

"Where are we going?" said the younger to her companion.

"My dear, we are going where you yourself led the way."

"I?"

"Yes, you; to the extremity of the palace, towards that seat yonder, where the young Frenchman is seated, wasting his time in sighs and lamentations."

Miss Mary Grafton hurriedly said, "No, no; I am not going there."

"Why not?"

"Let us go back, Lucy."

"Nay, on the contrary, let us go on, and have an explanation."

"What about?"

"About how it happens that the Vicomte de Bragelonne always accompanies you in all your walks, as you invariably accompany him in his."

"And you conclude either that he loves me, or that I love him?"

"Why not?—he is a most agreeable and charming companion.—No one hears me, I hope," said Lucy Stewart, as she turned round with a smile, which indicated, moreover, that her uneasiness on the subject was not extreme.

"No, no," said Mary, "the king is engaged in his summer-house with the Duke of Buckingham."

"Oh! a *propos* of the duke, Mary, it seems he has shown you great attention since his return from France; how is your own heart in that direction?"

Mary Grafton shrugged her shoulders with seeming indifference.

"Well, well, I will ask Bragelonne about it," said Stewart, laughing; "let us go and find him at once."

"What for?"

"I wish to speak to him."

"Not yet, one word before you do: come, come, you who know so many of the king's secrets, tell me why M. de Bragelonne is in England?"

"Because he was sent as an envoy from one sovereign to another."

"That may be; but, seriously, although politics do not much concern us, we know enough to be satisfied that M. de Bragelonne has no mission of serious import here."

"Well, then, listen," said Stewart, with assumed gravity, "for your sake I am going to betray a state secret. Shall I tell you the nature of the letter which King Louis XIV. gave M. de Bragelonne for King Charles II.? I will; these are the very words: 'My brother, the bearer of this is a gentleman attached to my court, and the son of one whom you regard most warmly. Treat him kindly, I beg, and try and make him like England.'"

"Did it say that!"

"Word for word—or something very like it. I will not answer for the form, but the substance I am sure of."

"Well, and what conclusion do you, or rather what conclusion does the king, draw from that?"

"That the king of France has his own reasons for removing M. de Bragelonne, and for getting him married anywhere else than in France."

"So that, then, in consequence of this letter—"

"King Charles received M. de Bragelonne, as you are aware, in the most distinguished and friendly manner; the handsomest apartments in Whitehall were allotted to him; and as you are the most valuable and precious person in his court, inasmuch as you have rejected his heart,—nay, do not blush,—he wished you to take a fancy to this Frenchman, and he was desirous to confer upon him so costly a prize. And this is the reason why you, the heiress of three hundred thousand pounds, a future duchess, so beautiful, so good, have been thrown in Bragelonne's way, in all the promenades and parties of pleasure to which he was invited. In fact it was a plot,—a kind of conspiracy."

Mary Grafton smiled with that charming expression which was habitual to her, and pressing her companion's arm, said: "Thank the king, Lucy."

"Yes, yes, but the Duke of Buckingham is jealous, so take care."

Hardly had she pronounced these words, when the duke appeared from one of the pavilions on the terrace, and, approaching the two girls, with a smile, said, "You are mistaken, Miss Lucy; I am not jealous; and the proof, Miss Mary, is yonder, in the person of M. de Bragelonne himself, who ought to be the cause of my jealousy, but who is dreaming in pensive solitude. Poor fellow! Allow me to leave you for a few minutes, while I avail myself of those few minutes to converse with Miss Lucy Stewart, to whom I have something to say." And then, bowing to Lucy, he added, "Will you do me the honour to accept my hand, in order that I may lead you to the king, who is waiting for us?" With these words, Buckingham, still smiling, took Miss Stewart's hand, and led her away. When by herself, Mary Grafton, her head gently inclined towards her shoulder, with that indolent gracefulness of action which distinguishes young English girls, remained for a moment with her eyes fixed on Raoul, but as if uncertain what to do. At last, after first blushing violently, and then turning deadly pale, thus revealing the internal combat which assailed her heart, she seemed to make up her mind to adopt a decided course, and with a tolerably firm step, advanced towards the seat on which Raoul was reclining, buried in the profoundest meditation, as we have already said. The sound of Miss Mary's steps, though they could hardly be heard upon the green sward, awakened Raoul from his musing attitude; he turned round, perceived the young girl, and walked forward to meet the companion whom his happy destiny had thrown in his way.

"I have been sent to you, monsieur," said Mary Grafton; "will you take care of me?"

"To whom is my gratitude due, for so great a happiness?" inquired Raoul.

"To the Duke of Buckingham," replied Mary, affecting a gayety she did not really feel.

"To the Duke of Buckingham, do you say?—he who so passionately seeks your charming society! Am I really to believe you are serious, mademoiselle?"

"The fact is, monsieur, you perceive, that everything seems to conspire to make us pass the best, or rather the longest, part of our days together. Yesterday it was the king who desired me to beg you to seat yourself next to me at dinner; to-day, it is the Duke of Buckingham who begs me to come and place myself near you on this seat."

"And he has gone away in order to leave us together?" asked Raoul, with some embarrassment.

"Look yonder, at the turning of that path; he is just out of sight, with Miss Stewart. Are these polite attentions usual in France, monsieur le vicomte?"

"I cannot very precisely say what people do in France, mademoiselle, for I can hardly be called a Frenchman. I have resided in many countries, and almost always as a soldier; and then, I have spent a long period of my life in the country. I am almost a savage."

"You do not like your residence in England, I fear."

"I scarcely know," said Raoul, inattentively, and sighing deeply at the same time.

"What! you do not know?"

"Forgive me," said Raoul, shaking his head, and collecting his thoughts, "I did not hear you."

"Oh!" said the young girl, sighing in her turn, "how wrong the duke was to send me here!"

"Wrong!" said Raoul, "perhaps so; for I am but a rude, uncouth companion, and my society annoys you. The duke did, indeed, very wrong to send you."

"It is precisely," replied Mary Grafton, in a clear, calm voice, "because your society does not annoy me, that the duke was wrong to send me to you."

It was now Raoul's turn to blush. "But," he resumed, "how happens it that the Duke of Buckingham should send you to me; and why did you come? the duke loves you, and you love him."

"No," replied Mary, seriously, "the duke does not love me, because he is in love with the Duchesse d'Orleans; and, as for myself, I have no affection for the duke."

Raoul looked at the young lady with astonishment.

"Are you a friend of the Duke of Buckingham?" she inquired.

"The duke has honoured me by calling me so ever since we met in France."

"You are simple acquaintances, then?"

"No; for the duke is the most intimate friend of one whom I regard as a brother."

"The Duc de Guiche?"

"Yes."

"He who is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orleans?"

"Oh! What is that you are saying?"

"And who loves him in return," continued the young girl, quietly.

Raoul bent down his head, and Mary Grafton, sighing deeply, continued, "They are very happy. But, leave me, Monsieur de Bragelonne, for the Duke of Buckingham has given you a very troublesome commission in offering me as a companion for your promenade. Your heart is elsewhere, and it is with the greatest difficulty you can be charitable enough to lend me your attention. Confess truly; it would be unfair on your part, vicomte, not to admit it."

"Madame, I do confess it."

She looked at him steadily. He was so noble and so handsome in his bearing, his eyes revealed so much gentleness, candor, and resolution, that the idea could not possibly enter her mind that he was either rudely discourteous, or a mere simpleton. She only perceived, clearly enough, that he loved another woman, and not herself, with the whole strength of his heart. "Ah! I now understand you," she said; "you have left your heart behind you in France." Raoul bowed. "The duke is aware of your affection?"

"No one knows it," replied Raoul.

"Why, therefore, do you tell me? Nay, answer me."

"I cannot."

"It is for me, then, to anticipate an explanation; you do not wish to tell me anything, because you are now convinced that I do not love the duke; because you see that I possibly might have loved you; because you are a gentleman of noble and delicate sentiments; and because, instead of accepting, even were it for the mere amusement of the passing hour, a hand which is almost pressed upon you; and because, instead of meeting my smiles with a smiling lip, you, who are young, have preferred to tell me, whom men have called beautiful, 'My heart is over the sea—it is in France.' For this, I thank you, Monsieur de Bragelonne; you are, indeed, a noble-hearted, noble-minded man, and I regard you all the more for it, as a friend only. And now let us cease speaking of myself, and talk of your own affairs. Forget that I have ever spoken to you of myself, tell me why you are sad, and why you have become more than usually so during these past four days?"

Raoul was deeply and sensibly moved by these sweet and melancholy tones; and as he could not, at the moment, find a word to say, the young girl again came to his assistance.

"Pity me," she said. "My mother was born in France, and I can truly affirm that I, too, am French in blood, as well as in feeling; but the leaden atmosphere and characteristic gloom of England seem to weigh upon me. Sometimes my dreams are golden-hued and full of wonderful enjoyments, when suddenly a mist rises and overspreads my fancy, blotting them out forever. Such, indeed, is the case at the present moment. Forgive me; I have now said enough on that subject; give me your hand, and relate your griefs to me as a friend."

"You say you are French in heart and soul?"

"Yes, not only, I repeat it, that my mother was French, but, further, as my father, a friend of King Charles I., was exiled in France, I, during the trial of that prince, as well as during the Protector's life, was brought up in Paris; at the Restoration of King Charles II., my poor father returned to England, where he died almost immediately afterwards; and then the king created me a duchess, and has dowered me according to my rank.

"Have you any relations in France?" Raoul inquired, with the deepest interest.

"I have a sister there, my senior by seven or eight years, who was married in France, and was early left a widow; her name is Madame de Belliere. Do you know her?" she added, observing Raoul start suddenly.

"I have heard her name."

"She, too, loves with her whole heart; and her last letters inform me she is happy, and her affection is, I conclude, returned. I told you, Monsieur de Bragelonne, that although I possess half of her nature, I do not share her happiness. But let us now speak of yourself; whom do you love in France?"

"A young girl, as soft and pure as a lily."

"But if she loves you, why are you sad?"

"I have been told that she ceases to love me."

"You do not believe it, I trust?"

"He who wrote me so does not sign his letter."

"An anonymous denunciation! some treachery, be assured," said Miss Grafton.



"Stay," said Raoul, showing the young girl a letter which he had read over a thousand times; she took it from his hand and read as follows:  
"VICOMTE,—You are perfectly right to amuse yourself yonder with the lovely faces of Charles II.'s court, for at Louis XIV.'s court, the castle in which your affections are enshrined is being besieged. Stay in London altogether, poor vicomte, or return without delay to Paris."  
"There is no signature," said Miss Mary.  
"None."  
"Believe it not, then."  
"Very good; but here is a second letter, from my friend De Guiche, which says, 'I am lying here wounded and ill. Return, Raoul, oh, return!'"  
"What do you intend doing?" inquired the young girl, with a feeling of oppression at her heart.  
"My intention, as soon as I received this letter, was immediately to take my leave of the king."  
"When did you receive it?"  
"The day before yesterday."  
"It is dated Fontainebleau."  
"A singular circumstance, do you not think, for the court is now at Paris? At all events, I would have set off; but when I mentioned my intention to the king, he began to laugh, and said to me, 'How comes it, monsieur l'ambassadeur, that you think of leaving? Has your sovereign recalled you?' I coloured, naturally enough, for I was confused by the question; for the fact is, the king himself sent me here, and I have received no order to return."  
Mary frowned in deep thought, and said, "Do you remain, then?"  
"I must, mademoiselle."  
"Do you ever receive any letters from her to whom you are so devoted?"  
"Never."  
"Never, do you say? Does she not love you, then?"  
"At least, she has not written to me since my departure, although she used occasionally to write to me before. I trust she may have been prevented."  
"Hush! the duke is coming."  
And Buckingham at that moment was seen at the end of the walk, approaching towards them, alone and smiling; he advanced slowly, and held out his hands to them both. "Have you arrived at an understanding?" he said.  
"About what?"  
"About whatever might render you happy, dear Mary, and make Raoul less miserable."

"I do not understand you, my lord," said Raoul.  
"That is my view of the subject, Miss Mary; do you wish me to mention it before M. de Bragelonne?" he added, with a smile.  
"If you mean," replied the young girl, haughtily, "that I was not indisposed to love M. de Bragelonne, that is useless, for I have told him so myself."  
Buckingham reflected for a moment, and, without seeming in any way discountenanced, as she expected, he said: "My reason for leaving you with M. de Bragelonne was, that I thoroughly knew your refined delicacy of feeling, no less than the perfect loyalty of your mind and heart, and I hoped that M. de Bragelonne's cure might be effected by the hands of a physician such as you are."  
"But, my lord, before you spoke of M. de Bragelonne's heart, you spoke to me of your own. Do you mean to effect the cure of two hearts at the same time?"  
"Perfectly true, madame; but you will do me the justice to admit that I have long discontinued a useless pursuit, acknowledging that my own wound is incurable."  
"My lord," said Mary, collecting herself for a moment before she spoke, "M. de Bragelonne is happy, for he loves and is beloved. He has no need of such a physician as I can be."  
"M. de Bragelonne," said Buckingham, "is on the very eve of experiencing a serious misfortune, and he has greater need than ever of sympathy and affection."  
"Explain yourself, my lord," inquired Raoul, anxiously.  
"No; gradually I will explain myself; but, if you desire it, I can tell Miss Grafton what you may not listen to yourself."  
"My lord, you are putting me to the torture; you know something you wish to conceal from me?"  
"I know that Miss Mary Grafton is the most charming object that a heart ill at ease could possibly meet with in its way through life."  
"I have already told you that the Vicomte de Bragelonne loves elsewhere," said the young girl.  
"He is wrong, then."  
"Do you assume to know, my lord, that I am wrong?"  
"Yes."

"Whom is it that he loves, then?" exclaimed the young girl.  
"He loves a lady who is unworthy of him," said Buckingham, with that calm, collected manner peculiar to Englishmen.  
Miss Grafton uttered a cry, which, together with the remark that Buckingham had that moment made, spread over De Bragelonne's features a deadly paleness, arising from the sudden surprise, and also from a vague fear of impending misfortune. "My lord," he exclaimed, "you have just pronounced words which compel me, without a moment's delay, to seek their explanation in Paris."  
"You will remain here," said Buckingham, "because you have no right to leave; and no one has the right to quit the service of the king for that of any woman, even were she as worthy of being loved as Mary Grafton is."  
"You will tell me all, then?"  
"I will, on condition that you will remain."  
"I will remain, if you will promise to speak openly and without reserve."  
Thus far had their conversation proceeded, and Buckingham, in all probability, was on the point of revealing, not indeed all that had taken place, but at least all he was aware of, when one of the king's attendants appeared at the end of the terrace, and advanced towards the summer-house where the king was sitting with Lucy Stewart. A courier followed him, covered with dust from head to foot, and who seemed as if he had but a few moments before dismounted from his horse.  
"The courier from France! Madame's courier!" exclaimed Raoul, recognizing the princess's livery; and while the attendant and the courier advanced towards the king, Buckingham and Miss Grafton exchanged a look full of intelligence with each other.

#### XXXVIII. The Courier from Madame.

Charles II. was busily engaged in proving, or in endeavoring to prove, to Miss Stewart that she was the only person for whom he cared at all, and consequently was avowing to her an affection similar to that which his ancestor Henry IV. had entertained for Gabrielle. Unfortunately for Charles II., he had hit upon an unlucky day, the very day Miss Stewart had taken it into her head to make him jealous, and therefore, instead of being touched by his offer, as the king had hoped, she laughed heartily.  
"Oh! sire, sire," she cried, laughing all the while; "if I were to be unfortunate enough to ask you for a proof of the affection you possess, how easy it would be to see that you are telling a falsehood."  
"Nay, listen to me," said Charles, "you know my cartoons by Raphael; you know whether I care for them or not; the whole world envies me their possession, as you well know also; my father commissioned Van Dyck to purchase them. Would you like me to send them to your house this very day?"  
"Oh, no!" replied the young girl; "pray keep them yourself, sire; my house is far too small to accommodate such visitors."  
"In that case you shall have Hampton Court to put the cartoons in."  
"Be less generous, sire, and learn to love a little while longer, that is all I have to ask you."  
"I shall never cease to love you; is not that enough?"  
"You are smiling, sire."  
"Do you wish me to weep?"  
"No; but I should like to see you a little more melancholy."  
"Thank Heaven, I have been so long enough; fourteen years of exile, poverty, and misery, I think I may well regard it as a debt discharged; besides, melancholy makes people look so plain."  
"Far from that—for look at the young Frenchman."  
"What! the Vicomte de Bragelonne? are you smitten too? By Heaven, they will all grow mad over him one after the other; but he, on the contrary, has a reason for being melancholy."  
"Why so?"  
"Oh, indeed! you wish me to betray state secrets, do you?"  
"If I wish it, you must do so, for you told me you were quite ready to do everything I wished."  
"Well, then, he is bored in his own country. Does that satisfy you?"  
"Bored?"

"Yes, a proof that he is a simpleton; I allow him to fall in love with Miss Mary Grafton, and he feels bored. Can you believe it?"  
"Very good; it seems, then, that if you were to find Miss Lucy Stewart indifferent to you, you would console yourself by falling in love with Miss Mary Grafton."  
"I don't say that; in the first place, you know that Mary Grafton does not care for me; besides, a man can only console himself for a lost affection by the discovery of a new one. Again, however, I repeat, the question is not of myself, but of that young man. One might almost be tempted to call the girl he has left behind him a Helen—a Helen before the little ceremony she went through with Paris, of course."  
"He has left some one, then?"  
"That is to say, some one has left *him*."  
"Poor fellow! so much the worse!"  
"Why do you mean by 'so much the worse'?"  
"Why not? why did he leave?"  
"Do you think it was of his own wish or will that he left?"  
"Was he obliged to leave, then?"  
"He left Paris under orders, my dear Stewart; and prepare to be surprised—by express orders of the king."  
"Ah! I begin to see, now."  
"At least say nothing at all about it."  
"You know very well that I am just as discreet as anybody else. And so the king sent him away?"  
"Yes."  
"And during his absence he takes his sweetheart from him?"  
"Yes; and, will you believe it? the silly fellow, instead of thanking the king, is making himself miserable."  
"What! thank the king for depriving him of the woman he loves! Really, sire, yours is a most ungallant speech."  
"But, pray understand me. If she whom the king had run off with was either a Miss Grafton or a Miss Stewart, I should not be of his opinion; nay, I should even think him not half wretched enough; but she is a little, thin, lame thing. Deuce take such fidelity as that! Surely, one can hardly understand how a man can refuse a girl who is rich for one who is poverty itself—a girl who loves him for one who deceives and betrays him."  
"Do you think that Mary seriously wishes to please the vicomte, sire?"  
"I do, indeed."

"Very good! the vicomte will settle down in England, for Mary has a clear head, and when she fixes her mind upon anything, she does so thoroughly."

"Take care, my dear Miss Stewart; if the vicomte has any idea of adopting our country, he has not long to do so, for it was only the day before yesterday that he again asked me for permission to leave."

"Which you refused him, I suppose?"

"I should think so, indeed; my royal brother is far too anxious for his absence; and, for myself, my *amour propre* is enlisted on his side, for I will never have it said that I had held out as a bait to this young man the noblest and gentlest creature in England—"

"You are very gallant, sire," said Miss Stewart, with a pretty pout.

"I do not allude to Miss Stewart, for she is worthy of a king's devotion; and since she has captivated me I trust that no one else will be caught by her; I say, therefore, finally, that the attention I have shown this young man will not have been thrown away; he will stay with us here, he will marry here, or I am very much mistaken."

"And I hope that when he is once married and settled, instead of being angry with your majesty, he will be grateful to you, for every one tries his utmost to please him; even the Duke of Buckingham, whose brilliancy, which is incredible, seems to pale before that of this young Frenchman."

"Including Miss Stewart even, who calls him the most finished gentleman she ever saw."

"Stay, sire; you have spoken quite enough, and quite highly enough, of Miss Grafton, to overlook what I may have said about De Bragelonne. But, by the by, sire, your kindness for some time past astonishes me: you think of those who are absent, you forgive those who have done you a wrong, in fact, you are as nearly as possible, perfect. How does it happen—"

"It is because you allow yourself to be loved," he said, beginning to laugh.

"Oh! there must be some other reason."

"Well, I am doing all I can to oblige my brother, Louis XIV."

"Nay, I must have another reason."

"Well, then, the true motive is that Buckingham strongly recommended the young man to me, saying: 'Sire, I begin by yielding up all claim to Miss Grafton; I pray you follow my example.'"

"The duke is, indeed, a true gentleman."

"Oh! of course, of course; it is Buckingham's turn now, I suppose, to turn your head. You seem determined to cross me in everything to-day."

At this moment some one rapped at the door.

"Who is it who presumes to interrupt us?" exclaimed Charles, impatiently.

"Really, sire, you are extremely vain with your 'who is it who presumes?' and in order to punish you for it—"

She went to the door and opened it.

"It is a courier from France," said Miss Stewart.

"A courier from France!" exclaimed Charles; "from my sister, perhaps?"

"Yes, sire," said the usher, "a special messenger."

"Let him come in at once," said Charles.

"You have a letter for me," said the king to the courier as he entered, "from the Duchess of Orleans?"

"Yes, sire," replied the courier, "and so urgent in its nature that I have only been twenty-six hours in bringing it to your majesty, and yet I lost three-quarters of an hour at Calais."

"Your zeal shall not be forgotten," said the king, as he opened the letter. When he had read it he burst out laughing, and exclaimed, "Upon my word, I am at a loss to understand anything about it." He then read the letter a second time, Miss Stewart assuming a manner marked by the greatest reserve, and doing her utmost to restrain her ardent curiosity.

"Francis," said the king to his valet, "see that this excellent fellow is well taken care of and sleeps soundly, and that on waking to-morrow he finds a purse of fifty sovereigns by his bedside."

"Sire!" said the courier, amazed.

"Begone, begone; my sister was perfectly right in desiring you to use the utmost diligence; the affair was most pressing." And he again began to laugh louder than ever. The courier, the valet, and Miss Stewart hardly knew what sort of countenance to assume. "Ah!" said the king, throwing himself back in his armchair: "When I think that you have knocked up—how many horses?"

"Two!"

"Two horses to bring this intelligence to me. That will do, you can leave us now."

The courier retired with the valet. Charles went to the window, which he opened, and leaning forward, called out—"Duke! Buckingham! come here, there's a good fellow."

The duke hurried to him, in obedience to the summons; but when he reached the door, and perceived Miss Stewart, he hesitated to enter.

"Come in, and shut the door," said the king. The duke obeyed; and, perceiving in what an excellent humor the king was, he advanced, smiling, towards him. "Well, my dear duke, how do you get on with your Frenchman?"

"Sire, I am in the most perfect state of utter despair about him."

"Why so?"

"Because charming Miss Grafton is willing to marry him, but he is unwilling."

"Why, he is a perfect Boeotian!" cried Miss Stewart. "Let him say either 'Yes,' or No,' and let the affair end."

"But," said Buckingham, seriously, "you know, or you ought to know, madame, that M. de Bragelonne is in love in another direction."

"In that case," said the king, coming to Miss Stewart's help, "nothing is easier; let him say 'No,' then."

"Very true; and I have proved to him he was wrong not to say 'Yes.'"

"You told him candidly, I suppose, that La Vallière was deceiving him?"

"Yes, without the slightest reserve; and, as soon as I had done so, he gave a start, as if he were going to clear the Channel at a bound."

"At all events," said Miss Stewart, "he has done something; and a very good thing too, upon my word."

"But," said Buckingham, "I stopped him; I have left him and Miss Mary in conversation together, and I sincerely trust that now he will not leave, as he seemed to have an idea of doing."

"An idea of leaving England?" cried the king.

"I, at one moment, hardly thought that any human power could have prevented him; but Miss Mary's eyes are now bent fully on him, and he will remain."

"Well, that is the very thing which deceives you, Buckingham," said the king, with a peal of laughter; "the poor fellow is predestined."

"Predestined to what?"

"If it were to be simply deceived, that is nothing; but, to look at him, it is a great deal."

"At a distance, and with Miss Grafton's aid, the blow will be warded off."

"Far from it, far from it; neither distance nor Miss Grafton's help will be of the slightest avail. Bragelonne will set off for Paris within an hour's time."

Buckingham started, and Miss Stewart opened her eyes very wide in astonishment.

"But, sire," said the duke, "your majesty knows that it is impossible."

"That is to say, my dear Buckingham, that it is impossible until it happens."

"Do not forget, sire, that the young man is a perfect lion, and that his wrath is terrible."

"I don't deny it, my dear duke."

"And that if he sees that his misfortune is certain, so much the worse for the author of it."

"I don't deny it; but what the deuce am I to do?"

"Were it the king himself," cried Buckingham, "I would not answer for him."

"Oh, the king has his musketeers to take care of him," said Charles, quietly; "I know that perfectly well, for I was kept dancing attendance in his ante-chamber at Blois. He has M. d'Artagnan, and what better guardian could the king have than M. d'Artagnan? I should make myself perfectly easy with twenty storms of passion, such as Bragelonne might display, if I had four guardians like D'Artagnan."

"But I entreat your majesty, who is so good and kind, to reflect a little."

"Stay," said Charles II., presenting the letter to the duke, "read, and answer yourself what you would do in my place."

Buckingham slowly took hold of Madame's letter, and trembling with emotion, read the following words:

"For your own sake, for mine, for the honour and safety of every one, send M. de Bragelonne back to France immediately. Your devoted sister, HENRIETTA."

"Well, Villiers, what do you say?"

"Really, sire, I have nothing to say," replied the duke, stupefied.

"Nay, would you, of all persons," said the king, artfully, "advise me not to listen to my sister when she writes so urgently?"

"Oh, no, no, sire; and yet—"

"You have not read the postscript, Villiers; it is under the fold of the letter, and escaped me at first; read it." And as the duke turned down a fold of the letter, he read:

"A thousand kind remembrances to those who love me."

The duke's head sank gradually on his breast; the paper trembled in his fingers, as if it had been changed to lead. The king paused for a moment, and, seeing that Buckingham did not speak, "He must follow his destiny, as we ours," continued the king; "every man has his own share of grief in this world; I have had my own,—I have had that of others who belong to me,—and have thus had a double weight of woe to endure!—But the deuce take all my cares now! Go, and bring our friend here, Villiers."

The duke opened the trellised door of the summer-house, and pointing at Raoul and Mary, who were walking together side by side, said, "What a cruel blow, sire, for poor Miss Grafton!"

"Nonsense; call him," said Charles II., knitting his black brows together; "every one seems to be sentimental here. There, look at Miss Stewart, who is wiping her eyes,—now deuce take the French fellow!"

The duke called to Raoul, and taking Miss Grafton by the hand, he led her towards the king.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," said Charles II., "did you not ask me the day before yesterday for permission to return to Paris?"

"Yes, sire," replied Raoul, greatly puzzled by this address.

"And I refused you, I think?"

"Yes, sire."

"For which you were angry with me?"

"No, sire; your majesty had no doubt excellent reasons for withholding it; for you are so wise and so good that everything you do is well done."

"I alleged, I believe, as a reason, that the king of France had not recalled you?"

"Yes, sire, that was the reason you assigned."

"Well, M. de Bragelonne, I have reflected over the matter since; if the king did not, in fact, fix your return, he begged me to render your sojourn in England as agreeable as possible; since, however, you ask my permission to return, it is because your longer residence in England is no longer agreeable to you."

"I do not say that, sire."

"No, but your request, at least," said the king, "signified that another place of residence would be more agreeable to you than this."

At this moment Raoul turned towards the door, against which Miss Grafton was leaning, pale and sorrow-stricken; her other hand was passed through the duke's arm.

"You do not reply," pursued Charles; "the proverb is plain enough, that 'silence gives consent.' Very good, Monsieur de Bragelonne; I am now in a position to satisfy you; whenever you please, therefore, you can leave for Paris, for which you have my authority."

"Sire!" exclaimed Raoul, while Mary stifled an exclamation of grief which rose to her lips, unconsciously pressing Buckingham's arm.

"You can be at Dover this evening," continued the king, "the tide serves at two o'clock in the morning."

Raoul, astounded, stammered out a few broken sentences, which equally answered the purpose both of thanks and of excuse.

"I therefore bid you adieu, Monsieur de Bragelonne, and wish you every sort of prosperity," said the king, rising; "you will confer a pleasure on me by keeping this diamond in remembrance of me; I had intended it as a marriage gift."

Miss Grafton felt her limbs almost giving way; and, as Raoul received the ring from the king's hand, he, too, felt his strength and courage failing him. He addressed a few respectful words to the king, a passing compliment to Miss Stewart, and looked for Buckingham to bid him adieu. The king profited by this moment to disappear. Raoul found the duke engaged in endeavoring to encourage Miss Grafton.

"Tell him to remain, I implore you!" said Buckingham to Mary.

"No, I will tell him to go," replied Miss Grafton, with returning animation; "I am not one of those women who have more pride than heart; if she whom he loves is in France, let him return thither and bless me for having advised him to go and seek his happiness there. If, on the contrary, she shall have ceased to love him, let him come back here again; I shall still love him, and his unhappiness will not have lessened him in my regard. In the arms of my house you will find that which Heaven has engraven on my heart—*Habenti parum, egentibus cuncta*. 'To the rich is accorded little, to the poor everything.'"

"I do not believe, Bragelonne, that you will find yonder the equivalent of what you leave behind you here."

"I think, or at least hope," said Raoul, with a gloomy air, "that she whom I love is worthy of my affection; but if it be true she is unworthy of me, as you have endeavored to make me believe, I will tear her image from my heart, duke, even if my heart breaks in the attempt."

Mary Grafton gazed upon him with an expression of the most indefinable pity, and Raoul returned her look with a sweet, sorrowful smile, saying, "Mademoiselle, the diamond which the king has given me was destined for you,—give me leave to offer it for your acceptance: if I marry in France, you will send it me back; if I do not marry, keep it." And he bowed and left her.

"What does he mean?" thought Buckingham, while Raoul pressed Mary's icy hand with marks of the most reverential respect.

Mary understood the look that Buckingham fixed upon her.

"If it were a wedding-ring, I would not accept it," she said.

"And yet you were willing to ask him to return to you."

"Oh! duke," cried the young girl in heart-broken accents, "a woman such as I am is never accepted as a consolation by a man like him."

"You do not think he will return, then?"

"Never," said Miss Grafton, in a choking voice.

"And I grieve to tell you, Mary, that he will find yonder his happiness destroyed, his mistress lost to him. His honour even has not escaped. What will be left him, then, Mary, equal to your affection? Answer, Mary, you who know yourself so well."

Miss Grafton placed her white hand on Buckingham's arm, and, while Raoul was hurrying away with headlong speed, she repeated in dying accents the line from Romeo and Juliet:

*"I must be gone and live, or stay and die."*

As she finished the last word, Raoul disappeared. Miss Grafton returned to her own apartments, paler than death. Buckingham availed himself of the arrival of the courier, who had brought the letter to the king, to write to Madame and to the Comte de Guiche. The king had not been mistaken, for at two in the morning the tide was at full flood, and Raoul had embarked for France.

XXXIX. Saint-Aignan Follows Malicorne's Advice.

The king most assiduously followed the progress which was made in La Vallière's portrait; and did so with a care and attention arising as much from a desire that it should resemble her as from the wish that the painter should prolong the period of its completion as much as possible. It was amusing to observe him follow the artist's brush, awaiting the completion of a particular plan, or the result of a combination of colours, and suggesting various modifications to the painter, which the latter consented to adopt with the most respectful docility. And again, when the artist, following Malicorne's advice, was a little late in arriving, and when Saint-Aignan had been obliged to be absent for some time, it was interesting to observe, though no one witnessed them, those moments of silence full of deep expression, which united in one sigh two souls most disposed to understand each other, and who by no means objected to the quiet meditation they enjoyed together. The minutes flew rapidly by, as if on wings, and as the king drew closer to Louise and bent his burning gaze upon her, a noise was suddenly heard in the ante-room. It was the artist, who had just arrived; Saint-Aignan, too, had returned, full of apologies; and the king began to talk and La Vallière to answer him very hurriedly, their eyes revealing to Saint-Aignan that they had enjoyed a century of happiness during his absence. In a word, Malicorne, philosopher that he was, though he knew it not, had learned how to inspire the king with an appetite in the midst of plenty, and with desire in the assurance of possession. La Vallière's fears of interruption had never been realized, and no one imagined she was absent from her apartment two or three hours every day; she pretended that her health was very uncertain; those who went to her room always knocked before entering, and Malicorne, the man of so many ingenious inventions, had constructed an acoustic piece of mechanism, by means of which La Vallière, when in Saint-Aignan's apartment, was always forewarned of any visits which were paid to the room she usually inhabited. In this manner, therefore, without leaving her room, and having no *confidante*, she was able to return to her apartment, thus removing by her appearance, a little tardy perhaps, the suspicions of the most determined skeptics. Malicorne having asked Saint-Aignan the next morning what news he had to report, the latter was obliged to confess that the quarter of an hour's liberty had made the king in most excellent humor. "We must double the dose," replied Malicorne, "but by insensible degrees; wait until they seem to wish it."

They were so desirous for it, however, that on the evening of the fourth day, at the moment when the painter was packing up his implements, during Saint-Aignan's continued absence, Saint-Aignan on his return noticed upon La Vallière's face a shade of disappointment and vexation, which she could not conceal. The king was less reserved, and exhibited his annoyance by a very significant shrug of the shoulders, at which La Vallière could not help blushing. "Very good!" thought Saint-Aignan to himself; "M. Malicorne will be delighted this evening;" as he, in fact, was, when it was reported to him.

"It is very evident," he remarked to the comte, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière hoped that you would be at least ten minutes later."

"And the king that I should be half an hour later, dear Monsieur Malicorne."

"You would show but very indifferent devotion to the king," replied the latter, "if you were to refuse his majesty that half-hour's satisfaction."

"But the painter," objected Saint-Aignan.

"I will take care of him," said Malicorne, "only I must study faces and circumstances a little better before I act; those are my magical inventions and contrivances; and while sorcerers are enabled by means of their astrolabe to take the altitude of the sun, moon, and stars, I am satisfied merely by looking into people's faces, in order to see if their eyes are encircled with dark lines, and if the mouth describes a convex or concave arc."

And the cunning Malicorne had every opportunity of watching narrowly and closely, for the very same evening the king accompanied the queen to Madame's apartments, and made himself so remarked by his serious face and his deep sigh, and looked at La Vallière with such a languishing expression, that Malicorne said to Montalais during the evening: "To-morrow." And he went off to the painter's house in the street of the Jardins Saint-Paul to request him to postpone the next sitting for a couple of days. Saint-Aignan was not within, when La Vallière, who was now quite familiar with the lower story, lifted up the trap-door and descended. The king, as usual was waiting for her on the staircase, and held a bouquet in his hand; as soon as he saw her, he clasped her tenderly in his arms. La Vallière, much moved at the action, looked around the room, but as she saw the king was alone, she did not complain of it. They sat down, the king reclining near the cushions on which Louise was seated, with his head supported by her knees, placed there as in an asylum whence no one could banish him; he gazed ardently upon her, and as if the moment had arrived when nothing could interpose between their two hearts; she, too, gazed with similar passion upon him, and from her eyes, so softly pure, emanated a flame, whose rays first kindled and then inflamed the heart of the king, who, trembling with happiness as Louise's hand rested on his head, grew giddy from excess of joy, and momentarily awaited either the painter's or Saint-Aignan's return to break the sweet illusion. But the door remained closed, and neither Saint-Aignan nor the painter appeared, nor did the hangings even move. A deep mysterious silence reigned in the room—a silence which seemed to influence even the song-birds in their gilded prisons. The king, completely overcome, turned round his head and buried his burning lips in La Vallière's hands, who, herself faint, with excess of emotion, pressed her trembling hands against her lover's lips. Louis threw himself upon his knees, and as La Vallière did not move her head, the king's forehead being within reach of her lips, she furtively passed her lips across the perfumed locks which caressed her cheeks. The king seized her in his arms, and, unable to resist the temptation, they exchanged their first kiss, that burning kiss, which changes love into delirium. Suddenly, a noise upon the upper floor was heard, which had, in fact, continued, though it had remained unnoticed, for some time; it had at last aroused La Vallière's attention, though but slowly so. As the noise, however, continued, as it forced itself upon the attention, and recalled the poor girl from her dreams of happiness to the sad realities of life, she rose in a state of utter bewilderment, though beautiful in her disorder, saying:

"Some one is waiting for me above. Louis, Louis, do you not hear?"

"Well! and am I not waiting for you, also?" said the king, with infinite tenderness of tone. "Let others henceforth wait for you."

But she gently shook her head, as she replied: "Happiness hidden... power concealed... my pride should be as silent as my heart."

The noise was again resumed.

"I hear Montalais's voice," she said, and she hurried up the staircase; the king followed her, unable to let her leave his sight, and covering her hand with his kisses. "Yes, yes," repeated La Vallière, who had passed half-way through the opening. "Yes, it is Montalais who is calling me; something important must have happened."

"Go then, dearest love," said the king, "but return quickly."

"No, no, not to-day, sire! Adieu! adieu!" she said, as she stooped down once more to embrace her lover—and escaped. Montalais was, in fact, waiting for her, very pale and agitated.

"Quick, quick! *he* is coming," she said.

"Who—who is coming?"

"Raoul," murmured Montalais.

"It is I—I," said a joyous voice, upon the last steps of the grand staircase.

La Vallière uttered a terrible shriek and threw herself back.

"I am here, dear Louise," said Raoul, running towards her. "I knew but too well that you had not ceased to love me."

La Vallière with a gesture, partly of extreme terror, and partly as if invoking a blessing, attempted to speak, but could not articulate one word. "No, no!" she said, as she fell into Montalais's arms, murmuring, "Do not touch me, do not come near me."

Montalais made a sign to Raoul, who stood almost petrified at the door, and did not even attempt to advance another step into the room. Then, looking towards the side of the room where the screen was, she exclaimed: "Imprudent girl, she has not even closed the trap-door."

And she advanced towards the corner of the room to close the screen, and also, behind the screen, the trap-door. But suddenly the king, who had heard Louise's exclamation, darted through the opening, and hurried forward to her assistance. He threw himself on his knees before her, as he overwhelmed Montalais with questions, who hardly knew where she was. At the moment, however, when the king threw himself on his knees, a cry of utter despair rang through the corridor, accompanied by the sound of retreating footsteps. The king wished to see who had uttered the cry and whose were the footsteps he had heard; and it was in vain that Montalais sought to retain him, for Louis, quitting his hold of La Vallière, hurried towards the door, too late, however, for Raoul was already at a distance, and the king only beheld a shadow that quickly vanished in the silent corridor. <sup>8</sup>

XL: Two Old Friends.

Whilst every one at court was busily engaged with his own affairs, a man mysteriously took up his post behind the Place de Greve, in the house which we once saw besieged by D'Artagnan on the occasion of the *emeute*. The principal entrance of the house was in the Place Baudoyer; it was tolerably large, surrounded by gardens, inclosed in the Rue Saint-Jean by the shops of toolmakers, which protected it from prying looks, and was walled in by a triple rampart of stone, noise, and verdure, like an embalmed mummy in its triple coffin. The man we have just alluded to walked along with a firm step, although he was no longer in his early prime. His dark cloak and long sword plainly revealed one who seemed in search of adventures; and, judging from his curling mustache, his fine smooth skin, which could be seen beneath his *sombrero*, it would not have been difficult to pronounce that gallantry had not a little share in his adventures. In fact, hardly had the cavalier entered the house, when the clock struck eight; and ten minutes afterwards a lady, followed by a servant armed to the teeth, approached and knocked at the same door, which an old woman immediately opened for her. The lady raised her veil as she entered; though no longer beautiful or young, she was still active and of an imposing carriage. She concealed, beneath a rich toilette and the most exquisite taste, an age which Ninon de l'Enclos alone could have smiled at with impunity. Hardly had she reached the vestibule, when the cavalier, whose features we have only roughly sketched, advanced towards her, holding out his hand.

"Good day, my dear duchesse," he said.

"How do you do, my dear Aramis?" replied the duchesse.

He led her to a most elegantly furnished apartment, on whose high windows were reflected the expiring rays of the setting sun, which filtered gaudily through the dark green needles of the adjacent firs. They sat down side by side. Neither of them thought of asking for additional light in the room, and they buried themselves as it were in the shadow, as if they wished to bury themselves in forgetfulness. “Chevalier,” said the duchesse, “you have never given me a single sign of life since our interview at Fontainebleau, and I confess that your presence there on the day of the Franciscan’s death, and your initiation in certain secrets, caused me the liveliest astonishment I ever experienced in my whole life.”

“I can explain my presence there to you, as well as my initiation,” said Aramis.

“But let us, first of all,” said the duchess, “talk a little of ourselves, for our friendship is by no means of recent date.”

“Yes, madame: and if Heaven wills it, we shall continue to be friends, I will not say for a long time, but forever.”

“That is quite certain, chevalier, and my visit is a proof of it.”

“Our interests, duchess, are no longer the same as they used to be,” said Aramis, smiling without apprehension in the growing gloom by which the room was overcast, for it could not reveal that his smile was less agreeable and not so bright as formerly.

“No, chevalier, at the present day we have other interests. Every period of life brings its own; and, as we now understand each other in conversing, as perfectly as we formerly did without saying a word, let us talk, if you like.”

“I am at your orders, duchesse. Ah! I beg your pardon, how did you obtain my address, and what was your object?”

“You ask me why? I have told you. Curiosity in the first place. I wished to know what you could have to do with the Franciscan, with whom I had certain business transactions, and who died so singularly. You know that on the occasion of our interview at Fontainebleau, in the cemetery, at the foot of the grave so recently closed, we were both so much overcome by our emotions that we omitted to confide to each other what we may have to say.”

“Yes, madame.”

“Well, then, I had no sooner left you than I repented, and have ever since been most anxious to ascertain the truth. You know that Madame de Longueville and myself are almost one, I suppose?”

“I was not aware,” said Aramis, discreetly.

“I remembered, therefore,” continued the duchesse, “that neither of us said anything to the other in the cemetery; that you did not speak of the relationship in which you stood to the Franciscan, whose burial you superintended, and that I did not refer to the position in which I stood to him; all which seemed very unworthy of two such old friends as ourselves, and I have sought an opportunity of an interview with you in order to give you some information that I have recently acquired, and to assure you that Marie Michon, now no more, has left behind her one who has preserved her recollection of events.”

Aramis bowed over the duchess’s hand, and pressed his lips upon it. “You must have had some trouble to find me again,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered, annoyed to find the subject taking a turn which Aramis wished to give it; “but I knew you were a friend of M. Fouquet’s, and so I inquired in that direction.”

“A friend! oh!” exclaimed the chevalier, “I can hardly pretend to be *that*. A poor priest who has been favoured by a generous protector, and whose heart is full of gratitude and devotion, is all that I pretend to be to M. Fouquet.”

“He made you a bishop?”

“Yes, duchesse.”

“A very good retiring pension for so handsome a musketeer.”

“Yes; in the same way that political intrigue is for yourself,” thought Aramis. “And so,” he added, “you inquired after me at M. Fouquet’s?”

“Easily enough. You had been to Fontainebleau with him, and had undertaken a voyage to your diocese, which is Belle-Ile-en-Mer, I believe.”

“No, madame,” said Aramis. “My diocese is Vannes.”

“I meant that. I only thought that Belle-Ile-en-Mer—”

“Is a property belonging to M. Fouquet, nothing more.”

“Ah! I had been told that Belle-Isle was fortified; besides, I know how great the military knowledge is you possess.”

“I have forgotten everything of the kind since I entered the Church,” said Aramis, annoyed.

“Suffice it to know that I learned you had returned from Vannes, and I sent off to one of our friends, M. le Comte de la Fere, who is discretion itself, in order to ascertain it, but he answered that he was not aware of your address.”

“So like Athos,” thought the bishop; “the really good man never changes.”

“Well, then, you know that I cannot venture to show myself here, and that the queen-mother has always some grievance or other against me.”

“Yes, indeed, and I am surprised at it.”

“Oh! there are various reasons for it. But, to continue, being obliged to conceal myself, I was fortunate enough to meet with M. d’Artagnan, who was formerly one of your old friends, I believe?”

“A friend of mine still, duchesse.”

“He gave me certain information, and sent me to M. Baisemeaux, the governor of the Bastille.”

Aramis was somewhat agitated at this remark, and a light flashed from his eyes in the darkness of the room, which he could not conceal from his keen-sighted friend. “M. de Baisemeaux!” he said, “why did D’Artagnan send you to M. de Baisemeaux?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“What can this possibly mean?” said the bishop, summoning all the resources of his mind to his aid, in order to carry on the combat in a befitting manner.

“M. de Baisemeaux is greatly indebted to you, D’Artagnan told me.”

“True, he is so.”

“And the address of a creditor is as easily ascertained as that of a debtor.”

“Very true; and so Baisemeaux indicated to you—”

“Saint-Mande, where I forwarded a letter to you.”

“Which I have in my hand, and which is most precious to me,” said Aramis, “because I am indebted to it for the pleasure of seeing you here.” The duchesse, satisfied at having successfully overcome the various difficulties of so delicate an explanation, began to breathe freely again, which Aramis, however, could not succeed in doing. “We had got as far as your visit to M. Baisemeaux, I believe?”

“Nay,” she said, laughing, “farther than that.”

“In that case we must have been speaking about the grudge you have against the queen-mother.”

“Further still,” she returned, “further still; we were talking of the connection—”

“Which existed between you and the Franciscan,” said Aramis, interrupting her eagerly, “well, I am listening to you very attentively.”

“It is easily explained,” returned the duchesse. “You know that I am living at Brussels with M. de Laicques?”

“I heard so.”

“You know that my children have ruined and stripped me of everything.”

“How terrible, dear duchesse.”

“Terrible indeed; this obliged me to resort to some means of obtaining a livelihood, and, particularly, to avoid vegetating for the remainder of my existence. I had old hatreds to turn to account, old friendships to make use of; I no longer had either credit or protectors.”

“*You*, who had extended protection towards so many persons,” said Aramis, softly.

“It is always the case, chevalier. Well, at the present time I am in the habit of seeing the king of Spain very frequently.”

“Ah!”

“Who has just nominated a general of the Jesuits, according to the usual custom.”

“Is it usual, indeed?”

“Were you not aware of it?”

“I beg your pardon; I was inattentive.”

“You must be aware of that—you who were on such good terms with the Franciscan.”

“With the general of the Jesuits, you mean?”

“Exactly. Well, then, I have seen the king of Spain, who wished to do me a service, but was unable. He gave me recommendations, however, to Flanders, both for myself and for Laicques too; and conferred a pension on me out of the funds belonging to the order.”

“Of Jesuits?”

“Yes. The general—I mean the Franciscan—was sent to me; and, for the purpose of conforming with the requisitions of the statues of the order, and of entitling me to the pension, I was reputed to be in a position to render certain services. You are aware that that is the rule?”

“No, I did not know it,” said Aramis.

Madame de Chevreuse paused to look at Aramis, but it was perfectly dark. “Well, such is the rule, however,” she resumed. “I had, therefore, to appear to possess a power of usefulness of some kind or other, and I proposed to travel for the order, and I was placed on the list of affiliated travelers. You understand it was a formality, by means of which I received my pension, which was very convenient for me.”

“Good heavens! duchesse, what you tell me is like a dagger-thrust. *You* obliged to receive a pension from the Jesuits?”

“No, chevalier! from Spain.”

“Except for a conscientious scruple, duchesse, you will admit that it is pretty nearly the same thing.”

“No, not at all.”

“But surely of your magnificent fortune there must remain—”

“Dampierre is all that remains.”

“And that is handsome enough.”

“Yes; but Dampierre is burdened, mortgaged, and almost fallen to ruin, like its owner.”

“And can the queen-mother know and see all that, without shedding a tear?” said Aramis, with a penetrating look, which encountered nothing but darkness.

“Yes. She has forgotten everything.”

“You, I believe, attempted to get restored to favour?”

“Yes; but, most singularly, the young king inherits the antipathy his dear father had for me. You will, perhaps, tell me that I am indeed a woman to be hated, and that I am no longer one who can be loved.”

“Dear duchesse, pray come quickly to the cause that brought you here; for I think we can be of service to each other.”

“Such has been my own thought. I came to Fontainebleau with a double object in view. In the first place, I was summoned there by the Franciscan whom you knew. By the by, how did you know him?—for I have told you my story, and have not yet heard yours.”

“I knew him in a very natural way, duchesse. I studied theology with him at Parma. We became fast friends; and it happened, from time to time, that business, or travel, or war, separated us from each other.”

“You were, of course, aware that he was the general of the Jesuits?”

“I suspected it.”

"But by what extraordinary chance did it happen that you were at the hotel when the affiliated travelers met together?"

"Oh!" said Aramis, in a calm voice, "it was the merest chance in the world. I was going to Fontainebleau to see M. Fouquet, for the purpose of obtaining an audience of the king. I was passing by, unknown; I saw the poor dying monk in the road, and recognized him immediately. You know the rest—he died in my arms."

"Yes; but bequeathing to you so vast a power that you issue your sovereign orders and directions like a monarch."

"He certainly did leave me a few commissions to settle."

"And what for me?"

"I have told you—a sum of twelve thousand livres was to be paid to you. I thought I had given you the necessary signature to enable you to receive it. Did you not get the money?"

"Oh! yes, yes. You give your orders, I am informed, with so much mystery, and such a majestic presence, that it is generally believed you are the successor of the defunct chief."

Aramis coloured impatiently, and the duchesse continued: "I have obtained my information," she said, "from the king of Spain himself; and he cleared up some of my doubts on the point. Every general of the Jesuits is nominated by him, and must be a Spaniard, according to the statutes of the order. You are not a Spaniard, nor have you been nominated by the king of Spain."

Aramis did not reply to this remark, except to say, "You see, duchesse, how greatly you were mistaken, since the king of Spain told you that."

"Yes, my dear Aramis; but there was something else which I have been thinking of."

"What is that?"

"You know, I believe, something about most things, and it occurred to me that you know the Spanish language."

"Every Frenchman who has been actively engaged in the Fronde knows Spanish."

"You have lived in Flanders?"

"Three years."

"And have stayed at Madrid?"

"Fifteen months."

"You are in a position, then, to become a naturalized Spaniard, when you like."

"Really?" said Aramis, with a frankness which deceived the duchesse.

"Undoubtedly. Two years' residence and an acquaintance with the language are indispensable. You have upwards of four years—more than double the time necessary."

"What are you driving at, duchesse?"

"At this—I am on good terms with the king of Spain."

"And I am not on bad terms," thought Aramis to himself.

"Shall I ask the king," continued the duchesse, "to confer the succession to the Franciscan's post upon you?"

"Oh, duchesse!"

"You have it already, perhaps?" she said.

"No, upon my honour."

"Very well, then, I can render you that service."

"Why did you not render the same service to M. de Laicques, duchesse? He is a very talented man, and one you love, besides."

"Yes, no doubt; but, at all events, putting Laicques aside, will you have it?"

"No, I thank you, duchesse."

She paused. "He is nominated," she thought; and then resumed aloud, "If you refuse me in this manner, it is not very encouraging for me, supposing I should have something to ask of you."

"Oh! ask, pray, ask."

"Ask! I cannot do so, if you have not the power to grant what I want."

"However limited my power and ability, ask all the same."

"I need a sum of money, to restore Dampierre."

"Ah!" replied Aramis, coldly—"money? Well, duchesse, how much would you require?"

"Oh! a tolerably round sum."

"So much the worse—you know I am not rich."

"No, no; but the order is—and if you had been the general—"

"You know I am not the general, I think."

"In that case, you have a friend who must be very wealthy—M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet! He is more than half ruined, madame."

"So it is said, but I did not believe it."

"Why, duchesse?"

"Because I have, or rather Laicques has, certain letters in his possession from Cardinal Mazarin, which establish the existence of very strange accounts."

"What accounts?"

"Relative to various sums of money borrowed and disposed of. I cannot very distinctly remember what they are; but they establish the fact that the superintendent, according to these letters, which are signed by Mazarin, had taken thirteen millions of francs from the coffers of the state. The case is a very serious one."

Aramis clenched his hands in anxiety and apprehension. "Is it possible," he said, "that you have such letters as you speak of, and have not communicated them to M. Fouquet?"

"Ah!" replied the duchesse, "I keep such trifling matters as these in reserve. The day may come when they will be of service; and they can be withdrawn from the safe custody in which they now remain."

"And that day has arrived?" said Aramis.

"Yes."

"And you are going to show those letters to M. Fouquet?"

"I prefer to talk about them with you, instead."

"You must be in sad want of money, my poor friend, to think of such things as these—you, too, who held M. de Mazarin's prose effusions in such indifferent esteem."

"The fact is, I am in want of money."

"And then," continued Aramis, in cold accents, "it must have been very distressing to you to be obliged to have recourse to such a means. It is cruel."

"Oh! if I had wished to do harm instead of good," said Madame de Chevreuse, "instead of asking the general of the order, or M. Fouquet, for the five hundred thousand francs I require, I—"

*"Five hundred thousand francs!"*

"Yes; no more. Do you think it much? I require at least as much as that to restore Dampierre."

"Yes, madame."

"I say, therefore, that instead of asking for this amount, I should have gone to see my old friend the queen-mother; the letters from her husband, Signor Mazarini, would have served me as an introduction, and I should have begged this mere trifle of her, saying to her, 'I wish, madame, to have the honour of receiving you at Dampierre. Permit me to put Dampierre in a fit state for that purpose.'"

Aramis did not return a single word. "Well," she said, "what are you thinking about?"

"I am making certain additions," said Aramis.

"And M. Fouquet subtractions. I, on the other hand, am trying my hand at the art of multiplication. What excellent calculators we all three are! How well we might understand one another!"

"Will you allow me to reflect?" said Aramis.

"No, for with such an opening between people like ourselves, 'yes' or 'no' is the only answer, and that an immediate one."

"It is a snare," thought the bishop; "it is impossible that Anne of Austria would listen to such a woman as this."

"Well?" said the duchesse.

"Well, madame, I should be very much astonished if M. Fouquet had five hundred thousand francs at his disposal at the present moment."

"It is no use speaking of it, then," said the duchesse, "and Dampierre must get restored how best it may."

"Oh! you are not embarrassed to such an extent as that, I suppose."

"No; I am never embarrassed."

"And the queen," continued the bishop, "will certainly do for you what the superintendent is unable to do?"

"Oh! certainly. But tell me, do you think it would be better that I should speak, myself, to M. Fouquet about these letters?"

"Nay, duchesse, you will do precisely whatever you please in that respect. M. Fouquet either feels or does not feel himself to be guilty; if he really be so, I know he is proud enough not to confess it; if he be not so, he will be exceedingly offended at your menace."

"As usual, you reason like an angel," said the duchesse, as she rose from her seat.

"And so, you are now going to denounce M. Fouquet to the queen," said Aramis.

"Denounce! Oh! what a disagreeable word. I shall not 'denounce' my dear friend; you know matters of policy too well to be ignorant how easily these affairs are arranged. I shall merely side against M. Fouquet, and nothing more; and, in a war of party against party, a weapon is always a weapon."

"No doubt."

"And once on friendly terms again with the queen-mother, I may be dangerous towards some persons."

"You are at liberty to prove so, duchesse."

"A liberty of which I shall avail myself."

"You are not ignorant, I suppose, duchesse, that M. Fouquet is on the best terms with the king of Spain."

"I suppose so."

"If, therefore, you begin a party warfare against M. Fouquet, he will reply in the same way; for he, too, is at perfect liberty to do so, is he not?"

"Oh! certainly."

"And as he is on good terms with Spain, he will make use of that friendship as a weapon of attack."

"You mean, that he is, naturally, on good terms with the general of the order of the Jesuits, my dear Aramis."

"That may be the case, duchesse."

"And that, consequently, the pension I have been receiving from the order will be stopped."

"I am greatly afraid it might be."

"Well; I must contrive to console myself in the best way I can; for after Richelieu, after the Fronde, after exile, what is there left for Madame de Chevreuse to be afraid of?"

"The pension, you are aware, is forty-eight thousand francs."

"Alas! I am quite aware of it."

"Moreover, in party contests, you know, the friends of one's enemy do not escape."

"Ah! you mean that poor Laicques will have to suffer."

"I am afraid it is almost inevitable, duchesse."

“Oh! he only receives twelve thousand francs pension.”

“Yes, but the king of Spain has some influence left; advised by M. Fouquet, he might get M. Laicques shut up in prison for a little while.”

“I am not very nervous on that point, my dear friend; because, once reconciled with Anne of Austria, I will undertake that France would insist upon M. Laicques’s liberation.”

“True. In that case, you will have something else to apprehend.”

“What can that be?” said the duchesse, pretending to be surprised and terrified.

“You will learn; indeed, you must know it already, that having once been an affiliated member of the order, it is not easy to leave it; for the secrets that any particular member may have acquired are unwholesome, and carry with them the germs of misfortune for whosoever may reveal them.”

The duchesse paused and reflected for a moment, and then said, “That is more serious: I will think it over.”

And notwithstanding the profound obscurity, Aramis seemed to feel a basilisk glance, like a white-hot iron, escape from his friend’s eyes, and plunge into his heart.

“Let us recapitulate,” said Aramis, determined to keep himself on his guard, and gliding his hand into his breast where he had a dagger concealed.

“Exactly, let us recapitulate; short accounts make long friends.”

“The suppression of your pension—”

“Forty-eight thousand francs, and that of Laicques’s twelve, make together sixty thousand francs; that is what you mean, I suppose?”

“Precisely; and I was trying to find out what would be your equivalent for that.”

“Five hundred thousand francs, which I shall get from the queen.”

“Or, which you will *not* get.”

“I know a means of procuring them,” said the duchesse, thoughtlessly.

This remark made the chevalier prick up his ears; and from the moment his adversary had committed this error, his mind was so thoroughly on its guard, that he seemed every moment to gain the advantage more and more; and she, consequently, to lose it. “I will admit, for argument’s sake, that you obtain the money,” he resumed; “you will lose twice as much, having a hundred thousand francs’ pension to receive instead of sixty thousand, and that for a period of ten years.”

“Not so, for I shall only be subjected to this reduction of my income during the period of M. Fouquet’s remaining in power, a period which I estimate at two months.”

“Ah!” said Aramis.

“I am frank, you see.”

“I thank you for it, duchesse; but you would be wrong to suppose that after M. Fouquet’s disgrace the order would resume the payment of your pension.”

“I know a means of making the order pay, as I know a means of forcing the queen-mother to concede what I require.”

“In that case, duchesse, we are all obliged to strike our flags to you. The victory is yours, and the triumph also. Be clement, I entreat you.”

“But is it possible,” resumed the duchesse, without taking notice of the irony, “that you really draw back from a miserable sum of five hundred thousand francs, when it is a question of sparing you—I mean your friend—I beg your pardon, I ought rather to say your protector—the disagreeable consequences which a party contest produces?”

“Duchesse, I tell you why; supposing the five hundred thousand francs were to be given you, M. Laicques will require his share, which will be another five hundred thousand francs, I presume? and then, after M. de Laicques’s and your own portions have been arranged, the portions which your children, your poor pensioners, and various other persons will require, will start up as fresh claims, and these letters, however compromising they may be in their nature, are not worth from three to four millions. Can you have forgotten the queen of France’s diamonds?—they were surely worth more than these bits of waste paper signed by Mazarin, and yet their recovery did not cost a fourth part of what you ask for yourself.”

“Yes, that is true; but the merchant values his goods at his own price, and it is for the purchaser to buy or refuse.”

“Stay a moment, duchesse; would you like me to tell you why I will not buy your letters?”

“Pray tell me.”

“Because the letters you claim to be Mazarin’s are false.”

“What an absurdity.”

“I have no doubt of it, for it would, to say the least, be very singular, that after you had quarreled with the queen through M. Mazarin’s means, you should have kept up any intimate acquaintance with the latter; it would look as if you had been acting as a spy; and upon my word, I do not like to make use of the word.”

“Oh! pray do.”

“You great complacence would seem suspicions, at all events.”

“That is quite true; but the contents of the letters are even more so.”

“I pledge you my word, duchesse, that you will not be able to make use of it with the queen.”

“Oh! yes, indeed; I can make use of everything with the queen.”

“Very good,” thought Aramis. “Croak on, old owl—hiss, beldame-viper.”

But the duchesse had said enough, and advanced a few steps towards the door. Aramis, however, had reserved one exposure which she did *not* expect.

He rang the bell, candles immediately appeared in the adjoining room, and the bishop found himself completely encircled by lights, which shone upon the worn, haggard face of the duchesse, revealing every feature but too clearly. Aramis fixed a long ironical look upon her pale, thin, withered cheeks—her dim, dull eyes—and upon her lips, which she kept carefully closed over her discoloured scanty teeth. He, however, had thrown himself into a graceful attitude, with his haughty and intelligent head thrown back; he smiled so as to reveal teeth still brilliant and dazzling. The antiquated coquette understood the trick that had been played her. She was standing immediately before a large mirror, in which her decrepitude, so carefully concealed, was only made more manifest. And, thereupon, without even saluting Aramis, who bowed with the ease and grace of the musketeer of early days, she hurried away with trembling steps, which her very precipitation only the more impeded. Aramis sprang across the room, like a zephyr, to lead her to the door. Madame de Chevreuse made a sign to her servant, who resumed his musket, and she left the house where such tender friends had not been able to understand each other only because they had understood each other too well.

XXI. Wherein May Be Seen that a Bargain Which Cannot Be Made with One Person, Can Be Carried Out with Another.

Aramis had been perfectly correct in his supposition; for hardly had she left the house in the Place Baudoyer than Madame de Chevreuse proceeded homeward. She was doubtless afraid of being followed, and by this means thought she might succeed in throwing those who might be following her off their guard; but scarcely had she arrived within the door of the hotel, and hardly had assured herself that no one who could cause her any uneasiness was on her track, when she opened the door of the garden, leading into another street, and hurried towards the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs, where M. Colbert resided.

We have already said that evening, or rather night, had closed in; it was a dark, thick night, besides; Paris had once more sunk into its calm, quiescent state, enshrouding alike within its indulgent mantle the high-born duchesse carrying out her political intrigue, and the simple citizen’s wife, who, having been detained late by a supper in the city, was making her way slowly homewards, hanging on the arm of a lover, by the shortest possible route. Madame de Chevreuse had been too well accustomed to nocturnal political intrigues to be ignorant that a minister never denies himself, even at his own private residence, to any young and beautiful woman who may chance to object to the dust and confusion of a public office, or to old women, as full of experience as of years, who dislike the indiscreet echo of official residences. A valet received the duchesse under the peristyle, and received her, it must be admitted, with some indifference of manner; he intimated, after having looked at her face, that it was hardly at such an hour that one so advanced in years as herself could be permitted to disturb Monsieur Colbert’s important occupations. But Madame de Chevreuse, without looking or appearing to be annoyed, wrote her name upon a leaf of her tablets—a name which had but too frequently sounded so disagreeably in the ears of Louis XIII. and of the great cardinal. She wrote her name in the large, ill-formed characters of the higher classes of that period, handed it to the valet, without uttering a word, but with so haughty and imperious a gesture, that the fellow, well accustomed to judge of people from their manners and appearance, perceived at once the quality of the person before him, bowed his head, and ran to M. Colbert’s room. The minister could not control a sudden exclamation as he opened the paper; and the valet, gathering from it the interest with which his master regarded the mysterious visitor, returned as fast as he could to beg the duchesse to follow him. She ascended to the first floor of the beautiful new house very slowly, rested herself on the landing-place, in order not to enter the apartment out of breath, and appeared before M. Colbert, who, with his own hands, held both the folding doors open. The duchesse paused at the threshold, for the purpose of well studying the character of the man with whom she was about to converse. At the first glance, the round, large, heavy head, thick brows, and ill-favoured features of Colbert, who wore, thrust low down on his head, a cap like a priest’s *calotte*, seemed to indicate that but little difficulty was likely to be met with in her negotiations with him, but also that she was to expect as little interest in the discussion of particulars; for there was scarcely any indication that the rough and uncouth nature of the man was susceptible to the impulses of a refined revenge, or of an exalted ambition. But when, on closer inspection, the duchesse perceived the small, piercingly black eyes, the longitudinal wrinkles of his high and massive forehead, the imperceptible twitching of the lips, on which were apparent traces of rough good-humor, Madame de Chevreuse altered her opinion of him, and felt she could say to herself: “I have found the man I want.”

“What is the subject, madame, which procures me the honour of a visit from you?” he inquired.

“The need I have of you, monsieur,” returned the duchesse, “as well as that which you have of me.”

“I am delighted, madame, with the first portion of your sentence; but, as far as the second portion is concerned—”

Madame de Chevreuse sat down in the armchair which M. Colbert advanced towards her. “Monsieur Colbert, you are the intendant of finances, and are ambitious of becoming the superintendent?”

“Madame!”

“Nay, do not deny it; that would only unnecessarily prolong our conversation, and that is useless.”

“And yet, madame, however well-disposed and inclined to show politeness I may be towards a lady of your position and merit, nothing will make me confess that I have ever entertained the idea of supplanting my superior.”

“I said nothing about supplanting, Monsieur Colbert. Could I accidentally have made use of that word? I hardly think that likely. The word ‘replace’ is less aggressive in its signification, and more grammatically suitable, as M. de Voiture would say. I presume, therefore, that you are ambitious of replacing M. Fouquet.”

“M. Fouquet’s fortune, madame, enables him to withstand all attempts. The superintendent in this age plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; the vessels pass beneath him and do not overthrow him.”

“I ought to have availed myself precisely of that very comparison. It is true, M. Fouquet plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; but I remember to have heard it said by M. Conrart, a member of the academy, I believe, that when the Colossus of Rhodes fell from its lofty position, the merchant who had cast it down—a merchant, nothing more, M. Colbert—loaded four hundred camels with the ruins. A merchant! and that is considerably less than an intendant of finances.”

“Madame, I can assure you that I shall never overthrow M. Fouquet.”

“Very good, Monsieur Colbert, since you persist in showing so much sensitiveness with me, as if you were ignorant that I am Madame de Chevreuse, and also that I am somewhat advanced in years; in other words, that you have to do with a woman who has had political dealings with the Cardinal Richelieu, and who has no time to lose; as, I repeat, you do not hesitate to commit such an imprudence, I shall go and find others who are more intelligent and more desirous of making their fortunes.”

“How, madame, how?”

“You give me a very poor idea of negotiations of the present day. I assure you that if, in my earlier days, a woman had gone to M. de Cinq-Mars, who was not, moreover, a man of a very high order of intellect, and had said to him about the cardinal what I have just said to you of M. Fouquet, M. de Cinq-Mars would by this time have already set actively to work.”

“Nay, madame, show a little indulgence, I entreat you.”

“Well, then, do you really consent to replace M. Fouquet?”

“Certainly, I do, if the king dismisses M. Fouquet.”

“Again, a word too much; it is quite evident that, if you have not yet succeeded in driving M. Fouquet from his post, it is because you have not been able to do so. Therefore, I should be the greatest simpleton possible if, in coming to you, I did not bring the very thing you require.”

“I am distressed to be obliged to persist, madame,” said Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchesse to sound the depths of his dissimulation, “but I must warn you that, for the last six years, denunciation after denunciation has been made against M. Fouquet, and he has remained unshaken and unaffected by them.”



"There is a time for everything, Monsieur Colbert; those who were the authors of those denunciations were not called Madame de Chevreuse, and they had no proofs equal to the six letters from M. de Mazarin which establish the offense in question."

"The offense!"

"The crime, if you like it better."

"The crime! committed by M. Fouquet!"

"Nothing less. It is rather strange, M. Colbert, but your face, which just now was cold and indifferent, is now positively the very reverse."

"A crime!"

"I am delighted to see that it makes an impression upon you."

"It is because that word, madame, embraces so many things."

"It embraces the post of superintendent of finance for yourself, and a letter of exile, or the Bastille, for M. Fouquet."

"Forgive me, madame la duchesse, but it is almost impossible that M. Fouquet can be exiled; to be imprisoned or disgraced, that is already a great deal."

"Oh, I am perfectly aware of what I am saying," returned Madame de Chevreuse, coldly. "I do not live at such a distance from Paris as not to know what takes place there. The king does not like M. Fouquet, and he would willingly sacrifice M. Fouquet if an opportunity were only given him."

"It must be a good one, though."

"Good enough, and one I estimate to be worth five hundred thousand francs."

"In what way?" said Colbert.

"I mean, monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my own hands, I will not allow it to be transferred to yours except for a sum of five hundred thousand francs."

"I understand you perfectly, madame. But since you have fixed a price for the sale, let me now see the value of the articles to be sold."

"Oh, a mere trifle; six letters, as I have already told you, from M. de Mazarin; and the autographs will most assuredly not be regarded as too highly priced, if they establish, in an irrefutable manner, that M. Fouquet has embezzled large sums of money from the treasury and appropriated them to his own purposes."

"In an irrefutable manner, do you say?" observed Colbert, whose eyes sparkled with delight.

"Perfectly so; would you like to read the letters?"

"With all my heart! Copies, of course?"

"Of course, the copies," said the duchesse, as she drew from her bosom a small packet of papers flattened by her velvet bodice. "Read," she said.

Colbert eagerly snatched the papers and devoured them. "Excellent!" he said.

"It is clear enough, is it not?"

"Yes, madame, yes; M. Mazarin must have handed the money to M. Fouquet, who must have kept it for his own purposes; but the question is, what money?"

"Exactly,—what money; if we come to terms I will join to these six letters a seventh, which will supply you with the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected. "And the originals of these letters?"

"A useless question to ask; exactly as if I were to ask you, Monsieur Colbert, whether the money-bags you will give me will be full or empty."

"Very good, madame."

"Is it concluded?"

"No; for there is one circumstance to which neither of us has given any attention."

"Name it!"

"M. Fouquet can be utterly ruined, under the legal circumstances you have detailed, only by means of legal proceedings."

"Well?"

"A public scandal, for instance; and yet neither the legal proceedings nor the scandal can be commenced against him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is procureur-general of the parliament; because, too, in France, all public administrators, the army, justice itself, and commerce, are intimately connected by ties of good-fellowship, which people call *esprit de corps*. In such a case, madame, the parliament will never permit its chief to be dragged before a public tribunal; and never, even if he be dragged there by royal authority, never, I say, will he be condemned."

"Well, Monsieur Colbert, I do not see what I have to do with that."

"I am aware of that, madame; but I have to do with it, and it consequently diminishes the value of what you have brought to show me. What good can a proof of a crime be to me, without the possibility of obtaining a condemnation?"

"Even if he be only suspected, M. Fouquet will lose his post of superintendent."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Colbert, whose dark, gloomy features were momentarily lighted up by an expression of hate and vengeance.

"Ah! ah! Monsieur Colbert," said the duchesse, "forgive me, but I did not think you were so impressionable. Very good; in that case, since you need more than I have to give you, there is no occasion to speak of the matter at all."

"Yes, madame, we will go on talking of it; only, as the value of your commodities had decreased, you must lower your pretensions."

"You are bargaining, then?"

"Every man who wishes to deal loyally is obliged to do so."

"How much will you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand francs," said Colbert.

The duchesse laughed in his face, and then said, suddenly, "Wait a moment, I have another arrangement to propose; will you give me three hundred thousand francs?"

"No, no."

"Oh, you can either accept or refuse my terms; besides, that is not all."

"More still! you are becoming too impracticable to deal with, madame."

"Less so than you think, perhaps, for it is not money I am going to ask you for."

"What is it, then?"

"A service; you know that I have always been most affectionately attached to the queen, and I am desirous of having an interview with her majesty."

"With the queen?"

"Yes, Monsieur Colbert, with the queen, who is, I admit, no longer my friend, and who has ceased to be so for a long time past, but who may again become so if the opportunity be only given her."

"Her majesty has ceased to receive any one, madame. She is a great sufferer, and you may be aware that the paroxysms of her disease occur with greater frequency than ever."

"That is the very reason why I wish to have an interview with her majesty; for in Flanders there is a great variety of these kinds of complaints."

"What, cancers—a fearful, incurable disorder?"

"Do not believe that, Monsieur Colbert. The Flemish peasant is somewhat a man of nature, and his companion for life is not alone a wife, but a female laborer also; for while he is smoking his pipe, the woman works: it is she who draws the water from the well; she who loads the mule or the ass, and even bears herself a portion of the burden. Taking but little care of herself, she gets knocked about first in one direction, and then in another, and very often is beaten by her husband, and cancers frequently rise from contusions."

"True, true," said Colbert.

"The Flemish women do not die the sooner on that account. When they are great sufferers from this disease they go in search of remedies, and the Beguines of Bruges are excellent doctors for every kind of disease. They have precious waters of one sort or another; specifics of various kinds; and they give a bottle of it and a wax candle to the sufferer, whereby the priests are gainers, and Heaven is served by the disposal of both their wares. I will take the queen some of this holy water, which I will procure from the Beguines of Bruges; her majesty will recover, and will burn as many wax candles as she may see fit. You see, Monsieur Colbert, to prevent my seeing the queen is almost as bad as committing the crime of regicide."

"You are undoubtedly, madame la duchesse, a woman of exceedingly great abilities, and I am more than astounded at their display; still I cannot but suppose that this charitable consideration towards the queen in some measure covers a slight personal interest for yourself."

"I have not given myself the trouble to conceal it, that I am aware of, Monsieur Colbert. You said, I believe, that I had a slight personal interest? On the contrary, it is a very great interest, and I will prove it to you, by resuming what I was saying. If you procure me a personal interview with her majesty, I will be satisfied with the three hundred thousand francs I have claimed; if not, I shall keep my letters, unless, indeed, you give me, on the spot, five hundred thousand francs."

And rising from her seat with this decisive remark, the old duchesse plunged M. Colbert into a disagreeable perplexity. To bargain any further was out of the question; and not to bargain was to pay a great deal too dearly for them. "Madame," he said, "I shall have the pleasure of handing over a hundred thousand crowns; but how shall I get the actual letters themselves?"

"In the simplest manner in the world, my dear Monsieur Colbert—whom will you trust?"

The financier began to laugh, silently, so that his large eyebrows went up and down like the wings of a bat, upon the deep lines of his yellow forehead. "No one," he said.

"You surely will make an exception in your own favour, Monsieur Colbert?"

"In what way, madame?"

"I mean that, if you would take the trouble to accompany me to the place where the letters are, they would be delivered into your own hands, and you would be able to verify and check them."

"Quite true."

"You would bring the hundred thousand crowns with you at the same time, for I, too, do not trust any one."

Colbert coloured to the tips of his ears. Like all eminent men in the art of figures, he was of an insolent and mathematical probity. "I will take with me, madame," he said, "two orders for the amount agreed upon, payable at my treasury. Will that satisfy you?"

"Would that the orders on your treasury were for two millions, monsieur l'intendant! I shall have the pleasure of showing you the way, then?"

"Allow me to order my carriage?"

"I have a carriage below, monsieur."

Colbert coughed like an irresolute man. He imagined, for a moment, that the proposition of the duchesse was a snare; that perhaps some one was waiting at the door; and that she whose secret had just been sold to Colbert for a hundred thousand crowns, had already offered it to Fouquet for the same sum. As he still hesitated, the duchesse looked at him full in the face.

"You prefer your own carriage?" she said.

"I admit I *do*."

"You suppose I am going to lead you into a snare or trap of some sort or other?"

"Madame la duchesse, you have the character of being somewhat inconsiderate at times, as I am reputed a sober, solemn character, a jest or practical joke might compromise me."

"Yes; the fact is, you are afraid. Well, then, take your own carriage, as many servants as you like, only think well of what I am going to say. What we two may arrange between ourselves, we are the only persons who will know—if a third person is present we might as well tell the whole world about it. After all, I do not make a point of it; my carriage shall follow yours, and I shall be satisfied to accompany you in your own carriage to the queen."

"To the queen?"

"Have you forgotten that already? Is it possible that one of the clauses of the agreement of so much importance to me, can have escaped you so soon? How trifling it seems to you, indeed; if I had known it I should have asked double what I have done."

"I have reflected, madame, and I shall not accompany you."

"Really—and why not?"

"Because I have the most perfect confidence in you."

"You overpower me. But—provided I receive the hundred thousand crowns?"

"Here they are, madame," said Colbert, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper, which he handed to the duchesse, adding, "You are paid."

"The trait is a fine one, Monsieur Colbert, and I will reward you for it," she said, beginning to laugh.

Madame de Chevreuse's laugh was a very sinister sound; a man with youth, faith, love, life itself, throbbing in his heart, would prefer a sob to such a lamentable laugh. The duchesse opened the front of her dress and drew forth from her bosom, somewhat less white than it once had been, a small packet of papers, tied with a flame-coloured ribbon, and, still laughing, she said, "There, Monsieur Colbert, are the originals of Cardinal Mazarin's letters; they are now your own property," she added, refastening the body of her dress; "your fortune is secured. And now accompany me to the queen."

"No, madame; if you are again about to run the chance of her majesty's displeasure, and it were known at the Palais Royal that I had been the means of introducing you there, the queen would never forgive me while she lived. No; there are certain persons at the palace who are devoted to me, who will procure you an admission without my being compromised."

"Just as you please, provided I enter."

"What do you term those religious women at Bruges who cure disorders?"

"Beguines."

"Good; are you one?"

"As you please,—but I must soon cease to be one."

"That is your affair."

"Excuse me, but I do not wish to be exposed to a refusal."

"That is again your own affair, madame. I am going to give directions to the head valet of the gentleman in waiting on the queen to allow admission to a Beguine, who brings an effectual remedy for her majesty's sufferings. You are the bearer of my letter, you will undertake to be provided with the remedy, and will give every explanation on the subject. I admit a knowledge of a Beguine, but I deny all knowledge of Madame de Chevreuse. Here, madame, then, is your letter of introduction."

#### XLII. The Skin of the Bear.

Colbert handed the duchesse the letter, and gently drew aside the chair behind which she was standing; Madame de Chevreuse, with a very slight bow, immediately left the room. Colbert, who had recognized Mazarin's handwriting, and had counted the letters, rang to summon his secretary, whom he enjoined to go in immediate search of M. Vanel, a counselor of the parliament. The secretary replied that, according to his usual practice, M. Vanel had just that moment entered the house, in order to give the intendant an account of the principal details of the business which had been transacted during the day in parliament. Colbert approached one of the lamps, read the letters of the deceased cardinal over again, smiled repeatedly as he recognized the great value of the papers Madame de Chevreuse had just delivered—and burying his head in his hands for a few minutes, reflected profoundly. In the meantime, a tall, loosely-made man entered the room; his spare, thin face, steady look, and hooked nose, as he entered Colbert's cabinet, with a modest assurance of manner, revealed a character at once supple and decided,—supple towards the master who could throw him the prey, firm towards the dogs who might possibly be disposed to dispute its possession. M. Vanel carried a voluminous bundle of papers under his arm, and placed it on the desk on which Colbert was leaning both his elbows, as he supported his head.

"Good day, M. Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his meditation.

"Good day, my lord," said Vanel, naturally.

"You should say monsieur, and not my lord," replied Colbert, gently.

"We give the title of my lord to ministers," returned Vanel, with extreme self-possession, "and you are a minister."

"Not yet."

"You are so in point of fact, and I call you my lord accordingly; besides you are seigneur for *me*, and that is sufficient; if you dislike my calling you my lord before others, allow me, at least, to call you so in private."

Colbert raised his head as if to read, or try to read, upon Vanel's face how much or how little sincerity entered into this protestation of devotion. But the counselor knew perfectly well how to sustain the weight of such a look, even backed with the full authority of the title he had conferred. Colbert sighed; he could not read anything in Vanel's face, and Vanel might possibly be honest in his professions, but Colbert recollected that this man, inferior to himself in every other respect, was actually his master in virtue of the fact of his having a wife. As he was pitying this man's lot, Vanel coldly drew from his pocket a perfumed letter, sealed with Spanish wax, and held it towards Colbert, saying, "A letter from my wife, my lord."

Colbert coughed, took, opened and read the letter, and then put it carefully away in his pocket, while Vanel turned over the leaves of the papers he had brought with him with an unmoved and unconcerned air. "Vanel," he said suddenly to his *protege*, "you are a hard-working man, I know; would twelve hours' daily labor frighten you?"

"I work fifteen hours every day."

"Impossible. A counselor need not work more than three hours a day in parliament."

"Oh! I am working up some returns for a friend of mine in the department of accounts, and, as I still have spare time on my hands, I am studying Hebrew."

"Your reputation stands high in the parliament, Vanel."

"I believe so, my lord."

"You must not grow rusty in your post of counselor."

"What must I do to avoid it?"

"Purchase a high place. Mean and low ambitions are very difficult to satisfy."

"Small purses are the most difficult ones to fill, my lord."

"What post have you in view?" said Colbert.

"I see none—not one."

"There is one, certainly, but one need be almost the king himself to be able to buy it without inconvenience; and the king will not be inclined, I suppose, to purchase the post of procureur-general."

At these words, Vanel fixed his peculiar, humble, dull look upon Colbert, who could hardly tell whether Vanel comprehended him or not. "Why do you speak to me, my lord," said Vanel, "of the post of procureur-general to the parliament; I know no other post than the one M. Fouquet fills."

"Exactly so, my dear counselor."

"You are not over fastidious, my lord; but before the post can be bought, it must be offered for sale."

"I believe, Monsieur Vanel, that it will be for sale before long."

"For sale! What! M. Fouquet's post of procureur-general?"

"So it is *said*."

"The post which renders him so perfectly invincible, for sale! Ha, ha!" said Vanel, beginning to laugh.

"Would you be afraid, then, of the post?" said Colbert, gravely.

"Afraid! no; but—"

"Are you desirous of obtaining it?"

"You are laughing at me, my lord," replied Vanel. "Is it likely that a counselor of the parliament would not be desirous of becoming procureur-general?"

"Well, Monsieur Vanel, since I tell you that the post, as report goes, will be shortly for sale—"

"I cannot help repeating, my lord, that it is impossible; a man never throws away the buckler, behind which he maintains his honour, his fortune, his very life."

"There are certain men mad enough, Vanel, to fancy themselves out of the reach of all mischances."

"Yes, my lord; but such men never commit their mad acts for the advantage of the poor Vanels of the world."

"Why not?"

"For the very reason that those Vanels are poor."

"It is true that M. Fouquet's post might cost a good round sum. What would you bid for it, Monsieur Vanel?"

"Everything I am worth."

"Which means?"

"Three or four hundred thousand francs."

"And the post is worth—"

"A million and a half, at the very lowest. I know persons who have offered one million seven hundred thousand francs, without being able to persuade M. Fouquet to sell. Besides, supposing it were to happen that M. Fouquet wished to sell, which I do not believe, in spite of what I have been told—"

"Ah! you have heard something about it, then; who told you?"

"M. de Gourville, M. Pelisson, and others."

"Very good; if, therefore, M. Fouquet did wish to sell—"

"I could not buy it just yet, since the superintendent will only sell for ready money, and no one has a million and a half to put down at once."

Colbert suddenly interrupted the counselor by an imperious gesture; he had begun to meditate. Observing his superior's serious attitude, and his perseverance in continuing the conversation on this subject, Vanel awaited the solution without venturing to precipitate it.

"Explain to me the privileges which this post confers."

"The right of impeaching every French subject who is not a prince of the blood; the right of quashing all proceedings taken against any Frenchman, who is neither king nor prince. The procureur-general is the king's right hand to punish the guilty; the office is the means whereby also he can evade the administration of justice. M. Fouquet, therefore, would be able, by stirring up parliament, to maintain himself even against the king; and the king could as easily, by humoring M. Fouquet, get his edicts registered in spite of every opposition and objection. The procureur-general can be made a very useful or a very dangerous instrument."

"Vanel, would you like to be procureur-general?" said Colbert, suddenly, softening both his look and his voice.

"I!" exclaimed the latter; "I have already had the honour to represent to you that I want about eleven hundred thousand francs to make up the amount."

"Borrow that sum from your friends."

"I have no friends richer than myself."

"You are an honest and honourable man, Vanel."

"Ah! my lord, if the world would only think as you do!"

"I think so, and that is quite enough; and if it should be needed, I will be your security."

"Do not forget the proverb, my lord."

"What is it?"

"That he who becomes responsible for another has to pay for his fancy."

"Let that make no difference."

Vanel rose, bewildered by this offer which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly made to him. "You are not trifling with me, my lord?" he said.

"Stay; you say that M. Gourville has spoken to you about M. Fouquet's post?"

“Yes; and M. Pelisson, also.”

“Officially so, or only through their own suggestion?”

“These were their very words: ‘The parliament members are as proud as they are wealthy; they ought to club together two or three millions among themselves, to present to their protector and leader, M. Fouquet.’”

“And what did you reply?”

“I said that, for my own part, I would give ten thousand francs if necessary.”

“Ah! you like M. Fouquet, then!” exclaimed Colbert, with a look of hatred.

“No; but M. Fouquet is our chief. He is in debt—is on the high road to ruin; and we ought to save the honour of the body of which we are members.”

“Exactly; and that explains why M. Fouquet will be always safe and sound, so long as he occupies his present post,” replied Colbert.

“Thereupon,” said Vanel, “M. Gourville added, ‘If we were to do anything out of charity to M. Fouquet, it could not be otherwise than most humiliating to him; and he would be sure to refuse it. Let the parliament subscribe among themselves to purchase, in a proper manner, the post of procureur-general; in that case, all would go well; the honour of our body would be saved, and M. Fouquet’s pride spared.’”

“That is an opening.”

“I considered it so, my lord.”

“Well, Monsieur Vanel, you will go at once, and find out either M. Gourville or M. Pelisson. Do you know any other friend of M. Fouquet?”

“I know M. de la Fontaine very well.”

“La Fontaine, the rhymester?”

“Yes; he used to write verses to my wife, when M. Fouquet was one of our friends.”

“Go to him, then, and try and procure an interview with the superintendent.”

“Willingly—but the sum itself?”

“On the day and hour you arrange to settle the matter, Monsieur Vanel, you shall be supplied with the money, so do not make yourself uneasy on *that* account.”

“My lord, such munificence! You eclipse kings even—you surpass M. Fouquet himself.”

“Stay a moment—do not let us mistake each other: I do not make you a present of fourteen hundred thousand francs, Monsieur Vanel; for I have children to provide for—but I will *lend* you that sum.”

“Ask whatever interest, whatever security you please, my lord; I am quite ready. And when all your requisitions are satisfied, I will still repeat, that you surpass kings and M. Fouquet in munificence. What conditions do you impose?”

“The repayment in eight years, and a mortgage upon the appointment itself.”

“Certainly. Is that all?”

“Wait a moment. I reserve to myself the right of purchasing the post from you at one hundred and fifty thousand francs profit for yourself, if, in your mode of filling the office, you do not follow out a line of conduct in conformity with the interests of the king and with my projects.”

“Ah-h!” said Vanel, in an altered tone.

“Is there anything in that which can possibly be objectionable to you, Monsieur Vanel?” said Colbert, coldly.

“Oh! no, no,” replied Vanel, nervously.

“Very good. We will sign an agreement to that effect whenever you like. And now go as quickly as you can to M. Fouquet’s friend, obtain an interview with the superintendent; do not be too difficult in making whatever concessions may be required of you; and when once the arrangements are all made—”

“I will press him to sign.”

“Be most careful to do nothing of the kind; do not speak of signatures with M. Fouquet, nor of deeds, nor even ask him to pass his word. Understand this: otherwise you will lose everything. All you have to do is to get M. Fouquet to give you his hand on the matter. Go, go.”

XLIII. An Interview with the Queen-Mother.

The queen-mother was in the bedroom at the Palais Royal, with Madame de Motteville and Senora Molina. King Louis, who had been impatiently expected the whole day, had not made his appearance; and the queen, who was growing impatient, had often sent to inquire about him. The moral atmosphere of the court seemed to indicate an approaching storm; the courtiers and the ladies of the court avoided meeting in the ante-chambers and the corridors in order not to converse on compromising subjects. Monsieur had joined the king early in the morning for a hunting-party; Madame remained in her own apartment, cool and distant to every one; and the queen-mother, after she had said her prayers in Latin, talked of domestic matters with her two friends in pure Castilian. Madame de Motteville, who understood the language perfectly, answered her in French. When the three ladies had exhausted every form of dissimulation and of politeness, as a circuitous mode of expressing that the king’s conduct was making the queen and the queen-mother pine away through sheer grief and vexation, and when, in the most guarded and polished phrases, they had fulminated every variety of imprecation against Mademoiselle de la Vallière, the queen-mother terminated her attack by an exclamation indicative of her own reflections and character. “*Estos hijos!*” said she to Molina—which means, “These children!” words full of meaning on a mother’s lips—words full of terrible significance in the mouth of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, hid many curious secrets in her soul.

“Yes,” said Molina, “children, children! for whom every mother becomes a sacrifice.”

“Yes,” replied the queen; “a mother sacrifices everything, certainly.” She did not finish her phrase; for she fancied, when she raised her eyes towards the full-length portrait of the pale Louis XIII., that light once more flashed from her husband’s dull eyes, and his nostrils grew livid with wrath. The portrait seemed animated by a living expression—speak it did not, but it seemed to threaten. A profound silence succeeded the queen’s last remark. La Molina began to turn over ribbons and laces on a large work-table. Madame de Motteville, surprised at the look of mutual intelligence which had been exchanged between the confidant and her mistress, cast down her eyes like a discreet woman, and pretending to be observant of nothing that was passing, listened with the utmost attention to every word. She heard nothing, however, but a very insignificant “hum” on the part of the Spanish duenna, who was the incarnation of caution—and a profound sigh on that of the queen. She looked up immediately.

“You are suffering?” she said.

“No, Motteville, no; why do you say that?”

“Your majesty almost groaned just now.”

“You are right; I did sigh, in truth.”

“Monsieur Valot is not far off; I believe he is in Madame’s apartment.”

“Why is he with Madame?”

“Madame is troubled with nervous attacks.”

“A very fine disorder, indeed! There is little good in M. Valot being there, when a very different physician would quickly cure Madame.”

Madame de Motteville looked up with an air of great surprise, as she replied, “Another doctor instead of M. Valot?—whom do you mean?”

“Occupation, Motteville, occupation. If any one is really ill, it is my poor daughter.”

“And your majesty, too.”

“Less so this evening, though.”

“Do not believe that too confidently, madame,” said De Motteville. And, as if to justify her caution, a sharp, acute pain seized the queen, who turned deadly pale, and threw herself back in the chair, with every symptom of a sudden fainting fit. Molina ran to a richly gilded tortoise-shell cabinet, from which she took a large rock-crystal bottle of scented salts, and held it to the queen’s nostrils, who inhaled it wildly for a few minutes, and murmured:

“It is hastening my death—but Heaven’s will be done!”

“Your majesty’s death is not so near at hand,” added Molina, replacing the smelling-bottle in the cabinet.

“Does your majesty feel better now?” inquired Madame de Motteville.

“Much better,” returned the queen, placing her finger on her lips, to impose silence on her favourite.

“It is very strange,” remarked Madame de Motteville, after a pause.

“What is strange?” said the queen.

“Does your majesty remember the day when this pain attacked you for the first time?”

“I remember only that it was a grievously sad day for me, Motteville.”

“But your majesty did not always regard that day as a sad one.”

“Why?”

“Because three and twenty years ago, on that very day, his present majesty, your own glorious son, was born at the very same hour.”

The queen uttered a loud cry, buried her face in her hands, and seemed utterly prostrated for some minutes; but whether from recollections which arose in her mind, or from reflection, or even with sheer pain, was doubtful. La Molina darted a look at Madame de Motteville, so full of bitter reproach, that the poor woman, perfectly ignorant of its meaning, was in her own exculpation on the point of asking an explanation, when, suddenly, Anne of Austria arose and said, “Yes, the 5th of September; my sorrow began on the 5th of September. The greatest joy, one day; the deepest sorrow the next;—the sorrow,” she added, “the bitter expiation of a too excessive joy.”

And, from that moment, Anne of Austria, whose memory and reason seemed to be suspended for the time, remained impenetrable, with vacant look, mind almost wandering, and hands hanging heavily down, as if life had almost departed.

“We must put her to bed,” said La Molina.

“Presently, Molina.”

“Let us leave the queen alone,” added the Spanish attendant.

Madame de Motteville rose; large tears were rolling down the queen’s pallid face; and Molina, having observed this sign of weakness, fixed her black vigilant eyes upon her.

“Yes, yes,” replied the queen. “Leave us, Motteville; go.”

The word “us” produced a disagreeable effect upon the ears of the French favourite; for it signified that an interchange of secrets, or of revelations of the past, was about to be made, and that one person was *de trop* in the conversation which seemed likely to take place.

“Will Molina, alone, be sufficient for your majesty to-night?” inquired the French woman.

“Yes,” replied the queen. Madame de Motteville bowed in submission, and was about to withdraw, when suddenly an old female attendant, dressed as if she had belonged to the Spanish court of the year 1620, opened the door, and surprised the queen in her tears. “The remedy!” she cried, delightedly, to the queen, as she unceremoniously approached the group.

“What remedy?” said Anne of Austria.

“For your majesty’s sufferings,” the former replied.

“Who brings it?” asked Madame de Motteville, eagerly; “Monsieur Valot?”

“No; a lady from Flanders.”

“From Flanders? Is she Spanish?” inquired the queen.

“I don’t know.”

“Who sent her?”

“M. Colbert.”

“Her name?”

"She did not mention it."  
"Her position in life?"  
"She will answer that herself."  
"Who is she?"  
"She is masked."  
"Go, Molina; go and see!" cried the queen.  
"It is needless," suddenly replied a voice, at once firm and gentle in its tone, which proceeded from the other side of the tapestry hangings; a voice which made the attendants start, and the queen tremble excessively. At the same moment, a masked female appeared through the hangings, and, before the queen could speak a syllable she added, "I am connected with the order of the Beguines of Bruges, and do, indeed, bring with me the remedy which is certain to effect a cure of your majesty's complaint." No one uttered a sound, and the Beguine did not move a step.  
"Speak," said the queen.  
"I will, when we are alone," was the answer.  
Anne of Austria looked at her attendants, who immediately withdrew. The Beguine, thereupon, advanced a few steps towards the queen, and bowed reverently before her. The queen gazed with increasing mistrust at this woman, who, in her turn, fixed a pair of brilliant eyes upon her, through her mask.  
"The queen of France must, indeed, be very ill," said Anne of Austria, "if it is known at the Beguinage of Bruges that she stands in need of being cured."  
"Your majesty is not irremediably ill."  
"But tell me how you happen to know I am suffering?"  
"Your majesty has friends in Flanders."  
"Since these friends, then, sent you, mention their names."  
"Impossible, madame, since your majesty's memory has not been awakened by your heart."  
Anne of Austria looked up, endeavoring to discover through the mysterious mask, and this ambiguous language, the name of her companion, who expressed herself with such familiarity and freedom; then, suddenly, wearied by a curiosity which wounded every feeling of pride in her nature, she said, "You are ignorant, perhaps, that royal personages are never spoken to with the face masked."  
"Deign to excuse me, madame," replied the Beguine, humbly.  
"I cannot excuse you. I may, possibly, forgive you, if you throw your mask aside."  
"I have made a vow, madame, to attend and aid all afflicted and suffering persons, without ever permitting them to behold my face. I might have been able to administer some relief to your body and to your mind, too; but since your majesty forbids me, I will take my leave. Adieu, madame, adieu!"  
These words were uttered with a harmony of tone and respect of manner that disarmed the queen of all anger and suspicion, but did not remove her feeling of curiosity. "You are right," she said; "it ill-becomes those who are suffering to reject the means of relief Heaven sends them. Speak, then; and may you, indeed, be able, as you assert, to administer relief to my body—"  
"Let us first speak a little of the mind, if you please," said the Beguine—"of the mind, which, I am sure, must also suffer."  
"My mind?"  
"There are cancers so insidious in their nature that their very pulsations cannot be felt. Such cancers, madame, leave the ivory whiteness of the skin unblemished, and putrefy not the firm, fair flesh, with their blue tints; the physician who bends over the patient's chest hears not, though he listens, the insatiable teeth of the disease grinding onward through the muscles, and the blood flows freely on; the knife has never been able to destroy, and rarely, even temporarily, to disarm the rage of these mortal scourges,—their home is in the mind, which they corrupt,—they gnaw the whole heart until it breaks. Such, madame, are the cancers fatal to queens; are you, too, free from their scourge?"  
Anne slowly raised her arm, dazzling in its perfect whiteness, and pure in its rounded outlines as it was in the time of her earlier days.  
"The evils to which you allude," she said, "are the condition of the lives of the high in rank upon earth, to whom Heaven has imparted mind. When those evils become too heavy to be borne, Heaven lightens their burdens by penitence and confession. Thus, only, we lay down our burden and the secrets that oppress us. But, forget not that the same gracious Heaven, in its mercy, apportions to their trials the strength of the feeble creatures of its hand; and my strength has enabled me to bear my burden. For the secrets of others, the silence of Heaven is more than sufficient; for my own secrets, that of my confessor is enough."  
"You are as courageous, madame, I see, as ever, against your enemies. You do not acknowledge your confidence in your friends?"  
"Queens have no friends; if you have nothing further to say to me,—if you feel yourself inspired by Heaven as a prophetess—leave me, I pray, for I dread the future."  
"I should have supposed," said the Beguine, resolutely, "that you would rather have dreaded the past."  
Hardly had these words escaped her lips, than the queen rose up proudly. "Speak," she cried, in a short, imperious tone of voice; "explain yourself briefly, quickly, entirely; or, if not—"  
"Nay, do not threaten me, your majesty," said the Beguine, gently; "I came here to you full of compassion and respect. I came here on the part of a friend."  
"Prove that to me! Comfort, instead of irritating me."  
"Easily enough, and your majesty will see who is friendly to you. What misfortune has happened to your majesty during these three and twenty years past—"  
"Serious misfortunes, indeed; have I not lost the king?"  
"I speak not of misfortunes of *that* kind. I wish to ask you, if, since the birth of the king, any indiscretion on a friend's part has caused your majesty the slightest serious anxiety, or distress?"  
"I do not understand you," replied the queen, clenching her teeth in order to conceal her emotion.  
"I will make myself understood, then. Your majesty remembers that the king was born on the 5th of September, 1638, at a quarter past eleven o'clock."  
"Yes," stammered out the queen.  
"At half-past twelve," continued the Beguine, "the dauphin, who had been baptized by My lord de Meaux in the king's and your own presence, was acknowledged as the heir of the crown of France. The king then went to the chapel of the old Chateau de Saint-Germain, to hear the *Te Deum* chanted."  
"Quite true, quite true," murmured the queen.  
"Your majesty's conferment took place in the presence of Monsieur, his majesty's late uncle, of the princes, and of the ladies attached to the court. The king's physician, Bouvard, and Honoure, the surgeon, were stationed in the ante-chamber; your majesty slept from three o'clock until seven, I believe."  
"Yes, yes; but you tell me no more than every one else knows as well as you and myself."  
"I am now, madame, approaching that which very few persons are acquainted with. Very few persons, did I say, alas! I might say two only, for formerly there were but five in all, and, for many years past, the secret has been well preserved by the deaths of the principal participators in it. The late king sleeps now with his ancestors; Perronnette, the midwife, soon followed him; Laporte is already forgotten."  
The queen opened her lips as though to reply; she felt, beneath her icy hand, with which she kept her face half concealed, the beads of perspiration on her brow.  
"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Beguine; "the king was seated at supper, full of joy and happiness; around him on all sides arose wild cries of delight and drinking of healths; the people cheered beneath the balconies; the Swiss guards, the musketeers, and the royal guards wandered through the city, borne about in triumph by the drunken students. Those boisterous sounds of general joy disturbed the dauphin, the future king of France, who was quietly lying in the arms of Madame de Hausac, his nurse, and whose eyes, as he opened them, and stared about, might have observed two crowns at the foot of his cradle. Suddenly your majesty uttered a piercing cry, and Dame Perronnette immediately flew to your bedside. The doctors were dining in a room at some distance from your chamber; the palace, deserted from the frequency of the irruptions made into it, was without either sentinels or guards. The midwife, having questioned and examined your majesty, gave a sudden exclamation as if in wild astonishment, and taking you in her arms, bewildered almost out of her senses from sheer distress of mind, dispatched Laporte to inform the king that her majesty the queen-mother wished to see him in her room. Laporte, you are aware, madame, was a man of the most admirable calmness and presence of mind. He did not approach the king as if he were the bearer of alarming intelligence and wished to inspire the terror he himself experienced; besides, it was not a very terrifying intelligence which awaited the king. Therefore, Laporte appeared with a smile upon his lips, and approached the king's chair, saying to him—"Sire, the queen is very happy, and would be still more so to see your majesty.' On that day, Louis XIII. would have given his crown away to the veriest beggar for a 'God bless you.' Animated, light-hearted, and full of gayety, the king rose from the table, and said to those around him, in a tone that Henry IV. might have adopted,—'Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.' He came to your beside, madame, at the very moment Dame Perronnette presented to him a second prince, as beautiful and healthy as the former, and said—"Sire, Heaven will not allow the kingdom of France to fall into the female line.' The king, yielding to a first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, and cried, 'Oh, Heaven, I thank Thee!'"  
At this part of her recital, the Beguine paused, observing how intensely the queen was suffering; she had thrown herself back in her chair, and with her head bent forward and her eyes fixed, listened without seeming to hear, and her lips moving convulsively, either breathing a prayer to Heaven or imprecations on the woman standing before her.  
"Ah! I do not believe that, if, because there could be but one dauphin in France," exclaimed the Beguine, "the queen allowed that child to vegetate, banished from his royal parents' presence, she was on that account an unfeeling mother. Oh, no, no; there are those alive who have known and witnessed the passionate kisses she imprinted on that innocent creature in exchange for a life of misery and gloom to which state policy condemned the twin brother of Louis XIV."  
"Oh! Heaven!" murmured the queen feebly.  
"It is admitted," continued the Beguine, quickly, "that when the king perceived the effect which would result from the existence of two sons, equal in age and pretensions, he trembled for the welfare of France, for the tranquillity of the state; and it is equally well known that Cardinal de Richelieu, by the direction of Louis XIII., thought over the subject with deep attention, and after an hour's meditation in his majesty's cabinet, he pronounced the following sentence:—"One prince means peace and safety for the state; two competitors, civil war and anarchy."  
The queen rose suddenly from her seat, pale as death, and her hands clenched together.  
"You know too much," she said, in a hoarse, thick voice, "since you refer to secrets of state. As for the friends from whom you have acquired this secret, they are false and treacherous. You are their accomplice in the crime which is being now committed. Now, throw aside your mask, or I will have you arrested by my captain of the guards. Do not think that this secret terrifies me! You have obtained it, you shall restore it to me. Never shall it leave your bosom, for neither your secret nor your own life belong to you from this moment."  
Anne of Austria, joining gesture to the threat, advanced a couple of steps towards the Beguine.  
"Learn," said the latter, "to know and value the fidelity, the honour, and secrecy of the friends you have abandoned." And, then, suddenly she threw aside her mask.  
"Madame de Chevreuse!" exclaimed the queen.  
"With your majesty, the sole living *confidante* of the secret."  
"Ah!" murmured Anne of Austria; "come and embrace me, duchesse. Alas! you kill your friend in thus trifling with her terrible distress."  
And the queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchesse, burst into a flood of bitter tears. "How young you are—still!" said the latter, in a hollow voice; "you can weep!"  
XLIV. Two Friends.  
The queen looked steadily at Madame de Chevreuse, and said: "I believe you just now made use of the word 'happy' in speaking of me. Hitherto, duchesse, I had thought it impossible that a human creature could anywhere be found more miserable than the queen of France."  
"Your afflictions, madame, have indeed been terrible enough. But by the side of those great and grand misfortunes to which we, two old friends, separated by men's malice, were just now alluding, you possess sources of pleasure, slight enough in themselves it may be, but greatly envied by the world."  
"What are they?" said Anne of Austria, bitterly. "What can induce you to pronounce the word 'pleasure,' duchesse—you who, just now, admitted that my body and my mind both stood in need of remedies?"  
Madame de Chevreuse collected herself for a moment, and then murmured, "How far removed kings are from other people!"  
"What do you mean?"  
"I mean that they are so far removed from the vulgar herd that they forget that others often stand in need of the bare necessities of life. They are like the inhabitant of the African mountains, who, gazing from the verdant tableland, refreshed by the rills of melted snow, cannot comprehend that the dwellers in the plains below are perishing from hunger and thirst in the midst of the desert, burnt up by the heat of the sun."  
The queen coloured, for she now began to perceive the drift of her friend's remark. "It was very wrong," she said, "to have neglected you."

"Oh! madame, I know the king has inherited the hatred his father bore me. The king would exile me if he knew I were in the Palais Royal."

"I cannot say that the king is very well disposed towards you, duchesse," replied the queen; "but I could—secretly, you know—"

The duchesse's disdainful smile produced a feeling of uneasiness in the queen's mind. "Duchesse," she hastened to add, "you did perfectly right to come here, even were it only to give us the happiness of contradicting the report of your death."

"Has it been rumored, then, that I was dead?"

"Everywhere."

"And yet my children did not go into mourning."

"Ah! you know, duchesse, the court is very frequently moving about from place to place; we see M. Albert de Luynes but seldom, and many things escape our minds in the midst of the preoccupations that constantly beset us."

"Your majesty ought not to have believed the report of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal; and you may perceive how rapidly I, your younger sister, as we used formerly to say, am approaching the tomb."

"If your majesty believed me dead, you ought, in that case, to have been astonished not to have received the news."

"Death not unfrequently takes us by surprise, duchesse."

"Oh! your majesty, those who are burdened with secrets such as we have just now discussed must, as a necessity of their nature, satisfy their craving desire to divulge them, and they feel they must gratify that desire before they die. Among the various preparations for their final journey, the task of placing their papers in order is not omitted."

The queen started.

"Your majesty will be sure to learn, in a particular manner, the day of my death."

"In what way?"

"Because your majesty will receive the next day, under several coverings, everything connected with our mysterious correspondence of former times."

"Did you not burn them?" cried Anne, in alarm.

"Traitors only," replied the duchesse, "destroy a royal correspondence."

"Traitors, do you say?"

"Yes, certainly, or rather they pretend to destroy, instead of which they keep or sell it. Faithful friends, on the contrary, most carefully secrete such treasures, for it may happen that some day or other they would wish to seek out their queen in order to say to her: 'Madame, I am getting old; my health is fast failing me; in the presence of the danger of death, for there is the risk for your majesty that this secret may be revealed, take, therefore, this paper, so fraught with menace for yourself, and trust not to another to burn it for you.'"

"What paper do you refer to?"

"As far as I am concerned, I have but one, it is true, but that is indeed most dangerous in its nature."

"Oh! duchesse, tell me what it is."

"A letter, dated Tuesday, the 2d of August, 1644, in which you beg me to go to Noisy-le-Sec, to see that unhappy child. In your own handwriting, madame, there are those words, 'that unhappy child!'"

A profound silence ensued; the queen's mind was busy in the past; Madame de Chevreuse was watching the progress of her scheme. "Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria; "how sad the existence he led, poor child, to finish it in so cruel a manner."

"Is he dead?" cried the duchesse suddenly, with a curiosity whose genuine accents the queen instinctively detected.

"He died of consumption, died forgotten, died withered and blighted like the flowers a lover has given to his mistress, which she leaves to die secreted in a drawer where she had hid them from the gaze of others."

"Died!" repeated the duchesse with an air of discouragement, which would have afforded the queen the most unfeigned delight, had it not been tempered in some measure with a mixture of doubt—

"Died—at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of his tutor, a poor, honest man, who did not long survive him."

"That can easily be understood; it is so difficult to bear up under the weight of such a loss and such a secret," said Madame de Chevreuse,—the irony of which reflection the queen pretended not to perceive. Madame de Chevreuse continued: "Well, madame, I inquired some years ago at Noisy-le-Sec about this unhappy child. I was told that it was not believed he was dead, and that was my reason for not having at first condoled with your majesty; for, most certainly, if I could have thought it were true, never should I have made the slightest allusion to so deplorable an event, and thus have re-awakened your majesty's most natural distress."

"You say that it is not believed the child died at Noisy?"

"No, madame."

"What did they say about him, then?"

"They said—but, no doubt, they were mistaken—"

"Nay, speak, speak!"

"They said, that one evening, about the year 1645, a lady, beautiful and majestic in her bearing, which was observed notwithstanding the mask and the mantle that concealed her figure—a lady of rank, of very high rank, no doubt—came in a carriage to the place where the road branches off; the very same spot, you know, where I awaited news of the young prince when your majesty was graciously pleased to send me there."

"Well, well?"

"That the boy's tutor, or guardian, took the child to this lady."

"Well, what next?"

"That both the child and his tutor left that part of the country the very next day."

"There, you see there is some truth in what you relate, since, in point of fact, the poor child died from a sudden attack of illness, which makes the lives of all children, as doctors say, suspended as it were by a thread."

"What your majesty says is quite true; no one knows it better than yourself—no one believes it more strongly than myself. But yet, how strange it is—"

"What can it now be?" thought the queen.

"The person who gave me these details, who was sent to inquire after the child's health—"

"Did you confide such a charge to any one else? Oh, duchesse!"

"Some one as dumb as your majesty, as dumb as myself; we will suppose it was myself, Madame; this some one, some months after, passing through Touraine—"

"Touraine!"

"Recognized both the tutor and the child, too! I am wrong, thought he recognized them, both living, cheerful, happy, and flourishing, the one in a green old age, the other in the flower of his youth. Judge after that what truth can be attributed to the rumors which are circulated, or what faith, after that, placed in anything that may happen in the world! But I am fatiguing your majesty; it was not my intention, however, to do so, and I will take my leave of you, after renewing to you the assurance of my most respectful devotion."

"Stay, duchesse; let us first talk a little about yourself."

"Of myself, madame! I am not worthy that you should bend your looks upon me."

"Why not, indeed? Are you not the oldest friend I have? Are you angry with me, duchesse?"

"I, indeed! what motive could I have? If I had reason to be angry with your majesty, should I have come here?"

"Duchesse, age is fast creeping on us both; we should be united against that death whose approach cannot be far off."

"You overpower me, madame, with the kindness of your language."

"No one has ever loved or served me as you have done, duchesse."

"Your majesty is too kind in remembering it."

"Not so. Give me a proof of your friendship, duchesse."

"My whole being is devoted to you, madame."

"The proof I require is, that you should ask something of me."

"Ask—"

"Oh, I know you well,—no one is more disinterested, more noble, and truly loyal."

"Do not praise me too highly, madame," said the duchesse, somewhat anxiously.

"I could never praise you as much as you deserve to be praised."

"And yet, age and misfortune effect a terrible change in people, madame."

"So much the better; for the beautiful, the haughty, the adored duchesse of former days might have answered me ungratefully, 'I do not wish for anything from you.' Heaven be praised! The misfortunes you speak of have indeed worked a change in you, for you will now, perhaps, answer me, 'I accept.'"

The duchesse's look and smile soon changed at this conclusion, and she no longer attempted to act a false part.

"Speak, dearest, what do you want?"

"I must first explain to you—"

"Do so unhesitatingly."

"Well, then, your majesty can confer the greatest, the most ineffable pleasure upon me."

"What is it?" said the queen, a little distant in her manner, from an uneasiness of feeling produced by this remark. "But do not forget, my good Chevreuse, that I am quite as much under my son's influence as I was formerly under my husband's."

"I will not be too hard, madame."

"Call me as you used to do; it will be a sweet echo of our happy youth."

"Well, then, my dear mistress, my darling Anne—"

"Do you know Spanish, still?"

"Yes."

"Ask me in Spanish, then."

"Will your majesty do me the honour to pass a few days with me at Dampierre?"

"Is that all?" said the queen, stupefied. "Nothing more than that?"

"Good heavens! can you possibly imagine that, in asking you that, I am not asking you the greatest conceivable favour? If that really be the case, you do not know me. Will you accept?"

"Yes, gladly. And I shall be happy," continued the queen, with some suspicion, "if my presence can in any way be useful to you."

"Useful!" exclaimed the duchesse, laughing; "oh, no, no, agreeable—delightful, if you like; and you promise me, then?"

"I swear it," said the queen, whereupon the duchesse seized her beautiful hand, and covered it with kisses. The queen could not help murmuring to herself, "She is a good-hearted woman, and very generous, too."

"Will your majesty consent to wait a fortnight before you come?"

"Certainly; but why?"

"Because," said the duchesse, "knowing me to be in disgrace, no one would lend me the hundred thousand francs, which I require to put Dampierre into a state of repair. But when it is known that I require that sum for the purpose of receiving your majesty at Dampierre properly, all the money in Paris will be at my disposal."

"Ah!" said the queen, gently nodding her head in sign of intelligence, "a hundred thousand francs! you want a hundred thousand francs to put Dampierre into repair?"

"Quite as much as that."

"And no one will lend you them?"

"No one."

"I will lend them to you, if you like, duchesse."

"Oh, I hardly dare accept such a sum."

"You would be wrong if you did *not*. Besides, a hundred thousand francs is really not much. I know but too well that you never set a right value upon your silence and secrecy. Push that table a little towards me, duchesse, and I will write you an order on M. Colbert; no, on M. Fouquet, who is a far more courteous and obliging man."

"Will he pay it, though?"

"If he will not pay it, I will; but it will be the first time he will have refused me."

The queen wrote and handed the duchesse the order, and afterwards dismissed her with a warm embrace.

XLV. How Jean de La Fontaine Came to Write His First Tale.

All these intrigues are exhausted; the human mind, so variously complicated, has been enabled to develop itself at its ease in the three outlines with which our recital has supplied it. It is not unlikely that, in the future we are now preparing, a question of politics and intrigues may still arise, but the springs by which they work will be so carefully concealed that no one will be able to see aught but flowers and paintings, just as at a theater, where a colossus appears upon the scene, walking along moved by the small legs and slender arms of a child concealed within the framework.

We now return to Saint-Mande, where the superintendent was in the habit of receiving his select confederacy of epicureans. For some time past the host had met with nothing but trouble. Every one in the house was aware of and felt for the minister's distress. No more magnificent or recklessly improvident *reunions*. Money had been the pretext assigned by Fouquet, and never was any pretext, as Gourville said, more fallacious, for there was not even a shadow of money to be seen.

M. Vatel was resolutely painstaking in keeping up the reputation of the house, and yet the gardeners who supplied the kitchens complained of ruinous delays. The agents for the supply of Spanish wines sent drafts which no one honoured; fishermen, whom the superintendent engaged on the coast of Normandy, calculated that if they were paid all that was due to them, the amount would enable them to retire comfortably for life; fish, which, at a later period, was the cause of Vatel's death, did not arrive at all. However, on the ordinary reception days, Fouquet's friends flocked in more numerous than ever. Gourville and the Abbe Fouquet talked over money matters—that is to say, the abbe borrowed a few pistoles from Gourville; Pelisson, seated with his legs crossed, was engaged in finishing the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open the parliament; and this speech was a masterpiece, because Pelisson wrote it for his friend—that is to say, he inserted all kinds of clever things the latter would most certainly never have taken the trouble to say of his own accord. Presently Loret and La Fontaine would enter from the garden, engaged in a dispute about the art of making verses. The painters and musicians, in their turn, were hovering near the dining-room. As soon as eight o'clock struck the supper would be announced, for the superintendent never kept any one waiting. It was already half-past seven, and the appetites of the guests were beginning to declare themselves in an emphatic manner. As soon as all the guests were assembled, Gourville went straight up to Pelisson, awoke him out of his reverie, and led him into the middle of a room, and closed the doors. "Well," he said, "anything new?"

Pelisson raised his intelligent and gentle face, and said: "I have borrowed five and twenty thousand francs of my aunt, and I have them here in good sterling money."

"Good," replied Gourville; "we only want one hundred and ninety-five thousand livres for the first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine.

"What! absent-minded as usual! Why, it was you who told us the small estate at Corbeli was going to be sold by one of M. Fouquet's creditors; and you, also, who proposed that all his friends should subscribe—more than that, it was you who said that you would sell a corner of your house at Chateau-Thierry, in order to furnish your own proportion, and you come and ask—'*The payment of what?*'"

This remark was received with a general laugh, which made La Fontaine blush. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I had not forgotten it; oh, no! only—"

"Only you remembered nothing about it," replied Loret.

"That is the truth, and the fact is, he is quite right, there is a great difference between forgetting and not remembering."

"Well, then," added Pelisson, "you bring your mite in the shape of the price of the piece of land you have sold?"

"Sold? no!"

"Have you not sold the field, then?" inquired Gourville, in astonishment, for he knew the poet's disinterestedness.

"My wife would not let me," replied the latter, at which there were fresh bursts of laughter.

"And yet you went to Chateau-Thierry for that purpose," said some one.

"Certainly I did, and on horseback."

"Poor fellow!"

"I had eight different horses, and I was almost bumped to death."

"You are an excellent fellow! And you rested yourself when you arrived there?"

"Rested! Oh! of course I did, for I had an immense deal of work to do."

"How so?"

"My wife had been flirting with the man to whom I wished to sell the land. The fellow drew back from his bargain, and so I challenged him."

"Very good, and you fought?"

"It seems not."

"You know nothing about it, I suppose?"

"No, my wife and her relations interfered in the matter. I was kept a quarter of an hour with my sword in my hand; but I was not wounded."

"And your adversary?"

"Oh! he wasn't wounded either, for he never came on the field."

"Capital!" cried his friends from all sides, "you must have been terribly angry."

"Exceedingly so; I caught cold; I returned home and then my wife began to quarrel with me."

"In real earnest?"

"Yes, in real earnest. She threw a loaf of bread at my head, a large loaf."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh! I upset the table over her and her guests; and then I got on my horse again, and here I am."

Every one had great difficulty in keeping his countenance at the exposure of this heroi-comedy, and when the laughter had subsided, one of the guests present said to La Fontaine: "Is that all you have brought back?"

"Oh, no! I have an excellent idea in my head."

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed that there is a good deal of sportive, jesting poetry written in France?"

"Yes, of course," replied every one.

"And," pursued La Fontaine, "only a very small portion of it is printed."

"The laws are strict, you know."

"That may be; but a rare article is a dear article, and that is the reason why I have written a small poem, excessively free in its style, very broad, and extremely cynical in its tone."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes," continued the poet, with assumed indifference, "and I have introduced the greatest freedom of language I could possibly employ."

Peals of laughter again broke forth, while the poet was thus announcing the quality of his wares. "And," he continued, "I have tried to excel everything that Boccaccio, Aretin, and other masters of their craft have written in the same style."

"Its fate is clear," said Pelisson; "it will be suppressed and forbidden."

"Do you think so?" said La Fontaine, simply. "I assure you I did not do it on my own account so much as M. Fouquet's."

This wonderful conclusion again raised the mirth of all present.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres," exclaimed La Fontaine, rubbing his hands together. "Serious and religions books sell at about half that rate."

"It would have been better," said Gourville, "to have written two religious books instead."

"It would have been too long, and not amusing enough," replied La Fontaine tranquilly; "my eight hundred livres are in this little bag, and I beg to offer them as *my* contribution."

As he said this, he placed his offering in the hands of their treasurer; it was then Loret's turn, who gave a hundred and fifty livres; the others stripped themselves in the same way; and the total sum in the purse amounted to forty thousand livres. The money was still being counted over when the superintendent noiselessly entered the room; he had heard everything; and then this man, who had possessed so many millions, who had exhausted all the pleasures and honours the world had to bestow, this generous heart, this inexhaustible brain, which had, like two burning crucibles, devoured the material and moral substance of the first kingdom in Europe, was seen to cross the threshold with tears in his eyes, and pass his fingers through the gold and silver which the bag contained.

"Poor offering," he said, in a softened and affected tone of voice, "you will disappear into the smallest corner of my empty purse, but you have filled to overflowing that which no one can ever exhaust, my heart. Thank you, my friends—thank you." And as he could not embrace every one present, who were all tearful, too, philosophers as they were, he embraced La Fontaine, saying to him, "Poor fellow! so you have, on my account, been beaten by your wife and censured by your confessor."

"Oh! it is a mere nothing," replied the poet; "if your creditors will only wait a couple of years, I shall have written a hundred other tales, which, at two editions each, will pay off the debt."

XLVI. La Fontaine in the Character of a Negotiator.

Fouquet pressed La Fontaine's hand most warmly, saying to him, "My dear poet, write a hundred other tales, not only for the eighty pistoles which each of them will produce you, but, still more, to enrich our language with a hundred new masterpieces of composition."

"Oh!" said La Fontaine, with a little air of pride, "you must not suppose that I have only brought this idea and the eighty pistoles to the superintendent."

"Oh! indeed," was the general acclamation from all parts of the room, "M. de la Fontaine is in funds to-day."

"Exactly," replied La Fontaine.

"Quick, quick!" cried the assembly.

"Take care," said Pelisson in La Fontaine's ear; "you have had a most brilliant success up to the present moment; do not go beyond your depth."

"Not at all, Monsieur Pelisson; and you, who are a man of decided taste, will be the first to approve of what I have done."

"We are talking of millions, remember," said Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand francs here, Monsieur Gourville," he replied, striking himself on the chest.

"The deuce take this Gascon from Chateau-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"It is not the pocket you must tap—but the brain," said Fouquet.

"Stay a moment, monsieur le surintendant," added La Fontaine; "you are not procureur-general—you are a poet."

"True, true!" cried Loret, Conrart, and every person present connected with literature.

"You are, I repeat, a poet and a painter, a sculptor, a friend of the arts and sciences; but, acknowledge that you are no lawyer."



"Oh! I do acknowledge it," replied M. Fouquet, smiling.

"If you were to be nominated at the Academy, you would refuse, I think."

"I think I should, with all due deference to the academicians."

"Very good; if, therefore, you do not wish to belong to the Academy, why do you allow yourself to form one of the parliament?"

"Oh!" said Pelisson, "we are talking politics."

"I wish to know whether the barrister's gown does or does not become M. Fouquet."

"There is no question of the gown at all," retorted Pelisson, annoyed at the laughter of those who were present.

"On the contrary, it is the gown," said Loret.

"Take the gown away from the procureur-general," said Conrart, "and we have M. Fouquet left us still, of whom we have no reason to complain; but, as he is no procureur-general without his gown, we agree with M. de la Fontaine and pronounce the gown to be nothing but a bugbear."

*"Fugiant risus leporesque,"* said Loret.

"The smiles and the graces," said some one present.

"That is not the way," said Pelisson, gravely, "that I translate *lepores*."

"How do you translate it?" said La Fontaine.

"Thus: The hares run away as soon as they see M. Fouquet." A burst of laughter, in which the superintendent joined, followed this sally.

"But why hares?" objected Conrart, vexed.

"Because the hare will be the very one who will not be over pleased to see M. Fouquet surrounded by all the attributes which his parliamentary strength and power confer on him."

"Oh! oh!" murmured the poets.

*"Quo non ascendam,"* said Conrart, "seems impossible to me, when one is fortunate enough to wear the gown of the procureur-general." [9](#)

"On the contrary, it seems so to me without that gown," said the obstinate Pelisson; "what is your opinion, Gourville?"

"I think the gown in question is a very good thing," replied the latter; "but I equally think that a million and a half is far better than the gown."

"And I am of Gourville's opinion," exclaimed Fouquet, stopping the discussion by the expression of his own opinion, which would necessarily bear down all the others.

"A million and a half," Pelisson grumbled out; "now I happen to know an Indian fable—"

"Tell it to me," said La Fontaine; "I ought to know it too."

"Tell it, tell it," said the others.

"There was a tortoise, which was, as usual, well protected by its shell," said Pelisson; "whenever its enemies threatened it, it took refuge within its covering. One day some one said to it, 'You must feel very hot in such a house as that in the summer, and you are altogether prevented showing off your graces; there is a snake here, who will give you a million and a half for your shell.'"

"Good!" said the superintendent, laughing.

"Well, what next?" said La Fontaine, more interested in the apologue than in the moral.

"The tortoise sold his shell and remained naked and defenseless. A vulture happened to see him, and being hungry, broke the tortoise's back with a blow of his beak and devoured it. The moral is, that M. Fouquet should take very good care to keep his gown."

La Fontaine understood the moral seriously. "You forget Aeschylus," he said, to his adversary.

"What do you mean?"

"Aeschylus was bald-headed, and a vulture—your vulture, probably—who was a great amateur in tortoises, mistook at a distance his head for a block of stone, and let a tortoise, which was shrunk up in his shell, fall upon it."

"Yes, yes, La Fontaine is right," resumed Fouquet, who had become very thoughtful; "whenever a vulture wishes to devour a tortoise, he well knows how to break his shell; but happy is that tortoise a snake pays a million and a half for his envelope. If any one were to bring me a generous-hearted snake like the one in your fable, Pelisson, I would give him my shell."

*"Rara avis in terres!"* cried Conrart. [10](#)

"And like a black swan, is he not?" added La Fontaine; "well, then, the bird in question, black and rare, is already found."

"Do you mean to say that you have found a purchaser for my post of procureur-general?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"I have, monsieur."

"But the superintendent never said that he wished to sell," resumed Pelisson.

"I beg your pardon," said Conrart, "you yourself spoke about it, even—"

"Yes, I am a witness to that," said Gourville.

"He seems very tenacious about his brilliant idea," said Fouquet, laughing. "Well, La Fontaine, who is the purchaser?"

"A perfect blackbird, for he is a counselor belonging to the parliament, an excellent fellow."

"What is his name?"

"Vanel."

"Vanel!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Vanel the husband of—"

"Precisely, her husband; yes, monsieur."

"Poor fellow!" said Fouquet, with an expression of great interest.

"He wishes to be everything that you have been, monsieur," said Gourville, "and to do everything that you have done."

"It is very agreeable; tell us all about it, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple. I see him occasionally, and a short time ago I met him, walking about on the Place de la Bastille, at the very moment when I was about to take the small carriage to come down here to Saint-Mande."

"He must have been watching his wife," interrupted Loret.

"Oh, no!" said La Fontaine, "he is far from being jealous. He accosted me, embraced me, and took me to the inn called L'Image Saint-Fiacre, and told me all about his troubles."

"He has his troubles, then?"

"Yes; his wife wants to make him ambitious."

"Well, and he told you—"

"That some one had spoken to him about a post in parliament; that M. Fouquet's name had been mentioned; that ever since, Madame Vanel dreams of nothing else than being called madame la procureur-generale, and that it makes her ill and kills her every night she does not dream about it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet.

"Wait a moment. Conrart is always telling me that I do not know how to conduct matters of business; you will see how I managed this one."

"Well, go on."

"'I suppose you know,' said I to Vanel, 'that the value of a post such as that which M. Fouquet holds is by no means trifling.'"

"'How much do you imagine it to be?' he said.

"'M. Fouquet, I know, has refused seventeen hundred thousand francs.'

"'My wife,' replied Vanel, 'had estimated it at about fourteen hundred thousand.'

"'Ready money?' I said.

"'Yes; she has sold some property of hers in Guienne, and has received the purchase money.'"

"That's a pretty sum to touch all at once," said the Abbe Fouquet, who had not hitherto said a word.

"Poor Madame Vanel!" murmured Fouquet.

Pelisson shrugged his shoulders, as he whispered in Fouquet's ear, "That woman is a perfect fiend."

"That may be; and it will be delightful to make use of this fiend's money to repair the injury which an angel has done herself for me."

Pelisson looked with a surprised air at Fouquet, whose thoughts were from that moment fixed upon a fresh object in view.

"Well!" inquired La Fontaine, "what about my negotiation?"

"Admirable, my dear poet."

"Yes," said Gourville; "but there are some people who are anxious to have the steed who have not even money enough to pay for the bridle."

"And Vanel would draw back from his offer if he were to be taken at his word," continued the Abbe Fouquet.

"I do not believe it," said La Fontaine.

"What do you know about it?"

"Why, you have not yet heard the *denouement* of my story."

"If there is a *denouement*, why do you beat about the bush so much?"

*"Semper ad eventum.* Is that correct?" said Fouquet, with the air of a nobleman who condescends to barbarisms. To which the Latinists present answered with loud applause. [11](#)

"My *denouement*," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that determined blackbird, knowing that I was coming to Saint-Mande, implored me to bring him with me, and, if possible, to present him to M. Fouquet."

"So that—"

"So that he is here; I left him in that part of the ground called Bel-Air. Well, M. Fouquet, what is your reply?"

"Well, it is not respectful towards Madame Vanel that her husband should run the risk of catching cold outside my house; send for him, La Fontaine, since you know where he is."

"I will go myself."

"And I will accompany you," said the Abbe Fouquet; "I will carry the money bags."

"No jesting," said Fouquet, seriously; "let the business be a serious one, if it is to be one at all. But first of all, let us show we are hospitable. Make my apologies, La Fontaine, to M. Vanel, and tell him how distressed I am to have kept him waiting, but that I was not aware he was there."

La Fontaine set off at once, fortunately accompanied by Gourville, for, absorbed in his own calculations, the poet would have mistaken the route, and was hurrying as fast as he could towards the village of Saint-Mande. Within a quarter of an hour afterwards, M. Vanel was introduced into the superintendent's cabinet, a description of which has already been given at the beginning of this story. When Fouquet saw him enter, he called to Pelisson, and whispered a few words in his ear. "Do not lose a single word of what I am going to say: let all the silver and gold plate, together with my jewels of every description, be packed up in the carriage. You will take the black horses: the jeweler will accompany you; and you will postpone the supper until Madame de Belliere's arrival."

"Will it be necessary to inform Madame de Belliere of it?" said Pelisson.

"No; that will be useless; I will do that. So, away with you, my dear friend."

Pelisson set off, not quite clear as to his friend's meaning or intention, but confident, like every true friend, in the judgment of the man he was blindly obeying. It is that which constitutes the strength of such men; distrust only arises in the minds of inferior natures.

Vanel bowed lowly to the superintendent, and was about to begin a speech.

"Do not trouble yourself, monsieur," said Fouquet, politely; "I am told you wish to purchase a post I hold. How much can you give me for it?"

"It is for you, my lord, to fix the amount you require. I know that offers of purchase have already been made to you for it."

"Madame Vanel, I have been told, values it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we have."

"Can you give me the money immediately?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel, frightened almost by the unpretending simplicity, amounting to greatness, of the man, for he had expected disputes, difficulties, opposition of every kind.

"When will you be able to bring it?"

"Whenever you please, my lord;" for he began to be afraid that Fouquet was trifling with him.

"If it were not for the trouble you would have in returning to Paris, I would say at once; but we will arrange that the payment and the signature shall take place at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Very good," said Vanel, as cold as ice, and feeling quite bewildered.

"Adieu, Monsieur Vanel, present my humblest respects to Madame Vanel," said Fouquet, as he rose; upon which Vanel, who felt the blood rushing to his head, for he was quite confounded by his success, said seriously to the superintendent, "Will you give me your word, my lord, upon this affair?"

Fouquet turned round his head, saying, "*Pardieu*, and you, monsieur?"

Vanel hesitated, trembled all over, and at last finished by hesitatingly holding out his hand. Fouquet opened and nobly extended his own; this loyal hand lay for a moment in Vanel's most hypocritical palm, and he pressed it in his own, in order the better to convince himself of the compact. The superintendent gently disengaged his hand, as he again said, "Adieu." And then Vanel ran hastily to the door, hurried along the vestibule, and fled as quickly as he could.

XLVII. Madame de Belliere's Plate and Diamonds.

Fouquet had no sooner dismissed Vanel than he began to reflect for a few moments—"A man never can do too much for the woman he has once loved. Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur-general—and why not confer this pleasure upon her? And, now that the most scrupulous and sensitive conscience will be unable to reproach me with anything, let my thoughts be bestowed on her who has shown so much devotion for me. Madame de Belliere ought to be there by this time," he said, as he turned towards the secret door.

After he had locked himself in, he opened the subterranean passage, and rapidly hastened towards the means of communicating between the house at Vincennes and his own residence. He had neglected to apprise his friend of his approach, by ringing the bell, perfectly assured that she would never fail to be exact at the rendezvous; as, indeed, was the case, for she was already waiting. The noise the superintendent made aroused her; she ran to take from under the door the letter he had thrust there, and which simply said, "Come, marquise; we are waiting supper for you." With her heart filled with happiness Madame de Belliere ran to her carriage in the Avenue de Vincennes, and in a few minutes she was holding out her hand to Gourville, who was standing at the entrance, where, in order the better to please his master, he had stationed himself to watch her arrival. She had not observed that Fouquet's black horse arrived at the same time, all steaming and foam-flaked, having returned to Saint-Mande with Pelisson and the very jeweler to whom Madame de Belliere had sold her plate and her jewels. Pelisson introduced the goldsmith into the cabinet, which Fouquet had not yet left. The superintendent thanked him for having been good enough to regard as a simple deposit in his hands, the valuable property which he had every right to sell; and he cast his eyes on the total of the account, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand francs. Then, going for a few moments to his desk, he wrote an order for fourteen hundred thousand francs, payable at sight, at his treasury, before twelve o'clock the next day.

"A hundred thousand francs profit!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, my lord, what generosity!"

"Nay, nay, not so, monsieur," said Fouquet, touching him on the shoulder; "there are certain kindnesses which can never be repaid. This profit is only what you have earned; but the interest of your money still remains to be arranged." And, saying this, he unfastened from his sleeve a diamond button, which the goldsmith himself had often valued at three thousand pistoles. "Take this," he said to the goldsmith, "in remembrance of me. Farewell; you are an honest man."

"And you, my lord," cried the goldsmith, completely overcome, "are the noblest man that ever lived."

Fouquet let the worthy goldsmith pass out of the room by a secret door, and then went to receive Madame de Belliere, who was already surrounded by all the guests. The marquise was always beautiful, but now her loveliness was more dazzling than ever. "Do you not think, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "that madame is more than usually beautiful this evening? And do you happen to know why?"

"Because madame is really the most beautiful of all women," said some one present.

"No; but because she is the best. And yet—"

"Yet?" said the marquise, smiling.

"And yet, all the jewels which madame is wearing this evening are nothing but false stones." At this remark the marquise blushed most painfully.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed all the guests, "that can very well be said of one who has the finest diamonds in Paris."

"Well?" said Fouquet to Pelisson, in a low tone.

"Well, at last I have understood you," returned the latter; "and you have done exceedingly well."

"Supper is ready, my lord," said Vatel, with majestic air and tone.

The crowd of guests hurried, more quickly than is usually the case with ministerial entertainments, towards the banqueting-room, where a magnificent spectacle presented itself. Upon the buffets, upon the side-tables, upon the supper-table itself, in the midst of flowers and light, glittered most dazzlingly the richest and most costly gold and silver plate that could possibly be seen—relics of those ancient magnificent productions the Florentine artists, whom the Medici family patronized, sculptured, chased, and moulded for the purpose of holding flowers, at a time when gold existed still in France. These hidden marvels, which had been buried during the civil wars, timidly reappeared during the intervals of that war of good taste called La Fronde; at a time when noblemen fighting against nobleman killed, but did not pillage each other. All the plate present had Madame de Belliere's arms engraved upon it. "Look," cried La Fontaine, "here is a P and a B."

But the most remarkable object present was the cover which Fouquet had assigned to the marquise. Near her was a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos, sardonyx stones, carved by the old Greeks of Asia Minor, with mountings of Mysian gold; curious mosaics of ancient Alexandria, set in silver; massive Egyptian bracelets lay heaped on a large plate of Palissy ware, supported by a tripod of gilt bronze, sculptured by Benvenuto Cellini. The marquise turned pale, as she recognized what she had never expected to see again. A profound silence fell on every one of the restless and excited guests. Fouquet did not even make a sign in dismissal of the richly liveried servants who crowded like bees round the huge buffets and other tables in the room. "Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you behold once belonged to Madame de Belliere, who, having observed one of her friends in great distress, sent all this gold and silver, together with the heap of jewels now before her, to her goldsmith. This noble conduct of a devoted friend can well be understood by such friends as you. Happy indeed is that man who sees himself loved in such a manner. Let us drink to the health of Madame de Belliere."

A tremendous burst of applause followed his words, and made poor Madame de Belliere sink back dumb and breathless in her seat. "And then," added Pelisson, who was always affected by a noble action, as he was invariably impressed by beauty, "let us also drink to the health of him who inspired madame's noble conduct; for such a man is worthy of being worthily loved."

It was now the marquise's turn. She rose, pale and smiling; and as she held out her glass with a faltering hand, and her trembling fingers touched those of Fouquet, her look, full of love, found its mirror in that of her ardent and generous-hearted lover. Begun in this manner, the supper soon became a *fete*; no one tried to be witty, but no one failed in being so. La Fontaine forgot his Gorgny wine, and allowed Vatel to reconcile him to the wines of the Rhone, and those from the shores of Spain. The Abbe Fouquet became so kind and good-natured, that Gourville said to him, "Take care, monsieur l'abbe; if you are so tender, you will be carved and eaten."

The hours passed away so joyously, that, contrary to his usual custom, the superintendent did not leave the table before the end of the dessert. He smiled upon his friends, delighted as a man is whose heart becomes intoxicated before his head—and, for the first time, looked at the clock. Suddenly a carriage rolled into the courtyard, and, strange to say, it was heard high above the noise of the mirth which prevailed. Fouquet listened attentively, and then turned his eyes towards the ante-chamber. It seemed as if he could hear a step passing across it, a step that, instead of pressing the ground, weighed heavily upon his heart. "M. d'Herblay, bishop of Vannes," the usher announced. And Aramis's grave and thoughtful face appeared upon the threshold of the door, between the remains of two garlands, of which the flame of a lamp had just burnt the thread that once united them.

XLVIII. M. de Mazarin's Receipt.

Fouquet would have uttered an exclamation of delight on seeing another friend arrive, if the cold air and averted aspect of Aramis had not restored all his reserve. "Are you going to join us at dessert?" he asked. "And yet you would be frightened, perhaps, at the noise which our wild friends here are making?"

"My lord," replied Aramis, respectfully, "I will begin by begging you to excuse me for having interrupted this merry meeting; and then, I will beg you to give me, as soon as your pleasure is attended to, a moment's audience on matters of business."

As the word "business" had aroused the attention of some of the epicureans present, Fouquet rose, saying: "Business first of all, Monsieur d'Herblay; we are too happy when matters of business arrive only at the end of a meal."

As he said this, he took the hand of Madame de Belliere, who looked at him with a kind of uneasiness, and then led her to an adjoining *salon*, after having recommended her to the most reasonable of his guests. And then, taking Aramis by the arm, he led him towards his cabinet. As soon as Aramis was there, throwing aside the respectful air he had assumed, he threw himself into a chair, saying: "Guess whom I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, every time you begin in that manner, I am sure to hear you announce something disagreeable."

"Well, and this time you will not be mistaken, either, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," added Fouquet, phlegmatically.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchesse, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Her ghost, perhaps?"

"No, no; the old she-wolf herself."

"Without teeth?"

"Possibly, but not without claws."

"Well! what harm can she meditate against me? I am no miser with women who are not prudes. A quality always prized, even by the woman who no longer presumes to look for love."

"Madame de Chevreuse knows very well that you are not avaricious, since she wishes to draw some money of you."

"Indeed! under what pretext?"

"Oh! pretexts are never wanting with *her*. Let me tell you what it is: it seems that the duchesse has a good many letters of M. de Mazarin's in her possession."

"I am not surprised at that, for the prelate was gallant enough."

"Yes, but these letters have nothing whatever to do with the prelate's love affairs. They concern, it is said, financial matters rather."

"And accordingly they are less interesting."

"Do you not suspect what I mean?"

"Not at all."

"Have you never heard speak of a prosecution being instituted for an embezzlement, or appropriation rather, of public funds?"

"Yes, a hundred, nay, a thousand times. Ever since I have been engaged in public matters I have hardly heard of anything else. It is precisely your own case, when, as a bishop, people reproach you for impiety; or, as a musketeer, for your cowardice; the very thing of which they are always accusing ministers of finance is the embezzlement of public funds."

"Very good; but take a particular instance, for the duchesse asserts that M. de Mazarin alludes to certain particular instances."

"What are they?"

"Something like a sum of thirteen millions of francs, of which it would be very difficult for you to define the precise nature of the employment."

"Thirteen millions!" said the superintendent, stretching himself in his armchair, in order to enable him the more comfortably to look up towards the ceiling. "Thirteen millions—I am trying to remember out of all those I have been accused of having stolen."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur, for it is very serious. It is positive that the duchesse has certain letters in her possession, and that these letters must be as she represents them, since she wished to sell them to me for five hundred thousand francs."

"Oh! one can have a very tolerable calumny got up for such a sum as that," replied Fouquet. "Ah! now I know what you mean," and he began to laugh very heartily.

"So much the better," said Aramis, a little reassured.

"I remember the story of those thirteen millions now. Yes, yes, I remember them quite well."

"I am delighted to hear it; tell me about them."

"Well, then, one day Signor Mazarin, Heaven rest his soul! made a profit of thirteen millions upon a concession of lands in the Valtelline; he canceled them in the registry of receipts, sent them to me, and then made me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good; then there is no doubt of their proper destination."

"No; the cardinal made me invest them in my own name, and gave me a receipt."

"You have the receipt?"

"Of course," said Fouquet, as he quietly rose from his chair, and went to his large ebony bureau inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold.

"What I most admire in you," said Aramis, with an air of great satisfaction, "is, your memory in the first place, then your self-possession, and, finally, the perfect order which prevails in your administration; you, of all men, too, who are by nature a poet."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "I am orderly out of a spirit of idleness, to save myself the trouble of looking after things, and so I know that Mazarin's receipt is in the third drawer under the letter M; I open the drawer, and place my hand upon the very paper I need. In the night, without a light, I could find it."

And with a confident hand he felt the bundle of papers which were piled up in the open drawer. "Nay, more than that," he continued, "I remember the paper as if I saw it; it is thick, somewhat crumpled, with gilt edges; Mazarin had made a blot upon the figure of the date. Ah!" he said, "the paper knows we are talking about it, and that we want it very much, and so it hides itself out of the way."

And as the superintendent looked into the drawer, Aramis rose from his seat.

"This is very singular," said Fouquet.

"Your memory is treacherous, my dear my lord; look in another drawer."

Fouquet took out the bundle of papers, and turned them over once more; he then grew very pale.

"Don't confine your search to that drawer," said Aramis; "look elsewhere."

"Quite useless; I have never made a mistake; no one but myself arranges any papers of mine of this nature; no one but myself ever opens this drawer, of which, besides, no one, myself excepted, is aware of the secret."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen from me; Madame de Chevreuse was right, chevalier; I have appropriated the public funds, I have robbed the state coffers of thirteen millions of money; I am a thief, Monsieur d'Herblay."

"Nay, nay, do not get irritated—do not get excited."

"And why not, chevalier? surely there is every reason for it. If legal proceedings are well arranged, and a judgment given in accordance with them, your friend the superintendent will soon follow Montfaucon, his colleague Enguerrand de Marigny, and his predecessor, Semblancay."

"Oh!" said Aramis, smiling, "not so fast as that."

"And why not? why not so fast? What do you suppose Madame de Chevreuse has done with those letters—for you refused them, I suppose?"

"Yes; at once. I suppose that she went and sold them to M. Colbert."

"Well?"

"I said I supposed so; I might have said I was sure of it, for I had her followed, and, when she left me, she returned to her own house, went out by a back door, and proceeded straight to the intendant's house in the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs."

"Legal proceedings will be instituted, then, scandal and dishonour will follow; and all will fall upon me like a thunderbolt, blindly, pitilessly."

Aramis approached Fouquet, who sat trembling in his chair, close to the open drawers; he placed his hand on his shoulder, and in an affectionate tone of voice, said: "Do not forget that the position of M. Fouquet can in no way be compared to that of Semblancay or of Marigny."

"And why not, in Heaven's name?"

"Because the proceedings against those ministers were determined, completed, and the sentence carried out, whilst in your case the same thing cannot take place."

"Another blow, why not? A peculator is, under any circumstances, a criminal."

"Criminals who know how to find a safe asylum are never in danger."

"What! make my escape? Fly?"

"No, I do not mean that; you forget that all such proceedings originate in the parliament, that they are instituted by the procureur-general, and that you are the procureur-general. You see that, unless you wish to condemn yourself—"

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, suddenly, dashing his fist upon the table.

"Well! what? what is the matter?"

"I am procureur-general no longer."

Aramis, at this reply, became as livid as death; he pressed his hands together convulsively, and with a wild, haggard look, which almost annihilated Fouquet, he said, laying a stress on every distinct syllable, "You are procureur-general no longer, do you say?"

"No."

"Since when?"

"Since the last four or five hours."

"Take care," interrupted Aramis, coldly; "I do not think you are in the full possession of your senses, my friend; collect yourself."

"I tell you," returned Fouquet, "that a little while ago, some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand francs for the appointment, and that I sold it."

Aramis looked as though he had been struck by lightning; the intelligent and mocking expression of his countenance assumed an aspect of such profound gloom and terror, that it had more effect upon the superintendent than all the exclamations and speeches in the world. "You had need of money, then?" he said, at last.

"Yes; to discharge a debt of honour." And in a few words, he gave Aramis an account of Madame de Belliere's generosity, and the manner in which he had thought it but right to discharge that act of generosity.

"Yes," said Aramis, "that is, indeed, a fine trait. What has it cost?"

"Exactly the fourteen hundred thousand francs—the price of my appointment."

"Which you received in that manner, without reflection. Oh, imprudent man!"

"I have not yet received the amount, but I shall to-morrow."

"It is not yet completed, then?"

"It must be carried out, though; for I have given the goldsmith, for twelve o'clock to-morrow, an order upon my treasury, into which the purchaser's money will be paid at six or seven o'clock."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Aramis, clapping his hands together, "nothing is yet completed, since you have not yet been paid."

"But the goldsmith?"

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand francs from me, at a quarter before twelve."

"Stay a moment; it is at six o'clock, this very morning, that I am to sign."

"Oh! I will answer that you do not sign."

"I have given my word, chevalier."

"If you have given it, you will take it back again, that is all."

"Can I believe what I hear?" cried Fouquet, in a most expressive tone. "Fouquet recall his word, after it has once been pledged!"

Aramis replied to the almost stern look of the minister by a look full of anger. "Monsieur," he said, "I believe I have deserved to be called a man of honour? As a soldier, I have risked my life five hundred times; as a priest I have rendered still greater services, both to the state and to my friends. The value of a word, once passed, is estimated according to the worth of the man who gives it. So long as it is in his own keeping, it is of the purest, finest gold; when his wish to keep it has passed away, it is a two-edged sword. With that word, therefore, he defends himself as with an honourable weapon, considering that, when he disregards his word, he endangers his life and incurs an amount of risk far greater than that which his adversary is likely to derive of profit. In such a case, monsieur, he appeals to Heaven and to justice."

Fouquet bent down his head, as he replied, "I am a poor, self-determined man, a true Breton born; my mind admires and fears yours. I do not say that I keep my word from a proper feeling only; I keep it, if you like, from custom, practice, pride, or what you will; but, at all events, the ordinary run of men are simple enough to admire this custom of mine; it is my sole good quality—leave me such honour as it confers."

"And so you are determined to sign the sale of the very appointment which can alone defend you against all your enemies."

"Yes, I shall sign."

"You will deliver yourself up, then, bound hand and foot, from a false notion of honour, which the most scrupulous casuists would disdain?"

"I shall sign," repeated Fouquet.

Aramis sighed deeply, and looked all round him with the impatient gesture of a man who would gladly dash something to pieces, as a relief to his feelings. "We have still one means left," he said; "and I trust you will not refuse me to make use of that."

"Certainly not, if it be loyal and honourable; as everything is, in fact, which you propose."

"I know nothing more loyal than the renunciation of your purchaser. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Certainly: but—"

"But!—if you allow me to manage the affair, I do not despair."

"Oh! you shall be absolutely master to do what you please."

"Whom are you in treaty with? What manner of man is it?"

"I am not aware whether you know the parliament."

"Most of its members. One of the presidents, perhaps?"

"No; only a counselor, of the name of Vanel."

Aramis became perfectly purple. "Vanel!" he cried, rising abruptly from his seat; "Vanel! the husband of Marguerite Vanel?"

"Exactly."

"Of your former mistress?"

"Yes, my dear fellow; she is anxious to be the wife of the procureur-general. I certainly owed poor Vanel that slight concession, and I am a gainer by it; since I, at the same time, can confer a pleasure on his wife."

Aramis walked straight up to Fouquet, and took hold of his hand. "Do you know," he said, very calmly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

“Ah! she has a new lover, then? I was not aware of it; no, I have no idea what his name is.”

“His name is M. Jean-Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of the finances: he lives in the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse has been this evening to take him Mazarin’s letters, which she wishes to sell.”

“Gracious Heaven!” murmured Fouquet, passing his hand across his forehead, from which the perspiration was starting.

“You now begin to understand, do you not?”

“That I am utterly lost!—yes.”

“Do you now think it worth while to be so scrupulous with regard to keeping your word?”

“Yes,” said Fouquet.

“These obstinate people always contrive matters in such a way, that one cannot but admire them all the while,” murmured Aramis.

Fouquet held out his hand to him, and, at the very moment, a richly ornamented tortoise-shell clock, supported by golden figures, which was standing on a console table opposite to the fireplace, struck six. The sound of a door being opened in the vestibule was heard, and Gourville came to the door of the cabinet to inquire if Fouquet would received M. Vanel. Fouquet turned his eyes from the gaze of Aramis, and then desired that M. Vanel should be shown in.

XLIX. Monsieur Colbert’s Rough Draft.

Vanel, who entered at this stage of the conversation, was nothing less for Aramis and Fouquet than the full stop which completes a phrase. But, for Vanel, Aramis’s presence in Fouquet’s cabinet had quite another signification; and, therefore, at his first step into the room, he paused as he looked at the delicate yet firm features of the bishop of Vannes, and his look of astonishment soon became one of scrutinizing attention. As for Fouquet, a perfect politician, that is to say, complete master of himself, he had already, by the energy of his own resolute will, contrived to remove from his face all traces of the emotion which Aramis’s revelation had occasioned. He was no longer, therefore, a man overwhelmed by misfortune and reduced to resort to expedients; he held his head proudly erect, and indicated by a gesture that Vanel could enter. He was now the first minister of the state, and in his own palace. Aramis knew the superintendent well; the delicacy of the feelings of his heart and the exalted nature of his mind no longer surprised him. He confined himself, then, for the moment—intending to resume later an active part in the conversation—to the performance of the difficult part of a man who looks on and listens, in order to learn and understand. Vanel was visibly overcome, and advanced into the middle of the cabinet, bowing to everything and everybody. “I am here,” he said.

“You are punctual, Monsieur Vanel,” returned Fouquet.

“In matters of business, my lord,” replied Vanel, “I look upon exactitude as a virtue.”

“No doubt, monsieur.”

“I beg your pardon,” interrupted Aramis, indicating Vanel with his finger, but addressing himself to Fouquet; “this is the gentleman, I believe, who has come about the purchase of your appointment?”

“Yes, I am,” replied Vanel, astonished at the extremely haughty tone in which Aramis had put the question; “but in what way am I to address you, who do me the honour—”

“Call me my lord,” replied Aramis, dryly. Vanel bowed.

“Come, gentlemen, a truce to these ceremonies; let us proceed to the matter itself.”

“My lord sees,” said Vanel, “that I am waiting your pleasure.”

“On the contrary, I am waiting,” replied Fouquet.

“What for, may I be permitted to ask, my lord?”

“I thought that you had perhaps something to say.”

“Oh,” said Vanel to himself, “he has reflected on the matter and I am lost.” But resuming his courage, he continued, “No, my lord, nothing, absolutely nothing more than what I said to you yesterday, and which I am again ready to repeat to you now.”

“Come, now, tell me frankly, Monsieur Vanel, is not the affair rather a burdensome one for you?”

“Certainly, my lord; fourteen hundred thousand francs is an important sum.”

“So important, indeed,” said Fouquet, “that I have reflected—”

“You have been reflecting, do you say, my lord?” exclaimed Vanel, anxiously.

“Yes; that you might not yet be in a position to purchase.”

“Oh, my lord!”

“Do not make yourself uneasy on that score, Monsieur Vanel; I shall not blame you for a failure in your word, which evidently may arise from inability on your part.”

“Oh, yes, my lord, you would blame me, and you would be right in doing so,” said Vanel; “for a man must either be very imprudent, or a fool, to undertake engagements which he cannot keep; and I, at least, have always regarded a thing agreed on as a thing actually carried out.”

Fouquet coloured, while Aramis uttered a “Hum!” of impatience.

“You would be wrong to exaggerate such notions as those, monsieur,” said the superintendent; “for a man’s mind is variable, and full of these very excusable caprices, which are, however, sometimes estimable enough; and a man may have wished for something yesterday of which he repents to-day.”

Vanel felt a cold sweat trickle down his face. “My lord!” he muttered.

Aramis, who was delighted to find the superintendent carry on the debate with such clearness and precision, stood leaning his arm upon the marble top of a console table and began to play with a small gold knife, with a malachite handle. Fouquet did not hasten to reply; but after a moment’s pause, “Come, my dear Monsieur Vanel,” he said, “I will explain to you how I am situated.” Vanel began to tremble.

“Yesterday I wished to sell—”

“My lord did more than wish to sell, he actually sold.”

“Well, well, that may be so; but to-day I ask you the favour to restore me my word which I pledged you.”

“I received your *word* as a satisfactory assurance that it would be kept.”

“I know that, and that is the reason why I now entreat you; do you understand me? I entreat you to restore it to me.”

Fouquet suddenly paused. The words “I entreat you,” the effect of which he did not immediately perceive, seemed almost to choke him as he uttered it. Aramis, still playing with his knife, fixed a look upon Vanel which seemed as if he wished to penetrate the recesses of his heart. Vanel simply bowed, as he said, “I am overcome, my lord, at the honour you do me to consult me upon a matter of business which is already completed; but—”

“Nay, do not say *but*, dear Monsieur Vanel.”

“Alas! my lord, you see,” he said, as he opened a large pocket-book, “I have brought the money with me,—the whole sum, I mean. And here, my lord, is the contract of sale which I have just effected of a property belonging to my wife. The order is authentic in every particular, the necessary signatures have been attached to it, and it is made payable at sight; it is ready money, in fact, and, in one word, the whole affair is complete.”

“My dear Monsieur Vanel, there is not a matter of business in this world, however important it may be, which cannot be postponed in order to oblige a man, who, by that means, might and would be made a devoted friend.”

“Certainly,” said Vanel, awkwardly.

“And much more justly acquired would that friend become, Monsieur Vanel, since the value of the service he had received would have been so considerable. Well, what do you say? what do you decide?”

Vanel preserved a perfect silence. In the meantime, Aramis had continued his close observation of the man. Vanel’s narrow face, his deeply sunken eyes, his arched eyebrows, had revealed to the bishop of Vannes the type of an avaricious and ambitious character. Aramis’s method was to oppose one passion by another. He saw that M. Fouquet was defeated—morally subdued—and so he came to his rescue with fresh weapons in his hands. “Excuse me, my lord,” he said; “you forgot to show M. Vanel that his own interests are diametrically opposed to this renunciation of the sale.”

Vanel looked at the bishop with astonishment; he had hardly expected to find an auxiliary in him. Fouquet also paused to listen to the bishop.

“Do you not see,” continued Aramis, “that M. Vanel, in order to purchase your appointment, has been obliged to sell a property belonging to his wife; well, that is no slight matter; for one cannot displace, as he has done, fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand francs without some considerable loss, and very serious inconvenience.”

“Perfectly true,” said Vanel, whose secret Aramis had, with keen-sighted gaze, wrung from the bottom of his heart.

“Inconveniences such as these are matters of great expense and calculation, and whenever a man has money matters to deal with, the expenses are generally the very first thing thought of.”

“Yes, yes,” said Fouquet, who began to understand Aramis’s meaning.

Vanel remained perfectly silent; he, too, had understood him. Aramis observed his coldness of manner and his silence. “Very good,” he said to himself, “you are waiting, I see, until you know the amount; but do not fear, I shall send you such a flight of crowns that you cannot but capitulate on the spot.”

“We must offer M. Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once,” said Fouquet, carried away by his generous feelings.

The sum was a good one. A prince, even, would have been satisfied with such a bonus. A hundred thousand crowns at that period was the dowry of a king’s daughter. Vanel, however, did not move.

“He is a perfect rascal!” thought the bishop, “well, we must offer the five hundred thousand francs at once,” and he made a sign to Fouquet accordingly.

“You seem to have spent more than that, dear Monsieur Vanel,” said the superintendent. “The price of ready money is enormous. You must have made a great sacrifice in selling your wife’s property. Well, what can I have been thinking of? I ought to have offered to sign you an order for five hundred thousand francs; and even in that case I shall feel that I am greatly indebted to you.”

There was not a gleam of delight or desire on Vanel’s face, which remained perfectly impassible; not a muscle of it changed in the slightest degree. Aramis cast a look almost of despair at Fouquet, and then, going straight up to Vanel and taking hold of him by the coat, in a familiar manner, he said, “Monsieur Vanel, it is neither the inconvenience, nor the displacement of your money, nor the sale of your wife’s property even, that you are thinking of at this moment; it is something more important still. I can well understand it; so pay particular attention to what I am going to say.”

“Yes, my lord,” Vanel replied, beginning to tremble in every limb, as the prelate’s eyes seemed almost ready to devour him.

“I offer you, therefore, in the superintendent’s name, not three hundred thousand livres, nor five hundred thousand, but a million. A million—do you understand me?” he added, as he shook him nervously.

“A million!” repeated Vanel, as pale as death.

“A million; in other words, at the present rate of interest, an income of seventy thousand francs.”

“Come, monsieur,” said Fouquet, “you can hardly refuse that. Answer—do you accept?”

“Impossible,” murmured Vanel.

Aramis bit his lips, and something like a cloud seemed to pass over his face. The thunder behind this cloud could easily be imagined. He still kept his hold on Vanel. “You have purchased the appointment for fifteen hundred thousand francs, I think. Well, you will receive these fifteen hundred thousand francs back again; by paying M. Fouquet a visit, and shaking hands with him on the bargain, you will have become a gainer of a million and a half. You get honour and profit at the same time, Monsieur Vanel.”

“I cannot do it,” said Vanel, hoarsely.

“Very well,” replied Aramis, who had grasped Vanel so tightly by the coat that, when he let go his hold, Vanel staggered back a few paces, “very well; one can now see clearly enough your object in coming here.”

“Yes,” said Fouquet, “one can easily see that.”

“But—” said Vanel, attempting to stand erect before the weakness of these two men of honour.

“Does the fellow presume to speak?” said Aramis, with the tone of an emperor.

“Fellow!” repeated Vanel.

"The scoundrel, I meant to say," added Aramis, who had now resumed his usual self-possession. "Come, monsieur, produce your deed of sale,—you have it about you, I suppose, in one of your pockets, already prepared, as an assassin holds his pistol or his dagger concealed under his cloak."

Vanel began to mutter something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet. "Where is this deed?"

Vanel tremblingly searched in his pockets, and as he drew out his pocket-book, a paper fell out of it, while Vanel offered the other to Fouquet. Aramis pounced upon the paper which had fallen out, as soon as he recognized the handwriting. "I beg your pardon," said Vanel, "that is a rough draft of the deed."

"I see that very clearly," retorted Aramis, with a smile more cutting than a lash of a whip; "and what I admire most is, that this draft is in M. Colbert's handwriting. Look, my lord, look."

And he handed the draft to Fouquet, who recognized the truth of the fact; for, covered with erasures, with inserted words, the margins filled with additions, this deed—a living proof of Colbert's plot—had just revealed everything to its unhappy victim. "Well!" murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, completely humiliated, seemed as if he were looking for some hole wherein to hide himself.

"Well!" said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy's name were not Colbert—if you had not this mean thief before you, I should say to you, 'Repudiate it,' such a proof as this absolves you from your word; but these fellows would think you were afraid; they would fear you less than they do; therefore sign the deed at once." And he held out a pen towards him.

Fouquet pressed Aramis's hand; but, instead of the deed which Vanel handed to him, he took the rough draft of it.

"No, not that paper," said Aramis, hastily; "this is the one. The other is too precious a document for you to part with."

"No, no!" replied Fouquet; "I will sign under M. Colbert's own handwriting even; and I write, 'The handwriting is approved of.'" He then signed, and said, "Here it is, Monsieur Vanel." And the latter seized the paper, dashed down the money, and was about to make his escape.

"One moment," said Aramis. "Are you quite sure the exact amount is there? It ought to be counted over, Monsieur Vanel; particularly since M. Colbert makes presents of money to ladies, I see. Ah, that worthy M. Colbert is not so generous as M. Fouquet." And Aramis, spelling every word, every letter of the order to pay, distilled his wrath and his contempt, drop by drop, upon the miserable wretch, who had to submit to this torture for a quarter of an hour. He was then dismissed, not in words, but by a gesture, as one dismisses or discharges a beggar or a menial.

As soon as Vanel had gone, the minister and the prelate, their eyes fixed on each other, remained silent for a few moments.

"Well," said Aramis, the first to break the silence; "to what can that man be compared, who, at the very moment he is on the point of entering into a conflict with an enemy armed from head to foot, panting for his life, presents himself for the contest utterly defenseless, throws down his arms, and smiles and kisses his hands to his adversary in the most gracious manner? Good faith, M. Fouquet, is a weapon which scoundrels frequently make use of against men of honour, and it answers their purpose. Men of honour, ought, in their turn, also, to make use of dishonest means against such scoundrels. You would soon see how strong they would become, without ceasing to be men of honour."

"What they did would be termed the acts of a scoundrel," replied Fouquet.

"Far from that; it would be merely coquetting or playing with the truth. At all events, since you have finished with this Vanel; since you have deprived yourself of the happiness of confounding him by repudiating your word; and since you have given up, for the purpose of being used against yourself, the only weapon which can ruin you—"

"My dear friend," said Fouquet, mournfully, "you are like the teacher of philosophy whom La Fontaine was telling us about the other day; he saw a child drowning, and began to read him a lecture divided into three heads."

Aramis smiled as he said, "Philosophy—yes; teacher—yes; a drowning child—yes; but a child can be saved—you shall see. But first of all let us talk about business. Did you not some time ago," he continued, as Fouquet looked at him with a bewildered air, "speak to me about an idea you had of giving a *fete* at Vaux?"

"Oh!" said Fouquet, "that was when affairs were flourishing."

"A *fete*, I believe, to which the king invited himself of his own accord?"

"No, no, my dear prelate; a *fete* to which M. Colbert advised the king to invite himself."

"Ah—exactly; as it would be a *fete* of so costly a character that you would be ruined in giving it."

"Precisely so. In happier days, as I said just now, I had a kind of pride in showing my enemies how inexhaustible my resources were; I felt it a point of honour to strike them with amazement, by creating millions under circumstances where they imagined nothing but bankruptcies and failures would follow. But, at present, I am arranging my accounts with the state, with the king, with myself; and I must now become a mean, stingy man; I shall be able to prove to the world that I can act or operate with my deniers as I used to do with my bags of pistoles, and from to-morrow my equipages shall be sold, my mansions mortgaged, my expenses curtailed."

"From to-morrow," interrupted Aramis, quietly, "you will occupy yourself, without the slightest delay, with your *fete* at Vaux, which must hereafter be spoken of as one of the most magnificent productions of your most prosperous days."

"Are you mad, Chevalier d'Herblay?"

"!I do you think so?"

"What do you mean, then? Do you not know that a *fete* at Vaux, one of the very simplest possible character, would cost four or five millions?"

"I do not speak of a *fete* of the very simplest possible character, my dear superintendent."

"But, since the *fete* is to be given to the king," replied Fouquet, who misunderstood Aramis's idea, "it cannot be simple."

"Just so: it ought to be on a scale of the most unbounded magnificence."

"In that case, I shall have to spend ten or twelve millions."

"You shall spend twenty, if you require it," said Aramis, in a perfectly calm voice.

"Where shall I get them?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"That is my affair, monsieur le surintendant; and do not be uneasy for a moment about it. The money shall be placed at once at your disposal, the moment you have arranged the plans of your *fete*."

"Chevalier! chevalier!" said Fouquet, giddy with amazement, "whither are you hurrying me?"

"Across the gulf into which you were about to fall," replied the bishop of Vannes. "Take hold of my cloak, and throw fear aside."

"Why did you not tell me that sooner, Aramis? There was a day when, with one million only, you could have saved me; whilst to-day—"

"Whilst to-day I can give you twenty," said the prelate. "Such is the case, however—the reason is very simple. On the day you speak of, I had not the million which you had need of at my disposal, whilst now I can easily procure the twenty millions we require."

"May Heaven hear you, and save me!"

Aramis resumed his usual smile, the expression of which was so singular. "Heaven never fails to hear me," he said.

"I abandon myself to you unreservedly," Fouquet murmured.

"No, no; I do not understand it in that manner. I am unreservedly devoted to you. Therefore, as you have the clearest, the most delicate, and the most ingenious mind of the two, you shall have entire control over the *fete*, even to the very smallest details. Only—"

"Only?" said Fouquet, as a man accustomed to understand and appreciate the value of a parenthesis.

"Well, then, leaving the entire invention of the details to you, I shall reserve to myself a general superintendence over the execution."

"In what way?"

"I mean, that you will make of me, on that day, a major-domo, a sort of inspector-general, or factotum—something between a captain of the guard and manager or steward. I will look after the people, and will keep the keys of the doors. You will give your orders, of course: but will give them to no one but me. They will pass through my lips, to reach those for whom they are intended—you understand?"

"No, I am very far from understanding."

"But you agree?"

"Of course, of course, my friend."

"That is all I care about, then. Thanks; and now go and prepare your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Everybody you know."

L: In Which the Author Thinks It Is High Time to Return to the Vicomte de Bragelonne.

Our readers will have observed in this story, the adventures of the new and of the past generation being detailed, as it were, side by side. He will have noticed in the former, the reflection of the glory of earlier years, the experience of the bitter things of this world; in the former, also, that peace which takes possession of the heart, and that healing of the scars which were formerly deep and painful wounds. In the latter, the conflicts of love and vanity; bitter disappointments, ineffable delights; life instead of memory. If, therefore, any variety has been presented to the reader in the different episodes of this tale, it is to be attributed to the numerous shades of colour which are presented on this double tablet, where two pictures are seen side by side, mingling and harmonizing their severe and pleasing tones. The repose of the emotions of one is found in harmonious contrast with the fiery sentiments of the other. After having talked reason with older heads, one loves to talk nonsense with youth. Therefore, if the threads of the story do not seem very intimately to connect the we are now writing with the one we have just written, we do not intend to give ourselves any more thought or trouble about it than Ruysdael took in painting an autumn sky, after having finished a spring-time scene. We accordingly resume Raoul de Bragelonne's story at the very place where our last sketch left him.

In a state of frenzy and dismay, or rather without power or will of his own,—hardly knowing what he was doing,—he fled swiftly, after the scene in La Vallière's chamber, that strange exclusion, Louise's grief, Montalais's terror, the king's wrath—all seemed to indicate some misfortune. But what? He had arrived from London because he had been told of the existence of a danger; and almost on his arrival this appearance of danger was manifest. Was not this sufficient for a lover? Certainly it was, but it was insufficient for a pure and upright heart such as his. And yet Raoul did not seek for explanations in the very quarter where more jealous or less timid lovers would have done. He did not go straightaway to his mistress, and say, "Louise, is it true that you love me no longer? Is it true that you love another?" Full of courage, full of friendship as he was full of love; a religious observer of his word, and believing blindly the word of others, Raoul said within himself, "Guiche wrote to put me on my guard, Guiche knows something; I will go and ask Guiche what he knows, and tell him what I have seen." The journey was not a long one. Guiche, who had been brought from Fontainebleau to Paris within the last two days, was beginning to recover from his wounds, and to walk about a little in his room. He uttered a cry of joy as he saw Raoul, with the eagerness of friendship, enter the apartment. Raoul was unable to refrain from a cry of grief, when he saw De Guiche, so pale, so thin, so melancholy. A very few words, and a simple gesture which De Guiche made to put aside Raoul's arm, were sufficient to inform the latter of the truth.

"Ah! so it is," said Raoul, seating himself beside his friend; "one loves and dies."

"No, no, not dies," replied Guiche, smiling, "since I am now recovering, and since, too, I can press you in my arms."

"Ah! I understand."

"And I understand you, too. You fancy I am unhappy, Raoul?"

"Alas!"

"No; I am the happiest of men. My body suffers, but not my mind or my heart. If you only knew—Oh! I am, indeed, the very happiest of men."

"So much the better," said Raoul; "so much the better, provided it lasts."

"It is over. I have had enough happiness to last me to my dying day, Raoul."

"I have no doubt you have had; but she—"

"Listen; I love her, because—but you are not listening to me."

"I beg your pardon."

"Your mind is preoccupied."

"Yes, your health, in the first place—"

"It is not that, I know."

"My dear friend, you would be wrong. I think, to ask me any questions—you of all persons in the world;" and he laid so much weight upon the "you," that he completely enlightened his friend upon the nature of the evil, and the difficulty of remedying it.

"You say that, Raoul, on account of what I wrote to you."

"Certainly. We will talk over that matter a little, when you have finished telling me of all your own pleasures and your pains."

"My dear friend, I am entirely at your service."

"Thank you; I have hurried, I have flown here; I came in half the time the government couriers usually take. Now, tell me, my dear friend, what did you want?"

"Nothing whatever, but to make you come."

"Well, then, I am here."

"All is quite right, then."

"There must have been something else, I suppose?"

"No, indeed."

"De Guiche!"

"Upon my honour!"

"You cannot possibly have crushed all my hopes so violently, or have exposed me to being disgraced by the king for my return, which is in disobedience of his orders—you cannot, I say, have planted jealousy in my heart, merely to say to me, 'It is all right, be perfectly easy.'"

"I do not say to you, Raoul, 'Be perfectly easy,' but pray understand me; I never will, nor can I, indeed, tell you anything else."

"What sort of person do you take me for?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you know anything, why conceal it from me? If you do not know anything, why did you write so warningly?"

"True, true, I was very wrong, and I regret having done so, Raoul. It seems nothing to write to a friend and say 'Come;' but to have this friend face to face, to feel him tremble, and breathlessly and anxiously wait to hear what one hardly dare tell him, is very difficult."

"Dare! I have courage enough, if you have not," exclaimed Raoul, in despair.

"See how unjust you are, and how soon you forget you have to do with a poor wounded fellow such as your unhappy friend is. So, calm yourself, Raoul. I said to you, 'Come'—you are here, so ask me nothing further."

"Your object in telling me to come was your hope that I should see with my own eyes, was it not? Nay, do not hesitate, for I have seen all."

"Oh!" exclaimed De Guiche.

"Or at least I thought—"

"There, now, you see you are not sure. But if you have any doubt, my poor friend, what remains for me to do?"

"I saw Louise much agitated—Montalais in a state of bewilderment—the king—"

"The king?"

"Yes. You turn your head aside. The danger is there, the evil is there; tell me, is it not so, is it not the king?"

"I say nothing."

"Oh! you say a thousand times more than nothing. Give me facts, for pity's sake, give me proofs. My friend, the only friend I have, speak—tell me all. My heart is crushed, wounded to death; I am dying from despair."

"If that really be so, as I see it is, indeed, dear Raoul," replied De Guiche, "you relieve me from my difficulty, and I will tell you all, perfectly sure that I can tell you nothing but what is consoling, compared to the despair from which I see you suffering."

"Go on,—go on; I am listening."

"Well, then, I can only tell you what you might learn from every one you meet."

"From every one, do you say? It is talked about, then!"

"Before you say people talk about it, learn what it is that people have to talk about. I assure you solemnly, that people only talk about what may, in truth, be very innocent; perhaps a walk—"

"Ah! a walk with the king?"

"Yes, certainly, a walk with the king; and I believe the king has already very frequently before taken walks with ladies, without on that account—"

"You would not have written to me, shall I say again, if there had been nothing unusual in this promenade."

"I know that while the storm lasted, it would have been far better if the king had taken shelter somewhere else, than to have remained with his head uncovered before La Vallière; but the king is so very courteous and polite."

"Oh! De Guiche, De Guiche, you are killing me!"

"Do not let us talk any more, then."

"Nay, let us continue. This walk was followed by others, I suppose?"

"No—I mean yes: there was the adventure of the oak, I think. But I know nothing about the matter at all." Raoul rose; De Guiche endeavored to imitate him, notwithstanding his weakness. "Well, I will not add another word: I have said either too much or not enough. Let others give you further information if they will, or if they can; my duty was to warn you, and *that* I have done. Watch over your own affairs now, yourself."

"Question others! Alas! you are no true friend to speak to me in that manner," said the young man, in utter distress. "The first man I meet may be either evilly disposed or a fool,—if the former, he will tell me a lie to make me suffer more than I do now; if the latter, he will do worse still. Ah! De Guiche, De Guiche, before two hours are over, I shall have been told ten falsehoods, and shall have as many duels on my hands. Save me, then; is it not best to know the worst always?"

"But I know nothing, I tell you; I was wounded, attacked by fever: out of my senses; and I have only a very faint recollection of it all. But there is no reason why we should search very far, when the very man we want is close at hand. Is not D'Artagnan your friend?"

"Oh! true, true!"

"Got to him, then. He will be able to throw sufficient light upon the subject." At this moment a lackey entered the room. "What is it?" said De Guiche.

"Some one is waiting for my lord in the Cabinet des Porcelaines."

"Very well. Will you excuse me, my dear Raoul? I am so proud since I have been able to walk again."

"I would offer you my arm, De Guiche, if I did not guess that the person in question is a lady."

"I believe so," said De Guiche, smiling as he quitted Raoul.

Raoul remained motionless, absorbed in grief, overwhelmed, like the miner upon whom a vault has just fallen in, who, wounded, his life-blood welling fast, his thoughts confused, endeavors to recover himself, to save his life and to retain his reason. A few minutes were all Raoul needed to dissipate the bewildering sensations occasioned by these two revelations. He had already recovered the thread of his ideas, when, suddenly, through the door, he fancied he recognized Montalais's voice in the Cabinet des Porcelaines. "She!" he cried. "Yes, it is indeed her voice! She will be able to tell me the whole truth; but shall I question her here? She conceals herself even from me; she is coming, no doubt, from Madame. I will see her in her own apartment. She will explain her alarm, her flight, the strange manner in which I was driven out; she will tell me all that—after M. d'Artagnan, who knows everything, shall have given me a fresh strength and courage. Madame, a coquette I fear, and yet a coquette who is herself in love, has her moments of kindness; a coquette who is as capricious and uncertain as life or death, but who tells De Guiche that he is the happiest of men. He at least is lying on roses." And so he hastily quitted the comte's apartments, reproaching himself as he went for having talked of nothing but his own affairs to De Guiche, and soon reached D'Artagnan's quarters.

#### LI. Bragelonne Continues His Inquiries.

The captain, sitting buried in his leathern armchair, his spurs fixed in the floor, his sword between his legs, was reading a number of letters, as he twisted his mustache. D'Artagnan uttered a welcome full of pleasure when he perceived his friend's son. "Raoul, my boy," he said, "by what lucky accident does it happen that the king has recalled you?"

These words did not sound agreeably in the young man's ears, who, as he seated himself, replied, "Upon my word I cannot tell you; all that I know is—I have come back."

"Hum!" said D'Artagnan, folding up his letters and directing a look full of meaning at him; "what do you say, my boy? that the king has not recalled you, and you have returned? I do not understand that at all."

Raoul was already pale enough; and he now began to turn his hat round and round in his hand.

"What the deuce is the matter that you look as you do, and what makes you so dumb?" said the captain. "Do people nowadays assume that sort of airs in England? I have been in England, and came here again as lively as a chaffinch. Will you not say something?"

"I have too much to say."

"Ah! how is your father?"

"Forgive me, my dear friend, I was going to ask you that."

D'Artagnan increased the sharpness of his penetrating gaze, which no secret was capable of resisting. "You are unhappy about something," he said.

"I am, indeed; and you know the reason very well, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"I?"

"Of course. Nay, do not pretend to be astonished."

"I am not pretending to be astonished, my friend."

"Dear captain, I know very well that in all trials of *finesse*, as well as in all trials of strength, I shall be beaten by you. You can see that at the present moment I am an idiot, an absolute noodle. I have neither head nor arm; do not despise, but help me. In two words, I am the most wretched of living beings."

"Oh, oh! why that?" inquired D'Artagnan, unbuckling his belt and thawing the asperity of his smile.

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière is deceiving me."

"She is deceiving you," said D'Artagnan, not a muscle of whose face had moved; "those are big words. Who makes use of them?"

"Every one."

"Ah! if every one says so, there must be some truth in it. I begin to believe there is fire when I see smoke. It is ridiculous, perhaps, but it is so."

"Therefore you *do* believe me?" exclaimed Bragelonne, quickly.

"I never mix myself up in affairs of that kind; you know that very well."

"What! not for a friend, for a son!"

"Exactly. If you were a stranger, I should tell you—I will tell *you* nothing at all. How is Porthos, do you know?"

"Monsieur," cried Raoul, pressing D'Artagnan's hand, "I entreat you in the name of the friendship you vowed my father!"

"The deuce take it, you are really ill—from curiosity."

"No, it is not from curiosity, it is from love."

"Good. Another big word. If you were really in love, my dear Raoul, you would be very different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you were really so deeply in love that I could believe I was addressing myself to your heart—but it is impossible."

"I tell you I love Louise to distraction."



D'Artagnan could read to the very bottom of the young man's heart.

"Impossible, I tell you," he said. "You are like all young men; you are not in love, you are out of your senses."

"Well! suppose it were only that?"

"No sensible man ever succeeded in making much of a brain when the head was turned. I have completely lost my senses in the same way a hundred times in my life. You would listen to me, but you would not hear me! you would hear, but you would not understand me; you would understand, but you would not obey me."

"Oh! try, try."

"I go far. Even if I were unfortunate enough to know something, and foolish enough to communicate it to you—You are my friend, you say?"

"Indeed, yes."

"Very good. I should quarrel with you. You would never forgive me for having destroyed your illusion, as people say in love affairs."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, you know all; and yet you plunge me in perplexity and despair, in death itself."

"There, there now."

"I never complain, as you know; but as Heaven and my father would never forgive me for blowing out my brains, I will go and get the first person I meet to give me the information which you withhold; I will tell him he lies, and—"

"And you would kill him. And a fine affair that would be. So much the better. What should I care? Kill any one you please, my boy, if it gives you any pleasure. It is exactly like a man with a toothache, who keeps on saying, 'Oh! what torture I am suffering. I could bite a piece of iron in half.' My answer always is, 'Bite, my friend, bite; the tooth will remain all the same.'"

"I shall not kill any one, monsieur," said Raoul, gloomily.

"Yes, yes! you now assume a different tone: instead of killing, you will get killed yourself, I suppose you mean? Very fine, indeed! How much I should regret you! Of course I should go about all day, saying, 'Ah! what a fine stupid fellow that Bragelonne was! as great a stupid as I ever met with. I have passed my whole life almost in teaching him how to hold and use his sword properly, and the silly fellow has got himself spitted like a lark.' Go, then, Raoul, go and get yourself disposed of, if you like. I hardly know who can have taught you logic, but deuce take me if your father has not been regularly robbed of his money."

Raoul buried his face in his hands, murmuring: "No, no; I have not a single friend in the world."

"Oh! bah!" said D'Artagnan.

"I meet with nothing but raillery or indifference."

"Idle fancies, monsieur. I do not laugh at you, although I am a Gascon. And, as for being indifferent, if I were so, I should have sent you about your business a quarter of an hour ago, for you would make a man who was out of his senses with delight as dull as possible, and would be the death of one who was out of spirits. How now, young man! do you wish me to disgust you with the girl you are attached to, and to teach you to execrate the whole sex who constitute the honour and happiness of human life?"

"Oh! tell me, monsieur, and I will bless you."

"Do you think, my dear fellow, that I can have crammed into my brain all about the carpenter, and the painter, and the staircase, and a hundred other similar tales of the same kind?"

"A carpenter! what do you mean?"

"Upon my word I don't know; some one told me there was a carpenter who made an opening through a certain flooring."

"In La Vallière's room!"

"Oh! I don't know where."

"In the king's apartment, perhaps?"

"Of course, if it were in the king's apartment, I should tell you, I suppose."

"In whose room, then?"

"I have told you for the last hour that I know nothing of the whole affair."

"But the painter, then? the portrait—"

"It seems that the king wished to have the portrait of one of the ladies belonging to the court."

"La Vallière?"

"Why, you seem to have only that name in your mouth. Who spoke to you of La Vallière?"

"If it be not her portrait, then, why do you suppose it would concern me?"

"I do not suppose it will concern you. But you ask me all sorts of questions, and I answer you. You positively will learn all the scandal of the affair, and I tell you—make the best you can of it."

Raoul struck his forehead with his hand in utter despair. "It will kill me!" he said.

"So you have said already."

"Yes, you are right," and he made a step or two, as if he were going to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for some one who will tell me the truth."

"Who is that?"

"A woman."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière herself, I suppose you mean?" said D'Artagnan, with a smile. "Ah! a famous idea that! You wish to be consoled by some one, and you will be so at once. She will tell you nothing ill of herself, of course. So be off."

"You are mistaken, monsieur," replied Raoul; "the woman I mean will tell me all the evil she possibly can."

"You allude to Montalais, I suppose—her friend; a woman who, on that account, will exaggerate all that is either bad or good in the matter. Do not talk to Montalais, my good fellow."

"You have some reasons for wishing me not to talk with Montalais?"

"Well, I admit it. And, in point of fact, why should I play with you as a cat does with a poor mouse? You distress me, you do, indeed. And if I wish you not to speak to Montalais just now, it is because you will be betraying your secret, and people will take advantage of it. Wait, if you can."

"I cannot."

"So much the worse. Why, you see, Raoul, if I had an idea,—but I have not got one."

"Promise me that you will pity me, my friend, that is all I need, and leave me to get out of the affair by myself."

"Oh! yes, indeed, in order that you may get deeper into the mire! A capital idea, truly! go and sit down at that table and take a pen in your hand."

"What for?"

"To write and ask Montalais to give you an interview."

"Ah!" said Raoul, snatching eagerly at the pen which the captain held out to him.

Suddenly the door opened, and one of the musketeers, approaching D'Artagnan, said, "Captain, Mademoiselle de Montalais is here, and wishes to speak to you."

"To me?" murmured D'Artagnan. "Ask her to come in; I shall soon see," he said to himself, "whether she wishes to speak to me or not."

The cunning captain was quite right in his suspicions; for as soon as Montalais entered she exclaimed, "Oh, monsieur! monsieur! I beg your pardon, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Oh! I forgive you, mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I know that, at my age, those who are looking for me generally need me for something or another."

"I was looking for M. de Bragelonne," replied Montalais.

"How very fortunate that is; he was looking for you, too. Raoul, will you accompany Mademoiselle de Montalais?"

"Oh! certainly."

"Go along, then," he said, as he gently pushed Raoul out of the cabinet; and then, taking hold of Montalais's hand, he said, in a low voice, "Be kind towards him; spare him, and spare her, too, if you can."

"Ah!" she said, in the same tone of voice, "it is not I who am going to speak to him."

"Who, then?"

"It is Madame who has sent for him."

"Very good," cried D'Artagnan, "it is Madame, is it? In an hour's time, then, the poor fellow will be cured."

"Or else dead," said Montalais, in a voice full of compassion. "Adieu, Monsieur d'Artagnan," she said; and she ran to join Raoul, who was waiting for her at a little distance from the door, very much puzzled and thoroughly uneasy at the dialogue, which promised no good augury for him.

LII. Two Jealousies.

Lovers are tender towards everything that forms part of the daily life of the object of their affection. Raoul no sooner found himself alone with Montalais, than he kissed her hand with rapture. "There, there," said the young girl, sadly, "you are throwing your kisses away; I will guarantee that they will not bring you back any interest."

"How so?—Why?—Will you explain to me, my dear Aure?"

"Madame will explain everything to you. I am going to take you to her apartments."

"*What!*"

"Silence! and throw away your dark and savage looks. The windows here have eyes, the walls have ears. Have the kindness not to look at me any longer; be good enough to speak to me aloud of the rain, of the fine weather, and of the charms of England."

"At all events—" interrupted Raoul.

"I tell you, I warn you, that wherever people may be, I know not how, Madame is sure to have eyes and ears open. I am not very desirous, you can easily believe, of being dismissed or thrown in to the Bastille. Let us talk, I tell you, or rather, do not let us talk at all."

Raoul clenched his hands, and tried to assume the look and gait of a man of courage, it is true, but of a man of courage on his way to the torture chamber. Montalais, glancing in every direction, walking along with an easy swinging gait, and holding up her head pertly in the air, preceded him to Madame's apartments, where he was at once introduced. "Well," he thought, "this day will pass away without my learning anything. Guiche showed too much consideration for my feelings; he had no doubt come to an understanding with Madame, and both of them, by a friendly plot, agreed to postpone the solution of the problem. Why have I not a determined, inveterate enemy—that serpent, De Wardes, for instance; that he would bite, is very likely; but I should not hesitate any more. To hesitate, to doubt—better, far, to die."

The next moment Raoul was in Madame's presence. Henrietta, more charming than ever, was half lying, half reclining in her armchair, her small feet upon an embroidered velvet cushion; she was playing with a kitten with long silky fur, which was biting her fingers and hanging by the lace of her collar.

Madame seemed plunged in deep thought, so deep, indeed, that it required both Montalais and Raoul's voice to disturb her from her reverie.

"Your highness sent for me?" repeated Raoul.

Madame shook her head as if she were just awakening, and then said, "Good morning, Monsieur de Bragelonne; yes, I sent for you; so you have returned from England?"

"Yes, Madame, and am at your royal highness's commands."

"Thank you; leave us, Montalais," and the latter immediately left the room.

"You have a few minutes to give me, Monsieur de Bragelonne, have you not?"

"My life is at your royal highness's disposal," Raoul returned with respect, guessing that there was something serious in these unusual courtesies; nor was he displeased, indeed, to observe the seriousness of her manner, feeling persuaded that there was some sort of affinity between Madame's sentiments and his own. In fact, every one at court, of any perception at all, knew perfectly well

the capricious fancy and absurd despotism of the princess's singular character. Madame had been flattered beyond all bounds by the king's attention; she had made herself talked about; she had inspired the queen with that mortal jealousy which is the stinging scorpion at the heel of every woman's happiness; Madame, in a word, in her attempts to cure a wounded pride, found that her heart had become deeply and passionately attached. We know what Madame had done to recall Raoul, who had been sent out of the way by Louis XIV. Raoul did not know of her letter to Charles II., although D'Artagnan had guessed its contents. Who will undertake to account for that seemingly inexplicable mixture of love and vanity, that passionate tenderness of feeling, that prodigious duplicity of conduct? No one can, indeed; not even the bad angel who kindles the love of coquetry in the heart of a woman. "Monsieur de Bragelonne," said the princess, after a moment's pause, "have you returned satisfied?"

Bragelonne looked at Madame Henrietta, and seeing how pale she was, not alone from what she was keeping back, but also from what she was burning to say, said: "Satisfied! what is there for me to be satisfied or dissatisfied about, Madame?"

"But what are those things with which a man of your age, and of your appearance, is usually either satisfied or dissatisfied?"

"How eager she is," thought Raoul, almost terrified; "what venom is it she is going to distil into my heart?" and then, frightened at what she might possibly be going to tell him, and wishing to put off the opportunity of having everything explained, which he had hitherto so ardently wished for, yet had dreaded so much, he replied: "I left, Madame, a dear friend in good health, and on my return I find him very ill."

"You refer to M. de Guiche," replied Madame Henrietta, with imperturbable self-possession; "I *have* heard he is a very dear friend of yours."

"He is, indeed, Madame."

"Well, it is quite true he has been wounded; but he is better now. Oh! M. de Guiche is not to be pitied," she said hurriedly; and then, recovering herself, added, "But has he anything to complain of? Has he complained of anything? Is there any cause of grief or sorrow that we are not acquainted with?"

"I allude only to his wound, Madame."

"So much the better, then, for, in other respects, M. de Guiche seems to be very happy; he is always in very high spirits. I am sure that you, Monsieur de Bragelonne, would far prefer to be, like him, wounded only in the body... for what, in deed, is such a wound, after all!"

Raoul started. "Alas!" he said to himself, "she is returning to it."

"What did you say?" she inquired.

"I did not say anything Madame."

"You did not say anything; you disapprove of my observation, then? you are perfectly satisfied, I suppose?"

Raoul approached closer to her. "Madame," he said, "your royal highness wishes to say something to me, and your instinctive kindness and generosity of disposition induce you to be careful and considerate as to your manner of conveying it. Will your royal highness throw this kind forbearance aside? I am able to bear everything; and I am listening."

"Ah!" replied Henrietta, "what do you understand, then?"

"That which your royal highness wishes me to understand," said Raoul, trembling, notwithstanding his command over himself, as he pronounced these words.

"In point of fact," murmured the princess... "it seems cruel, but since I have begun—"

"Yes, Madame, once your highness has deigned to begin, will you condescend to finish—"

Henrietta rose hurriedly and walked a few paces up and down her room. "What did M. de Guiche tell you?" she said, suddenly.

"Nothing, Madame."

"Nothing! Did he say nothing? Ah! how well I recognize him in that."

"No doubt he wished to spare me."

"And that is what friends call friendship. But surely, M. d'Artagnan, whom you have just left, must have told you."

"No more than De Guiche, Madame."

Henrietta made a gesture full of impatience, as she said, "At least, you know all the court knows."

"I know nothing at all, Madame."

"Not the scene in the storm?"

"No, Madame."

"Not the *tete-a-tete* in the forest?"

"No, Madame."

"Nor the flight to Chaillot?"

Raoul, whose head dropped like a blossom cut down by the reaper, made an almost superhuman effort to smile, as he replied with the greatest gentleness: "I have had the honour of telling your royal highness that I am absolutely ignorant of everything, that I am a poor unremembered outcast, who has this moment arrived from England. There have rolled so many stormy waves between myself and those I left behind me here, that the rumor of none of the circumstances your highness refers to, has been able to reach me."

Henrietta was affected by his extreme pallor, his gentleness, and his great courage. The principal feeling in her heart at that moment was an eager desire to hear the nature of the remembrance which the poor lover retained of the woman who had made him suffer so much. "Monsieur de Bragelonne," she said, "that which your friends have refused to do, I will do for you, whom I like and esteem very much. I will be your friend on this occasion. You hold your head high, as a man of honour should; and I deeply regret that you may have to bow before ridicule, and in a few days, it might be, contempt."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raoul, perfectly livid. "It is as bad as that, then?"

"If you do not know," said the princess, "I see that you guess; you were affianced, I believe, to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes, Madame."

"By that right, you deserve to be warned about her, as some day or another I shall be obliged to dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière from my service—"

"Dismiss La Vallière!" cried Bragelonne.

"Of course. Do you suppose I shall always be amenable to the tears and protestations of the king? No, no! my house shall no longer be made a convenience for such practices; but you tremble, you cannot stand—"

"No, Madame, no," said Bragelonne, making an effort over himself; "I thought I should have died just now, that was all. Your royal highness did me the honour to say that the king wept and implored you—"

"Yes, but in vain," returned the princess; who then related to Raoul the scene that took place at Chaillot, and the king's despair on his return; she told him of his indulgence to herself and the terrible word with which the outraged princess, the humiliated coquette, had quashed the royal anger.

Raoul stood with his head bent down.

"What do you think of it all?" she said.

"The king loves her," he replied.

"But you seem to think she does not love him!"

"Alas, Madame, I was thinking of the time when she loved *me*."

Henrietta was for a moment struck with admiration at this sublime disbelief: and then, shrugging her shoulders, she said, "You do not believe me, I see. How deeply you must love her. And you doubt if she loves the king?"

"I do, until I have a proof of it. Forgive me, Madame, but she has given me her word; and her mind and heart are too upright to tell a falsehood."

"You require a proof! Be it so. Come with me, then."

### LIII. A Domiciliary Visit.

The princess, preceding Raoul, led him through the courtyard towards that part of the building La Vallière inhabited, and, ascending the same staircase which Raoul himself had ascended that very morning, she paused at the door of the room in which the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The opportunity was remarkably well chosen to carry out the project Madame Henrietta had conceived, for the chateau was empty. The king, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court, had set off for Saint-Germain; Madame Henrietta was the only one who knew of Bragelonne's return, and thinking over the advantages which might be drawn from this return, she had feigned indisposition in order to remain behind. Madame was therefore confident of finding La Vallière's room and Saint-Aignan's apartment perfectly empty. She took a pass-key from her pocket and opened the door of her maid of honour's apartment. Bragelonne's gaze was immediately fixed upon the interior of the room, which he recognized at once; and the impression which the sight of it produced upon him was torture. The princess looked at him, and her practiced eye at once detected what was passing in the young man's heart.

"You asked for proofs," she said; "do not be astonished, then, if I give you them. But if you do not think you have courage enough to confront them, there is still time to withdraw."

"I thank you, Madame," said Bragelonne; "but I came here to be convinced. You promised to convince me,—do so."

"Enter, then," said Madame, "and shut the door behind you."

Bragelonne obeyed, and then turned towards the princess, whom he interrogated by a look.

"You know where you are, I suppose?" inquired Madame Henrietta.

"Everything leads me to believe I am in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"You are."

"But I would observe to your highness, that this room is a room, and is not a proof."

"Wait," said the princess, as she walked to the foot of the bed, folded up the screen into its several compartments, and stooped down towards the floor. "Look here," she continued; "stoop down and lift up this trap-door yourself."

"A trap-door!" said Raoul, astonished; for D'Artagnan's words began to return to his memory, and he had an indistinct recollection that D'Artagnan had made use of the same word. He looked, but uselessly, for some cleft or crevice which might indicate an opening or a ring to assist in lifting up the planking.

"Ah, I forgot," said Madame Henrietta, "I forgot the secret spring; the fourth plank of the flooring,—press on the spot where you will observe a knot in the wood. Those are the instructions; press, vicomte! press, I say, yourself."

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his finger on the spot which had been indicated to him; at the same moment the spring began to work, and the trap rose of its own accord.

"It is ingenious enough, certainly," said the princess; "and one can see that the architect foresaw that a woman's hand only would have to make use of this spring, for see how easily the trap-door opened without assistance."

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes, and a very pretty one, too," said Madame Henrietta. "See, vicomte, the staircase has a balustrade, intended to prevent the falling of timid persons, who might be tempted to descend the staircase; and I will risk myself on it accordingly. Come, vicomte, follow me!"

"But before following you, madame, may I ask where this staircase leads to?"

"Ah, true; I forgot to tell you. You know, perhaps, that formerly M. de Saint-Aignan lived in the very next apartment to the king?"

"Yes, Madame, I am aware of that; that was the arrangement, at least, before I left; and more than once I had the honour of visiting his rooms."

"Well, he obtained the king's leave to change his former convenient and beautiful apartment for the two rooms to which this staircase will conduct us, and which together form a lodging for him half the size, and at ten times greater the distance from the king,—a close proximity to whom is by no means disdained, in general, by the gentlemen belonging to the court."

"Very good, Madame," returned Raoul; "but go on, I beg, for I do not understand yet."

"Well, then it accidentally happened," continued the princess, "that M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment is situated underneath the apartments of my maids of honour, and by a further coincidence, exactly underneath the room of La Vallière."

"But what was the motive of this trap-door and this staircase?"

"That I cannot tell you. Would you like to go down to Monsieur de Saint-Aignan's rooms? Perhaps we shall be able to find the solution of the enigma there."

And Madame set the example by going down herself, while Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. At every step Bragelonne took, he advanced further into that mysterious apartment which had witnessed La Vallière's sighs and still retained the perfume of her presence. Bragelonne fancied he perceived, as he inhaled the atmosphere, that the young girl must have passed through. Then succeeded to these emanations of herself, which he regarded as invisible though certain proofs, flowers she preferred to all others—books of her own selection. If Raoul retained a single doubt on the subject, it would have vanished at the secret harmony of tastes and connection of the mind with the ordinary objects of life. La Vallière, in Bragelonne's eyes, was present there in each article of furniture, in the colour of the hangings, in all that surrounded him. Dumb, and now completely overwhelmed, there was nothing further for him now to learn, and he followed his pitiless conductress as blindly as the culprit follows the executioner; while Madame, as cruel as women of overstrung temperaments generally are, did not spare him the slightest detail. But it must be admitted that, notwithstanding the kind of apathy into which he had fallen, none of these details, even had he been left alone, would have escaped him. The happiness of the woman who loves, when that happiness is derived from a rival, is a living torture for a jealous man; but for a jealous man such as Raoul was, for one whose heart for the first time in its existence was being steeped in gall and bitterness, Louise's happiness was in reality an ignominious death, a death of body and soul. He guessed all; he fancied he could see them, with their hands clasped in each other's, their faces drawn close together, and reflected, side by side, in loving proximity, and they gazed upon the mirrors around them—so sweet an occupation for lovers, who, as they thus see themselves twice over, imprint the picture still more deeply on their memories. He could guess, too, the stolen kiss snatched as they separated from each other's loved society. The luxury, the studied elegance, eloquent of the perfection of indolence, of ease; the extreme care shown, either to spare the loved object every annoyance, or to occasion her a delightful surprise; that might and majesty of love multiplied by the majesty and might of royalty itself, seemed like a death-blow to Raoul. If there be anything which can in any way assuage or mitigate the tortures of jealousy, it is the inferiority of the man who is preferred to yourself; whilst, on the very contrary, if there be one anguish more bitter than another, a misery for which language lacks a word, it is the superiority of the man preferred to yourself, superior, perhaps, in youth, beauty, grace. It is in such moments as these that Heaven almost seems to have taken part against the disdained and rejected lover.

One final pang was reserved for poor Raoul. Madame Henrietta lifted up a silk curtain, and behind the canvas he perceived La Vallière's portrait. Not only the portrait of La Vallière, but of La Vallière radiant with youth, beauty, and happiness, inhaling life and enjoyment at every pore, because at eighteen years of age love itself is life.

"Louise!" murmured Bragelonne,—"Louise! is it true, then? Oh, you have never loved me, for never have you looked at me in that manner." And he felt as if his heart were crushed within his bosom.

Madame Henrietta looked at him, almost envious of his extreme grief, although she well knew there was nothing to envy in it, and that she herself was as passionately loved by De Guiche as Louise by Bragelonne. Raoul interpreted Madame Henrietta's look.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Madame; in your presence I know I ought to have greater self-control. But Heaven grant that you may never be struck by similar misery to that which crushes me at this moment, for you are but a woman, and would not be able to endure so terrible an affliction. Forgive me, I again entreat you, Madame; I am but a man without rank or position, while you belong to a race whose happiness knows no bounds, whose power acknowledges no limit."

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," replied Henrietta, "a mind such as yours merits all the consideration and respect which a queen's heart even can bestow. Regard me as your friend, monsieur; and as such, indeed, I would not allow your whole life to be poisoned by perfidy, and covered with ridicule. It was I, indeed, who, with more courage than any of your pretended friends,—I except M. de Guiche,—was the cause of your return from London; it is I, also, who now give you the melancholy proofs, necessary, however, for your cure if you are a lover with courage in his heart, and not a weeping Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me, even, and do not serve the king less faithfully than you have done."

Raoul smiled bitterly. "Ah! true, true; I was forgetting that; the king is my master."

"Your liberty, nay, your very life, is in danger."

A steady, penetrating look informed Madame Henrietta that she was mistaken, and that her last argument was not a likely one to affect the young man. "Take care, Monsieur de Bragelonne," she said, "for if you do not weigh well all your actions, you might throw into an extravagance of wrath a prince whose passions, once aroused, exceed the bounds of reason, and you would thereby involve your friends and family in the deepest distress; you must bend, you must submit, and you must cure yourself."

"I thank you, Madame; I appreciate the advice your royal highness is good enough to give me, and I will endeavor to follow it; but one final word, I beg."

"Name it."

"Should I be indiscreet in asking you the secret of this staircase, of this trap-door; a secret, which, it seems, you have discovered?"

"Nothing more simple. For the purpose of exercising a surveillance over the young girls who are attached to my service, I have duplicate keys of their doors. It seemed very strange to me that M. de Saint-Aignan should change his apartments. It seemed very strange that the king should come to see M. de Saint-Aignan every day, and, finally, it seemed very strange that so many things should be done during your absence, that the very habits and customs of the court appeared changed. I do not wish to be trifled with by the king, nor to serve as a cloak for his love affairs; for after La Vallière, who weeps incessantly, he will take a fancy to Montalais, who is always laughing; and then to Tonny-Charente, who does nothing but sing all day; to act such a part as that would be unworthy of me. I thrust aside the scruples which my friendship for you suggested. I discovered the secret. I have wounded your feelings, I know, and I again entreat you to pardon me; but I had a duty to fulfil. I have discharged it. You are now forewarned; the tempest will soon burst; protect yourself accordingly."

"You naturally expect, however, that a result of some kind must follow," replied Bragelonne, with firmness; "for you do not suppose I shall silently accept the shame thus thrust upon me, or the treachery which has been practiced against me?"

"You will take whatever steps in the matter you please, Monsieur Raoul, only do not betray the source whence you derived the truth. That is all I have to ask,—the only price I require for the service I have rendered you."

"Fear nothing, Madame," said Bragelonne, with a bitter smile.

"I bribed the locksmith, in whom the lovers confided. You can just as well have done so as myself, can you not?"

"Yes, Madame. Your royal highness, however, has no other advice or caution to give me, except that of not betraying you?"

"None."

"I am about, therefore, to beg your royal highness to allow me to remain here for one moment."

"Without me?"

"Oh! no, Madame. It matters very little; for what I have to do can be done in your presence. I only ask one moment to write a line to some one."

"It is dangerous, Monsieur de Bragelonne. Take care."

"No one can possibly know that your royal highness has done me the honour to conduct me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am going to write."

"Do as you please, then."

Raoul drew out his tablet, and wrote rapidly on one of the leaves the following words:

"MONSIEUR LE COMTE,—Do not be surprised to find this paper signed by me; the friend I shall very shortly send to call on you will have the honour to explain the object of my visit.

"VICOMTE RAOUL DE BRAGELONNE."

He rolled up the paper, slipped it into the lock of the door which communicated with the room set apart for the two lovers, and satisfied himself that the missive was so apparent that Saint-Aignan could not but see it as he entered; he rejoined the princess, who had already reached the top of the staircase. They then separated, Raoul pretending to thank her highness; Henrietta pitying, or seeming to pity, with all her heart, the wretched young man she had just condemned to such fearful torture. "Oh!" she said, as she saw him disappear, pale as death, and his eyes bursting with blood, "if I had foreseen this, I would have hid the truth from that poor gentleman."

#### LIV. Porthos's Plan of Action.

The great number of individuals we have introduced into this long story is the reason why each of them has been forced to appear only in turn, according to the exigencies of the recital. The result is, that our readers have had no opportunity of meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau. The honours which he had received from the king had not changed the easy, affectionate character of that excellent-hearted man; he may, perhaps, have held up his head a little higher than usual, and a majesty of demeanor, as it were, may have betrayed itself since the honour of dining at the king's table had been accorded him. His majesty's banqueting-room had produced a certain effect on Porthos. Le Seigneur de Bracieux et de Pierrefonds delighted to remember that, during that memorable dinner, the numerous array of servants, and the large number of officials in attendance on the guests, gave a certain tone and effect to the repast, and seemed, as it were, to furnish the room. Porthos undertook to confer upon Mouston a position of some kind or other, in order to establish a sort of hierarchy among his other domestics, and to create a military household, which was not unusual among the great captains of the age, since, in the preceding century, this luxury had been greatly encouraged by Messieurs de Treville, de Schomberg, de la Vieuville, without alluding to M. de Richelieu, M. de Conde, and de Bouillon-Turenne. And, therefore, why should not he, Porthos, the friend of the king, and of M. Fouquet, a baron, and engineer, etc., why should not he, indeed, enjoy all the delightful privileges which large possessions and unusual merit invariably confer? Somewhat neglected by Aramis, who, we know, was greatly occupied with M. Fouquet; neglected, also, on account of his being on duty, by D'Artagnan; tired of Truchen and Planchet, Porthos was surprised to find himself dreaming, without precisely knowing why; but if any one had said to him, "Do you want anything, Porthos?" he would most certainly have replied, "Yes." After one of those dinners, during which Porthos attempted to recall to his recollection all the details of the royal banquet, gently joyful, thanks to the excellence of the wines; gently melancholy, thanks to his ambitious ideas, Porthos was gradually falling off into a placid doze, when his servant entered to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak to him. Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the disposition of mind we are already aware of. Raoul advanced towards Porthos, and shook him by the hand; Porthos, surprised at his seriousness of aspect, offered him a seat. "Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have a service to ask of you."

"Nothing could happen more fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos; "I have eight thousand livres sent me this morning from Pierrefonds; and if you want any money—"

"No, I thank you; it is not money."

"So much the worse, then. I have always heard it said that that is the rarest service, but the easiest to render. The remark struck me; I like to cite remarks that strike me."

"Your heart is as good as your mind is sound and true."

"You are much too kind, I declare. You will dine here, of course?"

"No; I am not hungry."

"Eh! not dine? What a dreadful country England is!"

"Not too much so, indeed—but—"

"Well, if such excellent fish and meat were not to be procured there, it would hardly be endurable."

"Yes, I came to—"

"I am listening. Only just allow me to take a little sip. One gets thirsty in Paris;" and he ordered a bottle of champagne to be brought; and, having first filled Raoul's glass, he filled his own, drank it down at a gulp, and then resumed: "I needed that, in order to listen to you with proper attention. I am now entirely at your service. What do you wish to ask me, dear Raoul? What do you want?"

"Give me your opinion on quarrels in general, my dear friend."

"My opinion! Well—but—Explain your idea a little more coherently," replied Porthos, rubbing his forehead.

"I mean—you are generally good-humored, good-tempered, whenever any misunderstanding arises between a friend of yours and a stranger, for instance?"

"Oh! in the best of tempers."

"Very good; but what do you do, in such a case?"

"Whenever any friend of mine gets into a quarrel, I always act on one principle."

"What is that?"

"That lost time is irreparable, and one never arranges an affair so well as when everything has been done to embroil the disputants as much as possible."

"Ah! indeed, is that the principle on which you proceed?"

"Precisely; so, as soon as a quarrel takes place, I bring the two parties together."

"Exactly."

"You understand that by this means it is impossible for an affair not to be arranged."

"I should have thought that, treated in this manner, an affair would, on the contrary—"

"Oh! not the least in the world. Just fancy, now, I have had in my life something like a hundred and eighty to a hundred and ninety regular duels, without reckoning hasty encounters, or chance meetings."

"It is a very handsome aggregate," said Raoul, unable to resist a smile.

"A mere nothing; but I am so gentle. D'Artagnan reckons his duels by hundreds. It is very true he is a little too hard and sharp—I have often told him so."

"And so," resumed Raoul, "you generally arrange the affairs of honour your friends confide to you."

"There is not a single instance in which I have not finished by arranging every one of them," said Porthos, with a gentleness and confidence that surprised Raoul.

"But the way in which you settle them is at least honourable, I suppose?"

"Oh! rely upon that; and at this stage, I will explain my other principle to you. As soon as my friend has intrusted his quarrel to me, this is what I do; I go to his adversary at once, armed with a politeness and self-possession absolutely requisite under such circumstances."

"Decidedly," said Raoul to himself while the merry thunder of Porthos's laughter was resounding in his ears, "I am very unfortunate. De Guiche treats me with coolness, D'Artagnan with ridicule, Porthos is too tame; no one will settle this affair in the only way I wish it to be settled. And I came to Porthos because I wanted to find a sword instead of cold reasoning at my service. My ill-luck dogs me."

Porthos, who had recovered himself, continued: "By one simple expression, I leave my adversary without an excuse."

"That is as it may happen," said Raoul, absently.

"Not at all, it is quite certain. I have not left him an excuse; and then it is that I display all my courtesy, in order to attain the happy issue of my project. I advance, therefore, with an air of great politeness, and taking my adversary by the hand, I say to him: 'Now that you are convinced of having given the offense, we are sure of reparation; between my friend and yourself, the future can only offer an exchange of mutual courtesies of conduct, and consequently, my mission now is to acquaint you with the length of my friend's sword.'"

"What!" said Raoul.

"Wait a minute. 'The length of my friend's sword. My horse is waiting below; my friend is in such and such a spot and is impatiently awaiting your agreeable society; I will take you with me; we can call upon your second as we go along:' and the affair is arranged."

"And so," said Raoul, pale with vexation, "you reconcile the two adversaries on the ground."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Porthos. "Reconcile! What for?"

"You said that the affair was arranged."

"Of course! since my friend is waiting for him."

"Well! what then? If he is waiting—"

"Well! if he is waiting, it is merely to stretch his legs a little. The adversary, on the contrary, is stiff from riding; they place themselves in proper order, and my friend kills the opponent, and the affair is ended."

"Ah! he kills him, then?" cried Raoul.

"I should think so," said Porthos. "Is it likely I should ever have as a friend a man who allows himself to get killed? I have a hundred and one friends; at the head of the list stand your father, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, all of whom are living and well, I believe?"

"Oh, my dear baron," exclaimed Raoul, as he embraced Porthos.

"You approve of my method, then?" said the giant.

"I approve of it so thoroughly, that I shall have recourse to it this very day, without a moment's delay,—at once, in fact. You are the very man I have been looking for."

"Good; here I am, then; you want to fight, I suppose?"

"Absolutely."

"It is very natural. With whom?"

"With M. de Saint-Aignan."

"I know him—a most agreeable man, who was exceedingly polite to me the day I had the honour of dining with the king. I shall certainly acknowledge his politeness in return, even if it had not happened to be my usual custom. So, he has given you an offense?"

"A mortal offense."

"The deuce! I can say so, I suppose?"

"More than that, even, if you like."

"That is a very great convenience."

"I may look upon it as one of your arranged affairs, may I not?" said Raoul, smiling.

"As a matter of course. Where will you be waiting for him?"

"Ah! I forgot; it is a very delicate matter. M. de Saint-Aignan is a very great friend of the king's."

"So I have heard it said."

"So that if I kill him—"

"Oh! you will kill him, certainly; you must take every precaution to do so. But there is no difficulty in these matters now; if you had lived in our early days,—ah, those were days worth living for!"

"My dear friend, you do not quite understand me. I mean, that M. de Saint-Aignan being a friend of the king, the affair will be more difficult to manage, since the king might learn beforehand—"

"Oh! no; that is not likely. You know my method: 'Monsieur, you have just injured my friend, and—'"

"Yes, I know it."

"And then: 'Monsieur, I have horses below.' I carry him off before he can have spoken to any one."

"Will he allow himself to be carried off like that?"

"I should think so! I should like to see it fail. It would be the first time, if it did. It is true, though, that the young men of the present day—Bah! I would carry him off bodily, if that were all," and Porthos, adding gesture to speech, lifted Raoul and the chair he was sitting on off the ground, and carried them round the room.

"Very good," said Raoul, laughing. "All we have to do is to state the grounds of the quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Well, but that is done, it seems."

"No, my dear M. du Vallon, the usage of the present day requires that the cause of the quarrel should be explained."

"Very good. Tell me what it is, then."

"The fact is—"

"Deuce take it! how troublesome all this is! In former days we had no occasion to say anything about the matter. People fought for the sake of fighting; and I, for one, know no better reason than that."

"You are quite right, M. du Vallon."

"However, tell me what the cause is."

"It is too long a story to tell; only, as one must particularize to a certain extent, and as, on the other hand, the affair is full of difficulties, and requires the most absolute secrecy, you will have the kindness merely to tell M. de Saint-Aignan that he has, in the first place, insulted me by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings? Good," said Porthos, who began to count on his fingers; "next?"

"Then in getting a trap-door made in his new apartments."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trap-door: upon my word, that is very serious; you ought to be furious at that. What the deuce does the fellow mean by getting trap-doors made without first consulting you? Trap-doors! *mordieux!* I haven't got any, except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"And you will please add," said Raoul, "that my last motive for considering myself insulted is, the existence of the portrait that M. de Saint-Aignan well knows."

"Is it possible? A portrait, too! A change of residence, a trap-door, and a portrait! Why, my dear friend, with but one of these causes of complaint there is enough, and more than enough, for all the gentlemen in France and Spain to cut each other's throats, and that is saying but very little."

"Well, my dear friend, you are furnished with all you need, I suppose?"

"I shall take a second horse with me. Select your own rendezvous, and while you are waiting there, you can practice some of the best passes, so as to get your limbs as elastic as possible."

"Thank you. I shall be waiting for you in the wood of Vincennes, close to Minimes."

"All goes well, then. Where am I to find this M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"At the Palais Royal."

Porthos ran a huge hand-bell. "My court suit," he said to the servant who answered the summons, "my horse, and a led horse to accompany me." Then turning to Raoul, as soon as the servant had quitted the room, he said: "Does your father know anything about this?"

"No; I am going to write to him."

"And D'Artagnan?"

"No, nor D'Artagnan either. He is very cautious, you know, and might have diverted me from my purpose."

"D'Artagnan is a sound adviser, though," said Porthos, astonished that, in his own loyal faith in D'Artagnan, any one could have thought of himself, so long as there was a D'Artagnan in the world.

"Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "do not question me any more, I implore you. I have told you all that I had to say; it is prompt action I now expect, sharp and decided as you know how to arrange it. That, indeed, is my reason for having chosen you."

"You will be satisfied with me," replied Porthos.

"Do not forget, either, that, except ourselves, no one must know anything of this meeting."

"People generally find these things out," said Porthos, dryly, "when a dead body is discovered in a wood. But I promise everything, my dear friend, except the concealment of the dead body. There it is, and it must be seen, as a matter of course. It is a principle of mine, not to bury bodies. That has a smack of the assassin about it. Every risk has its peculiarities."

"To work, then, my dear friend."

"Rely upon me," said the giant, finishing the bottle, while a servant spread out upon a sofa the gorgeously decorated dress trimmed with lace.

Raoul left the room, saying to himself, with a secret delight, "Perfidious king! traitorous monarch! I cannot reach thee. I do not wish it; for kings are sacred objects. But your friend, your accomplice, your panderer—the coward who represents you—shall pay for your crime. I will kill him in thy name, and, afterwards, we will bethink ourselves of—*Louise.*"

LV. The Change of Residence, the Trap-Door, and the Portrait.

Porthos, intrusted, to his great delight, with this mission, which made him feel young again, took half an hour less than his usual time to put on his court suit. To show that he was a man acquainted with the usages of high society, he had begun by sending his lackey to inquire if Monsieur de Saint-Aignan were at home, and heard, in answer, that M. le Comte de Saint-Aignan had had the honour of accompanying the king to Saint-Germain, as well as the whole court; but that monsieur le comte had just that moment returned. Immediately upon this reply, Porthos made as much haste as possible, and reached Saint-Aignan's apartments just as the latter was having his boots taken off. The promenade had been delightful. The king, who was in love more than ever, and of course happier than ever, behaved in the most charming manner to every one. Nothing could possibly equal his kindness. M. de Saint-Aignan, it may be remembered, was a poet, and fancied that he had proved that he was so under too many a memorable circumstance to allow the title to be disputed by any one. An indefatigable rhymester, he had, during the whole of the journey, overwhelmed with quatrains, sextains, and madrigals, first the king, and then La Vallière. The king, on his side, was in a similarly poetical mood, and had made a distich; while La Vallière, delighting in poetry, as most women do

who are in love, had composed two sonnets. The day, then, had not been a bad one for Apollo; and so, as soon as he had returned to Paris, Saint-Aignan, who knew beforehand that his verse would be sure to be extensively circulated in court circles, occupied himself, with a little more attention than he had been able to bestow during the promenade, with the composition, as well as with the idea itself. Consequently, with all the tenderness of a father about to start his children in life, he candidly interrogated himself whether the public would find these offsprings of his imagination sufficiently elegant and graceful; and in order to make his mind easy on the subject, M. de Saint-Aignan recited to himself the madrigal he had composed, and which he had repeated from memory to the king, and had promised to write out for him on his return. All the time he was committing these words to memory, the comte was engaged in undressing himself more completely. He had just taken off his coat, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that Monsieur le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds was waiting to be received.

"Eh!" he said, "what does that bunch of names mean? I don't know anything about him."

"It is the same gentleman," replied the lackey, "who had the honour of dining with you, my lord, at the king's table, when his majesty was staying at Fontainebleau."

"Introduce him, then, at once," cried Saint-Aignan.

Porthos, in a few minutes, entered the room. M. de Saint-Aignan had an excellent recollection of persons, and, at the first glance, he recognized the gentleman from the country, who enjoyed so singular a reputation, and whom the king had received so favourably at Fontainebleau, in spite of the smiles of some of those who were present. He therefore advanced towards Porthos with all the outward signs of consideration of manner which Porthos thought but natural, considering that he himself, whenever he called upon an adversary, hoisted a standard of the most refined politeness. Saint-Aignan desired the servant to give Porthos a chair; and the latter, who saw nothing unusual in this act of politeness, sat down gravely and coughed. The ordinary courtesies having been exchanged between the two gentlemen, the comte, to whom the visit was paid, said, "May I ask, monsieur le baron, to what happy circumstance I am indebted for the favour of a visit from you?"

"The very thing I am about to have the honour of explaining to you, monsieur le comte; but, I beg your pardon—"

"What is the matter, monsieur?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"I regret to say that I have broken your chair."

"Not at all, monsieur," said Saint-Aignan; "not at all."

"It is the fact, though, monsieur le comte; I have broken it—so much so, indeed, that if I do not move, I shall fall down, which would be an exceedingly disagreeable position for me in the discharge of the very serious mission which has been intrusted to me with regard to yourself."

Porthos rose; and but just in time, for the chair had given way several inches. Saint-Aignan looked about him for something more solid for his guest to sit upon.

"Modern articles of furniture," said Porthos, while the comte was looking about, "are constructed in a ridiculously flimsy manner. In my early days, when I used to sit down with far more energy than is now the case, I do not remember ever to have broken a chair, except in taverns, with my arms."

Saint-Aignan smiled at this remark. "But," said Porthos, as he settled himself down on a couch, which creaked, but did not give way beneath his weight, "that unfortunately has nothing whatever to do with my present visit."

"Why unfortunately? Are you the bearer of a message of ill-omen, monsieur le baron?"

"Of ill-omen—for a gentleman? Certainly not, monsieur le comte," replied Porthos, nobly. "I have simply come to say that you have seriously insulted a friend of mine."

"I, monsieur?" exclaimed Saint-Aignan—"I have insulted a friend of yours, do you say? May I ask his name?"

"M. Raoul de Bragelonne."

"I have insulted M. Raoul de Bragelonne!" cried Saint-Aignan. "I really assure you, monsieur, that it is quite impossible; for M. de Bragelonne, whom I know but very slightly,—nay, whom I know hardly at all—is in England, and, as I have not seen him for a long time past, I cannot possibly have insulted him."

"M. de Bragelonne is in Paris, monsieur le comte," said Porthos, perfectly unmoved; "and I repeat, it is quite certain you have insulted him, since he himself told me you had. Yes, monsieur, you have seriously insulted him, mortally insulted him, I repeat."

"It is impossible, monsieur le baron, I swear, quite impossible."

"Besides," added Porthos, "you cannot be ignorant of the circumstance, since M. de Bragelonne informed me that he had already apprised you of it by a note."

"I give you my word of honour, monsieur, that I have received no note whatever."

"This is most extraordinary," replied Porthos.

"I will convince you," said Saint-Aignan, "that have received nothing in any way from him." And he rang the bell. "Basque," he said to the servant who entered, "how many letters or notes were sent here during my absence?"

"Three, monsieur le comte—a note from M. de Fiesque, one from Madame de Laferte, and a letter from M. de las Fuentes."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, monsieur le comte."

"Speak the truth before this gentleman—the truth, you understand. I will take care you are not blamed."

"There was a note, also, from—from—"

"Well, from whom?"

"From Mademoiselle—de—"

"Out with it!"

"De Laval."

"That is quite sufficient," interrupted Porthos. "I believe you, monsieur le comte."

Saint-Aignan dismissed the valet, and followed him to the door, in order to close it after him; and when he had done so, looking straight before him, he happened to see in the keyhole of the adjoining apartment the paper which Bragelonne had slipped in there as he left. "What is this?" he said.

Porthos, who was sitting with his back to the room, turned round. "Aha!" he said.

"A note in the keyhole!" exclaimed Saint-Aignan.

"That is not unlikely to be the missing letter, monsieur le comte," said Porthos.

Saint-Aignan took out the paper. "A note from M. de Bragelonne!" he exclaimed.

"You see, monsieur, I was right. Oh, when I say a thing—"

"Brought here by M. de Bragelonne himself," the comte murmured, turning pale. "This is infamous! How could he possibly have come here?" And the comte rang again.

"Who has been here during my absence with the king?"

"No one, monsieur."

"That is impossible! Some one must have been here."

"No one could possibly have entered, monsieur, since the keys have never left my pocket."

"And yet I find the letter in yonder lock; some one must have put it there; it could not have come here of its own accord."

Basque opened his arms as if signifying the most absolute ignorance on the subject.

"Probably it was M. de Bragelonne himself who placed it there," said Porthos.

"In that case he must have entered here."

"How could that have been, since I have the key in my own pocket?" returned Basque, perseveringly.

Saint-Aignan crumpled the letter in his palm, after having read it. "There is something mysterious about this," he murmured, absorbed in thought. Porthos left him to his reflections; but after a while returned to the mission he had undertaken.

"Shall we return to our little affair?" Porthos resumed, addressing Saint-Aignan after a brief pause.

"I think I can now understand it, from this note, which has arrived here in so singular a manner. Monsieur de Bragelonne says that a friend will call."

"I am his friend. I am the person he alludes to."

"For the purpose of giving me a challenge?"

"Precisely."

"And he complains that I have insulted him?"

"Mortally."

"In what way, may I ask; for his conduct is so mysterious, that, at least, it needs some explanation?"

"Monsieur," replied Porthos, "my friend cannot but be right; and, as far as his conduct is concerned, if it be mysterious, as you say, you have only yourself to blame for it." Porthos pronounced these words with an amount of confidence which, for a man who was unaccustomed to his ways, must have revealed an infinity of sense.

"Mystery, so be it; but what is all the mystery about?" said Saint-Aignan.

"You will think it the best, perhaps," Porthos replied, with a low bow, "if I do not enter in to particulars."

"Oh, I perfectly understand. We will touch very lightly upon it, then, so speak, monsieur, I am listening."

"In the first place, monsieur," said Porthos, "you have changed your apartments."

"Yes, that is quite true," said Saint-Aignan.

"You admit it," said Porthos, with an air of satisfaction.

"Admit it! of course I admit it. Why should I not admit it, do you suppose?"

"You have admitted it. Very good," said Porthos, lifting up one finger.

"But how can my having moved my lodgings have done M. de Bragelonne any harm? Have the goodness to tell me that, for I positively do not comprehend a word of what you are saying."

Porthos stopped him, and then said, with great gravity, "Monsieur, this is the first of M. de Bragelonne's complaints against you. If he makes a complaint, it is because he feels himself insulted."

Saint-Aignan began to beat his foot impatiently on the ground. "This looks like a spurious quarrel," he said.

"No one can possibly have a spurious quarrel with the Vicomte de Bragelonne," returned Porthos; "but, at all events, you have nothing to add on the subject of your changing your apartments, I suppose?"

"Nothing. And what is the next point?"

"Ah, the next! You will observe, monsieur, that the one I have already mentioned is a most serious injury, to which you have given no answer, or rather, have answered very indifferently. Is it possible, monsieur, that you have changed your lodgings? M. de Bragelonne feels insulted at your having done so, and you do not attempt to excuse yourself."

"What!" cried Saint-Aignan, who was getting annoyed at the perfect coolness of his visitor—"what! am I to consult M. de Bragelonne whether I am to move or not? You can hardly be serious, monsieur."

"I am. And it is absolutely necessary, monsieur; but under any circumstances, you will admit that it is nothing in comparison with the second ground of complaint."

"Well, what is that?"

Porthos assumed a very solemn expression as he said: "How about the trap-door, monsieur?"

Saint-Aignan turned exceedingly pale. He pushed back his chair so abruptly, that Porthos, simple as he was, perceived that the blow had told. "The trap-door," murmured Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, monsieur, explain that if you can," said Porthos, shaking his head.

Saint-Aignan held down his head, as he murmured: "I have been betrayed, everything is known!"

"Everything," replied Porthos, who knew nothing.

"You see me perfectly overwhelmed," pursued Saint-Aignan, "overwhelmed to a degree that I hardly know what I am about."

"A guilty conscience, monsieur. Your affair is a bad one, and when the public learns all about it, it will judge—"

"Oh, monsieur!" exclaimed the count, hurriedly, "such a secret ought not to be known even by one's confessor."

"That we will think about," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, in fact."

"Surely, monsieur," returned Saint-Aignan, "since M. de Bragelonne has penetrated the secret, he must be aware of the danger he as well as others run the risk of incurring."

"M. de Bragelonne runs no danger, monsieur, nor does he fear any either, as you, if it please Heaven, will find out very soon."

"This fellow is a perfect madman," thought Saint-Aignan. "What, in Heaven's name, does he want?" He then said aloud: "Come, monsieur, let us hush up this affair."

"You forget the portrait," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, which made the comte's blood freeze in his veins.

As the portrait in question was La Vallière's portrait, and no mistake could any longer exist on the subject, Saint-Aignan's eyes were completely opened. "Ah!" he exclaimed—"ah! monsieur, I remember now that M. de Bragelonne was engaged to be married to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air, all the majesty of ignorance, in fact, as he said: "It matters nothing whatever to me, nor to yourself, indeed, whether or not my friend was, as you say, engaged to be married. I am even astonished that you should have made use of so indiscreet a remark. It may possibly do your cause harm, monsieur."

"Monsieur," replied Saint-Aignan, "you are the incarnation of intelligence, delicacy, and loyalty of feeling united. I see the whole matter now clearly enough."

"So much the better," said Porthos.

"And," pursued Saint-Aignan, "you have made me comprehend it in the most ingenious and the most delicate manner possible. I beg you to accept my best thanks." Porthos drew himself up, unable to resist the flattery of the remark. "Only, now that I know everything, permit me to explain—"

Porthos shook his head, as a man who does not wish to hear, but Saint-Aignan continued: "I am in despair, I assure you, at all that has happened; but how would you have acted in my place? Come, between ourselves, tell me what you would have done?"

Porthos drew himself up as he answered: "There is now no question at all of what I should have done, young man; you have been made acquainted with the three causes of complaint against you, I believe?"

"As for the first, my change of rooms, and I now address myself to you as a man of honour and of great intelligence, could I, when the desire of so august a personage was so urgently expressed that I should move, ought I to have disobeyed?"

Porthos was about to speak, but Saint-Aignan did not give him time to answer. "Ah! my frankness, I see, convinces you," he said, interpreting the movement according to his own fancy. "You feel that I am right."

Porthos did not reply, and so Saint-Aignan continued: "I pass by that unfortunate trap-door," he said, placing his hand on Porthos's arm, "that trap-door, the occasion and means of so much unhappiness, and which was constructed for—you know what. Well, then, in plain truth, do you suppose that it was I who, of my own accord, in such a place, too, had that trap-door made?—Oh, no!—you do not believe it; and here, again, you feel, you guess, you understand the influence of a will superior to my own. You can conceive the infatuation, the blind, irresistible passion which has been at work. But, thank Heaven! I am fortunate in speaking to a man who has so much sensitiveness of feeling; and if it were not so, indeed, what an amount of misery and scandal would fall upon her, poor girl! and upon him—whom I will not name."

Porthos, confused and bewildered by the eloquence and gestures of Saint-Aignan, made a thousand efforts to stem this torrent of words, of which, by the by, he did not understand a single one; he remained upright and motionless on his seat, and that was all he could do. Saint-Aignan continued, and gave a new inflection to his voice, and an increasing vehemence to his gesture: "As for the portrait, for I readily believe the portrait is the principal cause of complaint, tell me candidly if you think me to blame?—Who was it who wished to have her portrait? Was it I?—Who is in love with her? Is it I?—Who wishes to gain her affection? Again, is it I?—Who took her likeness? I, do you think? No! a thousand times no! I know M. de Bragelonne must be in a state of despair; I know these misfortunes are most cruel. But I, too, am suffering as well; and yet there is no possibility of offering any resistance. Suppose we were to fight? we would be laughed at. If he obstinately persist in his course, he is lost. You will tell me, I know, that despair is ridiculous, but then you are a sensible man. You have understood me. I perceived by your serious, thoughtful, embarrassed air, even, that the importance of the situation we are placed in has not escaped you. Return, therefore, to M. de Bragelonne; thank him—as I have indeed reason to thank him—for having chosen as an intermediary a man of your high merit. Believe me that I shall, on my side, preserve an eternal gratitude for the man who has so ingeniously, so cleverly arranged the misunderstanding between us. And since ill luck would have it that the secret should be known to four instead of three, why, this secret, which might make the most ambitious man's fortune, I am delighted to share with you, monsieur, from the bottom of my heart I am delighted at it. From this very moment you can make use of me as you please, I place myself entirely at your mercy. What can I possibly do for you? What can I solicit, nay, require even? You have only to speak, monsieur, only to speak."

And, according to the familiarly friendly fashion of that period, Saint-Aignan threw his arms round Porthos, and clasped him tenderly in his embrace. Porthos allowed him to do this with the most perfect indifference. "Speak," resumed Saint-Aignan, "what do you require?"

"Monsieur," said Porthos, "I have a horse below: be good enough to mount him; he is a very good one and will play you no tricks."

"Mount on horseback! what for?" inquired Saint-Aignan, with no little curiosity.

"To accompany me to where M. de Bragelonne is waiting us."

"Ah! he wishes to speak to me, I suppose? I can well believe that; he wishes to have the details, very likely; alas! it is a very delicate matter; but at the present moment I cannot, for the king is waiting for me."

"The king must wait, then," said Porthos.

"What do you say? the king must wait!" interrupted the finished courtier, with a smile of utter amazement, for he could not understand that the king could under any circumstances be supposed to have to wait.

"It is merely the affair of a very short hour," returned Porthos.

"But where is M. de Bragelonne waiting for me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Ah, indeed! but are we going to laugh over the affair when we get there?"

"I don't think it likely," said Porthos, as his face assumed a look of utter hardness.

"But the Minimes is a rendezvous where duels take place, and what can I have to do at the Minimes?"

Porthos slowly drew his sword, and said: "That is the length of my friend's sword."

"Why, the man is mad!" cried Saint-Aignan.

The colour mounted to Porthos's face, as he replied: "If I had not the honour of being in your own apartment, monsieur, and of representing M. de Bragelonne's interests, I would throw you out of the window. It will be merely a pleasure postponed, and you will lose nothing by waiting. Will you come with me to the Minimes, monsieur, of your own free will?"

"But—"

"Take care, I will carry you if you do not come quickly."

"Basque!" cried Saint-Aignan. As soon as Basque appeared, he said, "The king wishes to see monsieur le comte."

"That is very different," said Porthos; "the king's service before anything else. We will wait until this evening, monsieur."

And saluting Saint-Aignan with his usual courtesy, Porthos left the room, delighted at having arranged another affair. Saint-Aignan looked after him as he left; and then hastily putting on his court dress again, he ran off, arranging his costume as he went along, muttering to himself, "The Minimes! the Minimes! We shall see how the king will fancy this challenge; for it is for him after all, that is certain."

LVI. Rivals in Politics.

On his return from the promenade, which had been so prolific in poetical effusions, and in which every one had paid his or her tribute to the Muses, as the poets of the period used to say, the king found M. Fouquet waiting for an audience. M. Colbert had lain in wait for his majesty in the corridor, and followed him like a jealous and watchful shadow; M. Colbert, with his square head, his vulgar and untidy, though rich costume, somewhat resembled a Flemish gentleman after he had been over-indulging in his national drink—beer. Fouquet, at sight of his enemy, remained perfectly unmoved, and during the whole of the scene which followed scrupulously resolved to observe a line of conduct particularly difficult to the man of superior mind, who does not even wish to show his contempt, for fear of doing his adversary too much honour. Colbert made no attempt to conceal his insolent expression of the vulgar joy he felt. In his opinion, M. Fouquet's was a game very badly played and hopelessly lost, although not yet finished. Colbert belonged to that school of politicians who think cleverness alone worthy of their admiration, and success the only thing worth caring for. Colbert, moreover, who was not simply an envious and jealous man, but who had the king's interest really at heart, because he was thoroughly imbued with the highest sense of probity in all matters of figures and accounts, could well afford to assign as a pretext for his conduct, that in hating and doing his utmost to ruin M. Fouquet, he had nothing in view but the welfare of the state and the dignity of the crown. None of these details escaped Fouquet's observation; through his enemy's thick, bushy brows, and despite the restless movement of his eyelids, he could, by merely looking at his eyes, penetrate to the very bottom of Colbert's heart, and he read to what an unbounded extent hate towards himself and triumph at his approaching fall existed there. But as, in observing everything, he wished to remain himself impenetrable, he composed his features, smiled with the charmingly sympathetic smile that was peculiarly his own, and saluted the king with the most dignified and graceful ease and elasticity of manner. "Sire," he said, "I perceive by your majesty's joyous air that you have been gratified with the promenade."

"Most gratified, indeed, monsieur le surintendant, most gratified. You were very wrong not to come with us, as I invited you to do."

"I was working, sire," replied the superintendent, who did not even seem to take the trouble to turn aside his head in merest respect of Colbert's presence.

"Ah! M. Fouquet," cried the king, "there is nothing like the country. I should be delighted to live in the country always, in the open air and under the trees."

"I should hope that your majesty is not yet weary of the throne," said Fouquet.

"No; but thrones of soft turf are very pleasant."

"Your majesty gratifies my utmost wishes in speaking in that manner, for I have a request to submit to you."

"On whose behalf, monsieur?"

"Oh behalf of the nymphs of Vaux, sire."

"Ah! ah!" said Louis XIV.

"Your majesty, too, once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet.

"Yes, I remember it."

"The *fête* at Vaux, the celebrated *fête*, I think, it was, sire," said Colbert, endeavoring to show his importance by taking part in the conversation.

Fouquet, with the profoundest contempt, did not take the slightest notice of the remark, as if, as far as he was concerned, Colbert had not even thought or said a word.

"Your majesty is aware," he said, "that I destine my estate at Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the most powerful of monarchs."

"I have given you my promise, monsieur," said Louis XIV., smiling; "and a king never departs from his word."

"And I have come now, sire, to inform your majesty that I am ready to obey your orders in every respect."

"Do you promise me many wonders, monsieur le surintendant?" said Louis, looking at Colbert.

"Wonders? Oh! no, sire. I do not undertake that. I hope to be able to procure your majesty a little pleasure, perhaps even a little forgetfulness of the cares of state."

"Nay, nay, M. Fouquet," returned the king; "I insist upon the word 'wonders.' You are a magician, I believe; we all know the power you wield; we also know that you can find gold even when there is none to be found elsewhere; so much so, indeed, that people say you coin it."

Fouquet felt that the shot was discharged from a double quiver, and that the king had launched an arrow from his own bow as well as one from Colbert's. "Oh!" said he, laughingly, "the people know perfectly well out of what mine I procure the gold; and they know it only too well, perhaps; besides," he added, "I can assure your majesty that the gold destined to pay the expenses of the *fête* at Vaux will cost neither blood nor tears; hard labor it may, perhaps, but that can be paid for."

Louis paused quite confused. He wished to look at Colbert; Colbert, too, wished to reply to him; a glance as swift as an eagle's, a king-like glance, indeed, which Fouquet darted at the latter, arrested the words upon his lips. The king, who had by this time recovered his self-possession, turned towards Fouquet, saying, "I presume, therefore, I am now to consider myself formally invited?"

"Yes, sire, if your majesty will condescend so far as to accept my invitation."

"What day have you fixed?"



“Any day your majesty may find most convenient.”

“You speak like an enchanter who has but to conjure up in actuality the wildest fancies, Monsieur Fouquet. I could not say so much, indeed, myself.”

“Your majesty will do, whenever you please, everything that a monarch can and ought to do. The king of France has servants at his bidding who are able to do anything on his behalf, to accomplish everything to gratify his pleasures.”

Colbert tried to look at the superintendent, in order to see whether this remark was an approach to less hostile sentiments on his part; but Fouquet had not even looked at his enemy, and Colbert hardly seemed to exist as far as he was concerned. “Very good, then,” said the king. “Will a week hence suit you?”

“Perfectly well, sire.”

“This is Tuesday; if I give you until next Sunday week, will that be sufficient?”

“The delay which your majesty deigns to accord me will greatly aid the various works which my architects have in hand for the purpose of adding to the amusement of your majesty and your friends.”

“By the by, speaking of my friends,” resumed the king; “how do you intend to treat them?”

“The king is master everywhere, sire; your majesty will draw up your own list and give your own orders. All those you may deign to invite will be my guests, my honoured guests, indeed.”

“I thank you!” returned the king, touched by the noble thought expressed in so noble a tone.

Fouquet, therefore, took leave of Louis XIV., after a few words had been added with regard to the details of certain matters of business. He felt that Colbert would remain behind with the king, that they would both converse about him, and that neither of them would spare him in the least degree. The satisfaction of being able to give a last and terrible blow to his enemy seemed to him almost like a compensation for everything they were about to subject him to. He turned back again immediately, as soon, indeed, as he had reached the door, and addressing the king, said, “I was forgetting that I had to crave your majesty’s forgiveness.”

“In what respect?” said the king, graciously.

“For having committed a serious fault without perceiving it.”

“A fault! You! Ah! Monsieur Fouquet, I shall be unable to do otherwise than forgive you. In what way or against whom have you been found wanting?”

“Against every sense of propriety, sire. I forgot to inform your majesty of a circumstance that has lately occurred of some little importance.”

“What is it?”

Colbert trembled; he fancied that he was about to frame a denunciation against him. His conduct had been unmasked. A single syllable from Fouquet, a single proof formally advanced, and before the youthful loyalty of feeling which guided Louis XIV., Colbert’s favour would disappear at once; the latter trembled, therefore, lest so daring a blow might overthrow his whole scaffold; in point of fact, the opportunity was so admirably suited to be taken advantage of, that a skillful, practiced player like Aramis would not have let it slip. “Sire,” said Fouquet, with an easy, unconcerned air, “since you have had the kindness to forgive me, I am perfectly indifferent about my confession; this morning I sold one of the official appointments I hold.”

“One of your appointments,” said the king, “which?”

Colbert turned perfectly livid. “That which conferred upon me, sire, a grand gown, and a stern air of gravity; the appointment of procureur-general.”

The king involuntarily uttered a loud exclamation and looked at Colbert, who, with his face bedewed with perspiration, felt almost on the point of fainting. “To whom have you sold this department, Monsieur Fouquet?” inquired the king.

Colbert was obliged to lean against a column of the fireplace. “To a councilor belonging to the parliament, sire, whose name is Vanel.”

“Vanel?”

“Yes, sire, a particular friend of the intendant Colbert,” added Fouquet; letting every word fall from his lips with the most inimitable nonchalance, and with an admirably assumed expression of forgetfulness and ignorance. And having finished, and having overwhelmed Colbert beneath the weight of this superiority, the superintendent again saluted the king and quitted the room, partially revenged by the stupefaction of the king and the humiliation of the favourite.

“Is it really possible,” said the king, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared, “that he has sold that office?”

“Yes, sire,” said Colbert, meaningly.

“He must be mad,” the king added.

Colbert this time did not reply; he had penetrated the king’s thought, a thought which amply revenged him for the humiliation he had just been made to suffer; his hatred was augmented by a feeling of bitter jealousy of Fouquet; and a threat of disgrace was now added to the plan he had arranged for his ruin. Colbert felt perfectly assured that for the future, between Louis XIV. and himself, their hostile feelings and ideas would meet with no obstacles, and that at the first fault committed by Fouquet, which could be laid hold of as a pretext, the chastisement so long impending would be precipitated. Fouquet had thrown aside his weapons of defense, and hate and jealousy had picked them up. Colbert was invited by the king to the *fete* at Vaux; he bowed like a man confident in himself, and accepted the invitation with the air of one who almost confers a favour. The king was about writing down Saint-Aignan’s name on his list of royal commands, when the usher announced the Comte de Saint-Aignan. As soon as the royal “Mercury” entered, Colbert discreetly withdrew.

LVII. Rivals in Love.

Saint-Aignan had quitted Louis XIV. hardly a couple of hours before; but in the first effervescence of his affection, whenever Louis XIV. was out of sight of La Vallière, he was obliged to talk about her. Besides, the only person with whom he could speak about her at his ease was Saint-Aignan, and thus Saint-Aignan had become an indispensable.

“Ah, is that you, comte?” he exclaimed, as soon as he perceived him, doubly delighted, not only to see him again, but also to get rid of Colbert, whose scowling face always put him out of humor. “So much the better, I am very glad to see you. You will make one of the best traveling party, I suppose?”

“Of what traveling part are you speaking, sire?” inquired Saint-Aignan.

“The one we are making up to go to the *fete* the superintendent is about to give at Vaux. Ah! Saint-Aignan, you will, at last, see a *fete*, a royal *fete*, by the side of which all our amusements at Fontainebleau are petty, contemptible affairs.”

“At Vaux! the superintendent going to give a *fete* in your majesty’s honour? Nothing more than that!”

“‘Nothing more than that,’ do you say? It is very diverting to find you treating it with so much disdain. Are you who express such an indifference on the subject, aware, that as soon as it is known that M. Fouquet is going to receive me at Vaux next Sunday week, people will be striving their very utmost to get invited to the *fete*? I repeat, Saint-Aignan, you shall be one of the invited guests.”

“Very well, sire; unless I shall, in the meantime, have undertaken a longer and a less agreeable journey.”

“What journey do you allude to?”

“The one across the Styx, sire.”

“Bah!” said Louis XIV., laughing.

“No, seriously, sire,” replied Saint-Aignan, “I am invited; and in such a way, in truth, that I hardly know what to say, or how to act, in order to refuse the invitation.”

“I do not understand you. I know that you are in a poetical vein; but try not to sink from Apollo to Phoebus.”

“Very well; if your majesty will deign to listen to me, I will not keep your mind on the rack a moment longer.”

“Speak.”

“Your majesty knows the Baron du Vallon?”

“Yes, indeed; a good servant to my father, the late king, and an admirable companion at table; for, I think, you are referring to the gentleman who dined with us at Fontainebleau?”

“Precisely so; but you have omitted to add to his other qualifications, sire, that he is a most charming polisher-off of other people.”

“What! Does M. du Vallon wish to polish you off?”

“Or to get me killed, which is much the same thing.”

“The deuce!”

“Do not laugh, sire, for I am not saying one word beyond the exact truth.”

“And you say he wishes to get you killed.”

“Such is that excellent person’s present idea.”

“Be easy; I will defend you, if he be in the wrong.”

“Ah! There is an ‘if!’

“Of course; answer me as candidly as if it were some one else’s affair instead of your own, my poor Saint-Aignan; is he right or wrong?”

“Your majesty shall be the judge.”

“What have you done to him?”

“To him, personally, nothing at all; but, it seems, to one of his friends, I have.”

“It is all the same. Is his friend one of the celebrated ‘four’?”

“No. It is the son of one of the celebrated ‘four,’ though.”

“What have you done to the son? Come, tell me.”

“Why, it seems that I have helped some one to take his mistress from him.”

“You confess it, then?”

“I cannot help confessing it, for it is true.”

“In that case, you are wrong; and if he were to kill you, he would be doing perfectly right.”

“Ah! that is your majesty’s way of reasoning, then!”

“Do you think it a bad way?”

“It is a very expeditious way, at all events.”

“‘Good justice is prompt;’ so my grandfather Henry IV. used to say.”

“In that case, your majesty will, perhaps, be good enough to sign my adversary’s pardon, for he is now waiting for me at the Minimes, for the purpose of putting me out of my misery.”

“His name, and a parchment!”

“There is a parchment upon your majesty’s table; and for his name—”

“Well, what is it?”

“The Vicomte de Bragelonne, sire.”

“‘The Vicomte de Bragelonne!’” exclaimed the king; changing from a fit of laughter to the most profound stupor, and then, after a moment’s silence, while he wiped his forehead, which was bedewed with perspiration, he again murmured, “Bragelonne!”

“No other, sire.”

“Bragelonne, who was affianced to—”

“Yes, sire.”

“But—he has been in London.”

“Yes; but I can assure you, sire, he is there no longer.”

“Is he in Paris, then?”

“He is at Minimes, sire, where he is waiting for me, as I have already had the honour of telling you.”

“Does he know all?”

"Yes; and many things besides. Perhaps your majesty would like to look at the letter I have received from him;" and Saint-Aignan drew from his pocket the note we are already acquainted with. "When your majesty has read the letter, I will tell you how it reached me."

The king read it in a great agitation, and immediately said, "Well?"

"Well, sire; your majesty knows a certain carved lock, closing a certain door of carved ebony, which separates a certain apartment from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Of course; Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, sire. Well, it was in the keyhole of that lock that I found yonder note."

"Who placed it there?"

"Either M. de Bragelonne, or the devil himself; but, inasmuch as the note smells of musk and not of sulphur, I conclude that it must be, not the devil, but M. de Bragelonne."

Louis bent his head, and seemed absorbed in sad and bitter thought. Perhaps something like remorse was at that moment passing through his heart. "The secret is discovered," he said.

"Sire, I shall do my utmost that the secret dies in the breast of the man who possesses it!" said Saint-Aignan, in a tone of bravado, as he moved towards the door; but a gesture of the king made him pause.

"Where are you going?" he inquired.

"Where they await me, sire."

"What for?"

"To fight, in all probability."

"You fight!" exclaimed the king. "One moment, if you please, monsieur le comte!"

Saint-Aignan shook his head, as a rebellious child does, whenever any one interferes to prevent him throwing himself into a well, or playing with a knife. "But, sire," he said.

"In the first place," continued the king. "I want to be enlightened a little further."

"Upon all points, if your majesty will be pleased to interrogate me," replied Saint-Aignan, "I will throw what light I can."

"Who told you that M. de Bragelonne had penetrated into that room?"

"The letter which I found in the keyhole told me."

"Who told you that it was De Bragelonne who put it there?"

"Who but himself would have dared to undertake such a mission?"

"You are right. How was he able to get into your rooms?"

"Ah! that is very serious, inasmuch as all the doors were closed, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed."

"Impossible, sire; for if he had been bribed, those who did so would not have sacrificed the poor fellow, whom, it is not unlikely, they might want to turn to further use by and by, in showing so clearly that it was he whom they had made use of."

"Quite true. And now I can only form one conjecture."

"Tell me what it is, sire, and we shall see if it is the same that has presented itself to my mind."

"That he effected an entrance by means of the staircase."

"Alas, sire, that seems to me more than probable."

"There is no doubt that some one must have sold the secret of the trap-door."

"Either sold it or given it."

"Why do you make that distinction?"

"Because there are certain persons, sire, who, being above the price of treason, give, and do not sell."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, sire! Your majesty's mind is too clear-sighted not to guess what I mean, and you will save me the embarrassment of naming the person I allude to."

"You are right: you mean Madame; I suppose her suspicions were aroused by your changing your lodgings."

"Madame has keys of the apartments of her maids of honour, and she is powerful enough to discover what no one but yourself could do, or she would not be able to discover anything."

"And you suppose, then, that my sister must have entered into an alliance with Bragelonne, and has informed him of all the details of the affair."

"Possibly even better still, for she perhaps accompanied him there."

"Which way? through your own apartments?"

"You think it impossible, sire? Well, listen to me. Your majesty knows that Madame is very fond of perfumes?"

"Yes, she acquired that taste from my mother."

"Vervain, particularly."

"Yes, it is the scent she prefers to all others."

"Very good, sire! my apartments happen to smell very strongly of vervain."

The king remained silent and thoughtful for a few moments, and then resumed: "But why should Madame take Bragelonne's part against me?"

Saint-Aignan could very easily have replied: "A woman's jealousy!" The king probed his friend to the bottom of his heart to ascertain if he had learned the secret of his flirtation with his sister-in-law. But Saint-Aignan was not an ordinary courtier; he did not lightly run the risk of finding out family secrets; and he was too a friend of the Muses not to think very frequently of poor Ovidius Naso, whose eyes shed so many tears in expiation of his crime for having once beheld something, one hardly knows what, in the palace of Augustus. He therefore passed by Madame's secret very skillfully. But as he had shown no ordinary sagacity in indicating Madame's presence in his rooms in company with Bragelonne, it was necessary, of course, for him to repay with interest the king's *amour propre*, and reply plainly to the question which had been put to him of: "Why has Madame taken Bragelonne's part against me?"

"Why?" replied Saint-Aignan. "Your majesty forgets, I presume, that the Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"I do not see the connection, however," said the king.

"Ah! I beg your pardon, then, sire; but I thought the Comte de Guiche was a very great friend of Madame's."

"Quite true," the king returned; "there is no occasion to search any further, the blow came from that direction."

"And is not your majesty of opinion that, in order to ward it off, it will be necessary to deal another blow?"

"Yes, but not one of the kind given in the Bois de Vincennes," replied the king.

"You forget, sire," said Saint-Aignan, "that I am a gentleman, and that I have been challenged."

"The challenge neither concerns nor was it intended for you."

"But I am the man, sire, who has been expected at the Minimes, sire, during the last hour and more; and I shall be dishonoured if I do not go."

"The first honour and duty of a gentleman is obedience to his sovereign."

"Sire!"

"I order you to remain."

"Sire!"

"Obey, monsieur!"

"As your majesty pleases."

"Besides, I wish to have the whole of this affair explained; I wish to know how it is that I have been so insolently trifled with, as to have the sanctuary of my affections pried into. It is not you, Saint-Aignan, whose business it is to punish those who have acted in this manner, for it is not your honour they have attacked, but my own."

"I implore your majesty not to overwhelm M. de Bragelonne with your wrath, for although in the whole of this affair he may have shown himself deficient in prudence, he has not been so in his feelings of loyalty."

"Enough! I shall know how to decide between the just and the unjust, even in the height of my anger. But take care that not a word of this is breathed to Madame."

"But what am I to do with regard to M. de Bragelonne? He will be seeking me in every direction, and—"

"I shall either have spoken to him, or taken care that he has been spoken to, before the evening is over."

"Let me once more entreat your majesty to be indulgent towards him."

"I have been indulgent long enough, comte," said Louis XIV., frowning severely; "it is now quite time to show certain persons that I am master in my own palace."

The king had hardly pronounced these words, which betokened that a fresh feeling of irritation was mingling with the recollections of old, when an usher appeared at the door of the cabinet. "What is the matter?" inquired the king, "and why do you presume to come when I have not summoned you?"

"Sire," said the usher, "your majesty desired me to permit M. le Comte de la Fere to pass freely on any and every occasion, when he might wish to speak to your majesty."

"Well, monsieur?"

"M. le Comte de la Fere is now waiting to see your majesty."

The king and Saint-Aignan at this reply exchanged a look which betrayed more uneasiness than surprise. Louis hesitated for a moment, but immediately afterwards, seeming to make up his mind, he said:

"Go, Saint-Aignan, and find Louise; inform her of the plot against us; do not let her be ignorant that Madame will return to her system of persecutions against her, and that she has set those to work who would have found it far safer to remain neuter."

"Sire—"

"If Louise gets nervous and frightened, reassure her as much as you can; tell her that the king's affection is an impenetrable shield over her; if, which I suspect is the case, she already knows everything, or if she has already been herself subjected to an attack of some kind or other from any quarter, tell her, be sure to tell her, Saint-Aignan," added the king, trembling with passion, "tell her, I say, that this time, instead of defending her, I will avenge her, and that too so terribly that no one will in future even dare to raise his eyes towards her."

"Is that all, sire?"

"Yes, all. Go as quickly as you can, and remain faithful; for, you who live in the midst of this stake of infernal torments, have not, like myself, the hope of the paradise beyond it."

Saint-Aignan exhausted himself in protestations of devotion, took the king's hand, kissed it, and left the room radiant with delight.

LVIII. King and Noble.

The king endeavored to recover his self-possession as quickly as possible, in order to meet M. de la Fere with an untroubled countenance. He clearly saw it was not mere chance that had induced the comte's visit, he had some vague impression of its importance; but he felt that to a man of Athos's tone of mind, to one of such a high order of intellect, his first reception ought not to present anything either disagreeable or otherwise than kind and courteous. As soon as the king had satisfied himself that, as far as appearances went, he was perfectly calm again, he gave directions to the ushers to introduce the comte. A few minutes afterwards Athos, in full court dress, and with his breast covered with the orders that he alone had the right to wear at the court of France, presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the king perceived, at the first glance, that he was not deceived in his anticipations. Louis advanced a step towards the comte, and, with a smile, held out his hand to him, over which Athos bowed with the air of the deepest respect.

"Monsieur le Comte de la Fere," said the king rapidly, "you are so seldom here, that it is a real piece of good fortune to see you."

Athos bowed and replied, "I should wish always to enjoy the happiness of being near your majesty."

The tone, however, in which this reply was conveyed, evidently signified, "I should wish to be one of your majesty's advisers, to save you the commission of faults." The king felt it so, and determined in this man's presence to preserve all the advantages which could be derived from his command over himself, as well as from his rank and position.

"I see you have something to say to me," he said.

"Had it not been so, I should not have presumed to present myself before your majesty."

"Speak quickly, I am anxious to satisfy you," returned the king, seating himself.

"I am persuaded," replied Athos, in a somewhat agitated tone of voice, "that your majesty will give me every satisfaction."

"Ah!" said the king, with a certain haughtiness of manner, "you have come to lodge a complaint here, then?"

"It would be a complaint," returned Athos, "only in the event of your majesty—but if you will deign to permit me, sire, I will begin the conversation from the very commencement."

"Do so, I am listening."

"Your majesty will remember that at the period of the Duke of Buckingham's departure, I had the honour of an interview with you."

"At or about that period, I think I remember you did; only, with regard to the subject of the conversation, I have quite forgotten it."

Athos started, as he replied. "I shall have the honour to remind your majesty of it. It was with regard to a formal demand I had addressed to you respecting a marriage which M. de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Ah!" thought the king, "we have come to it now.—I remember," he said, aloud.

"At that period," pursued Athos, "your majesty was so kind and generous towards M. de Bragelonne and myself, that not a single word which then fell from your lips has escaped my memory; and, when I asked your majesty to accord me Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand for M. de Bragelonne, you refused."

"Quite true," said Louis, dryly.

"Alleging," Athos hastened to say, "that the young lady had no position in society."

Louis could hardly force himself to listen with an appearance of royal propriety.

"That," added Athos, "she had but little fortune."

The king threw himself back in his armchair.

"That her extraction was indifferent."

A renewed impatience on the part of the king.

"And little beauty," added Athos, pitilessly.

This last bolt buried itself deep in the king's heart, and made him almost bound from his seat.

"You have a good memory, monsieur," he said.

"I invariably have, on occasions when I have had the distinguished honour of an interview with your majesty," retorted the comte, without being in the least disconcerted.

"Very good: it is admitted that I said all that."

"And I thanked your majesty for your remarks at the time, because they testified an interest in M. de Bragelonne which did him much honour."

"And you may possibly remember," said the king, very deliberately, "that you had the greatest repugnance for this marriage."

"Quite true, sire."

"And that you solicited my permission, much against your own inclination?"

"Yes, sire."

"And finally, I remember, for I have a memory nearly as good as your own; I remember, I say, that you observed at the time: 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves M. de Bragelonne.' Is that true?"

The blow told well, but Athos did not draw back. "Sire," he said, "I have already begged your majesty's forgiveness; but there are certain particulars in that conversation which are only intelligible from the *denouement*."

"Well, what is the *denouement*, monsieur?"

"This: that your majesty then said, 'that you would defer the marriage out of regard for M. de Bragelonne's own interests.'"

The king remained silent. "M. de Bragelonne is now so exceedingly unhappy that he cannot any longer defer asking your majesty for a solution of the matter."

The king turned pale; Athos looked at him with fixed attention.

"And what," said the king, with considerable hesitation, "does M. de Bragelonne request?"

"Precisely the very thing that I came to ask your majesty for at my last audience, namely, your majesty's consent to his marriage."

The king remained perfectly silent. "The questions which referred to the different obstacles in the way are all now quite removed for us," continued Athos. "Mademoiselle de la Vallière, without fortune, birth, or beauty, is not the less on that account the only good match in the world for M. de Bragelonne, since he loves this young girl."

The king pressed his hands impatiently together. "Does your majesty hesitate?" inquired the comte, without losing a particle of either his firmness or his politeness.

"I do not hesitate—I refuse," replied the king.

Athos paused a moment, as if to collect himself: "I have had the honour," he said, in a mild tone, "to observe to your majesty that no obstacle now interferes with M. de Bragelonne's affections, and that his determination seems unalterable."

"There is my will—and that is an obstacle, I should imagine!"

"That is the most serious of all," Athos replied quickly.

"Ah!"

"And may we, therefore, be permitted to ask your majesty, with the greatest humility, your reason for this refusal?"

"The reason!—A question to me!" exclaimed the king.

"A demand, sire!"

The king, leaning with both his hands upon the table, said, in a deep tone of concentrated passion: "You have lost all recollection of what is usual at court. At court, please to remember, no one ventures to put a question to the king."

"Very true, sire; but if men do not question, they conjecture."

"Conjecture! What may that mean, monsieur?"

"Very frequently, sire, conjecture with regard to a particular subject implies a want of frankness on the part of the king—"

"Monsieur!"

"And a want of confidence on the part of the subject," pursued Athos, intrepidly.

"You forget yourself," said the king, hurried away by anger in spite of all his self-control.

"Sire, I am obliged to seek elsewhere for what I thought I should find in your majesty. Instead of obtaining a reply from you, I am compelled to make one for myself."

The king rose. "Monsieur le comte," he said, "I have now given you all the time I had at my disposal." This was a dismissal.

"Sire," replied the comte, "I have not yet had time to tell your majesty what I came with the express object of saying, and I so rarely see your majesty that I ought to avail myself of the opportunity."

"Just now you spoke rudely of conjectures; you are now becoming offensive, monsieur."

"Oh, sire! offend your majesty! I?—never! All my life through I have maintained that kings are above all other men, not only from their rank and power, but from their nobleness of heart and their true dignity of mind. I never can bring myself to believe that my sovereign, he who passed his word to me, did so with a mental reservation."

"What do you mean? what mental reservation do you allude to?"

"I will explain my meaning," said Athos, coldly. "If, in refusing Mademoiselle de la Vallière to Monsieur de Bragelonne, your majesty had some other object in view than the happiness and fortune of the vicomte—"

"You perceive, monsieur, that you are offending me."

"If, in requiring the vicomte to delay his marriage, your majesty's only object was to remove the gentleman to whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière was engaged—"

"Monsieur! monsieur!"

"I have heard it said so in every direction, sire. Your majesty's affection for Mademoiselle de la Vallière is spoken of on all sides."

The king tore his gloves, which he had been biting for some time. "Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs. I have made up my mind to take a particular course, and I will break through every obstacle in my way."

"What obstacle?" said Athos.

The king stopped short, like a horse which, having taken the bit between his teeth and run away, finds it has slipped it back again, and that his career is checked. "I love Mademoiselle de la Vallière," he said suddenly, with mingled nobleness of feeling and passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, "that does not preclude your majesty from allowing M. de Bragelonne to marry Mademoiselle de la Vallière. The sacrifice is worthy of so great a monarch; it is fully merited by M. de Bragelonne, who has already rendered great service to your majesty, and who may well be regarded as a brave and worthy man. Your majesty, therefore, in renouncing the affection you entertain, offers a proof at once of generosity, gratitude, and good policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not love M. de Bragelonne," said the king, hoarsely.

"Does your majesty know that to be the case?" remarked Athos, with a searching look.

"I do know it."

"Since a very short time, then; for doubtless, had your majesty known it when I first preferred my request, you would have taken the trouble to inform me of it."

"Since a very short time, it is true, monsieur."

Athos remained silent for a moment, and then resumed: "In that case, I do not understand why your majesty should have sent M. de Bragelonne to London. That exile, and most properly so, too, is a matter of astonishment to every one who regards your majesty's honour with sincere affection."

"Who presumes to impugn my honour, Monsieur de la Fere?"

"The king's honour, sire, is made up of the honour of his whole nobility. Whenever the king offends one of his gentlemen, that is, whenever he deprives him of the smallest particle of his honour, it is from him, from the king himself, that that portion of honour is stolen."

"Monsieur de la Fere!" said the king, haughtily.

"Sire, you sent M. de Bragelonne to London either before you were Mademoiselle de la Vallière's lover, or since you have become so."

The king, irritated beyond measure, especially because he felt that he was being mastered, endeavored to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire," replied the comte, "I will tell you all; I will not leave your presence until I have been satisfied by your majesty or by myself; satisfied if you prove to me that you are right,—satisfied if I prove to you that you are wrong. Nay, sire, you can but listen to me. I am old now, and I am attached to everything that is really great and really powerful in your kingdom. I am of those who have shed their blood for your father and for yourself, without ever having asked a single favour either from yourself or from your father. I have never inflicted the slightest wrong or injury on any one in this world, and even kings are still my debtors. You can but listen to me, I repeat. I have come to ask you for an account of the honour of one of your servants whom you have deceived by a falsehood, or betrayed by want of heart of judgment. I know that these words irritate your majesty, but the facts themselves are killing us. I know that you are endeavoring to find some means whereby to chastise me for my frankness; but I know also the chastisement I will implore God to inflict upon you when I relate to Him your perjury and my son's unhappiness."

The king during these remarks was walking hurriedly to and fro, his hand thrust into the breast of his coat, his head haughtily raised, his eyes blazing with wrath. "Monsieur," he cried, suddenly, "if I acted towards you as a king, you would be already punished; but I am only a man, and I have the right to love in this world every one who loves me,—a happiness which is so rarely found."

"You cannot pretend to such a right as a man any more than as a king, sire; or if you intend to exercise that right in a loyal manner, you should have told M. de Bragelonne so, and not have exiled him."

"It is too great a condescension, monsieur, to discuss these things with you," interrupted Louis XIV., with that majesty of air and manner he alone seemed able to give his look and his voice.

"I was hoping that you would reply to me," said the comte.

"You shall know my reply, monsieur."

"You already know my thoughts on the subject," was the Comte de la Fere's answer.

"You have forgotten you are speaking to the king, monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten you are destroying the lives of two men, sire. It is a mortal sin."

"Leave the room!"

"Not until I have said this: 'Son of Louis XIII., you begin your reign badly, for you begin it by abduction and disloyalty! My race—myself too—are now freed from all that affection and respect towards you, which I made my son swear to observe in the vaults of Saint-Denis, in the presence of the relics of your noble forefathers. You are now become our enemy, sire, and henceforth we have nothing to do save with Heaven alone, our sole master. Be warned, be warned, sire.'"

"What! do you threaten?"

"Oh, no," said Athos, sadly, "I have as little bravado as fear in my soul. The God of whom I spoke to you is now listening to me; He knows that for the safety and honour of your crown I would even yet shed every drop of blood twenty years of civil and foreign warfare have left in my veins. I can well say, then, that I threaten the king as little as I threaten the man; but I tell you, sire, you lose two servants; for you have destroyed faith in the heart of the father, and love in the heart of the son; the one ceases to believe in the royal word, the other no longer believes in the loyalty of the man, or the purity of woman: the one is dead to every feeling of respect, the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Thus saying, Athos broke his sword across his knee, slowly placed the two pieces upon the floor, and saluting the king, who was almost choking from rage and shame, he quitted the cabinet. Louis, who sat near the table, completely overwhelmed, was several minutes before he could collect himself; but he suddenly rose and rang the bell violently. "Tell M. d'Artagnan to come here," he said to the terrified ushers.

LIX. After the Storm.

Our readers will doubtlessly have been asking themselves how it happened that Athos, of whom not a word has been said for some time past, arrived so very opportunely at court. We will, without delay, endeavor to satisfy their curiosity.

Porthos, faithful to his duty as an arranger of affairs, had, immediately after leaving the Palais Royal, set off to join Raoul at the Minimes in the Bois de Vincennes, and had related everything, even to the smallest details, which had passed between Saint-Aignan and himself. He finished by saying that the message which the king had sent to his favourite would probably not occasion more than a short delay, and that Saint-Aignan, as soon as he could leave the king, would not lose a moment in accepting the invitation Raoul had sent him.

But Raoul, less credulous than his old friend, had concluded from Porthos's recital that if Saint-Aignan was going to the king, Saint-Aignan would tell the king everything, and that the king would most assuredly forbid Saint-Aignan to obey the summons he had received to the hostile meeting. The consequence of his reflections was, that he had left Porthos to remain at the place appointed for the meeting, in the very improbable case that Saint-Aignan would come there; having endeavored to make Porthos promise that he would not remain there more than an hour or an hour and a half at the very longest. Porthos, however, formally refused to do anything of the kind, but, on the contrary, installed himself in the Minimes as if he were going to take root there, making Raoul promise that when he had been to see his father, he would return to his own apartments, in order that Porthos's servant might know where to find him in case M. de Saint-Aignan should happen to come to the rendezvous.

Bragelonne had left Vincennes, and proceeded at once straight to the apartments of Athos, who had been in Paris during the last two days, the comte having been already informed of what had taken place, by a letter from D'Artagnan. Raoul arrived at his father's; Athos, after having held out his hand to him, and embraced him most affectionately, made a sign for him to sit down.

"I know you come to me as a man would go to a friend, vicomte, whenever he is suffering; tell me, therefore, what is it that brings you now."

The young man bowed, and began his recital; more than once in the course of it his tears almost choked his utterance, and a sob, checked in his throat, compelled him to suspend his narrative for a few minutes. Athos most probably already knew how matters stood, as we have just now said D'Artagnan had already written to him; but, preserving until the conclusion that calm, unruffled composure of manner which constituted the almost superhuman side of his character, he replied, "Raoul, I do not believe there is a word of truth in these rumors; I do not believe in the existence of what you fear, although I do not deny that persons best entitled to the fullest credit have already conversed with me on the subject. In my heart and soul I think it utterly impossible that the king could be guilty of such an outrage on a gentleman. I will answer for the king, therefore, and will soon bring you back the proof of what I say."

Raoul, wavering like a drunken man between what he had seen with his own eyes and the imperturbable faith he had in a man who had never told a falsehood, bowed and simply answered, "Go, then, monsieur le comte; I will await your return." And he sat down, burying his face in his hands. Athos dressed, and then left him, in order to wait upon the king; the result of that interview is already known to our readers.

When he returned to his lodgings, Raoul, pale and dejected, had not quitted his attitude of despair. At the sound, however, of the opening doors, and of his father's footsteps as he approached him, the young man raised his head. Athos's face was very pale, his head uncovered, and his manner full of seriousness; he gave his cloak and hat to the lackey, dismissed him with a gesture, and sat down near Raoul.

"Well, monsieur," inquired the young man, "are you convinced yet?"

"I am, Raoul; the king loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"He confesses it, then?" cried Raoul.

"Yes," replied Athos.

"And she?"

"I have not seen her."

"No; but the king spoke to you about her. What did he say?"

"He says that she loves him."

"Oh, you see—you see, monsieur!" said the young man, with a gesture of despair.

"Raoul," resumed the comte, "I told the king, believe me, all that you yourself could possibly have urged, and I believe I did so in becoming language, though sufficiently firm."

"And what did you say to him, monsieur?"

"I told him, Raoul, that everything was now at an end between him and ourselves; that you would never serve him again. I told him that I, too, should remain aloof. Nothing further remains for me, then, but to be satisfied of one thing."

"What is that, monsieur?"

"Whether you have determined to adopt any steps."

"Any steps? Regarding what?"

"With reference to your disappointed affection, and—your ideas of vengeance."

"Oh, monsieur, with regard to my affection, I shall, perhaps, some day or other, succeed in tearing it from my heart; I trust I shall do so, aided by Heaven's merciful help, and your own wise exhortations. As far as vengeance is concerned, it occurred to me only when under the influence of an evil thought, for I could not revenge myself upon the one who is actually guilty; I have, therefore, already renounced every idea of revenge."

"And you no longer think of seeking a quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"No, monsieur; I sent him a challenge: if M. de Saint-Aignan accepts it, I will maintain it; if he does not take it up, I will leave things as they are."

"And La Vallière?"

"You cannot, I know, have seriously thought that I should dream of revenging myself upon a woman!" replied Raoul, with a smile so sad that a tear started even to the eyes of his father, who had so many times in the course of his life bowed beneath his own sorrows and those of others.

He held out his hand to Raoul, which the latter seized most eagerly.

"And so, monsieur le comte, you are quite satisfied that the misfortune is one beyond all remedy?" inquired the young man.

"Poor boy!" he murmured.

"You think that I still live in hope," said Raoul, "and you pity me. Oh, it is indeed horrible suffering for me to despise, as I am bound to do, the one I have loved so devotedly. If I had but some real cause of complaint against her, I should be happy, I should be able to forgive her."

Athos looked at his son with a profoundly sorrowful air, for the words Raoul had just pronounced seemed to have issued out of his own heart. At this moment the servant announced M. d'Artagnan. This name sounded very differently to the ears of Athos and Raoul. The musketeer entered the room with a vague smile on his lips. Raoul paused. Athos walked towards his friend with an expression of face that did not escape Bragelonne. D'Artagnan answered Athos's look by an imperceptible movement of the eyelid; and then, advancing towards Raoul, whom he took by the hand, he said, addressing both father and son, "Well, you are trying to console this poor boy, it seems."

"And you, kind and good as usual, have come to help me in my difficult task."

As he said this, Athos pressed D'Artagnan's hand between both his own. Raoul fancied he observed in this pressure something beyond the sense his mere words conveyed.

"Yes," replied the musketeer, smoothing his mustache with the hand that Athos had left free, "yes, I have come too."

"You are most welcome, chevalier; not for the consolation you bring with you, but on your own account. I am already consoled," said Raoul; and he attempted to smile, but the effort was more sad than any tears D'Artagnan had ever seen shed.

"That is all well and good, then," said D'Artagnan.

"Only," continued Raoul, "you have arrived just as the comte was about to give me the details of his interview with the king. You will allow the comte to continue?" added the young man, as, with his eyes fixed on the musketeer, he seemed to read the very depths of his heart.

"His interview with the king?" said D'Artagnan, in a tone so natural and unassumed that there was no means of suspecting that his astonishment was feigned. "You have seen the king, then, Athos?"

Athos smiled as he said, "Yes, I have seen him."

"Ah, indeed; you were unaware, then, that the comte had seen his majesty?" inquired Raoul, half reassured.

"Yes, indeed, quite so."

"In that case, I am less uneasy," said Raoul.

"Uneasy—and about what?" inquired Athos.

"Forgive me, monsieur," said Raoul, "but knowing so well the regard and affection you have for me, I was afraid you might possibly have expressed somewhat plainly to his majesty my own sufferings and your indignation, and that the king had consequently—"

"And that the king had consequently?" repeated D'Artagnan; "well, go on, finish what you were going to say."

"I have now to ask you to forgive me, Monsieur d'Artagnan," said Raoul. "For a moment, and I cannot help confessing it, I trembled lest you had come here, not as M. d'Artagnan, but as captain of the musketeers."

"You are mad, my poor boy," cried D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter, in which an exact observer might perhaps have wished to have heard a little more frankness.

"So much the better," said Raoul.

"Yes, mad; and do you know what I would advise you to do?"

"Tell me, monsieur, for the advice is sure to be good, as it comes from you."

"Very good, then; I advise you, after your long journey from England, after your visit to M. de Guiche, after your visit to Madame, after your visit to Porthos, after your journey to Vincennes, I advise you, I say, to take a few hours' rest; go and lie down, sleep for a dozen hours, and when you wake up, go and ride one of my horses until you have tired him to death."

And drawing Raoul towards him, he embraced him as he would have done his own child. Athos did the like; only it was very visible that the kiss was still more affectionate, and the pressure of his lips even warmer with the father than with the friend. The young man again looked at both his companions, endeavoring to penetrate their real meaning or their real feelings with the utmost strength of his intelligence; but his look was powerless upon the smiling countenance of the musketeer or upon the calm and composed features of the Comte de la Fere. "Where are you going, Raoul?" inquired the latter, seeing that Bragelonne was preparing to go out.

"To my own apartments," replied the latter, in his soft, sad voice.

"We shall be sure to find you there, then, if we should have anything to say to you?"

"Yes, monsieur; but do you suppose it likely you will have something to say to me?"

"How can I tell?" said Athos.

"Yes, something fresh to console you with," said D'Artagnan, pushing him towards the door.

Raoul, observing the perfect composure which marked every gesture of his two friends, quitted the comte's room, carrying away with him nothing but the individual feeling of his own particular distress.

"Thank Heaven," he said, "since that is the case, I need only think of myself."

And wrapping himself up in his cloak, in order to conceal from the passers-by in the streets his gloomy and sorrowful face, he quitted them, for the purpose of returning to his own rooms, as he had promised Porthos. The two friends watched the young man as he walked away with a feeling of genuine disinterested pity; only each expressed it in a different way.

"Poor Raoul!" said Athos, sighing deeply.

"Poor Raoul!" said D'Artagnan, shrugging his shoulders.

LX. Heu! Miser!

"Poor Raoul!" had said Athos. "Poor Raoul!" had said D'Artagnan: and, in point of fact, to be pitied by both these men, Raoul must indeed have been most unhappy. And therefore, when he found himself alone, face to face, as it were, with his own troubles, leaving behind him the intrepid friend and the indulgent father; when he recalled the avowal of the king's affection, which had robbed him of Louise de la Vallière, whom he loved so deeply, he felt his heart almost breaking, as indeed we all have at least once in our lives, at the first illusion destroyed, the first affection betrayed. "Oh!" he murmured, "all is over, then. Nothing is now left me in this world. Nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for. Guiche has told me so, my father has told me so, M. d'Artagnan has told me so. All life is but an idle dream. The future which I have been hopelessly pursuing for the last ten years is a dream! the union of hearts, a dream! a life of love and happiness, a dream! Poor fool that I am," he continued, after a pause, "to dream away my existence aloud, publicly, and in the face of others, friends and enemies—and for what purpose, too? in order that my friends may be saddened by my troubles, and my enemies may laugh at my sorrows. And so my unhappiness will soon become a notorious disgrace, a public scandal; and who knows but that to-morrow I may even be a public laughing-stock?"

And, despite the composure which he had promised his father and D'Artagnan to observe, Raoul could not resist uttering a few words of darkest menace. "And yet," he continued, "if my name were De Wardes, and if I had the pliancy of character and strength of will of M. d'Artagnan, I should laugh, with my lips at least; I should convince other women that this perfidious girl, honoured by the affection I have wasted on her, leaves me only one regret, that of having been abused and deceived by her seemingly modest and irreproachable conduct; a few might perhaps fawn on the king by jesting at my expense; I should put myself on the track of some of those buffoons; I should chastise a few of them, perhaps; the men would fear me, and by the time I had laid three dying or dead at my feet, I should be adored by the women. Yes, yes, that, indeed, would be the proper course to adopt, and the Comte de la Fere himself would not object to it. Has not he also been tried, in his earlier days, in the same manner as I have just been tried myself? Did he not replace affection by intoxication? He has often told me so. Why should I not replace love by pleasure? He must have suffered as much as I suffer, even more—if that is possible. The history of one man is the history of all, a dragging trial, more or less prolonged, more or less bitter—sorrowful. The note of human nature is nothing but one sustained cry. But what are the sufferings of others compared to those from which I am now suffering? Does the open wound in another's breast soften the anguish of the gaping ulcer in our own? Does the blood which is welling from another man's side stanch that which is pouring from our own? Does the general grief of our fellow-creatures lessen our own private and particular woe? No, no, each suffers on his own account, each struggles with his own grief, each sheds his own tears. And besides," he went on, "what has my life been up to the present moment? A cold, barren, sterile arena, in which I have always fought for others, never for myself. Sometimes for a king, sometimes for a woman. The king has betrayed, the woman disdained me. Miserable, unlucky wretch that I am! Women! Can I not make all expiate the crime of one of their sex? What does that need? To have a heart no longer, or to forget that I ever had one; to be strong, even against weakness itself; to lean always, even when one feels that the support is giving way. What is needed to attain, or succeed in all that? To be young, handsome, strong, valiant, rich. I am, or shall be, all that. But honour?" he still continued, "and what is honour after all? A theory which every man understands in his own way. My father tells me: 'Honour is the consideration of what is due to others, and particularly what is due to oneself.' But Guiche, and Manicamp, and Saint-Aignan particularly, would say to me: 'What's honour? Honour consists in studying and yielding to the passions and pleasures of one's king.' Honour such as that indeed, is easy and productive enough. With honour like that, I can keep my post at the court, become a gentleman of the chamber, and accept the command of a regiment, which may at any time be presented to me. With honour such as that, I can be duke and peer."

"The stain which that woman has stamped upon me, the grief that has broken my heart, the heart of the friend and playmate of her childhood, in no way affects M. de Bragelonne, an excellent officer, a courageous leader, who will cover himself with glory at the first encounter, and who will become a hundred times greater than Mademoiselle de la Vallière is to-day, the mistress of the king—for the king will not marry her—and the more publicly he will proclaim her as his mistress, the more opaque will grow the shadow of shame he casts upon her face, in the guise of a crown; and in proportion as others despise, as I despise her, I shall be gleaming honours in the field. Alas! we had walked together side by side, she and I, during the earliest, the brightest, the most angelic portion of our existence, hand in hand along the charming path of life, covered with the blossoms of youth; and then, alas! we reach a cross-road, where she separates herself from me, in which we have to follow a different route, whereby we become more and more widely separated from each other. And to attain the end of this path, oh, Heaven! I am now alone, in utter despair, and crushed to the very earth."

Such were the sinister reflections in which Raoul indulged, when his foot mechanically paused at the door of his own dwelling. He had reached it without remarking the streets through which he passed, without knowing how he had come; he pushed open the door, continued to advance, and ascended the staircase. The staircase, as in most of the houses at that period, was very dark, and the landings most obscure. Raoul lived on the first floor; he paused in order to ring. Olivain appeared, took his sword and cloak from his hands; Raoul himself opened the door which, from the ante-chamber, led into a small *salon*, richly furnished enough for the *salon* of a young man, and completely filled with flowers by Olivain, who, knowing his master's tastes, had shown himself studiously attentive in gratifying them, without caring whether his master perceived his attention or not. There was a portrait of La Vallière in the *salon*, which had been drawn by herself and given by her to Raoul. This portrait, fastened above a large easy chair covered with dark coloured damask, was the first point towards which Raoul bent his steps—the first object on which he fixed his eyes. It was, moreover, Raoul's usual habit to do so; every time he entered his room, this portrait, before anything else, attracted his attention. This time, as usual, he walked straight up to the portrait, placed his knees upon the arm chair, and paused to look at it sadly. His arms were crossed upon his breast, his head slightly thrown back, his eyes filled with tears, his mouth worked into a bitter smile. He looked at the portrait of the one he had so tenderly loved; and then all that he had said passed before his mind again, all that he had suffered seemed again to assail his heart; and, after a long silence, he murmured for the third time, "Miserable, unhappy wretch that I am!"

He had hardly pronounced these words, when he heard the sound of a sigh and a groan behind him. He turned sharply round and perceived, in the angle of the *salon*, standing up, a bending veiled female figure, which he had been the means of concealing behind the door as he opened it, and which he had not perceived as he entered. He advanced towards the figure, whose presence in his room had not been announced to him; and as he bowed, and inquired at the same moment who she was, she suddenly raised her head, and removed the veil from her face, revealing her pale and sorrow-stricken features. Raoul staggered back as if he had seen a ghost.

"Louise!" he cried, in a tone of such absolute despair, one could hardly have thought the human voice was capable of so desponding a cry, without the snapping of the human heart.

LXI. Wounds within Wounds.

Mademoiselle de la Vallière—for it was indeed she—advanced a few steps towards him. "Yes—Louise," she murmured.

But this interval, short as it had been, was quite sufficient for Raoul to recover himself. "You, mademoiselle?" he said; and then added, in an indefinable tone, "You here!"

"Yes, Raoul," the young girl replied, "I have been waiting for you."

"I beg your pardon. When I came into the room I was not aware—"

"I know—but I entreated Olivain not to tell you—" She hesitated; and as Raoul did not attempt to interrupt her, a moment's silence ensued, during which the sound of their throbbing hearts might have been heard, not in unison with each other, but the one beating as violently as the other. It was for Louise to speak, and she made an effort to do so.

"I wished to speak to you," she said. "It was absolutely necessary that I should see you—myself—alone. I have not hesitated to adopt a step which must remain secret; for no one, except yourself, could understand my motive, Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"In fact, mademoiselle," Raoul stammered out, almost breathless from emotion, "as far as I am concerned, and despite the good opinion you have of me, I confess—"

"Will you do me the great kindness to sit down and listen to me?" said Louise, interrupting him with her soft, sweet voice.

Bragelonne looked at her for a moment; then mournfully shaking his head, he sat, or rather fell down on a chair. "Speak," he said.

She cast a glance all round her. This look was a timid entreaty, and implored secrecy far more effectually than her expressed words had done a few minutes before. Raoul rouse, and went to the door, which he opened. "Olivain," he said, "I am not within for any one." And then, turning towards Louise, he added, "Is not that what you wished?"

Nothing could have produced a greater effect upon Louise than these few words, which seemed to signify, "You see that I still understand you." She passed a handkerchief across her eyes, in order to remove a rebellious tear which she could not restrain; and then, having collected herself for a moment, she said, "Raoul, do not turn your kind, frank look away from me. You are not one of those men who despise a woman for having given her heart to another, even though her affection might render him unhappy, or might wound his pride." Raoul did not reply.

"Alas!" continued La Vallière, "it is only too true, my cause is a bad one, and I cannot tell in what way to begin. It will be better for me, I think, to relate to you, very simply, everything that has befallen me. As I shall speak but the pure and simple truth, I shall always find my path clear before me in spite of the obscurity and obstacles I have to brave in order to solace my heart, which is full to overflowing, and wishes to pour itself out at your feet."

Raoul continued to preserve the same unbroken silence. La Vallière looked at him with an air that seemed to say, "Encourage me; for pity's sake, but a single word!" But Raoul did not open his lips; and the young girl was obliged to continue:

"Just now," she said, "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me by the king's directions." She cast down her eyes as she said this; while Raoul, on his side, turned his away, in order to avoid looking at her. "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me from the king," she repeated, "and told me that you knew all;" and she attempted to look Raoul in the face, after inflicting this further wound upon him, in addition to the many others he had already received; but it was impossible to meet Raoul's eyes.

"He told me you were incensed with me—and justly so, I admit."

This time Raoul looked at the young girl, and a smile full of disdain passed across his lips.

"Oh!" she continued, "I entreat you, do not say that you have had any other feeling against me than that of anger merely. Raoul, wait until I have told you all—wait until I have said to you all that I had to say—all that I came to say."

Raoul, by the strength of his iron will, forced his features to assume a calmer expression, and the disdainful smile upon his lip passed away.

"In the first place," said La Vallière, "in the first place, with my hands raised in entreaty towards you, with my forehead bowed to the ground before you, I entreat you, as the most generous, as the noblest of men, to pardon, to forgive me. If I have left you in ignorance of what was passing in my own bosom, never, at least, would I have consented to deceive you. Oh! I entreat you, Raoul—I implore you on my knees—answer me one word, even though you wrong me in doing so. Better, far better, an injurious word from your lips, than suspicion resting in your heart."

"I admire your subtlety of expression, mademoiselle," said Raoul, making an effort to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him, is loyal; but to deceive him—it seems that would be very wrong, and that you would not do it."

"Monsieur, for a long time I thought that I loved you better than anything else; and so long as I believed in my affection for you, I told you that loved you. I could have sworn it on the altar; but a day came when I was undeceived."

"Well, on that day, mademoiselle, knowing that I still continued to love you, true loyalty of conduct should have forced you to inform me you had ceased to love me."

"But on that day, Raoul—on that day, when I read in the depths of my own heart, when I confessed to myself that you no longer filled my mind entirely, when I saw another future before me than that of being your friend, your life-long companion, your wife—on that day, Raoul, you were not, alas! any more beside me."

"But you knew where I was, mademoiselle; you could have written to me."

"Raoul, I did not dare to do so. Raoul, I have been weak and cowardly. I knew you so thoroughly—I knew how devotedly you loved me, that I trembled at the bare idea of the grief I was about to cause you; and that is so true, Raoul, that this very moment I am now speaking to you, bending thus before you, my heart crushed in my bosom, my voice full of sighs, my eyes full of tears, it is so perfectly true, that I have no other defense than my frankness, I have no other sorrow greater than that which I read in your eyes."

Raoul attempted to smile.

"No!" said the young girl, with a profound conviction, "no, no; you will not do me so foul a wrong as to disguise your feelings before me now! You loved me; you were sure of your affection for me; you did not deceive yourself; you do not lie to your own heart—whilst I—!" And pale as death, her arms thrown despairingly above her head, she fell upon her knees.

"Whilst you," said Raoul, "you told me you loved me, and yet you loved another."

"Alas, yes!" cried the poor girl; "alas, yes! I do love another; and that other—oh! for Heaven's sake let me say it, Raoul, for it is my only excuse—that other I love better than my own life, better than my own soul even. Forgive my fault, or punish my treason, Raoul. I came here in no way to defend myself, but merely to say to you: 'You know what it is to love!'—in such a case am I! I love to that degree, that I would give my life, my very soul, to the man I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief and despair, unless Heaven come to my assistance, unless Heaven does show pity upon me. Raoul, I came here to submit myself to your will, whatever it might be—to die, if it were your wish I should die. Kill me, then, Raoul! if in your heart you believe I deserve death."

"Take care, mademoiselle," said Raoul: "the woman who invites death is one who has nothing but her heart's blood to offer to her deceived and betrayed lover."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul uttered a deep sigh, as he exclaimed, "And you love without being able to forget?"

"I love without a wish to forget; without a wish ever to love any one else," replied La Vallière.

"Very well," said Raoul. "You have said to me, in fact, all you had to say; all I could possibly wish to know. And now, mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness, for it is I who have almost been an obstacle in your life; I, too, who have been wrong, for, in deceiving myself, I helped to deceive you."

"Oh!" said La Vallière, "I do not ask you so much as that, Raoul."

"I only am to blame, mademoiselle," continued Raoul, "better informed than yourself of the difficulties of this life, I should have enlightened you. I ought not to have relied upon uncertainty; I ought to have extracted an answer from your heart, whilst I hardly even sought an acknowledgement from your lips. Once more, mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness."

"Impossible, impossible!" she cried, "you are mocking me."

"How, impossible?"

"Yes, it is impossible to be so good, and kind, ah! perfect to such a degree as that."

"Take care!" said Raoul, with a bitter smile, "for presently you may say perhaps I did not love you."

"Oh! you love me like an affectionate brother; let me hope that, Raoul."

"As a brother! undeceive yourself, Louise. I love you as a lover—as a husband, with the deepest, the truest, the fondest affection."

"Raoul, Raoul!"

"As a brother! Oh, Louise! I love you so deeply, that I would have shed my blood for you, drop by drop; I would, oh! how willingly, have suffered myself to be torn to pieces for your sake, have sacrificed my very future for you. I love you so deeply, Louise, that my heart feels dead and crushed within me,—my faith in human nature all is gone,—my eyes have lost their light; I loved you so deeply, that I now no longer see, think of, care for, anything, either in this world or the next."

"Raoul—dear Raoul! spare me, I implore you!" cried La Vallière. "Oh! if I had but known—"

"It is too late, Louise; you love, you are happy in your affection; I read your happiness through your tears—behind the tears which the loyalty of your nature makes you shed; I feel the sighs your affection breathes forth. Louise, Louise, you have made me the most abjectly wretched man living; leave me, I entreat you. Adieu! adieu!"

"Forgive me! oh, forgive me, Raoul, for what I have done."

"Have I not done much, much more? *Have I not told you that I love you still?*" She buried her face in her hands.

"And to tell you that—do you hear me, Louise?—to tell you that, at such a moment as this, to tell you that, as I have told you, is to pronounce my own sentence of death. Adieu!" La Vallière held out her hands to him in vain.

"We ought not to see each other again in this world," he said, and as she was on the point of crying out in bitter agony at this remark, he placed his hand on her mouth to stifle the exclamation. She pressed her lips upon it, and fell fainting to the ground. "Olivain," said Raoul, "take this young lady and bear her to the carriage which is waiting for her at the door." As Olivain lifted her up, Raoul made a movement as if to dart towards La Vallière, in order to give her a first and last kiss, but, stopping abruptly, he said, "No! she is not mine. I am no thief—as is the king of France." And he returned to his room, whilst the lackey carried La Vallière, still fainting, to the carriage.

LXII. What Raoul Had Guessed.

As soon as Raoul had quitted Athos and D'Artagnan, as the two exclamations that had followed his departure escaped their lips, they found themselves face to face alone. Athos immediately resumed the earnest air that he had assumed at D'Artagnan's arrival.

"Well," he said, "what have you come to announce to me, my friend?"

"I?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Yes; I do not see you in this way without some reason for it," said Athos, smiling.

"The deuce!" said D'Artagnan.

"I will place you at your ease. The king is furious, I suppose?"

"Well, I must say he is not altogether pleased."

"And you have come to arrest me, then?"

"My dear friend, you have hit the very mark."

"Oh, I expected it. I am quite ready to go with you."

"Deuce take it!" said D'Artagnan, "what a hurry you are in."

"I am afraid of delaying you," said Athos, smiling.

"I have plenty of time. Are you not curious, besides, to know how things went on between the king and me?"

"If you will be good enough to tell me, I will listen with the greatest of pleasure," said Athos, pointing out to D'Artagnan a large chair, into which the latter threw himself, assuming the easiest possible attitude.

"Well, I will do so willingly enough," continued D'Artagnan, "for the conversation is rather curious, I must say. In the first place the king sent for me."

"As soon as I had left?"

"You were just going down the last steps of the staircase, as the musketeers told me. I arrived. My dear Athos, he was not red in the face merely, he was positively purple. I was not aware, of course, of what had passed; only, on the ground, lying on the floor, I saw a sword broken in two."

"'Captain d'Artagnan,' cried the king, as soon as he saw me."

"'Sire,' I replied."

"'M. de la Fere has just left me; he is an insolent man.'"

"'An insolent man!' I exclaimed, in such a tone that the king stopped suddenly short."

"'Captain d'Artagnan,' resumed the king, with his teeth clenched, 'you will be good enough to listen to and hear me.'"

"'That is my duty, sire.'"

"'I have, out of consideration for M. de la Fere, wished to spare him—he is a man of whom I still retain some kind recollections—the discredit of being arrested in my palace. You will therefore take a carriage.' At this I made a slight movement."

"'If you object to arrest him yourself,' continued the king, 'send me my captain of the guards.'"

"'Sire,' I replied, 'there is no necessity for the captain of the guards, since I am on duty.'"

"'I should not like to annoy you,' said the king, kindly, 'for you have always served me well, Monsieur D'Artagnan.'"

"'You do not 'annoy' me, sire,' I replied; 'I am on duty, that is all.'"

"'But,' said the king, in astonishment, 'I believe the comte is your friend?'"

"'If he were my father, sire, it would not make me less on duty than I am.'"

"The king looked at me; he saw how unmoved my face was, and seemed satisfied. 'You will arrest M. le Comte de la Fere, then?' he inquired."

"'Most certainly, sire, if you give me the order to do so.'"

"'Very well; I order you to do so.'"

"I bowed, and replied, 'Where is the comte, sire?'"

"'You will look for him.'"

"'And am I to arrest him, wherever he may be?'"

"'Yes; but try that he may be at his own house. If he should have started for his own estate, leave Paris at once, and arrest him on his way thither.'"

"I bowed; but as I did not move, he said, 'Well, what are you waiting for?'"

"'For the order to arrest the comte, signed by yourself.'"

"The king seemed annoyed; for, in point of fact, it was the exercise of a fresh act of authority, a repetition of the arbitrary act, if, indeed, it is to be considered as such. He took hold of his pen slowly, and evidently in no very good temper; and then he wrote, 'Order for M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of my musketeers, to arrest M. le Comte de la Fere, wherever he is to be found.' He then turned towards me; but I was looking on without moving a muscle of my face. In all probability he thought he perceived something like bravado in my tranquil manner, for he signed hurriedly, and then handing me the order, he said, 'Go, monsieur!' I obeyed; and here I am."

Athos pressed his friend's hand. "Well, let us set off," he said.

"Oh! surely," said D'Artagnan, "you must have some trifling matters to arrange before you leave your apartments in this manner."

"I?—not at all."

"Why not?"

"Why, you know, D'Artagnan, that I have always been a very simple traveler on this earth, ready to go to the end of the world by the order of my sovereign; ready to quit it at the summons of my Maker. What does a man who is thus prepared require in such a case?—a portmanteau, or a shroud. I am ready at this moment, as I have always been, my dear friend, and can accompany you at once."

"But, Bragelonne—"

"I have brought him up in the same principles I laid down for my own guidance; and you observed that, as soon as he perceived you, he guessed, that very moment, the motive of your visit. We have thrown him off his guard for a moment; but do not be uneasy, he is sufficiently prepared for my disgrace not to be too much alarmed at it. So, let us go."

"Very well, let us go," said D'Artagnan, quietly.

"As I broke my sword in the king's presence, and threw the pieces at his feet, I presume that will dispense with the necessity of delivering it over to you."

"You are quite right; and besides that, what the deuce do you suppose I could do with your sword?"

"Am I to walk behind, or before you?" inquired Athos, laughing.



"You will walk arm in arm with me," replied D'Artagnan, as he took the comte's arm to descend the staircase; and in this manner they arrived at the landing. Grimaud, whom they had met in the ante-room, looked at them as they went out together in this manner, with some little uneasiness; his experience of affairs was quite sufficient to give him good reason to suspect that there was something wrong.

"Ah! is that you, Grimaud?" said Athos, kindly. "We are going—"

"To take a turn in my carriage," interrupted D'Artagnan, with a friendly nod of the head.

Grimaud thanked D'Artagnan by a grimace, which was evidently intended for a smile, and accompanied both the friends to the door. Athos entered first into the carriage; D'Artagnan followed him without saying a word to the coachman. The departure had taken place so quietly, that it excited no disturbance or attention even in the neighborhood. When the carriage had reached the quays, "You are taking me to the Bastille, I perceive," said Athos.

"I?" said D'Artagnan, "I take you wherever you may choose to go; nowhere else, I can assure you."

"What do you mean?" said the comte, surprised.

"Why, surely, my dear friend," said D'Artagnan, "you quite understand that I undertook the mission with no other object in view than that of carrying it out exactly as you liked. You surely did not expect that I was going to get you thrown into prison like that, brutally, and without any reflection. If I had anticipated that, I should have let the captain of the guards undertake it."

"And so—?" said Athos.

"And so, I repeat again, we will go wherever you may choose."

"My dear friend," said Athos, embracing D'Artagnan, "how like you that is!"

"Well, it seems simple enough to me. The coachman will take you to the barrier of the Cours-la-Reine; you will find a horse there which I have ordered to be kept ready for you; with that horse you will be able to do three posts without stopping; and I, on my side, will take care not to return to the king, to tell him that you have gone away, until the very moment it will be impossible to overtake you. In the meantime you will have reached Le Havre, and from Le Havre across to England, where you will find the charming residence of which M. Monk made me a present, without speaking of the hospitality which King Charles will not fail to show you. Well, what do you think of this project?"

Athos shook his head, and then said, smiling as he did so, "No, no, take me to the Bastille."

"You are an obstinate fellow, my dear Athos," returned D'Artagnan, "reflect for a few moments."

"On what subject?"

"That you are no longer twenty years of age. Believe me, I speak according to my own knowledge and experience. A prison is certain death for men who are at our time of life. No, no; I will never allow you to languish in prison in such a way. Why, the very thought of it makes my head turn giddy."

"Dear D'Artagnan," Athos replied, "Heaven most fortunately made my body as strong, powerful, and enduring as my mind; and, rely upon it, I shall retain my strength up to the very last moment."

"But this is not strength of mind or character; it is sheer madness."

"No, D'Artagnan, it is the highest order of reasoning. Do not suppose that I should in the slightest degree in the world discuss the question with you, whether you would not be ruined in endeavoring to save me. I should have done precisely as you propose if flight had been part of my plan of action; I should, therefore, have accepted from you what, without any doubt, you would have accepted from me. No! I know you too well even to breathe a word upon the subject."

"Ah! if you would only let me do it," said D'Artagnan, "what a dance we would give his most gracious majesty!"

"Still he is the king; do not forget that, my dear friend."

"Oh! that is all the same to me; and king though he be, I would plainly tell him, 'Sire, imprison, exile, kill every one in France and Europe; order me to arrest and poniard even whom you like—even were it Monsieur, your own brother; but do not touch one of the four musketeers, or if so, *mordieux!*'"

"My dear friend," replied Athos, with perfect calmness, "I should like to persuade you of one thing; namely, that I wish to be arrested; that I desire above all things that my arrest should take place."

D'Artagnan made a slight movement of his shoulders.

"Nay, I wish it, I repeat, more than anything; if you were to let me escape, it would be only to return of my own accord, and constitute myself a prisoner. I wish to prove to this young man, who is dazzled by the power and splendor of his crown, that he can be regarded as the first and chiefest among men only on the one condition of his proving himself to be the most generous and the wisest. He may punish me, imprison, torture me, it matters not. He abuses his opportunities, and I wish him to learn the bitterness of remorse, while Heaven teaches him what chastisement is."

"Well, well," replied D'Artagnan, "I know only too well that, when you have once said, 'no,' you mean 'no.' I do not insist any longer; you wish to go to the Bastille?"

"I do wish to go there."

"Let us go, then! To the Bastille!" cried D'Artagnan to the coachman. And throwing himself back in the carriage, he gnawed the ends of his mustache with a fury which, for Athos, who knew him well, signified a resolution either already taken or in course of formation. A profound silence ensued in the carriage, which continued to roll on, but neither faster nor slower than before. Athos took the musketeer by the hand.

"You are not angry with me, D'Artagnan?" he said.

"I!—oh, no! certainly not; of course not. What you do for heroism, I should have done from obstinacy."

"But you are quite of opinion, are you not, that Heaven will avenge me, D'Artagnan?"

"And I know one or two on earth who will not fail to lend a helping hand," said the captain.

#### LXIII. Three Guests Astonished to Find Themselves at Supper Together.

The carriage arrived at the outside of the gate of the Bastille. A soldier on guard stopped it, but D'Artagnan had only to utter a single word to procure admittance, and the carriage passed on without further difficulty. Whilst they were proceeding along the covered way which led to the courtyard of the governor's residence, D'Artagnan, whose lynx eyes saw everything, even through the walls, suddenly cried out, "What is that out yonder?"

"Well," said Athos, quietly; "what is it?"

"Look yonder, Athos."

"In the courtyard?"

"Yes, yes; make haste!"

"Well, a carriage; very likely conveying a prisoner like myself."

"That would be too droll."

"I do not understand you."

"Make haste and look again, and look at the man who is just getting out of that carriage."

At that very moment a second sentinel stopped D'Artagnan, and while the formalities were being gone through, Athos could see at a hundred paces from him the man whom his friend had pointed out to him. He was, in fact, getting out of the carriage at the door of the governor's house. "Well," inquired D'Artagnan, "do you see him?"

"Yes; he is a man in a gray suit."

"What do you say of him?"

"I cannot very well tell; he is, as I have just now told you, a man in a gray suit, who is getting out of a carriage; that is all."

"Athos, I will wager anything that it is he."

"He, who?"

"Aramis."

"Aramis arrested? Impossible!"

"I do not say he is arrested, since we see him alone in his carriage."

"Well, then, what is he doing here?"

"Oh! he knows Baisemeaux, the governor," replied the musketeer, slyly; "so we have arrived just in time."

"What for?"

"In order to see what we can see."

"I regret this meeting exceedingly. When Aramis sees me, he will be very much annoyed, in the first place, at seeing me, and in the next at being seen."

"Very well reasoned."

"Unfortunately, there is no remedy for it; whenever any one meets another in the Bastille, even if he wished to draw back to avoid him, it would be impossible."

"Athos, I have an idea; the question is, to spare Aramis the annoyance you were speaking of, is it not?"

"What is to be done?"

"I will tell you; or in order to explain myself in the best possible way, let me relate the affair in my own manner; I will not recommend you to tell a falsehood, for that would be impossible for you to do; but I will tell falsehoods enough for both; it is easy to do that when one is born to the nature and habits of a Gascon."

Athos smiled. The carriage stopped where the one we have just now pointed out had stopped; namely, at the door of the governor's house. "It is understood, then?" said D'Artagnan, in a low voice to his friend. Athos consented by a gesture. They ascended the staircase. There will be no occasion for surprise at the facility with which they had entered into the Bastille, if it be remembered that, before passing the first gate, in fact, the most difficult of all, D'Artagnan had announced that he had brought a prisoner of state. At the third gate, on the contrary, that is to say, when he had once fairly entered the prison, he merely said to the sentinel, "To M. Baisemeaux;" and they both passed on. In a few minutes they were in the governor's dining-room, and the first face which attracted D'Artagnan's observation was that of Aramis, who was seated side by side with Baisemeaux, awaiting the announcement of a meal whose odor impregnated the whole apartment. If D'Artagnan pretended surprise, Aramis did not pretend at all; he started when he saw his two friends, and his emotion was very apparent. Athos and D'Artagnan, however, complimented him as usual, and Baisemeaux, amazed, completely stupefied by the presence of his three guests, began to perform a few evolutions around them.

"By what lucky accident—"

"We were just going to ask you," retorted D'Artagnan.

"Are we going to give ourselves up as prisoners?" cried Aramis, with an affection of hilarity.

"Ah! ah!" said D'Artagnan; "it is true the walls smell deucedly like a prison. Monsieur de Baisemeaux, you know you invited me to sup with you the other day."

"I?" cried Baisemeaux.

"Yes, of course you did, although you now seem so struck with amazement. Don't you remember it?"

Baisemeaux turned pale and then red, looked at Aramis, who looked at him, and finished by stammering out, "Certainly—I am delighted—but, upon my honour—I have not the slightest—Ah! I have such a wretched memory."

"Well! I am wrong, I see," said D'Artagnan, as if he were offended.

"Wrong, what for?"

"Wrong to remember anything about it, it seems."

Baisemeaux hurried towards him. "Do not stand on ceremony, my dear captain," he said; "I have the worst memory in the world. I no sooner leave off thinking of my pigeons and their pigeon-house, than I am no better than the rawest recruit."

"At all events, you remember it now," said D'Artagnan, boldly.

"Yes, yes," replied the governor, hesitating; "I think I do remember."

"It was when you came to the palace to see me; you told me some story or other about your accounts with M. de Louviere and M. de Tremblay."

"Oh, yes! perfectly."

"And about M. d'Herblay's kindness towards you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, looking at the unhappy governor full in the face, "and yet you just now said you had no memory, Monsieur de Baisemeaux."

Baisemeaux interrupted the musketeer in the middle of his revelations. "Yes, yes; you're quite right; how could I have forgotten; I remember it now as well as possible; I beg you a thousand pardons. But now, once for all, my dear M. d'Artagnan, be sure that at this present time, as at any other, whether invited or not, you are perfectly at home here, you and M. d'Herblay, your friend," he said, turning towards Aramis; "and this gentleman, too," he added, bowing to Athos.

"Well, I thought it would be sure to turn out so," replied D'Artagnan, "and that is the reason I came. Having nothing to do this evening at the Palais Royal, I wished to judge for myself what your ordinary style of living was like; and as I was coming along, I met the Comte de la Fere."

Athos bowed. "The comte, who had just left his majesty, handed me an order which required immediate attention. We were close by here; I wished to call in, even if it were for no other object than that of shaking hands with you and of presenting the comte to you, of whom you spoke so highly that evening at the palace when—"

"Certainly, certainly—M. le Comte de la Fere?"

"Precisely."

"The comte is welcome, I am sure."

"And he will sup with you two, I suppose, whilst I, unfortunate dog that I am, must run off on a matter of duty. Oh! what happy beings you are, compared to myself," he added, sighing as loud as Porthos might have done.

"And so you are going away, then?" said Aramis and Baisemeaux together, with the same expression of delighted surprise, the tone of which was immediately noticed by D'Artagnan.

"I leave you in my place," he said, "a noble and excellent guest." And he touched Athos gently on the shoulder, who, astonished also, could not help exhibiting his surprise a little; which was noticed by Aramis only, for M. de Baisemeaux was not quite equal to the three friends in point of intelligence.

"What, are you going to leave us?" resumed the governor.

"I shall only be about an hour, or an hour and a half. I will return in time for dessert."

"Oh! we will wait for you," said Baisemeaux.

"No, no; that would be really disobliging me."

"You will be sure to return, though?" said Athos, with an expression of doubt.

"Most certainly," he said, pressing his friend's hand confidently; and he added, in a low voice, "Wait for me, Athos; be cheerful and lively as possible, and above all, don't allude even to business affairs, for Heaven's sake."

And with a renewed pressure of the hand, he seemed to warn the comte of the necessity of keeping perfectly discreet and impenetrable. Baisemeaux led D'Artagnan to the gate. Aramis, with many friendly protestations of delight, sat down by Athos, determined to make him speak; but Athos possessed every virtue and quality to the very highest degree. If necessity had required it, he would have been the finest orator in the world, but on other occasions he would rather have died than have opened his lips.

Ten minutes after D'Artagnan's departure, the three gentlemen sat down to table, which was covered with the most substantial display of gastronomic luxury. Large joints, exquisite dishes, preserves, the greatest variety of wines, appeared successively upon the table, which was served at the king's expense, and of which expense M. Colbert would have found no difficulty in saving two thirds, without any one in the Bastille being the worse for it. Baisemeaux was the only one who ate and drank with gastronomic resolution. Aramis allowed nothing to pass by him, but merely touched everything he took; Athos, after the soup and three *hors d'oeuvres*, ate nothing more. The style of conversation was such as might have been anticipated between three men so opposite in temper and ideas. Aramis was incessantly asking himself by what extraordinary chance Athos was there at Baisemeaux's when D'Artagnan was no longer there, and why D'Artagnan did not remain when Athos was there. Athos sounded all the depths of the mind of Aramis, who lived in the midst of subterfuge, evasion, and intrigue; he studied his man well and thoroughly, and felt convinced that he was engaged upon some important project. And then he too began to think of his own personal affair, and to lose himself in conjectures as to D'Artagnan's reason for having left the Bastille so abruptly, and for leaving behind him a prisoner so badly introduced and so badly looked after by the prison authorities. But we shall not pause to examine into the thoughts and feelings of these personages, but will leave them to themselves, surrounded by the remains of poultry, game, and fish, which Baisemeaux's generous knife and fork had so mutilated. We are going to follow D'Artagnan instead, who, getting into the carriage which had brought him, said to the coachman, "Return to the palace, as fast as the horses can gallop."

LXIV. What Took Place at the Louvre During the Supper at the Bastille.

M. de Saint-Aignan had executed the commission with which the king had intrusted him for La Vallière—as we have already seen in one of the preceding chapters; but, whatever his eloquence, he did not succeed in persuading the young girl that she had in the king a protector powerful enough for her under any combination of circumstances, and that she had no need of any one else in the world when the king was on her side. In point of fact, at the very first word which the favourite mentioned of the discovery of the famous secret, Louise, in a passion of tears, abandoned herself in utter despair to a sorrow which would have been far from flattering for the king, if he had been a witness of it from one of the corners of the room. Saint-Aignan, in his character of ambassador, felt almost as greatly offended at it as his master himself would have been, and returned to inform the king what he had seen and heard; and it is thus we find him, in a state of great agitation, in the presence of the king, who was, if possible, in a state of even greater flurry than himself.

"But," said the king to the courtier, when the latter had finished his report, "what did she decide to do? Shall I at least see her presently before supper? Will she come to me, or shall I be obliged to go to her room?"

"I believe, sire, that if your majesty wishes to see her, you will not only have to take the first step in advance, but will have to go the whole way."

"That I do not mind. Do you think she has yet a secret fancy for young Bragelonne?" muttered the king between his teeth.

"Oh! sire, that is not possible; for it is you alone, I am convinced, Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves, and that, too, with all her heart. But you know that De Bragelonne belongs to that proud race who play the part of Roman heroes."

The king smiled feebly; he knew how true the illustration was, for Athos had just left him.

"As for Mademoiselle de la Vallière," Saint-Aignan continued, "she was brought up under the care of the Dowager Madame, that is to say, in the greatest austerity and formality. This young engaged couple coldly exchanged their little vows in the prim presence of the moon and stars; and now, when they find they have to break those vows asunder, it plays the very deuce with them."

Saint-Aignan thought to have made the king laugh; but on the contrary, from a mere smile Louis passed to the greatest seriousness of manner. He already began to experience that remorse which the comte had promised D'Artagnan he would inflict upon him. He reflected that, in fact, these young persons had loved and sworn fidelity to each other; that one of the two had kept his word, and that the other was too conscientious not to feel her perjury most bitterly. And his remorse was not unaccompanied; for bitter pangs of jealousy began to beset the king's heart. He did not say another word, and instead of going to pay a visit to his mother, or the queen, or Madame, in order to amuse himself a little, and make the ladies laugh, as he himself used to say, he threw himself into the huge armchair in which his august father Louis XIII. had passed so many weary days and years in company with Barradat and Cinq-Mars. Saint-Aignan perceived the king was not to be amused at that moment; he tried a last resource, and pronounced Louise's name, which made the king look up immediately. "What does your majesty intend to do this evening—shall Mademoiselle de la Vallière be informed of your intention to see her?"

"It seems she is already aware of that," replied the king. "No, no, Saint-Aignan," he continued, after a moment's pause, "we will both of us pass our time in thinking, and musing, and dreaming; when Mademoiselle de la Vallière shall have sufficiently regretted what she now regrets, she will deign, perhaps, to give us some news of herself."

"Ah! sire, is it possible you can so misunderstand her heart, which is so full of devotion?"

The king rose, flushed from vexation and annoyance; he was a prey to jealousy as well as to remorse. Saint-Aignan was just beginning to feel that his position was becoming awkward, when the curtain before the door was raised. The king turned hastily round; his first idea was that a letter from Louise had arrived; but, instead of a letter of love, he only saw his captain of musketeers, standing upright, and perfectly silent in the doorway. "M. d'Artagnan," he said, "ah! Well, monsieur?"

D'Artagnan looked at Saint-Aignan; the king's eyes took the same direction as those of his captain; these looks would have been clear to any one, and for a still greater reason they were so for Saint-Aignan. The courtier bowed and quitted the room, leaving the king and D'Artagnan alone.

"Is it done?" inquired the king.

"Yes, sire," replied the captain of the musketeers, in a grave voice, "it is done."

The king was unable to say another word. Pride, however, obliged him not to pause at what he had done; whenever a sovereign has adopted a decisive course, even though it be unjust, he is compelled to prove to all witnesses, and particularly to prove it to himself, that he was quite right all through. A good means for effecting that—an almost infallible means, indeed—is, to try and prove his victim to be in the wrong. Louis, brought up by Mazarin and Anne of Austria, knew better than any one else his vocation as a monarch; he therefore endeavored to prove it on the present occasion. After a few moment's pause, which he had employed in making silently to himself the same reflections which we have just expressed aloud, he said, in an indifferent tone: "What did the comte say?"

"Nothing at all, sire."

"Surely he did not allow himself to be arrested without saying something?"

"He said he expected to be arrested, sire."

The king raised his head haughtily. "I presume," he said, "that M. le Comte de la Fere has not continued to play his obstinate and rebellious part."

"In the first place, sire, what do you wish to signify by *rebellious*?" quietly asked the musketeer. "A rebel, in the eyes of the king, is a man who not only allows himself to be shut up in the Bastille, but still more, who opposes those who do not wish to take him there."

"Who do not wish to take him there!" exclaimed the king. "What do you say, captain! Are you mad?"

"I believe not, sire."

"You speak of persons who did not wish to arrest M. de la Fere! Who are those persons, may I ask?"

"I should say those whom your majesty intrusted with that duty."

"But it was you whom I intrusted with it," exclaimed the king.

"Yes, sire; it was I."

"And yet you say that, despite my orders, you had the intention of not arresting the man who had insulted me!"

"Yes, sire—that was really my intention. I even proposed to the comte to mount a horse that I had prepared for him at the Barriere de la Conference."

"And what was your object in getting this horse ready?"

"Why, sire, in order that M. le Comte de la Fere might be able to reach Le Havre, and from that place make his escape to England."

"You betrayed me, then, monsieur?" cried the king, kindling with a wild pride.

"Exactly so."

There was nothing to say in answer to statements made in such a tone; the king was astounded at such an obstinate and open resistance on the part of D'Artagnan. "At least you had a reason, Monsieur d'Artagnan, for acting as you did?" said the king, proudly.

"I have always a reason for everything, sire."

"Your reason cannot be your friendship for the comte, at all events,—the only one that can be of any avail, the only one that could possibly excuse you,—for I placed you perfectly at your ease in that respect."

"Me, sire?"

"Did I not give you the choice to arrest, or not to arrest M. le Comte de la Fere?"

"Yes, sire, but—"

"But what?" exclaimed the king, impatiently.

"But you warned me, sire, that if I did not arrest him, your captain of the guard should do so."

"Was I not considerate enough towards you, from the very moment I did not compel you to obey me?"

"To me, sire, you were, but not to my friend, for my friend would be arrested all the same, whether by myself or by the captain of the guards."

“And this is your devotion, monsieur! a devotion which argues and reasons. You are no soldier, monsieur!”

“I wait for your majesty to tell me what I am.”

“Well, then—you are a Frondeur.”

“And since there is no longer any Fronde, sire, in that case—”

“But if what you say is true—”

“What I say is always true, sire.”

“What have you come to say to me, monsieur?”

“I have come to say to your majesty, ‘Sire, M. de la Fere is in the Bastille.’”

“That is not your fault, it would seem.”

“That is true, sire; but at all events he is there; and since he is there, it is important that your majesty should know it.”

“Ah! Monsieur d’Artagnan, so you set your king at defiance.”

“Sire—”

“Monsieur d’Artagnan! I warn you that you are abusing my patience.”

“On the contrary, sire.”

“What do you mean by ‘on the contrary’?”

“I have come to get myself arrested, too.”

“To get yourself arrested,—you!”

“Of course. My friend will get wearied to death in the Bastille by himself; and I have come to propose to your majesty to permit me to bear him company; if your majesty will but give me the word, I will

arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the guards for that, I assure you.”

The king darted towards the table and seized hold of a pen to write the order for D’Artagnan’s imprisonment. “Pay attention, monsieur, that this is forever,” cried the king, in tones of sternest menace.

“I can quite believe that,” returned the musketeer; “for when you have once done such an act as that, you will never be able to look me in the face again.”

The king dashed down his pen violently. “Leave the room, monsieur!” he said.

“Not so, if it please your majesty.”

“What is that you say?”

“Sire, I came to speak gently and temperately to your majesty; your majesty got into a passion with me; that is a misfortune; but I shall not the less on that account say what I had to say to you.”

“Your resignation, monsieur,—your resignation!” cried the king.

“Sire, you know whether I care about my resignation or not, since at Blois, on the very day when you refused King Charles the million which my friend the Comte de la Fere gave him, I then tendered

my resignation to your majesty.”

“Very well, monsieur—do it at once!”

“No, sire; for there is no question of my resignation at the present moment. Your majesty took up your pen just now to send me to the Bastille,—why should you change your intention?”

“D’Artagnan! Gascon that you are! who is king, allow me to ask,—you or myself?”

“You, sire, unfortunately.”

“What do you mean by ‘unfortunately’?”

“Yes, sire; for if it were I—”

“If it were you, you would approve of M. d’Artagnan’s rebellious conduct, I suppose?”

“Certainly.”

“Really!” said the king, shrugging his shoulders.

“And I should tell my captain of the musketeers,” continued D’Artagnan, “I should tell him, looking at him all the while with human eyes, and not with eyes like coals of fire, ‘M. d’Artagnan, I had forgotten that I was the king, for I descended from my throne in order to insult a gentleman.’”

“Monsieur,” said the king, “do you think you can excuse your friend by exceeding him in insolence?”

“Oh! sire! I should go much further than he did,” said D’Artagnan; “and it would be your own fault. I should tell you what he, a man full of the finest sense of delicacy, did not tell you; I should say—‘Sire, you have sacrificed his son, and he defended his son—you sacrificed himself; he addressed you in the name of honour, of religion, of virtue—you repulsed, drove him away, imprisoned him.’ I should be harder than he was, for I should say to you—‘Sire; it is for you to choose. Do you wish to have friends or lackeys—soldiers or slaves—great men or mere puppets? Do you wish men to serve you, or to bend and crouch before you? Do you wish men to love you, or to be afraid of you? If you prefer baseness, intrigue, cowardice, say so at once, sire, and we will leave you,—we who are the only individuals who are left,—nay, I will say more, the only models of the valor of former times; we who have done our duty, and have exceeded, perhaps, in courage and in merit, the men already great for posterity. Choose, sire! and that, too, without delay. Whatever relics remain to you of the great nobility, guard them with a jealous eye; you will never be deficient in courtiers. Delay not—and send me to the Bastille with my friend; for, if you did not know how to listen to the Comte de la Fere, whose voice is the sweetest and noblest in all the world when honour is the theme; if you do not know how to listen to D’Artagnan, the frankest and honestest voice of sincerity, you are a bad king, and to-morrow will be a poor king. And learn from me, sire, that bad kings are hated by their people, and poor kings are driven ignominiously away.’ That is what I had to say to you, sire; you were wrong to drive me to say it.”

The king threw himself back in his chair, cold as death, and as livid as a corpse. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, he could not have been more astonished; he seemed as if his respiration had utterly ceased, and that he was at the point of death. The honest voice of sincerity, as D’Artagnan had called it, had pierced through his heart like a sword-blade.

D’Artagnan had said all he had to say. Comprehending the king’s anger, he drew his sword, and, approaching Louis XIV. respectfully, he placed it on the table. But the king, with a furious gesture, thrust aside the sword, which fell on the ground and rolled to D’Artagnan’s feet. Notwithstanding the perfect mastery which D’Artagnan exercised over himself, he, too, in his turn, became pale, and, trembling with indignation, said: “A king may disgrace a soldier,—he may exile him, and may even condemn him to death; but were he a hundred times a king, he has no right to insult him by casting a dishonour upon his sword! Sire, a king of France has never repulsed with contempt the sword of a man such as I am! Stained with disgrace as this sword now is, it has henceforth no other sheath than either your heart or my own! I choose my own, sire; and you have to thank Heaven and my own patience that I do so.” Then snatching up his sword, he cried, “My blood be upon your head!” and, with a rapid gesture, he placed the hilt upon the floor and directed the point of the blade towards his breast. The king, however, with a movement far more rapid than that of D’Artagnan, threw his right arm around the musketeer’s neck, and with his left hand seized hold of the blade by the middle, and returned it silently to the scabbard. D’Artagnan, upright, pale, and still trembling, let the king do all to the very end. Louis, overcome and softened by gentler feelings, returned to the table, took a pen in his hand, wrote a few lines, signed them, and then held it out to D’Artagnan.

“What is this paper, sire?” inquired the captain.

“An order for M. d’Artagnan to set the Comte de la Fere at liberty immediately.”

D’Artagnan seized the king’s hand, and imprinted a kiss upon it; he then folded the order, placed it in his belt, and quitted the room. Neither the king nor the captain had uttered a syllable.

“Oh, human heart! thou guide and director of kings,” murmured Louis, when alone, “when shall I learn to read in your inmost recesses, as in the leaves of a book! Oh, I am not a bad king—nor am I a poor king; I am but still a child, when all is said and done.”

#### LXV. Political Rivals.

D’Artagnan had promised M. de Baisemeaux to return in time for dessert, and he kept his word. They had just reached the finer and more delicate class of wines and liqueurs with which the governor’s cellar had the reputation of being most admirably stocked, when the silver spurs of the captain resounded in the corridor, and he himself appeared at the threshold. Athos and Aramis had played a close game; neither of the two had been able to gain the slightest advantage over the other. They had supped, talked a good deal about the Bastille, of the last journey to Fontainebleau, of the intended *fete* that M. Fouquet was about to give at Vaux; they had generalized on every possible subject; and no one, excepting Baisemeaux, had in the slightest degree alluded to private matters. D’Artagnan arrived in the very midst of the conversation, still pale and much disturbed by his interview with the king. Baisemeaux hastened to give him a chair; D’Artagnan accepted a glass of wine, and set it down empty. Athos and Aramis both remarked his emotion; as for Baisemeaux, he saw nothing more than the captain of the king’s musketeers, to whom he endeavored to show every possible attention. But, although Aramis had remarked his emotion, he had not been able to guess the cause of it. Athos alone believed he had detected it. For him, D’Artagnan’s return, and particularly the manner in which he, usually so impassible, seemed overcome, signified, “I have just asked the king something which the king has refused me.” Thoroughly convinced that his conjecture was correct, Athos smiled, rose from the table, and made a sign to D’Artagnan, as if to remind him that they had something else to do than to sup together. D’Artagnan immediately understood him, and replied by another sign. Aramis and Baisemeaux watched this silent dialogue, and looked inquiringly at each other. Athos felt that he was called upon to give an explanation of what was passing.

“The truth is, my friend,” said the Comte de la Fere, with a smile, “that you, Aramis, have been supping with a state criminal, and you, Monsieur de Baisemeaux, with your prisoner.”

Baisemeaux uttered an exclamation of surprise, and almost of delight; for he was exceedingly proud and vain of his fortress, and for his own individual profit, the more prisoners he had, the happier he was, and the higher in rank the prisoners happened to be, the prouder he felt. Aramis assumed the expression of countenance he thought the position justified, and said, “Well, dear Athos, forgive me, but I almost suspected what has happened. Some prank of Raoul and La Vallière, I suppose?”

“Alas!” said Baisemeaux.

“And,” continued Aramis, “you, a high and powerful nobleman as you are, forgetful that courtiers now exist—you have been to the king, I suppose, and told him what you thought of his conduct?”

“Yes, you have guessed right.”

“So that,” said Baisemeaux, trembling at having supped so familiarly with a man who had fallen into disgrace with the king; “so that, monsieur le comte—”

“So that, my dear governor,” said Athos, “my friend D’Artagnan will communicate to you the contents of the paper which I perceived just peeping out of his belt, and which assuredly can be nothing else than the order for my incarceration.”

Baisemeaux held out his hand with his accustomed eagerness. D’Artagnan drew two papers from his belt, and presented one of them to the governor, who unfolded it, and then read, in a low tone of voice, looking at Athos over the paper, as he did so, and pausing from time to time: “Order to detain, in my chateau of the Bastille, Monsieur le Comte de la Fere.’ Oh, monsieur! this is indeed a very melancholy day for me.”

“You will have a patient prisoner, monsieur,” said Athos, in his calm, soft voice.

“A prisoner, too, who will not remain a month with you, my dear governor,” said Aramis; while Baisemeaux, still holding the order in his hand, transcribed it upon the prison registry.

“Not a day, or rather not even a night,” said D’Artagnan, displaying the second order of the king, “for now, dear M. de Baisemeaux, you will have the goodness to transcribe also this order for setting the comte immediately at liberty.”

“Ah!” said Aramis, “it is a labor that you have deprived me of, D’Artagnan;” and he pressed the musketeer’s hand in a significant manner, at the same moment as that of Athos.

“What!” said the latter in astonishment, “the king sets me at liberty!”

“Read, my dear friend,” returned D’Artagnan.

Athos took the order and read it. “It is quite true,” he said.

“Are you sorry for it?” asked D’Artagnan.

“Oh, no, on the contrary. I wish the king no harm; and the greatest evil or misfortune that any one can wish kings, is that they should commit an act of injustice. But you have had a difficult and painful task, I know. Tell me, have you not, D’Artagnan?”

“I? not at all,” said the musketeer, laughing: “the king does everything I wish him to do.”

Aramis looked fixedly at D’Artagnan, and saw that he was not speaking the truth. But Baisemeaux had eyes for nothing but D’Artagnan, so great was his admiration for a man who seemed to make the king do all he wished.

“And does the king exile Athos?” inquired Aramis.

“No, not precisely; the king did not explain himself upon that subject,” replied D’Artagnan; “but I think the comte could not well do better unless, indeed, he wishes particularly to thank the king—”

"No, indeed," replied Athos, smiling.

"Well, then, I think," resumed D'Artagnan, "that the comte cannot do better than to retire to his own chateau. However, my dear Athos, you have only to speak, to tell me what you want. If any particular place of residence is more agreeable to you than another, I am influential enough, perhaps, to obtain it for you."

"No, thank you," said Athos; "nothing can be more agreeable to me, my dear friend, than to return to my solitude beneath my noble trees on the banks of the Loire. If Heaven be the overruling physician of the evils of the mind, nature is a sovereign remedy. And so, monsieur," continued Athos, turning again towards Baisemeaux, "I am now free, I suppose?"

"Yes, monsieur le comte, I think so—at least, I hope so," said the governor, turning over and over the two papers in question, "unless, however, M. d'Artagnan has a third order to give me."

"No, my dear Baisemeaux, no," said the musketeer; "the second is quite enough: we will stop there—if you please."

"Ah! monsieur le comte," said Baisemeaux addressing Athos, "you do not know what you are losing. I should have placed you among the thirty-franc prisoners, like the generals—what am I saying?—I mean among the fifty-francs, like the princes, and you would have supped every evening as you have done to-night."

"Allow me, monsieur," said Athos, "to prefer my own simpler fare." And then, turning to D'Artagnan, he said, "Let us go, my dear friend. Shall I have that greatest of all pleasures for me—that of having you as my companion?"

"To the city gate only," replied D'Artagnan, "after which I will tell you what I told the king: 'I am on duty.'"

"And you, my dear Aramis," said Athos, smiling; "will you accompany me? La Fere is on the road to Vannes."

"Thank you, my dear friend," said Aramis, "but I have an appointment in Paris this evening, and I cannot leave without very serious interests suffering by my absence."

"In that case," said Athos, "I must say adieu, and take my leave of you. My dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, I have to thank you exceedingly for your kind and friendly disposition towards me, and particularly for the enjoyable specimen you have given me of the ordinary fare of the Bastille." And, having embraced Aramis, and shaken hands with M. de Baisemeaux, and having received best wishes for a pleasant journey from them both, Athos set off with D'Artagnan.

Whilst the *denouement* of the scene of the Palais Royal was taking place at the Bastille, let us relate what was going on at the lodgings of Athos and Bragelonne. Grimaud, as we have seen, had accompanied his master to Paris; and, as we have said, he was present when Athos went out; he had observed D'Artagnan gnaw the corners of his mustache; he had seen his master get into the carriage; he had narrowly examined both their countenances, and he had known them both for a sufficiently long period to read and understand, through the mask of their impassibility, that something serious was the matter. As soon as Athos had gone, he began to reflect; he then, and then only, remembered the strange manner in which Athos had taken leave of him, the embarrassment—imperceptible as it would have been to any but himself—of the master whose ideas were, to him, so clear and defined, and the expression of whose wishes was so precise. He knew that Athos had taken nothing with him but the clothes he had on him at the time; and yet he seemed to fancy that Athos had not left for an hour merely; or even for a day. A long absence was signified by the manner in which he pronounced the word "Adieu." All these circumstances recurred to his mind, with feelings of deep affection for Athos, with that horror of isolation and solitude which invariably besets the minds of those who love; and all these combined rendered poor Grimaud very melancholy, and particularly uneasy. Without being able to account to himself for what he did since his master's departure, he wandered about the room, seeking, as it were, for some traces of him, like a faithful dog, who is not exactly uneasy about his absent master, but at least is restless. Only as, in addition to the instinct of the animal, Grimaud subjoined the reasoning faculties of the man, Grimaud therefore felt uneasy and restless too. Not having found any indication which could serve as a guide, and having neither seen nor discovered anything which could satisfy his doubts, Grimaud began to wonder what could possibly have happened. Besides, imagination is the resource, or rather the plague of gentle and affectionate hearts. In fact, never does a feeling heart represent its absent friend to itself as being happy or cheerful. Never does the dove that wings its flight in search of adventures inspire anything but terror at home.

Grimaud soon passed from uneasiness to terror; he carefully went over, in his own mind, everything that had taken place: D'Artagnan's letter to Athos, the letter which had seemed to distress Athos so much after he had read it; then Raoul's visit to Athos, which resulted in Athos desiring him (Grimaud) to get his various orders and his court dress ready to put on; then his interview with the king, at the end of which Athos had returned home so unusually gloomy; then the explanation between the father and the son, at the termination of which Athos had embraced Raoul with such sadness of expression, while Raoul himself went away equally weary and melancholy; and finally, D'Artagnan's arrival, biting, as if he were vexed, the end of his mustache, and leaving again in the carriage, accompanied by the Comte de la Fere. All this composed a drama in five acts very clearly, particularly for so analytical an observer as Grimaud.

The first step he took was to search in his master's coat for M. d'Artagnan's letter; he found the letter still there, and its contents were found to run as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND,—Raoul has been to ask me for some particulars about the conduct of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, during our young friend's residence in London. I am a poor captain of musketeers, and I am sickened to death every day by hearing all the scandal of the barracks and bedside conversations. If I had told Raoul all I believe, I know the poor fellow would have died of it; but I am in the king's service, and cannot relate all I hear about the king's affairs. If your heart tells you to do it, set off at once; the matter concerns you more than it does myself, and almost as much as Raoul."

Grimaud tore, not a handful, but a finger-and-thumbful of hair out of his head; he would have done more if his head of hair had been in a more flourishing condition.

"Yes," he said, "that is the key of the whole enigma. The young girl has been playing her pranks; what people say about her and the king is true, then; our young master has been deceived; he ought to know it. Monsieur le comte has been to see the king, and has told him a piece of his mind; and then the king sent M. d'Artagnan to arrange the affair. Ah! gracious goodness!" continued Grimaud, "monsieur le comte, I now remember, returned without his sword."

This discovery made the perspiration break out all over poor Grimaud's face. He did not waste any more time in useless conjecture, but clapped his hat on his head, and ran to Raoul's lodgings. Raoul, after Louise had left him, had mastered his grief, if not his affection; and, compelled to look forward on that perilous road over which madness and revulsion were hurrying him, he had seen, from the very first glance, his father exposed to the royal obstinacy, since Athos had himself been the first to oppose any resistance to the royal will. At this moment, from a very natural sequence of feeling, the unhappy young man remembered the mysterious signs which Athos had made, and the unexpected visit of D'Artagnan; the result of the conflict between a sovereign and a subject revealed itself to his terrified vision. As D'Artagnan was on duty, that is, a fixture at his post without the possibility of leaving it, it was certainly not likely that he had come to pay Athos a visit merely for the pleasure of seeing him. He must have come to say something to him. This something in the midst of such painful conjectures must have been the news of either a misfortune or a danger. Raoul trembled at having been so selfish as to have forgotten his father for his affection; at having, in a word, passed his time in idle dreams, or in an indulgence of despair, at a time when a necessity existed for repelling such an imminent attack on Athos. The very idea nearly drove him frantic; he buckled on his sword and ran towards his father's lodgings. On his way there he encountered Grimaud, who, having set off from the opposite pole, was running with equal eagerness in search of the truth. The two men embraced each other most warmly.

"Grimaud," exclaimed Raoul, "is the comte well?"

"Have you seen him?"

"No; where is he?"

"I am trying to find out."

"And M. d'Artagnan?"

"Went out with him."

"When?"

"Ten minutes after you did."

"In what way did they go out?"

"In a carriage."

"Where did they go?"

"I have no idea at all."

"Did my father take any money with him?"

"No."

"Or his sword?"

"No."

"I have an idea, Grimaud, that M. d'Artagnan came in order to—"

"Arrest monsieur le comte, do you not think, monsieur?"

"Yes, Grimaud."

"I could have sworn it."

"What road did they take?"

"The way leading towards the quay."

"To the Bastille, then?"

"Yes, yes."

"Quick, quick; let us run."

"Yes, let us not lose a moment."

"But where are we to go?" said Raoul, overwhelmed.

"We will go to M. d'Artagnan's first, we may perhaps learn something there."

"No; if they keep me in ignorance at my father's, they will do the same everywhere. Let us go to—Oh, good heavens! why, I must be mad to-day, Grimaud; I have forgotten M. du Vallon, who is waiting for and expecting me still."

"Where is he, then?"

"At the Minimes of Vincennes."

"Thank goodness, that is on the same side as the Bastille. I will run and saddle the horses, and we will go at once," said Grimaud.

"Do, my friend, do."

LXVI. In Which Porthos Is Convinced without Having Understood Anything.

The good and worthy Porthos, faithful to all the laws of ancient chivalry, had determined to wait for M. de Saint-Aignan until sunset; and as Saint-Aignan did not come, as Raoul had forgotten to communicate with his second, and as he found that waiting so long was very wearisome, Porthos had desired one of the gate-keepers to fetch him a few bottles of good wine and a good joint of meat,—so that, at least, he might pass away the time by means of a glass or two and a mouthful of something to eat. He had just finished when Raoul arrived, escorted by Grimaud, both of them riding at full speed. As soon as Porthos saw the two cavaliers riding at such a pace along the road, he did not for a moment doubt but that they were the men he was expecting, and he rose from the grass upon which he had been indolently reclining and began to stretch his legs and arms, saying, "See what it is to have good habits. The fellow has finished by coming, after all. If I had gone away he would have found no one here and would have taken advantage of that." He then threw himself into a martial attitude, and drew himself up to the full height of his gigantic stature. But instead of Saint-Aignan, he only saw Raoul, who, with the most despairing gestures, accosted him by crying out, "Pray forgive me, my dear friend, I am most wretched."

"Raoul!" cried Porthos, surprised.

"You have been angry with me?" said Raoul, embracing Porthos.

"I? What for?"

"For having forgotten you. But I assure you my head seems utterly lost. If you only knew!"

"You have killed him?"

"Who?"

"Saint-Aignan; or, if that is not the case, what is the matter?"

"The matter is, that Monsieur le Comte de la Fere has by this time been arrested."

Porthos gave a start that would have thrown down a wall.

"Arrested!" he cried out; "by whom?"

"By D'Artagnan."

"It is impossible," said Porthos.

"My dear friend, it is perfectly true."

Porthos turned towards Grimaud, as if he needed a second confirmation of the intelligence.

Grimaud nodded his head. "And where have they taken him?"

"Probably to the Bastille."

"What makes you think that?"

"As we came along we questioned some persons, who saw the carriage pass; and others who saw it enter the Bastille."

"Oh!" muttered Porthos.

"What do you intend to do?" inquired Raoul.

"I? Nothing; only I will not have Athos remain at the Bastille."

"Do you know," said Raoul, advancing nearer to Porthos, "that the arrest was made by order of the king?"

Porthos looked at the young man, as if to say, "What does that matter to me?" This dumb language seemed so eloquent of meaning to Raoul that he did not ask any other question. He mounted his horse again; and Porthos, assisted by Grimaud, had already done the same.

"Let us arrange our plan of action," said Raoul.

"Yes," returned Porthos, "that is the best thing we can do."

Raoul sighed deeply, and then paused suddenly.

"What is the matter?" asked Porthos; "are you faint?"

"No, only I feel how utterly helpless our position is. Can we three pretend to go and take the Bastille?"

"Well, if D'Artagnan were only here," replied Porthos, "I am not so very certain we would fail."

Raoul could not resist a feeling of admiration at the sight of such perfect confidence, heroic in its simplicity. These were truly the celebrated men who, by three or four, attacked armies and assaulted castles! Men who had terrified death itself, who had survived the wrecks of a tempestuous age, and still stood, stronger than the most robust of the young.

"Monsieur," said he to Porthos, "you have just given me an idea; we absolutely must see M. d'Artagnan."

"Undoubtedly."

"He ought by this time to have returned home, after having taken my father to the Bastille. Let us go to his house."

"First inquire at the Bastille," said Grimaud, who was in the habit of speaking little, but that to the purpose.

Accordingly, they hastened towards the fortress, when one of those chances which Heaven bestows on men of strong will caused Grimaud suddenly to perceive the carriage, which was entering by the great gate of the drawbridge. This was the moment that D'Artagnan was, as we have seen, returning from his visit to the king. In vain was it that Raoul urged on his horse in order to join the carriage, and to see whom it contained. The horses had already gained the other side of the great gate, which again closed, while one of the sentries struck the nose of Raoul's horse with his musket; Raoul turned about, only too happy to find he had ascertained something respecting the carriage which had contained his father.

"We have him," said Grimaud.

"If we wait a little it is certain he will leave; don't you think so, my friend?"

"Unless, indeed, D'Artagnan also be a prisoner," replied Porthos, "in which case everything is lost."

Raoul returned no answer, for any hypothesis was admissible. He instructed Grimaud to lead the horses to the little street Jean-Beausire, so as to give rise to less suspicion, and himself with his piercing gaze watched for the exit either of D'Artagnan or the carriage. Nor had he decided wrongly; for twenty minutes had not elapsed before the gate reopened and the carriage reappeared. A dazzling of the eyes prevented Raoul from distinguishing what figures occupied the interior. Grimaud averred that he had seen two persons, and that one of them was his master. Porthos kept looking at Raoul and Grimaud by turns, in the hope of understanding their idea.

"It is clear," said Grimaud, "that if the comte is in the carriage, either he is set at liberty or they are taking him to another prison."

"We shall soon see that by the road he takes," answered Porthos.

"If he is set at liberty," said Grimaud, "they will conduct him home."

"True," rejoined Porthos.

"The carriage does not take that way," cried Raoul; and indeed the horses were just disappearing down the Faubourg St. Antoine.

"Let us hasten," said Porthos; "we will attack the carriage on the road and tell Athos to flee."

"Rebellion," murmured Raoul.

Porthos darted a second glance at Raoul, quite worthy of the first. Raoul replied only by spurring the flanks of his steed. In a few moments the three cavaliers had overtaken the carriage, and followed it so closely that their horses' breath moistened the back of it. D'Artagnan, whose senses were ever on the alert, heard the trot of the horses, at the moment when Raoul was telling Porthos to pass the chariot, so as to see who was the person accompanying Athos. Porthos complied, but could not see anything, for the blinds were lowered. Rage and impatience were gaining mastery over Raoul. He had just noticed the mystery preserved by Athos's companion, and determined on proceeding to extremities. On his part D'Artagnan had perfectly recognized Porthos, and Raoul also, from under the blinds, and had communicated to the comte the result of his observation. They were desirous only of seeing whether Raoul and Porthos would push the affair to the uttermost. And this they speedily did, for Raoul, presenting his pistol, threw himself on the leader, commanding the coachmen to stop. Porthos seized the coachman, and dragged him from his seat. Grimaud already had hold of the carriage door. Raoul threw open his arms, exclaiming, "M. le comte! M. le comte!"

"Ah! is it you, Raoul?" said Athos, intoxicated with joy.

"Not bad, indeed!" added D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter, and they both embraced the young man and Porthos, who had taken possession of them.

"My brave Porthos! best of friends," cried Athos, "it is still the same old way with you."

"He is still only twenty," said D'Artagnan, "brave Porthos!"

"Confound it," answered Porthos, slightly confused, "we thought that you were being arrested."

"While," rejoined Athos, "the matter in question was nothing but my taking a drive in M. d'Artagnan's carriage."

"But we followed you from the Bastille," returned Raoul, with a tone of suspicion and reproach.

"Where we had been to take supper with our friend M. Baisemeaux. Do you recollect Baisemeaux, Porthos?"

"Very well, indeed."

"And there we saw Aramis."

"In the Bastille?"

"At supper."

"Ah!" said Porthos, again breathing freely.

"He gave us a thousand messages to you."

"And where is M. le comte going?" asked Grimaud, already recompensed by a smile from his master.

"We were going home to Blois."

"How can that be?"

"At once?" said Raoul.

"Yes, right forward."

"Without any luggage?"

"Oh! Raoul would have been instructed to forward me mine, or to bring it with him on his return, *if* he returns."

"If nothing detains him longer in Paris," said D'Artagnan, with a glance firm and cutting as steel, and as painful (for it reopened the poor young fellow's wounds), "he will do well to follow you, Athos."

"There is nothing to keep me any longer in Paris," said Raoul.

"Then we will go immediately."

"And M. d'Artagnan?"

"Oh! as for me, I was only accompanying Athos as far as the barrier, and I return with Porthos."

"Very good," said the latter.

"Come, my son," added the comte, gently passing his arm around Raoul's neck to draw him into the carriage, and again embracing him. "Grimaud," continued the comte, "you will return quietly to Paris with your horse and M. du Vallon's, for Raoul and I will mount here and give up the carriage to these two gentlemen to return to Paris in; and then, as soon as you arrive, you will take my clothes and letters and forward the whole to me at home."

"But," observed Raoul, who was anxious to make the comte converse, "when you return to Paris, there will not be a single thing there for you—which will be very inconvenient."

"I think it will be a very long time, Raoul, ere I return to Paris. The last sojourn we have made there has not been of a nature to encourage me to repeat it."

Raoul hung down his head and said not a word more. Athos descended from the carriage and mounted the horse which had brought Porthos, and which seemed no little pleased at the exchange. Then they embraced, and clasped each other's hands, and interchanged a thousand pledges of eternal friendship. Porthos promised to spend a month with Athos at the first opportunity. D'Artagnan engaged to take advantage of his first leave of absence; and then, having embraced Raoul for the last time: "To you, my boy," said he, "I will write." Coming from D'Artagnan, who he knew wrote very seldom, these words expressed everything. Raoul was moved even to tears. He tore himself away from the musketeer and departed.

D'Artagnan rejoined Porthos in the carriage: "Well," said he, "my dear friend, what a day we have had!"

"Indeed we have," answered Porthos.

"You must be quite worn out."

"Not quite; however, I shall retire early to rest, so as to be ready for to-morrow."

"And wherefore?"

"Why! to complete what I have begun."

"You make me shudder, my friend, you seem to me quite angry. What the devil *have* you begun which is not finished?"

"Listen; Raoul has not fought, but *I* must fight!"

"With whom? with the king?"

"How!" exclaimed Porthos, astounded, "with the king?"

"Yes, I say, you great baby, with the king."

"I assure you it is with M. Saint-Aignan."

"Look now, this is what I mean; you draw your sword against the king in fighting with this gentleman."

"Ah!" said Porthos, staring; "are you sure of it?"

"Indeed I am."

"What in the world are we to do, then?"

"We must try and make a good supper, Porthos. The captain of the musketeers keeps a tolerable table. There you will see the handsome Saint-Aignan, and will drink his health."

"I?" cried Porthos, horrified.

"What!" said D'Artagnan, "you refuse to drink the king's health?"

"But, body alive! I am not talking to you about the king at all; I am speaking of M. de Saint-Aignan."

"But when I repeat that it is the same thing?"

"Ah, well, well!" said Porthos, overcome.

"You understand, don't you?"

"No," answered Porthos, "but 'tis all the same."

LXVII. M. de Baisemeaux's "Society."

The reader has not forgotten that, on quitting the Bastille, D'Artagnan and the Comte de la Fere had left Aramis in close confabulation with Baisemeaux. When once these two guests had departed, Baisemeaux did not in the least perceive that the conversation suffered by their absence. He used to think that wine after supper, and that of the Bastille in particular, was excellent, and that it was a stimulation quite sufficient to make any honest man talkative. But he little knew his Greatness, who was never more impenetrable than at dessert. His Greatness, however, perfectly understood M. de Baisemeaux, when he reckoned on making the governor discourse by the means which the latter regarded as efficacious. The conversation, therefore, without flagging in appearance, flagged in reality; for Baisemeaux not only had it nearly all to himself, but further, kept speaking only of that singular event, the incarceration of Athos, followed by so prompt an order to set him again at liberty. Nor, moreover, had Baisemeaux failed to observe that the two orders of arrest and of liberation, were both in the king's hand. But then, the king would not take the trouble to write similar orders except under pressing circumstances. All this was very interesting, and, above all, very puzzling to Baisemeaux; but as, on the other hand, all this was very clear to Aramis, the latter did not attach to the occurrence the same importance as did the worthy governor. Besides, Aramis rarely put himself out of the way for anything, and he had not yet told M. de Baisemeaux for what reason he had now done so. And so at the very climax of Baisemeaux's dissertation, Aramis suddenly interrupted him.

"Tell me, my dear Baisemeaux," said he, "have you never had any other diversions at the Bastille than those at which I assisted during the two or three visits I have had the honour to pay you?"

This address was so unexpected that the governor, like a vane which suddenly receives an impulsion opposed to that of the wind, was quite dumbfounded at it. "Diversions!" said he; "but I take them continually, my lord."

"Oh, to be sure! And these diversions?"

"Are of every kind."

"Visits, no doubt?"

"No, not visits. Visits are not frequent at the Bastille."

"What, are visits rare, then?"

"Very much so."

"Even on the part of your society?"

"What do you term my society—the prisoners?"

"Oh, no!—your prisoners, indeed! I know well it is you who visit them, and not they you. By your society, I mean, my dear Baisemeaux, the society of which you are a member."

Baisemeaux looked fixedly at Aramis, and then, as if the idea which had flashed across his mind were impossible, "Oh," he said, "I have very little society at present. If I must own it to you, dear M. d'Herblay, the fact is, to stay at the Bastille appears, for the most part, distressing and distasteful to persons of the gay world. As for the ladies, it is never without a certain dread, which costs me infinite trouble to allay, that they succeed in reaching my quarters. And, indeed, how should they avoid trembling a little, poor things, when they see those gloomy dungeons, and reflect that they are inhabited by prisoners who—" And in proportion as the eyes of Baisemeaux concentrated their gaze on the face of Aramis, the worthy governor's tongue faltered more and more until it ended by stopping altogether.

"No, you don't understand me, my dear M. Baisemeaux; you don't understand me. I do not at all mean to speak of society in general, but of a particular society—of *the* society, in a word—to which you are affiliated."

Baisemeaux nearly dropped the glass of muscat which he was in the act of raising to his lips. "Affiliated," cried he, "affiliated!"

"Yes, affiliated, undoubtedly," repeated Aramis, with the greatest self-possession. "Are you not a member of a secret society, my dear M. Baisemeaux?"

"Secret?"

"Secret or mysterious."

"Oh, M. d'Herblay!"

"Consider, now, don't deny it."

"But believe me."

"I believe what I know."

"I swear to you."

"Listen to me, my dear M. Baisemeaux; I say yes, you say no; one of us two necessarily says what is true, and the other, it inevitably follows, what is false."

"Well, and then?"

"Well, we shall come to an understanding presently."

"Let us see," said Baisemeaux; "let us see."

"Now drink your glass of muscat, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," said Aramis. "What the devil! you look quite scared."

"No, no; not the least in the world; oh, no."

"Drink then." Baisemeaux drank, but he swallowed the wrong way.

"Well," resumed Aramis, "if, I say, you are not a member of a secret or mysterious society, which you like to call it—the epithet is of no consequence—if, I say, you are not a member of a society similar to that I wish to designate, well, then, you will not understand a word of what I am going to say. That is all."

"Oh! be sure beforehand that I shall not understand anything."

"Well, well!"

"Try, now; let us see!"

"That is what I am going to do."

"If, on the contrary, you are one of the members of this society, you will immediately answer me—yes or no."

"Begin your questions," continued Baisemeaux, trembling.

"You will agree, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," continued Aramis, with the same impassibility, "that it is evident a man cannot be a member of a society, it is evident that he cannot enjoy the advantages it offers to the affiliated, without being himself bound to certain little services."

"In short," stammered Baisemeaux, "that would be intelligible, if—"

"Well," resumed Aramis, "there is in the society of which I speak, and of which, as it seems you are not a member—"

"Allow me," said Baisemeaux. "I should not like to say absolutely."

"There is an engagement entered into by all the governors and captains of fortresses affiliated to the order." Baisemeaux grew pale.

"Now the engagement," continued Aramis firmly, "is of this nature."

Baisemeaux rose, manifesting unspeakable emotion: "Go on, dear M. d'Herblay: go on," said he.

Aramis then spoke, or rather recited the following paragraph, in the same tone as if he had been reading it from a book: "The aforesaid captain or governor of a fortress shall allow to enter, when need shall arise, and on demand of the prisoner, a confessor affiliated to the order." He stopped. Baisemeaux was quite distressing to look at, being so wretchedly pale and trembling. "Is not that the text of the agreement?" quietly asked Aramis.

"My lord!" began Baisemeaux.

"Ah! well, you begin to understand, I think."

"My lord," cried Baisemeaux, "do not trifle so with my unhappy mind! I find myself as nothing in your hands, if you have the malignant desire to draw from me the little secrets of my administration."

"Oh! by no means; pray undeceive yourself, dear M. Baisemeaux; it is not the little secrets of your administration, but those of your conscience that I aim at."

"Well, then, my conscience be it, dear M. d'Herblay. But have some consideration for the situation I am in, which is no ordinary one."

"It is no ordinary one, my dear monsieur," continued the inflexible Aramis, "if you are a member of this society; but it is a quite natural one if free from all engagement. You are answerable only to the king."

"Well, monsieur, well! I obey only the king, and whom else would you have a French nobleman obey?"

Aramis did not yield an inch, but with that silvery voice of his continued: "It is very pleasant," said he, "for a French nobleman, for a prelate of France, to hear a man of your mark express himself so loyally, dear De Baisemeaux, and having heard you to believe no more than you do."

"Have you doubted, monsieur?"

"I? oh, no!"

"And so you doubt no longer?"

"I have no longer any doubt that such a man as you, monsieur," said Aramis, gravely, "does not faithfully serve the masters whom he voluntarily chose for himself."

"Masters!" cried Baisemeaux.

"Yes, masters, I said."

"Monsieur d'Herblay, you are still jesting, are you not?"

"Oh, yes! I understand that it is a more difficult position to have several masters than one; but the embarrassment is owing to you, my dear Baisemeaux, and I am not the cause of it."

"Certainly not," returned the unfortunate governor, more embarrassed than ever; "but what are you doing? You are leaving the table?"

"Assuredly."

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I am going."

"But you are behaving very strangely towards me, my lord."

"I am behaving strangely—how do you make that out?"

"Have you sworn, then, to put me to the torture?"

"No, I should be sorry to do so."

"Remain, then."

"I cannot."

"And why?"

"Because I have no longer anything to do here; and, indeed, I have duties to fulfil elsewhere."

"Duties, so late as this?"

"Yes; understand me now, my dear De Baisemeaux: they told me at the place whence I came, 'The aforesaid governor or captain will allow to enter, as need shall arise, on the prisoner's demand, a confessor affiliated with the order.' I came; you do not know what I mean, and so I shall return to tell them that they are mistaken, and that they must send me elsewhere."



“What! you are—” cried Baisemeaux, looking at Aramis almost in terror.

“The confessor affiliated to the order,” said Aramis, without changing his voice.

But, gentle as the words were, they had the same effect on the unhappy governor as a clap of thunder. Baisemeaux became livid, and it seemed to him as if Aramis’s beaming eyes were two forks of flame, piercing to the very bottom of his soul. “The confessor!” murmured he; “you, my lord, the confessor of the order!”

“Yes, I; but we have nothing to unravel together, seeing that you are not one of the affiliated.”

“My lord!”

“And I understand that, not being so, you refuse to comply with its command.”

“My lord, I beseech you, condescend to hear me.”

“And wherefore?”

“My lord, I do not say that I have nothing to do with the society.”

“Ah! ah!”

“I say not that I refuse to obey.”

“Nevertheless, M. de Baisemeaux, what has passed wears very much the air of resistance.”

“Oh, no! my lord, no; I only wished to be certain.”

“To be certain of what?” said Aramis, in a tone of supreme contempt.

“Of nothing at all, my lord.” Baisemeaux lowered his voice, and bending before the prelate, said, “I am at all times and in all places at the disposal of my superiors, but—”

“Very good. I like you better thus, monsieur,” said Aramis, as he resumed his seat, and put out his glass to Baisemeaux, whose hand trembled so that he could not fill it. “You were saying ‘but’—” continued Aramis.

“But,” replied the unhappy man, “having received no notice, I was very far from expecting it.”

“Does not the Gospel say, ‘Watch, for the moment is known only of God?’ Do not the rules of the order say, ‘Watch, for that which I will, you ought always to will also.’ And what pretext will serve you now that you did not expect the confessor, M. de Baisemeaux?”

“Because, my lord, there is at present in the Bastille no prisoner ill.”

Aramis shrugged his shoulders. “What do you know about that?” said he.

“But, nevertheless, it appears to me—”

“M. de Baisemeaux,” said Aramis, turning round in his chair, “here is your servant, who wishes to speak with you;” and at this moment, De Baisemeaux’s servant appeared at the threshold of the door.

“What is it?” asked Baisemeaux, sharply.

“Monsieur,” said the man, “they are bringing you the doctor’s return.”

Aramis looked at De Baisemeaux with a calm and confident eye.

“Well,” said he, “let the messenger enter.”

The messenger entered, saluted, and handed in the report. Baisemeaux ran his eye over it, and raising his head, said in surprise, “No. 12 is ill!”

“How was it, then,” said Aramis, carelessly, “that you told me everybody was well in your hotel, M. de Baisemeaux?” And he emptied his glass without removing his eyes from Baisemeaux.

The governor then made a sign to the messenger, and when he had quitted the room, said, still trembling, “I think that there is in the article, ‘on the prisoner’s demand.’”

“Yes, it is so,” answered Aramis. “But see what it is they want with you now.”

And that moment a sergeant put his head in at the door. “What do you want now?” cried Baisemeaux. “Can you not leave me in peace for ten minutes?”

“Monsieur,” said the sergeant, “the sick man, No. 12, has commissioned the turnkey to request you to send him a confessor.”

Baisemeaux very nearly sank on the floor; but Aramis disdained to reassure him, just as he had disdained to terrify him. “What must I answer?” inquired Baisemeaux.

“Just what you please,” replied Aramis, compressing his lips; “that is your business. *I* am not the governor of the Bastille.”

“Tell the prisoner,” cried Baisemeaux, quickly,—“tell the prisoner that his request is granted.” The sergeant left the room. “Oh! my lord, my lord,” murmured Baisemeaux, “how could I have suspected!—how could I have foreseen this!”

“Who requested you to suspect, and who besought you to foresee?” contemptuously answered Aramis. “The order suspects; the order knows; the order foresees—is that not enough?”

“What is it you command?” added Baisemeaux.

“I?—nothing at all. I am nothing but a poor priest, a simple confessor. Have I your orders to go and see the sufferer?”

“Oh, my lord, I do not order; I pray you to go.”

“‘Tis well; conduct me to him.”

#### The Prisoner.

Since Aramis’s singular transformation into a confessor of the order, Baisemeaux was no longer the same man. Up to that period, the place which Aramis had held in the worthy governor’s estimation was that of a prelate whom he respected and a friend to whom he owed a debt of gratitude; but now he felt himself an inferior, and that Aramis was his master. He himself lighted a lantern, summoned a turnkey, and said, returning to Aramis, “I am at your orders, my lord.” Aramis merely nodded his head, as much as to say, “Very good”; and signed to him with his hand to lead the way. Baisemeaux advanced, and Aramis followed him. It was a calm and lovely starlit night; the steps of three men resounded on the flags of the terraces, and the clinking of the keys hanging from the jailer’s girdle made itself heard up to the stories of the towers, as if to remind the prisoners that the liberty of earth was a luxury beyond their reach. It might have been said that the alteration effected in Baisemeaux extended even to the prisoners. The turnkey, the same who, on Aramis’s first arrival had shown himself so inquisitive and curious, was now not only silent, but impassible. He held his head down, and seemed afraid to keep his ears open. In this wise they reached the basement of the Bertaudiere, the two first stories of which were mounted silently and somewhat slowly; for Baisemeaux, though far from disobeying, was far from exhibiting any eagerness to obey. On arriving at the door, Baisemeaux showed a disposition to enter the prisoner’s chamber; but Aramis, stopping him on the threshold, said, “The rules do not allow the governor to hear the prisoner’s confession.”

Baisemeaux bowed, and made way for Aramis, who took the lantern and entered; and then signed to them to close the door behind him. For an instant he remained standing, listening whether Baisemeaux and the turnkey had retired; but as soon as he was assured by the sound of their descending footsteps that they had left the tower, he put the lantern on the table and gazed around. On a bed of green serge, similar in all respect to the other beds in the Bastille, save that it was newer, and under curtains half-drawn, reposed a young man, to whom we have already once before introduced Aramis. According to custom, the prisoner was without a light. At the hour of curfew, he was bound to extinguish his lamp, and we perceive how much he was favoured, in being allowed to keep it burning even till then. Near the bed a large leathern armchair, with twisted legs, sustained his clothes. A little table—without pens, books, paper, or ink—stood neglected in sadness near the window; while several plates, still unemptied, showed that the prisoner had scarcely touched his evening meal. Aramis saw that the young man was stretched upon his bed, his face half concealed by his arms. The arrival of a visitor did not caused any change of position; either he was waiting in expectation, or was asleep. Aramis lighted the candle from the lantern, pushed back the armchair, and approached the bed with an evident mixture of interest and respect. The young man raised his head. “What is it?” said he.

“You desired a confessor?” replied Aramis.

“Yes.”

“Because you were ill?”

“Yes.”

“Very ill?”

The young man gave Aramis a piercing glance, and answered, “I thank you.” After a moment’s silence, “I have seen you before,” he continued. Aramis bowed.

Doubtless the scrutiny the prisoner had just made of the cold, crafty, and imperious character stamped upon the features of the bishop of Vannes was little reassuring to one in his situation, for he added, “I am better.”

“And so?” said Aramis.

“Why, then—being better, I have no longer the same need of a confessor, I think.”

“Not even of the hair-cloth, which the note you found in your bread informed you of?”

The young man started; but before he had either assented or denied, Aramis continued, “Not even of the ecclesiastic from whom you were to hear an important revelation?”

“If it be so,” said the young man, sinking again on his pillow, “it is different; I am listening.”

Aramis then looked at him more closely, and was struck with the easy majesty of his mien, one which can never be acquired unless Heaven has implanted it in the blood or heart. “Sit down, monsieur,” said the prisoner.

Aramis bowed and obeyed. “How does the Bastille agree with you?” asked the bishop.

“Very well.”

“You do not suffer?”

“No.”

“You have nothing to regret?”

“Nothing.”

“Not even your liberty?”

“What do you call liberty, monsieur?” asked the prisoner, with the tone of a man who is preparing for a struggle.

“I call liberty, the flowers, the air, light, the stars, the happiness of going whithersoever the sinewy limbs of one-and-twenty chance to wish to carry you.”

The young man smiled, whether in resignation or contempt, it was difficult to tell. “Look,” said he, “I have in that Japanese vase two roses gathered yesterday evening in the bud from the governor’s garden; this morning they have blown and spread their vermilion chalice beneath my gaze; with every opening petal they unfold the treasures of their perfumes, filling my chamber with a fragrance that embalms it. Look now on these two roses; even among roses these are beautiful, and the rose is the most beautiful of flowers. Why, then, do you bid me desire other flowers when I possess the loveliest of all?”

Aramis gazed at the young man in surprise.

“If *flowers* constitute liberty,” sadly resumed the captive, “I am free, for I possess them.”

“But the air!” cried Aramis; “air is so necessary to life!”

“Well, monsieur,” returned the prisoner; “draw near to the window; it is open. Between high heaven and earth the wind whirls on its waftages of hail and lightning, exhales its torrid mist or breathes in gentle breezes. It caresses my face. When mounted on the back of this armchair, with my arm around the bars of the window to sustain myself, I fancy I am swimming the wide expanse before me.”

The countenance of Aramis darkened as the young man continued: “Light I have! what is better than light? I have the sun, a friend who comes to visit me every day without the permission of the governor or the jailer’s company. He comes in at the window, and traces in my room a square the shape of the window, which lights up the hangings of my bed and floods the very floor. This luminous square increases from ten o’clock till midday, and decreases from one till three slowly, as if, having hastened to my presence, it sorrowed at bidding me farewell. When its last ray disappears I have enjoyed its presence for five hours. Is not that sufficient? I have been told that there are unhappy beings who dig in quarries, and laborers who toil in mines, who never behold it at all.” Aramis wiped the drops from his brow. “As to the stars which are so delightful to view,” continued the young man, “they all resemble each other save in size and brilliancy. I am a favoured mortal, for if you had not lighted that candle you would have been able to see the beautiful stars which I was gazing at from my couch before your arrival, whose silvery rays were stealing through my brain.”

Aramis lowered his head; he felt himself overwhelmed with the bitter flow of that sinister philosophy which is the religion of the captive.

"So much, then, for the flowers, the air, the daylight, and the stars," tranquilly continued the young man; "there remains but exercise. Do I not walk all day in the governor's garden if it is fine—here if it rains? in the fresh air if it is warm; in perfect warmth, thanks to my winter stove, if it be cold? Ah! monsieur, do you fancy," continued the prisoner, not without bitterness, "that men have not done everything for me that a man can hope for or desire?"

"Men!" said Aramis; "be it so; but it seems to me you are forgetting Heaven."

"Indeed I have forgotten Heaven," murmured the prisoner, with emotion; "but why do you mention it? Of what use is it to talk to a prisoner of Heaven?"

Aramis looked steadily at this singular youth, who possessed the resignation of a martyr with the smile of an atheist. "Is not Heaven in everything?" he murmured in a reproachful tone.

"Say rather, at the end of everything," answered the prisoner, firmly.

"Be it so," said Aramis; "but let us return to our starting-point."

"I ask nothing better," returned the young man.

"I am your confessor."

"Yes."

"Well, then, you ought, as a penitent, to tell me the truth."

"My whole desire is to tell it you."

"Every prisoner has committed some crime for which he has been imprisoned. What crime, then, have you committed?"

"You asked me the same question the first time you saw me," returned the prisoner.

"And then, as now you evaded giving me an answer."

"And what reason have you for thinking that I shall now reply to you?"

"Because this time I am your confessor."

"Then if you wish me to tell what crime I have committed, explain to me in what a crime consists. For as my conscience does not accuse me, I aver that I am not a criminal."

"We are often criminals in the sight of the great of the earth, not alone for having ourselves committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed."

The prisoner manifested the deepest attention.

"Yes, I understand you," he said, after a pause; "yes, you are right, monsieur; it is very possible that, in such a light, I am a criminal in the eyes of the great of the earth."

"Ah! then you know something," said Aramis, who thought he had pierced not merely through a defect in the harness, but through the joints of it.

"No, I am not aware of anything," replied the young man; "but sometimes I think—and I say to myself—"

"What do you say to yourself?"

"That if I were to think but a little more deeply I should either go mad or I should divine a great deal."

"And then—and then?" said Aramis, impatiently.

"Then I leave off."

"You leave off?"

"Yes; my head becomes confused and my ideas melancholy; I feel *ennui* overtaking me; I wish—"

"What?"

"I don't know; but I do not like to give myself up to longing for things which I do not possess, when I am so happy with what I have."

"You are afraid of death?" said Aramis, with a slight uneasiness.

"Yes," said the young man, smiling.

Aramis felt the chill of that smile, and shuddered. "Oh, as you fear death, you know more about matters than you say," he cried.

"And you," returned the prisoner, "who bade me to ask to see you; you, who, when I did ask to see you, came here promising a world of confidence; how is it that, nevertheless, it is you who are silent, leaving it for me to speak? Since, then, we both wear masks, either let us both retain them or put them aside together."

Aramis felt the force and justice of the remark, saying to himself, "This is no ordinary man; I must be cautious.—Are you ambitious?" said he suddenly to the prisoner, aloud, without preparing him for the alteration.

"What do you mean by ambitious?" replied the youth.

"Ambition," replied Aramis, "is the feeling which prompts a man to desire more—much more—than he possesses."

"I said that I was contented, monsieur; but, perhaps, I deceive myself. I am ignorant of the nature of ambition; but it is not impossible I may have some. Tell me your mind; that is all I ask."

"An ambitious man," said Aramis, "is one who covets that which is beyond his station."

"I covet nothing beyond my station," said the young man, with an assurance of manner which for the second time made the bishop of Vannes tremble.

He was silent. But to look at the kindling eye, the knitted brow, and the reflective attitude of the captive, it was evident that he expected something more than silence,—a silence which Aramis now broke. "You lied the first time I saw you," said he.

"Lied!" cried the young man, starting up on his couch, with such a tone in his voice, and such a lightning in his eyes, that Aramis recoiled, in spite of himself.

"I *should* say," returned Aramis, bowing, "you concealed from me what you knew of your infancy."

"A man's secrets are his own, monsieur," retorted the prisoner, "and not at the mercy of the first chance-comer."

"True," said Aramis, bowing still lower than before, "'tis true; pardon me, but to-day do I still occupy the place of a chance-comer? I beseech you to reply, my lord."

This title slightly disturbed the prisoner; but nevertheless he did not appear astonished that it was given him. "I do not know you, monsieur," said he.

"Oh, but if I dared, I would take your hand and kiss it!"

The young man seemed as if he were going to give Aramis his hand; but the light which beamed in his eyes faded away, and he coldly and distrustfully withdrew his hand again. "Kiss the hand of a prisoner," he said, shaking his head, "to what purpose?"

"Why did you tell me," said Aramis, "that you were happy here? Why, that you aspired to nothing? Why, in a word, by thus speaking, do you prevent me from being frank in my turn?"

The same light shone a third time in the young man's eyes, but died ineffectually away as before.

"You distrust me," said Aramis.

"And why say you so, monsieur?"

"Oh, for a very simple reason; if you know what you ought to know, you ought to mistrust everybody."

"Then do not be astonished that I am mistrustful, since you suspect me of knowing what I do not know."

Aramis was struck with admiration at this energetic resistance. "Oh, my lord! you drive me to despair," said he, striking the armchair with his fist.

"And, on my part, I do not comprehend you, monsieur."

"Well, then, try to understand me." The prisoner looked fixedly at Aramis.

"Sometimes it seems to me," said the latter, "that I have before me the man whom I seek, and then—"

"And then your man disappears,—is it not so?" said the prisoner, smiling. "So much the better."

Aramis rose. "Certainly," said he; "I have nothing further to say to a man who mistrusts me as you do."

"And I, monsieur," said the prisoner, in the same tone, "have nothing to say to a man who will not understand that a prisoner ought to be mistrustful of everybody."

"Even of his old friends," said Aramis. "Oh, my lord, you are *too* prudent!"

"Of my old friends?—you one of my old friends,—you?"

"Do you no longer remember," said Aramis, "that you once saw, in the village where your early years were spent—"

"Do you know the name of the village?" asked the prisoner.

"Noisy-le-Sec, my lord," answered Aramis, firmly.

"Go on," said the young man, with an immovable aspect.

"Stay, my lord," said Aramis; "if you are positively resolved to carry on this game, let us break off. I am here to tell you many things, 'tis true; but you must allow me to see that, on your side, you have a desire to know them. Before revealing the important matters I still withhold, be assured I am in need of some encouragement, if not candor; a little sympathy, if not confidence. But you keep yourself intrenched in a pretended which paralyzes me. Oh, not for the reason you think; for, ignorant as you may be, or indifferent as you feign to be, you are none the less what you are, my lord, and there is nothing—nothing, mark me! which can cause you not to be so."

"I promise you," replied the prisoner, "to hear you without impatience. Only it appears to me that I have a right to repeat the question I have already asked, 'Who *are* you?'"

"Do you remember, fifteen or eighteen years ago, seeing at Noisy-le-Sec a cavalier, accompanied by a lady in black silk, with flame-coloured ribbons in her hair?"

"Yes," said the young man; "I once asked the name of this cavalier, and they told me that he called himself the Abbe d'Herblay. I was astonished that the abbe had so warlike an air, and they replied that there was nothing singular in that, seeing that he was one of Louis XIII.'s musketeers."

"Well," said Aramis, "that musketeer and abbe, afterwards bishop of Vannes, is your confessor now."

"I know it; I recognized you."

"Then, my lord, if you know that, I must further add a fact of which you are ignorant—that if the king were to know this evening of the presence of this musketeer, this abbe, this bishop, this confessor, *here*—here, who has risked everything to visit you, to-morrow would behold the steely glitter of the executioner's axe in a dungeon more gloomy, more obscure than yours."

While listening to these words, delivered with emphasis, the young man had raised himself on his couch, and was now gazing more and more eagerly at Aramis.

The result of his scrutiny was that he appeared to derive some confidence from it. "Yes," he murmured, "I remember perfectly. The woman of whom you speak came once with you, and twice afterwards with another." He hesitated.

"With another, who came to see you every month—is it not so, my lord?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who this lady was?"

The light seemed ready to flash from the prisoner's eyes. "I am aware that she was one of the ladies of the court," he said.

"You remember that lady well, do you not?"

"Oh, my recollection can hardly be very confused on this head," said the young prisoner. "I saw that lady once with a gentleman about forty-five years old. I saw her once with you, and with the lady dressed in black. I have seen her twice since then with the same person. These four people, with my master, and old Perronnette, my jailer, and the governor of the prison, are the only persons with whom I have ever spoken, and, indeed, almost the only persons I have ever seen."

"Then you were in prison?"

"If I am a prisoner here, then I was comparatively free, although in a very narrow sense—a house I never quitted, a garden surrounded with walls I could not climb, these constituted my residence, but you know it, as you have been there. In a word, being accustomed to live within these bounds, I never cared to leave them. And so you will understand, monsieur, that having never seen anything of the world, I have nothing left to care for; and therefore, if you relate anything, you will be obliged to explain each item to me as you go along."

"And I will do so," said Aramis, bowing; "for it is my duty, my lord."

"Well, then, begin by telling me who was my tutor."

"A worthy and, above all, an honourable gentleman, my lord; fit guide for both body and soul. Had you ever any reason to complain of him?"

"Oh, no; quite the contrary. But this gentleman of yours often used to tell me that my father and mother were dead. Did he deceive me, or did he speak the truth?"

"He was compelled to comply with the orders given him."  
"Then he lied?"  
"In one respect. Your father is dead."  
"And my mother?"  
"She is dead *for you*."  
"But then she lives for others, does she not?"  
"Yes."  
"And I—and I, then" (the young man looked sharply at Aramis) "am compelled to live in the obscurity of a prison?"  
"Alas! I fear so."

"And that because my presence in the world would lead to the revelation of a great secret?"  
"Certainly, a very great secret."  
"My enemy must indeed be powerful, to be able to shut up in the Bastille a child such as I then was."

"He is."  
"More powerful than my mother, then?"  
"And why do you ask that?"  
"Because my mother would have taken my part."  
Aramis hesitated. "Yes, my lord; more powerful than your mother."  
"Seeing, then, that my nurse and preceptor were carried off, and that I, also, was separated from them—either they were, or I am, very dangerous to my enemy?"  
"Yes; but you are alluding to a peril from which he freed himself, by causing the nurse and preceptor to disappear," answered Aramis, quietly.  
"Disappear!" cried the prisoner, "how did they disappear?"  
"In a very sure way," answered Aramis—"they are dead."  
The young man turned pale, and passed his hand tremblingly over his face. "Poison?" he asked.  
"Poison."

The prisoner reflected a moment. "My enemy must indeed have been very cruel, or hard beset by necessity, to assassinate those two innocent people, my sole support; for the worthy gentleman and the poor nurse had never harmed a living being."  
"In your family, my lord, necessity is stern. And so it is necessity which compels me, to my great regret, to tell you that this gentleman and the unhappy lady have been assassinated."

"Oh, you tell me nothing I am not aware of," said the prisoner, knitting his brows.  
"How?"  
"I suspected it."  
"Why?"  
"I will tell you."

At this moment the young man, supporting himself on his two elbows, drew close to Aramis's face, with such an expression of dignity, of self-command and of defiance even, that the bishop felt the electricity of enthusiasm strike in devouring flashes from that great heart of his, into his brain of adamant.

"Speak, my lord. I have already told you that by conversing with you I endanger my life. Little value as it has, I implore you to accept it as the ransom of your own."

"Well," resumed the young man, "this is why I suspected they had killed my nurse and my preceptor—"

"Whom you used to call your father?"  
"Yes; whom I called my father, but whose son I well knew I was not."  
"Who caused you to suppose so?"

"Just as you, monsieur, are too respectful for a friend, he was also too respectful for a father."

"I, however," said Aramis, "have no intention to disguise myself."

The young man nodded assent and continued: "Undoubtedly, I was not destined to perpetual seclusion," said the prisoner; "and that which makes me believe so, above all, now, is the care that was taken to render me as accomplished a cavalier as possible. The gentleman attached to my person taught me everything he knew himself—mathematics, a little geometry, astronomy, fencing and riding. Every morning I went through military exercises, and practiced on horseback. Well, one morning during the summer, it being very hot, I went to sleep in the hall. Nothing, up to that period, except the respect paid me, had enlightened me, or even roused my suspicions. I lived as children, as birds, as plants, as the air and the sun do. I had just turned my fifteenth year—"

"This, then, is eight years ago?"  
"Yes, nearly; but I have ceased to reckon time."

"Excuse me; but what did your tutor tell you, to encourage you to work?"

"He used to say that a man was bound to make for himself, in the world, that fortune which Heaven had refused him at his birth. He added that, being a poor, obscure orphan, I had no one but myself to look to; and that nobody either did, or ever would, take any interest in me. I was, then, in the hall I have spoken of, asleep from fatigue with long fencing. My preceptor was in his room on the first floor, just over me. Suddenly I heard him exclaim, and then he called: 'Perronnette! Perronnette! It was my nurse whom he called.'

"Yes, I know it," said Aramis. "Continue, my lord."

"Very likely she was in the garden; for my preceptor came hastily downstairs. I rose, anxious at seeing him anxious. He opened the garden-door, still crying out, 'Perronnette! Perronnette!' The windows of the hall looked into the court; the shutters were closed; but through a chink in them I saw my tutor draw near a large well, which was almost directly under the windows of his study. He stooped over the brim, looked into the well, and again cried out, and made wild and affrighted gestures. Where I was, I could not only see, but hear—and see and hear I did."

"Go on, I pray you," said Aramis.

"Dame Perronnette came running up, hearing the governor's cries. He went to meet her, took her by the arm, and drew her quickly towards the edge; after which, as they both bent over it together, 'Look, look,' cried he, 'what a misfortune!'

"'Calm yourself, calm yourself,' said Perronnette; 'what is the matter?'

"'The letter!' he exclaimed; 'do you see that letter?' pointing to the bottom of the well.

"'What letter?' she cried.

"'The letter you see down there; the last letter from the queen.'

"At this word I trembled. My tutor—he who passed for my father, he who was continually recommending me modesty and humility—in correspondence with the queen!

"'The queen's last letter!' cried Perronnette, without showing more astonishment than at seeing this letter at the bottom of the well; 'but how came it there?'

"A chance, Dame Perronnette—a singular chance. I was entering my room, and on opening the door, the window, too, being open, a puff of air came suddenly and carried off this paper—this letter of her majesty's; I darted after it, and gained the window just in time to see it flutter a moment in the breeze and disappear down the well.'

"Well," said Dame Perronnette; 'and if the letter has fallen into the well, 'tis all the same as if it was burnt; and as the queen burns all her letters every time she comes—'

"And so you see this lady who came every month was the queen," said the prisoner.

"'Doubtless, doubtless,' continued the old gentleman; 'but this letter contained instructions—how can I follow them?'

"'Write immediately to her; give her a plain account of the accident, and the queen will no doubt write you another letter in place of this.'

"'Oh! the queen would never believe the story,' said the good gentleman, shaking his head; 'she will imagine that I want to keep this letter instead of giving it up like the rest, so as to have a hold over her. She is so distrustful, and M. de Mazarin so—Yon devil of an Italian is capable of having us poisoned at the first breath of suspicion.'"

Aramis almost imperceptibly smiled.

"'You know, Dame Perronnette, they are both so suspicious in all that concerns Philippe.'

"Philippe was the name they gave me," said the prisoner.

"'Well, 'tis no use hesitating,' said Dame Perronnette, 'somebody must go down the well.'

"'Of course; so that the person who goes down may read the paper as he is coming up.'

"'But let us choose some villager who cannot read, and then you will be at ease.'

"'Granted; but will not any one who descends guess that a paper must be important for which we risk a man's life? However, you have given me an idea, Dame Perronnette; somebody shall go down the well, but that somebody shall be myself.'

"But at this notion Dame Perronnette lamented and cried in such a manner, and so implored the old nobleman, with tears in her eyes, that he promised her to obtain a ladder long enough to reach down, while she went in search of some stout-hearted youth, whom she was to persuade that a jewel had fallen into the well, and that this jewel was wrapped in a paper. 'And as paper,' remarked my preceptor, 'naturally unfolds in water, the young man would not be surprised at finding nothing, after all, but the letter wide open.'

"'But perhaps the writing will be already effaced by that time,' said Dame Perronnette.

"'No consequence, provided we secure the letter. On returning it to the queen, she will see at once that we have not betrayed her; and consequently, as we shall not rouse the distrust of Mazarin, we shall have nothing to fear from him.'

"Having come to this resolution, they parted. I pushed back the shutter, and, seeing that my tutor was about to re-enter, I threw myself on my couch, in a confusion of brain caused by all I had just heard. My governor opened the door a few moments after, and thinking I was asleep gently closed it again. As soon as ever it was shut, I rose, and, listening, heard the sound of retiring footsteps. Then I returned to the shutters, and saw my tutor and Dame Perronnette go out together. I was alone in the house. They had hardly closed the gate before I sprang from the window and ran to the well. Then, just as my governor had leaned over, so leaned I. Something white and luminous glistened in the green and quivering silence of the water. The brilliant disk fascinated and allured me; my eyes became fixed, and I could hardly breathe. The well seemed to draw me downwards with its slimy mouth and icy breath; and I thought I read, at the bottom of the water, characters of fire traced upon the letter the queen had touched. Then, scarcely knowing what I was about, and urged on by one of those instinctive impulses which drive men to destruction, I lowered the cord from the windlass of the well to within about three feet of the water, leaving the bucket dangling, at the same time taking infinite pains not to disturb that coveted letter, which was beginning to change its white tint for the hue of chrysoprase,—proof enough that it was sinking,—and then, with the rope weltering in my hands, slid down into the abyss. When I saw myself hanging over the dark pool, when I saw the sky lessening above my head, a cold shudder came over me, a chill fear got the better of me, I was seized with giddiness, and the hair rose on my head; but my strong will still reigned supreme over all the terror and disquietude. I gained the water, and at once plunged into it, holding on by one hand, while I immersed the other and seized the dear letter, which, alas! came in two in my grasp. I concealed the two fragments in my body-coat, and, helping myself with my feet against the sides of the pit, and clinging on with my hands, agile and vigorous as I was, and, above all, pressed for time, I regained the brink, drenching it as I touched it with the water that streamed off me. I was no sooner out of the well with my prize, than I rushed into the sunlight, and took refuge in a kind of shrubbery at the bottom of the garden. As I entered my hiding-place, the bell which resounded when the great gate was opened, rang. It was my preceptor come back again. I had but just time. I calculated that it would take ten minutes before he would gain my place of concealment, even if, guessing where I was, he came straight to it; and twenty if he were obliged to look for me. But this was time enough to allow me to read the cherished letter, whose fragments I hastened to unite again. The writing was already fading, but I managed to decipher it all.

"And will you tell me what you read therein, my lord?" asked Aramis, deeply interested.

"Quite enough, monsieur, to see that my tutor was a man of noble rank, and that Perronnette, without being a lady of quality, was far better than a servant; and also to perceived that I must myself be high-born, since the queen, Anne of Austria, and Mazarin, the prime minister, commended me so earnestly to their care." Here the young man paused, quite overcome.

"And what happened?" asked Aramis.

"It happened, monsieur," answered he, "that the workmen they had summoned found nothing in the well, after the closest search; that my governor perceived that the brink was all watery; that I was not so dried by the sun as to prevent Dame Perronnette spying that my garments were moist; and, lastly, that I was seized with a violent fever, owing to the chill and the excitement of my discovery, an attack of delirium supervening, during which I related the whole adventure; so that, guided by my avowal, my governor found the pieces of the queen's letter inside the bolster where I had concealed them."

"Ah!" said Aramis, "now I understand."

"Beyond this, all is conjecture. Doubtless the unfortunate lady and gentleman, not daring to keep the occurrence secret, wrote of all this to the queen and sent back the torn letter."

"After which," said Aramis, "you were arrested and removed to the Bastille."

"As you see."

"Your two attendants disappeared?"

"Alas!"

"Let us not take up our time with the dead, but see what can be done with the living. You told me you were resigned."

"I repeat it."

"Without any desire for freedom?"

"As I told you."

"Without ambition, sorrow, or thought?"

The young man made no answer.

"Well," asked Aramis, "why are you silent?"

"I think I have spoken enough," answered the prisoner, "and that now it is your turn. I am weary."

Aramis gathered himself up, and a shade of deep solemnity spread itself over his countenance. It was evident that he had reached the crisis in the part he had come to the prison to play. "One question," said Aramis.

"What is it? speak."

"In the house you inhabited there were neither looking-glasses nor mirrors?"

"What are those two words, and what is their meaning?" asked the young man; "I have no sort of knowledge of them."

"They designate two pieces of furniture which reflect objects; so that, for instance, you may see in them your own lineaments, as you see mine now, with the naked eye."

"No; there was neither a glass nor a mirror in the house," answered the young man.

Aramis looked round him. "Nor is there anything of the kind here, either," he said; "they have again taken the same precaution."

"To what end?"

"You will know directly. Now, you have told me that you were instructed in mathematics, astronomy, fencing, and riding; but you have not said a word about history."

"My tutor sometimes related to me the principal deeds of the king, St. Louis, King Francis I., and King Henry IV."

"Is that all?"

"Very nearly."

"This also was done by design, then; just as they deprived you of mirrors, which reflect the present, so they left you in ignorance of history, which reflects the past. Since your imprisonment, books have been forbidden you; so that you are unacquainted with a number of facts, by means of which you would be able to reconstruct the shattered mansion of your recollections and your hopes."

"It is true," said the young man.

"Listen, then; I will in a few words tell you what has passed in France during the last twenty-three or twenty-four years; that is, from the probable date of your birth; in a word, from the time that interests you."

"Say on." And the young man resumed his serious and attentive attitude.

"Do you know who was the son of Henry IV.?"

"At least I know who his successor was."

"How?"

"By means of a coin dated 1610, which bears the effigy of Henry IV.; and another of 1612, bearing that of Louis XIII. So I presumed that, there being only two years between the two dates, Louis was Henry's successor."

"Then," said Aramis, "you know that the last reigning monarch was Louis XIII.?"

"I do," answered the youth, slightly reddening.

"Well, he was a prince full of noble ideas and great projects, always, alas! deferred by the trouble of the times and the dread struggle that his minister Richelieu had to maintain against the great nobles of France. The king himself was of a feeble character, and died young and unhappy."

"I know it."

"He had been long anxious about having a heir; a care which weighs heavily on princes, who desire to leave behind them more than one pledge that their best thoughts and works will be continued."

"Did the king, then, die childless?" asked the prisoner, smiling.

"No, but he was long without one, and for a long while thought he should be the last of his race. This idea had reduced him to the depths of despair, when suddenly, his wife, Anne of Austria—"

The prisoner trembled.

"Did you know," said Aramis, "that Louis XIII.'s wife was called Anne of Austria?"

"Continue," said the young man, without replying to the question.

"When suddenly," resumed Aramis, "the queen announced an interesting event. There was great joy at the intelligence, and all prayed for her happy delivery. On the 5th of September, 1638, she gave birth to a son."

Here Aramis looked at his companion, and thought he observed him turning pale. "You are about to hear," said Aramis, "an account which few indeed could now avouch; for it refers to a secret which they imagined buried with the dead, entombed in the abyss of the confessional."

"And you will tell me this secret?" broke in the youth.

"Oh!" said Aramis, with unmistakable emphasis, "I do not know that I ought to risk this secret by intrusting it to one who has no desire to quit the Bastille."

"I hear you, monsieur."

"The queen, then, gave birth to a son. But while the court was rejoicing over the event, when the king had shown the new-born child to the nobility and people, and was sitting gayly down to table, to celebrate the event, the queen, who was alone in her room, was again taken ill and gave birth to a second son."

"Oh!" said the prisoner, betraying a better acquaintance with affairs than he had owned to, "I thought that Monsieur was only born in—"

Aramis raised his finger; "Permit me to continue," he said.

The prisoner sighed impatiently, and paused.

"Yes," said Aramis, "the queen had a second son, whom Dame Perronnette, the midwife, received in her arms."

"Dame Perronnette!" murmured the young man.

"They ran at once to the banqueting-room, and whispered to the king what had happened; he rose and quitted the table. But this time it was no longer happiness that his face expressed, but something akin to terror. The birth of twins changed into bitterness the joy to which that of an only son had given rise, seeing that in France (a fact you are assuredly ignorant of) it is the oldest of the king's sons who succeeds his father."

"I know it."

"And that the doctors and jurists assert that there is ground for doubting whether the son that first makes his appearance is the elder by the law of heaven and of nature."

The prisoner uttered a smothered cry, and became whiter than the coverlet under which he hid himself.

"Now you understand," pursued Aramis, "that the king, who with so much pleasure saw himself repeated in one, was in despair about two; fearing that the second might dispute the first's claim to seniority, which had been recognized only two hours before; and so this second son, relying on party interests and caprices, might one day sow discord and engender civil war throughout the kingdom; by these means destroying the very dynasty he should have strengthened."

"Oh, I understand!—I understand!" murmured the young man.

"Well," continued Aramis; "this is what they relate, what they declare; this is why one of the queen's two sons, shamefully parted from his brother, shamefully sequestered, is buried in profound obscurity; this is why that second son has disappeared, and so completely, that not a soul in France, save his mother, is aware of his existence."

"Yes! his mother, who has cast him off," cried the prisoner in a tone of despair.

"Except, also," Aramis went on, "the lady in the black dress; and, finally, excepting—"

"Excepting yourself—is it not? You who come and relate all this; you, who rouse in my soul curiosity, hatred, ambition, and, perhaps, even the thirst of vengeance; except you, monsieur, who, if you are the man to whom I expect, whom the note I have received applies to, whom, in short, Heaven ought to send me, must possess about you—"

"What?" asked Aramis.

"A portrait of the king, Louis XIV., who at this moment reigns upon the throne of France."

"Here is the portrait," replied the bishop, handing the prisoner a miniature in enamel, on which Louis was depicted life-like, with a handsome, lofty mien. The prisoner eagerly seized the portrait, and gazed at it with devouring eyes.

"And now, my lord," said Aramis, "here is a mirror." Aramis left the prisoner time to recover his ideas.

"So high!—so high!" murmured the young man, eagerly comparing the likeness of Louis with his own countenance reflected in the glass.

"What do you think of it?" at length said Aramis.

"I think that I am lost," replied the captive; "the king will never set me free."

"And I—I demand to know," added the bishop, fixing his piercing eyes significantly upon the prisoner, "I demand to know which of these two is king; the one this miniature portrays, or whom the glass reflects?"

"The king, monsieur," sadly replied the young man, "is he who is on the throne, who is not in prison; and who, on the other hand, can cause others to be entombed there. Royalty means power; and you behold how powerless I am."

"My lord," answered Aramis, with a respect he had not yet manifested, "the king, mark me, will, if you desire it, be the one that, quitting his dungeon, shall maintain himself upon the throne, on which his friends will place him."

"Tempt me not, monsieur," broke in the prisoner bitterly.

"Be not weak, my lord," persisted Aramis; "I have brought you all the proofs of your birth; consult them; satisfy yourself that you are a king's son; it is for *us* to act."

"No, no; it is impossible."

"Unless, indeed," resumed the bishop ironically, "it be the destiny of your race, that the brothers excluded from the throne should be always princes void of courage and honesty, as was your uncle, M. Gaston d'Orleans, who ten times conspired against his brother Louis XIII."

"What!" cried the prince, astonished; "my uncle Gaston 'conspired against his brother'; conspired to dethrone him?"

"Exactly, my lord; for no other reason. I tell you the truth."

“And he had friends—devoted friends?”

“As much so as I am to you.”

“And, after all, what did he do?—Failed!”

“He failed, I admit; but always through his own fault; and, for the sake of purchasing—not his life—for the life of the king’s brother is sacred and inviolable—but his liberty, he sacrificed the lives of all his friends, one after another. And so, at this day, he is a very blot on history, the detestation of a hundred noble families in this kingdom.”

“I understand, monsieur; either by weakness or treachery, my uncle slew his friends.”

“By weakness; which, in princes, is always treachery.”

“And cannot a man fail, then, from incapacity and ignorance? Do you really believe it possible that a poor captive such as I, brought up, not only at a distance from the court, but even from the world—you believe it possible that such a one could assist those of his friends who should attempt to serve him?” And as Aramis was about to reply, the young man suddenly cried out, with a violence which betrayed the temper of his blood, “We are speaking of friends; but how can I have any friends—I, whom no one knows; and have neither liberty, money, nor influence, to gain any?”

“I fancy I had the honour to offer myself to your royal highness.”

“Oh, do not style me so, monsieur; ’tis either treachery or cruelty. Bid me not think of aught beyond these prison-walls, which so grimly confine me; let me again love, or, at least, submit to my slavery and my obscurity.”

“My lord, my lord; if you again utter these desperate words—if, after having received proof of your high birth, you still remain poor-spirited in body and soul, I will comply with your desire, I will depart, and renounce forever the service of a master, to whom so eagerly I came to devote my assistance and my life!”

“Monsieur,” cried the prince, “would it not have been better for you to have reflected, before telling me all that you have done, that you have broken my heart forever?”

“And so I desire to do, my lord.”

“To talk to me about power, grandeur, eye, and to prate of thrones! Is a prison the fit place? You wish to make me believe in splendor, and we are lying lost in night; you boast of glory, and we are smothering our words in the curtains of this miserable bed; you give me glimpses of power absolute whilst I hear the footsteps of the every-watchful jailer in the corridor—that step which, after all, makes you tremble more than it does me. To render me somewhat less incredulous, free me from the Bastille; let me breathe the fresh air; give me my spurs and trusty sword, then we shall begin to understand each other.”

“It is precisely my intention to give you all this, my lord, and more; only, do you desire it?”

“A word more,” said the prince. “I know there are guards in every gallery, bolts to every door, cannon and soldiery at every barrier. How will you overcome the sentries—spike the guns? How will you break through the bolts and bars?”

“My lord,—how did you get the note which announced my arrival to you?”

“You can bribe a jailer for such a thing as a note.”

“If we can corrupt one turnkey, we can corrupt ten.”

“Well; I admit that it may be possible to release a poor captive from the Bastille; possible so to conceal him that the king’s people shall not again ensnare him; possible, in some unknown retreat, to sustain the unhappy wretch in some suitable manner.”

“My lord!” said Aramis, smiling.

“I admit that, whoever would do this much for me, would seem more than mortal in my eyes; but as you tell me I am a prince, brother of the king, how can you restore me the rank and power which my mother and my brother have deprived me of? And as, to effect this, I must pass a life of war and hatred, how can you cause me to prevail in those combats—render me invulnerable by my enemies? Ah! monsieur, reflect on all this; place me, to-morrow, in some dark cavern at a mountain’s base; yield me the delight of hearing in freedom sounds of the river, plain and valley, of beholding in freedom the sun of the blue heavens, or the stormy sky, and it is enough. Promise me no more than this, for, indeed, more you cannot give, and it would be a crime to deceive me, since you call yourself my friend.”

Aramis waited in silence. “My lord,” he resumed, after a moment’s reflection, “I admire the firm, sound sense which dictates your words; I am happy to have discovered my monarch’s mind.”

“Again, again! oh, God! for mercy’s sake,” cried the prince, pressing his icy hands upon his clammy brow, “do not play with me! I have no need to be a king to be the happiest of men.”

“But I, my lord, wish you to be a king for the good of humanity.”

“Ah!” said the prince, with fresh distrust inspired by the word; “ah! with what, then, has humanity to reproach my brother?”

“I forgot to say, my lord, that if you would allow me to guide you, and if you consent to become the most powerful monarch in Christendom, you will have promoted the interests of all the friends whom I devote to the success of your cause, and these friends are numerous.”

“Numerous?”

“Less numerous than powerful, my lord.”

“Explain yourself.”

“It is impossible; I will explain, I swear before Heaven, on that day that I see you sitting on the throne of France.”

“But my brother?”

“You shall decree his fate. Do you pity him?”

“Him, who leaves me to perish in a dungeon? No, no. For him I have no pity!”

“So much the better.”

“He might have himself come to this prison, have taken me by the hand, and have said, ‘My brother, Heaven created us to love, not to contend with one another. I come to you. A barbarous prejudice has condemned you to pass your days in obscurity, far from mankind, deprived of every joy. I will make you sit down beside me; I will buckle round your waist our father’s sword. Will you take advantage of this reconciliation to put down or restrain me? Will you employ that sword to spill my blood?’ ‘Oh! never,’ I would have replied to him, ‘I look on you as my preserver, I will respect you as my master. You give me far more than Heaven bestowed: for through you I possess liberty and the privilege of loving and being loved in this world.’”

“And you would have kept your word, my lord?”

“On my life! While now—now that I have guilty ones to punish—”

“In what manner, my lord?”

“What do you say as to the resemblance that Heaven has given me to my brother?”

“I say that there was in that likeness a providential instruction which the king ought to have heeded; I say that your mother committed a crime in rendering those different in happiness and fortune whom nature created so startlingly alike, of her own flesh, and I conclude that the object of punishment should be only to restore the equilibrium.”

“By which you mean—”

“That if I restore you to your place on your brother’s throne, he shall take yours in prison.”

“Alas! there’s such infinity of suffering in prison, especially it would be so for one who has drunk so deeply of the cup of enjoyment.”

“Your royal highness will always be free to act as you may desire; and if it seems good to you, after punishment, you will have it in your power to pardon.”

“Good. And now, are you aware of one thing, monsieur?”

“Tell me, my prince.”

“It is that I will hear nothing further from you till I am clear of the Bastille.”

“I was going to say to your highness that I should only have the pleasure of seeing you once again.”

“And when?”

“The day when my prince leaves these gloomy walls.”

“Heavens! how will you give me notice of it?”

“By myself coming to fetch you.”

“Yourself?”

“My prince, do not leave this chamber save with me, or if in my absence you are compelled to do so, remember that I am not concerned in it.”

“And so I am not to speak a word of this to any one whatever, save to you?”

“Save only to me.” Aramis bowed very low. The prince offered his hand.

“Monsieur,” he said, in a tone that issued from his heart, “one word more, my last. If you have sought me for my destruction; if you are only a tool in the hands of my enemies; if from our conference, in which you have sounded the depths of my mind, anything worse than captivity result, that is to say, if death befall me, still receive my blessing, for you will have ended my troubles and given me repose from the tormenting fever that has preyed on me for eight long, weary years.”

“My lord, wait the results ere you judge me,” said Aramis.

“I say that, in such a case, I bless and forgive you. If, on the other hand, you are come to restore me to that position in the sunshine of fortune and glory to which I was destined by Heaven; if by your means I am enabled to live in the memory of man, and confer luster on my race by deeds of valor, or by solid benefits bestowed upon my people; if, from my present depths of sorrow, aided by your generous hand, I raise myself to the very height of honour, then to you, whom I thank with blessings, to you will I offer half my power and my glory: though you would still be but partly recompensed, and your share must always remain incomplete, since I could not divide with you the happiness received at your hands.”

“My lord,” replied Aramis, moved by the pallor and excitement of the young man, “the nobleness of your heart fills me with joy and admiration. It is not you who will have to thank me, but rather the nation whom you will render happy, the posterity whose name you will make glorious. Yes; I shall indeed have bestowed upon you more than life, I shall have given you immortality.”

The prince offered his hand to Aramis, who sank upon his knee and kissed it.

“It is the first act of homage paid to our future king,” said he. “When I see you again, I shall say, ‘Good day, sire.’”

“Till then,” said the young man, pressing his wan and wasted fingers over his heart,—“till then, no more dreams, no more strain on my life—my heart would break! Oh, monsieur, how small is my prison—how low the window—how narrow are the doors! To think that so much pride, splendor, and happiness, should be able to enter in and to remain here!”

“Your royal highness makes me proud,” said Aramis, “since you infer it is I who brought all this.” And he rapped immediately on the door. The jailer came to open it with Baisemeaux, who, devoured by fear and uneasiness, was beginning, in spite of himself, to listen at the door. Happily, neither of the speakers had forgotten to smother his voice, even in the most passionate outbreaks.

“What a confessor!” said the governor, forcing a laugh; “who would believe that a compulsory recluse, a man as though in the very jaws of death, could have committed crimes so numerous, and so long to tell of?”

Aramis made no reply. He was eager to leave the Bastille, where the secret which overwhelmed him seemed to double the weight of the walls. As soon as they reached Baisemeaux’s quarters, “Let us proceed to business, my dear governor,” said Aramis.

“Alas!” replied Baisemeaux.

“You have to ask me for my receipt for one hundred and fifty thousand livres,” said the bishop.

“And to pay over the first third of the sum,” added the poor governor, with a sigh, taking three steps towards his iron strong-box.

“Here is the receipt,” said Aramis.

“And here is the money,” returned Baisemeaux, with a threefold sigh.

“The order instructed me only to give a receipt; it said nothing about receiving the money,” rejoined Aramis. “Adieu, monsieur le gouverneur!”

And he departed, leaving Baisemeaux almost more than stifled with joy and surprise at this regal present so liberally bestowed by the confessor extraordinary to the Bastille.

II. How Mouston Had Become Fatter without Giving Porthos Notice Thereof, and of the Troubles Which Consequently Befell that Worthy Gentleman.

Since the departure of Athos for Blois, Porthos and D'Artagnan were seldom together. One was occupied with harassing duties for the king, the other had been making many purchases of furniture which he intended to forward to his estate, and by aid of which he hoped to establish in his various residences something of the courtly luxury he had witnessed in all its dazzling brightness in his majesty's society. D'Artagnan, ever faithful, one morning during an interval of service thought about Porthos, and being uneasy at not having heard anything of him for a fortnight, directed his steps towards his hotel, and pounced upon him just as he was getting up. The worthy baron had a pensive—nay, more than pensive—melancholy air. He was sitting on his bed, only half-dressed, and with legs dangling over the edge, contemplating a host of garments, which with their fringes, lace, embroidery, and slashes of ill-assorted hues, were strewn all over the floor. Porthos, sad and reflective as La Fontaine's hare, did not observe D'Artagnan's entrance, which was, moreover, screened at this moment by M. Mouston, whose personal corpulency, quite enough at any time to hide one man from another, was effectually doubled by a scarlet coat which the intendant was holding up for his master's inspection, by the sleeves, that he might the better see it all over. D'Artagnan stopped at the threshold and looked in at the pensive Porthos and then, as the sight of the innumerable garments strewn the floor caused mighty sighs to heave the bosom of that excellent gentleman, D'Artagnan thought it time to put an end to these dismal reflections, and coughed by way of announcing himself.

"Ah!" exclaimed Porthos, whose countenance brightened with joy; "ah! ah! Here is D'Artagnan. I shall then get hold of an idea!"

At these words Mouston, doubting what was going on behind him, got out of the way, smiling kindly at the friend of his master, who thus found himself freed from the material obstacle which had prevented his reaching D'Artagnan. Porthos made his sturdy knees crack again in rising, and crossing the room in two strides, found himself face to face with his friend, whom he folded to his breast with a force of affection that seemed to increase with every day. "Ah!" he repeated, "you are always welcome, dear friend; but just now you are more welcome than ever."

"But you seem to have the megrims here!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

Porthos replied by a look expressive of dejection. "Well, then, tell me all about it, Porthos, my friend, unless it is a secret."

"In the first place," returned Porthos, "you know I have no secrets from you. This, then, is what saddens me."

"Wait a minute, Porthos; let me first get rid of all this litter of satin and velvet!"

"Oh, never mind," said Porthos, contemptuously; "it is all trash."

"Trash, Porthos! Cloth at twenty-five livres an ell! gorgeous satin! regal velvet!"

"Then you think these clothes are—"

"Splendid, Porthos, splendid! I'll wager that you alone in France have so many; and suppose you never had any more made, and were to live to be a hundred years of age, which wouldn't astonish me in the very least, you could still wear a new dress the day of your death, without being obliged to see the nose of a single tailor from now till then."

Porthos shook his head.

"Come, my friend," said D'Artagnan, "this unnatural melancholy in you frightens me. My dear Porthos, pray get it out, then. And the sooner the better."

"Yes, my friend, so I will: if, indeed, it is possible."

"Perhaps you have received bad news from Bracieux?"

"No: they have felled the wood, and it has yielded a third more than the estimate."

"Then there has been a falling-off in the pools of Pierrefonds?"

"No, my friend: they have been fished, and there is enough left to stock all the pools in the neighborhood."

"Perhaps your estate at Vallon has been destroyed by an earthquake?"

"No, my friend; on the contrary, the ground was struck with lightning a hundred paces from the chateau, and a fountain sprung up in a place entirely destitute of water."

"What in the world *is* the matter, then?"

"The fact is, I have received an invitation for the *fête* at Vaux," said Porthos, with a lugubrious expression.

"Well! do you complain of that? The king has caused a hundred mortal heart-burnings among the courtiers by refusing invitations. And so, my dear friend, you are really going to Vaux?"

"Indeed I am!"

"You will see a magnificent sight."

"Alas! I doubt it, though."

"Everything that is grand in France will be brought together there!"

"Ah!" cried Porthos, tearing out a lock of hair in his despair.

"Eh! good heavens, are you ill?" cried D'Artagnan.

"I am as firm as the Pont-Neuf! It isn't that."

"But what is it, then?"

"'Tis that I have no clothes!"

D'Artagnan stood petrified. "No clothes! Porthos, no clothes!" he cried, "when I see at least fifty suits on the floor."

"Fifty, truly; but not one which fits me!"

"What? not one that fits you? But are you not measured, then, when you give an order?"

"To be sure he is," answered Mouston; "but unfortunately I have gotten stouter!"

"What! *you* stouter!"

"So much so that I am now bigger than the baron. Would you believe it, monsieur?"

"*Parbleu!* it seems to me that is quite evident."

"Do you see, stupid?" said Porthos, "that is quite evident!"

"Be still, my dear Porthos," resumed D'Artagnan, becoming slightly impatient, "I don't understand why your clothes should not fit you, because Mouston has grown stouter."

"I am going to explain it," said Porthos. "You remember having related to me the story of the Roman general Antony, who had always seven wild boars kept roasting, each cooked up to a different point; so that he might be able to have his dinner at any time of the day he chose to ask for it. Well, then, I resolved, as at any time I might be invited to court to spend a week, I resolved to have always seven suits ready for the occasion."

"Capitally reasoned, Porthos—only a man must have a fortune like yours to gratify such whims. Without counting the time lost in being measured, the fashions are always changing."

"That is exactly the point," said Porthos, "in regard to which I flattered myself I had hit on a very ingenious device."

"Tell me what it is; for I don't doubt your genius."

"You remember what Mouston once was, then?"

"Yes; when he used to call himself Mousqueton."

"And you remember, too, the period when he began to grow fatter?"

"No, not exactly. I beg your pardon, my good Mouston."

"Oh! you are not in fault, monsieur," said Mouston, graciously. "You were in Paris, and as for us, we were at Pierrefonds."

"Well, well, my dear Porthos; there was a time when Mouston began to grow fat. Is that what you wished to say?"

"Yes, my friend; and I greatly rejoice over the period."

"Indeed, I believe you do," exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"You understand," continued Porthos, "what a world of trouble it spared for me."

"No, I don't—by any means."

"Look here, my friend. In the first place, as you have said, to be measured is a loss of time, even though it occur only once a fortnight. And then, one may be travelling; and then you wish to have seven suits always with you. In short, I have a horror of letting any one take my measure. Confound it! either one is a nobleman or not. To be scrutinized and scanned by a fellow who completely analyzes you, by inch and line—'tis degrading! Here, they find you too hollow; there, too prominent. They recognize your strong and weak points. See, now, when we leave the measurer's hands, we are like those strongholds whose angles and different thicknesses have been ascertained by a spy."

"In truth, my dear Porthos, you possess ideas entirely original."

"Ah! you see when a man is an engineer—"

"And has fortified Belle-Isle—'tis natural, my friend."

"Well, I had an idea, which would doubtless have proved a good one, but for Mouston's carelessness."

D'Artagnan glanced at Mouston, who replied by a slight movement of his body, as if to say, "You will see whether I am at all to blame in all this."

"I congratulated myself, then," resumed Porthos, "at seeing Mouston get fat; and I did all I could, by means of substantial feeding, to make him stout—always in the hope that he would come to equal myself in girth, and could then be measured in my stead."

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan. "I see—that spared you both time and humiliation."

"Consider my joy when, after a year and a half's judicious feeding—for I used to feed him up myself—the fellow—"

"Oh! I lent a good hand myself, monsieur," said Mouston, humbly.

"That's true. Consider my joy when, one morning, I perceived Mouston was obliged to squeeze in, as I once did myself, to get through the little secret door that those fools of architects had made in the chamber of the late Madame du Vallon, in the chateau of Pierrefonds. And, by the way, about that door, my friend, I should like to ask you, who know everything, why these wretches of architects, who ought to have the compasses run into them, just to remind them, came to make doorways through which nobody but thin people can pass?"

"Oh, those doors," answered D'Artagnan, "were meant for gallants, and they have generally slight and slender figures."

"Madame du Vallon had no gallant!" answered Porthos, majestically.

"Perfectly true, my friend," resumed D'Artagnan; "but the architects were probably making their calculations on a basis of the probability of your marrying again."

"Ah! that is possible," said Porthos. "And now I have received an explanation of how it is that doorways are made too narrow, let us return to the subject of Mouston's fatness. But see how the two things apply to each other. I have always noticed that people's ideas run parallel. And so, observe this phenomenon, D'Artagnan. I was talking to you of Mouston, who is fat, and it led us on to Madame du Vallon—"

"Who was thin?"

"Hum! Is it not marvelous?"

"My dear friend, a *savant* of my acquaintance, M. Costar, has made the same observation as you have, and he calls the process by some Greek name which I forget."

"What! my remark is not then original?" cried Porthos, astounded. "I thought I was the discoverer."

"My friend, the fact was known before Aristotle's days—that is to say, nearly two thousand years ago."

"Well, well, 'tis no less true," said Porthos, delighted at the idea of having jumped to a conclusion so closely in agreement with the greatest sages of antiquity.

"Wonderfully—but suppose we return to Mouston. It seems to me, we have left him fattening under our very eyes."

"Yes, monsieur," said Mouston.

"Well," said Porthos, "Mouston fattened so well, that he gratified all my hopes, by reaching my standard; a fact of which I was well able to convince myself, by seeing the rascal, one day, in a waistcoat of mine, which he had turned into a coat—a waistcoat, the mere embroidery of which was worth a hundred pistoles."

"'Twas only to try it on, monsieur," said Mouston.

"From that moment I determined to put Mouston in communication with my tailors, and to have him measured instead of myself."

"A capital idea, Porthos; but Mouston is a foot and a half shorter than you."



"Exactly! They measured him down to the ground, and the end of the skirt came just below my knee."

"What a marvelous man you are, Porthos! Such a thing could happen only to you."

"Ah! yes; pay your compliments; you have ample grounds to go upon. It was exactly at that time—that is to say, nearly two years and a half ago—that I set out for Belle-Isle, instructing Mouston (so as always to have, in every event, a pattern of every fashion) to have a coat made for himself every month."

"And did Mouston neglect complying with your instructions? Ah! that was anything but right, Mouston."

"No, monsieur, quite the contrary; quite the contrary!"

"No, he never forgot to have his coats made; but he forgot to inform me that he had got stouter!"

"But it was not my fault, monsieur! your tailor never told me."

"And this to such an extent, monsieur," continued Porthos, "that the fellow in two years has gained eighteen inches in girth, and so my last dozen coats are all too large, from a foot to a foot and a half."

"But the rest; those which were made when you were of the same size?"

"They are no longer the fashion, my dear friend. Were I to put them on, I should look like a fresh arrival from Siam; and as though I had been two years away from court."

"I understand your difficulty. You have how many new suits? nine? thirty-six? and yet not one to wear. Well, you must have a thirty-seventh made, and give the thirty-six to Mouston."

"Ah! monsieur!" said Mouston, with a gratified air. "The truth is, that monsieur has always been very generous to me."

"Do you mean to insinuate that I hadn't that idea, or that I was deterred by the expense? But it wants only two days to the *fete*; I received the invitation yesterday; made Mouston post hither with my wardrobe, and only this morning discovered my misfortune; and from now till the day after to-morrow, there isn't a single fashionable tailor who will undertake to make me a suit."

"That is to say, one covered all over with gold, isn't it?"

"I wish it so! undoubtedly, all over."

"Oh, we shall manage it. You won't leave for three days. The invitations are for Wednesday, and this is only Sunday morning."

"Tis true; but Aramis has strongly advised me to be at Vaux twenty-four hours beforehand."

"How, Aramis?"

"Yes, it was Aramis who brought me the invitation."

"Ah! to be sure, I see. You are invited on the part of M. Fouquet?"

"By no means! by the king, dear friend. The letter bears the following as large as life: 'M. le Baron du Vallon is informed that the king has condescended to place him on the invitation list—'"

"Very good; but you leave with M. Fouquet?"

"And when I think," cried Porthos, stamping on the floor, "when I think I shall have no clothes, I am ready to burst with rage! I should like to strangle somebody or smash something!"

"Neither strangle anybody nor smash anything, Porthos; I will manage it all; put on one of your thirty-six suits, and come with me to a tailor."

"Pooh! my agent has seen them all this morning."

"Even M. Percerin?"

"Who is M. Percerin?"

"Oh! only the king's tailor!"

"Oh, ah, yes," said Porthos, who wished to appear to know the king's tailor, but now heard his name mentioned for the first time; "to M. Percerin's, by Jove! I was afraid he would be too busy."

"Doubtless he will be; but be at ease, Porthos; he will do for me what he wouldn't do for another. Only you must allow yourself to be measured!"

"Ah!" said Porthos, with a sigh, "'tis vexatious, but what would you have me do?"

"Do? As others do; as the king does."

"What! do they measure the king, too? does he put up with it?"

"The king is a beau, my good friend, and so are you, too, whatever you may say about it."

Porthos smiled triumphantly. "Let us go to the king's tailor," he said; "and since he measures the king, I think, by my faith, I may do worse than allow him to measure *me*!"

### III. Who Messire Jean Percerin Was.

The king's tailor, Messire Jean Percerin, occupied a rather large house in the Rue St. Honoure, near the Rue de l'Arbre Sec. He was a man of great taste in elegant stuffs, embroideries, and velvets, being hereditary tailor to the king. The preferment of his house reached as far back as the time of Charles IX.; from whose reign dated, as we know, fancy in *bravery* difficult enough to gratify. The Percerin of that period was a Huguenot, like Ambrose Pare, and had been spared by the Queen of Navarre, the beautiful Margot, as they used to write and say, too, in those days; because, in sooth, he was the only one who could make for her those wonderful riding-habits which she so loved to wear, seeing that they were marvelously well suited to hide certain anatomical defects, which the Queen of Navarre used very studiously to conceal. Percerin being saved, made, out of gratitude, some beautiful black bodices, very inexpensively indeed, for Queen Catherine, who ended by being pleased at the preservation of a Huguenot people, on whom she had long looked with detestation. But Percerin was a very prudent man; and having heard it said that there was no more dangerous sign for a Protestant than to be smiled up on by Catherine, and having observed that her smiles were more frequent than usual, he speedily turned Catholic with all his family; and having thus become irrepochable, attained the lofty position of master tailor to the Crown of France. Under Henry III., gay king as he was, this position was as grand as the height of one of the loftiest peaks of the Cordilleras. Now Percerin had been a clever man all his life, and by way of keeping up his reputation beyond the grave, took very good care not to make a bad death of it, and so contrived to die very skillfully; and that at the very moment he felt his powers of invention declining. He left a son and a daughter, both worthy of the name they were called upon to bear; the son, a cutter as unerring and exact as the square rule; the daughter, apt at embroidery, and at designing ornaments. The marriage of Henry IV. and Marie de Medici, and the exquisite court-mourning for the afore-mentioned queen, together with a few words let fall by M. de Bassompierre, king of the *beaux* of the period, made the fortune of the second generation of Percerins. M. Concino Concini, and his wife Galligai, who subsequently shone at the French court, sought to Italianize the fashion, and introduced some Florentine tailors; but Percerin, touched to the quick in his patriotism and his self-esteem, entirely defeated these foreigners, and that so well that Concino was the first to give up his compatriots, and held the French tailor in such esteem that he would never employ any other, and thus wore a doublet of his on the very day that Vitry blew out his brains with a pistol at the Pont du Louvre.

And so it was a doublet issuing from M. Percerin's workshop, which the Parisians rejoiced in hacking into so many pieces with the living human body it contained. Notwithstanding the favour Concino Concini had shown Percerin, the king, Louis XIII., had the generosity to bear no malice to his tailor, and to retain him in his service. At the time that Louis the Just afforded this great example of equity, Percerin had brought up two sons, one of whom made his *debut* at the marriage of Anne of Austria, invented that admirable Spanish costume, in which Richelieu danced a saraband, made the costumes for the tragedy of "Mirame," and stitched on to Buckingham's mantle those famous pearls which were destined to be scattered about the pavements of the Louvre. A man becomes easily notable who has made the dresses of a Duke of Buckingham, a M. de Cinq-Mars, a Mademoiselle Ninon, a M. de Beaufort, and a Marion de Lorme. And thus Percerin the third had attained the summit of his glory when his father died. This same Percerin III., old, famous and wealthy, yet further dressed Louis XIV.; and having no son, which was a great cause of sorrow to him, seeing that with himself his dynasty would end, he had brought up several hopeful pupils. He possessed a carriage, a country house, men-servants the tallest in Paris; and by special authority from Louis XIV., a pack of hounds. He worked for MM. de Lyonne and Letellier, under a sort of patronage; but politic man as he was, and versed in state secrets, he never succeeded in fitting M. Colbert. This is beyond explanation; it is a matter for guessing or for intuition. Great geniuses of every kind live on unseen, intangible ideas; they act without themselves knowing why. The great Percerin (for, contrary to the rule of dynasties, it was, above all, the last of the Percerins who deserved the name of Great), the great Percerin was inspired when he cut a robe for the queen, or a coat for the king; he could mount a mantle for Monsieur, the clock of a stocking for Madame; but, in spite of his supreme talent, he could never hit off anything approaching a creditable fit for M. Colbert. "That man," he used often to say, "is beyond my art; my needle can never dot him down." We need scarcely say that Percerin was M. Fouquet's tailor, and that the superintendent highly esteemed him. M. Percerin was nearly eighty years old, nevertheless still fresh, and at the same time so dry, the courtiers used to say, that he was positively brittle. His renown and his fortune were great enough for M. le Prince, that king of fops, to take his arm when talking over the fashions; and for those least eager to pay never to dare to leave their accounts in arrear with him; for Master Percerin would for the first time make clothes upon credit, but the second never, unless paid for the former order.

It is easy to see at once that a tailor of such renown, instead of running after customers, made difficulties about obliging any fresh ones. And so Percerin declined to fit *bourgeois*, or those who had but recently obtained patents of nobility. A story used to circulate that even M. de Mazarin, in exchange for Percerin supplying him with a full suit of ceremonial vestments as cardinal, one fine day slipped letters of nobility into his pocket.

It was to the house of this grand llama of tailors that D'Artagnan took the despairing Porthos; who, as they were going along, said to his friend, "Take care, my good D'Artagnan, not to compromise the dignity of a man such as I am with the arrogance of this Percerin, who will, I expect, be very impertinent; for I give you notice, my friend, that if he is wanting in respect I will infallibly chastise him."

"Presented by me," replied D'Artagnan, "you have nothing to fear, even though you were what you are not."

"Ah! 'tis because—"

"What? Have you anything against Percerin, Porthos?"

"I think that I once sent Mouston to a fellow of that name."

"And then?"

"The fellow refused to supply me."

"Oh, a misunderstanding, no doubt, which it will be now exceedingly easy to set right. Mouston must have made a mistake."

"Perhaps."

"He has confused the names."

"Possibly. That rascal Mouston never can remember names."

"I will take it all upon myself."

"Very good."

"Stop the carriage, Porthos; here we are."

"Here! how here? We are at the Halles; and you told me the house was at the corner of the Rue de l'Arbre Sec."

"Tis true, but look."

"Well, I do look, and I see—"

"What?"

"*Pardieu!* that we are at the Halles!"

"You do not, I suppose, want our horses to clamber up on the roof of the carriage in front of us?"

"No."

"Nor the carriage in front of us to mount on top of the one in front of it. Nor that the second should be driven over the roofs of the thirty or forty others which have arrived before us."

"No, you are right, indeed. What a number of people! And what are they all about?"

"Tis very simple. They are waiting their turn."

"Bah! Have the comedians of the Hotel de Bourgogne shifted their quarters?"

"No; their turn to obtain an entrance to M. Percerin's house."

"And we are going to wait too?"

"Oh, we shall show ourselves prompter and not so proud."

"What are we to do, then?"

"Get down, pass through the footmen and lackeys, and enter the tailor's house, which I will answer for our doing, if you go first."

"Come along, then," said Porthos.

They accordingly alighted and made their way on foot towards the establishment. The cause of the confusion was that M. Percerin's doors were closed, while a servant, standing before them, was explaining to the illustrious customers of the illustrious tailor that just then M. Percerin could not receive anybody. It was bruited about outside still, on the authority of what the great lackey had told some great noble whom he favoured, in confidence, that M. Percerin was engaged on five costumes for the king, and that, owing to the urgency of the case, he was meditating in his office on the ornaments, colours, and cut of these five suits. Some, contented with this reason, went away again, contented to repeat the tale to others, but others, more tenacious, insisted on having the doors opened, and among these last three Blue Ribbons, intended to take parts in a ballet, which would inevitably fail unless the said three had their costumes shaped by the very hand of the great Percerin himself. D'Artagnan, pushing on Porthos, who scattered the groups of people right and left, succeeded in gaining the counter, behind which the journeyman tailors were doing their best to answer queries. (We forgot to mention that at the door they wanted to put off Porthos like the rest, but D'Artagnan, showing himself, pronounced merely these words, "The king's order," and was let in with his friend.) The poor fellows had enough to do, and did their best, to reply to the demands of the customers in the absence of their master, leaving off drawing a stitch to knit a sentence; and when wounded pride, or disappointed expectation, brought down upon them too cutting a rebuke, he who was attacked made a dive and disappeared under the counter. The line of discontented lords formed a truly remarkable picture. Our captain of musketeers, a man of sure and rapid observation, took it all in at a glance; and having run over the groups, his eye rested on a man in front of him. This man, seated upon a stool, scarcely showed his head above the counter that sheltered him. He was about forty years of age, with a melancholy aspect, pale face, and soft luminous eyes. He was looking at D'Artagnan and the rest, with his chin resting upon his hand, like a calm and inquiring amateur. Only on perceiving, and doubtless recognizing, our captain, he pulled his hat down over his eyes. It was this action, perhaps, that attracted D'Artagnan's attention. If so, the gentleman who had pulled down his hat produced an effect entirely different from what he had desired. In other respects his costume was plain, and his hair evenly cut enough for customers, who were not close observers, to take him for a mere tailor's apprentice, perched behind the board, and carefully stitching cloth or velvet. Nevertheless, this man held up his head too often to be very productively employed with his fingers. D'Artagnan was not deceived,—not he; and he saw at once that if this man was working at anything, it certainly was not at velvet.

"Eh!" said he, addressing this man, "and so you have become a tailor's boy, Monsieur Moliere!"

"Hush, M. d'Artagnan!" replied the man, softly, "you will make them recognize me."

"Well, and what harm?"

"The fact is, there is no harm, but—"

"You were going to say there is no good in doing it either, is it not so?"

"Alas! no; for I was occupied in examining some excellent figures."

"Go on—go on, Monsieur Moliere. I quite understand the interest you take in the plates—I will not disturb your studies."

"Thank you."

"But on one condition; that you tell me where M. Percerin really is."

"Oh! willingly; in his own room. Only—"

"Only that one can't enter it?"

"Unapproachable."

"For everybody?"

"Everybody. He brought me here so that I might be at my ease to make my observations, and then he went away."

"Well, my dear Monsieur Moliere, but you will go and tell him I am here."

"It!" exclaimed Moliere, in the tone of a courageous dog, from which you snatch the bone it has legitimately gained; "I disturb myself! Ah! Monsieur d'Artagnan, how hard you are upon me!"

"If you don't go directly and tell M. Percerin that I am here, my dear Moliere," said D'Artagnan, in a low tone, "I warn you of one thing: that I won't exhibit to you the friend I have brought with me."

Moliere indicated Porthos by an imperceptible gesture, "This gentleman, is it not?"

"Yes."

Moliere fixed upon Porthos one of those looks which penetrate the minds and hearts of men. The subject doubtless appeared a very promising one, for he immediately rose and led the way into the adjoining chamber.

#### IV. The Patterns.

During all this time the noble mob was slowly heaving away, leaving at every angle of the counter either a murmur or a menace, as the waves leave foam or scattered seaweed on the sands, when they retire with the ebbing tide. In about ten minutes Moliere reappeared, making another sign to D'Artagnan from under the hangings. The latter hurried after him, with Porthos in the rear, and after threading a labyrinth of corridors, introduced him to M. Percerin's room. The old man, with his sleeves turned up, was gathering up in folds a piece of gold-flowered brocade, so as the better to exhibit its luster. Perceiving D'Artagnan, he put the silk aside, and came to meet him, by no means radiant with joy, and by no means courteous, but, take it altogether, in a tolerably civil manner.

"The captain of the king's musketeers will excuse me, I am sure, for I am engaged."

"Eh! yes, on the king's costumes; I know that, my dear Monsieur Percerin. You are making three, they tell me."

"Five, my dear sir, five."

"Three or five, 'tis all the same to me, my dear monsieur; and I know that you will make them most exquisitely."

"Yes, I know. Once made they will be the most beautiful in the world, I do not deny it; but that they may be the most beautiful in the word, they must first be made; and to do this, captain, I am pressed for time."

"Oh, bah! there are two days yet; 'tis much more than you require, Monsieur Percerin," said D'Artagnan, in the coolest possible manner.

Percerin raised his head with the air of a man little accustomed to be contradicted, even in his whims; but D'Artagnan did not pay the least attention to the airs which the illustrious tailor began to assume.

"My dear M. Percerin," he continued, "I bring you a customer."

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed Percerin, crossly.

"M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," continued D'Artagnan. Percerin attempted a bow, which found no favour in the eyes of the terrible Porthos, who, from his first entry into the room, had been regarding the tailor askance.

"A very good friend of mine," concluded D'Artagnan.

"I will attend to monsieur," said Percerin, "but later."

"Later? but when?"

"When I have time."

"You have already told my valet as much," broke in Porthos, discontentedly.

"Very likely," said Percerin; "I am nearly always pushed for time."

"My friend," returned Porthos, sententiously, "there is always time to be found when one chooses to seek it."

Percerin turned crimson; an ominous sign indeed in old men blanched by age.

"Monsieur is quite at liberty to confer his custom elsewhere."

"Come, come, Percerin," interposed D'Artagnan, "you are not in a good temper to-day. Well, I will say one more word to you, which will bring you on your knees; monsieur is not only a friend of mine, but more, a friend of M. Fouquet's."

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed the tailor, "that is another thing." Then turning to Porthos, "Monsieur le baron is attached to the superintendent?" he inquired.

"I am attached to myself," shouted Porthos, at the very moment that the tapestry was raised to introduce a new speaker in the dialogue. Moliere was all observation, D'Artagnan laughed, Porthos swore.

"My dear Percerin," said D'Artagnan, "you will make a dress for the baron. 'Tis I who ask you."

"To you I will not say nay, captain."

"But that is not all; you will make it for him at once."

"'Tis impossible within eight days."

"That, then, is as much as to refuse, because the dress is wanted for the *fete* at Vaux."

"I repeat that it is impossible," returned the obstinate old man.

"By no means, dear Monsieur Percerin, above all if / ask you," said a mild voice at the door, a silvery voice which made D'Artagnan prick up his ears. It was the voice of Aramis.

"Monsieur d'Herblay!" cried the tailor.

"Aramis," murmured D'Artagnan.

"Ah! our bishop!" said Porthos.

"Good morning, D'Artagnan; good morning, Porthos; good-morning, my dear friends," said Aramis. "Come, come, M. Percerin, make the baron's dress; and I will answer for it you will gratify M. Fouquet." And he accompanied the words with a sign, which seemed to say, "Agree, and dismiss them."

It appeared that Aramis had over Master Percerin an influence superior even to D'Artagnan's, for the tailor bowed in assent, and turning round upon Porthos, said, "Go and get measured on the other side."

Porthos coloured in a formidable manner. D'Artagnan saw the storm coming, and addressing Moliere, said to him, in an undertone, "You see before you, my dear monsieur, a man who considers himself disgraced, if you measure the flesh and bones that Heaven has given him; study this type for me, Master Aristophanes, and profit by it."

Moliere had no need of encouragement, and his gaze dwelt long and keenly on the Baron Porthos. "Monsieur," he said, "if you will come with me, I will make them take your measure without touching you."

"Oh!" said Porthos, "how do you make that out, my friend?"

"I say that they shall apply neither line nor rule to the seams of your dress. It is a new method we have invented for measuring people of quality, who are too sensitive to allow low-born fellows to touch them. We know some susceptible persons who will not put up with being measured, a process which, as I think, wounds the natural dignity of a man; and if perchance monsieur should be one of these—"

"*Corboeuf!* I believe I am too!"

"Well, that is a capital and most consolatory coincidence, and you shall have the benefit of our invention."

"But how in the world can it be done?" asked Porthos, delighted.

"Monsieur," said Moliere, bowing, "if you will deign to follow me, you will see."

Aramis observed this scene with all his eyes. Perhaps he fancied from D'Artagnan's liveliness that he would leave with Porthos, so as not to lose the conclusion of a scene well begun. But, clear-sighted as he was, Aramis deceived himself. Porthos and Moliere left together: D'Artagnan remained with Percerin. Why? From curiosity, doubtless; probably to enjoy a little longer the society of his good friend Aramis. As Moliere and Porthos disappeared, D'Artagnan drew near the bishop of Vannes, a proceeding which appeared particularly to disconcert him.

"A dress for you, also, is it not, my friend?"

Aramis smiled. "No," said he.

"You will go to Vaux, however?"

"I shall go, but without a new dress. You forget, dear D'Artagnan, that a poor bishop of Vannes is not rich enough to have new dresses for every *fete*."

"Bah!" said the musketeer, laughing, "and do we write no more poems now, either?"

"Oh! D'Artagnan," exclaimed Aramis, "I have long ago given up all such tomfoolery."

"True," repeated D'Artagnan, only half convinced. As for Percerin, he was once more absorbed in contemplation of the brocades.

"Don't you perceive," said Aramis, smiling, "that we are greatly boring this good gentleman, my dear D'Artagnan?"

"Ah! ah!" murmured the musketeer, aside; "that is, I am boring you, my friend." Then aloud, "Well, then, let us leave; I have no further business here, and if you are as disengaged as I, Aramis—"

"No, not I—I wished—"

"Ah! you had something particular to say to M. Percerin? Why did you not tell me so at once?"

"Something particular, certainly," repeated Aramis, "but not for you, D'Artagnan. But, at the same time, I hope you will believe that I can never have anything so particular to say that a friend like you may not hear it."

"Oh, no, no! I am going," said D'Artagnan, imparting to his voice an evident tone of curiosity; for Aramis's annoyance, well dissembled as it was, had not a whit escaped him; and he knew that, in that impenetrable mind, every thing, even the most apparently trivial, was designed to some end; an unknown one, but an end that, from the knowledge he had of his friend's character, the musketeer felt must be important.

On his part, Aramis saw that D'Artagnan was not without suspicion, and pressed him. "Stay, by all means," he said, "this is what it is." Then turning towards the tailor, "My dear Percerin," said he,—*"I am even very happy that you are here, D'Artagnan."*

"Oh, indeed," exclaimed the Gascon, for the third time, even less deceived this time than before.

Percerin never moved. Aramis roused him violently, by snatching from his hands the stuff upon which he was engaged. "My dear Percerin," said he, "I have, near hand, M. Lebrun, one of M. Fouquet's painters."

"Ah, very good," thought D'Artagnan; "but why Lebrun?"

Aramis looked at D'Artagnan, who seemed to be occupied with an engraving of Mark Antony. "And you wish that I should make him a dress, similar to those of the Epicureans?" answered Percerin. And while saying this, in an absent manner, the worthy tailor endeavored to recapture his piece of brocade.

"An Epicurean's dress?" asked D'Artagnan, in a tone of inquiry.

"I see," said Aramis, with a most engaging smile, "it is written that our dear D'Artagnan shall know all our secrets this evening. Yes, friend, you have surely heard speak of M. Fouquet's Epicureans, have you not?"

"Undoubtedly. Is it not a kind of poetical society, of which La Fontaine, Loret, Pelisson, and Moliere are members, and which holds its sittings at Saint-Mande?"

"Exactly so. Well, we are going to put our poets in uniform, and enroll them in a regiment for the king."

"Oh, very well, I understand; a surprise M. Fouquet is getting up for the king. Be at ease; if that is the secret about M. Lebrun, I will not mention it."

"Always agreeable, my friend. No, Monsieur Lebrun has nothing to do with this part of it; the secret which concerns him is far more important than the other."

"Then, if it is so important as all that, I prefer not to know it," said D'Artagnan, making a show of departure.

"Come in, M. Lebrun, come in," said Aramis, opening a side-door with his right hand, and holding back D'Artagnan with his left.

"I'faith, I too, am quite in the dark," quoth Percerin.

Aramis took an "opportunity," as is said in theatrical matters.

"My dear M. de Percerin," Aramis continued, "you are making five dresses for the king, are you not? One in brocade; one in hunting-cloth; one in velvet; one in satin; and one in Florentine stuffs."

"Yes; but how—do you know all that, my lord?" said Percerin, astounded.

"It is all very simple, my dear monsieur; there will be a hunt, a banquet, concert, promenade and reception; these five kinds of dress are required by etiquette."

"You know everything, my lord!"

"And a thing or two in addition," muttered D'Artagnan.

"But," cried the tailor, in triumph, "what you do not know, my lord—prince of the church though you are—what nobody will know—what only the king, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and myself do know, is the colour of the materials and nature of the ornaments, and the cut, the *ensemble*, the finish of it all!"

"Well," said Aramis, "that is precisely what I have come to ask you, dear Percerin."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed the tailor, terrified, though Aramis had pronounced these words in his softest and most honeyed tones. The request appeared, on reflection, so exaggerated, so ridiculous, so monstrous to M. Percerin that first he laughed to himself, then aloud, and finished with a shout. D'Artagnan followed his example, not because he found the matter so "very funny," but in order not to allow Aramis to cool.

"At the outset, I appear to be hazarding an absurd question, do I not?" said Aramis. "But D'Artagnan, who is incarnate wisdom itself, will tell you that I could not do otherwise than ask you this."

"Let us see," said the attentive musketeer; perceiving with his wonderful instinct that they had only been skirmishing till now, and that the hour of battle was approaching.

"Let us see," said Percerin, incredulously.

"Why, now," continued Aramis, "does M. Fouquet give the king a *fete*?—Is it not to please him?"

"Assuredly," said Percerin. D'Artagnan nodded assent.

"By delicate attentions? by some happy device? by a succession of surprises, like that of which we were talking?—the enrolment of our Epicureans."

"Admirable."

"Well, then; this is the surprise we intend. M. Lebrun here is a man who draws most excellently."

"Yes," said Percerin; "I have seen his pictures, and observed that his dresses were highly elaborated. That is why I at once agreed to make him a costume—whether to agree with those of the Epicureans, or an original one."

"My dear monsieur, we accept your offer, and shall presently avail ourselves of it; but just now, M. Lebrun is not in want of the dresses you will make for himself, but of those you are making for the king."

Percerin made a bound backwards, which D'Artagnan—calmest and most appreciative of men, did not consider overdone, so many strange and startling aspects wore the proposal which Aramis had just hazarded. "The king's dresses! Give the king's dresses to any mortal whatever! Oh! for once, my lord, your grace is mad!" cried the poor tailor in extremity.

"Help me now, D'Artagnan," said Aramis, more and more calm and smiling. "Help me now to persuade monsieur, for *you* understand; do you not?"

"Eh! eh!—not exactly, I declare."

"What! you do not understand that M. Fouquet wishes to afford the king the surprise of finding his portrait on his arrival at Vaux; and that the portrait, which be a striking resemblance, ought to be dressed exactly as the king will be on the day it is shown?"

"Oh! yes, yes," said the musketeer, nearly convinced, so plausible was this reasoning. "Yes, my dear Aramis, you are right; it is a happy idea. I will wager it is one of your own, Aramis."

"Well, I don't know," replied the bishop; "either mine or M. Fouquet's." Then scanning Percerin, after noticing D'Artagnan's hesitation, "Well, Monsieur Percerin," he asked, "what do you say to this?"

"I say, that—"

"That you are, doubtless, free to refuse. I know well—and I by no means count upon compelling you, my dear monsieur. I will say more, I even understand all the delicacy you feel in taking up with M. Fouquet's idea; you dread appearing to flatter the king. A noble spirit, M. Percerin, a noble spirit!" The tailor stammered. "It would, indeed, be a very pretty compliment to pay the young prince," continued Aramis; "but as the surintendant told me, if Percerin refuse, tell him that it will not at all lower him in my opinion, and I shall always esteem him, only—"

"Only?" repeated Percerin, rather troubled.

"Only," continued Aramis, "'I shall be compelled to say to the king,'—you understand, my dear Monsieur Percerin, that these are M. Fouquet's words,—'I shall be constrained to say to the king, "Sire, I had intended to present your majesty with your portrait, but owing to a feeling of delicacy, slightly exaggerated perhaps, although creditable, M. Percerin opposed the project.'"

"Opposed!" cried the tailor, terrified at the responsibility which would weigh upon him; "I to oppose the desire, the will of M. Fouquet when he is seeking to please the king! Oh, what a hateful word you have uttered, my lord. Oppose! Oh, 'tis not I who said it, Heaven have mercy on me. I call the captain of the musketeers to witness it! Is it not true, Monsieur d'Artagnan, that I have opposed nothing?"

D'Artagnan made a sign indicating that he wished to remain neutral. He felt that there was an intrigue at the bottom of it, whether comedy or tragedy; he was at his wit's end at not being able to fathom it, but in the meanwhile wished to keep clear.

But already Percerin, goaded by the idea that the king was to be told he stood in the way of a pleasant surprise, had offered Lebrun a chair, and proceeded to bring from a wardrobe four magnificent dresses, the fifth being still in the workmen's hands; and these masterpieces he successively fitted upon four lay figures, which, imported into France in the time of Concini, had been given to Percerin II. by Marshal d'Onore, after the discomfiture of the Italian tailors ruined in their competition. The painter set to work to draw and then to paint the dresses. But Aramis, who was closely watching all the phases of his toil, suddenly stopped him.

"I think you have not quite got it, my dear Lebrun," he said; "your colours will deceive you, and on canvas we shall lack that exact resemblance which is absolutely requisite. Time is necessary for attentively observing the finer shades."

"Quite true," said Percerin, "but time is wanting, and on that head, you will agree with me, my lord, I can do nothing."

"Then the affair will fail," said Aramis, quietly, "and that because of a want of precision in the colours."

Nevertheless Lebrun went on copying the materials and ornaments with the closest fidelity—a process which Aramis watched with ill-concealed impatience.

"What in the world, now, is the meaning of this imbroglio?" the musketeer kept saying to himself.

"That will never do," said Aramis: "M. Lebrun, close your box, and roll up your canvas."

"But, monsieur," cried the vexed painter, "the light is abominable here."

"An idea, M. Lebrun, an idea! If we had a pattern of the materials, for example, and with time, and a better light—"

"Oh, then," cried Lebrun, "I would answer for the effect."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan, "this ought to be the knotty point of the whole thing; they want a pattern of each of the materials. *Mordieux!* Will this Percerin give in now?"

Percerin, beaten from his last retreat, and duped, moreover, by the feigned good-nature of Aramis, cut out five patterns and handed them to the bishop of Vannes.

"I like this better. That is your opinion, is it not?" said Aramis to D'Artagnan.

"My dear Aramis," said D'Artagnan, "my opinion is that you are always the same."

"And, consequently, always your friend," said the bishop in a charming tone.

"Yes, yes," said D'Artagnan, aloud; then, in a low voice, "If I am your dupe, double Jesuit that you are, I will not be your accomplice; and to prevent it, 'tis time I left this place.—Adieu, Aramis," he added aloud, "adieu; I am going to rejoin Porthos."

"Then wait for me," said Aramis, pocketing the patterns, "for I have done, and shall be glad to say a parting word to our dear old friend."

Lebrun packed up his paints and brushes, Percerin put back the dresses into the closet, Aramis put his hand on his pocket to assure himself the patterns were secure,—and they all left the study.

V. Where, Probably, Moliere Obtained His First Idea of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme.

D'Artagnan found Porthos in the adjoining chamber; but no longer an irritated Porthos, or a disappointed Porthos, but Porthos radiant, blooming, fascinating, and chattering with Moliere, who was looking upon him with a species of idolatry, and as a man would who had not only never seen anything greater, but not even ever anything so great. Aramis went straight up to Porthos and offered him his white hand, which lost itself in the gigantic clasp of his old friend,—an operation which Aramis never hazarded without a certain uneasiness. But the friendly pressure having been performed not too painfully for him, the bishop of Vannes passed over to Moliere.

"Well, monsieur," said he, "will you come with me to Saint-Mande?"

"I will go anywhere you like, my lord," answered Moliere.

"To Saint-Mande!" cried Porthos, surprised at seeing the proud bishop of Vannes fraternizing with a journeyman tailor. "What, Aramis, are you going to take this gentleman to Saint-Mande?"

"Yes," said Aramis, smiling, "our work is pressing."

"And besides, my dear Porthos," continued D'Artagnan, "M. Moliere is not altogether what he seems."

"In what way?" asked Porthos.

"Why, this gentleman is one of M. Percerin's chief clerks, and is expected at Saint-Mande to try on the dresses which M. Fouquet has ordered for the Epicureans."

"Tis precisely so," said Moliere.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Come, then, my dear M. Moliere," said Aramis, "that is, if you have done with M. du Vallon."

"We have finished," replied Porthos.

"And you are satisfied?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Completely so," replied Porthos.

Moliere took his leave of Porthos with much ceremony, and grasped the hand which the captain of the musketeers furtively offered him.

"Pray, monsieur," concluded Porthos, mincingly, "above all, be exact."

"You will have your dress the day after to-morrow, monsieur le baron," answered Moliere. And he left with Aramis.

Then D'Artagnan, taking Porthos's arm, "What has this tailor done for you, my dear Porthos," he asked, "that you are so pleased with him?"

"What has he done for me, my friend! done for me!" cried Porthos, enthusiastically.

"Yes, I ask you, what has he done for you?"

"My friend, he has done that which no tailor ever yet accomplished: he has taken my measure without touching me!"

"Ah, bah! tell me how he did it."

"First, then, they went, I don't know where, for a number of lay figures, of all heights and sizes, hoping there would be one to suit mine, but the largest—that of the drum-major of the Swiss guard—was two inches too short, and a half foot too narrow in the chest."

"Indeed!"

"It is exactly as I tell you, D'Artagnan; but he is a great man, or at the very least a great tailor, is this M. Moliere. He was not at all put at fault by the circumstance."

"What did he do, then?"

"Oh! it is a very simple matter. I'faith, 'tis an unheard-of thing that people should have been so stupid as not to have discovered this method from the first. What annoyance and humiliation they would have spared me!"

"Not to mention of the costumes, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, thirty dresses."

"Well, my dear Porthos, come, tell me M. Moliere's plan."

"Moliere? You call him so, do you? I shall make a point of recollecting his name."

"Yes; or Poquelin, if you prefer that."

"No; I like Moliere best. When I wish to recollect his name, I shall think of *voliere* [an aviary]; and as I have one at Pierrefonds—"

"Capital!" returned D'Artagnan. "And M. Moliere's plan?"

"Tis this: instead of pulling me to pieces, as all these rascals do—of making me bend my back, and double my joints—all of them low and dishonourable practices—" D'Artagnan made a sign of approbation with his head. "'Monsieur,' he said to me," continued Porthos, "'a gentleman ought to measure himself. Do me the pleasure to draw near this glass;' and I drew near the glass. I must own I did not exactly understand what this good M. Voliere wanted with me."

"Moliere!"

"Ah! yes, Moliere—Moliere. And as the fear of being measured still possessed me, 'Take care,' said I to him, 'what you are going to do with me; I am very ticklish, I warn you.' But he, with his soft voice (for he is a courteous fellow, we must admit, my friend), he with his soft voice, 'Monsieur,' said he, 'that your dress may fit you well, it must be made according to your figure. Your figure is exactly reflected in this mirror. We shall take the measure of this reflection.'"

"In fact," said D'Artagnan, "you saw yourself in the glass; but where did they find one in which you could see your whole figure?"

"My good friend, it is the very glass in which the king is used to look to see himself."

"Yes; but the king is a foot and a half shorter than you are."

"Ah! well, I know not how that may be; it is, no doubt, a cunning way of flattering the king; but the looking-glass was too large for me. 'Tis true that its height was made up of three Venetian plates of glass, placed one above another, and its breadth of three similar parallelograms in juxtaposition."

"Oh, Porthos! what excellent words you have command of. Where in the word did you acquire such a voluminous vocabulary?"

"At Belle-Ile. Aramis and I had to use such words in our strategic studies and castramentative experiments."

D'Artagnan recoiled, as though the sesquipedalian syllables had knocked the breath out of his body.

"Ah! very good. Let us return to the looking-glass, my friend."

"Then, this good M. Voliere—"

"Moliere."

"Yes—Moliere—you are right. You will see now, my dear friend, that I shall recollect his name quite well. This excellent M. Moliere set to work tracing out lines on the mirror, with a piece of Spanish chalk, following in all the make of my arms and my shoulders, all the while expounding this maxim, which I thought admirable: 'It is advisable that a dress should not incommode its wearer.'"

"In reality," said D'Artagnan, "that is an excellent maxim, which is, unfortunately, seldom carried out in practice."

"That is why I found it all the more astonishing, when he expatiated upon it."

"Ah! he expatiated?"

"*Parbleu!*"

"Let me hear his theory."

"'Seeing that,' he continued, 'one may, in awkward circumstances, or in a troublesome position, have one's doublet on one's shoulder, and not desire to take one's doublet off—'"

"True," said D'Artagnan.

"'And so,' continued M. Voliere—"

"Moliere."

"Moliere, yes. 'And so,' went on M. Moliere, 'you want to draw your sword, monsieur, and you have your doublet on your back. What do you do?'"

"'I take it off,' I answered.

"'Well, no,' he replied.

"'How no?'"

"'I say that the dress should be so well made, that it will in no way encumber you, even in drawing your sword.'"

"Ah, ah!"

"'Throw yourself on guard,' pursued he.

"I did it with such wondrous firmness, that two panes of glass burst out of the window.

"'Tis nothing, nothing,' said he. 'Keep your position.'"

"I raised my left arm in the air, the forearm gracefully bent, the ruffle drooping, and my wrist curved, while my right arm, half extended, securely covered my wrist with the elbow, and my breast with the wrist."

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "'tis the true guard—the academic guard."

"You have said the very word, dear friend. In the meanwhile, Voliere—"

"Moliere."

"Hold! I should certainly, after all, prefer to call him—what did you say his other name was?"

"Poquelin."

"I prefer to call him Poquelin."

"And how will you remember this name better than the other?"

"You understand, he calls himself Poquelin, does he not?"

"Yes."

"If I were to call to mind Madame Coquenard."

"Good."

"And change *Coc* into *Poc*, *nard* into *lin*; and instead of Coquenard I shall have Poquelin."

"'Tis wonderful," cried D'Artagnan, astounded. "Go on, my friend, I am listening to you with admiration."

"This Coquelin sketched my arm on the glass."

"I beg your pardon—Poquelin."

"What did I say, then?"

"You said Coquelin."

"Ah! true. This Poquelin, then, sketched my arm on the glass; but he took his time over it; he kept looking at me a good deal. The fact is, that I must have been looking particularly handsome."

"Does it weary you?" he asked.

"'A little,' I replied, bending a little in my hands, 'but I could hold out for an hour or so longer.'"

"'No, no, I will not allow it; the willing fellows will make it a duty to support your arms, as of old, men supported those of the prophet.'"

"'Very good,' I answered.

"'That will not be humiliating to you?'"

"'My friend,' said I, 'there is, I think, a great difference between being supported and being measured.'"

"The distinction is full of the soundest sense," interrupted D'Artagnan.

"Then," continued Porthos, "he made a sign: two lads approached; one supported my left arm, while the other, with infinite address, supported my right."

"'Another, my man,' cried he. A third approached. 'Support monsieur by the waist,' said he. The *garcon* complied."

"So that you were at rest?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Perfectly; and Pocquenard drew me on the glass."

"Poquelin, my friend."

"Poquelin—you are right. Stay, decidedly I prefer calling him Voliere."

"Yes; and then it was over, wasn't it?"

"During that time Voliere drew me as I appeared in the mirror."

"'Twas delicate in him."

"I much like the plan; it is respectful, and keeps every one in his place."

“And there it ended?”

“Without a soul having touched me, my friend.”

“Except the three *garçons* who supported you.”

“Doubtless; but I have, I think, already explained to you the difference there is between supporting and measuring.”

“’Tis true,” answered D’Artagnan; who said afterwards to himself, “I’faith, I greatly deceive myself, or I have been the means of a good windfall to that rascal Moliere, and we shall assuredly see the scene hit off to the life in some comedy or other.” Porthos smiled.

“What are you laughing at?” asked D’Artagnan.

“Must I confess? Well, I was laughing over my good fortune.”

“Oh, that is true; I don’t know a happier man than you. But what is this last piece of luck that has befallen you?”

“Well, my dear fellow, congratulate me.”

“I desire nothing better.”

“It seems that I am the first who has had his measure taken in that manner.”

“Are you so sure of it?”

“Nearly so. Certain signs of intelligence which passed between Voliere and the other *garçons* showed me the fact.”

“Well, my friend, that does not surprise me from Moliere,” said D’Artagnan.

“Voliere, my friend.”

“Oh, no, no, indeed! I am very willing to leave you to go on saying Voliere; but, as for me, I shall continued to say Moliere. Well, this, I was saying, does not surprise me, coming from Moliere, who is a very ingenious fellow, and inspired you with this grand idea.”

“It will be of great use to him by and by, I am sure.”

“Won’t it be of use to him, indeed? I believe you, it will, and that in the highest degree;—for you see my friend Moliere is of all known tailors the man who best clothes our barons, comtes, and marquises—according to their measure.”

On this observation, neither the application nor depth of which we shall discuss, D’Artagnan and Porthos quitted M. de Percerin’s house and rejoined their carriages, wherein we will leave them, in order to look after Moliere and Aramis at Saint-Mande.

VI. The Bee-Hive, the Bees, and the Honey.

The bishop of Vannes, much annoyed at having met D’Artagnan at M. Percerin’s, returned to Saint-Mande in no very good humor. Moliere, on the other hand, quite delighted at having made such a capital rough sketch, and at knowing where to find his original again, whenever he should desire to convert his sketch into a picture, Moliere arrived in the merriest of moods. All the first story of the left wing was occupied by the most celebrated Epicureans in Paris, and those on the freest footing in the house—every one in his compartment, like the bees in their cells, employed in producing the honey intended for that royal cake which M. Fouquet proposed to offer his majesty Louis XIV. during the *fête* at Vaux. Pelisson, his head leaning on his hand, was engaged in drawing out the plan of the prologue to the “Facheux,” a comedy in three acts, which was to be put on the stage by Poquelin de Moliere, as D’Artagnan called him, or Coquelin de Voliere, as Porthos styled him. Loret, with all the charming innocence of a gazetteer,—the gazetteers of all ages have always been so artless!—Loret was composing an account of the *fetes* at Vaux, before those *fetes* had taken place. La Fontaine sauntered about from one to the other, a peripatetic, absent-minded, boring, unbearable dreamer, who kept buzzing and humming at everybody’s elbow a thousand poetic abstractions. He so often disturbed Pelisson, that the latter, raising his head, crossly said, “At least, La Fontaine, supply me with a rhyme, since you have the run of the gardens at Parnassus.”

“What rhyme do you want?” asked the *Fabler* as Madame de Sevigne used to call him.

“I want a rhyme to *lumiere*.”

“*Omriere*,” answered La Fontaine.

“Ah, but, my good friend, one cannot talk of *wheel-ruts* when celebrating the delights of Vaux,” said Loret.

“Besides, it doesn’t rhyme,” answered Pelisson.

“What! doesn’t rhyme!” cried La Fontaine, in surprise.

“Yes; you have an abominable habit, my friend,—a habit which will ever prevent your becoming a poet of the first order. You rhyme in a slovenly manner.”

“Oh, oh, you think so, do you, Pelisson?”

“Yes, I do, indeed. Remember that a rhyme is never good so long as one can find a better.”

“Then I will never write anything again save in prose,” said La Fontaine, who had taken up Pelisson’s reproach in earnest. “Ah! I often suspected I was nothing but a rascally poet! Yes, ‘tis the very truth.”

“Do not say so; your remark is too sweeping, and there is much that is good in your ‘Fables.’”

“And to begin,” continued La Fontaine, following up his idea, “I will go and burn a hundred verses I have just made.”

“Where are your verses?”

“In my head.”

“Well, if they are in your head you cannot burn them.”

“True,” said La Fontaine; “but if I do not burn them—”

“Well, what will happen if you do not burn them?”

“They will remain in my mind, and I shall never forget them!”

“The deuce!” cried Loret; “what a dangerous thing! One would go mad with it!”

“The deuce! the deuce!” repeated La Fontaine; “what can I do?”

“I have discovered the way,” said Moliere, who had entered just at this point of the conversation.

“What way?”

“Write them first and burn them afterwards.”

“How simple! Well, I should never have discovered that. What a mind that devil of a Moliere has!” said La Fontaine. Then, striking his forehead, “Oh, thou wilt never be aught but an ass, Jean La Fontaine!” he added.

“*What* are you saying there, my friend?” broke in Moliere, approaching the poet, whose aside he had heard.

“I say I shall never be aught but an ass,” answered La Fontaine, with a heavy sigh and swimming eyes. “Yes, my friend,” he added, with increasing grief, “it seems that I rhyme in a slovenly manner.”

“Oh, ‘tis wrong to say so.”

“Nay, I am a poor creature!”

“Who said so?”

*“Parbleu!* ’twas Pelisson; did you not, Pelisson?”

Pelisson, again absorbed in his work, took good care not to answer.

“But if Pelisson said you were so,” cried Moliere, “Pelisson has seriously offended you.”

“Do you think so?”

“Ah! I advise you, as you are a gentleman, not to leave an insult like that unpunished.”

*“What!”* exclaimed La Fontaine.

“Did you ever fight?”

“Once only, with a lieutenant in the light horse.”

“What wrong had he done you?”

“It seems he ran away with my wife.”

“Ah, ah!” said Moliere, becoming slightly pale; but as, at La Fontaine’s declaration, the others had turned round, Moliere kept upon his lips the rallying smile which had so nearly died away, and continuing to make La Fontaine speak—

“And what was the result of the duel?”

“The result was, that on the ground my opponent disarmed me, and then made an apology, promising never again to set foot in my house.”

“And you considered yourself satisfied?” said Moliere.

“Not at all! on the contrary, I picked up my sword. ‘I beg your pardon, monsieur,’ I said. ‘I have not fought you because you were my wife’s friend, but because I was told I ought to fight. So, as I have never known any peace save since you made her acquaintance, do me the pleasure to continue your visits as heretofore, or *morbleu!* let us set to again.’ And so,” continued La Fontaine, “he was compelled to resume his friendship with madame, and I continue to be the happiest of husbands.”

All burst out laughing. Moliere alone passed his hand across his eyes. Why? Perhaps to wipe away a tear, perhaps to smother a sigh. Alas! we know that Moliere was a moralist, but he was not a philosopher. “’Tis all one,” he said, returning to the topic of the conversation, “Pelisson has insulted you.”

“Ah, truly! I had already forgotten it.”

“And I am going to challenge him on your behalf.”

“Well, you can do so, if you think it indispensable.”

“I do think it indispensable, and I am going to—”

“Stay,” exclaimed La Fontaine, “I want your advice.”

“Upon what? this insult?”

“No; tell me really now whether *lumiere* does not rhyme with *omriere*.”

“I should make them rhyme.”

“Ah! I knew you would.”

“And I have made a hundred thousand such rhymes in my time.”

“A hundred thousand!” cried La Fontaine. “Four times as many as ‘La Pucelle,’ which M. Chaplain is meditating. Is it also on this subject, too, that you have composed a hundred thousand verses?”

“Listen to me, you eternally absent-minded creature,” said Moliere.

“It is certain,” continued La Fontaine, “that *legume*, for instance, rhymes with *posthume*.”

“In the plural, above all.”

“Yes, above all in the plural, seeing that then it rhymes not with three letters, but with four; as *omiere* does with *lumiere*.”

“But give me *omieres* and *lumières* in the plural, my dear Pelisson,” said La Fontaine, clapping his hand on the shoulder of his friend, whose insult he had quite forgotten, “and they will rhyme.”

“Hem!” coughed Pelisson.

“Moliere says so, and Moliere is a judge of such things; he declares he has himself made a hundred thousand verses.”

“Come,” said Moliere, laughing, “he is off now.”

“It is like *rivage*, which rhymes admirably with *herbage*. I would take my oath of it.”

“But—” said Moliere.

"I tell you all this," continued La Fontaine, "because you are preparing a *divertissement* for Vaux, are you not?"

"Yes, the 'Facheux.'"

"Ah, yes, the 'Facheux;' yes, I recollect. Well, I was thinking a prologue would admirably suit your *divertissement*."

"Doubtless it would suit capially."

"Ah! you are of my opinion?"

"So much so, that I have asked you to write this very prologue."

"You asked *me* to write it?"

"Yes, you, and on your refusal begged you to ask Pelisson, who is engaged upon it at this moment."

"Ah! that is what Pelisson is doing, then? I'faith, my dear Moliere, you are indeed often right."

"When?"

"When you call me absent-minded. It is a monstrous defect; I will cure myself of it, and do your prologue for you."

"But inasmuch as Pelisson is about it!—"

"Ah, true, miserable rascal that I am! Loret was indeed right in saying I was a poor creature."

"It was not Loret who said so, my friend."

"Well, then, whoever said so, 'tis the same to me! And so your *divertissement* is called the 'Facheux?' Well, can you make *heureux* rhyme with *facheux*?"

"If obliged, yes."

"And even with *capriceux*."

"Oh, no, no."

"It would be hazardous, and yet why so?"

"There is too great a difference in the cadences."

"I was fancying," said La Fontaine, leaving Moliere for Loret—"I was fancying—"

"What were you fancying?" said Loret, in the middle of a sentence. "Make haste."

"You are writing the prologue to the 'Facheux,' are you not?"

"No! *mordieu!* it is Pelisson."

"Ah, Pelisson," cried La Fontaine, going over to him, "I was fancying," he continued, "that the nymph of Vaux—"

"Ah, beautiful!" cried Loret. "The nymph of Vaux! thank you, La Fontaine; you have just given me the two concluding verses of my paper."

"Well, if you can rhyme so well, La Fontaine," said Pelisson, "tell me now in what way you would begin my prologue?"

"I should say, for instance, 'Oh! nymph, who—' After 'who' I should place a verb in the second person singular of the present indicative; and should go on thus: 'this grot profound.'"

"But the verb, the verb?" asked Pelisson.

"To admire the greatest king of all kings round," continued La Fontaine.

"But the verb, the verb," obstinately insisted Pelisson. "This second person singular of the present indicative?"

"Well, then; quittest:

"Oh, nymph, who quittest now this grot profound, To admire the greatest king of all kings round."

"You would not put 'who quittest,' would you?"

"Why not?"

"Quittest," after 'you who'?"

"Ah! my dear fellow," exclaimed La Fontaine, "you are a shocking pedant!"

"Without counting," said Moliere, "that the second verse, 'king of all kings round,' is very weak, my dear La Fontaine."

"Then you see clearly I am nothing but a poor creature,—a shuffler, as you said."

"I never said so."

"Then, as Loret said."

"And it was not Loret either; it was Pelisson."

"Well, Pelisson was right a hundred times over. But what annoys me more than anything, my dear Moliere, is, that I fear we shall not have our Epicurean dresses."

"You expected yours, then, for the *fete*?"

"Yes, for the *fete*, and then for after the *fete*. My housekeeper told me that my own is rather faded."

"*Diable!* your housekeeper is right; rather more than faded."

"Ah, you see," resumed La Fontaine, "the fact is, I left it on the floor in my room, and my cat—"

"Well, your cat—"

"She made her nest upon it, which has rather changed its colour."

Moliere burst out laughing; Pelisson and Loret followed his example. At this juncture, the bishop of Vannes appeared, with a roll of plans and parchments under his arm. As if the angel of death had chilled all gay and sprightly fancies—as if that wan form had scared away the Graces to whom Xenocrates sacrificed—silence immediately reigned through the study, and every one resumed his self-possession and his pen. Aramis distributed the notes of invitation, and thanked them in the name of M. Fouquet. "The superintendent," he said, "being kept to his room by business, could not come and see them, but begged them to send him some of the fruits of their day's work, to enable him to forget the fatigue of his labor in the night."

At these words, all settled down to work. La Fontaine placed himself at a table, and set his rapid pen an endless dance across the smooth white vellum; Pelisson made a fair copy of his prologue; Moliere contributed fifty fresh verses, with which his visit to Percerin had inspired him; Loret, an article on the marvelous *fetes* he predicted; and Aramis, laden with his booty like the king of the bees, that great black drone, decked with purple and gold, re-entered his apartment, silent and busy. But before departing, "Remember, gentlemen," said he, "we leave to-morrow evening."

"In that case, I must give notice at home," said Moliere.

"Yes; poor Moliere!" said Loret, smiling; "he loves his home."

"*'He loves,'* yes," replied Moliere, with his sad, sweet smile. "'He loves,' that does not mean, they love *him*."

"As for me," said La Fontaine, "they love me at Chateau Thierry, I am very sure."

Aramis here re-entered after a brief disappearance.

"Will any one go with me?" he asked. "I am going by Paris, after having passed a quarter of an hour with M. Fouquet. I offer my carriage."

"Good," said Moliere, "I accept it. I am in a hurry."

"I shall dine here," said Loret. "M. de Gourville has promised me some craw-fish."

"He has promised me some whittings. Find a rhyme for that, La Fontaine."

Aramis went out laughing, as only he could laugh, and Moliere followed him. They were at the bottom of the stairs, when La Fontaine opened the door, and shouted out:

"He has promised us some whittings, In return for these our writings."

The shouts of laughter reached the ears of Fouquet at the moment Aramis opened the door of the study. As to Moliere, he had undertaken to order the horses, while Aramis went to exchange a parting word with the superintendent. "Oh, how they are laughing there!" said Fouquet, with a sigh.

"Do you not laugh, my lord?"

"I laugh no longer now, M. d'Herblay. The *fete* is approaching; money is departing."

"Have I not told you that was my business?"

"Yes, you promised me millions."

"You shall have them the day after the king's *entree* into Vaux."

Fouquet looked closely at Aramis, and passed the back of his icy hand across his moistened brow. Aramis perceived that the superintendent either doubted him, or felt he was powerless to obtain the money. How could Fouquet suppose that a poor bishop, ex-abbe, ex-musketeer, could find any?

"Why doubt me?" said Aramis. Fouquet smiled and shook his head.

"Man of little faith!" added the bishop.

"My dear M. d'Herblay," answered Fouquet, "if I fall—"

"Well; if you 'fall'?"

"I shall, at least, fall from such a height, that I shall shatter myself in falling." Then giving himself a shake, as though to escape from himself, "Whence came you," said he, "my friend?"

"From Paris—from Percerin."

"And what have you been doing at Percerin's, for I suppose you attach no great importance to our poets' dresses?"

"No; I went to prepare a surprise."

"Surprise?"

"Yes; which you are going to give to the king."

"And will it cost much?"

"Oh! a hundred pistoles you will give Lebrun."

"A painting?—Ah! all the better! And what is this painting to represent?"

"I will tell you; then at the same time, whatever you may say or think of it, I went to see the dresses for our poets."

"Bah! and they will be rich and elegant?"

"Splendid! There will be few great my lords with so good. People will see the difference there is between the courtiers of wealth and those of friendship."

"Ever generous and grateful, dear prelate."

"In your school."

Fouquet grasped his hand. "And where are you going?" he said.

"I am off to Paris, when you shall have given a certain letter."

"For whom?"

"M. de Lyonne."

"And what do you want with Lyonne?"

"I wish to make him sign a *lettre de cachet*."

"*'Lettre de cachet!'* Do you desire to put somebody in the Bastille?"

"On the contrary—to let somebody out."

"And who?"

"A poor devil—a youth, a lad who has been Bastilled these ten years, for two Latin verses he made against the Jesuits."



“Two Latin verses!’ and, for ‘two Latin verses,’ the miserable being has been in prison for ten years!”

“Yes!”

“And has committed no other crime?”

“Beyond this, he is as innocent as you or I.”

“On your word?”

“On my honour!”

“And his name is—”

“Seldon.”

“Yes.—But it is too bad. You knew this, and you never told me!”

“Twas only yesterday his mother applied to me, my lord.”

“And the woman is poor!”

“In the deepest misery.”

“Heaven,” said Fouquet, “sometimes bears with such injustice on earth, that I hardly wonder there are wretches who doubt of its existence. Stay, M. d’Herblay.” And Fouquet, taking a pen, wrote a few rapid lines to his colleague Lyonne. Aramis took the letter and made ready to go.

“Wait,” said Fouquet. He opened his drawer, and took out ten government notes which were there, each for a thousand francs. “Stay,” he said; “set the son at liberty, and give this to the mother; but, above all, do not tell her—”

“What, my lord?”

“That she is ten thousand livres richer than I. She would say I am but a poor superintendent! Go! and I pray that God will bless those who are mindful of his poor!”

“So also do I pray;” replied Aramis, kissing Fouquet’s hand.

And he went out quickly, carrying off the letter for Lyonne and the notes for Seldon’s mother, and taking up Moliere, who was beginning to lose patience.

#### VII. Another Supper at the Bastille.

Seven o’clock sounded from the great clock of the Bastille, that famous clock, which, like all the accessories of the state prison, the very use of which is a torture, recalled to the prisoners’ minds the destination of every hour of their punishment. The time-piece of the Bastille, adorned with figures, like most of the clocks of the period, represented St. Peter in bonds. It was the supper hour of the unfortunate captives. The doors, grating on their enormous hinges, opened for the passage of the baskets and trays of provisions, the abundance and the delicacy of which, as M. de Baisemeaux has himself taught us, was regulated by the condition in life of the prisoner. We understand on this head the theories of M. de Baisemeaux, sovereign dispenser of gastronomic delicacies, head cook of the royal fortress, whose trays, full-laden, were ascending the steep staircases, carrying some consolation to the prisoners in the shape of honestly filled bottles of good vintages. This same hour was that of M. le gouverneur’s supper also. He had a guest to-day, and the spit turned more heavily than usual. Roast partridges, flanked with quails and flanking a larded leveret; boiled fowls; hams, fried and sprinkled with white wine, *cardons* of Guipuzcoa and *la bisque ecrevisses*: these, together with soups and *hors d’oeuvres*, constituted the governor’s bill of fare. Baisemeaux, seated at table, was rubbing his hands and looking at the bishop of Vannes, who, booted like a cavalier, dressed in gray and sword at side, kept talking of his hunger and testifying the liveliest impatience. M. de Baisemeaux de Montezun was not accustomed to the unbending movements of his greatness my lord of Vannes, and this evening Aramis, becoming sprightly, volunteered confidence on confidence. The prelate had again a little touch of the musketeer about him. The bishop just trenched on the borders only of license in his style of conversation. As for M. de Baisemeaux, with the facility of vulgar people, he gave himself up entirely upon this point of his guest’s freedom. “Monsieur,” said he, “for indeed to-night I dare not call you my lord.”

“By no means,” said Aramis; “call me monsieur; I am booted.”

“Do you know, monsieur, of whom you remind me this evening?”

“No! faith,” said Aramis, taking up his glass; “but I hope I remind you of a capital guest.”

“You remind me of two, monsieur. Francois, shut the window; the wind may annoy his greatness.”

“And let him go,” added Aramis. “The supper is completely served, and we shall eat it very well without waiters. I like exceedingly to be *tete-a-tete* when I am with a friend.” Baisemeaux bowed respectfully.

“I like exceedingly,” continued Aramis, “to help myself.”

“Retire, Francois,” cried Baisemeaux. “I was saying that your greatness puts me in mind of two persons; one very illustrious, the late cardinal, the great Cardinal de la Rochelle, who wore boots like you.”

“Indeed,” said Aramis; “and the other?”

“The other was a certain musketeer, very handsome, very brave, very adventurous, very fortunate, who, from being abbe, turned musketeer, and from musketeer turned abbe.” Aramis condescended to smile. “From abbe,” continued Baisemeaux, encouraged by Aramis’s smile—“from abbe, bishop—and from bishop—”

“Ah! stay there, I beg,” exclaimed Aramis.

“I have just said, monsieur, that you gave me the idea of a cardinal.”

“Enough, dear M. Baisemeaux. As you said, I have on the boots of a cavalier, but I do not intend, for all that, to embroil myself with the church this evening.”

“But you have wicked intentions, nevertheless, my lord.”

“Oh, yes, wicked, I own, as everything mundane is.”

“You traverse the town and the streets in disguise?”

“In disguise, as you say.”

“And you still make use of your sword?”

“Yes, I should think so; but only when I am compelled. Do me the pleasure to summon Francois.”

“Have you no wine there?”

“’Tis not for wine, but because it is hot here, and the window is shut.”

“I shut the windows at supper-time so as not to hear the sounds or the arrival of couriers.”

“Ah, yes. You hear them when the window is open?”

“But too well, and that disturbs me. You understand?”

“Nevertheless I am suffocated. Francois.” Francois entered. “Open the windows, I pray you, Master Francois,” said Aramis. “You will allow him, dear M. Baisemeaux?”

“You are at home here,” answered the governor. The window was opened. “Do you not think,” said M. de Baisemeaux, “that you will find yourself very lonely, now M. de la Fere has returned to his household gods at Blois? He is a very old friend, is he not?”

“You know it as I do, Baisemeaux, seeing that you were in the musketeers with us.”

“Bah! with my friends I reckon neither bottles of wine nor years.”

“And you are right. But I do more than love M. de la Fere, dear Baisemeaux; I venerate him.”

“Well, for my part, though ’tis singular,” said the governor, “I prefer M. d’Artagnan to him. There is a man for you, who drinks long and well! That kind of people allow you at least to penetrate their thoughts.”

“Baisemeaux, make me tipsy to-night; let us have a merry time of it as of old, and if I have a trouble at the bottom of my heart, I promise you, you shall see it as you would a diamond at the bottom of your glass.”

“Bravo!” said Baisemeaux, and he poured out a great glass of wine and drank it off at a draught, trembling with joy at the idea of being, by hook or by crook, in the secret of some high archiepiscopal misdemeanor. While he was drinking he did not see with what attention Aramis was noting the sounds in the great court. A courier came in about eight o’clock as Francois brought in the fifth bottle, and, although the courier made a great noise, Baisemeaux heard nothing.

“The devil take him,” said Aramis.

“What! who?” asked Baisemeaux. “I hope ’tis neither the wine you drank nor he who is the cause of your drinking it.”

“No; it is a horse, who is making noise enough in the court for a whole squadron.”

“Poo! some courier or other,” replied the governor, redoubling his attention to the passing bottle. “Yes; and may the devil take him, and so quickly that we shall never hear him speak more. Hurrah! hurrah!”

“You forget me, Baisemeaux! my glass is empty,” said Aramis, lifting his dazzling Venetian goblet.

“Upon my honour, you delight me. Francois, wine!” Francois entered. “Wine, fellow! and better.”

“Yes, monsieur, yes; but a courier has just arrived.”

“Let him go to the devil, I say.”

“Yes, monsieur, but—”

“Let him leave his news at the office; we will see to it to-morrow. To-morrow, there will be time to-morrow; there will be daylight,” said Baisemeaux, chanting the words.

“Ah, monsieur,” grumbled the soldier Francois, in spite of himself, “monsieur.”

“Take care,” said Aramis, “take care!”

“Of what? dear M. d’Herblay,” said Baisemeaux, half intoxicated.

“The letter which the courier brings to the governor of a fortress is sometimes an order.”

“Nearly always.”

“Do not orders issue from the ministers?”

“Yes, undoubtedly; but—”

“And what to these ministers do but countersign the signature of the king?”

“Perhaps you are right. Nevertheless, ’tis very tiresome when you are sitting before a good table, *tete-a-tete* with a friend—Ah! I beg your pardon, monsieur; I forgot it is I who engage you at supper, and that I speak to a future cardinal.”

“Let us pass over that, dear Baisemeaux, and return to our soldier, to Francois.”

“Well, and what has Francois done?”

“He has demurred!”

“He was wrong, then?”

“However, he *has* demurred, you see; ’tis because there is something extraordinary in this matter. It is very possible that it was not Francois who was wrong in demurring, but you, who are in the wrong in not listening to him.”

“Wrong? I to be wrong before Francois? that seems rather hard.”

“Pardon me, merely an irregularity. But I thought it my duty to make an observation which I deem important.”

“Oh! perhaps you are right,” stammered Baisemeaux. “The king’s order is sacred; but as to orders that arrive when one is at supper, I repeat that the devil—”

“If you had said as much to the great cardinal—hem! my dear Baisemeaux, and if his order had any importance.”

“I do it that I may not disturb a bishop. *Mordioux!* am I not, then, excusable?”

“Do not forget, Baisemeaux, that I have worn the soldier’s coat, and I am accustomed to obedience everywhere.”

“You wish, then—”

“I wish that you would do your duty, my friend; yes, at least before this soldier.”

“’Tis mathematically true,” exclaimed Baisemeaux. Francois still waited: “Let them send this order of the king’s up to me,” he repeated, recovering himself. And he added in a low tone, “Do you know what it is? I will tell you something about as interesting as this. ‘Beware of fire near the powder magazine;’ or, ‘Look close after such and such a one, who is clever at escaping,’ Ah! if you only knew, my lord, how many times I have been suddenly awakened from the very sweetest, deepest slumber, by messengers arriving at full gallop to tell me, or rather, bring me a slip of paper containing these words: ‘Monsieur de Baisemeaux, what news?’ ’Tis clear enough that those who waste their time writing such orders have never slept in the Bastille. They would know better; they have never considered the thickness of my walls, the vigilance of my officers, the number of rounds we go. But, indeed, what can you expect, my lord? It is their business to write and torment me when I am at rest, and to trouble me when I am happy,” added Baisemeaux, bowing to Aramis. “Then let them do their business.”

“And do you do yours,” added the bishop, smiling.

Francois re-entered; Baisemeaux took from his hands the minister’s order. He slowly undid it, and as slowly read it. Aramis pretended to be drinking, so as to be able to watch his host through the glass. Then, Baisemeaux, having read it: “What was I just saying?” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked the bishop.

“An order of release! There, now; excellent news indeed to disturb us!”

“Excellent news for him whom it concerns, you will at least agree, my dear governor!”

“And at eight o’clock in the evening!”

“It is charitable!”

“Oh! charity is all very well, but it is for that fellow who says he is so weary and tired, but not for me who am amusing myself,” said Baisemeaux, exasperated.

“Will you lose by him, then? And is the prisoner who is to be set at liberty a good payer?”

“Oh, yes, indeed! a miserable, five-franc rat!”

“Let me see it,” asked M. d’Herblay. “It is no indiscretion?”

“By no means; read it.”

“There is ‘Urgent,’ on the paper; you have seen that, I suppose?”

“Oh, admirable! ‘Urgent!’—a man who has been there ten years! It is *urgent* to set him free to-day, this very evening, at eight o’clock!—*urgent!*” And Baisemeaux, shrugging his shoulders with an air of supreme disdain, flung the order on the table and began eating again.

“They are fond of these tricks!” he said, with his mouth full; “they seize a man, some fine day, keep him under lock and key for ten years, and write to you, ‘Watch this fellow well,’ or ‘Keep him very strictly.’ And then, as soon as you are accustomed to look upon the prisoner as a dangerous man, all of a sudden, without rhyme or reason they write—‘Set him at liberty,’ and actually add to their missive—‘urgent.’ You will own, my lord, ’tis enough to make a man at dinner shrug his shoulders!”

“What do you expect? It is for them to write,” said Aramis, “for you to execute the order.”

“Good! good! execute it! Oh, patience! You must not imagine that I am a slave.”

“Gracious Heaven! my very good M. Baisemeaux, who ever said so? Your independence is well known.”

“Thank Heaven!”

“But your goodness of heart is also known.”

“Ah! don’t speak of it!”

“And your obedience to your superiors. Once a soldier, you see, Baisemeaux, always a soldier.”

“And I shall directly obey; and to-morrow morning, at daybreak, the prisoner referred to shall be set free.”

“To-morrow?”

“At dawn.”

“Why not this evening, seeing that the *lettre de cachet* bears, both on the direction and inside, ‘*urgent*’?”

“Because this evening we are at supper, and our affairs are urgent, too!”

“Dear Baisemeaux, booted though I be, I feel myself a priest, and charity has higher claims upon me than hunger and thirst. This unfortunate man has suffered long enough, since you have just told me that he has been your prisoner these ten years. Abridge his suffering. His good time has come; give him the benefit quickly. God will repay you in Paradise with years of felicity.”

“You wish it?”

“I entreat you.”

“What! in the very middle of our repast?”

“I implore you; such an action is worth ten Benedicites.”

“It shall be as you desire, only our supper will get cold.”

“Oh! never heed that.”

Baisemeaux leaned back to ring for Francois, and by a very natural motion turned round towards the door. The order had remained on the table; Aramis seized the opportunity when Baisemeaux was not looking to change the paper for another, folded in the same manner, which he drew swiftly from his pocket. “Francois,” said the governor, “let the major come up here with the turnkeys of the Bertaudiere.” Francois bowed and quitted the room, leaving the two companions alone.

VIII. The General of the Order.

There was now a brief silence, during which Aramis never removed his eyes from Baisemeaux for a moment. The latter seemed only half decided to disturb himself thus in the middle of supper, and it was clear he was trying to invent some pretext, whether good or bad, for delay, at any rate till after dessert. And it appeared also that he had hit upon an excuse at last.

“Eh! but it is impossible!” he cried.

“How impossible?” said Aramis. “Give me a glimpse of this impossibility.”

“’Tis impossible to set a prisoner at liberty at such an hour. Where can he go to, a man so unacquainted with Paris?”

“He will find a place wherever he can.”

“You see, now, one might as well set a blind man free!”

“I have a carriage, and will take him wherever he wishes.”

“You have an answer for everything. Francois, tell monsieur le major to go and open the cell of M. Seldon, No. 3, Bertaudiere.”

“Seldon!” exclaimed Aramis, very naturally. “You said Seldon, I think?”

“I said Seldon, of course. ’Tis the name of the man they set free.”

“Oh! you mean to say Marchiali?” said Aramis.

“Marchiali? oh! yes, indeed. No, no, Seldon.”

“I think you are making a mistake, Monsieur Baisemeaux.”

“I have read the order.”

“And I also.”

“And I saw ‘Seldon’ in letters as large as that,” and Baisemeaux held up his finger.

“And I read ‘Marchiali’ in characters as large as this,” said Aramis, also holding up two fingers.

“To the proof; let us throw a light on the matter,” said Baisemeaux, confident he was right. “There is the paper, you have only to read it.”

“I read ‘Marchiali,’” returned Aramis, spreading out the paper. “Look.”

Baisemeaux looked, and his arms dropped suddenly. “Yes, yes,” he said, quite overwhelmed; “yes, Marchiali. ’Tis plainly written Marchiali! Quite true!”

“Ah!—”

“How? the man of whom we have talked so much? The man whom they are every day telling me to take such care of?”

“There is ‘Marchiali,’” repeated the inflexible Aramis.

“I must own it, my lord. But I understand nothing about it.”

“You believe your eyes, at any rate.”

“To tell me very plainly there is ‘Marchiali.’”

“And in a good handwriting, too.”

“’Tis a wonder! I still see this order and the name of Seldon, Irishman. I see it. Ah! I even recollect that under this name there was a blot of ink.”

“No, there is no ink; no, there is no blot.”

“Oh! but there was, though; I know it, because I rubbed my finger—this very one—in the powder that was over the blot.”

“In a word, be it how it may, dear M. Baisemeaux,” said Aramis, “and whatever you may have seen, the order is signed to release Marchiali, blot or no blot.”

“The order is signed to release Marchiali,” replied Baisemeaux, mechanically, endeavoring to regain his courage.

“And you are going to release this prisoner. If your heart dictates you to deliver Seldon also, I declare to you I will not oppose it the least in the world.” Aramis accompanied this remark with a smile, the irony of which effectually dispelled Baisemeaux’s confusion of mind, and restored his courage.

“My lord,” he said, “this Marchiali is the very same prisoner whom the other day a priest confessor of *our order* came to visit in so imperious and so secret a manner.”

“I don’t know that, monsieur,” replied the bishop.

“’Tis no such long time ago, dear Monsieur d’Herblay.”

“It is true. But *with us*, monsieur, it is good that the man of to-day should no longer know what the man of yesterday did.”

“In any case,” said Baisemeaux, “the visit of the Jesuit confessor must have given happiness to this man.”

Aramis made no reply, but recommenced eating and drinking. As for Baisemeaux, no longer touching anything that was on the table, he again took up the order and examined it every way. This investigation, under ordinary circumstances, would have made the ears of the impatient Aramis burn with anger; but the bishop of Vannes did not become incensed for so little, above all, when he had murmured to himself that to do so was dangerous. “Are you going to release Marchiali?” he said. “What mellow, fragrant and delicious sherry this is, my dear governor.”

“My lord,” replied Baisemeaux, “I shall release the prisoner Marchiali when I have summoned the courier who brought the order, and above all, when, by interrogating him, I have satisfied myself.”

“The order is sealed, and the courier is ignorant of the contents. What do you want to satisfy yourself about?”

“Be it so, my lord; but I shall send to the ministry, and M. de Lyonne will either confirm or withdraw the order.”

“What is the good of all that?” asked Aramis, coldly.

“What good?”

“Yes; what is your object, I ask?”

“The object of never deceiving oneself, my lord; nor being wanting in the respect which a subaltern owes to his superior officers, nor infringing the duties of a service one has accepted of one’s own free will.”

“Very good; you have just spoken so eloquently, that I cannot but admire you. It is true that a subaltern owes respect to his superiors; he is guilty when he deceives himself, and he should be punished if he infringed either the duties or laws of his office.”

Baisemeaux looked at the bishop with astonishment.

"It follows," pursued Aramis, "that you are going to ask advice, to put your conscience at ease in the matter?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And if a superior officer gives you orders, you will obey?"

"Never doubt it, my lord."

"You know the king's signature well, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Is it not on this order of release?"

"It is true, but it may—"

"Be forged, you mean?"

"That is evident, my lord."

"You are right. And that of M. de Lyonne?"

"I see it plain enough on the order; but for the same reason that the king's signature may have been forged, so also, and with even greater probability, may M. de Lyonne's."

"Your logic has the stride of a giant, M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis; "and your reasoning is irresistible. But on what special grounds do you base your idea that these signatures are false?"

"On this: the absence of counter-signatures. Nothing checks his majesty's signature; and M. de Lyonne is not there to tell me he has signed."

"Well, Monsieur de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, bending an eagle glance on the governor, "I adopt so frankly your doubts, and your mode of clearing them up, that I will take a pen, if you will give me one."

Baisemeaux gave him a pen.

"And a sheet of white paper," added Aramis.

Baisemeaux handed him some paper.

"Now, I—I, also—I, here present—incontestably, I—am going to write an order to which I am certain you will give credence, incredulous as you are!"

Baisemeaux turned pale at this icy assurance of manner. It seemed to him that the voice of the bishop's, but just now so playful and gay, had become funereal and sad; that the wax lights changed into the tapers of a mortuary chapel, the very glasses of wine into chalices of blood.

Aramis took a pen and wrote. Baisemeaux, in terror, read over his shoulder.

"A. M. D. G.," wrote the bishop; and he drew a cross under these four letters, which signify *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, "to the greater glory of God;" and thus he continued: "It is our pleasure that the order brought to M. de Baisemeaux de Montlezun, governor, for the king, of the castle of the Bastille, be held by him good and effectual, and be immediately carried into operation."

(Signed) D'HERBLAY

"General of the Order, by the grace of God."

Baisemeaux was so profoundly astonished, that his features remained contracted, his lips parted, and his eyes fixed. He did not move an inch, nor articulate a sound. Nothing could be heard in that large chamber but the wing-whisper of a little moth, which was fluttering to its death about the candles. Aramis, without even deigning to look at the man whom he had reduced to so miserable a condition, drew from his pocket a small case of black wax; he sealed the letter, and stamped it with a seal suspended at his breast, beneath his doublet, and when the operation was concluded, presented—still in silence—the missive to M. de Baisemeaux. The latter, whose hands trembled in a manner to excite pity, turned a dull and meaningless gaze upon the letter. A last gleam of feeling played over his features, and he fell, as if thunder-struck, on a chair.

"Come, come," said Aramis, after a long silence, during which the governor of the Bastille had slowly recovered his senses, "do not lead me to believe, dear Baisemeaux, that the presence of the general of the order is as terrible as His, and that men die merely from having seen Him. Take courage, rouse yourself; give me your hand—obey."

Baisemeaux, reassured, if not satisfied, obeyed, kissed Aramis's hand, and rose. "Immediately?" he murmured.

"Oh, there is no pressing haste, my host; take your place again, and do the honours over this beautiful dessert."

"My lord, I shall never recover such a shock as this; I who have laughed, who have jested with you! I who have dared to treat you on a footing of equality!"

"Say nothing about it, old comrade," replied the bishop, who perceived how strained the cord was and how dangerous it would have been to break it; "say nothing about it. Let us each live in our own way; to you, my protection and my friendship; to me, your obedience. Having exactly fulfilled these two requirements, let us live happily."

Baisemeaux reflected; he perceived, at a glance, the consequence of this withdrawal of a prisoner by means of a forged order; and, putting in the scale the guarantee offered him by the official order of the general, did not consider it of any value.

Aramis divined this. "My dear Baisemeaux," said he, "you are a simpleton. Lose this habit of reflection when I give myself the trouble to think for you."

And at another gesture he made, Baisemeaux bowed again. "How shall I set about it?" he said.

"What is the process for releasing a prisoner?"

"I have the regulations."

"Well, then, follow the regulations, my friend."

"I go with my major to the prisoner's room, and conduct him, if he is a personage of importance."

"But this Marchiali is not an important personage," said Aramis carelessly.

"I don't know," answered the governor, as if he would have said, "It is for you to instruct me."

"Then if you don't know it, I am right; so act towards Marchiali as you act towards one of obscure station."

"Good; the regulations so provide. They are to the effect that the turnkey, or one of the lower officials, shall bring the prisoner before the governor, in the office."

"Well, 'tis very wise, that; and then?"

"Then we return to the prisoner the valuables he wore at the time of his imprisonment, his clothes and papers, if the minister's orders have not otherwise dictated."

"What was the minister's order as to this Marchiali?"

"Nothing; for the unhappy man arrived here without jewels, without papers, and almost without clothes."

"See how simple, then, all is. Indeed, Baisemeaux, you make a mountain of everything. Remain here, and make them bring the prisoner to the governor's house."

Baisemeaux obeyed. He summoned his lieutenant, and gave him an order, which the latter passed on, without disturbing himself about it, to the next whom it concerned.

Half an hour afterwards they heard a gate shut in the court; it was the door to the dungeon, which had just rendered up its prey to the free air. Aramis blew out all the candles which lighted the room but one, which he left burning behind the door. This flickering glare prevented the sight from resting steadily on any object. It multiplied tenfold the changing forms and shadows of the place, by its wavering uncertainty. Steps drew near.

"Go and meet your men," said Aramis to Baisemeaux.

The governor obeyed. The sergeant and turnkeys disappeared. Baisemeaux re-entered, followed by a prisoner. Aramis had placed himself in the shade; he saw without being seen. Baisemeaux, in an agitated tone of voice, made the young man acquainted with the order which set him at liberty. The prisoner listened, without making a single gesture or saying a word.

"You will swear ('tis the regulation that requires it)," added the governor, "never to reveal anything that you have seen or heard in the Bastille."

The prisoner perceived a crucifix; he stretched out his hands and swore with his lips. "And now, monsieur, you are free. Whither do you intend going?"

The prisoner turned his head, as if looking behind him for some protection, on which he ought to rely. Then was it that Aramis came out of the shade: "I am here," he said, "to render the gentleman whatever service he may please to ask."

The prisoner slightly reddened, and, without hesitation, passed his arm through that of Aramis. "God have you in his holy keeping," he said, in a voice the firmness of which made the governor tremble as much as the form of the blessing astonished him.

Aramis, on shaking hands with Baisemeaux, said to him; "Does my order trouble you? Do you fear their finding it here, should they come to search?"

"I desire to keep it, my lord," said Baisemeaux. "If they found it here, it would be a certain indication I should be lost, and in that case you would be a powerful and a last auxiliary for me."

"Being your accomplice, you mean?" answered Aramis, shrugging his shoulders. "Adieu, Baisemeaux," said he.

The horses were in waiting, making each rusty spring reverberate the carriage again with their impatience. Baisemeaux accompanied the bishop to the bottom of the steps. Aramis caused his companion to mount before him, then followed, and without giving the driver any further order, "Go on," said he. The carriage rattled over the pavement of the courtyard. An officer with a torch went before the horses, and gave orders at every post to let them pass. During the time taken in opening all the barriers, Aramis barely breathed, and you might have heard his "sealed heart knock against his ribs."

The prisoner, buried in a corner of the carriage, made no more sign of life than his companion. At length, a jolt more sever than the others announced to them that they had cleared the last watercourse. Behind the carriage closed the last gate, that in the Rue St. Antoine. No more walls either on the right or the left; heaven everywhere, liberty everywhere, and life everywhere. The horses, kept in check by a vigorous hand, went quietly as far as the middle of the faubourg. There they began to trot. Little by little, whether they were warning to their work, or whether they were urged, they gained in swiftness, and once past Bercy, the carriage seemed to fly, so great was the ardor of the coursers. The horses galloped thus as far as Villeneuve St. George's, where relays were waiting. Then four instead of two whirled the carriage away in the direction of Melun, and pulled up for a moment in the middle of the forest of Senart. No doubt the order had been given the postilion beforehand, for Aramis had no occasion even to make a sign.

"What is the matter?" asked the prisoner, as if waking from a long dream.

"The matter is, my lord," said Aramis, "that before going further, it is necessary your royal highness and I should converse."

"I will await an opportunity, monsieur," answered the young prince.

"We could not have a better, my lord. We are in the middle of a forest, and no one can hear us."

"The postilion?"

"The postilion of this relay is deaf and dumb, my lord."

"I am at your service, M. d'Herblay."

"Is it your pleasure to remain in the carriage?"

"Yes; we are comfortably seated, and I like this carriage, for it has restored me to liberty."

"Wait, my lord; there is yet a precaution to be taken."

"What?"

"We are here on the highway; cavaliers or carriages traveling like ourselves might pass, and seeing us stopping, deem us in some difficulty. Let us avoid offers of assistance, which would embarrass us."

"Give the postilion orders to conceal the carriage in one of the side avenues."

"'Tis exactly what I wished to do, my lord."

Aramis made a sign to the deaf and dumb driver of the carriage, whom he touched on the arm. The latter dismounted, took the leaders by the bridle, and led them over the velvet sward and the mossy grass of a winding alley, at the bottom of which, on this moonless night, the deep shades formed a curtain blacker than ink. This done, the man lay down on a slope near his horses, who, on either side, kept nibbling the young oak shoots.

"I am listening," said the young prince to Aramis; "but what are you doing there?"

"I am disarming myself of my pistols, of which we have no further need, my lord."

"My prince," said Aramis, turning in the carriage towards his companion, "weak creature as I am, so unpretending in genius, so low in the scale of intelligent beings, it has never yet happened to me to converse with a man without penetrating his thoughts through that living mask which has been thrown over our mind, in order to retain its expression. But to-night, in this darkness, in the reserve which you maintain, I can read nothing on your features, and something tells me that I shall have great difficulty in wresting from you a sincere declaration. I beseech you, then, not for love of me, for subjects should never weigh as anything in the balance which princes hold, but for love of yourself, to retain every syllable, every inflexion which, under the present most grave circumstances, will all have a sense and value as important as any every uttered in the world."

"I listen," replied the young prince, "decidedly, without either eagerly seeking or fearing anything you are about to say to me." And he buried himself still deeper in the thick cushions of the carriage, trying to deprive his companion not only of the sight of him, but even of the very idea of his presence.

Black was the darkness which fell wide and dense from the summits of the intertwining trees. The carriage, covered in by this prodigious roof, would not have received a particle of light, not even if a ray could have struggled through the wreaths of mist that were already rising in the avenue.

"My lord," resumed Aramis, "you know the history of the government which to-day controls France. The king issued from an infancy imprisoned like yours, obscure as yours, and confined as yours; only, instead of ending, like yourself, this slavery in a prison, this obscurity in solitude, these straightened circumstances in concealment, he was fain to bear all these miseries, humiliations, and distresses, in full daylight, under the pitiless sun of royalty; on an elevation flooded with light, where every stain appears a blemish, every glory a stain. The king has suffered; it rankles in his mind; and he will avenge himself. He will be a bad king. I say not that he will pour out his people's blood, like Louis XI., or Charles IX.; for he has no mortal injuries to avenge; but he will devour the means and substance of his people; for he has himself undergone wrongs in his own interest and money. In the first place, then, I acquit my conscience, when I consider openly the merits and the faults of this great prince; and if I condemn him, my conscience absolves me."

Aramis paused. It was not to listen if the silence of the forest remained undisturbed, but it was to gather up his thoughts from the very bottom of his soul—to leave the thoughts he had uttered sufficient time to eat deeply into the mind of his companion.

"All that Heaven does, Heaven does well," continued the bishop of Vannes; "and I am so persuaded of it that I have long been thankful to have been chosen depositary of the secret which I have aided you to discover. To a just Providence was necessary an instrument, at once penetrating, persevering, and convinced, to accomplish a great work. I am this instrument. I possess penetration, perseverance, conviction; I govern a mysterious people, who has taken for its motto, the motto of God, '*Patiens quia oeternus*.'" The prince moved. "I divine, my lord, why you are raising your head, and are surprised at the people I have under my command. You did not know you were dealing with a king—oh! my lord, king of a people very humble, much disinherited; humble because they have no force save when creeping; disinherited, because never, almost never in this world, do my people reap the harvest they sow, nor eat the fruit they cultivate. They labor for an abstract idea; they heap together all the atoms of their power, so from a single man; and round this man, with the sweat of their labor, they create a misty halo, which his genius shall, in turn, render a glory gilded with the rays of all the crowns in Christendom. Such is the man you have beside you, my lord. It is to tell you that he has drawn you from the abyss for a great purpose, to raise you above the powers of the earth—above himself." <sup>1</sup>

The prince lightly touched Aramis's arm. "You speak to me," he said, "of that religious order whose chief you are. For me, the result of your words is, that the day you desire to hurl down the man you shall have raised, the event will be accomplished; and that you will keep under your hand your creation of yesterday."

"Undeceive yourself, my lord," replied the bishop. "I should not take the trouble to play this terrible game with your royal highness, if I had not a double interest in gaining it. The day you are elevated, you are elevated forever; you will overturn the footstool, as you rise, and will send it rolling so far, that not even the sight of it will ever again recall to you its right to simple gratitude."

"Oh, monsieur!"

"Your movement, my lord, arises from an excellent disposition. I thank you. Be well assured, I aspire to more than gratitude! I am convinced that, when arrived at the summit, you will judge me still more worthy to be your friend; and then, my lord, we two will do such great deeds, that ages hereafter shall long speak of them."

"Tell me plainly, monsieur—tell me without disguise—what I am to-day, and what you aim at my being to-morrow."

"You are the son of King Louis XIII., brother of Louis XIV., natural and legitimate heir to the throne of France. In keeping you near him, as Monsieur has been kept—Monsieur, your younger brother—the king reserved to himself the right of being legitimate sovereign. The doctors only could dispute his legitimacy. But the doctors always prefer the king who is to the king who is not. Providence has willed that you should be persecuted; this persecution to-day consecrates you king of France. You had, then, a right to reign, seeing that it is disputed; you had a right to be proclaimed seeing that you have been concealed; and you possess royal blood, since no one has dared to shed yours, as that of your servants has been shed. Now see, then, what this Providence, which you have so often accused of having in every way thwarted you, has done for you. It has given you the features, figure, age, and voice of your brother; and the very causes of your persecution are about to become those of your triumphant restoration. To-morrow, after to-morrow—from the very first, regal phantom, living shade of Louis XIV., you will sit upon his throne, whence the will of Heaven, confided in execution to the arm of man, will have hurled him, without hope of return."

"I understand," said the prince, "my brother's blood will not be shed, then."

"You will be sole arbiter of his fate."

"The secret of which they made an evil use against me?"

"You will employ it against him. What did he do to conceal it? He concealed you. Living image of himself, you will defeat the conspiracy of Mazarin and Anne of Austria. You, my prince, will have the same interest in concealing him, who will, as a prisoner, resemble you, as you will resemble him as a king."

"I fall back on what I was saying to you. Who will guard him?"

"Who guarded *you*?"

"You know this secret—you have made use of it with regard to myself. Who else knows it?"

"The queen-mother and Madame de Chevreuse."

"What will they do?"

"Nothing, if you choose."

"How is that?"

"How can they recognize you, if you act in such a manner that no one can recognize you?"

"Tis true; but there are grave difficulties."

"State them, prince."

"My brother is married; I cannot take my brother's wife."

"I will cause Spain to consent to a divorce; it is in the interest of your new policy; it is human morality. All that is really noble and really useful in this world will find its account therein."

"The imprisoned king will speak."

"To whom do you think he will speak—to the walls?"

"You mean, by walls, the men in whom you put confidence."

"If need be, yes. And besides, your royal highness—"

"Besides?"

"I was going to say, that the designs of Providence do not stop on such a fair road. Every scheme of this caliber is completed by its results, like a geometrical calculation. The king, in prison, will not be for you the cause of embarrassment that you have been for the king enthroned. His soul is naturally proud and impatient; it is, moreover, disarmed and enfeebled, by being accustomed to honours, and by the license of supreme power. The same Providence which has willed that the concluding step in the geometrical calculation I have had the honour of describing to your royal highness should be your ascension to the throne, and the destruction of him who is hurtful to you, has also determined that the conquered one shall soon end both his own and your sufferings. Therefore, his soul and body have been adapted for but a brief agony. Put into prison as a private individual, left alone with your doubts, deprived of everything, you have exhibited the most sublime, enduring principle of life in withstanding all this. But your brother, a captive, forgotten, and in bonds, will not long endure the calamity; and Heaven will resume his soul at the appointed time—that is to say, soon."

At this point in Aramis's gloomy analysis, a bird of night uttered from the depths of the forest that prolonged and plaintive cry which makes every creature tremble.

"I will exile the deposed king," said Philippe, shuddering; "'twill be more human."

"The king's good pleasure will decide the point," said Aramis. "But has the problem been well put? Have I brought out of the solution according to the wishes or the foresight of your royal highness?"

"Yes, monsieur, yes; you have forgotten nothing—except, indeed, two things."

"The first?"

"Let us speak of it at once, with the same frankness we have already conversed in. Let us speak of the causes which may bring about the ruin of all the hopes we have conceived. Let us speak of the risks we are running."

"They would be immense, infinite, terrific, insurmountable, if, as I have said, all things did not concur to render them of absolutely no account. There is no danger either for you or for me, if the constancy and intrepidity of your royal highness are equal to that perfection of resemblance to your brother which nature has bestowed upon you. I repeat it, there are no dangers, only obstacles; a word, indeed, which I find in all languages, but have always ill-understood, and, were I king, would have obliterated as useless and absurd."

"Yes, indeed, monsieur; there is a very serious obstacle, an insurmountable danger, which you are forgetting."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"There is conscience, which cries aloud; remorse, that never dies."

"True, true," said the bishop; "there is a weakness of heart of which you remind me. You are right, too, for that, indeed, is an immense obstacle. The horse afraid of the ditch, leaps into the middle of it, and is killed! The man who trembling crosses his sword with that of another leaves loopholes whereby his enemy has him in his power."

"Have you a brother?" said the young man to Aramis.

"I am alone in the world," said the latter, with a hard, dry voice.

"But, surely, there is some one in the world whom you love?" added Philippe.

"No one!—Yes, I love you."

The young man sank into so profound a silence, that the mere sound of his respiration seemed like a roaring tumult for Aramis. "My lord," he resumed, "I have not said all I had to say to your royal highness; I have not offered you all the salutary counsels and useful resources which I have at my disposal. It is useless to flash bright visions before the eyes of one who seeks and loves darkness: useless, too, is it to let the magnificence of the cannon's roar make itself heard in the ears of one who loves repose and the quiet of the country. My lord, I have your happiness spread out before me in my thoughts; listen to my words; precious they indeed are, in their import and their sense, for you who look with such tender regard upon the bright heavens, the verdant meadows, the pure air. I know a country instinct with delights of every kind, an unknown paradise, a secluded corner of the world—where alone, unfettered and unknown, in the thick covert of the woods, amidst flowers, and streams of rippling water, you will forget all the misery that human folly has so recently allotted you. Oh! listen to me, my prince. I do not jest. I have a heart, and mind, and soul, and can read your own,—aye, even to its depths. I will not take you unready for your task, in order to cast you into the crucible of my own desires, of my caprice, or my ambition. Let it be all or nothing. You are chilled and galled, sick at heart, overcome by excess of the emotions which but one hour's liberty has produced in you. For me, that is a certain and unmistakable sign that you do not wish to continue at liberty. Would you prefer a more humble life, a life more suited to your strength? Heaven is my witness, that I wish your happiness to be the result of the trial to which I have exposed you."

"Speak, speak," said the prince, with a vivacity which did not escape Aramis.

"I know," resumed the prelate, "in the Bas-Poitou, a canton, of which no one in France suspects the existence. Twenty leagues of country is immense, is it not? Twenty leagues, my lord, all covered with water and herbage, and reeds of the most luxuriant nature; the whole studded with islands covered with woods of the densest foliage. These large marshes, covered with reeds as with a thick mantle, sleep silently and calmly beneath the sun's soft and genial rays. A few fishermen with their families indolently pass their lives away there, with their great living-rafts of poplar and alder, the flooring formed of reeds, and the roof woven out of thick rushes. These barks, these floating-houses, are wafted to and fro by the changing winds. Whenever they touch a bank, it is but by chance; and so gently, too, that the sleeping fisherman is not awakened by the shock. Should he wish to land, it is merely because he has seen a large flight of landrails or plovers, of wild ducks, teal, widgeon, or woodchucks, which fall an easy pray to net or gun. Silver shad, eels, greedy pike, red and gray mullet, swim in shoals into his nets; he has but to choose the finest and largest, and return the others to the waters. Never yet has the food of the stranger, be he soldier or simple citizen, never has any one, indeed, penetrated into that district. The sun's rays there are soft and tempered: in plots of solid

earth, whose soil is swart and fertile, grows the vine, nourishing with generous juice its purple, white, and golden grapes. Once a week, a boat is sent to deliver the bread which has been baked at an oven—the common property of all. There—like the seigneurs of early days—powerful in virtue of your dogs, your fishing-lines, your guns, and your beautiful reed-built house, would you live, rich in the produce of the chase, in plentitude of absolute secrecy. There would years of your life roll away, at the end of which, no longer recognizable, for you would have been perfectly transformed, you would have succeeded in acquiring a destiny accorded to you by Heaven. There are a thousand pistoles in this bag, my lord—more, far more, than sufficient to purchase the whole marsh of which I have spoken; more than enough to live there as many years as you have days to live; more than enough to constitute you the richest, the freest, and the happiest man in the country. Accept it, as I offer it you—sincerely, cheerfully. Forthwith, without a moment's pause, I will unharness two of my horses, which are attached to the carriage yonder, and they, accompanied by my servant—my deaf and dumb attendant—shall conduct you—traveling throughout the night, sleeping during the day—to the locality I have described; and I shall, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that I have rendered to my prince the major service he himself preferred. I shall have made one human being happy; and Heaven for that will hold me in better account than if I had made one man powerful; the former task is far more difficult. And now, my lord, your answer to this proposition? Here is the money. Nay, do not hesitate. At Poitou, you can risk nothing, except the chance of catching the fevers prevalent there; and even of them, the so-called wizards of the country will cure you, for the sake of your pistoles. If you play the other game, you run the chance of being assassinated on a throne, strangled in a prison-cell. Upon my soul, I assure you, now I begin to compare them together, I myself should hesitate which lot I should accept."

"Monsieur," replied the young prince, "before I determine, let me alight from this carriage, walk on the ground, and consult that still voice within me, which Heaven bids us all to hearken to. Ten minutes is all I ask, and then you shall have your answer."

"As you please, my lord," said Aramis, bending before him with respect, so solemn and august in tone and address had sounded these strange words.

X. Crown and Tiara.

Aramis was the first to descend from the carriage; he held the door open for the young man. He saw him place his foot on the mossy ground with a trembling of the whole body, and walk round the carriage with an unsteady and almost tottering step. It seemed as if the poor prisoner was unaccustomed to walk on God's earth. It was the 15th of August, about eleven o'clock at night; thick clouds, portending a tempest, overspread the heavens, and shrouded every light and prospect underneath their heavy folds. The extremities of the avenues were imperceptibly detached from the copse, by a lighter shadow of opaque gray, which, upon closer examination, became visible in the midst of the obscurity. But the fragrance which ascended from the grass, fresher and more penetrating than that which exhaled from the trees around him; the warm and balmy air which enveloped him for the first time for many years past; the ineffable enjoyment of liberty in an open country, spoke to the prince in so seductive a language, that notwithstanding the premature caution, we would almost say dissimulation of his character, of which we have tried to give an idea, he could not restrain his emotion, and breathed a sigh of ecstasy. Then, by degrees, he raised his aching head and inhaled the softly scented air, as it was wafted in gentle gusts to his uplifted face. Crossing his arms on his chest, as if to control this new sensation of delight, he drank in delicious draughts of that mysterious air which interpenetrates at night the loftiest forests. The sky he was contemplating, the murmuring waters, the universal freshness—was not all this reality? Was not Aramis a madman to suppose that he had aught else to dream of in this world? Those exciting pictures of country life, so free from fears and troubles, the ocean of happy days that glitters incessantly before all young imaginations, are real allurements wherewith to fascinate a poor, unhappy prisoner, worn out by prison cares, emaciated by the stifling air of the Bastille. It was the picture, it will be remembered, drawn by Aramis, when he offered the thousand pistoles he had with him in the carriage to the prince, and the enchanted Eden which the deserts of Bas-Poitou hid from the eyes of the world. Such were the reflections of Aramis as he watched, with an anxiety impossible to describe, the silent progress of the emotions of Philippe, whom he perceived gradually becoming more and more absorbed in his meditations. The young prince was offering up an inward prayer to Heaven, to be divinely guided in this trying moment, upon which his life or death depended. It was an anxious time for the bishop of Vannes, who had never before been so perplexed. His iron will, accustomed to overcome all obstacles, never finding itself inferior or vanquished on any occasion, to be foiled in so vast a project from not having foreseen the influence which a view of nature in all its luxuriance would have on the human mind! Aramis, overwhelmed by anxiety, contemplated with emotion the painful struggle that was taking place in Philippe's mind. This suspense lasted the whole ten minutes which the young man had requested. During this space of time, which appeared an eternity, Philippe continued gazing with an imploring and sorrowful look towards the heavens; Aramis did not remove the piercing glance he had fixed on Philippe. Suddenly the young man bowed his head. His thought returned to the earth, his looks perceptibly hardened, his brow contracted, his mouth assuming an expression of undaunted courage; again his looks became fixed, but this time they wore a worldly expression, hardened by covetousness, pride, and strong desire. Aramis's look immediately became as soft as it had before been gloomy. Philippe, seizing his hand in a quick, agitated manner, exclaimed:

"Lead me to where the crown of France is to be found."

"Is this your decision, my lord?" asked Aramis.

"It is."

"Irrevocably so?"

Philippe did not even deign to reply. He gazed earnestly at the bishop, as if to ask him if it were possible for a man to waver after having once made up his mind.

"Such looks are flashes of the hidden fire that betrays men's character," said Aramis, bowing over Philippe's hand; "you will be great, my lord, I will answer for that."

"Let us resume our conversation. I wished to discuss two points with you; in the first place the dangers, or the obstacles we may meet with. That point is decided. The other is the conditions you intend imposing on me. It is your turn to speak, M. d'Herblay."

"The conditions, my lord?"

"Doubtless. You will not allow so mere a trifle to stop me, and you will not do me the injustice to suppose that I think you have no interest in this affair. Therefore, without subterfuge or hesitation, tell me the truth—"

"I will do so, my lord. Once a king—"

"When will that be?"

"To-morrow evening—I mean in the night."

"Explain yourself."

"When I shall have asked your highness a question."

"Do so."

"I sent to your highness a man in my confidence with instructions to deliver some closely written notes, carefully drawn up, which will thoroughly acquaint your highness with the different persons who compose and will compose your court."

"I perused those notes."

"Attentively?"

"I know them by heart."

"And understand them? Pardon me, but I may venture to ask that question of a poor, abandoned captive of the Bastille? In a week's time it will not be requisite to further question a mind like yours. You will then be in full possession of liberty and power."

"Interrogate me, then, and I will be a scholar representing his lesson to his master."

"We will begin with your family, my lord."

"My mother, Anne of Austria! all her sorrows, her painful malady. Oh! I know her—I know her."

"Your second brother?" asked Aramis, bowing.

"To these notes," replied the prince, "you have added portraits so faithfully painted, that I am able to recognize the persons whose characters, manners, and history you have so carefully portrayed. Monsieur, my brother, is a fine, dark young man, with a pale face; he does not love his wife, Henrietta, whom I, Louis XIV., loved a little, and still flirt with, even although she made me weep on the day she wished to dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière from her service in disgrace."

"You will have to be careful with regard to the watchfulness of the latter," said Aramis; "she is sincerely attached to the actual king. The eyes of a woman who loves are not easily deceived."

"She is fair, has blue eyes, whose affectionate gaze reveals her identity. She halts slightly in her gait; she writes a letter every day, to which I have to send an answer by M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Do you know the latter?"

"As if I saw him, and I know the last verses he composed for me, as well as those I composed in answer to his."

"Very good. Do you know your ministers?"

"Colbert, an ugly, dark-browed man, but intelligent enough, his hair covering his forehead, a large, heavy, full head; the mortal enemy of M. Fouquet."

"As for the latter, we need not disturb ourselves about him."

"No; because necessarily you will not require me to exile him, I suppose?"

Aramis, struck with admiration at the remark, said, "You will become very great, my lord."

"You see," added the prince, "that I know my lesson by heart, and with Heaven's assistance, and yours afterwards, I shall seldom go wrong."

"You have still an awkward pair of eyes to deal with, my lord."

"Yes, the captain of the musketeers, M. d'Artagnan, your friend."

"Yes; I can well say 'my friend.'"

"He who escorted La Vallière to Le Chaillot; he who delivered up Monk, cooped in an iron box, to Charles II.; he who so faithfully served my mother; he to whom the crown of France owes so much that it owes everything. Do you intend to ask me to exile him also?"

"Never, sire. D'Artagnan is a man to whom, at a certain given time, I will undertake to reveal everything; but be on your guard with him, for if he discovers our plot before it is revealed to him, you or I will certainly be killed or taken. He is a bold and enterprising man."

"I will think it over. Now tell me about M. Fouquet; what do you wish to be done with regard to him?"

"One moment more, I entreat you, my lord; and forgive me, if I seem to fail in respect to questioning you further."

"It is your duty to do so, nay, more than that, your right."

"Before we pass to M. Fouquet, I should very much regret forgetting another friend of mine."

"M. du Vallon, the Hercules of France, you mean; oh! as far as he is concerned, his interests are more than safe."

"No; it is not he whom I intended to refer to."

"The Comte de la Fere, then?"

"And his son, the son of all four of us."

"That poor boy who is dying of love for La Vallière, whom my brother so disloyally bereft him of? Be easy on that score. I shall know how to rehabilitate his happiness. Tell me only one thing, Monsieur d'Herblay; do men, when they love, forget the treachery that has been shown them? Can a man ever forgive the woman who has betrayed him? Is that a French custom, or is it one of the laws of the human heart?"

"A man who loves deeply, as deeply as Raoul loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière, finishes by forgetting the fault or crime of the woman he loves; but I do not yet know whether Raoul will be able to forget."

"I will see after that. Have you anything further to say about your friend?"

"No; that is all."

"Well, then, now for M. Fouquet. What do you wish me to do for him?"

"To keep him on as surintendant, in the capacity in which he has hitherto acted, I entreat you."

"Be it so; but he is the first minister at present."

"Not quite so."

"A king, ignorant and embarrassed as I shall be, will, as a matter of course, require a first minister of state."

"Your majesty will require a friend."

"I have only one, and that is yourself."  
"You will have many others by and by, but none so devoted, none so zealous for your glory."  
"You shall be my first minister of state."  
"Not immediately, my lord, for that would give rise to too much suspicion and astonishment."  
"M. de Richelieu, the first minister of my grandmother, Marie de Medici, was simply bishop of Lucon, as you are bishop of Vannes."  
"I perceive that your royal highness has studied my notes to great advantage; your amazing perspicacity overpowers me with delight."  
"I am perfectly aware that M. de Richelieu, by means of the queen's protection, soon became cardinal."  
"It would be better," said Aramis, bowing, "that I should not be appointed first minister until your royal highness has procured my nomination as cardinal."  
"You shall be nominated before two months are past, Monsieur d'Herblay. But that is a matter of very trifling moment; you would not offend me if you were to ask more than that, and you would cause me serious regret if you were to limit yourself to that."  
"In that case, I have something still further to hope for, my lord."  
"Speak! speak!"

"M. Fouquet will not keep long at the head of affairs, he will soon get old. He is fond of pleasure, consistently, I mean, with all his labors, thanks to the youthfulness he still retains; but this protracted youth will disappear at the approach of the first serious annoyance, or at the first illness he may experience. We will spare him the annoyance, because he is an agreeable and noble-hearted man; but we cannot save him from ill-health. So it is determined. When you shall have paid all M. Fouquet's debts, and restored the finances to a sound condition, M. Fouquet will be able to remain the sovereign ruler in his little court of poets and painters,—we shall have made him rich. When that has been done, and I have become your royal highness's prime minister, I shall be able to think of my own interests and yours."

The young man looked at his interrogator.  
"M. de Richelieu, of whom we were speaking just now, was very much to blame in the fixed idea he had of governing France alone, unaided. He allowed two kings, King Louis XIII. and himself, to be seated on the self-same throne, whilst he might have installed them more conveniently upon two separate and distinct thrones."

"Upon two thrones?" said the young man, thoughtfully.  
"In fact," pursued Aramis, quietly, "a cardinal, prime minister of France, assisted by the favour and by the countenance of his Most Christian Majesty the King of France, a cardinal to whom the king his master lends the treasures of the state, his army, his counsel, such a man would be acting with twofold injustice in applying these mighty resources to France alone. Besides," added Aramis, "you will not be a king such as your father was, delicate in health, slow in judgment, whom all things wearied; you will be a king governing by your brain and by your sword; you will have in the government of the state no more than you will be able to manage unaided; I should only interfere with you. Besides, our friendship ought never to be, I do not say impaired, but in any degree affected, by a secret thought. I shall have given you the throne of France, you will confer on me the throne of St. Peter. Whenever your loyal, firm, and mailed hand should joined in ties of intimate association the hand of a pope such as I shall be, neither Charles V., who owned two-thirds of the habitable globe, nor Charlemagne, who possessed it entirely, will be able to reach to half your stature. I have no alliances, I have no predilections; I will not throw you into persecutions of heretics, nor will I cast you into the troubled waters of family dissension; I will simply say to you: The whole universe is our own; for me the minds of men, for you their bodies. And as I shall be the first to die, you will have my inheritance. What do you say of my plan, my lord?"

"I say that you render me happy and proud, for no other reason than that of having comprehended you thoroughly. Monsieur d'Herblay, you shall be cardinal, and when cardinal, my prime minister; and then you will point out to me the necessary steps to be taken to secure your election as pope, and I will take them. You can ask what guarantees from me you please."

"It is useless. Never shall I act except in such a manner that you will be the gainer; I shall never ascend the ladder of fortune, fame, or position, until I have first seen you placed upon the round of the ladder immediately above me; I shall always hold myself sufficiently aloof from you to escape incurring your jealousy, sufficiently near to sustain your personal advantage and to watch over your friendship. All the contracts in the world are easily violated because the interests included in them incline more to one side than to another. With us, however, this will never be the case; I have no need of any guarantees."

"And so—my dear brother—will disappear?"  
"Simply. We will remove him from his bed by means of a plank which yields to the pressure of the finger. Having retired to rest a crowned sovereign, he will awake a captive. Alone you will rule from that moment, and you will have no interest dearer and better than that of keeping me near you."

"I believe it. There is my hand on it, Monsieur d'Herblay."  
"Allow me to kneel before you, sire, most respectfully. We will embrace each other on the day we shall have upon our temples, you the crown, I the tiara."  
"Still embrace me this very day also, and be, for and towards me, more than great, more than skillful, more than sublime in genius; be kind and indulgent—be my father!"  
Aramis was almost overcome as he listened to his voice; he fancied he detected in his own heart an emotion hitherto unknown; but this impression was speedily removed. "His father!" he thought; "yes, his Holy Father."

And they resumed their places in the carriage, which sped rapidly along the road leading to Vaux-le-Vicomte.

#### XI. The Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte.

The chateau of Vaux-le-Vicomte, situated about a league from Melun, had been built by Fouquet in 1655, at a time when there was a scarcity of money in France; Mazarin had taken all that there was, and Fouquet expended the remainder. However, as certain men have fertile, false, and useful vices, Fouquet, in scattering broadcast millions of money in the construction of this palace, had found a means of gathering, as the result of his generous profusion, three illustrious men together: Leveau, the architect of the building; Lenotre, the designer of the gardens; and Lebrun, the decorator of the apartments. If the Chateau de Vaux possessed a single fault with which it could be reproached, it was its grand, pretentious character. It is even at the present day proverbial to calculate the number of acres of roofing, the restoration of which would, in our age, be the ruin of fortunes cramped and narrowed as the epoch itself. Vaux-le-Vicomte, when its magnificent gates, supported by caryatides, have been passed through, has the principal front of the main building opening upon a vast, so-called, court of honour, inclosed by deep ditches, bordered by a magnificent stone balustrade. Nothing could be more noble in appearance than the central forecourt raised upon the flight of steps, like a king upon his throne, having around it four pavilions at the angles, the immense Ionic columns of which rose majestically to the whole height of the building. The friezes ornamented with arabesques, and the pediments which crowned the pilasters, conferred richness and grace on every part of the building, while the domes which surmounted the whole added proportion and majesty. This mansion, built by a subject, bore a far greater resemblance to those royal residences which Wolsey fancied he was called upon to construct, in order to present them to his master from the fear of rendering him jealous. But if magnificence and splendor were displayed in any one particular part of this palace more than another,—if anything could be preferred to the wonderful arrangement of the interior, to the sumptuousness of the gilding, and to the profusion of the paintings and statues, it would be the park and gardens of Vaux. The *jets d'eau*, which were regarded as wonderful in 1653, are still so, even at the present time; the cascades awakened the admiration of kings and princes; and as for the famous grotto, the theme of so many poetical effusions, the residence of that illustrious nymph of Vaux, whom Pelisson made converse with La Fontaine, we must be spared the description of all its beauties. We will do as Despreaux did,—we will enter the park, the trees of which are of eight years' growth only—that is to say, in their present position—and whose summits even yet, as they proudly tower aloft, blushingly unfold their leaves to the earliest rays of the rising sun. Lenotre had hastened the pleasure of the Maecenas of his period; all the nursery-grounds had furnished trees whose growth had been accelerated by careful culture and the richest plant-food. Every tree in the neighborhood which presented a fair appearance of beauty or stature had been taken up by its roots and transplanted to the park. Fouquet could well afford to purchase trees to ornament his park, since he had bought up three villages and their appurtenances (to use a legal word) to increase its extent. M. de Scudery said of this palace, that, for the purpose of keeping the grounds and gardens well watered, M. Fouquet had divided a river into a thousand fountains, and gathered the waters of a thousand fountains into torrents. This same Monsieur de Scudery said a great many other things in his "Clelie," about this palace of Valterre, the charms of which he describes most minutely. We should be far wiser to send our curious readers to Vaux to judge for themselves, than to refer them to "Clelie;" and yet there are as many leagues from Paris to Vaux, as there are volumes of the "Clelie." This magnificent palace had been got ready for the reception of the greatest reigning sovereign of the time. M. Fouquet's friends had transported thither, some their actors and their dresses, others their troops of sculptors and artists; not forgetting others with their ready-mended pens,—floods of impromptus were contemplated. The cascades, somewhat rebellious nymphs though they were, poured forth their waters brighter and clearer than crystal: they scattered over the bronze triton and nereids their waves of foam, which glistened like fire in the rays of the sun. An army of servants were hurrying to and fro in squadrons in the courtyard and corridors; while Fouquet, who had only that morning arrived, walked all through the palace with a calm, observant glance, in order to give his last orders, after his intendants had inspected everything.

It was, as we have said, the 15th of August. The sun poured down its burning rays upon the heathen deities of marble and bronze: it raised the temperature of the water in the conch shells, and ripened, on the walls, those magnificent peaches, of which the king, fifty years later, spoke so regretfully, when, at Marly, on an occasion of a scarcity of the finer sorts of peaches being complained of, in the beautiful gardens there—gardens which had cost France double the amount that had been expended on Vaux—the *great king* observed to some one: "You are far too young to have eaten any of M. Fouquet's peaches."

Oh, fame! Oh, blazon of renown! Oh, glory of this earth! That very man whose judgment was so sound and accurate where merit was concerned—he who had swept into his coffers the inheritance of Nicholas Fouquet, who had robbed him of Lenotre and Lebrun, and had sent him to rot for the remainder of his life in one of the state prisons—merely remembered the peaches of that vanquished, crushed, forgotten enemy! It was to little purpose that Fouquet had squandered thirty millions of francs in the fountains of his gardens, in the crucibles of his sculptors, in the writing-desks of his literary friends, in the portfolios of his painters; vainly had he fancied that thereby he might be remembered. A peach—a blushing, rich-flavored fruit, nestling in the trellis work on the garden-wall, hidden beneath its long, green leaves,—this little vegetable production, that a dormouse would nibble up without a thought, was sufficient to recall to the memory of this great monarch the mournful shade of the last surintendant of France.

With a perfect reliance that Aramis had made arrangements fairly to distribute the vast number of guests throughout the palace, and that he had not omitted to attend to any of the internal regulations for their comfort, Fouquet devoted his entire attention to the *ensemble* alone. In one direction Gourville showed him the preparations which had been made for the fireworks; in another, Moliere led him over the theater; at last, after he had visited the chapel, the *salons*, and the galleries, and was again going downstairs, exhausted with fatigue, Fouquet saw Aramis on the staircase. The prelate beckoned to him. The surintendant joined his friend, and, with him, paused before a large picture scarcely finished. Applying himself, heart and soul, to his work, the painter Lebrun, covered with perspiration, stained with paint, pale from fatigue and the inspiration of genius, was putting the last finishing touches with his rapid brush. It was the portrait of the king, whom they were expecting, dressed in the court suit which Percerin had condescended to show beforehand to the bishop of Vannes. Fouquet placed himself before this portrait, which seemed to live, as one might say, in the cool freshness of its flesh, and in its warmth of colour. He gazed upon it long and fixedly, estimated the prodigious labor that had been bestowed upon it, and, not being able to find any recompense sufficiently great for this Herculean effort, he passed his arm round the painter's neck and embraced him. The surintendant, by this action, had utterly ruined a suit of clothes worth a thousand pistoles, but he had satisfied, more than satisfied, Lebrun. It was a happy moment for the artist; it was an unhappy moment for M. Percerin, who was walking behind Fouquet, and was engaged in admiring, in Lebrun's painting, the suit that he had made for his majesty, a perfect *objet d'art*, as he called it, which was not to be matched except in the wardrobe of the surintendant. His distress and his exclamations were interrupted by a signal which had been given from the summit of the mansion. In the direction of Melun, in the still empty, open plain, the sentinels of Vaux had just perceived the advancing procession of the king and the queens. His majesty was entering Melun with his long train of carriages and cavaliers.

"In an hour—" said Aramis to Fouquet.  
"In an hour!" replied the latter, sighing.  
"And the people who ask one another what is the good of these royal *fetes*?" continued the bishop of Vannes, laughing, with his false smile.

"Alas! I, too, who am not the people, ask myself the same thing."  
"I will answer you in four and twenty hours, my lord. Assume a cheerful countenance, for it should be a day of true rejoicing."

"Well, believe me or not, as you like, D'Herblay," said the surintendant, with a swelling heart, pointing at the *cortege* of Louis, visible in the horizon, "he certainly loves me but very little, and I do not care much more for him; but I cannot tell you how it is, that since he is approaching my house—"

"Well, what?"  
"Well, since I know he is on his way here, as my guest, he is more sacred than ever for me; he is my acknowledged sovereign, and as such is very dear to me."  
"Dear? yes," said Aramis, playing upon the word, as the Abbe Terray did, at a later period, with Louis XV.

"Do not laugh, D'Herblay; I feel that, if he really seemed to wish it, I could love that young man."

"You should not say that to me," returned Aramis, "but rather to M. Colbert."



"To M. Colbert!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Why so?"

"Because he would allow you a pension out of the king's privy purse, as soon as he becomes surintendant," said Aramis, preparing to leave as soon as he had dealt this last blow.

"Where are you going?" returned Fouquet, with a gloomy look.

"To my own apartment, in order to change my costume, my lord."

"Whereabouts are you lodging, D'Herblay?"

"In the blue room on the second story."

"The room immediately over the king's room?"

"Precisely."

"You will be subject to very great restraint there. What an idea to condemn yourself to a room where you cannot stir or move about!"

"During the night, my lord, I sleep or read in my bed."

"And your servants?"

"I have but one attendant with me. I find my reader quite sufficient. Adieu, my lord; do not overfatigue yourself; keep yourself fresh for the arrival of the king."

"We shall see you by and by, I suppose, and shall see your friend Du Vallon also?"

"He is lodging next to me, and is at this moment dressing."

And Fouquet, bowing, with a smile, passed on like a commander-in-chief who pays the different outposts a visit after the enemy has been signaled in sight. 2

XII. The Wine of Melun.

The king had, in point of fact, entered Melun with the intention of merely passing through the city. The youthful monarch was most eagerly anxious for amusements; only twice during the journey had he been able to catch a glimpse of La Vallière, and, suspecting that his only opportunity of speaking to her would be after nightfall, in the gardens, and after the ceremonial of reception had been gone through, he had been very desirous to arrive at Vaux as early as possible. But he reckoned without his captain of the musketeers, and without M. Colbert. Like Calypso, who could not be consoled at the departure of Ulysses, our Gascon could not console himself for not having guessed why Aramis had asked Percerin to show him the king's new costumes. "There is not a doubt," he said to himself, "that my friend the bishop of Vannes had some motive in that;" and then he began to rack his brains most uselessly. D'Artagnan, so intimately acquainted with all the court intrigues, who knew the position of Fouquet better than even Fouquet himself did, had conceived the strangest fancies and suspicions at the announcement of the *fête*, which would have ruined a wealthy man, and which became impossible, utter madness even, for a man so poor as he was. And then, the presence of Aramis, who had returned from Belle-Isle, and been nominated by Monsieur Fouquet inspector-general of all the arrangements; his perseverance in mixing himself up with all the surintendant's affairs; his visits to Baisemeaux; all this suspicious singularity of conduct had excessively troubled and tormented D'Artagnan during the last two weeks.

"With men of Aramis's stamp," he said, "one is never the stronger except sword in hand. So long as Aramis continued a soldier, there was hope of getting the better of him; but since he has covered his cuirass with a stole, we are lost. But what can Aramis's object possibly be?" And D'Artagnan plunged again into deep thought. "What does it matter to me, after all," he continued, "if his only object is to overthrow M. Colbert? And what else can he be after?" And D'Artagnan rubbed his forehead—that fertile land, whence the plowshare of his nails had turned up so many and such admirable ideas in his time. He, at first, thought of talking the matter over with Colbert, but his friendship for Aramis, the oath of earlier days, bound him too strictly. He revolted at the bare idea of such a thing, and, besides, he hated the financier too cordially. Then, again, he wished to unburden his mind to the king; but yet the king would not be able to understand the suspicions which had not even a shadow of reality at their base. He resolved to address himself to Aramis, direct, the first time he met him. "I will get him," said the musketeer, "between a couple of candles, suddenly, and when he least expects it, I will place my hand upon his heart, and he will tell me—What will he tell me? Yes, he will tell me something, for *mordoux!* there is something in it, I know."

Somewhat calmer, D'Artagnan made every preparation for the journey, and took the greatest care that the military household of the king, as yet very inconsiderable in numbers, should be well officered and well disciplined in its meager and limited proportions. The result was that, through the captain's arrangements, the king, on arriving at Melun, saw himself at the head of both the musketeers and Swiss guards, as well as a picket of the French guards. It might almost have been called a small army. M. Colbert looked at the troops with great delight: he even wished they had been a third more in number.

"But why?" said the king.

"In order to give greater honour to M. Fouquet," replied Colbert.

"In order to ruin him the sooner," thought D'Artagnan.

When this little army appeared before Melun, the chief magistrates came out to meet the king, and to present him with the keys of the city, and invited him to enter the Hotel de Ville, in order to partake of the wine of honour. The king, who expected to pass through the city and to proceed to Vaux without delay, became quite red in the face from vexation.

"Who was fool enough to occasion this delay?" muttered the king, between his teeth, as the chief magistrate was in the middle of a long address.

"Not I, certainly," replied D'Artagnan, "but I believe it was M. Colbert."

Colbert, having heard his name pronounced, said, "What was M. d'Artagnan good enough to say?"

"I was good enough to remark that it was you who stopped the king's progress, so that he might taste the *vin de Brie*. Was I right?"

"Quite so, monsieur."

"In that case, then, it was you whom the king called some name or other."

"What name?"

"I hardly know; but wait a moment—idiot, I think it was—no, no, it was fool or dolt. Yes; his majesty said that the man who had thought of the *vin de Melun* was something of the sort."

D'Artagnan, after this broadside, quietly caressed his mustache; M. Colbert's large head seemed to become larger and larger than ever. D'Artagnan, seeing how ugly anger made him, did not stop half-way. The orator still went on with his speech, while the king's colour was visibly increasing.

"*Mordoux!*" said the musketeer, coolly, "the king is going to have an attack of determination of blood to the head. Where the deuce did you get hold of that idea, Monsieur Colbert? You have no luck."

"Monsieur," said the financier, drawing himself up, "my zeal for the king's service inspired me with the idea."

"Bah!"

"Monsieur, Melun is a city, an excellent city, which pays well, and which it would be imprudent to displease."

"There, now! I, who do not pretend to be a financier, saw only one idea in your idea."

"What was that, monsieur?"

"That of causing a little annoyance to M. Fouquet, who is making himself quite giddy on his donjons yonder, in waiting for us."

This was a home-stroke, hard enough in all conscience. Colbert was completely thrown out of the saddle by it, and retired, thoroughly discomfited. Fortunately, the speech was now at an end; the king drank the wine which was presented to him, and then every one resumed the progress through the city. The king bit his lips in anger, for the evening was closing in, and all hope of a walk with La Vallière was at an end. In order that the whole of the king's household should enter Vaux, four hours at least were necessary, owing to the different arrangements. The king, therefore, who was boiling with impatience, hurried forward as much as possible, in order to reach it before nightfall. But, at the moment he was setting off again, other and fresh difficulties arose.

"Is not the king going to sleep at Melun?" said Colbert, in a low tone of voice, to D'Artagnan.

M. Colbert must have been badly inspired that day, to address himself in that manner to the chief of the musketeers; for the latter guessed that the king's intention was very far from that of remaining where he was. D'Artagnan would not allow him to enter Vaux except he were well and strongly accompanied; and desired that his majesty would not enter except with all the escort. On the other hand, he felt that these delays would irritate that impatient monarch beyond measure. In what way could he possibly reconcile these difficulties? D'Artagnan took up Colbert's remark, and determined to repeated it to the king.

"Sire," he said, "M. Colbert has been asking me if your majesty does not intend to sleep at Melun."

"Sleep at Melun! What for?" exclaimed Louis XIV. "Sleep at Melun! Who, in Heaven's name, can have thought of such a thing, when M. Fouquet is expecting us this evening?"

"It was simply," replied Colbert, quickly, "the fear of causing your majesty the least delay; for, according to established etiquette, you cannot enter any place, with the exception of your own royal residences, until the soldiers' quarters have been marked out by the quartermaster, and the garrison properly distributed."

D'Artagnan listened with the greatest attention, biting his mustache to conceal his vexation; and the queens were not less interested. They were fatigued, and would have preferred to go to rest without proceeding any farther; more especially, in order to prevent the king walking about in the evening with M. de Saint-Aignan and the ladies of the court, for, if etiquette required the princesses to remain within their own rooms, the ladies of honour, as soon as they had performed the services required of them, had no restrictions placed upon them, but were at liberty to walk about as they pleased. It will easily be conjectured that all these rival interests, gathering together in vapors, necessarily produced clouds, and that the clouds were likely to be followed by a tempest. The king had no mustache to gnaw, and therefore kept biting the handle of his whip instead, with ill-concealed impatience. How could he get out of it? D'Artagnan looked as agreeable as possible, and Colbert as sulky as he could. Who was there he could get in a passion with?

"We will consult the queen," said Louis XIV., bowing to the royal ladies. And this kindness of consideration softened Maria Theresa's heart, who, being of a kind and generous disposition, when left to her own free-will, replied:

"I shall be delighted to do whatever your majesty wishes."

"How long will it take us to get to Vaux?" inquired Anne of Austria, in slow and measured accents, placing her hand upon her bosom, where the seat of her pain lay.

"An hour for your majesty's carriages," said D'Artagnan; "the roads are tolerably good."

The king looked at him. "And a quarter of an hour for the king," he hastened to add.

"We should arrive by daylight?" said Louis XIV.

"But the billeting of the king's military escort," objected Colbert, softly, "will make his majesty lose all the advantage of his speed, however quick he may be."

"Double ass that you are!" thought D'Artagnan; "if I had any interest or motive in demolishing your credit with the king, I could do it in ten minutes. If I were in the king's place," he added aloud, "I should, in going to M. Fouquet, leave my escort behind me; I should go to him as a friend; I should enter accompanied only by my captain of the guards; I should consider that I was acting more nobly, and should be invested with a still more sacred character by doing so."

Delight sparkled in the king's eyes. "That is indeed a very sensible suggestion. We will go to see a friend as friends; the gentlemen who are with the carriages can go slowly: but we who are mounted will ride on." And he rode off, accompanied by all those who were mounted. Colbert hid his ugly head behind his horse's neck.

"I shall be quits," said D'Artagnan, as he galloped along, "by getting a little talk with Aramis this evening. And then, M. Fouquet is a man of honour. *Mordoux!* I have said so, and it must be so."

And this was the way how, towards seven o'clock in the evening, without announcing his arrival by the din of trumpets, and without even his advanced guard, without out-riders or musketeers, the king presented himself before the gate of Vaux, where Fouquet, who had been informed of his royal guest's approach, had been waiting for the last half-hour, with his head uncovered, surrounded by his household and his friends.

XIII. Nectar and Ambrosia.

M. Fouquet held the stirrup of the king, who, having dismounted, bowed most graciously, and more graciously still held out his hand to him, which Fouquet, in spite of a slight resistance on the king's part, carried respectfully to his lips. The king wished to wait in the first courtyard for the arrival of the carriages, nor had he long to wait, for the roads had been put into excellent order by the superintendent, and a stone would hardly have been found of the size of an egg the whole way from Melun to Vaux; so that the carriages, rolling along as though on a carpet, brought the ladies to Vaux, without jolting or fatigue, by eight o'clock. They were received by Madame Fouquet, and at the moment they made their appearance, a light as bright as day burst forth from every quarter, trees, vases, and marble statues. This species of enchantment lasted until their majesties had retired into the palace. All these wonders and magical effects which the chronicler has heaped up, or rather embalmed, in his recital, at the risk of rivaling the brain-born scenes of romancers; these splendors whereby night seemed vanquished and nature corrected, together with every delight and luxury combined for the satisfaction of all the senses, as well as the imagination, Fouquet did in real truth offer to his sovereign in that enchanting retreat of which no monarch could at that time boast of possessing an equal. We do not intend to describe the grand banquet, at which the royal guests were present, nor the concerts, nor the fairy-like and more than magic transformations and metamorphoses; it will be enough for our purpose to depict the countenance the king assumed, which, from being gay, soon wore a very gloomy, constrained, and irritated expression. He remembered

his own residence, royal though it was, and the mean and indifferent style of luxury that prevailed there, which comprised but little more than what was merely useful for the royal wants, without being his own personal property. The large vases of the Louvre, the older furniture and plate of Henry II., of Francis I., and of Louis XI., were but historic monuments of earlier days; nothing but specimens of art, the relics of his predecessors; while with Fouquet, the value of the article was as much in the workmanship as in the article itself. Fouquet ate from a gold service, which artists in his own employ had modeled and cast for him alone. Fouquet drank wines of which the king of France did not even know the name, and drank them out of goblets each more valuable than the entire royal cellar. What, too, was to be said of the apartments, the hangings, the pictures, the servants and officers, of every description, of his household? What of the mode of service in which etiquette was replaced by order; stiff formality by personal, unrestrained comfort; the happiness and contentment of the guest became the supreme law of all who obeyed the host? The perfect swarm of busily engaged persons moving about noiselessly; the multitude of guests,—who were, however, even less numerous than the servants who waited on them,—the myriad of exquisitely prepared dishes, of gold and silver vases; the floods of dazzling light, the masses of unknown flowers of which the hot-houses had been despoiled, redundant with luxuriance of unequaled scent and beauty; the perfect harmony of the surroundings, which, indeed, was no more than the prelude of the promised *fête*, charmed all who were there; and they testified their admiration over and over again, not by voice or gesture, but by deep silence and rapt attention, those two languages of the courtier which acknowledge the hand of no master powerful enough to restrain them.

As for the king, his eyes filled with tears; he dared not look at the queen. Anne of Austria, whose pride was superior to that of any creature breathing, overwhelmed her host by the contempt with which she treated everything handed to her. The young queen, kind-hearted by nature and curious by disposition, praised Fouquet, ate with an exceedingly good appetite, and asked the names of the strange fruits as they were placed upon the table. Fouquet replied that he was not aware of their names. The fruits came from his own stores; he had often cultivated them himself, having an intimate acquaintance with the cultivation of exotic fruits and plants. The king felt and appreciated the delicacy of the replies, but was only the more humiliated; he thought the queen a little too familiar in her manners, and that Anne of Austria resembled Juno a little too much, in being too proud and haughty; his chief anxiety, however, was himself, that he might remain cold and distant in his behavior, bordering lightly the limits of supreme disdain or simple admiration.

But Fouquet had foreseen all this; he was, in fact, one of those men who foresee everything. The king had expressly declared that, so long as he remained under Fouquet’s roof, he did not wish his own different repasts to be served in accordance with the usual etiquette, and that he would, consequently, dine with the rest of society; but by the thoughtful attention of the surintendant, the king’s dinner was served up separately, if one may so express it, in the middle of the general table; the dinner, wonderful in every respect, from the dishes of which was composed, comprised everything the king liked and generally preferred to anything else. Louis had no excuse—he, indeed, who had the keenest appetite in his kingdom—for saying that he was not hungry. Nay, M. Fouquet did even better still; he certainly, in obedience to the king’s expressed desire, seated himself at the table, but as soon as the soups were served, he arose and personally waited on the king, while Madame Fouquet stood behind the queen-mother’s armchair. The disdain of Juno and the sulky fits of temper of Jupiter could not resist this excess of kindly feeling and polite attention. The queen ate a biscuit dipped in a glass of San-Lucar wine; and the king ate of everything, saying to M. Fouquet: “It is impossible, monsieur le surintendant, to dine better anywhere.” Whereupon the whole court began, on all sides, to devour the dishes spread before them with such enthusiasm that it looked as though a cloud of Egyptian locusts was settling down on green and growing crops.

As soon, however, as his hunger was appeased, the king became morose and overgloomed again; the more so in proportion to the satisfaction he fancied he had previously manifested, and particularly on account of the deferential manner which his courtiers had shown towards Fouquet. D’Artagnan, who ate a good deal and drank but little, without allowing it to be noticed, did not lose a single opportunity, but made a great number of observations which he turned to good profit.

When the supper was finished, the king expressed a wish not to lose the promenade. The park was illuminated; the moon, too, as if she had placed herself at the orders of the lord of Vaux, silvered the trees and lake with her own bright and quasi-phosphorescent light. The air was strangely soft and balmy; the daintily shell-gravelled walks through the thickly set avenues yielded luxuriously to the feet. The *fête* was complete in every respect, for the king, having met La Vallière in one of the winding paths of the wood, was able to press her hand and say, “I love you,” without any one overhearing him except M. d’Artagnan, who followed, and M. Fouquet, who preceded him.

The dreamy night of magical enchantments stole smoothly on. The king having requested to be shown to his room, there was immediately a movement in every direction. The queens passed to their own apartments, accompanied by them music of theorbos and lutes; the king found his musketeers awaiting him on the grand flight of steps, for M. Fouquet had brought them on from Melun and had invited them to supper. D’Artagnan’s suspicions at once disappeared. He was weary, he had supped well, and wished, for once in his life, thoroughly to enjoy a *fête* given by a man who was in every sense of the word a king. “M. Fouquet,” he said, “is the man for me.”

The king was conducted with the greatest ceremony to the chamber of Morpheus, of which we owe some cursory description to our readers. It was the handsomest and largest in the palace. Lebrun had painted on the vaulted ceiling the happy as well as the unhappy dreams which Morpheus inflicts on kings as well as on other men. Everything that sleep gives birth to that is lovely, its fairy scenes, its flowers and nectar, the wild voluptuousness or profound repose of the senses, had the painter elaborated on his frescoes. It was a composition as soft and pleasing in one part as dark and gloomy and terrible in another. The poisoned chalice, the glittering dagger suspended over the head of the sleeper; wizards and phantoms with terrific masks, those half-dim shadows more alarming than the approach of fire or the somber face of midnight, these, and such as these, he had made the companions of his more pleasing pictures. No sooner had the king entered his room than a cold shiver seemed to pass through him, and on Fouquet asking him the cause of it, the king replied, as pale as death:

“I am sleepy, that is all.”

“Does your majesty wish for your attendants at once?”

“No; I have to talk with a few persons first,” said the king. “Will you have the goodness to tell M. Colbert I wish to see him.”

Fouquet bowed and left the room.

XIV. A Gascon, and a Gascon and a Half.

D’Artagnan had determined to lose no time, and in fact he never was in the habit of doing so. After having inquired for Aramis, he had looked for him in every direction until he had succeeded in finding him. Besides, no sooner had the king entered Vaux, than Aramis had retired to his own room, meditating, doubtless, some new piece of gallant attention for his majesty’s amusement. D’Artagnan desired the servants to announce him, and found on the second story (in a beautiful room called the Blue Chamber, on account of the colour of its hangings) the bishop of Vannes in company with Porthos and several of the modern Epicureans. Aramis came forward to embrace his friend, and offered him the best seat. As it was after awhile generally remarked among those present that the musketeer was reserved, and wished for an opportunity for conversing secretly with Aramis, the Epicureans took their leave. Porthos, however, did not stir; for true it is that, having dined exceedingly well, he was fast asleep in his armchair; and the freedom of conversation therefore was not interrupted by a third person. Porthos had a deep, harmonious snore, and people might talk in the midst of its loud bass without fear of disturbing him. D’Artagnan felt that he was called upon to open the conversation.

“Well, and so we have come to Vaux,” he said.

“Why, yes, D’Artagnan. And how do you like the place?”

“Very much, and I like M. Fouquet, also.”

“Is he not a charming host?”

“No one could be more so.”

“I am told that the king began by showing great distance of manner towards M. Fouquet, but that his majesty grew much more cordial afterwards.”

“You did not notice it, then, since you say you have been told so?”

“No; I was engaged with the gentlemen who have just left the room about the theatrical performances and the tournaments which are to take place to-morrow.”

“Ah, indeed! you are the comptroller-general of the *fetes* here, then?”

“You know I am a friend of all kinds of amusement where the exercise of the imagination is called into activity; I have always been a poet in one way or another.”

“Yes, I remember the verses you used to write, they were charming.”

“I have forgotten them, but I am delighted to read the verses of others, when those others are known by the names of Moliere, Pelisson, La Fontaine, etc.”

“Do you know what idea occurred to me this evening, Aramis?”

“No; tell me what it was, for I should never be able to guess it, you have so many.”

“Well, the idea occurred to me, that the true king of France is not Louis XIV.”

“*What!*” said Aramis, involuntarily, looking the musketeer full in the eyes.

“No, it is Monsieur Fouquet.”

Aramis breathed again, and smiled. “Ah! you are like all the rest, jealous,” he said. “I would wager that it was M. Colbert who turned that pretty phrase.” D’Artagnan, in order to throw Aramis off his guard, related Colbert’s misadventures with regard to the *vin de Melun*.

“He comes of a mean race, does Colbert,” said Aramis.

“Quite true.”

“When I think, too,” added the bishop, “that that fellow will be your minister within four months, and that you will serve him as blindly as you did Richelieu or Mazarin—”

“And as you serve M. Fouquet,” said D’Artagnan.

“With this difference, though, that M. Fouquet is not M. Colbert.”

“True, true,” said D’Artagnan, as he pretended to become sad and full of reflection; and then, a moment after, he added, “Why do you tell me that M. Colbert will be minister in four months?”

“Because M. Fouquet will have ceased to be so,” replied Aramis.

“He will be ruined, you mean?” said D’Artagnan.

“Completely so.”

“Why does he give these *fetes*, then?” said the musketeer, in a tone so full of thoughtful consideration, and so well assumed, that the bishop was for the moment deceived by it. “Why did you not dissuade him from it?”

The latter part of the phrase was just a little too much, and Aramis’s former suspicions were again aroused. “It is done with the object of humoring the king.”

“By ruining himself?”

“Yes, by ruining himself for the king.”

“A most eccentric, one might say, sinister calculation, that.”

“Necessity, necessity, my friend.”

“I don’t see that, dear Aramis.”

“Do you not? Have you not remarked M. Colbert’s daily increasing antagonism, and that he is doing his utmost to drive the king to get rid of the superintendent?”

“One must be blind not to see it.”

“And that a cabal is already armed against M. Fouquet?”

“That is well known.”

“What likelihood is there that the king would join a party formed against a man who will have spent everything he had to please him?”

“True, true,” said D’Artagnan, slowly, hardly convinced, yet curious to broach another phase of the conversation. “There are follies, and follies,” he resumed, “and I do not like those you are committing.”

“What do you allude to?”

“As for the banquet, the ball, the concert, the theatricals, the tournaments, the cascades, the fireworks, the illuminations, and the presents—these are well and good, I grant; but why were not these expenses sufficient? Why was it necessary to have new liveries and costumes for your whole household?”

“You are quite right. I told M. Fouquet that myself; he replied, that if he were rich enough he would offer the king a newly erected chateau, from the vanes at the houses to the very sub-cellar; completely new inside and out; and that, as soon as the king had left, he would burn the whole building and its contents, in order that it might not be made use of by any one else.”

“How completely Spanish!”

“I told him so, and he then added this: ‘Whoever advises me to spare expense, I shall look upon as my enemy.’”

“It is positive madness; and that portrait, too!”

“What portrait?” said Aramis.

"That of the king, and the surprise as well."

"What surprise?"

"The surprise you seem to have in view, and on account of which you took some specimens away, when I met you at Percerin's." D'Artagnan paused. The shaft was discharged, and all he had to do was to wait and watch its effect.

"That is merely an act of graceful attention," replied Aramis.

D'Artagnan went up to his friend, took hold of both his hands, and looking him full in the eyes, said, "Aramis, do you still care for me a very little?"

"What a question to ask!"

"Very good. One favour, then. Why did you take some patterns of the king's costumes at Percerin's?"

"Come with me and ask poor Lebrun, who has been working upon them for the last two days and nights."

"Aramis, that may be truth for everybody else, but for me—"

"Upon my word, D'Artagnan, you astonish me."

"Be a little considerate. Tell me the exact truth; you would not like anything disagreeable to happen to me, would you?"

"My dear friend, you are becoming quite incomprehensible. What suspicion can you have possibly got hold of?"

"Do you believe in my instinctive feelings? Formerly you used to have faith in them. Well, then, an instinct tells me that you have some concealed project on foot."

"I—a project?"

"I am convinced of it."

"What nonsense!"

"I am not only sure of it, but I would even swear it."

"Indeed, D'Artagnan, you cause me the greatest pain. Is it likely, if I have any project in hand that I ought to keep secret from you, I should tell you about it? If I had one that I could and ought to have revealed, should I not have long ago divulged it?"

"No, Aramis, no. There are certain projects which are never revealed until the favourable opportunity arrives."

"In that case, my dear fellow," returned the bishop, laughing, "the only thing now is, that the 'opportunity' has not yet arrived."

D'Artagnan shook his head with a sorrowful expression. "Oh, friendship, friendship!" he said, "what an idle word you are! Here is a man who, if I were but to ask it, would suffer himself to be cut in pieces for my sake."

"You are right," said Aramis, nobly.

"And this man, who would shed every drop of blood in his veins for me, will not open up before me the least corner in his heart. Friendship, I repeat, is nothing but an unsubstantial shadow—a lure, like everything else in this bright, dazzling world."

"It is not thus you should speak of *our* friendship," replied the bishop, in a firm, assured voice; "for ours is not of the same nature as those of which you have been speaking."

"Look at us, Aramis; three out of the old 'four.' You are deceiving me; I suspect you; and Porthos is fast asleep. An admirable trio of friends, don't you think so? What an affecting relic of the former dear old times!"

"I can only tell you one thing, D'Artagnan, and I swear it on the Bible: I love you just as I used to do. If I ever suspect you, it is on account of others, and not on account of either of us. In everything I may do, and should happen to succeed in, you will find your fourth. Will you promise me the same favour?"

"If I am not mistaken, Aramis, your words—at the moment you pronounce them—are full of generous feeling."

"Such a thing is very possible."

"You are conspiring against M. Colbert. If that be all, *mordieux*, tell me so at once. I have the instrument in my own hand, and will pull out the tooth easily enough."

Aramis could not conceal a smile of disdain that flitted over his haughty features. "And supposing that I were conspiring against Colbert, what harm would there be in *that*?"

"No, no; that would be too trifling a matter for you to take in hand, and it was not on that account you asked Percerin for those patterns of the king's costumes. Oh! Aramis, we are not enemies, remember—we are brothers. Tell me what you wish to undertake, and, upon the word of a D'Artagnan, if I cannot help you, I will swear to remain neuter."

"I am undertaking nothing," said Aramis.

"Aramis, a voice within me speaks and seems to trickle forth a rill of light within my darkness: it is a voice that has never yet deceived me. It is the king you are conspiring against."

"The king?" exclaimed the bishop, pretending to be annoyed.

"Your face will not convince me; the king, I repeat."

"Will you help me?" said Aramis, smiling ironically.

"Aramis, I will do more than help you—I will do more than remain neuter—I will save you."

"You are mad, D'Artagnan."

"I am the wiser of the two, in this matter."

"You to suspect me of wishing to assassinate the king!"

"Who spoke of such a thing?" smiled the musketeer.

"Well, let us understand one another. I do not see what any one can do to a legitimate king as ours is, if he does not assassinate him." D'Artagnan did not say a word. "Besides, you have your guards and your musketeers here," said the bishop.

"True."

"You are not in M. Fouquet's house, but in your own."

"True; but in spite of that, Aramis, grant me, for pity's sake, one single word of a true friend."

"A true friend's word is ever truth itself. If I think of touching, even with my finger, the son of Anne of Austria, the true king of this realm of France—if I have not the firm intention of prostrating myself before his throne—if in every idea I may entertain to-morrow, here at Vaux, will not be the most glorious day my king ever enjoyed—may Heaven's lightning blast me where I stand!" Aramis had pronounced these words with his face turned towards the alcove of his own bedroom, where D'Artagnan, seated with his back towards the alcove, could not suspect that any one was lying concealed. The earnestness of his words, the studied slowness with which he pronounced them, the solemnity of his oath, gave the musketeer the most complete satisfaction. He took hold of both Aramis's hands, and shook them cordially. Aramis had endured reproaches without turning pale, and had blushed as he listened to words of praise. D'Artagnan, deceived, did him honour; but D'Artagnan, trustful and reliant, made him feel ashamed. "Are you going away?" he said, as he embraced him, in order to conceal the flush on his face.

"Yes. Duty summons me. I have to get the watch-word. It seems I am to be lodged in the king's ante-room. Where does Porthos sleep?"

"Take him away with you, if you like, for he rumbles through his sleepy nose like a park of artillery."

"Ah! he does not stay with you, then?" said D'Artagnan.

"Not the least in the world. He has a chamber to himself, but I don't know where."

"Very good!" said the musketeer; from whom this separation of the two associates removed his last suspicion, and he touched Porthos lightly on the shoulder; the latter replied by a loud yawn. "Come," said D'Artagnan.

"What, D'Artagnan, my dear fellow, is that you? What a lucky chance! Oh, yes—true; I have forgotten; I am at the *fête* at Vaux."

"Yes; and your beautiful dress, too."

"Yes, it was very attentive on the part of Monsieur Coquelin de Voliere, was it not?"

"Hush!" said Aramis. "You are walking so heavily you will make the flooring give way."

"True," said the musketeer; "this room is above the dome, I think."

"And I did not choose it for a fencing-room, I assure you," added the bishop. "The ceiling of the king's room has all the lightness and calm of wholesome sleep. Do not forget, therefore, that my flooring is merely the covering of his ceiling. Good night, my friends, and in ten minutes I shall be asleep myself." And Aramis accompanied them to the door, laughing quietly all the while. As soon as they were outside, he bolted the door, hurriedly; closed up the chinks of the windows, and then called out, "My lord!—my lord!" Philippe made his appearance from the alcove, as he pushed aside a sliding panel placed behind the bed.

"M. d'Artagnan entertains a great many suspicions, it seems," he said.

"Ah!—you recognized M. d'Artagnan, then?"

"Before you called him by his name, even."

"He is your captain of musketeers."

"He is very devoted to *me*," replied Philippe, laying a stress upon the personal pronoun.

"As faithful as a dog; but he bites sometimes. If D'Artagnan does not recognize you before *the other* has disappeared, rely upon D'Artagnan to the end of the world; for in that case, if he has seen nothing, he will keep his fidelity. If he sees, when it is too late, he is a Gascon, and will never admit that he has been deceived."

"I thought so. What are we to do, now?"

"Sit in this folding-chair. I am going to push aside a portion of the flooring; you will look through the opening, which answers to one of the false windows made in the dome of the king's apartment. Can you see?"

"Yes," said Philippe, starting as at the sight of an enemy; "I see the king!"

"What is he doing?"

"He seems to wish some man to sit down close to him."

"M. Fouquet?"

"No, no; wait a moment—"

"Look at the notes and the portraits, my prince."

"The man whom the king wishes to sit down in his presence is M. Colbert."

"Colbert sit down in the king's presence!" exclaimed Aramis. "It is impossible."

"Look."

Aramis looked through the opening in the flooring. "Yes," he said. "Colbert himself. Oh, my lord! what can we be going to hear—and what can result from this intimacy?"

"Nothing good for M. Fouquet, at all events."

The prince did not deceive himself.

We have seen that Louis XIV. had sent for Colbert, and Colbert had arrived. The conversation began between them by the king according to him one of the highest favours that he had ever done; it was true the king was alone with his subject. "Colbert," said he, "sit down."

The intendant, overcome with delight, for he feared he was about to be dismissed, refused this unprecedented honour.

"Does he accept?" said Aramis.

"No, he remains standing."

"Let us listen, then." And the future king and the future pope listened eagerly to the simple mortals they held under their feet, ready to crush them when they liked.

"Colbert," said the king, "you have annoyed me exceedingly to-day."

"I know it, sire."

"Very good; I like that answer. Yes, you knew it, and there was courage in the doing of it."

"I ran the risk of displeasing your majesty, but I risked, also, the concealment of your best interests."

"What! you were afraid of something on *my* account?"

"I was, sire, even if it were nothing more than an indigestion," said Colbert; "for people do not give their sovereigns such banquets as the one of to-day, unless it be to stifle them beneath the burden of good living." Colbert awaited the effect this coarse jest would produce upon the king; and Louis XIV., who was the vainest and the most fastidiously delicate man in his kingdom, forgave Colbert the joke.

"The truth is," he said, "that M. Fouquet has given me too good a meal. Tell me, Colbert, where does he get all the money required for this enormous expenditure,—can you tell?"

"Yes, I do know, sire."

"Will you be able to prove it with tolerable certainty?"

"Easily; and to the utmost farthing."

"I know you are very exact."

"Exactitude is the principal qualification required in an intendant of finances."

"But all are not so."

"I thank you majesty for so flattering a compliment from your own lips."

"M. Fouquet, therefore, is rich—very rich, and I suppose every man knows he is so."

"Every one, sire; the living as well as the dead."

"What does that mean, Monsieur Colbert?"

"The living are witnesses of M. Fouquet's wealth,—they admire and applaud the result produced; but the dead, wiser and better informed than we are, know how that wealth was obtained—and they rise up in accusation."

"So that M. Fouquet owes his wealth to some cause or other."

"The occupation of an intendant very often favours those who practice it."

"You have something to say to me more confidentially, I perceive; do not be afraid, we are quite alone."

"I am never afraid of anything under the shelter of my own conscience, and under the protection of your majesty," said Colbert, bowing.

"If the dead, therefore, were to speak—"

"They do speak sometimes, sire,—read."

"Ah!" murmured Aramis, in the prince's ear, who, close beside him, listened without losing a syllable, "since you are placed here, my lord, in order to learn your vocation of a king, listen to a piece of infamy—of a nature truly royal. You are about to be a witness of one of those scenes which the foul fiend alone conceives and executes. Listen attentively,—you will find your advantage in it."

The prince redoubled his attention, and saw Louis XIV. take from Colbert's hands a letter the latter held out to him.

"The late cardinal's handwriting," said the king.

"Your majesty has an excellent memory," replied Colbert, bowing; "it is an immense advantage for a king who is destined for hard work to recognize handwritings at the first glance."

The king read Mazarin's letter, and, as its contents are already known to the reader, in consequence of the misunderstanding between Madame de Chevreuse and Aramis, nothing further would be learned if we stated them here again.

"I do not quite understand," said the king, greatly interested.

"Your majesty has not acquired the utilitarian habit of checking the public accounts."

"I see that it refers to money that had been given to M. Fouquet."

"Thirteen millions. A tolerably good sum."

"Yes. Well, these thirteen millions are wanting to balance the total of the account. That is what I do not very well understand. How was this deficit possible?"

"Possible I do not say; but there is no doubt about fact that it is really so."

"You say that these thirteen millions are found to be wanting in the accounts?"

"I do not say so, but the registry does."

"And this letter of M. Mazarin indicates the employment of that sum and the name of the person with whom it was deposited?"

"As your majesty can judge for yourself."

"Yes; and the result is, then, that M. Fouquet has not yet restored the thirteen millions."

"That results from the accounts, certainly, sire."

"Well, and, consequently—"

"Well, sire, in that case, inasmuch as M. Fouquet has not yet given back the thirteen millions, he must have appropriated them to his own purpose; and with those thirteen millions one could incur four times and a little more as much expense, and make four times as great a display, as your majesty was able to do at Fontainebleau, where we only spent three millions altogether, if you remember."

For a blunderer, the *souvenir* he had evoked was a rather skillfully contrived piece of baseness; for by the remembrance of his own *fete* he, for the first time, perceived its inferiority compared with that of Fouquet. Colbert received back again at Vaux what Fouquet had given him at Fontainebleau, and, as a good financier, returned it with the best possible interest. Having once disposed the king's mind in this artful way, Colbert had nothing of much importance to detain him. He felt that such was the case, for the king, too, had again sunk into a dull and gloomy state. Colbert awaited the first words from the king's lips with as much impatience as Philippe and Aramis did from their place of observation.

"Are you aware what is the usual and natural consequence of all this, Monsieur Colbert?" said the king, after a few moments' reflection.

"No, sire, I do not know."

"Well, then, the fact of the appropriation of the thirteen millions, if it can be proved—"

"But it is so already."

"I mean if it were to be declared and certified, M. Colbert."

"I think it will be to-morrow, if your majesty—"

"Were we not under M. Fouquet's roof, you were going to say, perhaps," replied the king, with something of nobility in his demeanor.

"The king is in his own palace wherever he may be—especially in houses which the royal money has constructed."

"I think," said Philippe in a low tone to Aramis, "that the architect who planned this dome ought, anticipating the use it could be put to at a future opportunity, so to have contrived that it might be made to fall upon the heads of scoundrels such as M. Colbert."

"I think so too," replied Aramis; "but M. Colbert is so very *near the king* at this moment."

"That is true, and that would open the succession."

"Of which your younger brother would reap all the advantage, my lord. But stay, let us keep quiet, and go on listening."

"We shall not have long to listen," said the young prince.

"Why not, my lord?"

"Because, if I were king, I should make no further reply."

"And what would you do?"

"I should wait until to-morrow morning to give myself time for reflection."

Louis XIV. at last raised his eyes, and finding Colbert attentively waiting for his next remarks, said, hastily, changing the conversation, "M. Colbert, I perceive it is getting very late, and I shall now retire to bed. By to-morrow morning I shall have made up my mind."

"Very good, sire," returned Colbert, greatly incensed, although he restrained himself in the presence of the king.

The king made a gesture of adieu, and Colbert withdrew with a respectful bow. "My attendants!" cried the king; and, as they entered the apartment, Philippe was about to quit his post of observation.

"A moment longer," said Aramis to him, with his accustomed gentleness of manner; "what has just now taken place is only a detail, and to-morrow we shall have no occasion to think anything more about it; but the ceremony of the king's retiring to rest, the etiquette observed in addressing the king, that indeed is of the greatest importance. Learn, sire, and study well how you ought to go to bed of a night. Look! look!"

#### XV. Colbert.

History will tell us, or rather history has told us, of the various events of the following day, of the splendid *fetes* given by the surintendant to his sovereign. Nothing but amusement and delight was allowed to prevail throughout the whole of the following day; there was a promenade, a banquet, a comedy to be acted, and a comedy, too, in which, to his great amazement, Porthos recognized "M. Coquelin de Voliere" as one of the actors, in the piece called "Les Facheux." Full of preoccupation, however, from the scene of the previous evening, and hardly recovered from the effects of the poison which Colbert had then administered to him, the king, during the whole of the day, so brilliant in its effects, so full of unexpected and startling novelties, in which all the wonders of the "Arabian Night's Entertainments" seemed to be reproduced for his especial amusement—the king, we say, showed himself cold, reserved, and taciturn. Nothing could smooth the frowns upon his face; every one who observed him noticed that a deep feeling of resentment, of remote origin, increased by slow degrees, as the source becomes a river, thanks to the thousand threads of water that increase its body, was keenly alive in the depths of the king's heart. Towards the middle of the day only did he begin to resume a little serenity of manner, and by that time he had, in all probability, made up his mind. Aramis, who followed him step by step in his thoughts, as in his walk, concluded that the event he was expecting would not be long before it was announced. This time Colbert seemed to walk in concert with the bishop of Vannes, and had he received for every annoyance which he inflicted on the king a word of direction from Aramis, he could not have done better. During the whole of the day the king, who, in all probability, wished to free himself from some of the thoughts which disturbed his mind, seemed to seek La Vallière's society as actively as he seemed to show his anxiety to flee that of M. Colbert or M. Fouquet. The evening came. The king had expressed a wish not to walk in the park until after cards in the evening. In the interval between supper and the promenade, cards and dice were introduced. The king won a thousand pistoles, and, having won them, put them in his pocket, and then rose, saying, "And now, gentlemen, to the park." He found the ladies of the court were already there. The king, we have before observed, had won a thousand pistoles, and had put them in his pocket; but M. Fouquet had somehow contrived to lose ten thousand, so that among the courtiers there was still left a hundred and ninety thousand francs' profit to divide, a circumstance which made the countenances of the courtiers and the officers of the king's household the most joyous countenances in the world. It was not the same, however, with the king's face; for, notwithstanding his success at play, to which he was by no means insensible, there still remained a slight shade of dissatisfaction. Colbert was waiting for or upon him at the corner of one of the avenues; he was most probably waiting there in consequence of a rendezvous which had been given him by the king, as Louis XIV., who had avoided him, or who had seemed to avoid him, suddenly made him a sign, and they then struck into the depths of the park together. But La Vallière, too, had observed the king's gloomy aspect and kindling glances; she had remarked this—and as nothing which lay hidden or smoldering in his heart was hidden from the gaze of her affection, she understood that this repressed wrath menaced some one; she prepared to withstand the current of his vengeance, and intercede like an angel of mercy. Overcome by sadness, nervously agitated, deeply distressed at having been so long separated from her lover, disturbed at the sight of the emotion she had divined, she accordingly presented herself to the king with an embarrassed aspect, which in his then disposition of mind the king interpreted unfavourably. Then, as they were alone—nearly alone, inasmuch as Colbert, as soon as he perceived the young girl approaching, had stopped and drawn back a dozen paces—the king advanced towards La Vallière and took her by the hand. "Mademoiselle," he said to her, "should I be guilty of an indiscretion if I were to inquire if you were indisposed? for you seem to breathe as if you were oppressed by some secret cause of uneasiness, and your eyes are filled with tears."

"Oh! sire, if I be indeed so, and if my eyes are indeed full of tears, I am sorrowful only at the sadness which seems to oppress your majesty."

"My sadness? You are mistaken, mademoiselle; no, it is not sadness I experience."

"What is it, then, sire?"

"Humiliation."

"Humiliation? oh! sire, what a word for you to use!"

"I mean, mademoiselle, that wherever I may happen to be, no one else ought to be the master. Well, then, look round you on every side, and judge whether I am not eclipsed—I, the king of France—before the monarch of these wide domains. Oh!" he continued, clenching his hands and teeth, "when I think that this king—"

"Well, sire?" said Louise, terrified.

"—That this king is a faithless, unworthy servant, who grows proud and self-sufficient upon the strength of property that belongs to me, and which he has stolen. And therefore I am about to change this impudent minister's *fete* into sorrow and mourning, of which the nymph of Vaux, as the poets say, shall not soon lose the remembrance."

"Oh! your majesty—"

"Well, mademoiselle, are you about to take M. Fouquet's part?" said Louis, impatiently.

"No, sire; I will only ask whether you are well informed. Your majesty has more than once learned the value of accusations made at court."

Louis XIV. made a sign for Colbert to approach. "Speak, Monsieur Colbert," said the young prince, "for I almost believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière has need of your assistance before she can put any faith in the king's word. Tell mademoiselle what M. Fouquet has done; and you, mademoiselle, will perhaps have the kindness to listen. It will not be long."

Why did Louis XIV. insist upon it in such a manner? A very simple reason—his heart was not at rest, his mind was not thoroughly convinced; he imagined there lay some dark, hidden, tortuous intrigue behind these thirteen millions of francs; and he wished that the pure heart of La Vallière, which had revolted at the idea of theft or robbery, should approve—even were it only by a single word—the resolution he had taken, and which, nevertheless, he hesitated before carrying into execution.

"Speak, monsieur," said La Vallière to Colbert, who had advanced; "speak, since the king wishes me to listen to you. Tell me, what is the crime with which M. Fouquet is charged?"

"Oh! not very heinous, mademoiselle," he returned, "a mere abuse of confidence."

"Speak, speak, Colbert; and when you have related it, leave us, and go and inform M. d'Artagnan that I have certain orders to give him."

"M. d'Artagnan, sire!" exclaimed La Vallière; "but why send for M. d'Artagnan? I entreat you to tell me."

"*Pardieu!* in order to arrest this haughty, arrogant Titan who, true to his menace, threatens to scale my heaven."

"Arrest M. Fouquet, do you say?"

"Ah! does that surprise you?"

"In his own house!"

"Why not? If he be guilty, he is as guilty in his own house as anywhere else."

"M. Fouquet, who at this moment is ruining himself for his sovereign."

"In plain truth, mademoiselle, it seems as if you were defending this traitor."

Colbert began to chuckle silently. The king turned round at the sound of this suppressed mirth.

"Sire," said La Vallière, "it is not M. Fouquet I am defending; it is yourself."

"Me! you are defending me?"

"Sire, you would dishonour yourself if you were to give such an order."

"Dishonour myself!" murmured the king, turning pale with anger. "In plain truth, mademoiselle, you show a strange persistence in what you say."

"If I do, sire, my only motive is that of serving your majesty," replied the noble-hearted girl: "for that I would risk, I would sacrifice my very life, without the least reserve."

Colbert seemed inclined to grumble and complain. La Vallière, that timid, gentle lamb, turned round upon him, and with a glance like lightning imposed silence upon him. "Monsieur," she said, "when the king acts well, whether, in doing so, he does either myself or those who belong to me an injury, I have nothing to say; but were the king to confer a benefit either upon me or mine, and if he acted badly, I should tell him so."

"But it appears to me, mademoiselle," Colbert ventured to say, "that I too love the king."

"Yes, my lord, we both love him, but each in a different manner," replied La Vallière, with such an accent that the heart of the young king was powerfully affected by it. "I love him so deeply, that the whole world is aware of it; so purely, that the king himself does not doubt my affection. He is my king and my master; I am the least of all his servants. But whoso touches his honour assails my life. Therefore, I repeat, that they dishonour the king who advise him to arrest M. Fouquet under his own roof."

Colbert hung down his head, for he felt that the king had abandoned him. However, as he bent his head, he murmured, "Mademoiselle, I have only one word to say."

"Do not say it, then, monsieur; for I would not listen to it. Besides, what could you have to tell me? That M. Fouquet has been guilty of certain crimes? I believe he has, because the king has said so; and, from the moment the king said, 'I think so,' I have no occasion for other lips to say, 'I affirm it.' But, were M. Fouquet the vilest of men, I should say aloud, 'M. Fouquet's person is sacred to the king because he is the guest of M. Fouquet. Were his house a den of thieves, were Vaux a cave of coiners or robbers, his home is sacred, his palace is inviolable, since his wife is living in it; and that is an asylum which even executioners would not dare to violate.'"

La Vallière paused, and was silent. In spite of himself the king could not but admire her; he was overpowered by the passionate energy of her voice; by the nobleness of the cause she advocated. Colbert yielded, overcome by the inequality of the struggle. At last the king breathed again more freely, shook his head, and held out his hand to La Vallière. "Mademoiselle," he said, gently, "why do you decide against me? Do you know what this wretched fellow will do, if I give him time to breathe again?"

"Is he not a prey which will always be within your grasp?"

"Should he escape, and take to flight?" exclaimed Colbert.

"Well, monsieur, it will always remain on record, to the king's eternal honour, that he allowed M. Fouquet to flee; and the more guilty he may have been, the greater will the king's honour and glory appear, compared with such unnecessary misery and shame."

Louis kissed La Vallière's hand, as he knelt before her.

"I am lost," thought Colbert; then suddenly his face brightened up again. "Oh! no, no, aha, old fox!—not yet," he said to himself.

And while the king, protected from observation by the thick covert of an enormous lime, pressed La Vallière to his breast, with all the ardor of ineffable affection, Colbert tranquilly fumbled among the papers in his pocket-book and drew out of it a paper folded in the form of a letter, somewhat yellow, perhaps, but one that must have been most precious, since the intendant smiled as he looked at it; he then bent a look, full of hatred, upon the charming group which the young girl and the king formed together—a group revealed but for a moment, as the light of the approaching torches shone upon it. Louis noticed the light reflected upon La Vallière's white dress. "Leave me, Louise," he said, "for some one is coming."

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, some one is coming," cried Colbert, to expedite the young girl's departure.

Louise disappeared rapidly among the trees; and then, as the king, who had been on his knees before the young girl, was rising from his humble posture, Colbert exclaimed, "Ah! Mademoiselle de la Vallière has let something fall."

"What is it?" inquired the king.

"A paper—a letter—something white; look there, sire."

The king stooped down immediately and picked up the letter, crumpling it in his hand, as he did so; and at the same moment the torches arrived, inundating the blackness of the scene with a flood of light as bright as day.

XVI. Jealousy.

The torches we have just referred to, the eager attention every one displayed, and the new ovation paid to the king by Fouquet, arrived in time to suspend the effect of a resolution which La Vallière had already considerably shaken in Louis XIV.'s heart. He looked at Fouquet with a feeling almost of gratitude for having given La Vallière an opportunity of showing herself so generously disposed, so powerful in the influence she exercised over his heart. The moment of the last and greatest display had arrived. Hardly had Fouquet conducted the king towards the chateau, when a mass of fire burst from the dome of Vaux, with a prodigious uproar, pouring a flood of dazzling cataracts of rays on every side, and illumining the remotest corners of the gardens. The fireworks began. Colbert, at twenty paces from the king, who was surrounded and *feted* by the owner of Vaux, seemed, by the obstinate persistence of his gloomy thoughts, to do his utmost to recall Louis's attention, which the magnificence of the spectacle was already, in his opinion, too easily diverting. Suddenly, just as Louis was on the point of holding it out to Fouquet, he perceived in his hand the paper which, as he believed, La Vallière had dropped at his feet as she hurried away. The still stronger magnet of love drew the young prince's attention towards the *souvenir* of his idol; and, by the brilliant light, which increased momentarily in beauty, and drew from the neighboring villages loud cheers of admiration, the king read the letter, which he supposed was a loving and tender epistle La Vallière had destined for him. But as he read it, a death-like pallor stole over his face, and an expression of deep-seated wrath, illumined by the many-coloured fire which gleamed so brightly, soaringly around the scene, produced a terrible spectacle, which every one would have shuddered at, could they only have read into his heart, now torn by the most stormy and most bitter passions. There was no truce for him now, influenced as he was by jealousy and mad passion. From the very moment when the dark truth was revealed to him, every gentler feeling seemed to disappear; pity, kindness of consideration, the religion of hospitality, all were forgotten. In the bitter pang which wrung his heart, he, still too weak to hide his sufferings, was almost on the point of uttering a cry of alarm, and calling his guards to gather round him. This letter which Colbert had thrown down at the king's feet, the reader has doubtlessly guessed, was the same that had disappeared with the porter Toby at Fontainebleau, after the attempt which Fouquet had made upon La Vallière's heart. Fouquet saw the king's pallor, and was far from guessing the evil; Colbert saw the king's anger, and rejoiced inwardly at the approach of the storm. Fouquet's voice drew the young prince from his wrathful reverie.

"What is the matter, sire?" inquired the superintendent, with an expression of graceful interest.

Louis made a violent effort over himself, as he replied, "Nothing."

"I am afraid your majesty is suffering?"

"I am suffering, and have already told you so, monsieur; but it is nothing."

And the king, without waiting for the termination of the fireworks, turned towards the chateau. Fouquet accompanied him, and the whole court followed, leaving the remains of the fireworks consuming for their own amusement. The superintendent endeavored again to question Louis XIV., but did not succeed in obtaining a reply. He imagined there had been some misunderstanding between Louis and La Vallière in the park, which had resulted in a slight quarrel; and that the king, who was not ordinarily sulky by disposition, but completely absorbed by his passion for La Vallière, had taken a dislike to every one because his mistress had shown herself offended with him. This idea was sufficient to console him; he had even a friendly and kindly smile for the young king, when the latter wished him good night. This, however, was not all the king had to submit to; he was obliged to undergo the usual ceremony, which on that evening was marked by close adherence to the strictest etiquette. The next day was the one fixed for the departure; it was but proper that the guests should thank their host, and show him a little attention in return for the expenditure of his twelve millions. The only remark, approaching to amiability, which the king could find to say to M. Fouquet, as he took leave of him, were in these words, "M. Fouquet, you shall hear from me. Be good enough to desire M. d'Artagnan to come here."

But the blood of Louis XIV., who had so profoundly dissimulated his feelings, boiled in his veins; and he was perfectly willing to order M. Fouquet to be put an end to with the same readiness, indeed, as his predecessor had caused the assassination of le Marechal d'Ancre; and so he disguised the terrible resolution he had formed beneath one of those royal smiles which, like lightning-flashes, indicated *coups d'état*. Fouquet took the king's hand and kissed it; Louis shuddered throughout his whole frame, but allowed M. Fouquet to touch his hand with his lips. Five minutes afterwards, D'Artagnan, to whom the royal order had been communicated, entered Louis XIV.'s apartment. Aramis and Philippe were in theirs, still eagerly attentive, and still listening with all their ears. The king did not even give the captain of the musketeers time to approach his armchair, but ran forward to meet him. "Take care," he exclaimed, "that no one enters here."

"Very good, sire," replied the captain, whose glance had for a long time past analyzed the stormy indications on the royal countenance. He gave the necessary order at the door; but, returning to the king, he said, "Is there something fresh the matter, your majesty?"

"How many men have you here?" inquired the king, without making any other reply to the question addressed to him.

"What for, sire?"

"How many men have you, I say?" repeated the king, stamping upon the ground with his foot.

"I have the musketeers."

"Well; and what others?"

"Twenty guards and thirteen Swiss."



"How many men will be required to—" "To do what, sire?" replied the musketeer, opening his large, calm eyes. "To arrest M. Fouquet." D'Artagnan fell back a step. "To arrest M. Fouquet!" he burst forth. "Are you going to tell me that it is impossible?" exclaimed the king, in tones of cold, vindictive passion. "I never say that anything is impossible," replied D'Artagnan, wounded to the quick. "Very well; do it, then."

D'Artagnan turned on his heel, and made his way towards the door; it was but a short distance, and he cleared it in half a dozen paces; when he reached it he suddenly paused, and said, "Your majesty will forgive me, but, in order to effect this arrest, I should like written directions."

"For what purpose—and since when has the king's word been insufficient for you?"

"Because the word of a king, when it springs from a feeling of anger, may possibly change when the feeling changes."

"A truce to set phrases, monsieur; you have another thought besides that?"

"Oh, I, at least, have certain thoughts and ideas, which, unfortunately, others have not," D'Artagnan replied, impertinently.

The king, in the tempest of his wrath, hesitated, and drew back in the face of D'Artagnan's frank courage, just as a horse crouches on his haunches under the strong hand of a bold and experienced rider. "What is your thought?" he exclaimed.

"This, sire," replied D'Artagnan: "you cause a man to be arrested when you are still under his roof; and passion is alone the cause of that. When your anger shall have passed, you will regret what you have done; and then I wish to be in a position to show you your signature. If that, however, should fail to be a reparation, it will at least show us that the king was wrong to lose his temper."

"Wrong to lose his temper!" cried the king, in a loud, passionate voice. "Did not my father, my grandfathers, too, before me, lose their temper at times, in Heaven's name?"

"The king your father and the king your grandfather never lost their temper except when under the protection of their own palace."

"The king is master wherever he may be."

"That is a flattering, complimentary phrase which cannot proceed from any one but M. Colbert; but it happens not to be the truth. The king is at home in every man's house when he has driven its owner out of it."

The king bit his lips, but said nothing.

"Can it be possible?" said D'Artagnan; "here is a man who is positively ruining himself in order to please you, and you wish to have him arrested! *Mordieux!* Sire, if my name was Fouquet, and people treated me in that manner, I would swallow at a single gulp all sorts of fireworks and other things, and I would set fire to them, and send myself and everybody else in blown-up atoms to the sky. But it is all the same; it is your wish, and it shall be done."

"Go," said the king; "but have you men enough?"

"Do you suppose I am going to take a whole host to help me? Arrest M. Fouquet! why, that is so easy that a very child might do it! It is like drinking a glass of wormwood; one makes an ugly face, and that is all."

"If he defends himself?"

"He! it is not at all likely. Defend himself when such extreme harshness as you are going to practice makes the man a very martyr! Nay, I am sure that if he has a million of francs left, which I very much doubt, he would be willing enough to give it in order to have such a termination as this. But what does that matter? it shall be done at once."

"Stay," said the king; "do not make his arrest a public affair."

"That will be more difficult."

"Why so?"

"Because nothing is easier than to go up to M. Fouquet in the midst of a thousand enthusiastic guests who surround him, and say, 'In the king's name, I arrest you.' But to go up to him, to turn him first one way and then another, to drive him up into one of the corners of the chess-board, in such a way that he cannot escape; to take him away from his guests, and keep him a prisoner for you, without one of them, alas! having heard anything about it; that, indeed, is a genuine difficulty, the greatest of all, in truth; and I hardly see how it is to be done."

"You had better say it is impossible, and you will have finished much sooner. Heaven help me, but I seem to be surrounded by people who prevent me doing what I wish."

"I do not prevent your doing anything. Have you indeed decided?"

"Take care of M. Fouquet, until I shall have made up my mind by to-morrow morning."

"That shall be done, sire."

"And return, when I rise in the morning, for further orders; and now leave me to myself."

"You do not even want M. Colbert, then?" said the musketeer, firing his last shot as he was leaving the room. The king started. With his whole mind fixed on the thought of revenge, he had forgotten the cause and substance of the offense.

"No, no one," he said; "no one here! Leave me."

D'Artagnan quitted the room. The king closed the door with his own hands, and began to walk up and down his apartment at a furious pace, like a wounded bull in an arena, trailing from his horn the coloured streamers and the iron darts. At last he began to take comfort in the expression of his violent feelings.

"Miserable wretch that he is! not only does he squander my finances, but with his ill-gotten plunder he corrupts secretaries, friends, generals, artists, and all, and tries to rob me of the one to whom I am most attached. This is the reason that perfidious girl so boldly took his part! Gratitude! and who can tell whether it was not a stronger feeling—love itself?" He gave himself up for a moment to the bitterest reflections. "A satyr!" he thought, with that abhorrent hate with which young men regard those more advanced in life, who still think of love. "A man who has never found opposition or resistance in any one, who lavishes his gold and jewels in every direction, and who retains his staff of painters in order to take the portraits of his mistresses in the costume of goddesses." The king trembled with passion as he continued, "He pollutes and profanes everything that belongs to me! He destroys everything that is mine. He will be my death at last, I know. That man is too much for me; he is my mortal enemy, but he shall forthwith fall! I hate him—I hate him—I hate him!" and as he pronounced these words, he struck the arm of the chair in which he was sitting violently, over and over again, and then rose like one in an epileptic fit. "To-morrow! to-morrow! oh, happy day!" he murmured, "when the sun rises, no other rival shall that brilliant king of space possess but me. That man shall fall so low that when people look at the abject ruin my anger shall have wrought, they will be forced to confess at last and at least that I am indeed greater than he." The king, who was incapable of mastering his emotions any longer, knocked over with a blow of his fist a small table placed close to his bedside, and in the very bitterness of anger, almost weeping, and half-suffocated, he threw himself on his bed, dressed as he was, and bit the sheets in his extremity of passion, trying to find repose of body at least there. The bed creaked beneath his weight, and with the exception of a few broken sounds, emerging, or, one might say, exploding, from his overburdened chest, absolute silence soon reigned in the chamber of Morpheus.

#### XVII. High Treason.

The ungovernable fury which took possession of the king at the sight and at the perusal of Fouquet's letter to La Vallière by degrees subsided into a feeling of pain and extreme weariness. Youth, invigorated by health and lightness of spirits, requiring soon that what it loses should be immediately restored—youth knows not those endless, sleepless nights which enable us to realize the fable of the vulture unceasingly feeding on Prometheus. In cases where the man of middle life, in his acquired strength of will and purpose, and the old, in their state of natural exhaustion, find incessant augmentation of their bitter sorrow, a young man, surprised by the sudden appearance of misfortune, weakens himself in sighs, and groans, and tears, directly struggling with his grief, and is thereby far sooner overthrown by the inflexible enemy with whom he is engaged. Once overthrown, his struggles cease. Louis could not hold out more than a few minutes, at the end of which he had ceased to clench his hands, and scorch in fancy with his looks the invisible objects of his hatred; he soon ceased to attack with his violent imprecations not M. Fouquet alone, but even La Vallière herself; from fury he subsided into despair, and from despair into prostration. After he had thrown himself for a few minutes to and fro convulsively on his bed, his nerveless arms fell quietly down; his head lay languidly on his pillow; his limbs, exhausted with excessive emotion, still trembled occasionally, agitated by muscular contractions; while from his breast faint and infrequent sighs still issued. Morpheus, the tutelary deity of the apartment, towards whom Louis raised his eyes, wearied by his anger and reconciled by his tears, showered down upon him the sleep-inducing poppies with which his hands are ever filled; so presently the monarch closed his eyes and fell asleep. Then it seemed to him, as it often happens in that first sleep, so light and gentle, which raises the body above the couch, and the soul above the earth—it seemed to him, we say, as if the god Morpheus, painted on the ceiling, looked at him with eyes resembling human eyes; that something shone brightly, and moved to and fro in the dome above the sleeper; that the crowd of terrible dreams which thronged together in his brain, and which were interrupted for a moment, half revealed a human face, with a hand resting against the mouth, and in an attitude of deep and absorbed meditation. And strange enough, too, this man bore so wonderful a resemblance to the king himself, that Louis fancied he was looking at his own face reflected in a mirror; with the exception, however, that the face was saddened by a feeling of the profoundest pity. Then it seemed to him as if the dome gradually retired, escaping from his gaze, and that the figures and attributes painted by Lebrun became darker and darker as the distance became more and more remote. A gentle, easy movement, as regular as that by which a vessel plunges beneath the waves, had succeeded to the immovableness of the bed. Doubtless the king was dreaming, and in this dream the crown of gold, which fastened the curtains together, seemed to recede from his vision, just as the dome, to which it remained suspended, had done, so that the winged genius which, with both its hand, supported the crown, seemed, though vainly so, to call upon the king, who was fast disappearing from it. The bed still sunk. Louis, with his eyes open, could not resist the deception of this cruel hallucination. At last, as the light of the royal chamber faded away into darkness and gloom, something cold, gloomy, and inexplicable in its nature seemed to infect the air. No paintings, nor gold, nor velvet hangings, were visible any longer, nothing but walls of a dull gray colour, which the increasing gloom made darker every moment. And yet the bed still continued to descend, and after a minute, which seemed in its duration almost an age to the king, it reached a stratum of air, black and chill as death, and then it stopped. The king could no longer see the light in his room, except as from the bottom of a well we can see the light of day. "I am under the influence of some atrocious dream," he thought. "It is time to awaken from it. Come! let me wake."

Every one has experienced the sensation the above remark conveys; there is hardly a person who, in the midst of a nightmare whose influence is suffocating, has not said to himself, by the help of that light which still burns in the brain when every human light is extinguished, "It is nothing but a dream, after all." This was precisely what Louis XIV. said to himself; but when he said, "Come, come! wake up," he perceived that not only was he already awake, but still more, that he had his eyes open also. And then he looked all round him. On his right hand and on his left two armed men stood in stolid silence, each wrapped in a huge cloak, and the face covered with a mask; one of them held a small lamp in his hand, whose glimmering light revealed the saddest picture a king could look upon. Louis could not help saying to himself that his dream still lasted, and that all he had to do to cause it to disappear was to move his arms or to say something aloud; he darted from his bed, and found himself upon the damp, moist ground. Then, addressing himself to the man who held the lamp in his hand, he said:

"What is this, monsieur, and what is the meaning of this jest?"

"It is no jest," replied in a deep voice the masked figure that held the lantern.

"Do you belong to M. Fouquet?" inquired the king, greatly astonished at his situation.

"It matters very little to whom we belong," said the phantom; "we are your masters now, that is sufficient."

The king, more impatient than intimidated, turned to the other masked figure. "If this is a comedy," he said, "you will tell M. Fouquet that I find it unseemly and improper, and that I command it should cease."

The second masked person to whom the king had addressed himself was a man of huge stature and vast circumference. He held himself erect and motionless as any block of marble. "Well!" added the king, stamping his foot, "you do not answer!"

"We do not answer you, my good monsieur," said the giant, in a stentorian voice, "because there is nothing to say."

"At least, tell me what you want," exclaimed Louis, folding his arms with a passionate gesture.

"You will know by and by," replied the man who held the lamp.

"In the meantime tell me where I am."

"Look."

Louis looked all round him; but by the light of the lamp which the masked figure raised for the purpose, he could perceive nothing but the damp walls which glistened here and there with the slimy traces of the snail. "Oh—oh!—a dungeon," cried the king.



"No, a subterranean passage."

"Which leads—?"

"Will you be good enough to follow us?"

"I shall not stir from hence!" cried the king.

"If you are obstinate, my dear young friend," replied the taller of the two, "I will lift you up in my arms, and roll you up in your own cloak, and if you should happen to be stifled, why—so much the worse for you."

As he said this, he disengaged from beneath his cloak a hand of which Milo of Crotona would have envied him the possession, on the day when he had that unhappy idea of rending his last oak. The king dreaded violence, for he could well believe that the two men into whose power he had fallen had not gone so far with any idea of drawing back, and that they would consequently be ready to proceed to extremities, if necessary. He shook his head and said: "It seems I have fallen into the hands of a couple of assassins. Move on, then."

Neither of the men answered a word to this remark. The one who carried the lantern walked first, the king followed him, while the second masked figure closed the procession. In this manner they passed along a winding gallery of some length, with as many staircases leading out of it as are to be found in the mysterious and gloomy palaces of Ann Radcliffe's creation. All these windings and turnings, during which the king heard the sound of running water *over his head*, ended at last in a long corridor closed by an iron door. The figure with the lamp opened the door with one of the keys he wore suspended at his girdle, where, during the whole of the brief journey, the king had heard them rattle. As soon as the door was opened and admitted the air, Louis recognized the balmy odors that trees exhale in hot summer nights. He paused, hesitatingly, for a moment or two; but the huge sentinel who followed him thrust him out of the subterranean passage.

"Another blow," said the king, turning towards the one who had just had the audacity to touch his sovereign; "what do you intend to do with the king of France?"

"Try to forget that word," replied the man with the lamp, in a tone which as little admitted of a reply as one of the famous decrees of Minos.

"You deserve to be broken on the wheel for the words that you have just made use of," said the giant, as he extinguished the lamp his companion handed to him; "but the king is too kind-hearted."

Louis, at that threat, made so sudden a movement that it seemed as if he meditated flight; but the giant's hand was in a moment placed on his shoulder, and fixed him motionless where he stood. "But tell me, at least, where we are going," said the king.

"Come," replied the former of the two men, with a kind of respect in his manner, and leading his prisoner towards a carriage which seemed to be in waiting. The carriage was completely concealed amid the trees. Two horses, with their feet fettered, were fastened by a halter to the lower branches of a large oak.

"Get in," said the same man, opening the carriage-door and letting down the step. The king obeyed, seated himself at the back of the carriage, the padded door of which was shut and locked immediately upon him and his guide. As for the giant, he cut the fastenings by which the horses were bound, harnessed them himself, and mounted on the box of the carriage, which was unoccupied. The carriage set off immediately at a quick trot, turned into the road to Paris, and in the forest of Senart found a relay of horses fastened to the trees in the same manner the first horses had been, and without a postilion. The man on the box changed the horses, and continued to follow the road towards Paris with the same rapidity, so that they entered the city about three o'clock in the morning. They carriage proceeded along the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and, after having called out to the sentinel, "By the king's order," the driver conducted the horses into the circular inclosure of the Bastille, looking out upon the courtyard, called La Cour du Gouvernement. There the horses drew up, reeking with sweat, at the flight of steps, and a sergeant of the guard ran forward. "Go and wake the governor," said the coachman in a voice of thunder.

With the exception of this voice, which might have been heard at the entrance of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, everything remained as calm in the carriage as in the prison. Ten minutes afterwards, M. de Baisemeaux appeared in his dressing-gown on the threshold of the door. "What is the matter now?" he asked; "and whom have you brought me there?"

The man with the lantern opened the carriage-door, and said two or three words to the one who acted as driver, who immediately got down from his seat, took up a short musket which he kept under his feet, and placed its muzzle on his prisoner's chest.

"And fire at once if he speaks!" added aloud the man who alighted from the carriage.

"Very good," replied his companion, without another remark.

With this recommendation, the person who had accompanied the king in the carriage ascended the flight of steps, at the top of which the governor was awaiting him. "Monsieur d'Herblay!" said the latter.

"Hush!" said Aramis. "Let us go into your room."

"Good heavens! what brings you here at this hour?"

"A mistake, my dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," Aramis replied, quietly. "It appears that you were quite right the other day."

"What about?" inquired the governor.

"About the order of release, my dear friend."

"Tell me what you mean, monsieur—no, my lord," said the governor, almost suffocated by surprise and terror.

"It is a very simple affair: you remember, dear M. de Baisemeaux, that an order of release was sent to you."

"Yes, for Marchiali."

"Very good! we both thought that it was for Marchiali?"

"Certainly; you will recollect, however, that I would not credit it, but that you compelled me to believe it."

"Oh! Baisemeaux, my good fellow, what a word to make use of!—strongly recommended, that was all."

"Strongly recommended, yes; strongly recommended to give him up to you; and that you carried him off with you in your carriage."

"Well, my dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, it was a mistake; it was discovered at the ministry, so that I now bring you an order from the king to set at liberty Seldon,—that poor Seldon fellow, you know."

"Seldon! are you sure this time?"

"Well, read it yourself," added Aramis, handing him the order.

"Why," said Baisemeaux, "this order is the very same that has already passed through my hands."

"Indeed?"

"It is the very one I assured you I saw the other evening. *Parbleu!* I recognize it by the blot of ink."

"I do not know whether it is that; but all I know is, that I bring it for you."

"But then, what about the other?"

"What other?"

"Marchiali."

"I have got him here with me."

"But that is not enough for me. I require a new order to take him back again."

"Don't talk such nonsense, my dear Baisemeaux; you talk like a child! Where is the order you received respecting Marchiali?"

Baisemeaux ran to his iron chest and took it out. Aramis seized hold of it, coolly tore it in four pieces, held them to the lamp, and burnt them. "Good heavens! what are you doing?" exclaimed Baisemeaux, in an extremity of terror.

"Look at your position quietly, my good governor," said Aramis, with imperturbable self-possession, "and you will see how very simple the whole affair is. You no longer possess any order justifying Marchiali's release."

"I am a lost man!"

"Far from it, my good fellow, since I have brought Marchiali back to you, and all accordingly is just the same as if he had never left."

"Ah!" said the governor, completely overcome by terror.

"Plain enough, you see; and you will go and shut him up immediately."

"I should think so, indeed."

"And you will hand over this Seldon to me, whose liberation is authorized by this order. Do you understand?"

"I—"

"You do understand, I see," said Aramis. "Very good." Baisemeaux clapped his hands together.

"But why, at all events, after having taken Marchiali away from me, do you bring him back again?" cried the unhappy governor, in a paroxysm of terror, and completely dumbfounded.

"For a friend such as you are," said Aramis—"for so devoted a servant, I have no secrets;" and he put his mouth close to Baisemeaux's ear, as he said, in a low tone of voice, "you know the resemblance between that unfortunate fellow, and—"

"And the king?—yes!"

"Very good; the first use that Marchiali made of his liberty was to persist—Can you guess what?"

"How is it likely I should guess?"

"To persist in saying that he was king of France; to dress himself up in clothes like those of the king; and then pretend to assume that he was the king himself."

"Gracious heavens!"

"That is the reason why I have brought him back again, my dear friend. He is mad and lets every one see how mad he is."

"What is to be done, then?"

"That is very simple; let no one hold any communication with him. You understand that when his peculiar style of madness came to the king's ears, the king, who had pitied his terrible affliction, and saw that all his kindness had been repaid by black ingratitude, became perfectly furious; so that, now—and remember this very distinctly, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, for it concerns you most closely—so that there is now, I repeat, sentence of death pronounced against all those who may allow him to communicate with any one else but me or the king himself. You understand, Baisemeaux, sentence of death!"

"You need not ask me whether I understand."

"And now, let us go down, and conduct this poor devil back to his dungeon again, unless you prefer he should come up here."

"What would be the good of that?"

"It would be better, perhaps, to enter his name in the prison-book at once!"

"Of course, certainly; not a doubt of it."

"In that case, have him up."

Baisemeaux ordered the drums to be beaten and the bell to be rung, as a warning to every one to retire, in order to avoid meeting a prisoner, about whom it was desired to observe a certain mystery. Then, when the passages were free, he went to take the prisoner from the carriage, at whose breast Porthos, faithful to the directions which had been given him, still kept his musket leveled. "Ah! is that you, miserable wretch?" cried the governor, as soon as he perceived the king. "Very good, very good." And immediately, making the king get out of the carriage, he led him, still accompanied by Porthos, who had not taken off his mask, and Aramis, who again resumed his, up the stairs, to the second Bertaudiere, and opened the door of the room in which Philippe for six long years had bemoaned his existence. The king entered the cell without pronouncing a single word: he faltered in as limp and haggard as a rain-struck lily. Baisemeaux shut the door upon him, turned the key twice in the lock, and then returned to Aramis. "It is quite true," he said, in a low tone, "that he bears a striking resemblance to the king; but less so than you said."

"So that," said Aramis, "you would not have been deceived by the substitution of the one for the other?"

"What a question!"

"You are a most valuable fellow, Baisemeaux," said Aramis; "and now, set Seldon free."

"Oh, yes. I was going to forget that. I will go and give orders at once."

"Bah! to-morrow will be time enough."

"To-morrow!—oh, no. This very minute."  
"Well; go off to your affairs, I will go away to mine. But it is quite understood, is it not?"  
"What 'is quite understood?"  
"That no one is to enter the prisoner's cell, expect with an order from the king; an order which I will myself bring."  
"Quite so. Adieu, my lord."

Aramis returned to his companion. "Now, Porthos, my good fellow, back again to Vaux, and as fast as possible."  
"A man is light and easy enough, when he has faithfully served his king; and, in serving him, saved his country," said Porthos. "The horses will be as light as if our tissues were constructed of the wind of heaven. So let us be off." And the carriage, lightened of a prisoner, who might well be—as he in fact was—very heavy in the sight of Aramis, passed across the drawbridge of the Bastille, which was raised again immediately behind it.

XVIII. A Night at the Bastille.

Pain, anguish, and suffering in human life are always in proportion to the strength with which a man is endowed. We will not pretend to say that Heaven always apportions to a man's capability of endurance the anguish with which he afflicts him; for that, indeed, would not be true, since Heaven permits the existence of death, which is, sometimes, the only refuge open to those who are too closely pressed—too bitterly afflicted, as far as the body is concerned. Suffering is in proportion to the strength which has been accorded; in other words, the weak suffer more, where the trial is the same, than the strong. And what are the elementary principles, we may ask, that compose human strength? Is it not—more than anything else—exercise, habit, experience? We shall not even take the trouble to demonstrate this, for it is an axiom in morals, as in physics. When the young king, stupefied and crushed in every sense and feeling, found himself led to a cell in the Bastille, he fancied death itself is but a sleep; that it, too, has its dreams as well; that the bed had broken through the flooring of his room at Vaux; that death had resulted from the occurrence; and that, still carrying out his dream, the king, Louis XIV., now no longer living, was dreaming one of those horrors, impossible to realize in life, which is termed dethronement, imprisonment, and insult towards a sovereign who formerly wielded unlimited power. To be present at—an actual witness, too—of this bitterness of death; to float, indecisively, in an incomprehensible mystery, between resemblance and reality; to hear everything, to see everything, without interfering in a single detail of agonizing suffering, was—so the king thought within himself—a torture far more terrible, since it might last forever. "Is this what is termed eternity—hell?" he murmured, at the moment the door was closed upon him, which we remember Baisemeaux had shut with his own hands. He did not even look round him; and in the room, leaning with his back against the wall, he allowed himself to be carried away by the terrible supposition that he was already dead, as he closed his eyes, in order to avoid looking upon something even worse still. "How can I have died?" he said to himself, sick with terror. "The bed might have been let down by some artificial means? But no! I do not remember to have felt a bruise, nor any shock either. Would they not rather have poisoned me at my meals, or with the fumes of wax, as they did my ancestress, Jeanne d'Albret?" Suddenly, the chill of the dungeons seemed to fall like a wet cloak upon Louis's shoulders. "I have seen," he said, "my father lying dead upon his funeral couch, in his regal robes. That pale face, so calm and worn; those hands, once so skillful, lying nerveless by his side; those limbs stiffened by the icy grasp of death; nothing there betokened a sleep that was disturbed by dreams. And yet, how numerous were the dreams which Heaven might have sent that royal corpse—him whom so many others had preceded, hurried away by him into eternal death! No, that king was still the king: he was enthroned still upon that funeral couch, as upon a velvet armchair; he had not abdicated one title of his majesty. God, who had not punished him, cannot, will not punish me, who have done nothing." A strange sound attracted the young man's attention. He looked round him, and saw on the mantel-shelf, just below an enormous crucifix, coarsely painted in fresco on the wall, a rat of enormous size engaged in nibbling a piece of dry bread, but fixing all the time, an intelligent and inquiring look upon the new occupant of the cell. The king could not resist a sudden impulse of fear and disgust: he moved back towards the door, uttering a loud cry; and as if he but needed this cry, which escaped from his breast almost unconsciously, to recognize himself, Louis knew that he was alive and in full possession of his natural senses. "A prisoner!" he cried. "I—, a prisoner!" He looked round him for a bell to summon some one to him. "There are no bells in the Bastille," he said, "and it is in the Bastille I am imprisoned. In what way can I have been made a prisoner? It must have been owing to a conspiracy of M. Fouquet. I have been drawn to Vaux, as to a snare. M. Fouquet cannot be acting alone in this affair. His agent—That voice that I but just now heard was M. d'Herblay's; I recognized it. Colbert was right, then. But what is Fouquet's object? To reign in my place and stead?—Impossible. Yet who knows!" thought the king, relapsing into gloom again. "Perhaps my brother, the Duc d'Orleans, is doing that which my uncle wished to do during the whole of his life against my father. But the queen?—My mother, too? And La Vallière? Oh! La Vallière, she will have been abandoned to Madame. Dear, dear girl! Yes, it is—it must be so. They have shut her up as they have me. We are separated forever!" And at this idea of separation the poor lover burst into a flood of tears and sobs and groans.

"There is a governor in this place," the king continued, in a fury of passion; "I will speak to him, I will summon him to me."  
He called—no voice replied to his. He seized hold of his chair, and hurled it against the massive oaken door. The wood resounded against the door, and awakened many a mournful echo in the profound depths of the staircase; but from a human creature, none.  
This was a fresh proof for the king of the slight regard in which he was held at the Bastille. Therefore, when his first fit of anger had passed away, having remarked a barred window through which there passed a stream of light, lozenge-shaped, which must be, he knew, the bright orb of approaching day, Louis began to call out, at first gently enough, then louder and louder still; but no one replied. Twenty other attempts which he made, one after another, obtained no other or better success. His blood began to boil within him, and mount to his head. His nature was such, that, accustomed to command, he trembled at the idea of disobedience. The prisoner broke the chair, which was too heavy for him to lift, and made use of it as a battering ram to strike against the door. He struck so loudly, and so repeatedly, that the perspiration soon began to pour down his face. The sound became tremendous and continuous; certain stifled, smothered cries replied in different directions. This sound produced a strange effect upon the king. He paused to listen; it was the voice of the prisoners, formerly his victims, now his companions. The voices ascended like vapors through the thick ceilings and the massive walls, and rose in accusations against the author of this noise, as doubtless their sighs and tears accused, in whispered tones, the author of their captivity. After having deprived so many people of their liberty, the king came among them to rob them of their rest. This idea almost drove him mad; it redoubled his strength, or rather his will, bent upon obtaining some information, or a conclusion to the affair. With a portion of the broken chair he recommenced the noise. At the end of an hour, Louis heard something in the corridor, behind the door of his cell, and a violent blow, which was returned upon the door itself, made him cease his own.

"Are you mad?" said a rude, brutal voice. "What is the matter with you this morning?"  
"This morning!" thought the king; but he said aloud, politely, "Monsieur, are you the governor of the Bastille?"  
"My good fellow, your head is out of sorts," replied the voice; "but that is no reason why you should make such a terrible disturbance. Be quiet; *mordieux!*"  
"Are you the governor?" the king inquired again.

He heard a door on the corridor close; the jailer had just left, not condescending to reply a single word. When the king had assured himself of his departure, his fury knew no longer any bounds. As agile as a tiger, he leaped from the table to the window, and struck the iron bars with all his might. He broke a pane of glass, the pieces of which fell clanking into the courtyard below. He shouted with increasing hoarseness, "The governor, the governor!" This excess lasted fully an hour, during which time he was in a burning fever. With his hair in disorder and matted on his forehead, his dress torn and covered with dust and plaster, his linen in shreds, the king never rested until his strength was utterly exhausted, and it was not until then that he clearly understood the pitiless thickness of the walls, the impenetrable nature of the cement, invincible to every influence but that of time, and that he possessed no other weapon but despair. He leaned his forehead against the door, and let the feverish throbbings of his heart calm by degrees; it had seemed as if one single additional pulsation would have made it burst.

"A moment will come when the food which is given to the prisoners will be brought to me. I shall then see some one, I shall speak to him, and get an answer."  
And the king tried to remember at what hour the first repast of the prisoners was served at the Bastille; he was ignorant even of this detail. The feeling of remorse at this remembrance smote him like the thrust of a dagger, that he should have lived for five and twenty years a king, and in the enjoyment of every happiness, without having bestowed a moment's thought on the misery of those who had been unjustly deprived of their liberty. The king blushed for very shame. He felt that Heaven, in permitting this fearful humiliation, did no more than render to the man the same torture as had been inflicted by that man upon so many others. Nothing could be more efficacious for reawakening his mind to religious influences than the prostration of his heart and mind and soul beneath the feeling of such acute wretchedness. But Louis dared not even kneel in prayer to God to entreat him to terminate his bitter trial.

"Heaven is right," he said; "Heaven acts wisely. It would be cowardly to pray to Heaven for that which I have so often refused my own fellow-creatures."  
He had reached this stage of his reflections, that is, of his agony of mind, when a similar noise was again heard behind his door, followed this time by the sound of the key in the lock, and of the bolts being withdrawn from their staples. The king bounded forward to be nearer to the person who was about to enter, but, suddenly reflecting that it was a movement unworthy of a sovereign, he paused, assumed a noble and calm expression, which for him was easy enough, and waited with his back turned towards the window, in order, to some extent, to conceal his agitation from the eyes of the person who was about to enter. It was only a jailer with a basket of provisions. The king looked at the man with restless anxiety, and waited until he spoke.

"Ah!" said the latter, "you have broken your chair. I said you had done so! Why, you have gone quite mad."  
"Monsieur," said the king, "be careful what you say; it will be a very serious affair for you."  
The jailer placed the basket on the table, and looked at his prisoner steadily. "What do you say?" he said.

"Desire the governor to come to me," added the king, in accents full of calm and dignity.  
"Come, my boy," said the turnkey, "you have always been very quiet and reasonable, but you are getting vicious, it seems, and I wish you to know it in time. You have broken your chair, and made a great disturbance; that is an offense punishable by imprisonment in one of the lower dungeons. Promise me not to begin over again, and I will not say a word about it to the governor."

"I wish to see the governor," replied the king, still governing his passions.  
"He will send you off to one of the dungeons, I tell you; so take care."

"I insist upon it, do you hear?"  
"Ah! ah! your eyes are becoming wild again. Very good! I shall take away your knife."

And the jailer did what he said, quitted the prisoner, and closed the door, leaving the king more astounded, more wretched, more isolated than ever. It was useless, though he tried it, to make the same noise again on his door, and equally useless that he threw the plates and dishes out of the window; not a single sound was heard in recognition. Two hours afterwards he could not be recognized as a king, a gentleman, a man, a human being; he might rather be called a madman, tearing the door with his nails, trying to tear up the flooring of his cell, and uttering such wild and fearful cries that the old Bastille seemed to tremble to its very foundations for having revolted against its master. As for the governor, the jailer did not even think of disturbing him; the turnkeys and the sentinels had reported the occurrence to him, but what was the good of it? Were not these madmen common enough in such a prison? and were not the walls still stronger? M. de Baisemeaux, thoroughly impressed with what Aramis had told him, and in perfect conformity with the king's order, hoped only that one thing might happen; namely, that the madman Marchiali might be mad enough to hang himself to the canopy of his bed, or to one of the bars of the window. In fact, the prisoner was anything but a profitable investment for M. Baisemeaux, and became more annoying than agreeable to him. These complications of Seldon and Marchiali—the complications first of setting at liberty and then imprisoning again, the complications arising from the strong likeness in question—had at last found a very proper *denouement*. Baisemeaux even thought he had remarked that D'Herblay himself was not altogether dissatisfied with the result.

"And then, really," said Baisemeaux to his next in command, "an ordinary prisoner is already unhappy enough in being a prisoner; he suffers quite enough, indeed, to induce one to hope, charitably enough, that his death may not be far distant. With still greater reason, accordingly, when the prisoner has gone mad, and might bite and make a terrible disturbance in the Bastille; why, in such a case, it is not simply an act of mere charity to wish him dead; it would be almost a good and even commendable action, quietly to have him put out of his misery."  
And the good-natured governor thereupon sat down to his late breakfast.

XIX. The Shadow of M. Fouquet.

D'Artagnan, still confused and oppressed by the conversation he had just had with the king, could not resist asking himself if he were really in possession of his senses, if he were really and truly at Vaux; if he, D'Artagnan, were really the captain of the musketeers, and M. Fouquet the owner of the chateau in which Louis XIV. was at that moment partaking of his hospitality. These reflections were not those of a drunken man, although everything was in prodigal profusion at Vaux, and the surintendant's wines had met with a distinguished reception at the *fete*. The Gascon, however, was a man of calm self-possession; and no sooner did he touch his bright steel blade, than he knew how to adopt morally the cold, keen weapon as his guide of action.

"Well," he said, as he quitted the royal apartment, "I seem now to be mixed up historically with the destinies of the king and of the minister; it will be written, that M. d'Artagnan, a younger son of a Gascon family, placed his hand on the shoulder of M. Nicolas Fouquet, the surintendant of the finances of France. My descendants, if I have any, will flatter themselves with the distinction which this arrest will confer, just as the members of the De Luynes family have done with regard to the estates of the poor Marechal d'Ancre. But the thing is, how best to execute the king's directions in a proper manner. Any man would know how to say to M. Fouquet, 'Your sword, monsieur.' But it is not every one who would be able to take care of M. Fouquet without others knowing anything about it. How am I to manage, then, so that M. le surintendant pass from the height of favour to the direst disgrace; that Vaux be turned into a dungeon for him; that after having been steeped to his lips, as it were, in all the perfumes and incense of Ahasuerus, he is transferred to the gallows of Haman; in other words, of Enguerrand de Marigny?" And at this reflection, D'Artagnan's brow became clouded with

perplexity. The musketeer had certain scruples on the matter, it must be admitted. To deliver up to death (for not a doubt existed that Louis hated Fouquet mortally) the man who had just shown himself so delightful and charming a host in every way, was a real insult to one's conscience. "It almost seems," said D'Artagnan to himself, "that if I am not a poor, mean, miserable fellow, I should let M. Fouquet know the opinion the king has about him. Yet, if I betray my master's secret, I shall be a false-hearted, treacherous knave, a traitor, too, a crime provided for and punishable by military laws—so much so, indeed, that twenty times, in former days when wars were rife, I have seen many a miserable fellow strung up to a tree for doing, in but a small degree, what my scruples counsel me to undertake upon a great scale now. No, I think that a man of true readiness of wit ought to get out of this difficulty with more skill than that. And now, let us admit that I do possess a little readiness of invention; it is not at all certain, though, for, after having for forty years absorbed so large a quantity, I shall be lucky if there were to be a pistole's-worth left." D'Artagnan buried his head in his hands, tore at his mustache in sheer vexation, and added, "What can be the reason of M. Fouquet's disgrace? There seem to be three good ones: the first, because M. Colbert doesn't like him; the second, because he wished to fall in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and lastly, because the king likes M. Colbert and loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Oh! he is lost! But shall I put my foot on his neck, I, of all men, when he is falling a prey to the intrigues of a pack of women and clerks? For shame! If he be dangerous, I will lay him low enough; if, however, he be only persecuted, I will look on. I have come to such a decisive determination, that neither king nor living man shall change my mind. If Athos were here, he would do as I have done. Therefore, instead of going, in cold blood, up to M. Fouquet, and arresting him off-hand and shutting him up altogether, I will try and conduct myself like a man who understands what good manners are. People will talk about it, of course; but they shall talk well of it, I am determined." And D'Artagnan, drawing by a gesture peculiar to himself his shoulder-belt over his shoulder, went straight off to M. Fouquet, who, after he had taken leave of his guests, was preparing to retire for the night and to sleep tranquilly after the triumphs of the day. The air was still perfumed, or infected, whichever way it may be considered, with the odors of the torches and the fireworks. The wax-lights were dying away in their sockets, the flowers fell unfastened from the garlands, the groups of dancers and courtiers were separating in the salons. Surrounded by his friends, who complimented him and received his flattering remarks in return, the surintendant half-closed his wearied eyes. He longed for rest and quiet; he sank upon the bed of laurels which had been heaped up for him for so many days past; it might almost have been said that he seemed bowed beneath the weight of the new debts which he had incurred for the purpose of giving the greatest possible honour to this *fete*. Fouquet had just retired to his room, still smiling, but more than half-asleep. He could listen to nothing more, he could hardly keep his eyes open; his bed seemed to possess a fascinating and irresistible attraction for him. The god Morpheus, the presiding deity of the dome painted by Lebrun, had extended his influence over the adjoining rooms, and showered down his most sleep-inducing poppies upon the master of the house. Fouquet, almost entirely alone, was being assisted by his *valet de chambre* to undress, when M. d'Artagnan appeared at the entrance of the room. D'Artagnan had never been able to succeed in making himself common at the court; and notwithstanding he was seen everywhere and on all occasions, he never failed to produce an effect wherever and whenever he made his appearance. Such is the happy privilege of certain natures, which in that respect resemble either thunder or lightning; every one recognizes them; but their appearance never fails to arouse surprise and astonishment, and whenever they occur, the impression is always left that the last was the most conspicuous or most important.

"What! M. d'Artagnan?" said Fouquet, who had already taken his right arm out of the sleeve of his doublet.

"At your service," replied the musketeer.

"Come in, my dear M. d'Artagnan."

"Thank you."

"Have you come to criticise the *fete*? You are ingenious enough in your criticisms, I know."

"By no means."

"Are not your men looked after properly?"

"In every way."

"You are not comfortably lodged, perhaps?"

"Nothing could be better."

"In that case, I have to thank you for being so amiably disposed, and I must not fail to express my obligations to you for all your flattering kindness."

These words were as much as to say, "My dear D'Artagnan, pray go to bed, since you have a bed to lie down on, and let me do the same."

D'Artagnan did not seem to understand it.

"Are you going to bed already?" he said to the superintendent.

"Yes; have you anything to say to me?"

"Nothing, monsieur, nothing at all. You sleep in this room, then?"

"Yes; as you see."

"You have given a most charming *fete* to the king."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh! beautiful!"

"Is the king pleased?"

"Enchanted."

"Did he desire you to say as much to me?"

"He would not choose so unworthy a messenger, my lord."

"You do not do yourself justice, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Is that your bed, there?"

"Yes; but why do you ask? Are you not satisfied with your own?"

"My I speak frankly to you?"

"Most assuredly."

"Well, then, I am not."

Fouquet started; and then replied, "Will you take my room, Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"What! deprive you of it, my lord? never!"

"What am I to do, then?"

"Allow me to share yours with you."

Fouquet looked at the musketeer fixedly. "Ah! ah!" he said, "you have just left the king."

"I have, my lord."

"And the king wishes you to pass the night in my room?"

"My lord—"

"Very well, Monsieur d'Artagnan, very well. You are the master here."

"I assure you, my lord, that I do not wish to abuse—"

Fouquet turned to his valet, and said, "Leave us." When the man had left, he said to D'Artagnan, "You have something to say to me?"

"I?"

"A man of your superior intelligence cannot have come to talk with a man like myself, at such an hour as the present, without grave motives."

"Do not interrogate me."

"On the contrary. What do you want with me?"

"Nothing more than the pleasure of your society."

"Come into the garden, then," said the superintendent suddenly, "or into the park."

"No," replied the musketeer, hastily, "no."

"Why?"

"The fresh air—"

"Come, admit at once that you arrest me," said the superintendent to the captain.

"Never!" said the latter.

"You intend to look after me, then?"

"Yes, my lord, I do, upon my honour."

"Upon your honour—ah! that is quite another thing! So I am to be arrested in my own house."

"Do not say such a thing."

"On the contrary, I will proclaim it aloud."

"If you do so, I shall be compelled to request you to be silent."

"Very good! Violence towards me, and in my own house, too."

"We do not seem to understand one another at all. Stay a moment; there is a chess-board there; we will have a game, if you have no objections."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, I am in disgrace, then?"

"Not at all; but—"

"I am prohibited, I suppose, from withdrawing from your sight."

"I do not understand a word you are saying, my lord; and if you wish me to withdraw, tell me so."

"My dear Monsieur d'Artagnan, your mode of action is enough to drive me mad; I was almost sinking for want of sleep, but you have completely awakened me."

"I shall never forgive myself, I am sure; and if you wish to reconcile me with myself, why, go to sleep in your bed in my presence; and I shall be delighted."

"I am under surveillance, I see."

"I will leave the room if you say any such thing."

"You are beyond my comprehension."

"Good night, my lord," said D'Artagnan, as he pretended to withdraw.

Fouquet ran after him. "I will not lie down," he said. "Seriously, and since you refuse to treat me as a man, and since you finesse with me, I will try and set you at bay, as a hunter does a wild boar."

"Bah!" cried D'Artagnan, pretending to smile.

"I shall order my horses, and set off for Paris," said Fouquet, sounding the captain of the musketeers.

"If that be the case, my lord, it is very difficult."

"You will arrest me, then?"

"No, but I shall go along with you."

"That is quite sufficient, Monsieur d'Artagnan," returned Fouquet, coldly. "It was not for nothing you acquired your reputation as a man of intelligence and resource; but with me all this is quite superfluous.

Let us come to the point. Do me a service. Why do you arrest me? What have I done?"

"Oh! I know nothing about what you may have done; but I do not arrest you—this evening, at least!"

"This evening!" said Fouquet, turning pale, "but to-morrow?"

"It is not to-morrow just yet, my lord. Who can ever answer for the morrow?"

"Quick, quick, captain! let me speak to M. d'Herblay."

“Alas! that is quite impossible, my lord. I have strict orders to see that you hold no communication with any one.”

“With M. d’Herblay, captain—with your friend!”

“My lord, is M. d’Herblay the only person with whom you ought to be prevented holding any communication?”

Fouquet coloured, and then assuming an air of resignation, he said: “You are right, monsieur; you have taught me a lesson I ought not to have evoked. A fallen man cannot assert his right to anything, even from those whose fortunes he may have made; for a still stronger reason, he cannot claim anything from those to whom he may never have had the happiness of doing a service.”

“My lord!”

“It is perfectly true, Monsieur d’Artagnan; you have always acted in the most admirable manner towards me—in such a manner, indeed, as most becomes the man who is destined to arrest me. You, at least, have never asked me anything.”

“Monsieur,” replied the Gascon, touched by his eloquent and noble tone of grief, “will you—I ask it as a favour—pledge me your word as a man of honour that you will not leave this room?”

“What is the use of it, dear Monsieur d’Artagnan, since you keep watch and ward over me? Do you suppose I should contend against the most valiant sword in the kingdom?”

“It is not that, at all, my lord; but that I am going to look for M. d’Herblay, and, consequently, to leave you alone.”

Fouquet uttered a cry of delight and surprise.

“To look for M. d’Herblay! to leave me alone!” he exclaimed, clasping his hands together.

“Which is M. d’Herblay’s room? The blue room is it not?”

“Yes, my friend, yes.”

“Your friend! thank you for that word, my lord; you confer it upon me to-day, at least, if you have never done so before.”

“Ah! you have saved me.”

“It will take a good ten minutes to go from hence to the blue room, and to return?” said D’Artagnan.

“Nearly so.”

“And then to wake Aramis, who sleeps very soundly, when he is asleep, I put that down at another five minutes; making a total of fifteen minutes’ absence. And now, my lord, give me your word that you will not in any way attempt to make your escape, and that when I return I shall find you here again.”

“I give it, monsieur,” replied Fouquet, with an expression of the warmest and deepest gratitude.

D’Artagnan disappeared. Fouquet looked at him as he quitted the room, waited with a feverish impatience until the door was closed behind him, and as soon as it was shut, flew to his keys, opened two or three secret doors concealed in various articles of furniture in the room, looked vainly for certain papers, which doubtless he had left at Saint-Mande, and which he seemed to regret not having found in them; then hurriedly seizing hold of letters, contracts, papers, writings, he heaped them up into a pile, which he burnt in the extremest haste upon the marble hearth of the fireplace, not even taking time to draw from the interior of it the vases and pots of flowers with which it was filled. As soon as he had finished, like a man who has just escaped an imminent danger, and whose strength abandons him as soon as the danger is past, he sank down, completely overcome, on a couch. When D’Artagnan returned, he found Fouquet in the same position; the worthy musketeer had not the slightest doubt that Fouquet, having given his word, would not even think of failing to keep it, but he had thought it most likely that Fouquet would turn his (D’Artagnan’s) absence to the best advantage in getting rid of all the papers, memorandums, and contracts, which might possibly render his position, which was even now serious enough, more dangerous than ever. And so, lifting up his head like a dog who has regained the scent, he perceived an odor resembling smoke he had relied on finding in the atmosphere, and having found it, made a movement of his head in token of satisfaction. As D’Artagnan entered, Fouquet, on his side, raised his head, and not one of D’Artagnan’s movements escaped him. And then the looks of the two men met, and they both saw that they had understood each other without exchanging a syllable.

“Well!” asked Fouquet, the first to speak, “and M. d’Herblay?”

“Upon my word, my lord,” replied D’Artagnan, “M. d’Herblay must be desperately fond of walking out at night, and composing verses by moonlight in the park of Vaux, with some of your poets, in all probability, for he is not in his own room.”

“What! not in his own room?” cried Fouquet, whose last hope thus escaped him; for unless he could ascertain in what way the bishop of Vannes could assist him, he perfectly well knew that he could expect assistance from no other quarter.

“Or, indeed,” continued D’Artagnan, “if he is in his own room, he has very good reasons for not answering.”

“But surely you did not call him in such a manner that he could have heard you?”

“You can hardly suppose, my lord, that having already exceeded my orders, which forbade me leaving you a single moment—you can hardly suppose, I say, that I should have been mad enough to rouse the whole house and allow myself to be seen in the corridor of the bishop of Vannes, in order that M. Colbert might state with positive certainty that I gave you time to burn your papers.”

“My papers?”

“Of course; at least that is what I should have done in your place. When any one opens a door for me I always avail myself of it.”

“Yes, yes, and I thank you, for I have availed myself of it.”

“And you have done perfectly right. Every man has his own peculiar secrets with which others have nothing to do. But let us return to Aramis, my lord.”

“Well, then, I tell you, you could not have called loud enough, or Aramis would have heard you.”

“However softly any one may call Aramis, my lord, Aramis always hears when he has an interest in hearing. I repeat what I said before—Aramis was not in his own room, or Aramis had certain reasons for not recognizing my voice, of which I am ignorant, and of which you may be even ignorant yourself, notwithstanding your liege-man is His Greatness the Lord Bishop of Vannes.”

Fouquet drew a deep sigh, rose from his seat, took three or four turns in his room, and finished by seating himself, with an expression of extreme dejection, upon his magnificent bed with velvet hangings, and costliest lace. D’Artagnan looked at Fouquet with feelings of the deepest and sincerest pity.

“I have seen a good many men arrested in my life,” said the musketeer, sadly; “I have seen both M. de Cinq-Mars and M. de Chalais arrested, though I was very young then. I have seen M. de Conde arrested with the princes; I have seen M. de Retz arrested; I have seen M. Broussel arrested. Stay a moment, my lord, it is disagreeable to have to say, but the very one of all those whom you most resemble at this moment was that poor fellow Broussel. You were very near doing as he did, putting your dinner napkin in your portfolio, and wiping your mouth with your papers. *Mordieux!* My lord Fouquet, a man like you ought not to be dejected in this manner. Suppose your friends saw you?”

“Monsieur d’Artagnan,” returned the surintendant, with a smile full of gentleness, “you do not understand me; it is precisely because my friends are not looking on, that I am as you see me now. I do not live, exist even, isolated from others; I am nothing when left to myself. Understand that throughout my whole life I have passed every moment of my time in making friends, whom I hoped to render my stay and support. In times of prosperity, all these cheerful, happy voices—rendered so through and by my means—formed in my honour a concert of praise and kindly actions. In the least disfavour, these humbler voices accompanied in harmonious accents the murmur of my own heart. Isolation I have never yet known. Poverty (a phantom I have sometimes beheld, clad in rags, awaiting me at the end of my journey through life)—poverty has been the specter with which many of my own friends have trifled for years past, which they poetize and caress, and which has attracted me towards them. Poverty! I accept it, acknowledge it, receive it, as a disinherited sister; for poverty is neither solitude, nor exile, nor imprisonment. Is it likely I shall ever be poor, with such friends as Pelisson, as La Fontaine, as Moliere? with such a mistress as—Oh! if you knew how utterly lonely and desolate I feel at this moment, and how you, who separate me from all I love, seem to resemble the image of solitude, of annihilation—death itself.”

“But I have already told you, Monsieur Fouquet,” replied D’Artagnan, moved to the depths of his soul, “that you are woefully exaggerating. The king likes you.”

“No, no,” said Fouquet, shaking his head.

“M. Colbert hates you.”

“M. Colbert! What does that matter to me?”

“He will ruin you.”

“Ah! I defy him to do that, for I am ruined already.”

At this singular confession of the superintendent, D’Artagnan cast his glance all round the room; and although he did not open his lips, Fouquet understood him so thoroughly, that he added: “What can be done with such wealth of substance as surrounds us, when a man can no longer cultivate his taste for the magnificent? Do you know what good the greater part of the wealth and the possessions which we rich enjoy, confer upon us? merely to disgust us, by their very splendor even, with everything which does not equal it! Vaux! you will say, and the wonders of Vaux! What of it? What boot these wonders? If I am ruined, how shall I fill with water the urns which my Naiads bear in their arms, or force the air into the lungs of my Tritons? To be rich enough, Monsieur d’Artagnan, a man must be too rich.”

D’Artagnan shook his head.

“Oh! I know very well what you think,” replied Fouquet, quickly. “If Vaux were yours, you would sell it, and would purchase an estate in the country; an estate which should have woods, orchards, and land attached, so that the estate should be made to support its master. With forty millions you might—”

“Ten millions,” interrupted D’Artagnan.

“Not a million, my dear captain. No one in France is rich enough to give two millions for Vaux, and to continue to maintain it as I have done; no one could do it, no one would know how.”

“Well,” said D’Artagnan, “in any case, a million is not abject misery.”

“It is not far from it, my dear monsieur. But you do not understand me. No; I will not sell my residence at Vaux; I will give it to you, if you like,” and Fouquet accompanied these words with a movement of the shoulders to which it would be impossible to do justice.

“Give it to the king; you will make a better bargain.”

“The king does not require me to give it to him,” said Fouquet; “he will take it away from me with the most absolute ease and grace, if it pleases him to do so; and that is the very reason I should prefer to see it perish. Do you know, Monsieur d’Artagnan, that if the king did not happen to be under my roof, I would take this candle, go straight to the dome, and set fire to a couple of huge chests of fusees and fireworks which are in reserve there, and would reduce my palace to ashes.”

“Bah!” said the musketeer, negligently. “At all events, you would not be able to burn the gardens, and that is the finest feature of the place.”

“And yet,” resumed Fouquet, thoughtfully, “what was I saying? Great heavens! burn Vaux! destroy my palace! But Vaux is not mine; these wonderful creations are, it is true, the property, as far as sense of enjoyment goes, of the man who has paid for them; but as far as duration is concerned, they belong to those who created them. Vaux belongs to Lebrun, to Lenotre, to Pelisson, to Levau, to La Fontaine, to Moliere; Vaux belongs to posterity, in fact. You see, Monsieur d’Artagnan, that my very house has ceased to be my own.”

“That is all well and good,” said D’Artagnan; “the idea is agreeable enough, and I recognize M. Fouquet himself in it. That idea, indeed, makes me forget that poor fellow Broussel altogether; and I now fail to recognize in you the whining complaints of that old Frondeur. If you are ruined, monsieur, look at the affair manfully, for you too, *mordieux!* belong to posterity, and have no right to lessen yourself in any way. Stay a moment; look at me, I who seem to exercise in some degree a kind of superiority over you, because I am arresting you; fate, which distributes their different parts to the comedians of this world, accorded me a less agreeable and less advantageous part to fill than yours has been. I am one of those who think that the parts which kings and powerful nobles are called upon to act are infinitely of more worth than the parts of beggars or lackeys. It is far better on the stage—on the stage, I mean, of another theater than the theater of this world—it is far better to wear a fine coat and to talk a fine language, than to walk the boards shod with a pair of old shoes, or to get one’s backbone gently polished by a hearty dressing with a stick. In one word, you have been a prodigal with money, you have ordered and been obeyed—have been steeped to the lips in enjoyment; while I have dragged my tether after me, have been commanded and have obeyed, and have drudged my life away. Well, although I may seem of such trifling importance beside you, my lord, I do declare to you, that the recollection of what I have done serves me as a spur, and prevents me from bowing my old head too soon. I shall remain unto the very end a trooper; and when my turn comes, I shall fall perfectly straight, all in a heap, still alive, after having selected my place beforehand. Do as I do, Monsieur Fouquet, you will not find yourself the worse for it; a fall happens only once in a lifetime to men like yourself, and the chief thing is, to take it gracefully when the chance presents itself. There is a Latin proverb—the words have escaped me, but I remember the sense of it very well, for I have thought over it more than once—which says, ‘The end crowns the work!’”

Fouquet rose from his seat, passed his arm round D’Artagnan’s neck, and clasped him in a close embrace, whilst with the other hand he pressed his hand. “An excellent homily,” he said, after a moment’s pause.

“A soldier’s, my lord.”

“You have a regard for me, in telling me all that.”

"Perhaps."

Fouquet resumed his pensive attitude once more, and then, a moment after, he said: "Where can M. d'Herblay be? I dare not ask you to send for him."

"You would not ask me, because I would not do it, Monsieur Fouquet. People would learn it, and Aramis, who is not mixed up with the affair, might possibly be compromised and included in your disgrace."

"I will wait here till daylight," said Fouquet.

"Yes; that is best."

"What shall we do when daylight comes?"

"I know nothing at all about it, my lord."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, will you do me a favour?"

"Most willingly."

"You guard me, I remain; you are acting in the full discharge of your duty, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"Very good, then; remain as close to me as my shadow if you like; and I infinitely prefer such a shadow to any one else."

D'Artagnan bowed to the compliment.

"But, forget that you are Monsieur d'Artagnan, captain of the musketeers; forget that I am Monsieur Fouquet, surintendant of the finances; and let us talk about my affairs."

"That is rather a delicate subject."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; but, for your sake, Monsieur Fouquet, I will do what may almost be regarded as an impossibility."

"Thank you. What did the king say to you?"

"Nothing."

"Ah! is that the way you talk?"

"The deuce!"

"What do you think of my situation?"

"I do not know."

"However, unless you have some ill feeling against me—"

"Your position is a difficult one."

"In what respect?"

"Because you are under your own roof."

"However difficult it may be, I understand it very well."

"Do you suppose that, with any one else but yourself, I should have shown so much frankness?"

"What! so much frankness, do you say? you, who refuse to tell me the slightest thing?"

"At all events, then, so much ceremony and consideration."

"Ah! I have nothing to say in that respect."

"One moment, my lord: let me tell you how I should have behaved towards any one but yourself. It might be that I happened to arrive at your door just as your guests or your friends had left you—or, if they had not gone yet, I should wait until they were leaving, and should then catch them one after the other, like rabbits; I should lock them up quietly enough, I should steal softly along the carpet of your corridor, and with one hand upon you, before you suspected the slightest thing amiss, I should keep you safely until my master's breakfast in the morning. In this way, I should just the same have avoided all publicity, all disturbance, all opposition; but there would also have been no warning for M. Fouquet, no consideration for his feelings, none of those delicate concessions which are shown by persons who are essentially courteous in their natures, whenever the decisive moment may arrive. Are you satisfied with the plan?"

"It makes me shudder."

"I thought you would not like it. It would have been very disagreeable to have made my appearance to-morrow, without any preparation, and to have asked you to deliver up your sword."

"Oh! monsieur, I should have died of shame and anger."

"Your gratitude is too eloquently expressed. I have not done enough to deserve it, I assure you."

"Most certainly, monsieur, you will never get me to believe that."

"Well, then, my lord, if you are satisfied with what I have done, and have somewhat recovered from the shock which I prepared you for as much as I possibly could, let us allow the few hours that remain to pass away undisturbed. You are harassed, and should arrange your thoughts; I beg you, therefore, go to sleep, or pretend to go to sleep, either on your bed, or in your bed; I will sleep in this armchair; and when I fall asleep, my rest is so sound that a cannon would not wake me."

Fouquet smiled. "I expect, however," continued the musketeer, "the case of a door being opened, whether a secret door, or any other; or the case of any one going out of, or coming into, the room—for anything like that my ear is as quick and sensitive as the ear of a mouse. Creaking noises make me start. It arises, I suppose, from a natural antipathy to anything of the kind. Move about as much as you like; walk up and down in any part of the room, write, efface, destroy, burn,—nothing like that will prevent me from going to sleep or even prevent me from snoring, but do not touch either the key or the handle of the door, for I should start up in a moment, and that would shake my nerves and make me ill."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said Fouquet, "you are certainly the most witty and the most courteous man I ever met with; and you will leave me only one regret, that of having made your acquaintance so late."

D'Artagnan drew a deep sigh, which seemed to say, "Alas! you have perhaps made it too soon." He then settled himself in his armchair, while Fouquet, half lying on his bed and leaning on his arm, was meditating on his misadventures. In this way, both of them, leaving the candles burning, awaited the first dawn of the day; and when Fouquet happened to sigh too loudly, D'Artagnan only snored the louder. Not a single visit, not even from Aramis, disturbed their quietude: not a sound even was heard throughout the whole vast palace. Outside, however, the guards of honour on duty, and the patrol of musketeers, paced up and down; and the sound of their feet could be heard on the gravel walks. It seemed to act as an additional soporific for the sleepers, while the murmuring of the wind through the trees, and the unceasing music of the fountains whose waters tumbled in the basin, still went on uninterruptedly, without being disturbed at the slight noises and items of little moment that constitute the life and death of human nature.

## XX. The Morning.

In vivid contrast to the sad and terrible destiny of the king imprisoned in the Bastille, and tearing, in sheer despair, the bolts and bars of his dungeon, the rhetoric of the chroniclers of old would not fail to present, as a complete antithesis, the picture of Philippe lying asleep beneath the royal canopy. We do not pretend to say that such rhetoric is always bad, and always scatters, in places where they have no right to grow, the flowers with which it embellishes and enlivens history. But we shall, on the present occasion, carefully avoid polishing the antithesis in question, but shall proceed to draw another picture as minutely as possible, to serve as foil and counterfoil to the one in the preceding chapter. The young prince alighted from Aramis's room, in the same way the king had descended from the apartment dedicated to Morpheus. The dome gradually and slowly sank down under Aramis's pressure, and Philippe stood beside the royal bed, which had ascended again after having deposited its prisoner in the secret depths of the subterranean passage. Alone, in the presence of all the luxury which surrounded him; alone, in the presence of his power; alone, with the part he was about to be forced to act, Philippe for the first time felt his heart, and mind, and soul expand beneath the influence of a thousand mutable emotions, which are the vital throbs of a king's heart. He could not help changing colour when he looked upon the empty bed, still tumbled by his brother's body. This mute accomplice had returned, after having completed the work it had been destined to perform; it returned with the traces of the crime; it spoke to the guilty author of that crime, with the frank and unreserved language which an accomplice never fears to use in the company of his companion in guilt; for it spoke the truth. Philippe bent over the bed, and perceived a pocket-handkerchief lying on it, which was still damp from the cold sweat which had poured from Louis XIV.'s face. This sweat-bestained handkerchief terrified Philippe, as the gore of Abel frightened Cain.

"I am face to face with my destiny," said Philippe, his eyes on fire, and his face a livid white. "Is it likely to be more terrifying than my captivity has been sad and gloomy? Though I am compelled to follow out, at every moment, the sovereign power and authority I have usurped, shall I cease to listen to the scruples of my heart? Yes! the king has lain on this bed; it is indeed his head that has left its impression on this pillow; his bitter tears that have stained this handkerchief: and yet, I hesitate to throw myself on the bed, or to press in my hand the handkerchief which is embroidered with my brother's arms. Away with such weakness; let me imitate M. d'Herblay, who asserts that a man's action should be always one degree above his thoughts; let me imitate M. d'Herblay, whose thoughts are of and for himself alone, who regards himself as a man of honour, so long as he injures or betrays his enemies only. I, I alone, should have occupied this bed, if Louis XIV. had not, owing to my mother's criminal abandonment, stood in my way; and this handkerchief, embroidered with the arms of France, would in right and justice belong to me alone, if, as M. d'Herblay observes, I had been left my royal cradle. Philippe, son of France, take your place on that bed; Philippe, sole king of France, resume the blazonry that is yours! Philippe, sole heir presumptive to Louis XIII., your father, show yourself without pity or mercy for the usurper who, at this moment, has not even to suffer the agony of the remorse of all that you have had to submit to."

With these words, Philippe, notwithstanding an instinctive repugnance of feeling, and in spite of the shudder of terror which mastered his will, threw himself on the royal bed, and forced his muscles to press the still warm place where Louis XIV. had lain, while he buried his burning face in the handkerchief still moistened by his brother's tears. With his head thrown back and buried in the soft down of his pillow, Philippe perceived above him the crown of France, suspended, as we have stated, by angels with outspread golden wings.

A man may be ambitious of lying in a lion's den, but can hardly hope to sleep there quietly. Philippe listened attentively to every sound; his heart panted and throbbed at the very suspicion of approaching terror and misfortune; but confident in his own strength, which was confirmed by the force of an overpoweringly resolute determination, he waited until some decisive circumstance should permit him to judge for himself. He hoped that imminent danger might be revealed to him, like those phosphoric lights of the tempest which show the sailors the altitude of the waves against which they have to struggle. But nothing approached. Silence, that mortal enemy of restless hearts, and of ambitious minds, shrouded in the thickness of its gloom during the remainder of the night the future king of France, who lay there sheltered beneath his stolen crown. Towards the morning a shadow, rather than a body, glided into the royal chamber; Philippe expected his approach and neither expressed nor exhibited any surprise.

"Well, M. d'Herblay?"

"Well, sire, all is accomplished."

"How?"

"Exactly as we expected."

"Did he resist?"

"Terribly! tears and entreaties."

"And then?"

"A perfect stupor."

"But at last?"

"Oh! at last, a complete victory, and absolute silence."

"Did the governor of the Bastille suspect anything?"

"Nothing."

"The resemblance, however—"

"Was the cause of the success."

"But the prisoner cannot fail to explain himself. Think well of that. I have myself been able to do as much as that, on former occasion."

"I have already provided for every chance. In a few days, sooner if necessary, we will take the captive out of his prison, and will send him out of the country, to a place of exile so remote—"

"People can return from their exile, Monsieur d'Herblay."

"To a place of exile so distant, I was going to say, that human strength and the duration of human life would not be enough for his return."

Once more a cold look of intelligence passed between Aramis and the young king.

"And M. du Vallon?" asked Philippe in order to change the conversation.

"He will be presented to you to-day, and confidentially will congratulate you on the danger which that conspirator has made you run."

"What is to be done with him?"

"With M. du Vallon?"

"Yes; confer a dukedom on him, I suppose."

"A dukedom," replied Aramis, smiling in a significant manner.

"Why do you laugh, Monsieur d'Herblay?"

"I laugh at the extreme caution of your idea."

"Cautious, why so?"

"Your majesty is doubtless afraid that poor Porthos may possible become a troublesome witness, and you wish to get rid of him."

"What! in making him a duke?"

"Certainly; you would assuredly kill him, for he would die from joy, and the secret would die with him."

"Good heavens!"

"Yes," said Aramis, phlegmatically; "I should lose a very good friend."

At this moment, and in the middle of this idle conversation, under the light tone of which the two conspirators concealed their joy and pride at their mutual success, Aramis heard something which made him prick up his ears.

"What is that?" said Philippe.

"The dawn, sire."

"Well?"

"Well, before you retired to bed last night, you probably decided to do something this morning at break of day."

"Yes, I told my captain of the musketeers," replied the young man hurriedly, "that I should expect him."

"If you told him that, he will certainly be here, for he is a most punctual man."

"I hear a step in the vestibule."

"It must be he."

"Come, let us begin the attack," said the young king resolutely.

"Be cautious for Heaven's sake. To begin the attack, and with D'Artagnan, would be madness. D'Artagnan knows nothing, he has seen nothing; he is a hundred miles from suspecting our mystery in the slightest degree, but if he comes into this room the first this morning, he will be sure to detect something of what has taken place, and which he would imagine it his business to occupy himself about. Before we allow D'Artagnan to penetrate into this room, we must air the room thoroughly, or introduce so many people into it, that the keenest scent in the whole kingdom may be deceived by the traces of twenty different persons."

"But how can I send him away, since I have given him a rendezvous?" observed the prince, impatient to measure swords with so redoubtable an antagonist.

"I will take care of that," replied the bishop, "and in order to begin, I am going to strike a blow which will completely stupefy our man."

"He, too, is striking a blow, for I hear him at the door," added the prince, hurriedly.

And, in fact, a knock at the door was heard at that moment. Aramis was not mistaken; for it was indeed D'Artagnan who adopted that mode of announcing himself.

We have seen how he passed the night in philosophizing with M. Fouquet, but the musketeer was very weary even of feigning to fall asleep, and as soon as earliest dawn illumined with its gloomy gleams of light the sumptuous cornices of the superintendent's room, D'Artagnan rose from his armchair, arranged his sword, brushed his coat and hat with his sleeve, like a private soldier getting ready for inspection.

"Are you going out?" said Fouquet.

"Yes, my lord. And you?"

"I shall remain."

"You pledge your word?"

"Certainly."

"Very good. Besides, my only reason for going out is to try and get that reply,—you know what I mean?"

"That sentence, you mean—"

"Stay, I have something of the old Roman in me. This morning, when I got up, I remarked that my sword had got caught in one of the *aiguillettes*, and that my shoulder-belt had slipped quite off. That is an infallible sign."

"Of prosperity?"

"Yes, be sure of it; for every time that that confounded belt of mine stuck fast to my back, it always signified a punishment from M. de Treville, or a refusal of money by M. de Mazarin. Every time my sword hung fast to my shoulder-belt, it always predicted some disagreeable commission or another for me to execute, and I have had showers of them all my life through. Every time, too, my sword danced about in its sheath, a duel, fortunate in its result, was sure to follow: whenever it dangled about the calves of my legs, it signified a slight wound; every time it fell completely out of the scabbard, I was booked, and made up my mind that I should have to remain on the field of battle, with two or three months under surgical bandages into the bargain."

"I did not know your sword kept you so well informed," said Fouquet, with a faint smile, which showed how he was struggling against his own weakness. "Is your sword bewitched, or under the influence of some imperial charm?"

"Why, you must know that my sword may almost be regarded as part of my own body. I have heard that certain men seem to have warnings given them by feeling something the matter with their legs, or a throbbing of their temples. With me, it is my sword that warns me. Well, it told me of nothing this morning. But, stay a moment—look here, it has just fallen of its own accord into the last hole of the belt. Do you know what that is a warning of?"

"No."

"Well, that tells me of an arrest that will have to be made this very day."

"Well," said the surintendant, more astonished than annoyed by this frankness, "if there is nothing disagreeable predicted to you by your sword, I am to conclude that it is not disagreeable for you to arrest me."

"You! arrest *you*!"

"Of course. The warning—"

"Does not concern you, since you have been arrested ever since yesterday. It is not you I shall have to arrest, be assured of that. That is the reason why I am delighted, and also the reason why I said that my day will be a happy one."

And with these words, pronounced with the most affectionate graciousness of manner, the captain took leave of Fouquet in order to wait upon the king. He was on the point of leaving the room, when Fouquet said to him, "One last mark of kindness."

"What is it, my lord?"

"M. d'Herblay; let me see Monsieur d'Herblay."

"I am going to try and get him to come to you."

D'Artagnan did not think himself so good a prophet. It was written that the day would pass away and realize all the predictions that had been made in the morning. He had accordingly knocked, as we have seen, at the king's door. The door opened. The captain thought that it was the king who had just opened it himself; and this supposition was not altogether inadmissible, considering the state of agitation in which he had left Louis XIV. the previous evening; but instead of his royal master, whom he was on the point of saluting with the greatest respect, he perceived the long, calm features of Aramis. So extreme was his surprise that he could hardly refrain from uttering a loud exclamation. "Aramis!" he said.

"Good morning, dear D'Artagnan," replied the prelate, coldly.

"You here!" stammered out the musketeer.

"His majesty desires you to report that he is still sleeping, after having been greatly fatigued during the whole night."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, who could not understand how the bishop of Vannes, who had been so indifferent a favourite the previous evening, had become in half a dozen hours the most magnificent mushroom of fortune that had ever sprung up in a sovereign's bedroom. In fact, to transmit the orders of the king even to the mere threshold of that monarch's room, to serve as an intermediary of Louis XIV. so as to be able to give a single order in his name at a couple paces from him, he must have become more than Richelieu had ever been to Louis XIII. D'Artagnan's expressive eye, half-opened lips, his curling mustache, said as much indeed in the plainest language to the chief favourite, who remained calm and perfectly unmoved.

"Moreover," continued the bishop, "you will be good enough, monsieur le capitaine des mousquetaires, to allow those only to pass into the king's room this morning who have special permission. His majesty does not wish to be disturbed just yet."

"But," objected D'Artagnan, almost on the point of refusing to obey this order, and particularly of giving unrestrained passage to the suspicions which the king's silence had aroused—"but, monsieur l'evêque, his majesty gave me a rendezvous for this morning."

"Later, later," said the king's voice, from the bottom of the alcove; a voice which made a cold shudder pass through the musketeer's veins. He bowed, amazed, confused, and stupefied by the smile with which Aramis seemed to overwhelm him, as soon as these words had been pronounced.

"And then," continued the bishop, "as an answer to what you were coming to ask the king, my dear D'Artagnan, here is an order of his majesty, which you will be good enough to attend to forthwith, for it concerns M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan took the order which was held out to him. "To be set at liberty!" he murmured. "Ah!" and he uttered a second "ah!" still more full of intelligence than the former; for this order explained Aramis's presence with the king, and that Aramis, in order to have obtained Fouquet's pardon, must have made considerable progress in the royal favour, and that this favour explained, in its tenor, the hardly conceivable assurance with which M. d'Herblay issued the order in the king's name. For D'Artagnan it was quite sufficient to have understood something of the matter in hand to order to understand the rest. He bowed and withdrew a couple of paces, as though he were about to leave.

"I am going with you," said the bishop.

"Where to?"

"To M. Fouquet; I wish to be a witness of his delight."

"Ah! Aramis, how you puzzled me just now!" said D'Artagnan again.

"But you understand *now*, I suppose?"

"Of course I understand," he said aloud; but added in a low tone to himself, almost hissing the words between his teeth, "No, no, I do not understand yet. But it is all the same, for here is the order for it." And then he added, "I will lead the way, my lord," and he conducted Aramis to Fouquet's apartments.

XXI. The King's Friend.

Fouquet was waiting with anxiety; he had already sent away many of his servants and friends, who, anticipating the usual hour of his ordinary receptions, had called at his door to inquire after him. Preserving the utmost silence respecting the danger which hung suspended by a hair above his head, he only asked them, as he did every one, indeed, who came to the door, where Aramis was. When he saw D'Artagnan return, and when he perceived the bishop of Vannes behind him, he could hardly restrain his delight; it was fully equal to his previous uneasiness. The mere sight of Aramis



was a complete compensation to the surintendant for the unhappiness he had undergone in his arrest. The prelate was silent and grave; D'Artagnan completely bewildered by such an accumulation of events.

"Well, captain, so you have brought M. d'Herblay to me."

"And something better still, my lord."

"What is that?"

"Liberty."

"I am free!"

"Yes; by the king's order."

Fouquet resumed his usual serenity, that he might interrogate Aramis with a look.

"Oh! yes, you can thank M. l'evêque de Vannes," pursued D'Artagnan, "for it is indeed to him that you owe the change that has taken place in the king."

"Oh!" said Fouquet, more humiliated at the service than grateful at its success.

"But you," continued D'Artagnan, addressing Aramis—"you, who have become M. Fouquet's protector and patron, can you not do something for me?"

"Anything in the wide world you like, my friend," replied the bishop, in his calmest tones.

"One thing only, then, and I shall be perfectly satisfied. How on earth did you manage to become the favourite of the king, you who have never spoken to him more than twice in your life?"

"From a friend such as you are," said Aramis, "I cannot conceal anything."

"Ah! very good, tell me, then."

"Very well. You think that I have seen the king only twice, whilst the fact is I have seen him more than a hundred times; only we have kept it very secret, that is all." And without trying to remove the colour which at this revelation made D'Artagnan's face flush scarlet, Aramis turned towards M. Fouquet, who was as much surprised as the musketeer. "My lord," he resumed, "the king desires me to inform you that he is more than ever your friend, and that your beautiful *fête*, so generously offered by you on his behalf, has touched him to the very heart."

And thereupon he saluted M. Fouquet with so much reverence of manner, that the latter, incapable of understanding a man whose diplomacy was of so prodigious a character, remained incapable of uttering a single syllable, and equally incapable of thought or movement. D'Artagnan fancied he perceived that these two men had something to say to each other, and he was about to yield to that feeling of instinctive politeness which in such a case hurries a man towards the door, when he feels his presence is an inconvenience for others; but his eager curiosity, spurred on by so many mysteries, counseled him to remain.

Aramis thereupon turned towards him, and said, in a quiet tone, "You will not forget, my friend, the king's order respecting those whom he intends to receive this morning on rising." These words were clear enough, and the musketeer understood them; he therefore bowed to Fouquet, and then to Aramis,—to the latter with a slight admixture of ironical respect,—and disappeared.

No sooner had he left, than Fouquet, whose impatience had hardly been able to wait for that moment, darted towards the door to close it, and then returning to the bishop, he said, "My dear D'Herblay, I think it now high time you should explain all that has passed, for, in plain and honest truth, I do not understand anything."

"We will explain all that to you," said Aramis, sitting down, and making Fouquet sit down also. "Where shall I begin?"

"With this first of all. Why does the king set me at liberty?"

"You ought rather to ask me what his reason was for having you arrested."

"Since my arrest, I have had time to think over it, and my idea is that it arises out of some slight feeling of jealousy. My *fête* put M. Colbert out of temper, and M. Colbert discovered some cause of complaint against me; Belle-Isle, for instance."

"No; there is no question at all just now of Belle-Isle."

"What is it, then?"

"Do you remember those receipts for thirteen millions which M. de Mazarin contrived to steal from you?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Well, you are pronounced a public robber."

"Good heavens!"

"Oh! that is not all. Do you also remember that letter you wrote to La Vallière?"

"Alas! yes."

"And that proclaims you a traitor and a suborner."

"Why should he have pardoned me, then?"

"We have not yet arrived at that part of our argument. I wish you to be quite convinced of the fact itself. Observe this well: the king knows you to be guilty of an appropriation of public funds. Oh! of course / know that you have done nothing of the kind; but, at all events, the king has seen the receipts, and he can do no other than believe you are incriminated."

"I beg your pardon, I do not see—"

"You will see presently, though. The king, moreover, having read your love-letter to La Vallière, and the offers you there made her, cannot retain any doubt of your intentions with regard to that young lady; you will admit that, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Pray conclude."

"In the fewest words. The king, we may henceforth assume, is your powerful, implacable, and eternal enemy."

"Agreed. But am I, then, so powerful, that he has not dared to sacrifice me, notwithstanding his hatred, with all the means which my weakness, or my misfortunes, may have given him as a hold upon me?"

"It is clear, beyond all doubt," pursued Aramis, coldly, "that the king has quarreled with you—irreconcilably."

"But, since he has absolved me—"

"Do you believe it likely?" asked the bishop, with a searching look.

"Without believing in his sincerity, I believe it in the accomplished fact."

Aramis slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"But why, then, should Louis XIV. have commissioned you to tell me what you have just stated?"

"The king charged me with no message for you."

"With nothing!" said the superintendent, stupefied. "But, that order—"

"Oh! yes. You are quite right. There *is* an order, certainly;" and these words were pronounced by Aramis in so strange a tone, that Fouquet could not resist starting.

"You are concealing something from me, I see. What is it?"

Aramis softly rubbed his white fingers over his chin, but said nothing.

"Does the king exile me?"

"Do not act as if you were playing at the game children play at when they have to try and guess where a thing has been hidden, and are informed, by a bell being rung, when they are approaching near to it, or going away from it."

"Speak, then."

"Guess."

"You alarm me."

"Bah! that is because you have not guessed, then."

"What did the king say to you? In the name of our friendship, do not deceive me."

"The king has not said one word to me."

"You are killing me with impatience, D'Herblay. Am I still superintendent?"

"As long as you like."

"But what extraordinary empire have you so suddenly acquired over his majesty's mind?"

"Ah! that's the point."

"He does your bidding?"

"I believe so."

"It is hardly credible."

"So any one would say."

"D'Herblay, by our alliance, by our friendship, by everything you hold dearest in the world, speak openly, I implore you. By what means have you succeeded in overcoming Louis XIV.'s prejudices, for he did not like you, I am certain."

"The king will like me *now*," said Aramis, laying stress upon the last word.

"You have something particular, then, between you?"

"Yes."

"A secret, perhaps?"

"A secret."

"A secret of such a nature as to change his majesty's interests?"

"You are, indeed, a man of superior intelligence, my lord, and have made a particularly accurate guess. I have, in fact, discovered a secret, of a nature to change the interests of the king of France."

"Ah!" said Fouquet, with the reserve of a man who does not wish to ask any more questions.

"And you shall judge of it yourself," pursued Aramis; "and you shall tell me if I am mistaken with regard to the importance of this secret."

"I am listening, since you are good enough to unbosom yourself to me; only do not forget that I have asked you about nothing which it may be indiscreet in you to communicate."

Aramis seemed, for a moment, as if he were collecting himself.

"Do not speak!" said Fouquet: "there is still time enough."

"Do you remember," said the bishop, casting down his eyes, "the birth of Louis XIV.?"

"As if it were yesterday."

"Have you ever heard anything particular respecting his birth?"

"Nothing; except that the king was not really the son of Louis XIII."

"That does not matter to us, or the kingdom either; he is the son of his father, says the French law, whose father is recognized by law."

"True; but it is a grave matter, when the quality of races is called into question."

"A merely secondary question, after all. So that, in fact, you have never learned or heard anything in particular?"

"Nothing."

"That is where my secret begins. The queen, you must know, instead of being delivered of a son, was delivered of twins."

Fouquet looked up suddenly as he replied:

"And the second is dead?"

"You will see. These twins seemed likely to be regarded as the pride of their mother, and the hope of France; but the weak nature of the king, his superstitious feelings, made him apprehend a series of conflicts between two children whose rights were equal; so he put out of the way—he suppressed—one of the twins."

"Suppressed, do you say?"

"Have patience. Both the children grew up; the one on the throne, whose minister you are—the other, who is my friend, in gloom and isolation."

"Good heavens! What are you saying, Monsieur d'Herblay? And what is this poor prince doing?"

"Ask me, rather, what has he done."

"Yes, yes."

"He was brought up in the country, and then thrown into a fortress which goes by the name of the Bastille."

"Is it possible?" cried the surintendant, clasping his hands.

"The one was the most fortunate of men: the other the most unhappy and miserable of all living beings."

"Does his mother not know this?"

"Anne of Austria knows it all."

"And the king?"

"Knows absolutely nothing."

"So much the better," said Fouquet.

This remark seemed to make a great impression on Aramis; he looked at Fouquet with the most anxious expression of countenance.

"I beg your pardon; I interrupted you," said Fouquet.

"I was saying," resumed Aramis, "that this poor prince was the unhappiest of human beings, when Heaven, whose thoughts are over all His creatures, undertook to come to his assistance."

"Oh! in what way? Tell me."

"You will see. The reigning king—I say the reigning king—you can guess very well why?"

"No. Why?"

"Because *both* of them, being legitimate princes, ought to have been kings. Is not that your opinion?"

"It is, certainly."

"Unreservedly?"

"Most unreservedly; twins are one person in two bodies."

"I am pleased that a legist of your learning and authority should have pronounced such an opinion. It is agreed, then, that each of them possessed equal rights, is it not?"

"Incontestably! but, gracious heavens, what an extraordinary circumstance!"

"We are not at the end of it yet.—Patience."

"Oh! I shall find 'patience' enough."

"Heaven wished to raise up for that oppressed child an avenger, or a supporter, or vindicator, if you prefer it. It happened that the reigning king, the usurper—you are quite of my opinion, I believe, that it is an act of usurpation quietly to enjoy, and selfishly to assume the right over, an inheritance to which a man has only half a right?"

"Yes, usurpation is the word."

"In that case, I continue. It was Heaven's will that the usurper should possess, in the person of his first minister, a man of great talent, of large and generous nature."

"Well, well," said Fouquet, "I understand you; you have relied upon me to repair the wrong which has been done to this unhappy brother of Louis XIV. You have thought well; I will help you. I thank you, D'Herblay, I thank you."

"Oh, no, it is not that at all; you have not allowed me to finish," said Aramis, perfectly unmoved.

"I will not say another word, then."

"M. Fouquet, I was observing, the minister of the reigning sovereign, was suddenly taken into the greatest aversion, and menaced with the ruin of his fortune, loss of liberty, loss of life even, by intrigue and personal hatred, to which the king gave too readily an attentive ear. But Heaven permits (still, however, out of consideration for the unhappy prince who had been sacrificed) that M. Fouquet should in his turn have a devoted friend who knew this state secret, and felt that he possessed strength and courage enough to divulge this secret, after having had the strength to carry it locked up in his own heart for twenty years.

"Go no farther," said Fouquet, full of generous feelings. "I understand you, and can guess everything now. You went to see the king when the intelligence of my arrest reached you; you implored him, he refused to listen to you; then you threatened him with that secret, threatened to reveal it, and Louis XIV., alarmed at the risk of its betrayal, granted to the terror of your indiscretion what he refused to your generous intercession. I understand, I understand; you have the king in your power; I understand."

"You understand *nothing*—as yet," replied Aramis, "and again you interrupt me. Then, too, allow me to observe that you pay no attention to logical reasoning, and seem to forget what you ought most to remember."

"What do you mean?"

"You know upon what I laid the greatest stress at the beginning of our conversation?"

"Yes, his majesty's hate, invincible hate for me; yes, but what feeling of hate could resist the threat of such a revelation?"

"Such a revelation, do you say? that is the very point where your logic fails you. What! do you suppose that if I had made such a revelation to the king, I should have been alive now?"

"It is not ten minutes ago that you were with the king."

"That may be. He might not have had the time to get me killed outright, but he would have had the time to get me gagged and thrown in a dungeon. Come, come, show a little consistency in your reasoning, *mordieu!*"

And by the mere use of this word, which was so thoroughly his old musketeer's expression, forgotten by one who never seemed to forget anything, Fouquet could not but understand to what a pitch of exaltation the calm, impenetrable bishop of Vannes had wrought himself. He shuddered.

"And then," replied the latter, after having mastered his feelings, "should I be the man I really am, should I be the true friend you believe me, if I were to expose you, whom the king already hates so bitterly, to a feeling more than ever to be dreaded in that young man? To have robbed him, is nothing; to have addressed the woman he loves, is not much; but to hold in your keeping both his crown and his honour, why, he would pluck out your heart with his own hands."

"You have not allowed him to penetrate your secret, then?"

"I would sooner, far sooner, have swallowed at one draught all the poisons that Mithridates drank in twenty years, in order to try and avoid death, than have betrayed my secret to the king."

"What have you done, then?"

"Ah! now we are coming to the point, my lord. I think I shall not fail to excite in you a little interest. You are listening, I hope."

"How can you ask me if I am listening? Go on."

Aramis walked softly all round the room, satisfied himself that they were alone, and that all was silent, and then returned and placed himself close to the armchair in which Fouquet was seated, awaiting with the deepest anxiety the revelation he had to make.

"I forgot to tell you," resumed Aramis, addressing himself to Fouquet, who listened to him with the most absorbed attention—"I forgot to mention a most remarkable circumstance respecting these twins, namely, that God had formed them so startlingly, so miraculously, like each other, that it would be utterly impossible to distinguish the one from the other. Their own mother would not be able to distinguish them."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"The same noble character in their features, the same carriage, the same stature, the same voice."

"But their thoughts? degree of intelligence? their knowledge of human life?"

"There is inequality there, I admit, my lord. Yes; for the prisoner of the Bastille is, most incontestably, superior in every way to his brother; and if, from his prison, this unhappy victim were to pass to the throne, France would not, from the earliest period of its history, perhaps, have had a master more powerful in genius and nobility of character."

Fouquet buried his face in his hands, as if he were overwhelmed by the weight of this immense secret. Aramis approached him.

"There is a further inequality," he said, continuing his work of temptation, "an inequality which concerns yourself, my lord, between the twins, both sons of Louis XIII., namely, the last comer does not know M. Colbert."

Fouquet raised his head immediately—his features were pale and distorted. The bolt had hit its mark—not his heart, but his mind and comprehension.

"I understand you," he said to Aramis; "you are proposing a conspiracy to me?"

"Something like it."

"One of those attempts which, as you said at the beginning of this conversation, alters the fate of empires?"

"And of superintendents, too; yes, my lord."

"In a word, you propose that I should agree to the substitution of the son of Louis XIII., who is now a prisoner in the Bastille, for the son of Louis XIII., who is at this moment asleep in the Chamber of Morpheus?"

Aramis smiled with the sinister expression of the sinister thought which was passing through his brain. "Exactly," he said.

"Have you thought," continued Fouquet, becoming animated with that strength of talent which in a few seconds originates, and matures the conception of a plan, and with that largeness of view which foresees all consequences, and embraces every result at a glance—"have you thought that we must assemble the nobility, the clergy, and the third estate of the realm; that we shall have to depose the reigning sovereign, to disturb by so frightful a scandal the tomb of their dead father, to sacrifice the life, the honour of a woman, Anne of Austria, the life and peace of mind and heart of another woman, Maria Theresa; and suppose that it were all done, if we were to succeed in doing it—"

"I do not understand you," continued Aramis, coldly. "There is not a single syllable of sense in all you have just said."

"What!" said the superintendent, surprised, "a man like you refuse to view the practical bearing of the case! Do you confine yourself to the childish delight of a political illusion, and neglect the chances of its being carried into execution; in other words, the reality itself, is it possible?"

"My friend," said Aramis, emphasizing the word with a kind of disdainful familiarity, "what does Heaven do in order to substitute one king for another?"

"Heaven!" exclaimed Fouquet—"Heaven gives directions to its agent, who seizes upon the doomed victim, hurries him away, and seats the triumphant rival on the empty throne. But you forget that this agent is called death. Oh! Monsieur d'Herblay, in Heaven's name, tell me if you have had the idea—"

"There is no question of that, my lord; you are going beyond the object in view. Who spoke of Louis XIV.'s death? who spoke of adopting the example which Heaven sets in following out the strict execution of its decrees? No, I wish you to understand that Heaven effects its purposes without confusion or disturbance, without exciting comment or remark, without difficulty or exertion; and that men, inspired by Heaven, succeed like Heaven itself, in all their undertakings, in all they attempt, in all they do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my *friend*," returned Aramis, with the same intonation on the word friend that he had applied to it the first time—"I mean that if there has been any confusion, scandal, and even effort in the substitution of the prisoner for the king, I defy you to prove it."

"What!" cried Fouquet, whiter than the handkerchief with which he wiped his temples, "what do you say?"

"Go to the king's apartment," continued Aramis, tranquilly, "and you who know the mystery, I defy even you to perceive that the prisoner of the Bastille is lying in his brother's bed."

"But the king," stammered Fouquet, seized with horror at the intelligence.

"What king?" said Aramis, in his gentlest tone; "the one who hates you, or the one who likes you?"

"The king—of—*yesterday*."

"The king of yesterday! be quite easy on that score; he has gone to take the place in the Bastille which his victim occupied for so many years."

"Great God! And who took him there?"

"I."

"You?"

"Yes, and in the simplest way. I carried him away last night. While he was descending into midnight, the other was ascending into day. I do not think there has been any disturbance whatever. A flash of lightning without thunder awakens nobody."

Fouquet uttered a thick, smothered cry, as if he had been struck by some invisible blow, and clasping his head between his clenched hands, he murmured: "You did that?"

"Cleverly enough, too; what do you think of it?"

"You dethroned the king? imprisoned him, too?"

"Yes, that has been done."

"And such an action was committed *here*, at Vaux?"

"Yes, here, at Vaux, in the Chamber of Morpheus. It would almost seem that it had been built in anticipation of such an act."

"And at what time did it occur?"

"Last night, between twelve and one o'clock."

Fouquet made a movement as if he were on the point of springing upon Aramis; he restrained himself. "At Vaux; under my roof!" he said, in a half-strangled voice.

"I believe so! for it is still your house, and it is likely to continue so, since M. Colbert cannot rob you of it now."

"It was under my roof, then, monsieur, that you committed this crime?"

"This crime?" said Aramis, stupefied.

"This abominable crime!" pursued Fouquet, becoming more and more excited; "this crime more execrable than an assassination! this crime which dishonours my name forever, and entails upon me the horror of posterity."

"You are not in your senses, monsieur," replied Aramis, in an irresolute tone of voice; "you are speaking too loudly; take care!"

"I will call out so loudly, that the whole world shall hear me."

"Monsieur Fouquet, take care!"

Fouquet turned round towards the prelate, whom he looked at full in the face. "You have dishonoured me," he said, "in committing so foul an act of treason, so heinous a crime upon my guest, upon one who was peacefully reposing beneath my roof. Oh! woe, woe is me!"

"Woe to the man, rather, who beneath your roof meditated the ruin of your fortune, your life. Do you forget that?"

"He was my guest, my sovereign."

Aramis rose, his eyes literally bloodshot, his mouth trembling convulsively. "Have I a man out of his senses to deal with?" he said.

"You have an honourable man to deal with."

"You are mad."

"A man who will prevent you consummating your crime."

"You are mad, I say."

"A man who would sooner, oh! far sooner, die; who would kill you even, rather than allow you to complete his dishonour."

And Fouquet snatched up his sword, which D'Artagnan had placed at the head of his bed, and clenched it resolutely in his hand. Aramis frowned, and thrust his hand into his breast as if in search of a weapon. This movement did not escape Fouquet, who, full of nobleness and pride in his magnanimity, threw his sword to a distance from him, and approached Aramis so close as to touch his shoulder with his disarmed hand. "Monsieur," he said, "I would sooner die here on the spot than survive this terrible disgrace; and if you have any pity left for me, I entreat you to take my life."

Aramis remained silent and motionless.

"You do not reply?" said Fouquet.

Aramis raised his head gently, and a glimmer of hope might be seen once more to animate his eyes. "Reflect, my lord," he said, "upon everything we have to expect. As the matter now stands, the king is still alive, and his imprisonment saves your life."

"Yes," replied Fouquet, "you may have been acting on my behalf, but I will not, do not, accept your services. But, first of all, I do not wish your ruin. You will leave this house."

Aramis stifled the exclamation which almost escaped his broken heart.

"I am hospitable towards all who are dwellers beneath my roof," continued Fouquet, with an air of inexpressible majesty; "you will not be more fatally lost than he whose ruin you have consummated."

"You will be so," said Aramis, in a hoarse, prophetic voice, "you will be so, believe me."

"I accept the augury, Monsieur d'Herblay; but nothing shall prevent me, nothing shall stop me. You will leave Vaux—you must leave France; I give you four hours to place yourself out of the king's reach."

"Four hours?" said Aramis, scornfully and incredulously.

"Upon the word of Fouquet, no one shall follow you before the expiration of that time. You will therefore have four hours' advance of those whom the king may wish to dispatch after you."

"Four hours!" repeated Aramis, in a thick, smothered voice.

"It is more than you will need to get on board a vessel and flee to Belle-Isle, which I give you as a place of refuge."

"Ah!" murmured Aramis.

"Belle-Isle is as much mine for you, as Vaux is mine for the king. Go, D'Herblay, go! as long as I live, not a hair of your head shall be injured."

"Thank you," said Aramis, with a cold irony of manner.

"Go at once, then, and give me your hand, before we both hasten away; you to save your life, I to save my honour."

Aramis withdrew from his breast the hand he had concealed there; it was stained with his blood. He had dug his nails into his flesh, as if in punishment for having nursed so many projects, more vain, insensate, and fleeting than the life of the man himself. Fouquet was horror-stricken, and then his heart smote him with pity. He threw open his arms as if to embrace him.

"I had no arms," murmured Aramis, as wild and terrible in his wrath as the shade of Dido. And then, without touching Fouquet's hand, he turned his head aside, and stepped back a pace or two. His last word was an imprecation, his last gesture a curse, which his blood-stained hand seemed to invoke, as it sprinkled on Fouquet's face a few drops of blood which flowed from his breast. And both of them darted out of the room by the secret staircase which led down to the inner courtyard. Fouquet ordered his best horses, while Aramis paused at the foot of the staircase which led to Porthos's apartment. He reflected profoundly and for some time, while Fouquet's carriage left the courtyard at full gallop.

"Shall I go alone?" said Aramis to himself, "or warn the prince? Oh! fury! Warn the prince, and then—do what? Take him with me? To carry this accusing witness about with me everywhere? War, too, would follow—civil war, implacable in its nature! And without any resource save myself—it is impossible! What could he do without me? Oh! without me he will be utterly destroyed. Yet who knows—let destiny be fulfilled—condemned he was, let him remain so then! Good or evil Spirit—gloomy and scornful Power, whom men call the genius of humanity, thou art a power more restlessly uncertain, more baselessly useless, than wild mountain wind! Chance, thou term'st thyself, but thou art nothing; thou inflamest everything with thy breath, crumblest mountains at thy approach, and suddenly art thyself destroyed at the presence of the Cross of dead wood behind which stand another Power invisible like thyself—whom thou deniest, perhaps, but whose avenging hand is on thee, and hurls thee in the dust dishonoured and unnamed! Lost!—I am lost! What can be done? Flee to Belle-Isle? Yes, and leave Porthos behind me, to talk and relate the whole affair to every one! Porthos, too, who will have to suffer for what he has done. I will not let poor Porthos suffer. He seems like one of the members of my own frame; and his grief or misfortune would be mine as well. Porthos shall leave with me, and shall follow my destiny. It must be so."

And Aramis, apprehensive of meeting any one to whom his hurried movements might appear suspicious, ascended the staircase without being perceived. Porthos, so recently returned from Paris, was already in a profound sleep; his huge body forgot its fatigue, as his mind forgot its thoughts. Aramis entered, light as a shadow, and placed his nervous grasp on the giant's shoulder. "Come, Porthos," he cried, "come."

Porthos obeyed, rose from his bed, opened his eyes, even before his intelligence seemed to be aroused.

"We leave immediately," said Aramis.

"Ah!" returned Porthos.

"We shall go mounted, and faster than we have ever gone in our lives."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"Dress yourself, my friend."

And he helped the giant to dress himself, and thrust his gold and diamonds into his pocket. Whilst he was thus engaged, a slight noise attracted his attention, and on looking up, he saw D'Artagnan watching them through the half-opened door. Aramis started.

"What the devil are you doing there in such an agitated manner?" said the musketeer.

"Hush!" said Porthos.

"We are going off on a mission of great importance," added the bishop.

"You are very fortunate," said the musketeer.

"Oh, dear me!" said Porthos, "I feel so wearied; I would far sooner have been fast asleep. But the service of the king...."

"Have you seen M. Fouquet?" said Aramis to D'Artagnan.

"Yes, this very minute, in a carriage."

"What did he say to you?"

"Adieu;" nothing more."

"Was that all?"

"What else do you think he could say? Am I worth anything now, since you have got into such high favour?"

"Listen," said Aramis, embracing the musketeer; "your good times are returning again. You will have no occasion to be jealous of any one."

"Ah! bah!"

"I predict that something will happen to you to-day which will increase your importance more than ever."

"Really?"

"You know that I know all the news?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Come, Porthos, are you ready? Let us go."

"I am quite ready, Aramis."

"Let us embrace D'Artagnan first."

"Most certainly."

"But the horses?"

"Oh! there is no want of them here. Will you have mine?"

"No; Porthos has his own stud. So adieu! adieu!"

The fugitives mounted their horses beneath the very eyes of the captain of the musketeers, who held Porthos's stirrup for him, and gazed after them until they were out of sight. "On any other occasion," thought the Gascon, "I should say that those gentlemen were making their escape; but in these days politics seem so changed that such an exit is termed going on a mission. I have no objection; let me attend to my own affairs, that is more than enough for *me*,"—and he philosophically entered his apartments.

XXII. Showing How the Countersign Was Respected at the Bastille.

Fouquet tore along as fast as his horses could drag him. On his way he trembled with horror at the idea of what had just been revealed to him. "What must have been," he thought, "the youth of those extraordinary men, who, even as age is stealing fast upon them, are still able to conceive such gigantic plans, and carry them through without a tremor?"

At one moment he could not resist the idea that all Aramis had just been recounting to him was nothing more than a dream, and whether the fable itself was not the snare; so that when Fouquet arrived at the Bastille, he might possibly find an order of arrest, which would send him to join the dethroned king. Strongly impressed with this idea, he gave certain sealed orders on his route, while fresh horses were being harnessed to his carriage. These orders were addressed to M. d'Artagnan and to certain others whose fidelity to the king was far above suspicion.

"In this way," said Fouquet to himself, "prisoner or not, I shall have performed the duty that I owe my honour. The orders will not reach them until after my return, if I should return free, and consequently they will not have been unsealed. I shall take them back again. If I am delayed; it will be because some misfortune will have befallen me; and in that case assistance will be sent for me as well as for the king."

Prepared in this manner, the superintendent arrived at the Bastille; he had traveled at the rate of five leagues and a half the hour. Every circumstance of delay which Aramis had escaped in his visit to the Bastille befell Fouquet. It was useless giving his name, equally useless his being recognized; he could not succeed in obtaining an entrance. By dint of entreaties, threats, commands, he succeeded in inducing a sentinel to speak to one of the subalterns, who went and told the major. As for the governor they did not even dare disturb him. Fouquet sat in his carriage, at the outer gate of the fortress, chafing with rage and impatience, awaiting the return of the officers, who at last re-appeared with a sufficiently sulky air.

"Well," said Fouquet, impatiently, "what did the major say?"

"Well, monsieur," replied the soldier, "the major laughed in my face. He told me that M. Fouquet was at Vaux, and that even were he at Paris, M. Fouquet would not get up at so early an hour as the present."

"*Mordieu!* you are an absolute set of fools," cried the minister, darting out of the carriage; and before the subaltern had time to shut the gate, Fouquet sprang through it, and ran forward in spite of the soldier, who cried out for assistance. Fouquet gained ground, regardless of the cries of the man, who, however, having at last come up with Fouquet, called out to the sentinel of the second gate, "Look out, look out, sentinel!" The man crossed his pike before the minister; but the latter, robust and active, and hurried away, too, by his passion, wrested the pike from the soldier and struck him a violent blow on the shoulder with it. The subaltern, who approached too closely, received a share of the blows as well. Both of them uttered loud and furious cries, at the sound of which the whole of the first body of the advanced guard poured out of the guardhouse. Among them there was one, however, who recognized the superintendent, and who called, "My lord, ah! my lord. Stop, stop, you fellows!" And he effectually checked the soldiers, who were on the point of revenging their companions. Fouquet desired them to open the gate, but they refused to do so without the countersign; he desired them to inform the governor of his presence; but the latter had already heard the disturbance at the gate. He ran forward, followed by his major, and accompanied by a picket of twenty men, persuaded that an attack was being made on the Bastille. Baisemeaux also recognized Fouquet immediately, and dropped the sword he bravely had been brandishing.

"Ah! my lord," he stammered, "how can I excuse—"

"Monsieur," said the superintendent, flushed with anger, and heated by his exertions, "I congratulate you. Your watch and ward are admirably kept."

Baisemeaux turned pale, thinking that this remark was made ironically, and portended a furious burst of anger. But Fouquet had recovered his breath, and, beckoning the sentinel and the subaltern, who were rubbing their shoulders, towards him, he said, "There are twenty pistoles for the sentinel, and fifty for the officer. Pray receive my compliments, gentlemen. I will not fail to speak to his majesty about you. And now, M. Baisemeaux, a word with you."

And he followed the governor to his official residence, accompanied by a murmur of general satisfaction. Baisemeaux was already trembling with shame and uneasiness. Aramis's early visit, from that moment, seemed to possess consequences, which a functionary such as he (Baisemeaux) was, was perfectly justified in apprehending. It was quite another thing, however, when Fouquet in a sharp tone of voice, and with an imperious look, said, "You have seen M. d'Herblay this morning?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And are you not horrified at the crime of which you have made yourself an accomplice?"

"Well," thought Baisemeaux, "good so far;" and then he added, aloud, "But what crime, my lord, do you allude to?"

"That for which you can be quartered alive, monsieur—do not forget that! But this is not a time to show anger. Conduct me immediately to the prisoner."

"To what prisoner?" said Baisemeaux, trembling.

"You pretend to be ignorant? Very good—it is the best plan for you, perhaps; for if, in fact, you were to admit your participation in such a crime, it would be all over with you. I wish, therefore, to seem to believe in your assumption of ignorance."

"I entreat you, my lord—"

"That will do. Lead me to the prisoner."

"To Marchiali?"

"Who is Marchiali?"

"The prisoner who was brought back this morning by M. d'Herblay."

"He is called Marchiali?" said the superintendent, his conviction somewhat shaken by Baisemeaux's cool manner.

"Yes, my lord; that is the name under which he was inscribed here."

Fouquet looked steadily at Baisemeaux, as if he would read his very heart; and perceived, with that clear-sightedness most men possess who are accustomed to the exercise of power, that the man was speaking with perfect sincerity. Besides, in observing his face for a few moments, he could not believe that Aramis would have chosen such a confidant.

"It is the prisoner," said the superintendent to him, "whom M. d'Herblay carried away the day before yesterday?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And whom he brought back this morning?" added Fouquet, quickly: for he understood immediately the mechanism of Aramis's plan.

"Precisely, my lord."

"And his name is Marchiali, you say?"

"Yes, Marchiali. If my lord has come here to remove him, so much the better, for I was going to write about him."

"What has he done, then?"

"Ever since this morning he has annoyed me extremely. He has had such terrible fits of passion, as almost to make me believe that he would bring the Bastille itself down about our ears."

"I will soon relieve you of his possession," said Fouquet.

"Ah! so much the better."

"Conduct me to his prison."

"Will my lord give me the order?"

"What order?"

"An order from the king."

"Wait until I sign you one."

"That will not be sufficient, my lord. I must have an order from the king."

Fouquet assumed an irritated expression. "As you are so scrupulous," he said, "with regard to allowing prisoners to leave, show me the order by which this one was set at liberty."

Baisemeaux showed him the order to release Seldon.

"Very good," said Fouquet; "but Seldon is not Marchiali."

"But Marchiali is not at liberty, my lord; he is here."

"But you said that M. d'Herblay carried him away and brought him back again."

"I did not say so."

"So surely did you say it, that I almost seem to hear it now."

"It was a slip of my tongue, then, my lord."

"Take care, M. Baisemeaux, take care."

"I have nothing to fear, my lord; I am acting according to the very strictest regulation."

"Do you dare to say so?"

"I would say so in the presence of one of the apostles. M. d'Herblay brought me an order to set Seldon at liberty. Seldon is free."

"I tell you that Marchiali has left the Bastille."

"You must prove that, my lord."

"Let me see him."

"You, my lord, who govern this kingdom, know very well that no one can see any of the prisoners without an express order from the king."

"M. d'Herblay has entered, however."

"That remains to be proved, my lord."

"M. de Baisemeaux, once more I warn you to pay particular attention to what you are saying."

"All the documents are there, my lord."

"M. d'Herblay is overthrown."

"Overthrown?—M. d'Herblay! Impossible!"

"You see that he has undoubtedly influenced you."

"No, my lord; what does, in fact, influence me, is the king's service. I am doing my duty. Give me an order from him, and you shall enter."

"Stay, M. le gouverneur, I give you my word that if you allow me to see the prisoner, I will give you an order from the king at once."

"Give it to me now, my lord."

"And that, if you refuse me, I will have you and all your officers arrested on the spot."

"Before you commit such an act of violence, my lord, you will reflect," said Baisemeaux, who had turned very pale, "that we will only obey an order signed by the king; and that it will be just as easy for you to obtain one to see Marchiali as to obtain one to do me so much injury; me, too, who am perfectly innocent."

"True. True!" cried Fouquet, furiously; "perfectly true. M. de Baisemeaux," he added, in a sonorous voice, drawing the unhappy governor towards him, "do you know why I am so anxious to speak to the prisoner?"

"No, my lord; and allow me to observe that you are terrifying me out of my senses; I am trembling all over—in fact, I feel as though I were about to faint."

"You will stand a better chance of fainting outright, Monsieur Baisemeaux, when I return here at the head of ten thousand men and thirty pieces of cannon."

"Good heavens, my lord, you are losing your senses."

"When I have roused the whole population of Paris against you and your accursed towers, and have battered open the gates of this place, and hanged you to the topmost tree of yonder pinnacle!"

"My lord! my lord! for pity's sake!"

"I give you ten minutes to make up your mind," added Fouquet, in a calm voice. "I will sit down here, in this armchair, and wait for you; if, in ten minutes' time, you still persist, I leave this place, and you may think me as mad as you like. Then—you shall see!"

Baisemeaux stamped his foot on the ground like a man in a state of despair, but he did not reply a single syllable; whereupon Fouquet seized a pen and ink, and wrote:

"Order for M. le Prevot des Marchands to assemble the municipal guard and to march upon the Bastille on the king's immediate service."

Baisemeaux shrugged his shoulders. Fouquet wrote:

"Order for the Duc de Bouillon and M. le Prince de Conde to assume the command of the Swiss guards, of the king's guards, and to march upon the Bastille on the king's immediate service."

Baisemeaux reflected. Fouquet still wrote:

"Order for every soldier, citizen, or gentleman to seize and apprehend, wherever he may be found, le Chevalier d'Herblay, Eveque de Vannes, and his accomplices, who are: first, M. de Baisemeaux, governor of the Bastille, suspected of the crimes of high treason and rebellion—"

"Stop, my lord!" cried Baisemeaux; "I do not understand a single jot of the whole matter; but so many misfortunes, even were it madness itself that had set them at their awful work, might happen here in a couple of hours, that the king, by whom I must be judged, will see whether I have been wrong in withdrawing the countersign before this flood of imminent catastrophes. Come with me to the keep, my lord, you shall see Marchiali."

Fouquet darted out of the room, followed by Baisemeaux as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "What a terrible morning!" he said; "what a disgrace for *me*!"

"Walk faster," replied Fouquet.

Baisemeaux made a sign to the jailer to precede them. He was afraid of his companion, which the latter could not fail to perceive.

"A truce to this child's play," he said, roughly. "Let the man remain here; take the keys yourself, and show me the way. Not a single person, do you understand, must hear what is going to take place here."

"Ah!" said Baisemeaux, undecided.

"Again!" cried M. Fouquet. "Ah! say 'no' at once, and I will leave the Bastille and will myself carry my own dispatches."

Baisemeaux bowed his head, took the keys, and unaccompanied, except by the minister, ascended the staircase. The higher they advanced up the spiral staircase, the more clearly did certain muffled murmurs become distinct appeals and fearful imprecations.

"What is that?" asked Fouquet.

"That is your Marchiali," said the governor; "this is the way these madmen scream."

And he accompanied that reply with a glance more pregnant with injurious allusion, as far as Fouquet was concerned, than politeness. The latter trembled; he had just recognized in one cry more terrible than any that had preceded it, the king's voice. He paused on the staircase, snatching the bunch of keys from Baisemeaux, who thought this new madman was going to dash out his brains with one of them. "Ah!" he cried, "M. d'Herblay did not say a word about that."

"Give me the keys at once!" cried Fouquet, tearing them from his hand. "Which is the key of the door I am to open?"

"That one."

A fearful cry, followed by a violent blow against the door, made the whole staircase resound with the echo.

"Leave this place," said Fouquet to Baisemeaux, in a threatening tone.

"I ask nothing better," murmured the latter, to himself. "There will be a couple of madmen face to face, and the one will kill the other, I am sure."

"Go!" repeated Fouquet. "If you place your foot on this staircase before I call you, remember that you shall take the place of the meanest prisoner in the Bastille."

"This job will kill me, I am sure it will," muttered Baisemeaux, as he withdrew with tottering steps.

The prisoner's cries became more and more terrible. When Fouquet had satisfied himself that Baisemeaux had reached the bottom of the staircase, he inserted the key in the first lock. It was then that he heard the hoarse, choking voice of the king, crying out, in a frenzy of rage, "Help, help! I am the king." The key of the second door was not the same as the first, and Fouquet was obliged to look for it on the bunch. The king, however, furious and almost mad with rage and passion, shouted at the top of his voice, "It was M. Fouquet who brought me here. Help me against M. Fouquet! I am the king! Help the king against M. Fouquet!" These cries filled the minister's heart with terrible emotions. They were followed by a shower of blows leveled against the door with a part of the broken chair with which the king had armed himself. Fouquet at last succeeded in finding the key. The king was almost exhausted; he could hardly articulate distinctly as he shouted, "Death to Fouquet! death to the traitor Fouquet!" The door flew open.

### XXIII. The King's Gratitude.

The two men were on the point of darting towards each other when they suddenly and abruptly stopped, as a mutual recognition took place, and each uttered a cry of horror.

"Have you come to assassinate me, monsieur?" said the king, when he recognized Fouquet.

"The king in this state!" murmured the minister.

Nothing could be more terrible indeed than the appearance of the young prince at the moment Fouquet had surprised him; his clothes were in tatters; his shirt, open and torn to rags, was stained with sweat and with the blood which streamed from his lacerated breast and arms. Haggard, ghastly pale, his hair in disheveled masses, Louis XIV. presented the most perfect picture of despair, distress, anger and fear combined that could possibly be united in one figure. Fouquet was so touched, so affected and disturbed by it, that he ran towards him with his arms stretched out and his eyes filled with tears. Louis held up the massive piece of wood of which he had made such a furious use.

"Sire," said Fouquet, in a voice trembling with emotion, "do you not recognize the most faithful of your friends?"

"A friend—you!" repeated Louis, gnashing his teeth in a manner which betrayed his hate and desire for speedy vengeance.

"The most respectful of your servants," added Fouquet, throwing himself on his knees. The king let the rude weapon fall from his grasp. Fouquet approached him, kissed his knees, and took him in his arms with inconceivable tenderness.

"My king, my child," he said, "how you must have suffered!"

Louis, recalled to himself by the change of situation, looked at himself, and ashamed of the disordered state of his apparel, ashamed of his conduct, and ashamed of the air of pity and protection that was shown towards him, drew back. Fouquet did not understand this movement; he did not perceive that the king's feeling of pride would never forgive him for having been a witness of such an exhibition of weakness.

"Come, sire," he said, "you are free."

"Free?" repeated the king. "Oh! you set me at liberty, then, after having dared to lift up your hand against me."

"You do not believe that!" exclaimed Fouquet, indignantly; "you cannot believe me to be guilty of such an act."

And rapidly, warmly even, he related the whole particulars of the intrigue, the details of which are already known to the reader. While the recital continued, Louis suffered the most horrible anguish of mind; and when it was finished, the magnitude of the danger he had run struck him far more than the importance of the secret relative to his twin brother.

"Monsieur," he said, suddenly to Fouquet, "this double birth is a falsehood; it is impossible—you cannot have been the dupe of it."

"Sire!"

"It is impossible, I tell you, that the honour, the virtue of my mother can be suspected, and my first minister has not yet done justice on the criminals!"

"Reflect, sire, before you are hurried away by anger," replied Fouquet. "The birth of your brother—"

"I have only one brother—and that is Monsieur. You know it as well as myself. There is a plot, I tell you, beginning with the governor of the Bastille."

"Be careful, sire, for this man has been deceived as every one else has by the prince's likeness to yourself."

"Likeness? Absurd!"

"This Marchiali must be singularly like your majesty, to be able to deceive every one's eye," Fouquet persisted.

"Ridiculous!"

"Do not say so, sire; those who had prepared everything in order to face and deceive your ministers, your mother, your officers of state, the members of your family, must be quite confident of the resemblance between you."

"But where are these persons, then?" murmured the king.

"At Vaux."

"At Vaux! and you suffer them to remain there!"

"My most instant duty appeared to me to be your majesty's release. I have accomplished that duty; and now, whatever your majesty may command, shall be done. I await your orders."

Louis reflected for a few moments.

"Muster all the troops in Paris," he said.

"All the necessary orders are given for that purpose," replied Fouquet.

"You have given orders!" exclaimed the king.

"For that purpose, yes, sire; your majesty will be at the head of ten thousand men in less than an hour."

The only reply the king made was to take hold of Fouquet's hand with such an expression of feeling, that it was very easy to perceive how strongly he had, until that remark, maintained his suspicions of the minister, notwithstanding the latter's intervention.

"And with these troops," he said, "we shall go at once and besiege in your house the rebels who by this time will have established and intrenched themselves therein."

"I should be surprised if that were the case," replied Fouquet.

"Why?"

"Because their chief—the very soul of the enterprise—having been unmasked by me, the whole plan seems to me to have miscarried."

"You have unmasked this false prince also?"

"No, I have not seen him."

"Whom have you seen, then?"

"The leader of the enterprise, not that unhappy young man; the latter is merely an instrument, destined through his whole life to wretchedness, I plainly perceive."

"Most certainly."

"It is M. l'Abbe d'Herblay, Eveque de Vannes."

"Your friend?"

"He was my friend, sire," replied Fouquet, nobly.

"An unfortunate circumstance for you," said the king, in a less generous tone of voice.

"Such friendships, sire, had nothing dishonourable in them so long as I was ignorant of the crime."

"You should have foreseen it."

"If I am guilty, I place myself in your majesty's hands."

"Ah! Monsieur Fouquet, it was not that I meant," returned the king, sorry to have shown the bitterness of his thought in such a manner. "Well! I assure you that, notwithstanding the mask with which the villain covered his face, I had something like a vague suspicion that he was the very man. But with this chief of the enterprise there was a man of prodigious strength, the one who menaced me with a force almost herculean; what is he?"

"It must be his friend the Baron du Vallon, formerly one of the musketeers."

"The friend of D'Artagnan? the friend of the Comte de la Fere? Ah!" exclaimed the king, as he paused at the name of the latter, "we must not forget the connection that existed between the conspirators and M. de Bragelonne."

"Sire, sire, do not go too far. M. de la Fere is the most honourable man in France. Be satisfied with those whom I deliver up to you."

"With those whom you deliver up to me, you say? Very good, for you will deliver up those who are guilty to me."

"What does your majesty understand by that?" inquired Fouquet.

"I understand," replied the king, "that we shall soon arrive at Vaux with a large body of troops, that we will lay violent hands upon that nest of vipers, and that not a soul shall escape."

"Your majesty will put these men to death!" cried Fouquet.

"To the very meanest of them."

"Oh! sire."

"Let us understand one another, Monsieur Fouquet," said the king, haughtily. "We no longer live in times when assassination was the only and the last resource kings held in reservation at extremity. No, Heaven be praised! I have parliaments who sit and judge in my name, and I have scaffolds on which supreme authority is carried out."

Fouquet turned pale. "I will take the liberty of observing to your majesty, that any proceedings instituted respecting these matters would bring down the greatest scandal upon the dignity of the throne. The august name of Anne of Austria must never be allowed to pass the lips of the people accompanied by a smile."

"Justice must be done, however, monsieur."

"Good, sire; but royal blood must not be shed upon a scaffold."

"The royal blood! you believe that!" cried the king with fury in his voice, stamping his foot on the ground. "This double birth is an invention; and in that invention, particularly, do I see M. d'Herblay's crime. It is the crime I wish to punish rather than the violence, or the insult."

"And punish it with death, sire?"

"With death; yes, monsieur, I have said it."

"Sire," said the surintendant, with firmness, as he raised his head proudly, "your majesty will take the life, if you please, of your brother Philippe of France; that concerns you alone, and you will doubtless consult the queen-mother upon the subject. Whatever she may command will be perfectly correct. I do not wish to mix myself up in it, not even for the honour of your crown, but I have a favour to ask of you, and I beg to submit it to you."

"Speak," said the king, in no little degree agitated by his minister's last words. "What do you require?"

"The pardon of M. d'Herblay and of M. du Vallon."

"My assassins?"

"Two rebels, sire, that is all."

"Oh! I understand, then, you ask me to forgive your friends."

"My friends!" said Fouquet, deeply wounded.

"Your friends, certainly; but the safety of the state requires that an exemplary punishment should be inflicted on the guilty."

"I will not permit myself to remind your majesty that I have just restored you to liberty, and have saved your life."

"Monsieur!"

"I will not allow myself to remind your majesty that had M. d'Herblay wished to carry out his character of an assassin, he could very easily have assassinated your majesty this morning in the forest of Senart, and all would have been over." The king started.

"A pistol-bullet through the head," pursued Fouquet, "and the disfigured features of Louis XIV., which no one could have recognized, would be M. d'Herblay's complete and entire justification."

The king turned pale and giddy at the bare idea of the danger he had escaped.

"If M. d'Herblay," continued Fouquet, "had been an assassin, he had no occasion to inform me of his plan in order to succeed. Freed from the real king, it would have been impossible in all futurity to guess the false. And if the usurper had been recognized by Anne of Austria, he would still have been—her son. The usurper, as far as Monsieur d'Herblay's conscience was concerned, was still a king of the blood of Louis XIII. Moreover, the conspirator, in that course, would have had security, secrecy, impunity. A pistol-bullet would have procured him all that. For the sake of Heaven, sire, grant me his forgiveness."

The king, instead of being touched by the picture, so faithfully drawn in all details, of Aramis's generosity, felt himself most painfully and cruelly humiliated. His unconquerable pride revolted at the idea that a man had held suspended at the end of his finger the thread of his royal life. Every word that fell from Fouquet's lips, and which he thought most efficacious in procuring his friend's pardon, seemed to pour another drop of poison into the already ulcerated heart of Louis XIV. Nothing could bend or soften him. Addressing himself to Fouquet, he said, "I really don't know, monsieur, why you should solicit the pardon of these men. What good is there in asking that which can be obtained without solicitation?"

"I do not understand you, sire."

"It is not difficult, either. Where am I now?"

"In the Bastille, sire."

"Yes; in a dungeon. I am looked upon as a madman, am I not?"

"Yes, sire."

"And no one is known here but Marchiali?"

"Certainly."

"Well; change nothing in the position of affairs. Let the poor madman rot between the slimy walls of the Bastille, and M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon will stand in no need of my forgiveness. Their new king will absolve them."

"Your majesty does me a great injustice, sire; and you are wrong," replied Fouquet, dryly; "I am not child enough, nor is M. d'Herblay silly enough, to have omitted to make all these reflections; and if I had wished to make a new king, as you say, I had no occasion to have come here to force open the gates and doors of the Bastille, to free you from this place. That would show a want of even common sense. Your majesty's mind is disturbed by anger; otherwise you would be far from offending, groundlessly, the very one of your servants who has rendered you the most important service of all."

Louis perceived that he had gone too far; that the gates of the Bastille were still closed upon him, whilst, by degrees, the floodgates were gradually being opened, behind which the generous-hearted Fouquet had restrained his anger. "I did not say that to humiliate you, Heaven knows, monsieur," he replied. "Only you are addressing yourself to me in order to obtain a pardon, and I answer according to my conscience. And so, judging by my conscience, the criminals we speak of are not worthy of consideration or forgiveness."

Fouquet was silent.

"What I do is as generous," added the king, "as what you have done, for I am in your power. I will even say it is more generous, inasmuch as you place before me certain conditions upon which my liberty, my life, may depend; and to reject which is to make a sacrifice of both."

"I was wrong, certainly," replied Fouquet. "Yes,—I had the appearance of extorting a favour; I regret it, and entreat your majesty's forgiveness."

"And you are forgiven, my dear Monsieur Fouquet," said the king, with a smile, which restored the serene expression of his features, which so many circumstances had altered since the preceding evening.

"I have my own forgiveness," replied the minister, with some degree of persistence; "but M. d'Herblay, and M. du Vallon?"

"They will never obtain theirs, as long as I live," replied the inflexible king. "Do me the kindness not to speak of it again."

"Your majesty shall be obeyed."

"And you will bear me no ill-will for it?"

"Oh! no, sire; for I anticipated the event."

"You had 'anticipated' that I should refuse to forgive those gentlemen?"

"Certainly; and all my measures were taken in consequence."

"What do you mean to say?" cried the king, surprised.

"M. d'Herblay came, as may be said, to deliver himself into my hands. M. d'Herblay left to me the happiness of saving my king and my country. I could not condemn M. d'Herblay to death; nor could I, on the other hand, expose him to your majesty's justifiable wrath; it would have been just the same as if I had killed him myself."

"Well! and what have you done?"

"Sire, I gave M. d'Herblay the best horses in my stables and four hours' start over all those your majesty might, probably, dispatch after him."

"Be it so!" murmured the king. "But still, the world is wide enough and large enough for those whom I may send to overtake your horses, notwithstanding the 'four hours' start' which you have given to M. d'Herblay."

"In giving him these four hours, sire, I knew I was giving him his life, and he will save his life."

"In what way?"

"After having galloped as hard as possible, with the four hours' start, before your musketeers, he will reach my chateau of Belle-Isle, where I have given him a safe asylum."

"That may be! But you forget that you have made me a present of Belle-Isle."

"But not for you to arrest my friends."

"You take it back again, then?"

"As far as that goes—yes, sire."

"My musketeers shall capture it, and the affair will be at an end."

"Neither your musketeers, nor your whole army could take Belle-Isle," said Fouquet, coldly. "Belle-Isle is impregnable."

The king became perfectly livid; a lightning flash seemed to dart from his eyes. Fouquet felt that he was lost, but he as not one to shrink when the voice of honour spoke loudly within him. He bore the king's wrathful gaze; the latter swallowed his rage, and after a few moments' silence, said, "Are we going to return to Vaux?"

"I am at your majesty's orders," replied Fouquet, with a low bow; "but I think that your majesty can hardly dispense with changing your clothes previous to appearing before your court."

"We shall pass by the Louvre," said the king. "Come." And they left the prison, passing before Baisemeaux, who looked completely bewildered as he saw Marchiali once more leave; and, in his helplessness, tore out the major portion of his few remaining hairs. It was perfectly true, however, that Fouquet wrote and gave him an authority for the prisoner's release, and that the king wrote beneath it, "Seen and approved, Louis"; a piece of madness that Baisemeaux, incapable of putting two ideas together, acknowledged by giving himself a terrible blow on the forehead with his own fist.

XXIV. The False King.

In the meantime, usurped royalty was playing out its part bravely at Vaux. Philippe gave orders that for his *petit lever* the *grandes entrees*, already prepared to appear before the king, should be introduced. He determined to give this order notwithstanding the absence of M. d'Herblay, who did not return—our readers know the reason. But the prince, not believing that absence could be prolonged, wished, as all rash spirits do, to try his valor and his fortune far from all protection and instruction. Another reason urged him to this—Anne of Austria was about to appear; the guilty mother was about to stand in the presence of her sacrificed son. Philippe was not willing, if he had a weakness, to render the man a witness of it before whom he was bound thenceforth to display so much strength. Philippe opened his folding doors, and several persons entered silently. Philippe did not stir whilst his *valets de chambre* dressed him. He had watched, the evening before, all the habits of his brother, and played the king in such a manner as to awaken no suspicion. He was thus completely dressed in hunting costume when he received his visitors. His own memory and the notes of Aramis announced everybody to him, first of all Anne of Austria, to whom Monsieur gave his hand, and then Madame with M. de Saint-Aignan. He smiled at seeing these countenances, but trembled on recognizing his mother. That still so noble and imposing figure, ravaged by pain, pleaded in his heart the cause of the famous queen who had immolated a child to reasons of state. He found his mother still handsome. He knew that Louis XIV. loved her, and he promised himself to love her likewise, and not to prove a scourge to her old age. He contemplated his brother with a tenderness easily to be understood. The latter had usurped nothing, had cast no shades athwart his life. A separate tree, he allowed the stem to rise without heeding its elevation or majestic life. Philippe promised himself to be a kind brother to this prince, who required nothing but gold to minister to his pleasures. He bowed with a friendly air to Saint-Aignan, who was all reverences and smiles, and trembling held out his hand to Henrietta, his sister-in-law, whose beauty struck him; but he saw in the eyes of that princess an expression of coldness which would facilitate, as he thought, their future relations.



"How much more easy," thought he, "it will be to be the brother of that woman than her gallant, if she evinces towards me a coldness that my brother could not have for her, but which is imposed upon me as a duty." The only visit he dreaded at this moment was that of the queen; his heart—his mind—had just been shaken by so violent a trial, that, in spite of their firm temperament, they would not, perhaps, support another shock. Happily the queen did not come. Then commenced, on the part of Anne of Austria, a political dissertation upon the welcome M. Fouquet had given to the house of France. She mixed up hostilities with compliments addressed to the king, and questions as to his health, with little maternal flatteries and diplomatic artifices.

"Well, my son," said she, "are you convinced with regard to M. Fouquet?"

"Saint-Aignan," said Philippe, "have the goodness to go and inquire after the queen."

At these words, the first Philippe had pronounced aloud, the slight difference that there was between his voice and that of the king was sensible to maternal ears, and Anne of Austria looked earnestly at her son. Saint-Aignan left the room, and Philippe continued:

"Madame, I do not like to hear M. Fouquet ill-spoken of, you know I do not—and you have even spoken well of him yourself."

"That is true; therefore I only question you on the state of your sentiments with respect to him."

"Sire," said Henrietta, "I, on my part, have always liked M. Fouquet. He is a man of good taste,—a superior man."

"A superintendent who is never sordid or niggardly," added Monsieur, "and who pays in gold all the orders I have on him."

"Every one in this thinks too much of himself, and nobody for the state," said the old queen. "M. Fouquet, it is a fact, M. Fouquet is ruining the state."

"Well, mother!" replied Philippe, in rather a lower key, "do you likewise constitute yourself the buckler of M. Colbert?"

"How is that?" replied the old queen, rather surprised.

"Why, in truth," replied Philippe, "you speak that just as your old friend Madame de Chevreuse would speak."

"Why do you mention Madame de Chevreuse to me?" said she, "and what sort of humor are you in to-day towards me?"

Philippe continued: "Is not Madame de Chevreuse always in league against somebody? Has not Madame de Chevreuse been to pay you a visit, mother?"

"Monsieur, you speak to me now in such a manner that I can almost fancy I am listening to your father."

"My father did not like Madame de Chevreuse, and had good reason for not liking her," said the prince. "For my part, I like her no better than *he* did, and if she thinks proper to come here as she formerly did, to sow divisions and hatreds under the pretext of begging money—why—"

"Well! what?" said Anne of Austria, proudly, herself provoking the storm.

"Well!" replied the young man firmly, "I will drive Madame de Chevreuse out of my kingdom—and with her all who meddle with its secrets and mysteries."

He had not calculated the effect of this terrible speech, or perhaps he wished to judge the effect of it, like those who, suffering from a chronic pain, and seeking to break the monotony of that suffering, touch their wound to procure a sharper pang. Anne of Austria was nearly fainting; her eyes, open but meaningless, ceased to see for several seconds; she stretched out her arms towards her other son, who supported and embraced her without fear of irritating the king.

"Sire," murmured she, "you are treating your mother very cruelly."

"In what respect, madame?" replied he. "I am only speaking of Madame de Chevreuse; does my mother prefer Madame de Chevreuse to the security of the state and of my person? Well, then, madame, I tell you Madame de Chevreuse has returned to France to borrow money, and that she addressed herself to M. Fouquet to sell him a certain secret."

"A certain secret!" cried Anne of Austria.

"Concerning pretended robberies that monsieur le surintendant had committed, which is false," added Philippe. "M. Fouquet rejected her offers with indignation, preferring the esteem of the king to complicity with such intriguers. Then Madame de Chevreuse sold the secret to M. Colbert, and as she is insatiable, and was not satisfied with having extorted a hundred thousand crowns from a servant of the state, she has taken a still bolder flight, in search of surer sources of supply. Is that true, madame?"

"You know all, sire," said the queen, more uneasy than irritated.

"Now," continued Philippe, "I have good reason to dislike this fury, who comes to my court to plan the shame of some and the ruin of others. If Heaven has suffered certain crimes to be committed, and has concealed them in the shadow of its clemency, I will not permit Madame de Chevreuse to counteract the just designs of fate."

The latter part of this speech had so agitated the queen-mother, that her son had pity on her. He took her hand and kissed it tenderly; she did not feel that in that kiss, given in spite of repulsion and bitterness of the heart, there was a pardon for eight years of suffering. Philippe allowed the silence of a moment to swallow the emotions that had just developed themselves. Then, with a cheerful smile:

"We will not go to-day," said he, "I have a plan." And, turning towards the door, he hoped to see Aramis, whose absence began to alarm him. The queen-mother wished to leave the room.

"Remain where you are, mother," said he, "I wish you to make your peace with M. Fouquet."

"I bear M. Fouquet no ill-will; I only dreaded his prodigalities."

"We will put that to rights, and will take nothing of the superintendent but his good qualities."

"What is your majesty looking for?" said Henrietta, seeing the king's eyes constantly turned towards the door, and wishing to let fly a little poisoned arrow at his heart, supposing he was so anxiously expecting either La Vallière or a letter from her.

"My sister," said the young man, who had divined her thought, thanks to that marvelous perspicuity of which fortune was from that time about to allow him the exercise, "my sister, I am expecting a most distinguished man, a most able counselor, whom I wish to present to you all, recommending him to your good graces. Ah! come in, then, D'Artagnan."

"What does your majesty wish?" said D'Artagnan, appearing.

"Where is monsieur the bishop of Vannes, your friend?"

"Why, sire—"

"I am waiting for him, and he does not come. Let him be sought for."

D'Artagnan remained for an instant stupefied; but soon, reflecting that Aramis had left Vaux privately on a mission from the king, he concluded that the king wished to preserve the secret. "Sire," replied he, "does your majesty absolutely require M. d'Herblay to be brought to you?"

"Absolutely is not the word," said Philippe; "I do not want him so particularly as that; but if he can be found—"

"I thought so," said D'Artagnan to himself.

"Is this M. d'Herblay the bishop of Vannes?"

"Yes, madame."

"A friend of M. Fouquet?"

"Yes, madame; an old musketeer."

Anne of Austria blushed.

"One of the four braves who formerly performed such prodigies."

The old queen repented of having wished to bite; she broke off the conversation, in order to preserve the rest of her teeth. "Whatever may be your choice, sire," said she, "I have no doubt it will be excellent."

All bowed in support of that sentiment.

"You will find in him," continued Philippe, "the depth and penetration of M. de Richelieu, without the avarice of M. de Mazarin!"

"A prime minister, sire?" said Monsieur, in a fright.

"I will tell you all about that, brother; but it is strange that M. d'Herblay is not here!"

He called out:

"Let M. Fouquet be informed that I wish to speak to him—oh! before you, before you; do not retire!"

M. de Saint-Aignan returned, bringing satisfactory news of the queen, who only kept her bed from precaution, and to have strength to carry out the king's wishes. Whilst everybody was seeking M. Fouquet and Aramis, the new king quietly continued his experiments, and everybody, family, officers, servants, had not the least suspicion of his identity, his air, his voice, and manners were so like the king's. On his side, Philippe, applying to all countenances the accurate descriptions and key-notes of character supplied by his accomplice Aramis, conducted himself so as not to give birth to a doubt in the minds of those who surrounded him. Nothing from that time could disturb the usurper. With what strange facility had Providence just reversed the loftiest fortune of the world to substitute the lowliest in its stead! Philippe admired the goodness of God with regard to himself, and seconded it with all the resources of his admirable nature. But he felt, at times, something like a specter gliding between him and the rays of his new glory. Aramis did not appear. The conversation had languished in the royal family; Philippe, preoccupied, forgot to dismiss his brother and Madame Henrietta. The latter were astonished, and began, by degrees, to lose all patience. Anne of Austria stooped towards her son's ear and addressed some words to him in Spanish. Philippe was completely ignorant of that language, and grew pale at this unexpected obstacle. But, as if the spirit of the imperturbable Aramis had covered him with his infallibility, instead of appearing disconcerted, Philippe rose. "Well! what?" said Anne of Austria.

"What is all that noise?" said Philippe, turning round towards the door of the second staircase.

And a voice was heard saying, "This way, this way! A few steps more, sire!"

"The voice of M. Fouquet," said D'Artagnan, who was standing close to the queen-mother.

"Then M. d'Herblay cannot be far off," added Philippe.

But he then saw what he little thought to have beheld so near to him. All eyes were turned towards the door at which M. Fouquet was expected to enter; but it was not M. Fouquet who entered. A terrible cry resounded from all corners of the chamber, a painful cry uttered by the king and all present. It is given to but few men, even those whose destiny contains the strangest elements, and accidents the most wonderful, to contemplate such a spectacle similar to that which presented itself in the royal chamber at that moment. The half-closed shutters only admitted the entrance of an uncertain light passing through thick violet velvet curtains lined with silk. In this soft shade, the eyes were by degrees dilated, and every one present saw others rather with imagination than with actual sight. There could not, however, escape, in these circumstances, one of the surrounding details; and the new object which presented itself appeared as luminous as though it shone out in full sunlight. So it happened with Louis XIV., when he showed himself, pale and frowning, in the doorway of the secret stairs. The face of Fouquet appeared behind him, stamped with sorrow and determination. The queen-mother, who perceived Louis XIV., and who held the hand of Philippe, uttered a cry of which we have spoken, as if she beheld a phantom. Monsieur was bewildered, and kept turning his head in astonishment from one to the other. Madame made a step forward, thinking she was looking at the form of her brother-in-law reflected in a mirror. And, in fact, the illusion was possible. The two princes, both pale as death—for we renounce the hope of being able to describe the fearful state of Philippe—trembling, clenching their hands convulsively, measured each other with looks, and darted their glances, sharp as poniards, at each other. Silent, panting, bending forward, they appeared as if about to spring upon an enemy. The unheard-of resemblance of countenance, gesture, shape, height, even to the resemblance of costume, produced by chance—for Louis XIV. had been to the Louvre and put on a violet-coloured dress—the perfect analogy of the two princes, completed the consternation of Anne of Austria. And yet she did not at once guess the truth. There are misfortunes in life so truly dreadful that no one will at first accept them; people rather believe in the supernatural and the impossible. Louis had not reckoned on these obstacles. He expected that he had only to appear to be acknowledged. A living sun, he could not endure the suspicion of equality with any one. He did not admit that every torch should not become darkness at the instant he shone out with his conquering ray. At the aspect of Philippe, then, he was perhaps more terrified than any one round him, and his silence, his immobility were, this time, a concentration and a calm which precede the violent explosions of concentrated passion.

But Fouquet! who shall paint his emotion and stupor in presence of this living portrait of his master! Fouquet thought Aramis was right, that this newly-arrived was a king as pure in his race as the other, and that, for having repudiated all participation in this *coup d'etat*, so skillfully got up by the General of the Jesuits, he must be a mad enthusiast, unworthy of ever dipping his hands in political grand strategy work. And then it was the blood of Louis XIII. which Fouquet was sacrificing to the blood of Louis XIII.; it was to a selfish ambition he was sacrificing a noble ambition; to the right of keeping he sacrificed the right of having. The whole extent of his fault was revealed to him at simple sight of the pretender. All that passed in the mind of Fouquet was lost upon the persons present. He had five minutes to focus meditation on this point of conscience; five minutes, that is to say five ages, during which the two kings and their family scarcely found energy to breathe after so terrible a shock. D'Artagnan, leaning against the wall, in front of Fouquet, with his hand to his brow, asked himself the cause of such a wonderful prodigy. He could not have said at once why he doubted, but he knew assuredly that he had reason to doubt, and that in this meeting of the two Louis XIV.s lay all the doubt and difficulty that during late days had rendered the conduct of Aramis so suspicious to the

musketeer. These ideas were, however, enveloped in a haze, a veil of mystery. The actors in this assembly seemed to swim in the vapors of a confused waking. Suddenly Louis XIV., more impatient and more accustomed to command, ran to one of the shutters, which he opened, tearing the curtains in his eagerness. A flood of living light entered the chamber, and made Philippe draw back to the alcove. Louis seized upon this movement with eagerness, and addressing himself to the queen:

"My mother," said he, "do you not acknowledge your son, since every one here has forgotten his king!" Anne of Austria started, and raised her arms towards Heaven, without being able to articulate a single word.

"My mother," said Philippe, with a calm voice, "do you not acknowledge your son?" And this time, in his turn, Louis drew back.

As to Anne of Austria, struck suddenly in head and heart with fell remorse, she lost her equilibrium. No one aiding her, for all were petrified, she sank back in her fauteuil, breathing a weak, trembling sigh. Louis could not endure the spectacle and the affront. He bounded towards D'Artagnan, over whose brain a vertigo was stealing and who staggered as he caught at the door for support.

"*A moi! mousquetaire!*" said he. "Look us in the face and say which is the paler, he or I!"

This cry roused D'Artagnan, and stirred in his heart the fibers of obedience. He shook his head, and, without more hesitation, he walked straight up to Philippe, on whose shoulder he laid his hand, saying, "Monsieur, you are my prisoner!"

Philippe did not raise his eyes towards Heaven, nor stir from the spot, where he seemed nailed to the floor, his eye intently fixed upon the king his brother. He reproached him with a sublime silence for all misfortunes past, all tortures to come. Against this language of the soul the king felt he had no power; he cast down his eyes, dragging away precipitately his brother and sister, forgetting his mother, sitting motionless within three paces of the son whom she left a second time to be condemned to death. Philippe approached Anne of Austria, and said to her, in a soft and nobly agitated voice:

"If I were not your son, I should curse you, my mother, for having rendered me so unhappy."

D'Artagnan felt a shudder pass through the marrow of his bones. He bowed respectfully to the young prince, and said as he bent, "Excuse me, my lord, I am but a soldier, and my oaths are his who has just left the chamber."

"Thank you, M. d'Artagnan.... What has become of M. d'Herblay?"

"M. d'Herblay is in safety, my lord," said a voice behind them; "and no one, while I live and am free, shall cause a hair to fall from his head."

"Monsieur Fouquet!" said the prince, smiling sadly.

"Pardon me, my lord," said Fouquet, kneeling, "but he who is just gone out from hence was my guest."

"Here are," murmured Philippe, with a sigh, "brave friends and good hearts. They make me regret the world. On, M. d'Artagnan, I follow you."

At the moment the captain of the musketeers was about to leave the room with his prisoner, Colbert appeared, and, after remitting an order from the king to D'Artagnan, retired. D'Artagnan read the paper, and then crushed it in his hand with rage.

"What is it?" asked the prince.

"Read, my lord," replied the musketeer.

Philippe read the following words, hastily traced by the hand of the king:

"M. d'Artagnan will conduct the prisoner to the Ile Sainte-Marguerite. He will cover his face with an iron vizor, which the prisoner shall never raise except at peril of his life."

"That is just," said Philippe, with resignation; "I am ready."

"Aramis was right," said Fouquet, in a low voice, to the musketeer, "this one is every whit as much a king as the other."

"More so!" replied D'Artagnan. "He wanted only you and me."

#### XXV. In Which Porthos Thinks He Is Pursuing a Duchy.

Aramis and Porthos, having profited by the time granted them by Fouquet, did honour to the French cavalry by their speed. Porthos did not clearly understand on what kind of mission he was forced to display so much velocity; but as he saw Aramis spurring on furiously, he, Porthos, spurred on in the same way. They had soon, in this manner, placed twelve leagues between them and Vaux; they were then obliged to change horses, and organize a sort of post arrangement. It was during a relay that Porthos ventured to interrogate Aramis discreetly.

"Hush!" replied the latter, "know only that our fortune depends on our speed."

As if Porthos had still been the musketeer, without a sou or a *maille* of 1626, he pushed forward. That magic word "fortune" always means something in the human ear. It means *enough* for those who have nothing; it means *too much* for those who have enough.

"I shall be made a duke!" said Porthos, aloud. He was speaking to himself.

"That is possible," replied Aramis, smiling after his own fashion, as Porthos's horse passed him. Aramis felt, notwithstanding, as though his brain were on fire; the activity of the body had not yet succeeded in subduing that of the mind. All there is of raging passion, mental toothache or mortal threat, raged, gnawed and grumbled in the thoughts of the unhappy prelate. His countenance exhibited visible traces of this rude combat. Free on the highway to abandon himself to every impression of the moment, Aramis did not fail to swear at every start of his horse, at every inequality in the road. Pale, at times inundated with boiling sweats, then again dry and icy, he flogged his horses till the blood streamed from their sides. Porthos, whose dominant fault was not sensibility, groaned at this. Thus traveled they on for eight long hours, and then arrived at Orleans. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. Aramis, on observing this, judged that nothing showed pursuit to be a possibility. It would be without example that a troop capable of taking him and Porthos should be furnished with relays sufficient to perform forty leagues in eight hours. Thus, admitting pursuit, which was not at all manifest, the fugitives were five hours in advance of their pursuers.

Aramis thought that there might be no imprudence in taking a little rest, but that to continue would make the matter more certain. Twenty leagues more, performed with the same rapidity, twenty more leagues devoured, and no one, not even D'Artagnan, could overtake the enemies of the king. Aramis felt obliged, therefore, to inflict upon Porthos the pain of mounting on horseback again. They rode on till seven o'clock in the evening, and had only one post more between them and Blois. But here a diabolical accident alarmed Aramis greatly. There were no horses at the post. The prelate asked himself by what infernal machination his enemies had succeeded in depriving him of the means of going further,—he who never recognized chance as a deity, who found a cause for every accident, preferred believing that the refusal of the postmaster, at such an hour, in such a country, was the consequence of an order emanating from above: an order given with a view of stopping short the king-maker in the midst of his flight. But at the moment he was about to fly into a passion, so as to procure either a horse or an explanation, he was struck with the recollection that the Comte de la Fere lived in the neighborhood.

"I am not traveling," said he; "I do not want horses for a whole stage. Find me two horses to go and pay a visit to a nobleman of my acquaintance who resides near this place."

"What nobleman?" asked the postmaster.

"M. le Comte de la Fere."

"Oh!" replied the postmaster, uncovering with respect, "a very worthy nobleman. But, whatever may be my desire to make myself agreeable to him, I cannot furnish you with horses, for all mine are engaged by M. le Duc de Beaufort."

"Indeed!" said Aramis, much disappointed.

"Only," continued the postmaster, "if you will put up with a little carriage I have, I will harness an old blind horse who has still his legs left, and peradventure will draw you to the house of M. le Comte de la Fere."

"It is worth a louis," said Aramis.

"No, monsieur, such a ride is worth no more than a crown; that is what M. Grimaud, the comte's intendant, always pays me when he makes use of that carriage; and I should not wish the Comte de la Fere to have to reproach me with having imposed on one of his friends."

"As you please," said Aramis, "particularly as regards disobliging the Comte de la Fere; only I think I have a right to give you a louis for your idea."

"Oh! doubtless," replied the postmaster with delight. And he himself harnessed the ancient horse to the creaking carriage. In the meantime Porthos was curious to behold. He imagined he had discovered a clew to the secret, and he felt pleased, because a visit to Athos, in the first place, promised him much satisfaction, and, in the next, gave him the hope of finding at the same time a good bed and good supper. The master, having got the carriage ready, ordered one of his men to drive the strangers to La Fere. Porthos took his seat by the side of Aramis, whispering in his ear, "I understand."

"Aha!" said Aramis, "and what do you understand, my friend?"

"We are going, on the part of the king, to make some great proposal to Athos."

"Pooh!" said Aramis.

"You need tell me nothing about it," added the worthy Porthos, endeavoring to reseat himself so as to avoid the jolting, "you need tell me nothing, I shall guess."

"Well! do, my friend; guess away."

They arrived at Athos's dwelling about nine o'clock in the evening, favoured by a splendid moon. This cheerful light rejoiced Porthos beyond expression; but Aramis appeared annoyed by it in an equal degree. He could not help showing something of this to Porthos, who replied—"Ay! ay! I guess how it is! the mission is a secret one."

These were his last words in the carriage. The driver interrupted him by saying, "Gentlemen, we have arrived."

Porthos and his companion alighted before the gate of the little chateau, where we are about to meet again our old acquaintances Athos and Bragelonne, the latter of whom had disappeared since the discovery of the infidelity of La Vallière. If there be one saying truer than another, it is this: great griefs contain within themselves the germ of consolation. This painful wound, inflicted upon Raoul, had drawn him nearer to his father again; and God knows how sweet were the consolations which flowed from the eloquent mouth and generous heart of Athos. The wound was not cicatrized, but Athos, by dint of conversing with his son and mixing a little more of his life with that of the young man, had brought him to understand that this pang of a first infidelity is necessary to every human existence; and that no one has loved without encountering it. Raoul listened, again and again, but never understood. Nothing replaces in the deeply afflicted heart the remembrance and thought of the beloved object. Raoul then replied to the reasoning of his father:

"Monsieur, all that you tell me is true; I believe that no one has suffered in the affections of the heart so much as you have; but you are a man too great by reason of intelligence, and too severely tried by adverse fortune not to allow for the weakness of the soldier who suffers for the first time. I am paying a tribute that will not be paid a second time; permit me to plunge myself so deeply in my grief that I may forget myself in it, that I may drown even my reason in it."

"Raoul! Raoul!"

"Listen, monsieur. Never shall I accustom myself to the idea that Louise, the chastest and most innocent of women, has been able to so basely deceive a man so honest and so true a lover as myself. Never can I persuade myself that I see that sweet and noble mask change into a hypocritical lascivious face. Louise lost! Louise infamous! Ah! my lord, that idea is much more cruel to me than Raoul abandoned—Raoul unhappy!"

Athos then employed the heroic remedy. He defended Louise against Raoul, and justified her perfidy by her love. "A woman who would have yielded to a king because he is a king," said he, "would deserve to be styled infamous; but Louise loves Louis. Young, both, they have forgotten, he his rank, she her vows. Love absolves everything, Raoul. The two young people love each other with sincerity."

And when he had dealt this severe poniard-thrust, Athos, with a sigh, saw Raoul bound away beneath the rankling wound, and fly to the thickest recesses of the wood, or the solitude of his chamber, whence, an hour after, he would return, pale, trembling, but subdued. Then, coming up to Athos with a smile, he would kiss his hand, like the dog who, having been beaten, caresses a respected master, to redeem his fault. Raoul redeemed nothing but his weakness, and only confessed his grief. Thus passed away the days that followed that scene in which Athos had so violently shaken the indomitable pride of the king. Never, when conversing with his son, did he make any allusion to that scene; never did he give him the details of that vigorous lecture, which might, perhaps, have consoled the young man, by showing him his rival humbled. Athos did not wish that the offended lover should forget the respect due to his king. And when Bragelonne, ardent, angry, and melancholy, spoke with contempt of royal words, of the equivocal faith which certain madmen draw from promises that emanate from thrones, when, passing over two centuries, with that rapidity of a bird that traverses a narrow strait to go from one continent to the other, Raoul ventured to predict the time in which kings would be esteemed as less than other men, Athos said to him, in his serene, persuasive voice, "You are right, Raoul; all that you say will happen; kings will lose their privileges, as stars which have survived their aeons lose their splendor. But when that moment comes, Raoul, we shall be dead. And remember well what I say to you. In this world, all, men, women, and kings, must live for the present. We can only live for the future for God."

This was the manner in which Athos and Raoul were, as usual, conversing, and walking backwards and forwards in the long alley of limes in the park, when the bell which served to announce to the comte either the hour of dinner or the arrival of a visitor, was rung; and, without attaching any importance to it, he turned towards the house with his son; and at the end of the alley they found themselves in the presence of Aramis and Porthos.

Raoul uttered a cry, and affectionately embraced Porthos. Aramis and Athos embraced like old men; and this embrace itself being a question for Aramis, he immediately said, “My friend, we have not long to remain with you.”

“Ah!” said the comte.

“Only time to tell you of my good fortune,” interrupted Porthos.

“Ah!” said Raoul.

Athos looked silently at Aramis, whose somber air had already appeared to him very little in harmony with the good news Porthos hinted.

“What is the good fortune that has happened to you? Let us hear it,” said Raoul, with a smile.

“The king has made me a duke,” said the worthy Porthos, with an air of mystery, in the ear of the young man, “a duke by *brevet*.”

But the *asides* of Porthos were always loud enough to be heard by everybody. His murmurs were in the diapason of ordinary roaring. Athos heard him, and uttered an exclamation which made Aramis start. The latter took Athos by the arm, and, after having asked Porthos’s permission to say a word to his friend in private, “My dear Athos,” he began, “you see me overwhelmed with grief and trouble.”

“With grief and trouble, my dear friend?” cried the comte; “oh, what?”

“In two words. I have conspired against the king; that conspiracy has failed, and, at this moment, I am doubtless pursued.”

“You are pursued!—a conspiracy! Eh! my friend, what do you tell me?”

“The saddest truth. I am entirely ruined.”

“Well, but Porthos—this title of duke—what does all that mean?”

“That is the subject of my severest pain; that is the deepest of my wounds. I have, believing in infallible success, drawn Porthos into my conspiracy. He threw himself into it, as you know he would do, with all his strength, without knowing what he was about; and now he is as much compromised as myself—as completely ruined as I am.”

“Good God!” And Athos turned towards Porthos, who was smiling complacently.

“I must make you acquainted with the whole. Listen to me,” continued Aramis; and he related the history as we know it. Athos, during the recital, several times felt the sweat break from his forehead. “It was a great idea,” said he, “but a great error.”

“For which I am punished, Athos.”

“Therefore, I will not tell you my entire thought.”

“Tell it, nevertheless.”

“It is a crime.”

“A capital crime; I know it is. *Lese majeste*.”

“Porthos! poor Porthos!”

“What would you advise me to do? Success, as I have told you, was certain.”

“M. Fouquet is an honest man.”

“And I a fool for having so ill-judged him,” said Aramis. “Oh, the wisdom of man! Oh, millstone that grinds the world! and which is one day stopped by a grain of sand which has fallen, no one knows how, between its wheels.”

“Say by a diamond, Aramis. But the thing is done. How do you think of acting?”

“I am taking away Porthos. The king will never believe that that worthy man has acted innocently. He never can believe that Porthos has thought he was serving the king, whilst acting as he has done. His head would pay my fault. It shall not, must not, be so.”

“You are taking him away, whither?”

“To Belle-Isle, at first. That is an impregnable place of refuge. Then, I have the sea, and a vessel to pass over into England, where I have many relations.”

“You? in England?”

“Yes, or else in Spain, where I have still more.”

“But, our excellent Porthos! you ruin him, for the king will confiscate all his property.”

“All is provided for. I know how, when once in Spain, to reconcile myself with Louis XIV., and restore Porthos to favour.”

“You have credit, seemingly, Aramis!” said Athos, with a discreet air.

“Much; and at the service of my friends.”

These words were accompanied by a warm pressure of the hand.

“Thank you,” replied the comte.

“And while we are on this head,” said Aramis, “you also are a malcontent; you also, Raoul, have griefs to lay to the king. Follow our example; pass over into Belle-Isle. Then we shall see, I guarantee upon my honour, that in a month there will be war between France and Spain on the subject of this son of Louis XIII., who is an Infante likewise, and whom France detains inhumanly. Now, as Louis XIV. would have no inclination for a war on that subject, I will answer for an arrangement, the result of which must bring greatness to Porthos and to me, and a duchy in France to you, who are already a grandee of Spain. Will you join us?”

“No; for my part I prefer having something to reproach the king with; it is a pride natural to my race to pretend to a superiority over royal races. Doing what you propose, I should become the obliged of the king; I should certainly be the gainer on that ground, but I should be a loser in my conscience.—No, thank you!”

“Then give me two things, Athos,—your absolution.”

“Oh! I give it you if you really wished to avenge the weak and oppressed against the oppressor.”

“That is sufficient for me,” said Aramis, with a blush which was lost in the obscurity of the night. “And now, give me your two best horses to gain the second post, as I have been refused any under the pretext of the Duc de Beaufort being traveling in this country.”

“You shall have the two best horses, Aramis; and again I recommend poor Porthos strongly to your care.”

“Oh! I have no fear on that score. One word more: do you think I am maneuvering for him as I ought?”

“The evil being committed, yes; for the king would not pardon him, and you have, whatever may be said, always a supporter in M. Fouquet, who will not abandon you, he being himself compromised, notwithstanding his heroic action.”

“You are right. And that is why, instead of gaining the sea at once, which would proclaim my fear and guilt, that is why I remain upon French ground. But Belle-Isle will be for me whatever ground I wish it to be, English, Spanish, or Roman; all will depend, with me, on the standard I shall think proper to unfurl.”

“How so?”

“It was I who fortified Belle-Isle; and, so long as I defend it, nobody can take Belle-Isle from me. And then, as you have said just now, M. Fouquet is there. Belle-Isle will not be attacked without the signature of M. Fouquet.”

“That is true. Nevertheless, be prudent. The king is both cunning and strong.” Aramis smiled.

“I again recommend Porthos to you,” repeated the count, with a sort of cold persistence.

“Whatever becomes of me, count,” replied Aramis, in the same tone, “our brother Porthos will fare as I do—or *better*.”

Athos bowed whilst pressing the hand of Aramis, and turned to embrace Porthos with emotion.

“I was born lucky, was I not?” murmured the latter, transported with happiness, as he folded his cloak round him.

“Come, my dear friend,” said Aramis.

Raoul had gone out to give orders for the saddling of the horses. The group was already divided. Athos saw his two friends on the point of departure, and something like a mist passed before his eyes and weighed upon his heart.

“It is strange,” thought he, “whence comes the inclination I feel to embrace Porthos once more?” At that moment Porthos turned round, and he came towards his old friend with open arms. This last endearment was tender as in youth, as in times when hearts were warm—life happy. And then Porthos mounted his horse. Aramis came back once more to throw his arms round the neck of Athos. The latter watched them along the high-road, elongated by the shade, in their white cloaks. Like phantoms they seemed to enlarge on their departure from the earth, and it was not in the mist, but in the declivity of the ground that they disappeared. At the end of the perspective, both seemed to have given a spring with their feet, which made them vanish as if evaporated into cloud-land.

Then Athos, with a very heavy heart, returned towards the house, saying to Bragelonne, “Raoul, I don’t know what it is that has just told me that I have seen those two for the last time.”

“It does not astonish me, monsieur, that you should have such a thought,” replied the young man, “for I have at this moment the same, and think also that I shall never see Messieurs du Vallon and d’Herblay again.”

“Oh! you,” replied the count, “you speak like a man rendered sad by a different cause; you see everything in black; you are young, and if you chance never to see those old friends again, it will because they no longer exist in the world in which you have yet many years to pass. But I—”

Raoul shook his head sadly, and leaned upon the shoulder of the count, without either of them finding another word in their hearts, which were ready to overflow.

All at once a noise of horses and voices, from the extremity of the road to Blois, attracted their attention that way. Flambeaux-bearers shook their torches merrily among the trees of their route, and turned round, from time to time, to avoid distancing the horsemen who followed them. These flames, this noise, this dust of a dozen richly caparisoned horses, formed a strange contrast in the middle of the night with the melancholy and almost funereal disappearance of the two shadows of Aramis and Porthos. Athos went towards the house; but he had hardly reached the parterre, when the entrance gate appeared in a blaze; all the flambeaux stopped and appeared to enflame the road. A cry was heard of “M. le Duc de Beaufort”—and Athos sprang towards the door of his house. But the duke had already alighted from his horse, and was looking around him.

“I am here, my lord,” said Athos.

“Ah! good evening, dear count,” said the prince, with that frank cordiality which won him so many hearts. “Is it too late for a friend?”

“Ah! my dear prince, come in!” said the count.

And, M. de Beaufort leaning on the arm of Athos, they entered the house, followed by Raoul, who walked respectfully and modestly among the officers of the prince, with several of whom he was acquainted.

The prince turned round at the moment when Raoul, in order to leave him alone with Athos, was shutting the door, and preparing to go with the other officers into an adjoining apartment.

“Is that the young man I have heard M. le Prince speak so highly of?” asked M. de Beaufort.

“It is, my lord.”

“He is quite the soldier; let him stay, count, we cannot spare him.”

“Remain, Raoul, since my lord permits it,” said Athos.

“*Ma foi!* he is tall and handsome!” continued the duke. “Will you give him to me, my lord, if I ask him of you?”

“How am I to understand you, my lord?” said Athos.

“Why, I call upon you to bid you farewell.”

“Farewell!”

“Yes, in good truth. Have you no idea of what I am about to become?”

“Why, I suppose, what you have always been, my lord,—a valiant prince, and an excellent gentleman.”

“I am going to become an African prince,—a Bedouin gentleman. The king is sending me to make conquests among the Arabs.”

"What is this you tell me, my lord?"

"Strange, is it not? I, the Parisian *par essence*, I who have reigned in the faubourgs, and have been called King of the Halles,—I am going to pass from the Place Maubert to the minarets of Gigelli; from a Frondeur I am becoming an adventurer!"

"Oh, my lord, if you did not yourself tell me that—"

"It would not be credible, would it? Believe me, nevertheless, and we have but to bid each other farewell. This is what comes of getting into favour again."

"Into favour?"

"Yes. You smile. Ah, my dear count, do you know why I have accepted this enterprise, can you guess?"

"Because your highness loves glory above—everything."

"Oh! no; there is no glory in firing muskets at savages. I see no glory in that, for my part, and it is more probable that I shall there meet with something else. But I have wished, and still wish earnestly, my dear count, that my life should have that last *facet*, after all the whimsical exhibitions I have seen myself make during fifty years. For, in short, you must admit that it is sufficiently strange to be born the grandson of a king, to have made war against kings, to have been reckoned among the powers of the age, to have maintained my rank, to feel Henry IV. within me, to be great admiral of France—and then to go and get killed at Gigelli, among all those Turks, Saracens, and Moors."

"My lord, you harp with strange persistence on that theme," said Athos, in an agitated voice. "How can you suppose that so brilliant a destiny will be extinguished in that remote and miserable scene?"

"And can you believe, upright and simple as you are, that if I go into Africa for this ridiculous motive, I will not endeavor to come out of it without ridicule? Shall I not give the world cause to speak of me? And to be spoken of, nowadays, when there are Monsieur le Prince, M. de Turenne, and many others, my contemporaries, I, admiral of France, grandson of Henry IV., king of Paris, have I anything left but to get myself killed? *Cordieu!* I will be talked of, I tell you; I shall be killed whether or not; if not there, somewhere else."

"Why, my lord, this is mere exaggeration; and hitherto you have shown nothing exaggerated save in bravery."

"*Peste!* my dear friend, there is bravery in facing scurvy, dysentery, locusts, poisoned arrows, as my ancestor St. Louis did. Do you know those fellows still use poisoned arrows? And then, you know me of old, I fancy, and you know that when I once make up my mind to a thing, I perform it in grim earnest."

"Yes, you made up your mind to escape from Vincennes."

"Ay, but you aided me in that, my master; and, *a propos*, I turn this way and that, without seeing my old friend, M. Vaugrimaud. How is he?"

"M. Vaugrimaud is still your highness's most respectful servant," said Athos, smiling.

"I have a hundred pistoles here for him, which I bring as a legacy. My will is made, count."

"Ah! my lord! my lord!"

"And you may understand that if Grimaud's name were to appear in my will—" The duke began to laugh; then addressing Raoul, who, from the commencement of this conversation, had sunk into a profound reverie, "Young man," said he, "I know there is to be found here a certain De Vouvray wine, and I believe—" Raoul left the room precipitately to order the wine. In the meantime M. de Beaufort took the hand of Athos.

"What do you mean to do with him?" asked he.

"Nothing at present, my lord."

"Ah! yes, I know; since the passion of the king for La Vallière."

"Yes, my lord."

"That is all true, then, is it? I think I know her, that little La Vallière. She is not particularly handsome, if I remember right?"

"No, my lord," said Athos.

"Do you know whom she reminds me of?"

"Does she remind your highness of any one?"

"She reminds me of a very agreeable girl, whose mother lived in the Halles."

"Ah! ah!" said Athos, smiling.

"Oh! the good old times," added M. de Beaufort. "Yes, La Vallière reminds me of that girl."

"Who had a son, had she not?" [3](#)

"I believe she had," replied the duke, with careless *naivete* and a complaisant forgetfulness, of which no words could translate the tone and the vocal expression. "Now, here is poor Raoul, who is your son, I believe."

"Yes, he is my son, my lord."

"And the poor lad has been cut out by the king, and he frets."

"Still better, my lord, he abstains."

"You are going to let the boy rust in idleness; it is a mistake. Come, give him to me."

"My wish is to keep him at home, my lord. I have no longer anything in the world but him, and as long as he likes to remain—"

"Well, well," replied the duke. "I could, nevertheless, have soon put matters to rights again. I assure you, I think he has in him the stuff of which marechals of France are made; I have seen more than one produced from less likely rough material."

"That is very possible, my lord; but it is the king who makes marechals of France, and Raoul will never accept anything of the king."

Raoul interrupted this conversation by his return. He preceded Grimaud, whose still steady hands carried the plateau with one glass and a bottle of the duke's favourite wine. On seeing his old *protege*, the duke uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"Grimaud! Good evening, Grimaud!" said he; "how goes it?"

The servant bowed profoundly, as much gratified as his noble interlocutor.

"Two old friends!" said the duke, shaking honest Grimaud's shoulder after a vigorous fashion; which was followed by another still more profound and delighted bow from Grimaud.

"But what is this, count, only one glass?"

"I should not think of drinking with your highness, unless your highness permitted me," replied Athos, with noble humility.

"*Cordieu!* you were right to bring only one glass, we will both drink out of it, like two brothers in arms. Begin, count."

"Do me the honour," said Athos, gently putting back the glass.

"You are a charming friend," replied the Duc de Beaufort, who drank, and passed the goblet to his companion. "But that is not all," continued he, "I am still thirsty, and I wish to do honour to this handsome young man who stands here. I carry good luck with me, vicomte," said he to Raoul; "wish for something while drinking out of my glass, and may the black plague grab me if what you wish does not come to pass!" He held the goblet to Raoul, who hastily moistened his lips, and replied with the same promptitude:

"I have wished for something, my lord." His eyes sparkled with a gloomy fire, and the blood mounted to his cheeks; he terrified Athos, if only with his smile.

"And what have you wished for?" replied the duke, sinking back into his fauteuil, whilst with one hand he returned the bottle to Grimaud, and with the other gave him a purse.

"Will you promise me, my lord, to grant me what I wish for?"

"*Pardieu!* That is agreed upon."

"I wished, monsieur le duc, to go with you to Gigelli."

Athos became pale, and was unable to conceal his agitation. The duke looked at his friend, as if desirous to assist him to parry this unexpected blow.

"That is difficult, my dear vicomte, very difficult," added he, in a lower tone of voice.

"Pardon me, my lord, I have been indiscreet," replied Raoul, in a firm voice; "but as you yourself invited me to wish—"

"To wish to leave me?" said Athos.

"Oh! monsieur—can you imagine—"

"Well, *mordieu!*" cried the duke, "the young vicomte is right! What can he do here? He will go moldy with grief."

Raoul blushed, and the excitable prince continued: "War is a distraction: we gain everything by it; we can only lose one thing by it—life—then so much the worse!"

"That is to say, memory," said Raoul, eagerly; "and that is to say, so much the better!"

He repented of having spoken so warmly when he saw Athos rise and open the window; which was, doubtless, to conceal his emotion. Raoul sprang towards the comte, but the latter had already overcome his emotion, and turned to the lights with a serene and impassible countenance. "Well, come," said the duke, "let us see! Shall he go, or shall he not? If he goes, comte, he shall be my aide-de-camp, my son."

"My lord!" cried Raoul, bending his knee.

"My lord!" cried Athos, taking the hand of the duke; "Raoul shall do just as he likes."

"Oh! no, monsieur, just as you like," interrupted the young man.

"*Par la corbleu!*" said the prince in his turn, "it is neither the comte nor the vicomte that shall have his way, it is I. I will take him away. The marine offers a superb fortune, my friend."

Raoul smiled again so sadly, that this time Athos felt his heart penetrated by it, and replied to him by a severe look. Raoul comprehended it all; he recovered his calmness, and was so guarded, that not another word escaped him. The duke at length rose, on observing the advanced hour, and said, with animation, "I am in great haste, but if I am told I have lost time in talking with a friend, I will reply I have gained—on the balance—a most excellent recruit."

"Pardon me, monsieur le duc," interrupted Raoul, "do not tell the king so, for it is not the king I wish to serve."

"Eh! my friend, whom, then, will you serve? The times are past when you might have said, 'I belong to M. de Beaufort.' No, nowadays, we all belong to the king, great or small. Therefore, if you serve on board my vessels, there can be nothing equivocal about it, my dear vicomte; it will be the king you will serve."

Athos waited with a kind of impatient joy for the reply about to be made to this embarrassing question by Raoul, the intractable enemy of the king, his rival. The father hoped that the obstacle would overcome the desire. He was thankful to M. de Beaufort, whose lightness or generous reflection had thrown an impediment in the way of the departure of a son, now his only joy. But Raoul, still firm and tranquil, replied: "Monsieur le duc, the objection you make I have already considered in my mind. I will serve on board your vessels, because you do me the honour to take me with you; but I shall there serve a more powerful master than the king: I shall serve God!"

"God! how so?" said the duke and Athos together.

"My intention is to make profession, and become a knight of Malta," added Bragelonne, letting fall, one by one, words more icy than the drops which fall from the bare trees after the tempests of winter. [4](#)

Under this blow Athos staggered and the prince himself was moved. Grimaud uttered a heavy groan, and let fall the bottle, which was broken without anybody paying attention. M. de Beaufort looked the young man in the face, and read plainly, though his eyes were cast down, the fire of resolution before which everything must give way. As to Athos, he was too well acquainted with that tender, but inflexible soul; he could not hope to make it deviate from the fatal road it had just chosen. He could only press the hand the duke held out to him. "Comte, I shall set off in two days for Toulon," said M. de Beaufort. "Will you meet me at Paris, in order that I may know your determination?"

"I will have the honour of thanking you there, *mon prince*, for all your kindness," replied the comte.

"And be sure to bring the vicomte with you, whether he follows me or does not follow me," added the duke; "he has my word, and I only ask yours."

Having thrown a little balm upon the wound of the paternal heart, he pulled the ear of Grimaud, whose eyes sparkled more than usual, and regained his escort in the parterre. The horses, rested and refreshed, set off with spirit through the lovely night, and soon placed a considerable distance between their master and the chateau.

Athos and Bragelonne were again face to face. Eleven o'clock was striking. The father and son preserved a profound silence towards each other, where an intelligent observer would have expected cries and tears. But these two men were of such a nature that all emotion following their final resolutions plunged itself so deep into their hearts that it was lost forever. They passed, then, silently and

almost breathlessly, the hour that preceded midnight. The clock, by striking, alone pointed out to them how many minutes had lasted the painful journey made by their souls in the immensity of their remembrances of the past and fear of the future. Athos rose first, saying, "it is late, then.... Till to-morrow."

Raoul rose, and in his turn embraced his father. The latter held him clasped to his breast, and said, in a tremulous voice, "In two days, you will have left me, my son—left me forever, Raoul!"

"Monsieur," replied the young man, "I had formed a determination, that of piercing my heart with my sword; but you would have thought that cowardly. I have renounced that determination, and *therefore* we must part."

"You leave me desolate by going, Raoul."

"Listen to me again, monsieur, I implore you. If I do not go, I shall die here of grief and love. I know how long a time I have to live thus. Send me away quickly, monsieur, or you will see me basely die before your eyes—in your house—this is stronger than my will—stronger than my strength—you may plainly see that within one month I have lived thirty years, and that I approach the end of my life."

"Then," said Athos, coldly, "you go with the intention of getting killed in Africa? Oh, tell me! do not lie!"

Raoul grew deadly pale, and remained silent for two seconds, which were to his father two hours of agony. Then, all at once: "Monsieur," said he, "I have promised to devote myself to God. In exchange for the sacrifice I make of my youth and liberty, I will only ask of Him one thing, and that is, to preserve me for you, because you are the only tie which attaches me to this world. God alone can give me the strength not to forget that I owe you everything, and that nothing ought to stand in my esteem before you."

Athos embraced his son tenderly, and said:

"You have just replied to me on the word of honour of an honest man; in two days we shall be with M. de Beaufort at Paris, and you will then do what will be proper for you to do. You are free, Raoul; adieu."

And he slowly gained his bedroom. Raoul went down into the garden, and passed the night in the alley of limes.

XXVIII. Preparations for Departure.

Athos lost no more time in combating this immutable resolution. He gave all his attention to preparing, during the two days the duke had granted him, the proper appointments for Raoul. This labor chiefly concerned Grimaud, who immediately applied himself to it with the good-will and intelligence we know he possessed. Athos gave this worthy servant orders to take the route to Paris when the equipments should be ready; and, not to expose himself to the danger of keeping the duke waiting, or delaying Raoul, so that the duke should perceive his absence, he himself, the day after the visit of M. de Beaufort, set off for Paris with his son.

For the poor young man it was an emotion easily to be understood, thus to return to Paris amongst all the people who had known and loved him. Every face recalled a pang to him who had suffered so much; to him who had loved so much, some circumstance of his unhappy love. Raoul, on approaching Paris, felt as if he were dying. Once in Paris, he really existed no longer. When he reached Guiche's residence, he was informed that Guiche was with Monsieur. Raoul took the road to the Luxembourg, and when arrived, without suspecting that he was going to the place where La Vallière had lived, he heard so much music and respired so many perfumes, he heard so much joyous laughter, and saw so many dancing shadows, that if it had not been for a charitable woman, who perceived him so dejected and pale beneath a doorway, he would have remained there a few minutes, and then would have gone away, never to return. But, as we have said, in the first ante-chamber he had stopped, solely for the sake of not mixing himself with all those happy beings he felt were moving around him in the adjacent salons. And as one of Monsieur's servants, recognizing him, had asked him if he wished to see Monsieur or Madame, Raoul had scarcely answered him, but had sunk down upon a bench near the velvet doorway, looking at a clock, which had stopped for nearly an hour. The servant had passed on, and another, better acquainted with him, had come up, and interrogated Raoul whether he should inform M. de Guiche of his being there. This name did not even arouse the recollections of Raoul. The persistent servant went on to relate that De Guiche had just invented a new game of lottery, and was teaching it to the ladies. Raoul, opening his large eyes, like the absent man in Theophrastus, made no answer, but his sadness increased two shades. With his head hanging down, his limbs relaxed, his mouth half open for the escape of his sighs, Raoul remained, thus forgotten, in the ante-chamber, when all at once a lady's robe passed, rubbing against the doors of a side salon, which opened on the gallery. A lady, young, pretty, and gay, scolding an officer of the household, entered by that way, and expressed herself with much vivacity. The officer replied in calm but firm sentences; it was rather a little love pet than a quarrel of courtiers, and was terminated by a kiss on the fingers of the lady. Suddenly, on perceiving Raoul, the lady became silent, and pushing away the officer:

"Make your escape, Malicorne," said she; "I did not think there was any one here. I shall curse you, if they have either heard or seen us!"

Malicorne hastened away. The young lady advanced behind Raoul, and stretching her joyous face over him as he lay:

"Monsieur is a gallant man," said she, "and no doubt—"

She here interrupted herself by uttering a cry. "Raoul!" said she, blushing.

"Mademoiselle de Montalais!" said Raoul, paler than death.

He rose unsteadily, and tried to make his way across the slippery mosaic of the floor; but she had comprehended that savage and cruel grief; she felt that in the flight of Raoul there was an accusation of herself. A woman, ever vigilant, she did not think she ought to let the opportunity slip of making good her justification; but Raoul, though stopped by her in the middle of the gallery, did not seem disposed to surrender without a combat. He took it up in a tone so cold and embarrassed, that if they had been thus surprised, the whole court would have no doubt about the proceedings of Mademoiselle de Montalais.

"Ah! monsieur," said she with disdain, "what you are doing is very unworthy of a gentleman. My heart inclines me to speak to you; you compromise me by a reception almost uncivil; you are wrong, monsieur; and you confound your friends with enemies. Farewell!"

Raoul had sworn never to speak of Louise, never even to look at those who might have seen Louise; he was going into another world, that he might never meet with anything Louise had seen, or even touched. But after the first shock of his pride, after having had a glimpse of Montalais, the companion of Louise—Montalais, who reminded him of the turret of Blois and the joys of youth—all his reason faded away.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle; it enters not, it cannot enter into my thoughts to be uncivil."

"Do you wish to speak to me?" said she, with the smile of former days. "Well! come somewhere else; for we may be surprised."

"Oh!" said he.

She looked at the clock, doubtingly, then, having reflected:

"In my apartment," said she, "we shall have an hour to ourselves." And taking her course, lighter than a fairy, she ran up to her chamber, followed by Raoul. Shutting the door, and placing in the hands of her *cameriste* the mantle she had held upon her arm:

"You were seeking M. de Guiche, were you not?" said she to Raoul.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"I will go and ask him to come up here, presently, after I have spoken to you."

"Do so, mademoiselle."

"Are you angry with me?"

Raoul looked at her for a moment, then, casting down his eyes, "Yes," said he.

"You think I was concerned in the plot which brought about the rupture, do you not?"

"Rupture!" said he, with bitterness. "Oh! mademoiselle, there can be no rupture where there has been no love."

"You are in error," replied Montalais; "Louise did love you."

Raoul started.

"Not with love, I know; but she liked you, and you ought to have married her before you set out for London."

Raoul broke into a sinister laugh, which made Montalais shudder.

"You tell me that very much at your ease, mademoiselle. Do people marry whom they like? You forget that the king then kept for himself as his mistress her of whom we are speaking."

"Listen," said the young woman, pressing the hands of Raoul in her own, "you were wrong in every way; a man of your age ought never to leave a woman of hers alone."

"There is no longer any faith in the world, then," said Raoul.

"No, vicomte," said Montalais, quietly. "Nevertheless, let me tell you that, if, instead of loving Louise coldly and philosophically, you had endeavored to awaken her to love—"

"Enough, I pray you, mademoiselle," said Raoul. "I feel as though you are all, of both sexes, of a different age from me. You can laugh, and you can banter agreeably. I, mademoiselle, I loved Mademoiselle de—" Raoul could not pronounce her name,—"I loved her well! I put my faith in her—now I am quits by loving her no longer."

"Oh, vicomte!" said Montalais, pointing to his reflection in a looking-glass.

"I know what you mean, mademoiselle; I am much altered, am I not? Well! Do you know why? Because my face is the mirror of my heart, the outer surface changed to match the mind within."

"You are consoled, then?" said Montalais, sharply.

"No, I shall never be consoled."

"I don't understand you, M. de Bragelonne."

"I care but little for that. I do not quite understand myself."

"You have not even tried to speak to Louise?"

"Who! I?" exclaimed the young man, with eyes flashing fire; "I!—Why do you not advise me to marry her? Perhaps the king would consent now." And he rose from his chair full of anger.

"I see," said Montalais, "that you are not cured, and that Louise has one enemy the more."

"One enemy the more!"

"Yes; favourites are but little beloved at the court of France."

"Oh! while she has her lover to protect her, is not that enough? She has chosen him of such a quality that her enemies cannot prevail against her." But, stopping all at once, "And then she has you for a friend, mademoiselle," added he, with a shade of irony which did not glide off the cuirass.

"Who! I?—Oh, no! I am no longer one of those whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière condescends to look upon; but—"

This *but*, so big with menace and with storm; this *but*, which made the heart of Raoul beat, such griefs did it presage for her whom lately he loved so dearly; this terrible *but*, so significant in a woman like Montalais, was interrupted by a moderately loud noise heard by the speakers proceeding from the alcove behind the wainscoting. Montalais turned to listen, and Raoul was already rising, when a lady entered the room quietly by the secret door, which she closed after her.

"Madame!" exclaimed Raoul, on recognizing the sister-in-law of the king.

"Stupid wretch!" murmured Montalais, throwing herself, but too late, before the princess, "I have been mistaken in an hour!" She had, however, time to warn the princess, who was walking towards Raoul.

"M. de Bragelonne, Madame," and at these words the princess drew back, uttering a cry in her turn.

"Your royal highness," said Montalais, with volubility, "is kind enough to think of this lottery, and—"

The princess began to lose countenance. Raoul hastened his departure, without divining all, but he felt that he was in the way. Madame was preparing a word of transition to recover herself, when a closet opened in front of the alcove, and M. de Guiche issued, all radiant, also from that closet. The palest of the four, we must admit, was still Raoul. The princess, however, was near fainting, and was obliged to lean upon the foot of the bed for support. No one ventured to support her. This scene occupied several minutes of terrible suspense. But Raoul broke it. He went up to the count, whose inexpressible emotion made his knees tremble, and taking his hand. "Dear count," said he, "tell Madame I am too unhappy not to merit pardon; tell her also that I have loved in the course of my life, and that the horror of the treachery that has been practiced on me renders me inexorable towards all other treachery that may be committed around me. This is why, mademoiselle," said he, smiling to Montalais, "I never would divulge the secret of the visits of my friend to your apartment. Obtain from Madame—from Madame, who is so clement and so generous,—obtain her pardon for you whom she has just surprised also. You are both free, love each other, be happy!"

The princess felt for a moment a despair that cannot be described; it was repugnant to her, notwithstanding the exquisite delicacy which Raoul had exhibited, to feel herself at the mercy of one who had discovered such an indiscretion. It was equally repugnant to her to accept the evasion offered by this delicate deception. Agitated, nervous, she struggled against the double stings of these two

troubles. Raoul comprehended her position, and came once more to her aid. Bending his knee before her: "Madame!" said he, in a low voice, "in two days I shall be far from Paris; in a fortnight I shall be far from France, where I shall never be seen again."

"Are you going away, then?" said she, with great delight.

"With M. de Beaufort."

"Into Africa!" cried De Guiche, in his turn. "You, Raoul—oh! my friend—into Africa, where everybody dies!"

And forgetting everything, forgetting that that forgetfulness itself compromised the princess more eloquently than his presence, "Ingrate!" said he, "and you have not even consulted me!" And he embraced him; during which time Montalais had led away Madame, and disappeared herself.

Raoul passed his hand over his brow, and said, with a smile, "I have been dreaming!" Then warmly to Guiche, who by degrees absorbed him, "My friend," said he, "I conceal nothing from you, who are the elected of my heart. I am going to seek death in yonder country; your secret will not remain in my breast more than a year."

"Oh, Raoul! a man!"

"Do you know what is my thought, count? This is it—I shall live more vividly, being buried beneath the earth, than I have lived for this month past. We are Christians, my friend, and if such sufferings were to continue, I would not be answerable for the safety of my soul."

De Guiche was anxious to raise objections.

"Not one word more on my account," said Raoul; "but advice to you, dear friend; what I am going to say to you is of much greater importance."

"What is that?"

"Without doubt you risk much more than I do, because you love."

"Oh!"

"It is a joy so sweet to me to be able to speak to you thus! Well, then, De Guiche, beware of Montalais."

"What! of that kind friend?"

"She was the friend of—her you know of. She ruined her by pride."

"You are mistaken."

"And now, when she has ruined her, she would ravish from her the only thing that renders that woman excusable in my eyes."

"What is that?"

"Her love."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that there is a plot formed against her who is the mistress of the king—a plot formed in the very house of Madame."

"Can you think so?"

"I am certain of it."

"By Montalais?"

"Take her as the least dangerous of the enemies I dread for—the other!"

"Explain yourself clearly, my friend; and if I can understand you—"

"In two words. Madame has been long jealous of the king."

"I know she has—"

"Oh! fear nothing—you are beloved—you are beloved, count; do you feel the value of these three words? They signify that you can raise your head, that you can sleep tranquilly, that you can thank God every minute of you life. You are beloved; that signifies that you may hear everything, even the counsel of a friend who wishes to preserve your happiness. You are beloved, De Guiche, you are beloved! You do not endure those atrocious nights, those nights without end, which, with arid eye and fainting heart, others pass through who are destined to die. You will live long, if you act like the miser who, bit by bit, crumb by crumb, collects and heaps up diamonds and gold. You are beloved!—allow me to tell you what you must do that you may be beloved forever."

De Guiche contemplated for some time this unfortunate young man, half mad with despair, till there passed through his heart something like remorse at his own happiness. Raoul suppressed his feverish excitement, to assume the voice and countenance of an impassible man.

"They will make her, whose name I should wish still to be able to pronounce—they will make her suffer. Swear to me that you will not second them in anything—but that you will defend her when possible, as I would have done myself."

"I swear I will," replied De Guiche.

"And," continued Raoul, "some day, when you shall have rendered her a great service—some day when she shall thank you, promise me to say these words to her—I have done you this kindness, madame, at the warm request of M. de Bragelonne, whom you so deeply injured."

"I swear I will," murmured De Guiche.

"That is all. Adieu! I set out to-morrow, or the day after, for Toulon. If you have a few hours to spare, give them to me."

"All! all!" cried the young man.

"Thank you!"

"And what are you going to do now?"

"I am going to meet M. le comte at Planchet's residence, where we hope to find M. d'Artagnan."

"M. d'Artagnan?"

"Yes, I wish to embrace him before my departure. He is a brave man, who loves me dearly. Farewell, my friend; you are expected, no doubt; you will find me, when you wish, at the lodgings of the comte. Farewell!"

The two young men embraced. Those who chanced to see them both thus, would not have hesitated to say, pointing to Raoul, "That is the happy man!"

XXIX. Planchet's Inventory.

Athos, during the visit made to the Luxembourg by Raoul, had gone to Planchet's residence to inquire after D'Artagnan. The comte, on arriving at the Rue des Lombards, found the shop of the grocer in great confusion; but it was not the encumberment of a lucky sale, or that of an arrival of goods. Planchet was not enthroned, as usual, on sacks and barrels. No. A young man with a pen behind his ear, and another with an account-book in his hand, were setting down a number of figures, whilst a third counted and weighed. An inventory was being taken. Athos, who had no knowledge of commercial matters, felt himself a little embarrassed by material obstacles and the majesty of those who were thus employed. He saw several customers sent away, and asked himself whether he, who came to buy nothing, would not be more properly deemed importunate. He therefore asked very politely if he could see M. Planchet. The reply, quite carelessly given, was that M. Planchet was packing his trunks. These words surprised Athos. "What! his trunks?" said he; "is M. Planchet going away?"

"Yes, monsieur, directly."

"Then, if you please, inform him that M. le Comte de la Fere desires to speak to him for a moment."

At the mention of the comte's name, one of the young men, no doubt accustomed to hear it pronounced with respect, immediately went to inform Planchet. It was at this moment that Raoul, after his painful scene with Montalais and De Guiche, arrived at the grocer's house. Planchet left his job directly he received the comte's message.

"Ah! monsieur le comte!" exclaimed he, "how glad I am to see you! What good star brings you here?"

"My dear Planchet," said Athos, pressing the hand of his son, whose sad look he silently observed,—“we are come to learn of you—But in what confusion do I find you! You are as white as a miller; where have you been rummaging?"

"Ah, *diable!* take care, monsieur; don't come near me till I have well shaken myself."

"What for? Flour or dust only whiten."

"No, no; what you see on my arms is arsenic."

"Arsenic?"

"Yes; I am taking my precautions against rats."

"Ay, I suppose in an establishment like this, rats play a conspicuous part."

"It is not with this establishment I concern myself, monsieur le comte. The rats have robbed me of more here than they will ever rob me of again."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you may have observed, monsieur, my inventory is being taken."

"Are you leaving trade, then?"

"Eh! *mon Dieu!* yes. I have disposed of my business to one of my young men."

"Bah! you are rich, then, I suppose?"

"Monsieur, I have taken a dislike to the city; I don't know whether it is because I am growing old, and as M. d'Artagnan one day said, when we grow old we more often think of the adventures of our youth; but for some time past I have felt myself attracted towards the country and gardening. I was a countryman formerly." And Planchet marked this confession with a rather pretentious laugh for a man making profession of humility.

Athos made a gesture of approval, and then added: "You are going to buy an estate, then?"

"I have bought one, monsieur."

"Ah! that is still better."

"A little house at Fontainebleau, with something like twenty acres of land round it."

"Very well, Planchet! Accept my compliments on your acquisition."

"But, monsieur, we are not comfortable here; the cursed dust makes you cough. *Corbleu!* I do not wish to poison the most worthy gentleman in the kingdom."

Athos did not smile at this little pleasantry which Planchet had aimed at him, in order to try his strength in mundane facetiousness.

"Yes," said Athos, "let us have a little talk by ourselves—in your own room, for example. You have a room, have you not?"

"Certainly, monsieur le comte."

"Upstairs, perhaps?" And Athos, seeing Planchet a little embarrassed, wished to relieve him by going first.

"It is—but—" said Planchet, hesitating.

Athos was mistaken in the cause of this hesitation, and, attributing it to a fear the grocer might have of offering humble hospitality, "Never mind, never mind," said he, still going up, "the dwelling of a tradesman in this quarter is not expected to be a palace. Come on."

Raoul nimbly preceded him, and entered first. Two cries were heard simultaneously—we may say three. One of these cries dominated the others; it emanated from a woman. Another proceeded from the mouth of Raoul; it was an exclamation of surprise. He had no sooner uttered it than he shut the door sharply. The third was from fright; it came from Planchet.

"I ask your pardon!" added he; "madame is dressing."

Raoul had, no doubt, seen that what Planchet said was true, for he turned round to go downstairs again.

"Madame—" said Athos. "Oh! pardon me, Planchet, I did not know that you had upstairs—"

"It is Truchen," added Planchet, blushing a little.

"It is whoever you please, my good Planchet; but pardon my rudeness."

"No, no; go up now, gentlemen."



"We will do no such thing," said Athos.  
"Oh! madame, having notice, has had time—"  
"No, Planchet; farewell!"

"Eh, gentlemen! you would not disoblige me by thus standing on the staircase, or by going away without having sat down."  
"If we had known you had a lady upstairs," replied Athos, with his customary coolness, "we would have asked permission to pay our respects to her."

Planchet was so disconcerted by this little extravagance, that he forced the passage, and himself opened the door to admit the comte and his son. Truchen was quite dressed: in the costume of the shopkeeper's wife, rich yet coquettish; German eyes attacking French eyes. She left the apartment after two courtesies, and went down into the shop—but not without having listened at the door, to know what Planchet's gentlemen visitors would say of her. Athos suspected that, and therefore turned the conversation accordingly. Planchet, on his part, was burning to give explanations, which Athos avoided. But, as certain tenacities are stronger than others, Athos was forced to hear Planchet recite his idyls of felicity, translated into a language more chaste than that of Longus. So Planchet related how Truchen had charmed the years of his advancing age, and brought good luck to his business, as Ruth did to Boaz.

"You want nothing now, then, but heirs to your property."  
"If I had one he would have three hundred thousand livres," said Planchet.  
"Humph! you must have one, then," said Athos, phlegmatically, "if only to prevent your little fortune being lost."  
This word *little fortune* placed Planchet in his rank, like the voice of the sergeant when Planchet was but a *piqueur* in the regiment of Piedmont, in which Rochefort had placed him. Athos perceived that the grocer would marry Truchen, and, in spite of fate, establish a family. This appeared the more evident to him when he learned that the young man to whom Planchet was selling the business was her cousin. Having heard all that was necessary of the happy prospects of the retiring grocer, "What is M. d'Artagnan about?" said he; "he is not at the Louvre."  
"Ah! monsieur le comte, Monsieur d'Artagnan has disappeared."  
"Disappeared!" said Athos, in surprise.  
"Oh! monsieur, we know what that means."  
"But / do not know."  
"Whenever M. d'Artagnan disappears it is always for some mission or some great affair."  
"Has he said anything to you about it?"  
"Never."

"You were acquainted with his departure for England formerly, were you not?"  
"On account of the speculation." said Planchet, heedlessly.  
"The speculation!"  
"I mean—" interrupted Planchet, quite confused.  
"Well, well; neither your affairs nor those of your master are in question; the interest we take in him alone has induced me to apply to you. Since the captain of the musketeers is not here, and as we cannot learn from you where we are likely to find M. d'Artagnan, we will take our leave of you. *Au revoir*, Planchet, *au revoir*. Let us be gone, Raoul."  
"Monsieur le comte, I wish I were able to tell you—"  
"Oh, not at all; I am not the man to reproach a servant with discretion."

This word "servant" struck rudely on the ears of the  *demi-millionnaire* Planchet, but natural respect and *bonhomie* prevailed over pride. "There is nothing indiscreet in telling you, monsieur le comte, M. d'Artagnan came here the other day—"   
"Aha?"  
"And remained several hours consulting a geographical chart."  
"You are right, then, my friend; say no more about it."

"And the chart is there as a proof," added Planchet, who went to fetch from the neighboring wall, where it was suspended by a twist, forming a triangle with the bar of the window to which it was fastened, the plan consulted by the captain on his last visit to Planchet. This plan, which he brought to the comte, was a map of France, upon which the practiced eye of that gentleman discovered an itinerary, marked out with small pins; wherever a pin was missing, a hole denoted its having been there. Athos, by following with his eye the pins and holes, saw that D'Artagnan had taken the direction of the south, and gone as far as the Mediterranean, towards Toulon. It was near Cannes that the marks and the punctured places ceased. The Comte de la Fere puzzled his brains for some time, to divine what the musketeer could be going to do at Cannes, and what motive could have led him to examine the banks of the Var. The reflections of Athos suggested nothing. His accustomed perspicacity was at fault. Raoul's researches were not more successful than his father's.  
"Never mind," said the young man to the comte, who silently, and with his finger, had made him understand the route of D'Artagnan; "we must confess that there is a Providence always occupied in connecting our destiny with that of M. d'Artagnan. There he is on the coast of Cannes, and you, monsieur, will, at least, conduct me as far as Toulon. Be assured that we shall meet with him more easily upon our route than on this map."  
Then, taking leave of Planchet, who was scolding his shopmen, even the cousin of Truchen, his successor, the gentlemen set out to pay a visit to M. de Beaufort. On leaving the grocer's shop, they saw a coach, the future depository of the charms of Mademoiselle Truchen and Planchet's bags of crowns.  
"Every one journeys towards happiness by the route he chooses," said Raoul, in a melancholy tone.  
"Road to Fontainebleau!" cried Planchet to his coachman.

XXX. The Inventory of M. de Beaufort.

To have talked of D'Artagnan with Planchet, to have seen Planchet quit Paris to bury himself in his country retreat, had been for Athos and his son like a last farewell to the noise of the capital—to their life of former days. What, in fact, did these men leave behind them—one of whom had exhausted the past age in glory, and the other, the present age in misfortune? Evidently neither of them had anything to ask of his contemporaries. They had only to pay a visit to M. de Beaufort, and arrange with him the particulars of departure. The duke was lodged magnificently in Paris. He had one of those superb establishments pertaining to great fortunes, the like of which certain old men remembered to have seen in all their glory in the times of wasteful liberality of Henry III.'s reign. Then, really, several great nobles were richer than the king. They knew it, used it, and never deprived themselves of the pleasure of humiliating his royal majesty when they had an opportunity. It was this egotistical aristocracy Richelieu had constrained to contribute, with its blood, its purse, and its duties, to what was from his time styled the king's service. From Louis XI.—that terrible mower-down of the great—to Richelieu, how many families had raised their heads! How many, from Richelieu to Louis XIV., had bowed their heads, never to raise them again! But M. de Beaufort was born a prince, and of a blood which is not shed upon scaffolds, unless by the decree of peoples,—a prince who had kept up a grand style of living. How did he maintain his horses, his people, and his table? Nobody knew; himself less than others. Only there were then privileges for the sons of kings, to whom nobody refused to become a creditor, whether from respect or the persuasion that they would some day be paid. Athos and Raoul found the mansion of the duke in as much confusion as that of Planchet. The duke, likewise, was making his inventory; that is to say, he was distributing to his friends everything of value he had in his house. Owing nearly two millions—an enormous amount in those days—M. de Beaufort had calculated that he could not set out for Africa without a good round sum, and, in order to find that sum, he was distributing to his old creditors plate, arms, jewels, and furniture, which was more magnificent in selling it, and brought him back double. In fact, how could a man to whom ten thousand livres were owing, refuse to carry away a present worth six thousand, enhanced in estimation from having belonged to a descendant of Henry IV.? And how, after having carried away that present, could he refuse ten thousand livres more to this generous noble? This, then, was what had happened. The duke had no longer a dwelling-house—that had become useless to an admiral whose place of residence is his ship; he had no longer need of superfluous arms, when he was placed amidst his cannons; no more jewels, which the sea might rob him of; but he had three or four hundred thousand crowns fresh in his coffers. And throughout the house there was a joyous movement of people who believed they were plundering my lord. The prince had, in a supreme degree, the art of making happy the creditors most to be pitied. Every distressed man, every empty purse, found in him patience and sympathy for his position. To some he said, "I wish I had what *you* have; I would give it you." And to others, "I have but this silver ewer; it is worth at least five hundred livres,—take it." The effect of which was—so truly is courtesy a current payment—that the prince constantly found means to renew his creditors. This time he used no ceremony; it might be called a general pillage. He gave up everything. The Oriental fable of the poor Arab who carried away from the pillage of palace a kettle at the bottom of which was concealed a bag of gold, and whom everybody allowed to pass without jealousy,—this fable had become a truth in the prince's mansion. Many contractors paid themselves upon the offices of the duke. Thus, the provision department, who plundered the clothes-presses and the harness-rooms, attached very little value to things which tailors and saddlers set great store by. Anxious to carry home to their wives presents given them by my lord, many were seen bounding joyously along, under the weight of earthen jars and bottles, gloriously stamped with the arms of the prince. M. de Beaufort finished by giving away his horses and the hay from his lofts. He made more than thirty happy with kitchen utensils; and thirty more with the contents of his cellar. Still further; all these people went away with the conviction that M. de Beaufort only acted in this manner to prepare for a new fortune concealed beneath the Arabs' tents. They repeated to each other, while pillaging his hotel, that he was sent to Gigelli by the king to reconstruct his lost fortunes; that the treasures of Africa would be equally divided between the admiral and the king of France; that these treasures consisted in mines of diamonds, or other fabulous stones; the gold and silver mines of Mount Atlas did not even obtain the honour of being named. In addition to the mines to be worked—which could not be begun till after the campaign—there would be the booty made by the army. M. de Beaufort would lay his hands on all the riches pirates had robbed Christendom of since the battle of Lepanto. The number of millions from these sources defied calculation. Why, then, should he, who was going in quest of such treasure, set any store by the poor utensils of his past life?

And reciprocally, why should they spare the property of him who spared it so little himself?  
Such was the position of affairs. Athos, with his piercing practiced glance, saw what was going on at once. He found the admiral of France a little exalted, for he was rising from a table of fifty covers, at which the guests had drunk long and deeply to the prosperity of the expedition; at the conclusion of which repast, the remains, with the dessert, had been given to the servants, and the empty dishes and plates to the curious. The prince was intoxicated with his ruin and his popularity at one and the same time. He had drunk his old wine to the health of his wine of the future. When he saw Athos and Raoul:

"There is my aide-de-camp being brought to me!" he cried. "Come hither, comte; come hither, vicomte."  
Athos tried to find a passage through the heaps of linen and plate.  
"Ah! step over, step over!" said the duke, offering a full glass to Athos. The latter drank it; Raoul scarcely moistened his lips.  
"Here is your commission," said the prince to Raoul. "I had prepared it, reckoning upon you. You will go before me as far as Antibes."

"Yes, my lord."  
"Here is the order." And De Beaufort gave Raoul the order. "Do you know anything of the sea?"  
"Yes, my lord; I have traveled with M. le Prince."  
"That is well. All these barges and lighters must be in attendance to form an escort and carry my provisions. The army must be prepared to embark in a fortnight at the very latest."  
"That shall be done, my lord."

"The present order gives you the right to visit and search all the isles along the coast; you will there make the enrolments and levies you may want for me."  
"Yes, monsieur le duc."  
"And you are an active man, and will work freely, you will spend much money."

"I hope not, my lord."  
"But I am sure you will. My intendant has prepared the orders of a thousand livres, drawn upon the cities of the south; he will give you a hundred of them. Now, dear vicomte, be gone."  
Athos interrupted the prince. "Keep your money, my lord; war is to be waged among the Arabs with gold as well as lead."

"I wish to try the contrary," replied the duke; "and then you are acquainted with my ideas upon the expedition—plenty of noise, plenty of fire, and, if so it must be, I shall disappear in the smoke." Having spoken thus, M. de Beaufort began to laugh; but his mirth was not reciprocated by Athos and Raoul. He perceived this at once. "Ah," said he, with the courteous egotism of his rank and age, "you are such people as a man should not see after dinner; you are cold, stiff, and dry when I am all fire, suppleness, and wine. No, devil take me! I should always see you fasting, vicomte, and you, comte, if you wear such a face as that, you shall see me no more."

He said this, pressing the hand of Athos, who replied with a smile, “My lord, do not talk so grandly because you happen to have plenty of money. I predict that within a month you will be dry, stiff, and cold, in presence of your strong-box, and that then, having Raoul at your elbow, fasting, you will be surprised to see him gay, animated, and generous, because he will have some new crowns to offer you.”

“God grant it may be so!” cried the delighted duke. “Comte, stay with me!”

“No, I shall go with Raoul; the mission with which you charge him is a troublesome and difficult one. Alone it would be too much for him to execute. You do not observe, my lord, you have given him command of the first order.”

“Bah!”

“And in your naval arrangements, too.”

“That may be true. But one finds that such fine young fellows as your son generally do all that is required of them.”

“My lord, I believe you will find nowhere so much zeal and intelligence, so much real bravery, as in Raoul; but if he failed to arrange your embarkation, you would only meet the fate that you deserve.”

“Humph! you are scolding me, then.”

“My lord, to provision a fleet, to assemble a flotilla, to enroll your maritime force, would take an admiral a year. Raoul is a cavalry officer, and you allow him a fortnight!”

“I tell you he will do it.”

“He may; but I will go and help him.”

“To be sure you will; I reckoned upon you, and still further believe that when we are once at Toulon you will not let him depart alone.”

“Oh!” said Athos, shaking his head.

“Patience! patience!”

“My lord, permit us to take our leave.”

“Begone, then, and may my good luck attend you.”

“Adieu! my lord; and may your own good luck attend you likewise.”

“Here is an expedition admirably commenced!” said Athos to his son. “No provisions—no store flotilla! What can be done, thus?”

“Humph!” murmured Raoul; “if all are going to do as I am, provisions will not be wanted.”

“Monsieur,” replied Athos, sternly, “do not be unjust and senseless in your egotism, or your grief, whichever you please to call it. If you set out for this war solely with the intention of getting killed therein, you stand in need of nobody, and it was scarcely worth while to recommend you to M. de Beaufort. But when you have been introduced to the prime commandant—when you have accepted the responsibility of a post in his army, the question is no longer about *you*, but about all those poor soldiers, who, as well as you, have hearts and bodies, who will weep for their country and endure all the necessities of their condition. Remember, Raoul, that officers are ministers as useful to the world as priests, and that they ought to have more charity.”

“Monsieur, I know it and have practiced it; I would have continued to do so still, but—”

“You forget also that you are of a country that is proud of its military glory; go and die if you like, but do not die without honour and without advantage to France. Cheer up, Raoul! do not let my words grieve you; I love you, and wish to see you perfect.”

“I love your reproaches, monsieur,” said the young man, mildly; “they alone may cure me, because they prove to me that some one loves me still.”

“And now, Raoul, let us be off; the weather is so fine, the heavens so clear, those heavens which we always find above our heads, which you will see more clear still at Gigelli, and which will speak to you of me there, as they speak to me here of God.”

The two gentlemen, after having agreed on this point, talked over the wild freaks of the duke, convinced that France would be served in a very incomplete manner, as regarded both spirit and practice, in the ensuing expedition; and having summed up the ducal policy under the one word vanity, they set forward, in obedience rather to their will than destiny. The sacrifice was half accomplished.

XXXI. The Silver Dish.

The journey passed off pretty well. Athos and his son traversed France at the rate of fifteen leagues per day; sometimes more, sometimes less, according to the intensity of Raoul's grief. It took them a fortnight to reach Toulon, and they lost all traces of D'Artagnan at Antibes. They were forced to believe that the captain of the musketeers was desirous of preserving an incognito on his route, for Athos derived from his inquiries an assurance that such a cavalier as he described had exchanged his horse for a well-closed carriage on quitting Avignon. Raoul was much affected at not meeting with D'Artagnan. His affectionate heart longed to take a farewell and received consolation from that heart of steel. Athos knew from experience that D'Artagnan became impenetrable when engaged in any serious affair, whether on his own account or on the service of the king. He even feared to offend his friend, or thwart him by too pressing inquiries. And yet when Raoul commenced his labor of classing the flotilla, and got together the *chalands* and lighters to send them to Toulon, one of the fishermen told the comte that his boat had been laid up to refit since a trip he had made on account of a gentleman who was in great haste to embark. Athos, believing that this man was telling a falsehood in order to be left at liberty to fish, and so gain more money when all his companions were gone, insisted upon having the details. The fisherman informed him that six days previously, a man had come in the night to hire his boat, for the purpose of visiting the island of St. Honnorat. The price was agreed upon, but the gentleman had arrived with an immense carriage case, which he insisted upon embarking, in spite of the many difficulties that opposed the operation. The fisherman wished to retract. He had even threatened, but his threats had procured him nothing but a shower of blows from the gentleman's cane, which fell upon his shoulders sharp and long. Swearing and grumbling, he had recourse to the syndic of his brotherhood at Antibes, who administer justice among themselves and protect each other; but the gentleman had exhibited a certain paper, at sight of which the syndic, bowing to the very ground, enjoined obedience from the fisherman, and abused him for having been refractory. They then departed with the freight.

“But all this does not tell us,” said Athos, “how you injured your boat.”

“This is the way. I was steering towards St. Honnorat as the gentleman desired me; but he changed his mind, and pretended that I could not pass to the south of the abbey.”

“And why not?”

“Because, monsieur, there is in front of the square tower of the Benedictines, towards the southern point, the bank of the *Moines*.”

“A rock?” asked Athos.

“Level with the water, but below water; a dangerous passage, yet one I have cleared a thousand times; the gentleman required me to land him at Sainte-Marguerite's.”

“Well?”

“Well, monsieur!” cried the fisherman, with his *Provençal* accent, “a man is a sailor, or he is not; he knows his course, or he is nothing but a fresh-water lubber. I was obstinate, and wished to try the channel. The gentleman took me by the collar, and told me quietly he would strangle me. My mate armed himself with a hatchet, and so did I. We had the affront of the night before to pay him out for. But the gentleman drew his sword, and used it in such an astonishingly rapid manner, that we neither of us could get near him. I was about to hurl my hatchet at his head, and I had a right to do so, hadn't I, monsieur? for a sailor aboard is master, as a citizen is in his chamber; I was going, then, in self-defense, to cut the gentleman in two, when, all at once—believe me or not, monsieur—the great carriage case opened of itself, I don't know how, and there came out of it a sort of a phantom, his head covered with a black helmet and a black mask, something terrible to look upon, which came towards me threatening with its fist.”

“And that was—” said Athos.

“That was the devil, monsieur; for the gentleman, with great glee, cried out, on seeing him: ‘Ah! thank you, my lord!’”

“A most strange story!” murmured the comte, looking at Raoul.

“And what did you do?” asked the latter of the fisherman.

“You must know, monsieur, that two poor men, such as we are, could be no match for two gentlemen; but when one of them turned out to be the devil, we had no earthly chance! My companion and I did not stop to consult one another; we made but one jump into the sea, for we were within seven or eight hundred feet of the shore.”

“Well, and then?”

“Why, and then, my lord, as there was a little wind from the southwest, the boat drifted into the sands of Sainte-Marguerite's.”

“Oh!—but the travelers?”

“Bah! you need not be uneasy about them! It was pretty plain that one was the devil, and protected the other; for when we recovered the boat, after she got afloat again, instead of finding these two creatures injured by the shock, we found nothing, not even the carriage or the case.”

“Very strange! very strange!” repeated the comte. “But after that, what did you do, my friend?”

“I made my complaint to the governor of Sainte-Marguerite's, who brought my finger under my nose by telling me if I plagued him with such silly stories he would have me flogged.”

“What! did the governor himself say so?”

“Yes, monsieur; and yet my boat was injured, seriously injured, for the prow is left upon the point of Sainte-Marguerite's, and the carpenter asks a hundred and twenty livres to repair it.”

“Very well,” replied Raoul; “you will be exempted from the service. Go.”

“We will go to Sainte-Marguerite's, shall we?” said the comte to Bragelonne, as the man walked away.

“Yes, monsieur, for there is something to be cleared up; that man does not seem to me to have told the truth.”

“Nor to me either, Raoul. The story of the masked man and the carriage having disappeared, may be told to conceal some violence these fellows have committed upon their passengers in the open sea, to punish him for his persistence in embarking.”

“I formed the same suspicion; the carriage was more likely to contain property than a man.”

“We shall see to that, Raoul. The gentleman very much resembles D'Artagnan; I recognize his methods of proceeding. Alas! we are no longer the young invincibles of former days. Who knows whether the hatchet or the iron bar of this miserable coaster has not succeeded in doing that which the best blades of Europe, balls, and bullets have not been able to do in forty years?”

That same day they set out for Sainte-Marguerite's, on board a *chasse-maree* come from Toulon under orders. The impression they experienced on landing was a singularly pleasing one. The island seemed loaded with flowers and fruits. In its cultivated part it served as a garden for the governor. Orange, pomegranate, and fig trees bent beneath the weight of their golden or purple fruits. All round this garden, in the uncultivated parts, red partridges ran about in conveys among the brambles and tufts of junipers, and at every step of the comte and Raoul a terrified rabbit quitted his thyme and heath to scuttle away to the burrow. In fact, this fortunate isle was uninhabited. Flat, offering nothing but a tiny bay for the convenience of embarkation, and under the protection of the governor, who went shares with them, smugglers made use of it as a provisional *entrepot*, at the expense of not killing the game or devastating the garden. With this compromise, the governor was in a situation to be satisfied with a garrison of eight men to guard his fortress, in which twelve cannons accumulated coats of moldy green. The governor was a sort of happy farmer, harvesting wines, figs, oil, and oranges, preserving his citrons and *cedrates* in the sun of his casemates. The fortress, encircled by a deep ditch, its only guardian, arose like three heads upon turrets connected with each other by terraces covered with moss.

Athos and Raoul wandered for some time round the fences of the garden without finding any one to introduce them to the governor. They ended by making their own way into the garden. It was at the hottest time of the day. Each living thing sought its shelter under grass or stone. The heavens spread their fiery veils as if to stifle all noises, to envelop all existences; the rabbit under the broom, the fly under the leaf, slept as the wave did beneath the heavens. Athos saw nothing living but a soldier, upon the terrace beneath the second and third court, who was carrying a basket of provisions on his head. This man returned almost immediately without his basket, and disappeared in the shade of his sentry-box. Athos supposed he must have been carrying dinner to some one, and, after having done so, returned to dine himself. All at once they heard some one call out, and raising their heads, perceived in the frame of the bars of the window something of a white colour, like a hand that was waved backwards and forwards—something shining, like a polished weapon struck by the rays of the sun. And before they were able to ascertain what it was, a luminous train, accompanied by a hissing sound in the air, called their attention from the donjon to the ground. A second dull noise was heard from the ditch, and Raoul ran to pick up a silver plate which was rolling along the dry sand. The hand that had thrown this plate made a sign to the two gentlemen, and then disappeared. Athos and Raoul, approaching each other, commenced an attentive examination of the dusty plate, and they discovered, in characters traced upon the bottom of it with the point of a knife, this inscription:

*“I am the brother of the king of France—a prisoner to-day—a madman to-morrow. French gentlemen and Christians, pray to God for the soul and the reason of the son of your old rulers.”*

The plate fell from the hands of Athos whilst Raoul was endeavoring to make out the meaning of these dismal words. At the same moment they heard a cry from the top of the donjon. Quick as lightning Raoul bent down his head, and forced down that of his father likewise. A musket-barrel glittered from the crest of the wall. A white smoke floated like a plume from the mouth of the musket, and a ball was flattened against a stone within six inches of the two gentlemen.

“*Cordieu!*” cried Athos. “What, are people assassinated here? Come down, cowards as you are!”

“Yes, come down!” cried Raoul, furiously shaking his fist at the castle.

One of the assailants—he who was about to fire—replied to these cries by an exclamation of surprise; and, as his companion, who wished to continue the attack, had re-seized his loaded musket, he who had cried out threw up the weapon, and the ball flew into the air. Athos and Raoul, seeing them disappear from the platform, expected they would come down to them, and waited with a firm demeanor. Five minutes had not elapsed, when a stroke upon a drum called the eight soldiers of the garrison to arms, and they showed themselves on the other side of the ditch with their muskets in hand. At the head of these men was an officer, whom Athos and Raoul recognized as the one who had fired the first musket. The man ordered the soldiers to “make ready.”

“We are going to be shot!” cried Raoul; “but, sword in hand, at least, let us leap the ditch! We shall kill at least two of these scoundrels, when their muskets are empty.” And, suiting the action to the word, Raoul was springing forward, followed by Athos, when a well-known voice resounded behind them, “Athos! Raoul!”

“D’Artagnan!” replied the two gentlemen.

“Recover arms! *Mordious!*” cried the captain to the soldiers. “I was sure I could not be mistaken!”

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Athos. “What! were we to be shot without warning?”

“It was I who was going to shoot you, and if the governor missed you, I should not have missed you, my dear friends. How fortunate it is that I am accustomed to take a long aim, instead of firing at the instant I raise my weapon! I thought I recognized you. Ah! my dear friends, how fortunate!” And D’Artagnan wiped his brow, for he had run fast, and emotion with him was not feigned.

“How!” said Athos. “And is the gentleman who fired at us the governor of the fortress?”

“In person.”

“And why did he fire at us? What have we done to him?”

“*Pardieu!* You received what the prisoner threw to you?”

“That is true.”

“That plate—the prisoner has written something on it, has he not?”

“Yes.”

“Good heavens! I was afraid he had.”

And D’Artagnan, with all the marks of mortal disquietude, seized the plate, to read the inscription. When he had read it, a fearful pallor spread across his countenance. “Oh! good heavens!” repeated he. “Silence!—Here is the governor.”

“And what will he do to us? Is it our fault?”

“It is true, then?” said Athos, in a subdued voice. “It is true?”

“Silence! I tell you—silence! If he only believes you can read; if he only suspects you have understood; I love you, my dear friends, I would willingly be killed for you, but—”

“But—” said Athos and Raoul.

“But I could not save you from perpetual imprisonment if I saved you from death. Silence, then! Silence again!”

The governor came up, having crossed the ditch upon a plank bridge.

“Well!” said he to D’Artagnan, “what stops us?”

“You are Spaniards—you do not understand a word of French,” said the captain, eagerly, to his friends in a low voice.

“Well!” replied he, addressing the governor, “I was right; these gentlemen are two Spanish captains with whom I was acquainted at Ypres, last year; they don’t know a word of French.”

“Ah!” said the governor, sharply. “And yet they were trying to read the inscription on the plate.”

D’Artagnan took it out of his hands, effacing the characters with the point of his sword.

“How!” cried the governor, “what are you doing? I cannot read them now!”

“It is a state secret,” replied D’Artagnan, bluntly; “and as you know that, according to the king’s orders, it is under the penalty of death any one should penetrate it, I will, if you like, allow you to read it, and have you shot immediately afterwards.”

During this apostrophe—half serious, half ironical—Athos and Raoul preserved the coolest, most unconcerned silence.

“But, is it possible,” said the governor, “that these gentlemen do not comprehend at least some words?”

“Suppose they do! If they do understand a few spoken words, it does not follow that they should understand what is written. They cannot even read Spanish. A noble Spaniard, remember, ought never to know how to read.”

The governor was obliged to be satisfied with these explanations, but he was still tenacious. “Invite these gentlemen to come to the fortress,” said he.

“That I will willingly do. I was about to propose it to you.” The fact is, the captain had quite another idea, and would have wished his friends a hundred leagues off. But he was obliged to make the best of it. He addressed the two gentlemen in Spanish, giving them a polite invitation, which they accepted. They all turned towards the entrance of the fort, and, the incident being at an end, the eight soldiers returned to their delightful leisure, for a moment disturbed by this unexpected adventure.

#### XXXII. Captive and Jailers.

When they had entered the fort, and whilst the governor was making some preparations for the reception of his guests, “Come,” said Athos, “let us have a word of explanation whilst we are alone.”

“It is simply this,” replied the musketeer. “I have conducted hither a prisoner, who the king commands shall not be seen. You came here, he has thrown something to you through the lattice of his window; I was at dinner with the governor, I saw the object thrown, and I saw Raoul pick it up. It does not take long to understand this. I understood it, and I thought you in intelligence with my prisoner. And then—”

“And then—you commanded us to be shot.”

“*Ma foi!* I admit it; but, if I was the first to seize a musket, fortunately, I was the last to take aim at you.”

“If you had killed me, D’Artagnan, I should have had the good fortune to die for the royal house of France, and it would be an honour to die by your hand—you, its noblest and most loyal defender.”

“What the devil, Athos, do you mean by the royal house?” stammered D’Artagnan. “You don’t mean that you, a well-informed and sensible man, can place any faith in the nonsense written by an idiot?” “I do believe in it.”

“With so much the more reason, my dear chevalier, from your having orders to kill all those who do believe in it,” said Raoul.

“That is because,” replied the captain of the musketeers—“because every calumny, however absurd it may be, has the almost certain chance of becoming popular.”

“No, D’Artagnan,” replied Athos, promptly; “but because the king is not willing that the secret of his family should transpire among the people, and cover with shame the executioners of the son of Louis XIII.”

“Do not talk in such a childish manner, Athos, or I shall begin to think you have lost your senses. Besides, explain to me how it is possible Louis XIII. should have a son in the Isle of Sainte-Marguerite.”

“A son whom you have brought hither masked, in a fishing-boat,” said Athos. “Why not?”

D’Artagnan was brought to a pause.

“Oh!” said he; “whence do you know that a fishing-boat—?”

“Brought you to Sainte-Marguerite’s with the carriage containing the prisoner—with a prisoner whom you styled my lord. Oh! I am acquainted with all that,” resumed the comte. D’Artagnan bit his mustache.

“If it were true,” said he, “that I had brought hither in a boat and with a carriage a masked prisoner, nothing proves that this prisoner must be a prince—a prince of the house of France.”

“Ask Aramis such riddles,” replied Athos, coolly.

“Aramis,” cried the musketeer, quite at a stand. “Have you seen Aramis?”

“After his discomfiture at Vaux, yes; I have seen Aramis, a fugitive, pursued, bewildered, ruined; and Aramis has told me enough to make me believe in the complaints this unfortunate young prince cut upon the bottom of the plate.”

D’Artagnan’s head sunk on his breast in some confusion. “This is the way,” said he, “in which God turns to nothing that which men call wisdom! A fine secret must that be of which twelve or fifteen persons hold the tattered fragments! Athos, cursed be the chance which has brought you face to face with me in this affair! for now—”

“Well,” said Athos, with his customary mild severity, “is your secret lost because I know it? Consult your memory, my friend. Have I not borne secrets heavier than this?”

“You have never borne one so dangerous,” replied D’Artagnan, in a tone of sadness. “I have something like a sinister idea that all who are concerned with this secret will die, and die unhappily.”

“The will of God be done!” said Athos, “but here is your governor.”

D’Artagnan and his friends immediately resumed their parts. The governor, suspicious and hard, behaved towards D’Artagnan with a politeness almost amounting to obsequiousness. With respect to the travelers, he contented himself with offering good cheer, and never taking his eye from them. Athos and Raoul observed that he often tried to embarrass them by sudden attacks, or to catch them off their guard; but neither the one nor the other gave him the least advantage. What D’Artagnan had said was probable, if the governor did not believe it to be quite true. They rose from the table to repose awhile.

“What is this man’s name? I don’t like the looks of him,” said Athos to D’Artagnan in Spanish.

“De Saint-Mars,” replied the captain.

“He is, then, I suppose, the prince’s jailer?”

“Eh! how can I tell? I may be kept at Sainte-Marguerite forever.”

“Oh! no, not you!”

“My friend, I am in the situation of a man who finds a treasure in the midst of a desert. He would like to carry it away, but he cannot; he would like to leave it, but he dares not. The king will not dare to recall me, for no one else would serve him as faithfully as I do; he regrets not having me near him, from being aware that no one would be of so much service near his person as myself. But it will happen as it may please God.”

“But,” observed Raoul, “your not being certain proves that your situation here is provisional, and you will return to Paris?”

“Ask these gentlemen,” interrupted the governor, “what was their purpose in coming to Saint-Marguerite?”

“They came from learning there was a convent of Benedictines at Sainte-Honorat which is considered curious; and from being told there was excellent shooting in the island.”

“That is quite at their service, as well as yours,” replied Saint-Mars.

D’Artagnan politely thanked him.

“When will they depart?” added the governor.

“To-morrow,” replied D’Artagnan.

M. de Saint-Mars went to make his rounds, and left D’Artagnan alone with the pretended Spaniards.

“Oh!” exclaimed the musketeer, “here is a life and a society that suits me very little. I command this man, and he bores me, *mordious!* Come, let us have a shot or two at the rabbits; the walk will be beautiful, and not fatiguing. The whole island is but a league and a half in length, with the breadth of a league; a real park. Let us try to amuse ourselves.”

“As you please, D’Artagnan; not for the sake of amusing ourselves, but to gain an opportunity for talking freely.”

D’Artagnan made a sign to a soldier, who brought the gentlemen some guns, and then returned to the fort.

“And now,” said the musketeer, “answer me the question put to you by that black-looking Saint-Mars: what did you come to do at the Lerin Isles?”

“To bid you farewell.”

“Bid me farewell! What do you mean by that? Is Raoul going anywhere?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will lay a wager it is with M. de Beaufort.”

"With M. de Beaufort it is, my dear friend. You always guess correctly."

"From habit."

Whilst the two friends were commencing their conversation, Raoul, with his head hanging down and his heart oppressed, seated himself on a mossy rock, his gun across his knees, looking at the sea—looking at the heavens, and listening to the voice of his soul; he allowed the sportsmen to attain a considerable distance from him. D'Artagnan remarked his absence.

"He has not recovered the blow?" said he to Athos.

"He is struck to death."

"Oh! your fears exaggerate, I hope. Raoul is of a tempered nature. Around all hearts as noble as his, there is a second envelope that forms a cuirass. The first bleeds, the second resists."

"No," replied Athos, "Raoul will die of it."

"*Mordieux!*" said D'Artagnan, in a melancholy tone. And he did not add a word to this exclamation. Then, a minute after, "Why do you let him go?"

"Because he insists on going."

"And why do you not go with him?"

"Because I could not bear to see him die."

D'Artagnan looked his friend earnestly in the face. "You know one thing," continued the comte, leaning upon the arm of the captain; "you know that in the course of my life I have been afraid of but few things. Well! I have an incessant gnawing, insurmountable fear that an hour will come in which I shall hold the dead body of that boy in my arms."

"Oh!" murmured D'Artagnan; "oh!"

"He will die, I know, I have a perfect conviction of that; but I would not see him die."

"How is this, Athos? you come and place yourself in the presence of the bravest man, you say you have ever seen, of your own D'Artagnan, of that man without an equal, as you formerly called him, and you come and tell him, with your arms folded, that you are afraid of witnessing the death of your son, you who have seen all that can be seen in this world! Why have you this fear, Athos? Man upon this earth must expect everything, and ought to face everything."

"Listen to me, my friend. After having worn myself out upon this earth of which you speak, I have preserved but two religions: that of life, friendship, my duty as a father—that of eternity, love, and respect for God. Now, I have within me the revelation that if God should decree that my friend or my son should render up his last sigh in my presence—oh! no, I cannot even tell you, D'Artagnan!"

"Speak, speak, tell me!"

"I am strong against everything, except against the death of those I love. For that only there is no remedy. He who dies, gains; he who sees others die, loses. No, this is it—to know that I should no more meet on earth him whom I now behold with joy; to know that there would nowhere be a D'Artagnan any more, nowhere again be a Raoul, oh! I am old, look you, I have no longer courage; I pray God to spare me in my weakness; but if he struck me so plainly and in that fashion, I should curse him. A Christian gentleman ought not to curse his God, D'Artagnan; it is enough to once have cursed a king!"

"Humph!" sighed D'Artagnan, a little confused by this violent tempest of grief.

"Let me speak to him, Athos. Who knows?"

"Try, if you please, but I am convinced you will not succeed."

"I will not attempt to console him. I will serve him."

"You will?"

"Doubtless, I will. Do you think this would be the first time a woman had repented of an infidelity? I will go to him, I tell you."

Athos shook his head, and continued his walk alone, D'Artagnan, cutting across the brambles, rejoined Raoul and held out his hand to him. "Well, Raoul! You have something to say to me?"

"I have a kindness to ask of you," replied Bragelonne.

"Ask it, then."

"You will some day return to France?"

"I hope so."

"Ought I to write to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"No, you must not."

"But I have many things to say to her."

"Go and say them to her, then."

"Never!"

"Pray, what virtue do you attribute to a letter, which your speech might not possess?"

"Perhaps you are right."

"She loves the king," said D'Artagnan, bluntly; "and she is an honest girl." Raoul started. "And you, you whom she abandons, she, perhaps, loves better than she does the king, but after another fashion."

"D'Artagnan, do you believe she loves the king?"

"To idolatry. Her heart is inaccessible to any other feeling. You might continue to live near her, and would be her best friend."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raoul, with a passionate burst of repugnance at such a hideous hope.

"Will you do so?"

"It would be base."

"That is a very absurd word, which would lead me to think slightly of your understanding. Please to understand, Raoul, that it is never base to do that which is imposed upon us by a superior force. If your heart says to you, 'Go there, or die,' why go, Raoul. Was she base or brave, she whom you loved, in preferring the king to you, the king whom her heart commanded her imperiously to prefer to you? No, she was the bravest of women. Do, then, as she has done. Oblige yourself. Do you know one thing of which I am sure, Raoul?"

"What is that?"

"Why, that by seeing her closely with the eyes of a jealous man—"

"Well?"

"Well! you would cease to love her."

"Then I am decided, my dear D'Artagnan."

"To set off to see her again?"

"No; to set off that I may *never* see her again. I wish to love her forever."

"Ha! I must confess," replied the musketeer, "that is a conclusion which I was far from expecting."

"This is what I wish, my friend. You will see her again, and you will give her a letter which, if you think proper, will explain to her, as to yourself, what is passing in my heart. Read it; I drew it up last night. Something told me I should see you to-day." He held the letter out, and D'Artagnan read:

"MADEMOISELLE,—You are not wrong in my eyes in not loving me. You have only been guilty of one fault towards me, that of having left me to believe you loved me. This error will cost me my life. I pardon you, but I cannot pardon myself. It is said that happy lovers are deaf to the sorrows of rejected lovers. It will not be so with you, who did not love me, save with anxiety. I am sure that if I had persisted in endeavoring to change that friendship into love, you would have yielded out of a fear of bringing about my death, or lessening the esteem I had for you. It is much more delightful to me to die, knowing that *you* are free and satisfied. How much, then, will you love me, when you will no longer fear either my presence or reproaches? You will love me, because, however charming a new love may appear to you, God has not made me in anything inferior to him you have chosen, and because my devotedness, my sacrifice, and my painful end will assure me, in your eyes, a certain superiority over him. I have allowed to escape, in the candid credulity of my heart, the treasure I possessed. Many people tell me that you loved me enough to lead me to hope you would have loved me much. That idea takes from my mind all bitterness, and leads me only to blame myself. You will accept this last farewell, and you will bless me for having taken refuge in the inviolable asylum where hatred is extinguished, and where all love endures forever. Adieu, mademoiselle. If your happiness could be purchased by the last drop of my blood, I would shed that drop. I willingly make the sacrifice of it to my misery!

"RAOUL, VICOTME DE BRAGELONNE."

"The letter reads very well," said the captain. "I have only one fault to find with it."

"Tell me what that is!" said Raoul.

"Why, it is that it tells everything, except the thing which exhales, like a mortal poison from your eyes and from your heart; except the senseless love which still consumes you." Raoul grew paler, but remained silent.

"Why did you not write simply these words:

"MADEMOISELLE,—Instead of cursing you, I love you and I die."

"That is true," exclaimed Raoul, with a sinister kind of joy.

And tearing the letter he had just taken back, he wrote the following words upon a leaf of his tablets:

"To procure the happiness of once more telling you I love you, I commit the baseness of writing to you; and to punish myself for that baseness, I die." And he signed it.

"You will give her these tablets, captain, will you not?"

"When?" asked the latter.

"On the day," said Bragelonne, pointing to the last sentence, "on the day when you can place a date under these words." And he sprang away quickly to join Athos, who was returning with slow steps. As they re-entered the fort, the sea rose with that rapid, gusty vehemence which characterizes the Mediterranean; the ill-humor of the element became a tempest. Something shapeless, and tossed about violently by the waves, appeared just off the coast.

"What is that?" said Athos,—*"a wrecked boat?"*

"No, it is not a boat," said D'Artagnan.

"Pardon me," said Raoul, "there is a bark gaining the port rapidly."

"Yes, there is a bark in the creek, which is prudently seeking shelter here; but that which Athos points to in the sand is not a boat at all—it has run aground."

"Yes, yes, I see it."

"It is the carriage, which I threw into the sea after landing the prisoner."

"Well!" said Athos, "if you take my advice, D'Artagnan, you will burn that carriage, in order that no vestige of it may remain, without which the fishermen of Antibes, who have believed they had to do with the devil, will endeavor to prove that your prisoner was but a man."

"Your advice is good, Athos, and I will this night have it carried out, or rather, I will carry it out myself; but let us go in, for the rain falls heavily, and the lightning is terrific."

As they were passing over the ramparts to a gallery of which D'Artagnan had the key, they saw M. de Saint-Mars directing his steps towards the chamber inhabited by the prisoner. Upon a sign from D'Artagnan, they concealed themselves in an angle of the staircase.

"What is it?" said Athos.

"You will see. Look. The prisoner is returning from chapel."

And they saw, by the red flashes of lightning against the violet fog which the wind stamped upon the bank-ward sky, they saw pass gravely, at six paces behind the governor, a man clothed in black and masked by a vizor of polished steel, soldered to a helmet of the same nature, which altogether enveloped the whole of his head. The fire of the heavens cast red reflections on the polished surface, and these reflections, flying off capriciously, seemed to be angry looks launched by the unfortunate, instead of imprecations. In the middle of the gallery, the prisoner stopped for a moment, to contemplate the infinite horizon, to respire the sulphurous perfumes of the tempest, to drink in thirstily the hot rain, and to breathe a sigh resembling a smothered groan.

"Come on, monsieur," said Saint-Mars, sharply, to the prisoner, for he already became uneasy at seeing him look so long beyond the walls. "Monsieur, come on!"

"Say my lord!" cried Athos, from his corner, with a voice so solemn and terrible, that the governor trembled from head to foot. Athos insisted upon respect being paid to fallen majesty. The prisoner turned round.

"Who spoke?" asked Saint-Mars.

"It was I," replied D'Artagnan, showing himself promptly. "You know that is the order."

"Call me neither monsieur nor my lord," said the prisoner in his turn, in a voice that penetrated to the very soul of Raoul; "call me ACCURSED!" He passed on, and the iron door croaked after him.

"There goes a truly unfortunate man!" murmured the musketeer in a hollow whisper, pointing out to Raoul the chamber inhabited by the prince.

XXXIII. Promises.

Scarcely had D'Artagnan re-entered his apartment with his two friends, when one of the soldiers of the fort came to inform him that the governor was seeking him. The bark which Raoul had perceived at sea, and which appeared so eager to gain the port, came to Sainte-Marguerite with an important dispatch for the captain of the musketeers. On opening it, D'Artagnan recognized the writing of the king: "I should think," said Louis XIV., "you will have completed the execution of my orders, Monsieur d'Artagnan; return, then, immediately to Paris, and join me at the Louvre."

"There is the end of my exile!" cried the musketeer with joy; "God be praised, I am no longer a jailer!" And he showed the letter to Athos.

"So, then, you must leave us?" replied the latter, in a melancholy tone.

"Yes, but to meet again, dear friend, seeing that Raoul is old enough now to go alone with M. de Beaufort, and will prefer his father going back in company with M. d'Artagnan, to forcing him to travel two hundred leagues solitarily to reach home at La Fere; will you not, Raoul?"

"Certainly," stammered the latter, with an expression of tender regret.

"No, no, my friend," interrupted Athos, "I will never quit Raoul till the day his vessel disappears on the horizon. As long as he remains in France he shall not be separated from me."

"As you please, dear friend; but we will, at least, leave Sainte-Marguerite together; take advantage of the bark that will convey me back to Antibes."

"With all my heart; we cannot too soon be at a distance from this fort, and from the spectacle that shocked us so just now."

The three friends quitted the little isle, after paying their respects to the governor, and by the last flashes of the departing tempest they took their farewell of the white walls of the fort. D'Artagnan parted from his friend that same night, after having seen fire set to the carriage upon the shore by the orders of Saint-Mars, according to the advice the captain had given him. Before getting on horseback, and after leaving the arms of Athos: "My friends," said he, "you bear too much resemblance to two soldiers who are abandoning their post. Something warns me that Raoul will require being supported by you in his rank. Will you allow me to ask permission to go over into Africa with a hundred good muskets? The king will not refuse me, and I will take you with me."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," replied Raoul, pressing his hand with emotion, "thanks for that offer, which would give us more than we wish, either monsieur le comte or I. I, who am young, stand in need of labor of mind and fatigue of body; monsieur le comte wants the profoundest repose. You are his best friend. I recommend him to your care. In watching over him, you are holding both our souls in your hands."

"I must go; my horse is all in a fret," said D'Artagnan, with whom the most manifest sign of a lively emotion was the change of ideas in conversation. "Come, comte, how many days longer has Raoul to stay here?"

"Three days at most."

"And how long will it take you to reach home?"

"Oh! a considerable time," replied Athos. "I shall not like the idea of being separated too quickly from Raoul. Time will travel too fast of itself to require me to aid it by distance. I shall only make half-stages."

"And why so, my friend? Nothing is more dull than traveling slowly; and hostelry life does not become a man like you."

"My friend, I came hither on post-horses; but I wish to purchase two animals of a superior kind. Now, to take them home fresh, it would not be prudent to make them travel more than seven or eight leagues a day."

"Where is Grimaud?"

"He arrived yesterday morning with Raoul's appointments; and I have left him to sleep."

"That is, never to come back again," D'Artagnan suffered to escape him. "Till we meet again, then, dear Athos—and if you are diligent, I shall embrace you the sooner." So saying, he put his foot in the stirrup, which Raoul held.

"Farewell!" said the young man, embracing him.

"Farewell!" said D'Artagnan, as he got into his saddle.

His horse made a movement which divided the cavalier from his friends. This scene had taken place in front of the house chosen by Athos, near the gates of Antibes, whither D'Artagnan, after his supper, had ordered his horses to be brought. The road began to branch off there, white and undulating in the vapors of the night. The horse eagerly respired the salt, sharp perfume of the marshes. D'Artagnan put him to a trot; and Athos and Raoul sadly turned towards the house. All at once they heard the rapid approach of a horse's steps, and first believed it to be one of those singular repercussions which deceive the ear at every turn in a road. But it was really the return of the horseman. They uttered a cry of joyous surprise; and the captain, springing to the ground like a young man, seized within his arms the two beloved heads of Athos and Raoul. He held them long embraced thus, without speaking a word, or suffering the sigh which was bursting his breast to escape him. Then, as rapidly as he had come back, he set off again, with a sharp application of his spurs to the sides of his fiery horse.

"Alas!" said the comte, in a low voice, "alas! alas!"

"An evil omen!" on his side, said D'Artagnan to himself, making up for lost time. "I could not smile upon them. An evil omen!"

The next day Grimaud was on foot again. The service commanded by M. de Beaufort was happily accomplished. The flotilla, sent to Toulon by the exertions of Raoul, had set out, dragging after it in little nutshells, almost invisible, the wives and friends of the fishermen and smugglers put in requisition for the service of the fleet. The time, so short, which remained for father and son to live together, appeared to go by with double rapidity, like some swift stream that flows towards eternity. Athos and Raoul returned to Toulon, which began to be filled with the noise of carriages, with the noise of arms, the noise of neighing horses. The trumpeters sounded their spirited marches; the drummers signalized their strength; the streets were overflowing with soldiers, servants, and tradespeople. The Duc de Beaufort was everywhere, superintending the embarkation with the zeal and interest of a good captain. He encouraged the humblest of his companions; he scolded his lieutenants, even those of the highest rank. Artillery, provisions, baggage, he insisted upon seeing all himself. He examined the equipment of every soldier; assured himself of the health and soundness of every horse. It was plain that, light, boastful, egotistical, in his hotel, the gentleman became the soldier again—the high noble, a captain—in face of the responsibility he had accepted. And yet, it must be admitted that, whatever was the care with which he presided over the preparations for departure, it was easy to perceive careless precipitation, and the absence of all the precaution that make the French soldier the first soldier in the world, because, in that world, he is the one most abandoned to his own physical and moral resources. All things having satisfied, or appearing to have satisfied, the admiral, he paid his compliments to Raoul, and gave the last orders for sailing, which was ordered the next morning at daybreak. He invited the comte had his son to dine with him; but they, under a pretext of service, kept themselves apart. Gaining their hostelry, situated under the trees of the great Place, they took their repast in haste, and Athos led Raoul to the rocks which dominate the city, vast gray mountains, whence the view is infinite and embraces a liquid horizon which appears, so remote is it, on a level with the rocks themselves. The night was fine, as it always is in these happy climes. The moon, rising behind the rocks, unrolled a silver sheet on the cerulean carpet of the sea. In the roadsteads maneuvered silently the vessels which had just taken their rank to facilitate the embarkation. The sea, loaded with phosphoric light, opened beneath the hulls of the barks that transported the baggage and munitions; every dip of the prow plowed up this gulf of white flames; from every oar dropped liquid diamonds. The sailors, rejoicing in the largesses of the admiral, were heard murmuring their slow and artless songs. Sometimes the grinding of the chains was mixed with the dull noise of shot falling into the holds. Such harmonies, such a spectacle, oppress the heart like fear, and dilate it like hope. All this life speaks of death. Athos had seated himself with his son, upon the moss, among the brambles of the promontory. Around their heads passed and repassed large bats, carried along by the fearful whirl of their blind chase. The feet of Raoul were over the edge of the cliff, bathed in that void which is peopled by vertigo, and provokes to self-annihilation. When the moon had risen to its fullest height, caressing with light the neighboring peaks, when the watery mirror was illumined in its full extent, and the little red fires had made their openings in the black masses of every ship, Athos, collecting all his ideas and all his courage, said:

"God has made all these things that we see, Raoul; He has made us also,—poor atoms mixed up with this monstrous universe. We shine like those fires and those stars; we sigh like those waves; we suffer like those great ships, which are worn out in plowing the waves, in obeying the wind that urges them towards an end, as the breath of God blows us towards a port. Everything likes to live, Raoul; and everything seems beautiful to living things."

"Monsieur," said Raoul, "we have before us a beautiful spectacle!"

"How good D'Artagnan is!" interrupted Athos, suddenly, "and what a rare good fortune it is to be supported during a whole life by such a friend as he is! That is what you have missed, Raoul."

"A friend!" cried Raoul, "I have wanted a friend!"

"M. de Guiche is an agreeable companion," resumed the comte, coldly, "but I believe, in the times in which you live, men are more engaged in their own interests and their own pleasures than they were in ours. You have sought a secluded life; that is a great happiness, but you have lost your strength thereby. We four, more weaned from those delicate abstractions that constitute your joy, furnished much more resistance when misfortune presented itself."

"I have not interrupted you, monsieur, to tell you that I had a friend, and that that friend is M. de Guiche. *Certes*, he is good and generous, and moreover he loves me. But I have lived under the guardianship of another friendship, monsieur, as precious and as strong as that of which you speak, since it is yours."

"I have not been a friend for you, Raoul," said Athos.

"Eh! monsieur, and in what respect not?"

"Because I have given you reason to think that life has but one face, because, sad and severe, alas! I have always cut off for you, without, God knows, wishing to do so, the joyous buds that spring incessantly from the fair tree of youth; so that at this moment I repent of not having made of you a more expansive, dissipated, animated man."

"I know why you say that, monsieur. No, it is not you who have made me what I am; it was love, which took me at the time when children only have inclinations; it is the constancy natural to my character, which with other creatures is but habit. I believed that I should always be as I was; I thought God had cast me in a path quite clear, quite straight, bordered with fruits and flowers. I had ever watching over me your vigilance and strength. I believed myself to be vigilant and strong. Nothing prepared me; I fell once, and that once deprived me of courage for the whole of my life. It is quite true that I wrecked myself. Oh, no, monsieur! you are nothing in my past but happiness—in my future but hope! No, I have no reproach to make against life such as you made it for me; I bless you, and I love you ardently."

"My dear Raoul, your words do me good. They prove to me that you will act a little for me in the time to come."

"I shall only act for you, monsieur."

"Raoul, what I have never hitherto done with respect to you, I will henceforward do. I will be your friend, not your father. We will live in expanding ourselves, instead of living and holding ourselves prisoners, when you come back. And that will be soon, will it not?"

"Certainly, monsieur, for such an expedition cannot last long."

"Soon, then, Raoul, soon, instead of living moderately on my income, I will give you the capital of my estates. It will suffice for launching you into the world till my death; and you will give me, I hope, before that time, the consolation of not seeing my race extinct."

"I will do all you may command," said Raoul, much agitated.

"It is not necessary, Raoul, that your duty as aide-de-camp should lead you into too hazardous enterprises. You have gone through your ordeal; you are known to be a true man under fire. Remember that war with Arabs is a war of snares, ambuscades, and assassinations."

"So it is said, monsieur."

"There is never much glory in falling in an ambuscade. It is a death which always implies a little rashness or want of foresight. Often, indeed, he who falls in one meets with but little pity. Those who are not pitied, Raoul, have died to little purpose. Still further, the conqueror laughs, and we Frenchmen ought not to allow stupid infidels to triumph over our faults. Do you clearly understand what I am saying to you, Raoul? God forbid I should encourage you to avoid encounters."

"I am naturally prudent, monsieur, and I have very good fortune," said Raoul, with a smile which chilled the heart of his poor father; "for," the young man hastened to add, "in twenty combats through which I have been, I have only received one scratch."

"There is in addition," said Athos, "the climate to be dreaded: that is an ugly end, to die of fever! King Saint-Louis prayed God to send him an arrow or the plague, rather than the fever."

"Oh, monsieur! with sobriety, with reasonable exercise—"

"I have already obtained from M. de Beaufort a promise that his dispatches shall be sent off every fortnight to France. You, as his aide-de-camp, will be charged with expediting them, and will be sure not to forget me."

"No, monsieur," said Raoul, almost choked with emotion.

"Besides, Raoul, as you are a good Christian, and I am one also, we ought to reckon upon a more special protection of God and His guardian angels. Promise me that if anything evil should happen to you, on any occasion, you will think of me at once."

"First and at once! Oh! yes, monsieur."

"And will call upon me?"

"Instantly."

"You dream of me sometimes, do you not, Raoul?"

"Every night, monsieur. During my early youth I saw you in my dreams, calm and mild, with one hand stretched out over my head, and that it was which made me sleep so soundly—formerly."

"We love each other too dearly," said the comte, "that from this moment, in which we separate, a portion of both our souls should not travel with one and the other of us, and should not dwell wherever we may dwell. Whenever you may be sad, Raoul, I feel that my heart will be dissolved in sadness; and when you smile on thinking of me, be assured you will send me, from however remote a distance, a vital scintillation of your joy."

"I will not promise you to be joyous," replied the young man; "but you may be certain that I will never pass an hour without thinking of you, not one hour, I swear, unless I shall be dead."

Athos could contain himself no longer; he threw his arm round the neck of his son, and held him embraced with all the power of his heart. The moon began to be now eclipsed by twilight; a golden band surrounded the horizon, announcing the approach of the day. Athos threw his cloak over the shoulders of Raoul, and led him back to the city, where burdens and porters were already in motion, like a vast ant-hill. At the extremity of the plateau which Athos and Bragelonne were quitting, they saw a dark shadow moving uneasily backwards and forwards, as if in indecision or ashamed to be seen. It was Grimaud, who in his anxiety had tracked his master, and was there awaiting him.

"Oh! my good Grimaud," cried Raoul, "what do you want? You are come to tell us it is time to be gone, have you not?"

"Alone?" said Grimaud, addressing Athos and pointing to Raoul in a tone of reproach, which showed to what an extent the old man was troubled.

"Oh! you are right!" cried the comte. "No, Raoul shall not go alone; no, he shall not be left alone in a strange land without some friendly hand to support him, some friendly heart to recall to him all he loved!"

"I?" said Grimaud.

"You, yes, you!" cried Raoul, touched to the inmost heart.

"Alas!" said Athos, "you are very old, my good Grimaud."

"So much the better," replied the latter, with an inexpressible depth of feeling and intelligence.

"But the embarkation is begun," said Raoul, "and you are not prepared."

"Yes," said Grimaud, showing the keys of his trunks, mixed with those of his young master.

"But," again objected Raoul, "you cannot leave monsieur le comte thus alone; monsieur le comte, whom you have never quitted?"

Grimaud turned his diamond eyes upon Athos and Raoul, as if to measure the strength of both. The comte uttered not a word.

"Monsieur le comte prefers my going," said Grimaud.

"I do," said Athos, by an inclination of the head.

At that moment the drums suddenly rolled, and the clarions filled the air with their inspiring notes. The regiments destined for the expedition began to debouch from the city. They advanced to the number of five, each composed of forty companies. Royals marched first, distinguished by their white uniform, faced with blue. The *ordonnance* colours, quartered cross-wise, violet and dead leaf, with a sprinkling of golden *fleurs-de-lis*, left the white-coloured flag, with its *fleur-de-lised* cross, to dominate the whole. Musketeers at the wings, with their forked sticks and their muskets on their shoulders; pikemen in the center, with their lances, fourteen feet in length, marched gayly towards the transports, which carried them in detail to the ships. The regiments of Picardy, Navarre, Normandy, and Royal Vaisseau, followed after. M. de Beaufort had known well how to select his troops. He himself was seen closing the march with his staff—it would take a full hour before he could reach the sea. Raoul with Athos turned his steps slowly towards the beach, in order to take his place when the prince embarked. Grimaud, boiling with the ardor of a young man, superintended the embarkation of Raoul's baggage in the admiral's vessel. Athos, with his arm passed through that of the son he was about to lose, absorbed in melancholy meditation, was deaf to every noise around him. An officer came quickly towards them to inform Raoul that M. de Beaufort was anxious to have him by his side.

"Have the kindness to tell the prince," said Raoul, "that I request he will allow me this hour to enjoy the company of my father."

"No, no," said Athos, "an aide-de-camp ought not thus to quit his general. Please to tell the prince, monsieur, that the vicomte will join him immediately." The officer set off at a gallop.

"Whether we part here or part there," added the comte, "it is no less a separation." He carefully brushed the dust from his son's coat, and passed his hand over his hair as they walked along. "But, Raoul," said he, "you want money. M. de Beaufort's train will be splendid, and I am certain it will be agreeable to you to purchase horses and arms, which are very dear things in Africa. Now, as you are not actually in the service of the king or M. de Beaufort, and are simply a volunteer, you must not reckon upon either pay or largesse. But I should not like you to want for anything at Gigelli. Here are two hundred pistoles; if you would please me, Raoul, spend them."

Raoul pressed the hand of his father, and, at the turning of a street, they saw M. de Beaufort, mounted on a magnificent white *genet*, which responded by graceful curvets to the applause of the women of the city. The duke called Raoul, and held out his hand to the comte. He spoke to him for some time, with such a kindly expression that the heart of the poor father even felt a little comforted. It was, however, evident to both father and son that their walk amounted to nothing less than a punishment. There was a terrible moment—that at which, on quitting the sands of the shore, the soldiers and sailors exchanged the last kisses with their families and friends; a supreme moment, in which, notwithstanding the clearness of the heavens, the warmth of the sun, of the perfumes of the air, and the rich life that was circulating in their veins, everything appeared black, everything bitter, everything created doubts of Providence, nay, at the most, of God. It was customary for the admiral and his suite to embark last; the cannon waited to announce, with its formidable voice, that the leader had placed his foot on board his vessel. Athos, forgetful of both the admiral and the fleet, and of his own dignity as a strong man, opened his arms to his son, and pressed him convulsively to his heart.

"Accompany us on board," said the duke, very much affected; "you will gain a good half-hour."

"No," said Athos, "my farewell has been spoken, I do not wish to voice a second."

"Then, vicomte, embark—embark quickly!" added the prince, wishing to spare the tears of these two men, whose hearts were bursting. And paternally, tenderly, very much as Porthos might have done, he took Raoul in his arms and placed him in the boat, the oars of which, at a signal, immediately were dipped in the waves. He himself, forgetful of ceremony, jumped into his boat, and pushed it off with a vigorous foot. "Adieu!" cried Raoul.

Athos replied only by a sign, but he felt something burning on his hand: it was the respectful kiss of Grimaud—the last farewell of the faithful dog. This kiss given, Grimaud jumped from the step of the mole upon the stem of a two-oared yawl, which had just been taken in tow by a *chaland* served by twelve galley-oars. Athos seated himself on the mole, stunned, deaf, abandoned. Every instant took from him one of the features, one of the shades of the pale face of his son. With his arms hanging down, his eyes fixed, his mouth open, he remained confounded with Raoul—in one same look, in one same thought, in one same stupor. The sea, by degrees, carried away boats and faces to that distance at which men become nothing but points,—loves, nothing but remembrances. Athos saw his son ascend the ladder of the admiral's ship, he saw him lean upon the rail of the deck, and place himself in such a manner as to be always an object in the eye of his father. In vain the cannon thundered, in vain from the ship sounded the long and lordly tumult, responded to by immense acclamations from the shore; in vain did the noise deafen the ear of the father, the smoke obscured the cherished object of his aspirations. Raoul appeared to him to the last moment; and the imperceptible atom, passing from black to pale, from pale to white, from white to nothing, disappeared for Athos—disappeared very long after, to all the eyes of the spectators, had disappeared both gallant ships and swelling sails. Towards midday, when the sun devoured space, and scarcely the tops of the masts dominated the incandescent limit of the sea, Athos perceived a soft aerial shadow rise, and vanish as soon as seen. This was the smoke of a cannon, which M. de Beaufort ordered to be fired as a last salute to the coast of France. The point was buried in its turn beneath the sky, and Athos returned with slow and painful step to his deserted hostelry.

#### XXXIV. Among Women.

D'Artagnan had not been able to hide his feelings from his friends so much as he would have wished. The stoical soldier, the impassive man-at-arms, overcome by fear and sad presentiments, had yielded, for a few moments, to human weakness. When, therefore, he had silenced his heart and calmed the agitation of his nerves, turning towards his lackey, a silent servant, always listening, in order to obey the more promptly:

"Rabaud," said he, "mind, we must travel thirty leagues a day."

"At your pleasure, captain," replied Rabaud.

And from that moment, D'Artagnan, accommodating his action to the pace of the horse, like a true centaur, gave up his thoughts to nothing—that is to say, to everything. He asked himself why the king had sent for him back; why the Iron Mask had thrown the silver plate at the feet of Raoul. As to the first subject, the reply was negative; he knew right well that the king's calling him was from necessity. He still further knew that Louis XIV. must experience an imperious desire for a private conversation with one whom the possession of such a secret placed on a level with the highest powers of the kingdom. But as to saying exactly what the king's wish was, D'Artagnan found himself completely at a loss. The musketeer had no doubts, either, upon the reason which had urged the unfortunate Philippe to reveal his character and birth. Philippe, buried forever beneath a mask of steel, exiled to a country where the men seemed little more than slaves of the elements; Philippe, deprived even of the society of D'Artagnan, who had loaded him with honours and delicate attentions, had nothing more to see than odious specters in this world, and, despair beginning to devour him, he poured himself forth in complaints, in the belief that his revelations would raise up some avenger for him. The manner in which the musketeer had been near killing his two best friends, the destiny which had so strangely brought Athos to participate in the great state secret, the farewell of Raoul, the obscurity of the future which threatened to end in a melancholy death; all this threw D'Artagnan incessantly back on lamentable predictions and forebodings, which the rapidity of his pace did not dissipate, as it used formerly to do. D'Artagnan passed from these considerations to the remembrance of the proscribed Porthos and Aramis. He saw them both, fugitives, tracked, ruined—laborious architects of fortunes they had lost; and as the king called for his man of execution in hours of vengeance and malice, D'Artagnan trembled at the very idea of receiving some commission that would make his very soul bleed. Sometimes, ascending hills, when the winded horse breathed hard from his red nostrils, and heaved his flanks, the captain, left to more freedom of thought, reflected on the prodigious genius of Aramis, a genius of acumen and intrigue, a match to which the Fronde and the civil war had produced but twice. Soldier, priest, diplomatist; gallant, avaricious, cunning; Aramis had never taken the good things of this life except as stepping-stones to rise to giddier ends. Generous in spirit, if not lofty in heart, he never did ill but for the sake of shining even yet more brilliantly. Towards the end of his career, at the moment of reaching the goal, like the patrician Fuscus, he had made a false step upon a plank, and had fallen into the sea. But Porthos, good, harmless Porthos! To see Porthos hungry, to see Mousqueton without gold lace, imprisoned, perhaps; to see Pierrefonds, Bracieux, razed to the very stones, dishonoured even to the timber,—these were so many poignant griefs for D'Artagnan, and every time that one of these griefs struck him, he bounded like a horse at the sting of a gadfly beneath the vaults of foliage where he has sought shady shelter from the burning sun. Never was the man of spirit subjected to *ennui*, if his body was exposed to fatigue; never did the man of healthy body fail to find life light, if he had something to engage his mind. D'Artagnan, riding fast, thinking as constantly, alighted from his horse in Pairs, fresh and tender in his muscles as the athlete preparing for the gymnasium. The king did not expect him so soon, and had just departed for the chase towards Meudon. D'Artagnan, instead of riding after the king, as he would formerly have done, took off his boots, had a bath, and waited till his majesty should return dusty and tired. He occupied the interval of five hours in taking, as people say, the air of the house, and in arming himself against all ill chances. He learned that the king, during the last fortnight, had been gloomy; that the queen-mother was ill and much depressed; that Monsieur, the king's brother, was exhibiting a devotional turn; that Madame had the vapors; and that M. de Guiche was gone to one of his estates. He learned that M. Colbert was radiant; that M. Fouquet consulted a fresh physician every day, who still did not cure him, and that his principal complaint was one which physicians do not usually cure, unless they are political physicians. The king, D'Artagnan was told, behaved in the kindest manner to M. Fouquet, and did not allow him to be ever out of his sight; but the surintendant, touched to the heart, like one of those fine trees a worm has punctured, was declining daily, in spite of the royal smile, that sun of court trees. D'Artagnan learned that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had become indispensable to the king; that the king, during his sporting excursions, if he did not take her with him, wrote to her frequently, no longer verses, but, which was much worse, prose, and that whole pages at a time. Thus, as the political Pleiad of the day said, the *first king in the world* was seen descending from his horse *with an ardor beyond compare*, and on the crown of his hat scrawling bombastic phrases, which M. de Saint-Aignan, aide-de-camp in perpetuity, carried to La Vallière at the risk of foundering his horses. During this time, deer and pheasants were left to the free enjoyment of their nature, hunted so lazily that, it was said, the art of venery ran great risk of degenerating at the court of France.



D'Artagnan then thought of the wishes of poor Raoul, of that desponding letter destined for a woman who passed her life in hoping, and as D'Artagnan loved to philosophize a little occasionally, he resolved to profit by the absence of the king to have a minute's talk with Mademoiselle de la Vallière. This was a very easy affair; while the king was hunting, Louise was walking with some other ladies in one of the galleries of the Palais Royal, exactly where the captain of the musketeers had some guards to inspect. D'Artagnan did not doubt that, if he could but open the conversation on Raoul, Louise might give him grounds for writing a consolatory letter to the poor exile; and hope, or at least consolation for Raoul, in the state of heart in which he had left him, was the sun, was life to two men, who were very dear to our captain. He directed his course, therefore, to the spot where he knew he should find Mademoiselle de la Vallière. D'Artagnan found La Vallière the center of the circle. In her apparent solitude, the king's favourite received, like a queen, more, perhaps, than the queen, a homage of which Madame had been so proud, when all the king's looks were directed to her and commanded the looks of the courtiers. D'Artagnan, although no squire of dames, received, nevertheless, civilities and attentions from the ladies; he was polite, as a brave man always is, and his terrible reputation had conciliated as much friendship among the men as admiration among the women. On seeing him enter, therefore, they immediately accosted him; and, as is not unfrequently the case with fair ladies, opened the attack by questions. "Where *had* he been? What *had* become of him so long? Why had they not seen him as usual make his fine horse curvet in such beautiful style, to the delight and astonishment of the curious from the king's balcony?"

He replied that he had just come from the land of oranges. This set all the ladies laughing. Those were times in which everybody traveled, but in which, notwithstanding, a journey of a hundred leagues was a problem often solved by death.

"From the land of oranges?" cried Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. "From Spain?"

"Eh! eh!" said the musketeer.

"From Malta?" echoed Montalais.

"*Ma foi!* You are coming very near, ladies."

"Is it an island?" asked La Vallière.

"Mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I will not give you the trouble of seeking any further; I come from the country where M. de Beaufort is, at this moment, embarking for Algiers."

"Have you seen the army?" asked several warlike fair ones.

"As plainly as I see you," replied D'Artagnan.

"And the fleet?"

"Yes, I saw everything."

"Have we any of us any friends there?" said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, coldly, but in a manner to attract attention to a question that was not without its calculated aim.

"Why," replied D'Artagnan, "yes; there were M. de la Guillotiere, M. de Manchy, M. de Bragelonne—"

La Vallière became pale. "M. de Bragelonne!" cried the perfidious Athenais. "Eh, what!—is he gone to the wars?—he!"

Montalais trod on her toe, but all in vain.

"Do you know what my opinion is?" continued she, addressing D'Artagnan.

"No, mademoiselle; but I should like very much to know it."

"My opinion is, then, that all the men who go to this war are desperate, desponding men, whom love has treated ill; and who go to try if they cannot find jet-complexioned women more kind than fair ones have been."

Some of the ladies laughed; La Vallière was evidently confused; Montalais coughed loud enough to waken the dead.

"Mademoiselle," interrupted D'Artagnan, "you are in error when you speak of black women at Gigelli; the women there have not jet faces; it is true they are not white—they are yellow."

"Yellow!" exclaimed the bevy of fair beauties.

"Eh! do not disparage it. I have never seen a finer colour to match with black eyes and a coral mouth."

"So much the better for M. de Bragelonne," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, with persistent malice. "He will make amends for his loss. Poor fellow!"

A profound silence followed these words; and D'Artagnan had time to observe and reflect that women—mild doves—treat each other more cruelly than tigers. But making La Vallière pale did not satisfy Athenais; she determined to make her blush likewise. Resuming the conversation without pause, "Do you know, Louise," said she, "that there is a great sin on your conscience?"

"What sin, mademoiselle?" stammered the unfortunate girl, looking round her for support, without finding it.

"Eh!—why," continued Athenais, "the poor young man was affianced to you; he loved you; you cast him off."

"Well, that is a right which every honest woman has," said Montalais, in an affected tone. "When we know we cannot constitute the happiness of a man, it is much better to cast him off."

"Cast him off! or refuse him!—that's all very well," said Athenais, "but that is not the sin Mademoiselle de la Vallière has to reproach herself with. The actual sin is sending poor Bragelonne to the wars; and to wars in which death is so very likely to be met with." Louise pressed her hand over her icy brow. "And if he dies," continued her pitiless tormentor, "you will have killed him. That is the sin."

Louise, half-dead, caught at the arm of the captain of the musketeers, whose face betrayed unusual emotion. "You wished to speak with me, Monsieur d'Artagnan," said she, in a voice broken by anger and pain. "What had you to say to me?"

D'Artagnan made several steps along the gallery, holding Louise on his arm; then, when they were far enough removed from the others—"What I had to say to you, mademoiselle," replied he, "Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente has just expressed; roughly and unkindly, it is true but still in its entirety."

She uttered a faint cry; pierced to the heart by this new wound, she went her way, like one of those poor birds which, struck unto death, seek the shade of the thicket in which to die. She disappeared at one door, at the moment the king was entering by another. The first glance of the king was directed towards the empty seat of his mistress. Not perceiving La Vallière, a frown came over his brow; but as soon as he saw D'Artagnan, who bowed to him—"Ah! monsieur!" cried he, "you *have* been diligent! I am much pleased with you." This was the superlative expression of royal satisfaction. Many men would have been ready to lay down their lives for such a speech from the king. The maids of honour and the courtiers, who had formed a respectful circle round the king on his entrance, drew back, on observing he wished to speak privately with his captain of the musketeers. The king led the way out of the gallery, after having again, with his eyes, sought everywhere for La Vallière, whose absence he could not account for. The moment they were out of the reach of curious ears, "Well! Monsieur d'Artagnan," said he, "the prisoner?"

"Is in his prison, sire."

"What did he say on the road?"

"Nothing, sire."

"What did he do?"

"There was a moment at which the fisherman—who took me in his boat to Sainte-Marguerite—revolted, and did his best to kill me. The—the prisoner defended me instead of attempting to fly."

The king became pale. "Enough!" said he; and D'Artagnan bowed. Louis walked about his cabinet with hasty steps. "Were you at Antibes," said he, "when Monsieur de Beaufort came there?"

"No, sire; I was setting off when monsieur le duc arrived."

"Ah!" which was followed by a fresh silence. "Whom did you see there?"

"A great many persons," said D'Artagnan, coolly.

The king perceived he was unwilling to speak. "I have sent for you, monsieur le capitaine, to desire you to go and prepare my lodgings at Nantes."

"At Nantes!" cried D'Artagnan.

"In Bretagne."

"Yes, sire, it is in Bretagne. Will you majesty make so long a journey as to Nantes?"

"The States are assembled there," replied the king. "I have two demands to make of them: I wish to be there."

"When shall I set out?" said the captain.

"This evening—to-morrow—to-morrow evening; for you must stand in need of rest."

"I have rested, sire."

"That is well. Then between this and to-morrow evening, when you please."

D'Artagnan bowed as if to take his leave; but, perceiving the king very much embarrassed, "Will you majesty," said he, stepping two paces forward, "take the court with you?"

"Certainly I shall."

"Then you majesty will, doubtless, want the musketeers?" And the eye of the king sank beneath the penetrating glance of the captain.

"Take a brigade of them," replied Louis.

"Is that all? Has your majesty no other orders to give me?"

"No—ah—yes."

"I am all attention, sire."

"At the castle of Nantes, which I hear is very ill arranged, you will adopt the practice of placing musketeers at the door of each of the principal dignitaries I shall take with me."

"Of the principal?"

"Yes."

"For instance, at the door of M. de Lyonne?"

"Yes."

"And that of M. Letellier?"

"Yes."

"Of M. de Brienne?"

"Yes."

"And of monsieur le surintendant?"

"Without doubt."

"Very well, sire. By to-morrow I shall have set out."

"Oh, yes; but one more word, Monsieur d'Artagnan. At Nantes you will meet with M. le Duc de Gesvres, captain of the guards. Be sure that your musketeers are placed before his guards arrive. Precedence always belongs to the first comer."

"Yes, sire."

"And if M. de Gesvres should question you?"

"Question me, sire! Is it likely that M. de Gesvres should question me?" And the musketeer, turning cavalierly on his heel, disappeared. "To Nantes!" said he to himself, as he descended from the stairs.

"Why did he not dare to say, from thence to Belle-Isle?"

As he reached the great gates, one of M. Brienne's clerks came running after him, exclaiming, "Monsieur d'Artagnan! I beg your pardon—"

"What is the matter, Monsieur Ariste?"

"The king has desired me to give you this order."

"Upon your cash-box?" asked the musketeer.

"No, monsieur; on that of M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan was surprised, but he took the order, which was in the king's own writing, and was for two hundred pistoles. "What!" thought he, after having politely thanked M. Brienne's clerk, "M. Fouquet is to pay for the journey, then! *Mordieux!* that is a bit of pure Louis XI. Why was not this order on the chest of M. Colbert? He would have paid it with such joy." And D'Artagnan, faithful to his principle of never letting an order at sight get cold, went straight to the house of M. Fouquet, to receive his two hundred pistoles.

The superintendent had no doubt received advice of the approaching departure, for he was giving a farewell dinner to his friends. From the bottom to the top of the house, the hurry of the servants bearing dishes, and the diligence of the *registres*, denoted an approaching change in offices and kitchen. D'Artagnan, with his order in his hand, presented himself at the offices, when he was told it was too late to pay cash, the chest was closed. He only replied: "On the king's service."

The clerk, a little put out by the serious air of the captain, replied, that "that was a very respectable reason, but that the customs of the house were respectable likewise; and that, in consequence, he begged the bearer to call again next day." D'Artagnan asked if he could not see M. Fouquet. The clerk replied that M. le surintendant did not interfere with such details, and rudely closed the outer door in the captain's face. But the latter had foreseen this stroke, and placed his boot between the door and the door-case, so that the lock did not catch, and the clerk was still nose to nose with his interlocutor. This made him change his tone, and say, with terrified politeness, "If monsieur wishes to speak to M. le surintendant, he must go to the ante-chambers; these are the offices, where my lord never comes."

"Oh! very well! Where are they?" replied D'Artagnan.

"On the other side of the court," said the clerk, delighted to be free. D'Artagnan crossed the court, and fell in with a crowd of servants.

"My lord sees nobody at this hour," he was answered by a fellow carrying a vermeil dish, in which were three pheasants and twelve quails.

"Tell him," said the captain, laying hold of the servant by the end of his dish, "that I am M. d'Artagnan, captain of his majesty's musketeers."

The fellow uttered a cry of surprise, and disappeared; D'Artagnan following him slowly. He arrived just in time to meet M. Pelisson in the ante-chamber: the latter, a little pale, came hastily out of the dining-room to learn what was the matter. D'Artagnan smiled.

"There is nothing unpleasant, Monsieur Pelisson; only a little order to receive the money for."

"Ah!" said Fouquet's friend, breathing more freely; and he took the captain by the hand, and, dragging him behind him, led him into the dining-room, where a number of friends surrounded the surintendant, placed in the center, and buried in the cushions of a *fauteuil*. There were assembled all the Epicureans who so lately at Vaux had done the honours of the mansion of wit and money in aid of M. Fouquet. Joyous friends, for the most part faithful, they had not fled their protector at the approach of the storm, and, in spite of the threatening heavens, in spite of the trembling earth, they remained there, smiling, cheerful, as devoted in misfortune as they had been in prosperity. On the left of the surintendant sat Madame de Belliere; on his right was Madame Fouquet; as if braving the laws of the world, and putting all vulgar reasons of propriety to silence, the two protecting angels of this man united to offer, at the moment of the crisis, the support of their twined arms. Madame de Belliere was pale, trembling, and full of respectful attentions for madame la surintendante, who, with one hand on her husband's, was looking anxiously towards the door by which Pelisson had gone out to bring D'Artagnan. The captain entered at first full of courtesy, and afterwards of admiration, when, with his infallible glance, he had divined as well as taken in the expression of every face. Fouquet raised himself up in his chair.

"Pardon me, Monsieur d'Artagnan," said he, "if I did not myself receive you when coming in the king's name." And he pronounced the last words with a sort of melancholy firmness, which filled the hearts of all his friends with terror.

"My lord," replied D'Artagnan, "I only come to you in the king's name to demand payment of an order for two hundred pistoles."

The clouds passed from every brow but that of Fouquet, which still remained overcast.

"Ah! then," said he, "perhaps you also are setting out for Nantes?"

"I do not know whither I am setting out, my lord."

"But," said Madame Fouquet, recovered from her fright, "you are not going so soon, monsieur le capitaine, as not to do us the honour to take a seat with us?"

"Madame, I should esteem that a great honour done me, but I am so pressed for time, that, you see, I have been obliged to permit myself to interrupt your repast to procure payment of my note."

"The reply to which shall be gold," said Fouquet, making a sign to his intendant, who went out with the order D'Artagnan handed him.

"Oh!" said the latter, "I was not uneasy about the payment; the house is good."

A painful smile passed over the pale features of Fouquet.

"Are you in pain?" asked Madame de Belliere.

"Do you feel your attack coming on?" asked Madame Fouquet.

"Neither, thank you both," said Fouquet.

"Your attack?" said D'Artagnan, in his turn; "are you unwell, my lord?"

"I have a tertian fever, which seized me after the *fete* at Vaux."

"Caught cold in the grottos, at night, perhaps?"

"No, no; nothing but agitation, that was all."

"The too much heart you displayed in your reception of the king," said La Fontaine, quietly, without suspicion that he was uttering a sacrilege.

"We cannot devote too much heart to the reception of our king," said Fouquet, mildly, to his poet.

"Monsieur meant to say the too great ardor," interrupted D'Artagnan, with perfect frankness and much amenity. "The fact is, my lord, that hospitality was never practiced as at Vaux."

Madame Fouquet permitted her countenance to show clearly that if Fouquet had conducted himself well towards the king, the king had hardly done the like to the minister. But D'Artagnan knew the terrible secret. He alone with Fouquet knew it; those two men had not, the one the courage to complain, the other the right to accuse. The captain, to whom the two hundred pistoles were brought, was about to take his leave, when Fouquet, rising, took a glass of wine, and ordered one to be given to D'Artagnan.

"Monsieur," said he, "to the health of the king, *whatever may happen*."

"And to your health, my lord, *whatever may happen*," said D'Artagnan.

He bowed, with these words of evil omen, to all the company, who rose as soon as they heard the sound of his spurs and boots at the bottom of the stairs.

"I, for a moment, thought it was I and not my money he wanted," said Fouquet, endeavoring to laugh.

"You!" cried his friends; "and what for, in the name of Heaven!"

"Oh! do not deceive yourselves, my dear brothers in Epicurus," said the superintendent; "I do not wish to make a comparison between the most humble sinner on the earth, and the God we adore, but remember, he gave one day to his friends a repast which is called the Last Supper, and which was nothing but a farewell dinner, like that which we are making at this moment."

A painful cry of denial arose from all parts of the table. "Shut the doors," said Fouquet, and the servants disappeared. "My friends," continued Fouquet, lowering his voice, "what was I formerly? What am I now? Consult among yourselves and reply. A man like me sinks when he does not continue to rise. What shall we say, then, when he really sinks? I have no more money, no more credit; I have no longer anything but powerful enemies, and powerless friends."

"Quick!" cried Pelisson. "Since you explain yourself with such frankness, it is our duty to be frank, likewise. Yes, you are ruined—yes, you are hastening to your ruin—stop. And, in the first place, what money have we left?"

"Seven hundred thousand livres," said the intendant.

"Bread," murmured Madame Fouquet.

"Relays," said Pelisson, "relays, and fly!"

"Whither?"

"To Switzerland—to Savoy—but fly!"

"If my lord flies," said Madame Belliere, "it will be said that he was guilty—was afraid."

"More than that, it will be said that I have carried away twenty millions with me."

"We will draw up memoirs to justify you," said La Fontaine. "Fly!"

"I will remain," said Fouquet. "And, besides, does not everything serve me?"

"You have Belle-Isle," cried the Abbe Fouquet.

"And I am naturally going there, when going to Nantes," replied the superintendent. "Patience, then, patience!"

"Before arriving at Nantes, what a distance!" said Madame Fouquet.

"Yes, I know that well," replied Fouquet. "But what is to be done there? The king summons me to the States. I know well it is for the purpose of ruining me; but to refuse to go would be to evince uneasiness."

"Well, I have discovered the means of reconciling everything," cried Pelisson. "You are going to set out for Nantes."

Fouquet looked at him with an air of surprise.

"But with friends; but in your own carriage as far as Orleans; in your own barge as far as Nantes; always ready to defend yourself, if you are attacked; to escape, if you are threatened. In fact, you will carry your money against all chances; and, whilst flying, you will only have obeyed the king; then, reaching the sea, when you like, you will embark for Belle-Isle, and from Belle-Isle you will shoot out wherever it may please you, like the eagle that leaps into space when it has been driven from its eyrie."

A general assent followed Pelisson's words. "Yes, do so," said Madame Fouquet to her husband.

"Do so," said Madame de Belliere.

"Do it! do it!" cried all his friends.

"I will do so," replied Fouquet.

"This very evening?"

"In an hour?"

"Instantly."

"With seven hundred thousand livres you can lay the foundation of another fortune," said the Abbe Fouquet.

"What is there to prevent our arming corsairs at Belle-Isle?"

"And, if necessary, we will go and discover a new world," added La Fontaine, intoxicated with fresh projects and enthusiasm.

A knock at the door interrupted this concert of joy and hope. "A courier from the king," said the master of the ceremonies.

A profound silence immediately ensued, as if the message brought by this courier was nothing but a reply to all the projects given birth to a moment before. Every one waited to see what the master would do. His brow was streaming with perspiration, and he was really suffering from his fever at that instant. He passed into his cabinet, to receive the king's message. There prevailed, as we have said, such a silence in the chambers, and throughout the attendance, that from the dining-room could be heard the voice of Fouquet, saying, "That is well, monsieur." This voice was, however, broken by fatigue, and trembled with emotion. An instant after, Fouquet called Gourville, who crossed the gallery amidst the universal expectation. At length, he himself re-appeared among his guests; but it was no longer the same pale, spiritless countenance they had beheld when he left them; from pale he had become livid; and from spiritless, annihilated. A breathing, living specter, he advanced with his arms stretched out, his mouth parched, like a shade that comes to salute the friends of former days. On seeing him thus, every one cried out, and every one rushed towards Fouquet. The latter, looking at Pelisson, leaned upon his wife, and pressed the icy hand of the Marquise de Belliere.

"Well," said he, in a voice which had nothing human in it.

"What has happened, my God!" said some one to him.

Fouquet opened his right hand, which was clenched, but glistening with perspiration, and displayed a paper, upon which Pelisson cast a terrified glance. He read the following lines, written by the king's hand:

"DEAR AND WELL-BELOVED MONSIEUR FOUQUET,—Give us, upon that which you have left of ours, the sum of seven hundred thousand livres, of which we stand in need to prepare for our departure.

"And, as we know your health is not good, we pray God to restore you, and to have you in His holy keeping. "LOUIS.

"The present letter is to serve as a receipt."

A murmur of terror circulated through the apartment.

"Well," cried Pelisson, in his turn, "you have received that letter?"

"Received it, yes!"

"What will you do, then?"

"Nothing, since I have received it."

"But—"

"If I have received it, Pelisson, I have paid it," said the surintendant, with a simplicity that went to the heart of all present.

"You have paid it!" cried Madame Fouquet. "Then we are ruined!"

"Come, no useless words," interrupted Pelisson. "Next to money, life. My lord, to horse! to horse!"

"What, leave us!" at once cried both the women, wild with grief.

"Eh! my lord, in saving yourself, you save us all. To horse!"

"But he cannot hold himself on. Look at him."

"Oh! if he takes time to reflect—" said the intrepid Pelisson.

"He is right," murmured Fouquet.

"My lord! My lord!" cried Gourville, rushing up the stairs, four steps at once. "My lord!"

"Well! what?"

"I escorted, as you desired, the king's courier with the money."

"Yes."

"Well! when I arrived at the Palais Royal, I saw—"

"Take breath, my poor friend, take breath; you are suffocating."

"What did you see?" cried the impatient friends.

"I saw the musketeers mounting on horseback," said Gourville.

"There, then!" cried every voice at once; "there, then! is there an instant to be lost?"

Madame Fouquet rushed downstairs, calling for her horses; Madame de Belliere flew after her, catching her in her arms, and saying: "Madame, in the name of his safety, do not betray anything, do not manifest alarm."

Pelisson ran to have the horses put to the carriages. And, in the meantime, Gourville gathered in his hat all that the weeping friends were able to throw into it of gold and silver—the last offering, the pious alms made to misery by poverty. The surintendant, dragged along by some, carried by others, was shut up in his carriage. Gourville took the reins, and mounted the box. Pelisson supported Madame Fouquet, who had fainted. Madame de Belliere had more strength, and was well paid for it; she received Fouquet's last kiss. Pelisson easily explained this precipitate departure by saying that an order from the king had summoned the minister to Nantes.

#### XXXVI. In M. Colbert's Carriage.

As Gourville had seen, the king's musketeers were mounting and following their captain. The latter, who did not like to be confined in his proceedings, left his brigade under the orders of a lieutenant, and set off on post horses, recommending his men to use all diligence. However rapidly they might travel, they could not arrive before him. He had time, in passing along the Rue des Petits-Champs, to see something which afforded him plenty of food for thought and conjecture. He saw M. Colbert coming out from his house to get into his carriage, which was stationed before the door. In this carriage D'Artagnan perceived the hoods of two women, and being rather curious, he wished to know the names of the ladies hid beneath these hoods. To get a glimpse at them, for they kept themselves closely covered up, he urged his horse so near the carriage, that he drove him against the step with such force as to shake everything containing and contained. The terrified women uttered, the one a faint cry, by which D'Artagnan recognized a young woman, the other an imprecation, in which he recognized the vigor and *aplomb* that half a century bestows. The hoods were thrown back: one of the women was Madame Vanel, the other the Duchesse de Chevreuse. D'Artagnan's eyes were quicker than those of the ladies; he had seen and known them, whilst they did not recognize him; and as they laughed at their fright, pressing each other's hands,—

"Humph!" said D'Artagnan, "the old duchesse is no more inaccessible to friendship than formerly. *She* paying her court to the mistress of M. Colbert! Poor M. Fouquet! that presages you nothing good!"

He rode on. M. Colbert got into his carriage and the distinguished trio commenced a sufficiently slow pilgrimage toward the wood of Vincennes. Madame de Chevreuse set down Madame Vanel at her husband's house, and, left alone with M. Colbert, chatted upon affairs whilst continuing her ride. She had an inexhaustible fund of conversation, that dear duchesse, and as she always talked for the ill of others, though ever with a view to her own good, her conversation amused her interlocutor, and did not fail to leave a favourable impression.

She taught Colbert, who, poor man! was ignorant of the fact, how great a minister he was, and how Fouquet would soon become a cipher. She promised to rally around him, when he should become surintendant, all the old nobility of the kingdom, and questioned him as to the preponderance it would be proper to allow La Vallière. She praised him, she blamed him, she bewildered him. She showed him the secret of so many secrets that, for a moment, Colbert thought he was doing business with the devil. She proved to him that she held in her hand the Colbert of to-day, as she had held the Fouquet of yesterday; and as he asked her very simply the reason of her hatred for the surintendant: "Why do you yourself hate him?" said she.

"Madame, in politics," replied he, "the differences of system oft bring about dissensions between men. M. Fouquet always appeared to me to practice a system opposed to the true interests of the king." She interrupted him.—"I will say no more to you about M. Fouquet. The journey the king is about to take to Nantes will give a good account of him. M. Fouquet, for me, is a man gone by—and for you also."

Colbert made no reply. "On his return from Nantes," continued the duchesse, "the king, who is only anxious for a pretext, will find that the States have not behaved well—that they have made too few sacrifices. The States will say that the imposts are too heavy, and that the surintendant has ruined them. The king will lay all the blame on M. Fouquet, and then—"

"And then?" said Colbert.

"Oh! he will be disgraced. Is not that your opinion?"

Colbert darted a glance at the duchesse, which plainly said: "If M. Fouquet be only disgraced, you will not be the cause of it."

"Your place, M. Colbert," the duchesse hastened to say, "must be a high place. Do you perceive any one between the king and yourself, after the fall of M. Fouquet?"

"I do not understand," said he.

"You *will* understand. To what does your ambition aspire?"

"I have none."

"It was useless, then, to overthrow the superintendent, Monsieur Colbert. It was idle."

"I had the honour to tell you, madame—"

"Oh! yes, I know, all about the interest of the king—but, if you please, we will speak of your own."

"Mine! that is to say, the affairs of his majesty."

"In short, are you, or are you not endeavoring to ruin M. Fouquet? Answer without evasion."

"Madame, I ruin nobody."

"I am endeavoring to comprehend, then, why you purchased from me the letters of M. Mazarin concerning M. Fouquet. Neither can I conceive why you have laid those letters before the king."

Colbert, half stupefied, looked at the duchesse with an air of constraint.

"Madame," said he, "I can less easily conceive how you, who received the money, can reproach me on that head—"

"That is," said the old duchesse, "because we must will that which we wish for, unless we are not able to obtain what we wish."

"*Will!*" said Colbert, quite confounded by such coarse logic.

"You are not able, *hein!* Speak."

"I am not able, I allow, to destroy certain influences near the king."

"That fight in favour of M. Fouquet? What are they? Stop, let me help you."

"Do, madame."

"La Vallière?"

"Oh! very little influence; no knowledge of business, and small means. M. Fouquet has paid his court to her."

"To defend him would be to accuse herself, would it not?"

"I think it would."

"There is still another influence, what do you say to that?"

"Is it considerable?"

"The queen-mother, perhaps?"

"Her majesty, the queen-mother, has a weakness for M. Fouquet very prejudicial to her son."

"Never believe that," said the old duchesse, smiling.

"Oh!" said Colbert, with incredulity, "I have often experienced it."

"Formerly?"

"Very recently, madame, at Vaux. It was she who prevented the king from having M. Fouquet arrested."

"People do not forever entertain the same opinions, my dear monsieur. That which the queen may have wished recently, she would not wish, perhaps, to-day."

"And why not?" said Colbert, astonished.

"Oh! the reason is of very little consequence."

"On the contrary, I think it is of great consequence; for, if I were certain of not displeasing her majesty, the queen-mother, my scruples would be all removed."

"Well! have you never heard talk of a certain secret?"

"A secret?"

"Call it what you like. In short, the queen-mother has conceived a bitter hatred for all those who have participated, in one fashion or another, in the discovery of this secret, and M. Fouquet I believe is one of these."

"Then," said Colbert, "we may be sure of the assent of the queen-mother?"

"I have just left her majesty, and she assures me so."

"So be it, then, madame."

"But there is something further; do you happen to know a man who was the intimate friend of M. Fouquet, M. d'Herblay, a bishop, I believe?"

"Bishop of Vannes."

"Well! this M. d'Herblay, who also knew the secret, the queen-mother is pursuing with the utmost rancor."

"Indeed!"

"So hotly pursued, that if he were dead, she would not be satisfied with anything less than his head, to satisfy her he would never speak again."

"And is that the desire of the queen-mother?"

"An order is given for it."

"This Monsieur d'Herblay shall be sought for, madame."

"Oh! it is well known where he is."

Colbert looked at the duchesse.

"Say where, madame."

"He is at Belle-Ile-en-Mer."

"At the residence of M. Fouquet?"

"At the residence of M. Fouquet."

"He shall be taken."

It was now the duchesse's turn to smile. "Do not fancy the capture so easy," said she; "do not promise it so lightly."

"Why not, madame?"

"Because M. d'Herblay is not one of those people who can be taken when and where you please."

"He is a rebel, then?"

"Oh! Monsieur Colbert, we have passed all our lives in making rebels, and yet you see plainly, that so far from being taken, we take others."

Colbert fixed upon the old duchesse one of those fierce looks of which no words can convey the expression, accompanied by a firmness not altogether wanting in grandeur. "The times are gone," said he, "in which subjects gained duchies by making war against the king of France. If M. d'Herblay conspires, he will perish on the scaffold. That will give, or will not give, pleasure to his enemies,—a matter, by the way, of little importance to *us*."

And this *us*, a strange word in the mouth of Colbert, made the duchesse thoughtful for a moment. She caught herself reckoning inwardly with this man—Colbert had regained his superiority in the conversation, and he meant to keep it.

"You ask me, madame," he said, "to have this M. d'Herblay arrested?"

"I?—I ask you nothing of the kind!"

"I thought you did, madame. But as I have been mistaken, we will leave him alone; the king has said nothing about him."

The duchesse bit her nails.

"Besides," continued Colbert, "what a poor capture would this bishop be! A bishop game for a king! Oh! no, no; I will not even take the slightest notice of him."

The hatred of the duchesse now discovered itself.

"Game for a woman!" said she. "Is not the queen a woman? If she wishes M. d'Herblay arrested, she has her reasons. Besides, is not M. d'Herblay the friend of him who is doomed to fall?"

"Oh! never mind that," said Colbert. "This man shall be spared, if he is not the enemy of the king. Is that displeasing to you?"

"I say nothing."

"Yes—you wish to see him in prison, in the Bastille, for instance."

"I believe a secret better concealed behind the walls of the Bastille than behind those of Belle-Isle."

"I will speak to the king about it; he will clear up the point."

"And whilst waiting for that enlightenment, Monsieur l'Eveque de Vannes will have escaped. I would do so."

"Escaped! he! and whither should he escape? Europe is ours, in will, if not in fact."

"He will always find an asylum, monsieur. It is evident you know nothing of the man you have to do with. You do not know D'Herblay; you do not know Aramis. He was one of those four musketeers who, under the late king, made Cardinal de Richelieu tremble, and who, during the regency, gave so much trouble to My lord Mazarin."

"But, madame, what can he do, unless he has a kingdom to back him?"

"He has one, monsieur."

"A kingdom, he! what, Monsieur d'Herblay?"

"I repeat to you, monsieur, that if he wants a kingdom, he either has it or will have it."

"Well, as you are so earnest that this rebel should not escape, madame, I promise you he shall not escape."

"Belle-Isle is fortified, M. Colbert, and fortified by him."

"If Belle-Isle were also defended by him, Belle-Isle is not impregnable; and if Monsieur l'Eveque de Vannes is shut up in Belle-Isle, well, madame, the place shall be besieged, and he will be taken."

"You may be very certain, monsieur, that the zeal you display in the interest of the queen-mother will please her majesty mightily, and you will be magnificently rewarded; but what shall I tell her of your projects respecting this man?"

"That when once taken, he shall be shut up in a fortress from which her secret shall never escape."

"Very well, Monsieur Colbert, and we may say, that, dating from this instant, we have formed a solid alliance, that is, you and I, and that I am absolutely at your service."

"It is I, madame, who place myself at yours. This Chevalier d'Herblay is a kind of Spanish spy, is he not?"

"Much more."

"A secret ambassador?"

"Higher still."

"Stop—King Phillip III. of Spain is a bigot. He is, perhaps, the confessor of Phillip III."

"You must go higher even than that."

"*Mordieu!*" cried Colbert, who forgot himself so far as to swear in the presence of this great lady, of this old friend of the queen-mother. "He must then be the general of the Jesuits."

"I believe you have guessed it at last," replied the duchesse.

"Ah! then, madame, this man will ruin us all if we do not ruin him; and we must make haste, too."

"Such was my opinion, monsieur, but I did not dare to give it you."

"And it was lucky for us he has attacked the throne, and not us."

"But, mark this well, M. Colbert. M. d'Herblay is never discouraged; if he has missed one blow, he will be sure to make another; he will begin again. If he has allowed an opportunity to escape of making a king for himself, sooner or later, he will make another, of whom, to a certainty, you will not be prime minister."

Colbert knitted his brow with a menacing expression. "I feel assured that a prison will settle this affair for us, madame, in a manner satisfactory for both."

The duchesse smiled again.

"Oh! if you knew," said she, "how many times Aramis has got out of prison!"

"Oh!" replied Colbert, "we will take care that he shall not get out *this* time."

"But you were not attending to what I said to you just now. Do you remember that Aramis was one of the four invincibles whom Richelieu so dreaded? And at that period the four musketeers were not in possession of that which they have now—money and experience."

Colbert bit his lips.

"We will renounce the idea of the prison," said he, in a lower tone: "we will find a little retreat from which the invincible cannot possibly escape."

"That was well spoken, our ally!" replied the duchesse. "But it is getting late; had we not better return?"

"The more willingly, madame, from my having my preparations to make for setting out with the king."

"To Paris!" cried the duchesse to the coachman.

And the carriage returned towards the Faubourg Saint Antoine, after the conclusion of the treaty that gave to death the last friend of Fouquet, the last defender of Belle-Isle, the former friend of Marie Michon, the new foe of the old duchesse.

#### XXXVII. The Two Lighters.

D'Artagnan had set off; Fouquet likewise was gone, and with a rapidity which doubled the tender interest of his friends. The first moments of this journey, or better say, this flight, were troubled by a ceaseless dread of every horse and carriage to be seen behind the fugitive. It was not natural, in fact, if Louis XIV. was determined to seize this prey, that he should allow it to escape; the young lion was already accustomed to the chase, and he had bloodhounds sufficiently clever to be trusted. But insensibly all fears were dispersed; the surintendant, by hard traveling, placed such a distance between himself and his persecutors, that no one of them could reasonably be expected to overtake him. As to his position, his friends had made it excellent for him. Was he not traveling to join the king at Nantes, and what did the rapidity prove but his zeal to obey? He arrived, fatigued, but reassured, at Orleans, where he found, thanks to the care of a courier who had preceded him, a handsome lighter of eight oars. These lighters, in the shape of gondolas, somewhat wide and heavy, containing a small chamber, covered by the deck, and a chamber in the poop, formed by a tent, then acted as passage-boats from Orleans to Nantes, by the Loire, and this passage, a long one in our days, appeared then more easy and convenient than the high-road, with its post-hacks and its ill-hung carriages. Fouquet went on board this lighter, which set out immediately. The rowers, knowing they had the honour of conveying the surintendant of the finances, pulled with all their strength, and that magic word, the *finances*, promised them a liberal gratification, of which they wished to prove themselves worthy. The lighter seemed to leap the mimic waves of the Loire. Magnificent weather, a sunrise that empurpled all the landscape, displayed the river in all its limpid serenity. The current and the rowers carried Fouquet along as wings carry a bird, and he arrived before Beaugency without the slightest accident having signalized the voyage. Fouquet hoped to be the first to arrive at Nantes; there he would see the notables and gain support among the principal members of the States; he would make himself a necessity, a thing very easy for a man of his merit, and would delay the catastrophe, if he did not succeed in avoiding it entirely. "Besides," said Gourville to him, "at Nantes, you will make out, or we will make out, the intentions of your enemies; we will have horses always ready to convey you to Poitou, a bark in which to gain the sea, and when once upon the open sea, Belle-Isle is your inviolable port. You see, besides, that no one is watching you, no one is following." He had scarcely finished when they discovered at a distance, behind an elbow formed by the river, the masts of a huge lighter coming down. The rowers of Fouquet's boat uttered a cry of surprise on seeing this galley.

"What is the matter?" asked Fouquet.

"The matter is, my lord," replied the patron of the bark, "that it is a truly remarkable thing—that lighter comes along like a hurricane."

Gourville started, and mounted to the deck, in order to obtain a better view.

Fouquet did not go up with him, but said to Gourville, with restrained mistrust: "See what it is, dear friend."

The lighter had just passed the elbow. It came on so fast, that behind it might be plainly seen the white wake illumined with the fires of the day.

"How they go," repeated the skipper, "how they go! They must be well paid! I did not think," he added, "that oars of wood could behave better than ours, but yonder oarsmen prove the contrary."

"Well they may," said one of the rowers, "they are twelve, and we but eight."

"Twelve rowers!" replied Gourville, "twelve! impossible."

The number of eight rowers for a lighter had never been exceeded, even for the king. This honour had been paid to monsieur le surintendant, more for the sake of haste than of respect.

"What does it mean?" said Gourville, endeavoring to distinguish beneath the tent, which was already apparent, travelers which the most piercing eye could not yet have succeeded in discovering.

"They must be in a hurry, for it is not the king," said the patron.

Fouquet shuddered.

"By what sign do you know that it is not the king?" said Gourville.

"In the first place, because there is no white flag with fleurs-de-lis, which the royal lighter always carries."

"And then," said Fouquet, "because it is impossible it should be the king, Gourville, as the king was still in Paris yesterday."

Gourville replied to the surintendant by a look which said: "You were there yourself yesterday."

"And by what sign do you make out they are in such haste?" added he, for the sake of gaining time.

"By this, monsieur," said the patron; "these people must have set out a long while after us, and they have already nearly overtaken us."

"Bah!" said Gourville, "who told you that they do not come from Beaugency or from Moit even?"

"We have seen no lighter of that shape, except at Orleans. It comes from Orleans, monsieur, and makes great haste."

Fouquet and Gourville exchanged a glance. The captain remarked their uneasiness, and, to mislead him, Gourville immediately said:

"Some friend, who has laid a wager he would catch us; let us win the wager, and not allow him to come up with us."

The patron opened his mouth to say that it was quite impossible, but Fouquet said with much *hauteur*,—"If it is any one who wishes to overtake us, let him come."

"We can try, my lord," said the man, timidly. "Come, you fellows, put out your strength; row, row!"

"No," said Fouquet, "on the contrary; stop short."

"My lord! what folly!" interrupted Gourville, stooping towards his ear.

"Pull up!" repeated Fouquet. The eight oars stopped, and resisting the water, created a retrograde motion. It stopped. The twelve rowers in the other did not, at first, perceive this maneuver, for they continued to urge on their boat so vigorously that it arrived quickly within musket-shot. Fouquet was short-sighted, Gourville was annoyed by the sun, now full in his eyes; the skipper alone, with that habit and clearness which are acquired by a constant struggle with the elements, perceived distinctly the travelers in the neighboring lighter.

"I can see them!" cried he; "there are two."

"I can see nothing," said Gourville.

"You will not be long before you distinguish them; in twenty strokes of their oars they will be within ten paces of us."

But what the patron announced was not realized; the lighter imitated the movement commanded by Fouquet, and instead of coming to join its pretended friends, it stopped short in the middle of the river.

"I cannot comprehend this," said the captain.

"Nor I," cried Gourville.

"You who can see so plainly the people in that lighter," resumed Fouquet, "try to describe them to us, before we are too far off."

"I thought I saw two," replied the boatman. "I can only see one now, under the tent."

"What sort of man is he?"

"He is a dark man, broad-shouldered, bull-necked."

A little cloud at that moment passed across the azure, darkening the sun. Gourville, who was still looking, with one hand over his eyes, became able to see what he sought, and all at once, jumping from the deck into the chamber where Fouquet awaited him: "Colbert!" said he, in a voice broken by emotion.

"Colbert!" repeated Fouquet. "Too strange! but no, it is impossible!"

"I tell you I recognized him, and he, at the same time, so plainly recognized me, that he is just gone into the chamber on the poop. Perhaps the king has sent him on our track."

"In that case he would join us, instead of lying by. What is he doing there?"

"He is watching us, without a doubt."

"I do not like uncertainty," said Fouquet; "let us go straight up to him."

"Oh! my lord, do not do that, the lighter is full of armed men."

"He wishes to arrest me, then, Gourville? Why does he not come on?"

"My lord, it is not consistent with your dignity to go to meet even your ruin."

"But to allow them to watch me like a malefactor!"

"Nothing yet proves that they are watching you, my lord; be patient!"

"What is to be done, then?"

"Do not stop; you were only going so fast to appear to obey the king's order with zeal. Redouble the speed. He who lives will see!"

"That is better. Come!" cried Fouquet; "since they remain stock-still yonder, let us go on."

The captain gave the signal, and Fouquet's rowers resumed their task with all the success that could be looked for from men who had rested. Scarcely had the lighter made a hundred fathoms, than the other, that with the twelve rowers, resumed its rapid course. This position lasted all day, without any increase or diminution of distance between the two vessels. Towards evening Fouquet wished to try the intentions of his persecutor. He ordered his rowers to pull towards the shore, as if to effect a landing. Colbert's lighter imitated this maneuver, and steered towards the shore in a slanting direction. By the merest chance, at the spot where Fouquet pretended to wish to land, a stableman, from the chateau of Langeais, was following the flowery banks leading three horses in halters. Without doubt the people of the twelve-oared lighter fancied that Fouquet was directing his course to these horses ready for flight, for four or five men, armed with muskets, jumped from the lighter on to the shore, and marched along the banks, as if to gain ground on the horseman. Fouquet, satisfied of having forced the enemy to a demonstration, considered his intention evident, and put his boat in motion again. Colbert's people returned likewise to theirs, and the course of the two vessels was resumed with fresh perseverance. Upon seeing this, Fouquet felt himself threatened closely, and in a prophetic voice—"Well, Gourville," said he, whisperingly, "what did I say at our last repast, at my house? Am I going, or not, to my ruin?"

"Oh! my lord!"

"These two boats, which follow each other with so much emulation, as if we were disputing, M. Colbert and I, a prize for swiftness on the Loire, do they not aptly represent our fortunes; and do you not believe, Gourville, that one of the two will be wrecked at Nantes?"

"At least," objected Gourville, "there is still uncertainty; you are about to appear at the States; you are about to show what sort of man you are; your eloquence and genius for business are the buckler and sword that will serve to defend you, if not to conquer with. The Bretons do not know you; and when they become acquainted with you your cause is won! Oh! let M. Colbert look to it well, for his lighter is as much exposed as yours to being upset. Both go quickly, his faster than yours, it is true; we shall see which will be wrecked first."

Fouquet, taking Gourville's hand—"My friend," said he, "everything considered, remember the proverb, 'First come, first served!' Well! M. Colbert takes care not to pass me. He is a prudent man is M. Colbert."

He was right; the two lighters held their course as far as Nantes, watching each other. When the surintendant landed, Gourville hoped he should be able to seek refuge at once, and have the relays prepared. But, at the landing, the second lighter joined the first, and Colbert, approaching Fouquet, saluted him on the quay with marks of the profoundest respect—marks so significant, so public, that their result was the bringing of the whole population upon La Fosse. Fouquet was completely self-possessed; he felt that in his last moments of greatness he had obligations towards himself. He wished to fall from such a height that his fall should crush some of his enemies. Colbert was there—so much the worse for Colbert. The surintendant, therefore, coming up to him, replied, with that arrogant semi-closure of the eyes peculiar to him—"What! is that you, M. Colbert?"

"To offer you my respects, my lord," said the latter.

"Were you in that lighter?"—pointing to the one with twelve rowers.

"Yes, my lord."

"Of twelve rowers?" said Fouquet; "what luxury, M. Colbert. For a moment I thought it was the queen-mother."

"My lord!"—and Colbert blushed.

"This is a voyage that will cost those who have to pay for it dear, Monsieur l'Intendant!" said Fouquet. "But you have, happily, arrived!—You see, however," added he, a moment after, "that I, who had but eight rowers, arrived before you." And he turned his back towards him, leaving him uncertain whether the maneuvers of the second lighter had escaped the notice of the first. At least he did not give him the satisfaction of showing that he had been frightened. Colbert, so annoyingly attacked, did not give way.

"I have not been quick, my lord," he replied, "because I followed your example whenever you stopped."

"And why did you do that, Monsieur Colbert?" cried Fouquet, irritated by the base audacity; "as you had a superior crew to mine, why did you not either join me or pass me?"

"Out of respect," said the intendant, bowing to the ground.

Fouquet got into a carriage which the city had sent to him, we know not why or how, and he repaired to *la Maison de Nantes*, escorted by a vast crowd of people, who for several days had been agog with expectation of a convocation of the States. Scarcely was he installed when Gourville went out to order horses on the route to Poitiers and Vannes, and a boat at Paimboef. He performed these various operations with so much mystery, activity, and generosity, that never was Fouquet, then laboring under an attack of fever, more nearly saved, except for the counteraction of that immense disturber of human projects,—chance. A report was spread during the night, that the king was coming in great haste on post horses, and would arrive in ten or twelve hours at the latest. The people, while waiting for the king, were greatly rejoiced to see the musketeers, newly arrived, with Monsieur d'Artagnan, their captain, and quartered in the castle, of which they occupied all the posts, in quality of guard of honour. M. d'Artagnan, who was very polite, presented himself, about ten o'clock, at the lodgings of the surintendant to pay his respectful compliments; and although the minister suffered from fever, although he was in such pain as to be bathed in sweat, he would receive M. d'Artagnan, who was delighted with that honour, as will be seen by the conversation they had together.

XXXVIII. Friendly Advice.

Fouquet had gone to bed, like a man who clings to life, and wishes to economize, as much as possible, that slender tissue of existence, of which the shocks and frictions of this world so quickly wear out the tenuity. D'Artagnan appeared at the door of this chamber, and was saluted by the superintendent with a very affable "Good day."

"*Bon jour!* my lord," replied the musketeer; "how did you get through the journey?"

"Tolerably well, thank you."

"And the fever?"

"But poorly. I drink, as you perceive. I am scarcely arrived, and I have already levied a contribution of *tisane* upon Nantes."

"You should sleep first, my lord."

"Eh! *corbleu!* my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan, I should be very glad to sleep."

"Who hinders you?"

"Why, *you* in the first place."

"!? Oh, my lord!"

"No doubt you do. Is it at Nantes as at Paris? Do you not come in the king's name?"

"For Heaven's sake, my lord," replied the captain, "leave the king alone! The day on which I shall come on the part of the king, for the purpose you mean, take my word for it, I will not leave you long in doubt. You will see me place my hand on my sword, according to the *ordonnance*, and you will hear my say at once, in ceremonial voice, 'My lord, in the name of the king, I arrest you!'"

"You promise me that frankness?" said the superintendent.

"Upon my honour! But we have not come to that, believe me."

"What makes you think that, M. d'Artagnan? For my part, I think quite the contrary."

"I have heard speak of nothing of the kind," replied D'Artagnan.

"Eh! eh!" said Fouquet.

"Indeed, no. You are an agreeable man, in spite of your fever. The king should not, cannot help loving you, at the bottom of his heart."

Fouquet's expression implied doubt. "But M. Colbert?" said he; "does M. Colbert love me as much as you say?"

"I am not speaking of M. Colbert," replied D'Artagnan. "He is an exceptional man. He does not love you; so much is very possible; but, *mordieux!* the squirrel can guard himself against the adder with very little trouble."

"Do you know that you are speaking to me quite as a friend?" replied Fouquet; "and that, upon my life! I have never met with a man of your intelligence, and heart?"

"You are pleased to say so," replied D'Artagnan. "Why did you wait till to-day to pay me such a compliment?"

"Blind that we are!" murmured Fouquet.

"Your voice is getting hoarse," said D'Artagnan; "drink, my lord, drink!" And he offered him a cup of *tisane*, with the most friendly cordiality; Fouquet took it, and thanked him by a gentle smile. "Such things only happen to me," said the musketeer. "I have passed ten years under your very beard, while you were rolling about tons of gold. You were clearing an annual pension of four millions; you never observed me; and you find out there is such a person in the world, just at the moment you—"

"Just at the moment I am about to fall," interrupted Fouquet. "That is true, my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"I did not say so."

"But you thought so; and that is the same thing. Well! if I fall, take my word as truth, I shall not pass a single day without saying to myself, as I strike my brow, 'Fool! fool!—stupid mortal! You had a Monsieur d'Artagnan under your eye and hand, and you did not employ him, you did not enrich him!'"

"You overwhelm me," said the captain. "I esteem you greatly."

"There exists another man, then, who does not think as M. Colbert thinks," said the surintendant.

"How this M. Colbert looms up in your imagination! He is worse than fever!"

"Oh! I have good cause," said Fouquet. "Judge for yourself." And he related the details of the course of the lighters, and the hypocritical persecution of Colbert. "Is not this a clear sign of my ruin?"

D'Artagnan became very serious. "That is true," he said. "Yes; it has an unsavoury odor, as M. de Treville used to say." And he fixed on M. Fouquet his intelligent and significant look.

"Am I not clearly designated in that, captain? Is not the king bringing me to Nantes to get me away from Paris, where I have so many creatures, and to possess himself of Belle-Isle?"

"Where M. d'Herblay is," added D'Artagnan. Fouquet raised his head. "As for me, my lord," continued D'Artagnan, "I can assure you the king has said nothing to me against you."

"Indeed!"

"The king commanded me to set out for Nantes, it is true; and to say nothing about it to M. de Gesvres."

"My friend."

"To M. de Gesvres, yes, my lord," continued the musketeer, whose eye s did not cease to speak a language different from the language of his lips. "The king, moreover, commanded me to take a brigade of musketeers, which is apparently superfluous, as the country is quite quiet."

"A brigade!" said Fouquet, raising himself upon his elbow.

"Ninety-six horsemen, yes, my lord. The same number as were employed in arresting MM. de Chalais, de Cinq-Mars, and Montmorency."

Fouquet pricked up his ears at these words, pronounced without apparent value. "And what else?" said he.

"Oh! nothing but insignificant orders; such as guarding the castle, guarding every lodging, allowing none of M. de Gesvres's guards to occupy a single post."

"And as to myself," cried Fouquet, "what orders had you?"

"As to you, my lord?—not the smallest word."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, my safety, my honour, perhaps my life are at stake. You would not deceive me?"

"I?—to what end? Are you threatened? Only there really is an order with respect to carriages and boats—"

"An order?"

"Yes; but it cannot concern you—a simple measure of police."

"What is it, captain?—what is it?"

"To forbid all horses or boats to leave Nantes, without a pass, signed by the king."

"Great God! but—"

D'Artagnan began to laugh. "All that is not to be put into execution before the arrival of the king at Nantes. So that you see plainly, my lord, the order in nowise concerns you."

Fouquet became thoughtful, and D'Artagnan feigned not to observe his preoccupation. "It is evident, by my thus confiding to you the orders which have been given to me, that I am friendly towards you, and that I am trying to prove to you that none of them are directed against you."

"Without doubt!—without doubt!" said Fouquet, still absent.

"Let us recapitulate," said the captain, his glance beaming with earnestness. "A special guard about the castle, in which your lodging is to be, is it not?"

"Do you know the castle?"

"Ah! my lord, a regular prison! The absence of M. de Gesvres, who has the honour of being one of your friends. The closing of the gates of the city, and of the river without a pass; but, only when the king shall have arrived. Please to observe, Monsieur Fouquet, that if, instead of speaking to man like you, who are one of the first in the kingdom, I were speaking to a troubled, uneasy conscience—I should compromise myself forever. What a fine opportunity for any one who wished to be free! No police, no guards, no orders; the water free, the roads free, Monsieur d'Artagnan obliged to lend his horses, if required. All this ought to reassure you, Monsieur Fouquet, for the king would not have left me thus independent, if he had any sinister designs. In truth, Monsieur Fouquet, ask me whatever you like, I am at your service; and, in return, if you will consent to do it, do me a service, that of giving my compliments to Aramis and Porthos, in case you embark for Belle-Isle, as you have a right to do without changing your dress, immediately, in your *robe de chambre*—just as you are." Saying these words, and with a profound bow, the musketeer, whose looks had lost none of their intelligent kindness, left the apartment. He had not reached the steps of the vestibule, when Fouquet, quite beside himself, hung to the bell-rope, and shouted, "My horses!—my lighter!" But nobody answered. The surintendant dressed himself with everything that came to hand.

"Gourville!—Gourville!" cried he, while slipping his watch into his pocket. And the bell sounded again, whilst Fouquet repeated, "Gourville!—Gourville!"

Gourville at length appeared, breathless and pale.

"Let us be gone! Let us be gone!" cried Fouquet, as soon as he saw him.

"It is too late!" said the surintendant's poor friend.

"Too late!—why?"

"Listen!" And they heard the sounds of trumpets and drums in front of the castle.

"What does that mean, Gourville?"

"It means the king is come, my lord."

"The king!"

"The king, who has ridden double stages, who has killed horses, and who is eight hours in advance of all our calculations."

"We are lost!" murmured Fouquet. "Brave D'Artagnan, all is over, thou has spoken to me too late!"

The king, in fact, was entering the city, which soon resounded with the cannon from the ramparts, and from a vessel which replied from the lower parts of the river. Fouquet's brow darkened; he called his *valets de chambre* and dressed in ceremonial costume. From his window, behind the curtains, he could see the eagerness of the people, and the movement of a large troop, which had followed the prince. The king was conducted to the castle with great pomp, and Fouquet saw him dismount under the portcullis, and say something in the ear of D'Artagnan, who held his stirrup. D'Artagnan, when the king had passed under the arch, directed his steps towards the house Fouquet was in; but so slowly, and stopping so frequently to speak to his musketeers, drawn up like a hedge, that it might be said he was counting the seconds, or the steps, before accomplishing his object. Fouquet opened the window to speak to him in the court.

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan, on perceiving him, "are you still there, my lord?"

And that word *still* completed the proof to Fouquet of how much information and how many useful counsels were contained in the first visit the musketeer had paid him. The surintendant sighed deeply.

"Good heavens! yes, monsieur," replied he. "The arrival of the king has interrupted me in the projects I had formed."

"Oh, then you know that the king has arrived?"

"Yes, monsieur, I have seen him; and this time you come from him—"

"To inquire after you, my lord; and, if your health is not too bad, to beg you to have the kindness to repair to the castle."

"Directly, Monsieur d'Artagnan, directly!"

"Ah, *mordieux*!" said the captain, "now the king is come, there is no more walking for anybody—no more free will; the password governs all now, you as much as me, me as much as you."

Fouquet heaved a last sigh, climbed with difficulty into his carriage, so great was his weakness, and went to the castle, escorted by D'Artagnan, whose politeness was not less terrifying this time than it had just before been consoling and cheerful.

#### XXXIX. How the King, Louis XIV., Played His Little Part.

As Fouquet was alighting from his carriage, to enter the castle of Nantes, a man of mean appearance went up to him with marks of the greatest respect, and gave him a letter. D'Artagnan endeavored to prevent this man from speaking to Fouquet, and pushed him away, but the message had been given to the surintendant. Fouquet opened the letter and read it, and instantly a vague terror, which D'Artagnan did not fail to penetrate, was painted on the countenance of the first minister. Fouquet put the paper into the portfolio which he had under his arm, and passed on towards the king's apartments. D'Artagnan, through the small windows made at every landing of the donjon stairs, saw, as he went up behind Fouquet, the man who had delivered the note, looking round him on the place and making signs to several persons, who disappeared in the adjacent streets, after having themselves repeated the signals. Fouquet was made to wait for a moment on the terrace of which we have spoken,—a terrace which abutted on the little corridor, at the end of which the cabinet of the king was located. Here D'Artagnan passed on before the surintendant, whom, till that time, he had respectfully accompanied, and entered the royal cabinet.

"Well?" asked Louis XIV., who, on perceiving him, threw on to the table covered with papers a large green cloth.

"The order is executed, sire."

"And Fouquet?"

"Monsieur le surintendant follows me," said D'Artagnan.

"In ten minutes let him be introduced," said the king, dismissing D'Artagnan again with a gesture. The latter retired; but had scarcely reached the corridor at the extremity of which Fouquet was waiting for him, when he was recalled by the king's bell.

"Did he not appear astonished?" asked the king.

"Who, sire?"

"*Fouquet*," replied the king, without saying monsieur, a peculiarity which confirmed the captain of the musketeers in his suspicions.

"No, sire," replied he.

"That's well!" And a second time Louis dismissed D'Artagnan.

Fouquet had not quitted the terrace where he had been left by his guide. He reperused his note, conceived thus:

"Something is being contrived against you. Perhaps they will not dare to carry it out at the castle; it will be on your return home. The house is already surrounded by musketeers. Do not enter. A white horse is in waiting for you behind the esplanade!"

Fouquet recognized the writing and zeal of Gourville. Not being willing that, if any evil happened to himself, this paper should compromise a faithful friend, the surintendant was busy tearing it into a thousand morsels, spread about by the wind from the balustrade of the terrace. D'Artagnan found him watching the snowflake fluttering of the last scraps in space.

"Monsieur," said he, "the king awaits you."

Fouquet walked with a deliberate step along the little corridor, where MM. de Brienne and Rose were at work, whilst the Duc de Saint-Aignan, seated on a chair, likewise in the corridor, appeared to be waiting for orders, with feverish impatience, his sword between his legs. It appeared strange to Fouquet that MM. Brienne, Rose, and de Saint-Aignan, in general so attentive and obsequious, should scarcely take the least notice, as he, the surintendant, passed. But how could he expect to find it otherwise among courtiers, he whom the king no longer called anything but *Fouquet*? He raised his head, determined to look every one and everything bravely in the face, and entered the king's apartment, where a little bell, which we already know, had already announced him to his majesty.

The king, without rising, nodded to him, and with interest: "Well! how are you, Monsieur Fouquet?" said he.

"I am in a high fever," replied the surintendant; "but I am at the king's service."

"That is well; the States assemble to-morrow; have you a speech ready?"



Fouquet looked at the king with astonishment. "I have not, sire," replied he; "but I will improvise one. I am too well acquainted with affairs to feel any embarrassment. I have only one question to ask; will your majesty permit me?"

"Certainly. Ask it."

"Why did not your majesty do his first minister the honour of giving him notice of this in Paris?"

"You were ill; I was not willing to fatigue you."

"Never did a labor—never did an explanation fatigue me, sire; and since the moment is come for me to demand an explanation of my king—"

"Oh, Monsieur Fouquet! an explanation? An explanation, pray, of what?"

"Of your majesty's intentions with respect to myself."

The king blushed. "I have been calumniated," continued Fouquet, warmly, "and I feel called upon to adjure the justice of the king to make inquiries."

"You say all this to me very uselessly, Monsieur Fouquet; I know what I know."

"Your majesty can only know the things that have been told to you; and I, on my part, have said nothing to you, whilst others have spoken many, many times—"

"What do you wish to say?" said the king, impatient to put an end to this embarrassing conversation.

"I will go straight to the facts, sire; and I accuse a certain man of having injured me in your majesty's opinion."

"Nobody has injured you, Monsieur Fouquet."

"That reply proves to me, sire, that I am right."

"Monsieur Fouquet, I do not like people to be accused."

"Not when one is accused?"

"We have already spoken too much about this affair."

"Your majesty will not allow me to justify myself?"

"I repeat that I do not accuse you."

Fouquet, with a half-bow, made a step backward. "It is certain," thought he, "that he has made up his mind. He alone who cannot go back can show such obstinacy. Not to see the danger now would be to be blind indeed; not to shun it would be stupid." He resumed aloud, "Did your majesty send for me on business?"

"No, Monsieur Fouquet, but for some advice I wish to give you."

"I respectfully await it, sire."

"Rest yourself, Monsieur Fouquet, do not throw away your strength; the session of the States will be short, and when my secretaries shall have closed it, I do not wish business to be talked of in France for a fortnight."

"Has the king nothing to say to me on the subject of this assembly of the States?"

"No, Monsieur Fouquet."

"Not to me, the surintendant of the finances?"

"Rest yourself, I beg you; that is all I have to say to you."

Fouquet bit his lips and hung his head. He was evidently busy with some uneasy thought. This uneasiness struck the king. "Are you angry at having to rest yourself, M. Fouquet?" said he.

"Yes, sire, I am not accustomed to take rest."

"But you are ill; you must take care of yourself."

"Your majesty spoke just now of a speech to be pronounced to-morrow."

His majesty made no reply; this unexpected stroke embarrassed him. Fouquet felt the weight of this hesitation. He thought he could read danger in the eyes of the young prince, which fear would but precipitate. "If I appear frightened, I am lost," thought he.

The king, on his part, was only uneasy at the alarm of Fouquet. "Has he a suspicion of anything?" murmured he.

"If his first word is severe," again thought Fouquet; "if he becomes angry, or feigns to be angry for the sake of a pretext, how shall I extricate myself? Let us smooth the declivity a little. Gourville was right."

"Sire," said he, suddenly, "since the goodness of the king watches over my health to the point of dispensing with my labor, may I not be allowed to be absent from the council of to-morrow? I could pass the day in bed, and will entreat the king to grant me his physician, that we may endeavor to find a remedy against this fearful fever."

"So be it, Monsieur Fouquet, it shall be as you desire; you shall have a holiday to-morrow, you shall have the physician, and shall be restored to health."

"Thanks!" said Fouquet, bowing. Then, opening his game: "Shall I not have the happiness of conducting your majesty to my residence of Belle-Isle?"

And he looked Louis full in the face, to judge of the effect of such a proposal. The king blushed again.

"Do you know," replied he, endeavoring to smile, "that you have just said, 'My residence of Belle-Isle'?"

"Yes, sire."

"Well! do you not remember," continued the king in the same cheerful tone, "that you gave me Belle-Isle?"

"That is true again, sire. Only, as you have not taken it, you will doubtless come with me and take possession of it."

"I mean to do so."

"That was, besides, your majesty's intention as well as mine; and I cannot express to your majesty how happy and proud I have been to see all the king's regiments from Paris to help take possession."

The king stammered out that he did not bring the musketeers for that alone.

"Oh, I am convinced of that," said Fouquet, warmly; "your majesty knows very well that you have nothing to do but to come alone with a cane in your hand, to bring to the ground all the fortifications of Belle-Isle."

"*Peste!*" cried the king; "I do not wish those fine fortifications, which cost so much to build, to fall at all. No, let them stand against the Dutch and English. You would not guess what I want to see at Belle-Isle, Monsieur Fouquet; it is the pretty peasants and women of the lands on the sea-shore, who dance so well, and are so seducing with their scarlet petticoats! I have heard great boast of your pretty tenants, monsieur le surintendant; well, let me have a sight of them."

"Whenever your majesty pleases."

"Have you any means of transport? It shall be to-morrow, if you like."

The surintendant felt this stroke, which was not adroit, and replied, "No, sire; I was ignorant of your majesty's wish; above all, I was ignorant of your haste to see Belle-Isle, and I am prepared with nothing."

"You have a boat of your own, nevertheless?"

"I have five; but they are all in port, or at Paimboeuf; and to join them, or bring them hither, would require at least twenty-four hours. Have I any occasion to send a courier? Must I do so?"

"Wait a little, put an end to the fever,—wait till to-morrow."

"That is true. Who knows but that by to-morrow we may not have a hundred other ideas?" replied Fouquet, now perfectly convinced and very pale.

The king started, and stretched his hand out towards his little bell, but Fouquet prevented his ringing.

"Sire," said he, "I have an ague—I am trembling with cold. If I remain a moment longer, I shall most likely faint. I request your majesty's permission to go and fling myself beneath the bedclothes."

"Indeed, you are in a shiver; it is painful to behold! Come, Monsieur Fouquet, begone! I will send to inquire after you."

"Your majesty overwhelms me with kindness. In an hour I shall be better."

"I will call some one to reconduct you," said the king.

"As you please, sire; I would gladly take the arm of any one."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan!" cried the king, ringing his little bell.

"Oh, sire," interrupted Fouquet, laughing in such a manner as made the prince feel cold, "would you give me the captain of your musketeers to take me to my lodgings? An equivocal honour that, sire! A simple footman, I beg."

"And why, M. Fouquet? M. d'Artagnan conducts me often, and extremely well!"

"Yes, but when he conducts you, sire, it is to obey you; whilst me—"

"Go on!"

"If I am obliged to return home supported by the leader of the musketeers, it would be everywhere said you had had me arrested."

"Arrested!" replied the king, who became paler than Fouquet himself,—“arrested! oh!"

"And why should they not say so?" continued Fouquet, still laughing; "and I would lay a wager there would be people found wicked enough to laugh at it." This sally disconcerted the monarch. Fouquet was skillful enough, or fortunate enough, to make Louis XIV. recoil before the appearance of the deed he meditated. M. d'Artagnan, when he appeared, received an order to desire a musketeer to accompany the surintendant.

"Quite unnecessary," said the latter; "sword for sword; I prefer Gourville, who is waiting for me below. But that will not prevent me enjoying the society of M. d'Artagnan. I am glad he will see Belle-Isle, he is so good a judge of fortifications."

D'Artagnan bowed, without at all comprehending what was going on. Fouquet bowed again and left the apartment, affecting all the slowness of a man who walks with difficulty. When once out of the castle, "I am saved!" said he. "Oh! yes, disloyal king, you shall see Belle-Isle, but it shall be when I am no longer there."

He disappeared, leaving D'Artagnan with the king.

"Captain," said the king, "you will follow M. Fouquet at the distance of a hundred paces."

"Yes, sire."

"He is going to his lodgings again. You will go with him."

"Yes, sire."

"You will arrest him in my name, and will shut him up in a carriage."

"In a carriage. Well, sire?"

"In such a fashion that he may not, on the road, either converse with any one or throw notes to people he may meet."

"That will be rather difficult, sire."

"Not at all."

"Pardon me, sire, I cannot stifle M. Fouquet, and if he asks for liberty to breathe, I cannot prevent him by closing both the windows and the blinds. He will throw out at the doors all the cries and notes possible."

"The case is provided for, Monsieur d'Artagnan; a carriage with a trellis will obviate both the difficulties you point out."

"A carriage with an iron trellis!" cried D'Artagnan; "but a carriage with an iron trellis is not made in half an hour, and your majesty commands me to go immediately to M. Fouquet's lodgings."

"The carriage in question is already made."

"Ah! that is quite a different thing," said the captain; "if the carriage is ready made, very well, then, we have only to set it in motion."

"It is ready—and the horses harnessed."

"Ah!"

"And the coachman, with the outriders, is waiting in the lower court of the castle."

D'Artagnan bowed. "There only remains for me to ask your majesty whither I shall conduct M. Fouquet."

"To the castle of Angers, at first."

"Very well, sire."

"Afterwards we will see."

"Yes, sire."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, one last word: you have remarked that, for making this capture of M. Fouquet, I have not employed my guards, on which account M. de Gesvres will be furious."

"Your majesty does not employ your guards," said the captain, a little humiliated, "because you mistrust M. de Gesvres, that is all."

"That is to say, monsieur, that I have more confidence in you."

"I know that very well, sire! and it is of no use to make so much of it."

"It is only for the sake of arriving at this, monsieur, that if, from this moment, it should happen that by any chance whatever M. Fouquet should escape—such chances have been, monsieur—"

"Oh! very often, sire; but for others, not for me."

"And why not with you?"

"Because I, sire, have, for an instant, wished to save M. Fouquet."

The king started. "Because," continued the captain, "I had then a right to do so, having guessed your majesty's plan, without you having spoken to me of it, and that I took an interest in M. Fouquet. Now, was I not at liberty to show my interest in this man?"

"In truth, monsieur, you do not reassure me with regard to your services."

"If I had saved him then, I should have been perfectly innocent; I will say more, I should have done well, for M. Fouquet is not a bad man. But he was not willing; his destiny prevailed; he let the hour of liberty slip by. So much the worse! Now I have orders, I will obey those orders, and M. Fouquet you may consider as a man arrested. He is at the castle of Angers, this very M. Fouquet."

"Oh! you have not got him yet, captain."

"That concerns me; every one to his trade, sire; only, once more, reflect! Do you seriously give me orders to arrest M. Fouquet, sire?"

"Yes, a thousand times, yes!"

"In writing, sire, then."

"Here is the order."

D'Artagnan read it, bowed to the king, and left the room. From the height of the terrace he perceived Gourville, who went by with a joyous air towards the lodgings of M. Fouquet.

XL: The White Horse and the Black.

"That is rather surprising," said D'Artagnan; "Gourville running about the streets so gayly, when he is almost certain that M. Fouquet is in danger; when it is almost equally certain that it was Gourville who warned M. Fouquet just now by the note which was torn into a thousand pieces upon the terrace, and given to the winds by monsieur le surintendant. Gourville is rubbing his hands; that is because he has done something clever. Whence comes M. Gourville? Gourville is coming from the Rue aux Herbes. Whither does the Rue aux Herbes lead?" And D'Artagnan followed, along the tops of the houses of Nantes, dominated by the castle, the line traced by the streets, as he would have done upon a topographical plan; only, instead of the dead, flat paper, the living chart rose in relief with the cries, the movements, and the shadows of men and things. Beyond the inclosure of the city, the great verdant plains stretched out, bordering the Loire, and appeared to run towards the pink horizon, which was cut by the azure of the waters and the dark green of the marshes. Immediately outside the gates of Nantes two white roads were seen diverging like separate fingers of a gigantic hand. D'Artagnan, who had taken in all the panorama at a glance by crossing the terrace, was led by the line of the Rue aux Herbes to the mouth of one of those roads which took its rise under the gates of Nantes. One step more, and he was about to descend the stairs, take his trellised carriage, and go towards the lodgings of M. Fouquet. But chance decreed, at the moment of plunging into the staircase, that he was attracted by a moving point then gaining ground upon that road.

"What is that?" said the musketeer to himself; "a horse galloping,—a runaway horse, no doubt. What a rate he is going at!" The moving point became detached from the road, and entered into the fields. "A white horse," continued the captain, who had just observed the colour thrown luminously against the dark ground, "and he is mounted; it must be some boy whose horse is thirsty and has run away with him."

These reflections, rapid as lightning, simultaneous with visual perception, D'Artagnan had already forgotten when he descended the first steps of the staircase. Some morsels of paper were spread over the stairs, and shone out white against the dirty stones. "Eh! eh!" said the captain to himself, "here are some of the fragments of the note torn by M. Fouquet. Poor man! he has given his secret to the wind; the wind will have no more to do with it, and brings it back to the king. Decidedly, Fouquet, you play with misfortune! the game is not a fair one,—fortune is against you. The star of Louis XIV. obscures yours; the adder is stronger and more cunning than the squirrel." D'Artagnan picked up one of these morsels of paper as he descended. "Gourville's pretty little hand!" cried he, whilst examining one of the fragments of the note; "I was not mistaken." And he read the word "horse." "Stop!" said he; and he examined another, upon which there was not a letter traced. Upon a third he read the word "white;" "white horse," repeated he, like a child that is spelling. "Ah, *mordoux!*" cried the suspicious spirit, "a white horse!" And, like that grain of powder which, burning, dilates into ten thousand times its volume, D'Artagnan, enlightened by ideas and suspicions, rapidly reascended the stairs towards the terrace. The white horse was still galloping in the direction of the Loire, at the extremity of which, melting into the vapors of the water, a little sail appeared, wave-balanced like a water-butterfly. "Oh!" cried the musketeer, "only a man who wants to fly would go at that pace across plowed lands; there is but one Fouquet, a financier, to ride thus in open day upon a white horse; there is no one but the lord of Belle-Isle who would make his escape towards the sea, while there are such thick forests on land, and there is but one D'Artagnan in the world to catch M. Fouquet, who has half an hour's start, and who will have gained his boat within an hour." This being said, the musketeer gave orders that the carriage with the iron trellis should be taken immediately to a thicket situated just outside the city. He selected his best horse, jumped upon his back, galloped along the Rue aux Herbes, taking, not the road Fouquet had taken, but the bank itself of the Loire, certain that he should gain ten minutes upon the total distance, and, at the intersection of the two lines, come up with the fugitive, who could have no suspicion of being pursued in that direction. In the rapidity of the pursuit, and with the impatience of the avenger, animating himself as in war, D'Artagnan, so mild, so kind towards Fouquet, was surprised to find himself become ferocious—almost sanguinary. For a long time he galloped without catching sight of the white horse. His rage assumed fury, he doubted himself,—he suspected that Fouquet had buried himself in some subterranean road, or that he had changed the white horse for one of those famous black ones, as swift as the wind, which D'Artagnan, at Saint-Mande, had so frequently admired and envied for their vigor and their fleetness.

At such moments, when the wind cut his eyes so as to make the tears spring from them, when the saddle had become burning hot, when the galled and spurred horse reared with pain, and threw behind him a shower of dust and stones, D'Artagnan, raising himself in his stirrups, and seeing nothing on the waters, nothing beneath the trees, looked up into the air like a madman. He was losing his senses. In the paroxysms of eagerness he dreamt of aerial ways,—the discovery of following century; he called to his mind Daedalus and the vast wings that had saved him from the prisons of Crete. A hoarse sigh broke from his lips, as he repeated, devoured by the fear of ridicule, "!! !! duped by a Gourville! !! They will say that I am growing old,—they will say I have received a million to allow Fouquet to escape!" And he again dug his spurs into the sides of his horse: he had ridden astonishingly fast. Suddenly, at the extremity of some open pasture-ground, behind the hedges, he saw a white form which showed itself, disappeared, and at last remained distinctly visible against the rising ground. D'Artagnan's heart leaped with joy. He wiped the streaming sweat from his brow, relaxed the tension of his knees,—by which the horse breathed more freely,—and, gathering up his reins, moderated the speed of the vigorous animal, his active accomplice on this man-hunt. He had then time to study the direction of the road, and his position with regard to Fouquet. The superintendent had completely winded his horse by crossing the soft ground. He felt the necessity of gaining a firmer footing, and turned towards the road by the shortest secant line. D'Artagnan, on his part, had nothing to do but to ride straight on, concealed by the sloping shore; so that he would cut his quarry off the road when he came up with him. Then the real race would begin,—then the struggle would be in earnest.

D'Artagnan gave his horse good breathing-time. He observed that the superintendent had relaxed into a trot, which was to say, he, too, was favouring his horse. But both of them were too much pressed for time to allow them to continue long at that pace. The white horse sprang off like an arrow the moment his feet touched firm ground. D'Artagnan dropped his head, and his black horse broke into a gallop. Both followed the same route; the quadruple echoes of this new race-course were confounded. Fouquet had not yet perceived D'Artagnan. But on issuing from the slope, a single echo struck the air; it was that of the steps of D'Artagnan's horse, which rolled along like thunder. Fouquet turned round, and saw behind him, within a hundred paces, his enemy bent over the neck of his horse. There could be no doubt—the shining baldrick, the red cassock—it was a musketeer. Fouquet slackened his hand likewise, and the white horse placed twenty feet more between his adversary and himself.

"Oh, but," thought D'Artagnan, becoming very anxious, "that is not a common horse M. Fouquet is upon—let us see!" And he attentively examined with his infallible eye the shape and capabilities of the courser. Round full quarters—a thin long tail—large hocks—thin legs, as dry as bars of steel—hoofs hard as marble. He spurred his own, but the distance between the two remained the same. D'Artagnan listened attentively; not a breath of the horse reached him, and yet he seemed to cut the air. The black horse, on the contrary, began to puff like any blacksmith's bellows.

"I must overtake him, if I kill my horse," thought the musketeer; and he began to saw the mouth of the poor animal, whilst he buried the rowels of his merciless spurs into his sides. The maddened horse gained twenty toises, and came up within pistol-shot of Fouquet.

"Courage!" said the musketeer to himself, "courage! the white horse will perhaps grow weaker, and if the horse does not fall, the master must pull up at last." But horse and rider remained upright together, gaining ground by difficult degrees. D'Artagnan uttered a wild cry, which made Fouquet turn round, and added speed to the white horse.

"A famous horse! a mad rider!" growled the captain. "Hola! *mordoux!* Monsieur Fouquet! stop! in the king's name!" Fouquet made no reply.

"Do you hear me?" shouted D'Artagnan, whose horse had just stumbled.

"*Pardieu!*" replied Fouquet, laconically; and rode on faster.

D'Artagnan was nearly mad; the blood rushed boiling to his temples and his eyes. "In the king's name!" cried he again, "stop, or I will bring you down with a pistol-shot!"

"Do!" replied Fouquet, without relaxing his speed.

D'Artagnan seized a pistol and cocked it, hoping that the double click of the spring would stop his enemy. "You have pistols likewise," said he, "turn and defend yourself."

Fouquet did turn round at the noise, and looking D'Artagnan full in the face, opened, with his right hand, the part of his dress which concealed his body, but he did not even touch his holsters. There were not more than twenty paces between the two.

"*Mordoux!*" said D'Artagnan, "I will not assassinate you; if you will not fire upon me, surrender! what is a prison?"

"I would rather die!" replied Fouquet; "I shall suffer less."

D'Artagnan, drunk with despair, hurled his pistol to the ground. "I will take you alive!" said he; and by a prodigy of skill which this incomparable horseman alone was capable, he threw his horse forward to within ten paces of the white horse; already his hand was stretched out to seize his prey.

"Kill me! kill me!" cried Fouquet, "'twould be more humane!"

"No! alive—alive!" murmured the captain.

At this moment his horse made a false step for the second time, and Fouquet's again took the lead. It was an unheard-of spectacle, this race between two horses which now only kept alive by the will of their riders. It might be said that D'Artagnan rode, carrying his horse along between his knees. To the furious gallop had succeeded the fast trot, and that had sunk to what might be scarcely called a trot at all. But the chase appeared equally warm in the two fatigued *athletoe*. D'Artagnan, quite in despair, seized his second pistol, and cocked it.

"At your horse! not at you!" cried he to Fouquet. And he fired. The animal was hit in the quarters—he made a furious bound, and plunged forward. At that moment D'Artagnan's horse fell dead.

"I am dishonoured!" thought the musketeer; "I am a miserable wretch! for pity's sake, M. Fouquet, throw me one of your pistols, that I may blow out my brains!" But Fouquet rode away.

"For mercy's sake! for mercy's sake!" cried D'Artagnan; "that which you will not do at this moment, I myself will do within an hour, but here, upon this road, I should die bravely; I should die esteemed; do me that service, M. Fouquet!"

M. Fouquet made no reply, but continued to trot on. D'Artagnan began to run after his enemy. Successively he threw away his hat, his coat, which embarrassed him, and then the sheath of his sword, which got between his legs as he was running. The sword in his hand itself became too heavy, and he threw it after the sheath. The white horse began to rattle in its throat; D'Artagnan gained upon him. From a trot the exhausted animal sunk to a staggering walk—the foam from his mouth was mixed with blood. D'Artagnan made a desperate effort, sprang towards Fouquet, and seized him by the leg, saying in a broken, breathless voice, "I arrest you in the king's name! blow my brains out, if you like; we have both done our duty."

Fouquet hurled far from him, into the river, the two pistols D'Artagnan might have seized, and dismounting from his horse—"I am your prisoner, monsieur," said he; "will you take my arm, for I see you are ready to faint?"

"Thanks!" murmured D'Artagnan, who, in fact, felt the earth sliding from under his feet, and the light of day turning to blackness around him; then he rolled upon the sand, without breath or strength. Fouquet hastened to the brink of the river, dipped some water in his hat, with which he bathed the temples of the musketeer, and introduced a few drop between his lips. D'Artagnan raised himself with difficulty, and looked about him with a wandering eye. He beheld Fouquet on his knees, with his wet hat in his hand, smiling upon him with ineffable sweetness. "You are not off, then?" cried he. "Oh, monsieur! the true king of royalty, in heart, in soul, is not Louis of the Louvre, or Philippe of Sainte-Marguerite; it is you, proscribed, condemned!"

"I, who this day am ruined by a single error, M. d'Artagnan."

"What, in the name of Heaven, is that?"

"I should have had you for a friend! But how shall we return to Nantes? We are a great way from it."

"That is true," said D'Artagnan, gloomily.

"The white horse will recover, perhaps; he is a good horse! Mount, Monsieur d'Artagnan; I will walk till you have rested a little."

"Poor beast! and wounded, too?" said the musketeer.

"He will go, I tell you; I know him; but we can do better still, let us both get up, and ride slowly."

"We can try," said the captain. But they had scarcely charged the animal with this double load, when he began to stagger, and then with a great effort walked a few minutes, then staggered again, and sank down dead by the side of the black horse, which he had just managed to come up to.

"We will go on foot—destiny wills it so—the walk will be pleasant," said Fouquet, passing his arm through that of D'Artagnan.

"*Mordieux!*" cried the latter, with a fixed eye, a contracted brow, and a swelling heart—"What a disgraceful day!"

They walked slowly the four leagues which separated them from the little wood behind which the carriage and escort were in waiting. When Fouquet perceived that sinister machine, he said to D'Artagnan, who cast down his eyes, ashamed of Louis XIV., "There is an idea that did not emanate from a brave man, Captain d'Artagnan; it is not yours. What are these gratings for?" said he.

"To prevent your throwing letters out."

"Ingenious!"

"But you can speak, if you cannot write," said D'Artagnan.

"Can I speak to you?"

"Why, certainly, if you wish to do so."

Fouquet reflected for a moment, then looking the captain full in the face, "One single word," said he; "will you remember it?"

"I will not forget it."

"Will you speak it to whom I wish?"

"I will."

"Saint-Mande," articulated Fouquet, in a low voice.

"Well! and for whom?"

"For Madame de Belliere or Pelisson."

"It shall be done."

The carriage rolled through Nantes, and took the route to Angers.

#### XLII. In Which the Squirrel Falls,—the Adder Flies.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The king, full of impatience, went to his cabinet on the terrace, and kept opening the door of the corridor, to see what his secretaries were doing. M. Colbert, seated in the same place M. de Saint-Aignan had so long occupied in the morning, was chatting in a low voice with M. de Brienne. The king opened the door suddenly, and addressed them. "What is it you are saying?"

"We were speaking of the first sitting of the States," said M. de Brienne, rising.

"Very well," replied the king, and returned to his room.

Five minutes after, the summons of the bell recalled Rose, whose hour it was.

"Have you finished your copies?" asked the king.

"Not yet, sire."

"See if M. d'Artagnan has returned."

"Not yet, sire."

"It is very strange," murmured the king. "Call M. Colbert."

Colbert entered; he had been expecting this all the morning.

"Monsieur Colbert," said the king, very sharply; "you must ascertain what has become of M. d'Artagnan."

Colbert in his calm voice replied, "Where does your majesty desire him to be sought for?"

"Eh! monsieur! do you not know on what I have sent him?" replied Louis, acrimoniously.

"Your majesty did not inform me."

"Monsieur, there are things that must be guessed; and you, above all, are apt to guess them."

"I might have been able to imagine, sire; but I do not presume to be positive."

Colbert had not finished these words when a rougher voice than that of the king interrupted the interesting conversation thus begun between the monarch and his clerk.

"D'Artagnan!" cried the king, with evident joy.

D'Artagnan, pale and in evidently bad humor, cried to the king, as he entered, "Sire, is it your majesty who has given orders to my musketeers?"

"What orders?" said the king.

"About M. Fouquet's house?"

"None!" replied Louis.

"Ha!" said D'Artagnan, biting his mustache; "I was not mistaken, then; it was monsieur here;" and he pointed to Colbert.

"What orders? Let me know," said the king.

"Orders to turn the house topsy-turvy, to beat M. Fouquet's servants, to force the drawers, to give over a peaceful house to pillage! *Mordieux!* these are savage orders!"

"Monsieur!" said Colbert, turning pale.

"Monsieur," interrupted D'Artagnan, "the king alone, understand,—the king alone has a right to command my musketeers; but, as to you, I forbid you to do it, and I tell you so before his majesty; gentlemen who carry swords do not sling pens behind their ears."

"D'Artagnan! D'Artagnan!" murmured the king.

"It is humiliating," continued the musketeer; "my soldiers are disgraced. I do not command *reitres*, thank you, nor clerks of the intendant, *mordieux!*"

"Well! but what is all this about?" said the king with authority.

"About this, sire; monsieur—monsieur, who could not guess your majesty's orders, and consequently could not know I was gone to arrest M. Fouquet; monsieur, who has caused the iron cage to be constructed for his patron of yesterday—has sent M. de Roncherolles to the lodgings of M. Fouquet, and, under the pretense of securing the surintendant's papers, they have taken away the furniture. My musketeers have been posted round the house all the morning; such were my orders. Why did any one presume to order them to enter? Why, by forcing them to assist in this pillage, have they been made accomplices in it? *Mordieux!* we serve the king, we do; but we do not serve M. Colbert!" 5

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the king, sternly, "take care; it is not in my presence that such explanations, and made in such a tone, should take place."

"I have acted for the good of the king," said Colbert, in a faltering voice. "It is hard to be so treated by one of your majesty's officers, and that without redress, on account of the respect I owe the king."

"The respect you owe the king," cried D'Artagnan, his eyes flashing fire, "consists, in the first place, in making his authority respected, and his person beloved. Every agent of a power without control represents that power, and when people curse the hand which strikes them, it is the royal hand that God reproaches, do you hear? Must a soldier, hardened by forty years of wounds and blood, give you this lesson, monsieur? Must mercy be on my side, and ferocity on yours? You have caused the innocent to be arrested, bound, and imprisoned!"

"Accomplices, perhaps, of M. Fouquet," said Colbert.

"Who told you M. Fouquet had accomplices, or even that he was guilty? The king alone knows that; his justice is not blind! When he says, 'Arrest and imprison' such and such a man, he is obeyed. Do not talk to me, then, any more of the respect you owe the king, and be careful of your words, that they may not chance to convey the slightest menace; for the king will not allow those to be threatened who do him service by others who do him disservice; and if in case I should have, which God forbid! a master so ungrateful, I would make myself respected."

Thus saying, D'Artagnan took his station haughtily in the king's cabinet, his eyes flashing, his hand on his sword, his lips trembling, affecting much more anger than he really felt. Colbert, humiliated and devoured with rage, bowed to the king as if to ask his permission to leave the room. The king, thwarted alike in pride and in curiosity, knew not which part to take. D'Artagnan saw him hesitate. To remain longer would have been a mistake: it was necessary to score a triumph over Colbert, and the only method was to touch the king so near the quick, that his majesty would have no other means of extrication but choosing between the two antagonists. D'Artagnan bowed as Colbert had done; but the king, who, in preference to everything else, was anxious to have all the exact details of the arrest of the surintendant of the finances from him who had made him tremble for a moment,—the king, perceiving that the ill-humor of D'Artagnan would put off for half an hour at least the details he was burning to be acquainted with,—Louis, we say, forgot Colbert, who had nothing new to tell him, and recalled his captain of the musketeers.

"In the first place," said he, "let me see the result of your commission, monsieur; you may rest yourself hereafter."

D'Artagnan, who was just passing through the doorway, stopped at the voice of the king, retraced his steps, and Colbert was forced to leave the closet. His countenance assumed almost a purple hue, his black and threatening eyes shone with a dark fire beneath their thick brows; he stepped out, bowed before the king, half drew himself up in passing D'Artagnan, and went away with death in his heart. D'Artagnan, on being left alone with the king, softened immediately, and composing his countenance: "Sire," said he, "you are a young king. It is by the dawn that people judge whether the day will be fine or dull. How, sire, will the people, whom the hand of God has placed under your law, argue of your reign, if between them and you, you allow angry and violent ministers to interpose their mischief? But let us speak of myself, sire, let us leave a discussion that may appear idle, and perhaps inconvenient to you. Let us speak of myself. I have arrested M. Fouquet."

"You took plenty of time about it," said the king, sharply.

D'Artagnan looked at the king. "I perceive that I have expressed myself badly. I announced to your majesty that I had arrested Monsieur Fouquet."

"You did; and what then?"

"Well! I ought to have told your majesty that M. Fouquet had arrested me; that would have been more just. I re-establish the truth, then; I have been arrested by M. Fouquet."

It was now the turn of Louis XIV. to be surprised. His majesty was astonished in his turn.

D'Artagnan, with his quick glance, appreciated what was passing in the heart of his master. He did not allow him time to put any questions. He related, with that poetry, that picturesqueness, which perhaps he alone possessed at that period, the escape of Fouquet, the pursuit, the furious race, and, lastly, the inimitable generosity of the surintendant, who might have fled ten times over, who might have killed the adversary in the pursuit, but who had preferred imprisonment, perhaps worse, to the humiliation of one who wished to rob him of his liberty. In proportion as the tale advanced, the king became agitated, devouring the narrator's words, and drumming with his finger-nails upon the table.

"It results from all this, sire, in my eyes, at least, that the man who conducts himself thus is a gallant man, and cannot be an enemy to the king. That is my opinion, and I repeat it to your majesty. I know what the king will say to me, and I bow to it,—reasons of state. So be it! To my ears that sounds highly respectable. But I am a soldier, and I have received my orders, my orders are executed—very unwillingly on my part, it is true, but they are executed. I say no more."

"Where is M. Fouquet at this moment?" asked Louis, after a short silence.

"M. Fouquet, sire," replied D'Artagnan, "is in the iron cage that M. Colbert had prepared for him, and is galloping as fast as four strong horses can drag him, towards Angers."

"Why did you leave him on the road?"

"Because your majesty did not tell me to go to Angers. The proof, the best proof of what I advance, is that the king desired me to be sought for but this minute. And then I had another reason."

"What is that?"

"Whilst I was with him, poor M. Fouquet would never attempt to escape."

"Well!" cried the king, astonished.

"Your majesty ought to understand, and does understand, certainly, that my warmest wish is to know that M. Fouquet is at liberty. I have given him one of my brigadiers, the most stupid I could find among my musketeers, in order that the prisoner might have a chance of escaping."

"Are you mad, Monsieur d'Artagnan?" cried the king, crossing his arms on his breast. "Do people utter such enormities, even when they have the misfortune to think them?"

"Ah! sire, you cannot expect that I should be an enemy to M. Fouquet, after what he has just done for you and me. No, no; if you desire that he should remain under your lock and bolt, never give him in charge to me; however closely wired might be the cage, the bird would, in the end, take wing."

"I am surprised," said the king, in his sternest tone, "you did not follow the fortunes of the man M. Fouquet wished to place upon my throne. You had in him all you want—affection, gratitude. In my service, monsieur, you will only find a master."

"If M. Fouquet had not gone to seek you in the Bastille, sire," replied D'Artagnan, with a deeply impressive manner, "one single man would have gone there, and I should have been that man—you know that right well, sire."

The king was brought to a pause. Before that speech of his captain of the musketeers, so frankly spoken and so true, the king had nothing to offer. On hearing D'Artagnan, Louis remembered the D'Artagnan of former times; him who, at the Palais Royal, held himself concealed behind the curtains of his bed, when the people of Paris, led by Cardinal de Retz, came to assure themselves of the presence of the king; the D'Artagnan whom he saluted with his hand at the door of his carriage, when repairing to Notre Dame on his return to Paris; the soldier who had quitted his service at Blois; the lieutenant he had recalled to be beside his person when the death of Mazarin restored his power; the man he had always found loyal, courageous, devoted. Louis advanced towards the door and called Colbert. Colbert had not left the corridor where the secretaries were at work. He reappeared.

"Colbert, did you make a perquisition on the house of M. Fouquet?"

"Yes, sire."

"What has it produced?"

"M. de Roncherolles, who was sent with your majesty's musketeers, has remitted me some papers," replied Colbert.

"I will look at them. Give me your hand."

"My hand, sire!"

"Yes, that I may place it in that of M. d'Artagnan. In fact, M. d'Artagnan," added he, with a smile, turning towards the soldier, who, at sight of the clerk, had resumed his haughty attitude, "you do not know this man; make his acquaintance." And he pointed to Colbert. "He has been made but a moderately valuable servant in subaltern positions, but he will be a great man if I raise him to the foremost rank."

"Sire!" stammered Colbert, confused with pleasure and fear.

"I always understood why," murmured D'Artagnan in the king's ear; "he was jealous."

"Precisely, and his jealousy confined his wings."

"He will henceforward be a winged-serpent," grumbled the musketeer, with a remnant of hatred against his recent adversary.

But Colbert, approaching him, offered to his eyes a physiognomy so different from that which he had been accustomed to see him wear; he appeared so good, so mild, so easy; his eyes took the expression of an intelligence so noble, that D'Artagnan, a connoisseur in physiognomies, was moved, and almost changed in his convictions. Colbert pressed his hand.

"That which the king has just told you, monsieur, proves how well his majesty is acquainted with men. The inveterate opposition I have displayed, up to this day, against abuses and not against men, proves that I had it in view to prepare for my king a glorious reign, for my country a great blessing. I have many ideas, M. d'Artagnan. You will see them expand in the sun of public peace; and if I have not the good fortune to conquer the friendship of honest men, I am at least certain, monsieur, that I shall obtain their esteem. For their admiration, monsieur, I would give my life."

This change, this sudden elevation, this mute approbation of the king, gave the musketeer matter for profound reflection. He bowed civilly to Colbert, who did not take his eyes off him. The king, when he saw they were reconciled, dismissed them. They left the room together. As soon as they were out of the cabinet, the new minister, stopping the captain, said:

"Is it possible, M. d'Artagnan, that with such an eye as yours, you did not, at the first glance, at the first impression, discover what sort of man I am?"

"Monsieur Colbert," replied the musketeer, "a ray of the sun in our eyes prevents us from seeing the most vivid flame. The man in power radiates, you know; and since you are there, why should you continue to persecute him who had just fallen into disgrace, and fallen from such a height?"

"I, monsieur!" said Colbert; "oh, monsieur! I would never persecute him. I wished to administer the finances and to administer them alone, because I am ambitious, and, above all, because I have the most entire confidence in my own merit; because I know that all the gold of this country will ebb and flow beneath my eyes, and I love to look at the king's gold; because, if I live thirty years, in thirty years not a *denir* of it will remain in my hands; because, with that gold, I will build granaries, castles, cities, and harbors; because I will create a marine, I will equip navies that shall waft the name of France to the most distant people; because I will create libraries and academies; because I will make France the first country in the world, and the wealthiest. These are the motives for my animosity against M. Fouquet, who prevented my acting. And then, when I shall be great and strong, when France is great and strong, in my turn, then, will I cry, 'Mercy!'"

"Mercy, did you say? then ask his liberty of the king. The king is only crushing him on *your* account."

Colbert again raised his head. "Monsieur," said he, "you know that is not so, and that the king has his own personal animosity against M. Fouquet; it is not for me to teach you that."

"But the king will grow tired; he will forget."

"The king never forgets, M. d'Artagnan. Hark! the king calls. He is going to issue an order. I have not influenced him, have I? Listen."

The king, in fact, was calling his secretaries. "Monsieur d'Artagnan," said he.

"I am here, sire."

"Give twenty of your musketeers to M. de Saint-Aignan, to form a guard for M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan and Colbert exchanged looks. "And from Angers," continued the king, "they will conduct the prisoner to the Bastille, in Paris."

"You were right," said the captain to the minister.

"Saint-Aignan," continued the king, "you will have any one shot who shall attempt to speak privately with M. Fouquet, during the journey."

"But myself, sire," said the duke.

"You, monsieur, you will only speak to him in the presence of the musketeers." The duke bowed and departed to execute his commission.

D'Artagnan was about to retire likewise; but the king stopped him.

"Monsieur," said he, "you will go immediately, and take possession of the isle and fief of Belle-Ile-en-Mer."

"Yes, sire. Alone?"

"You will take a sufficient number of troops to prevent delay, in case the place should be contumacious."

A murmur of courtly incredulity rose from the group of courtiers. "That shall be done," said D'Artagnan.

"I saw the place in my infancy," resumed the king, "and I do not wish to see it again. You have heard me? Go, monsieur, and do not return without the keys."

Colbert went up to D'Artagnan. "A commission which, if you carry it out well," said he, "will be worth a marechal's baton to you."

"Why do you employ the words, 'if you carry it out well?'"

"Because it is difficult."

"Ah! in what respect?"

"You have friends in Belle-Isle, Monsieur d'Artagnan; and it is not an easy thing for men like you to march over the bodies of their friends to obtain success."

D'Artagnan hung his head in deepest thought, whilst Colbert returned to the king. A quarter of an hour after, the captain received the written order from the king, to blow up the fortress of Belle-Isle, in case of resistance, with power of life and death over all the inhabitants or refugees, and an injunction not to allow one to escape.

"Colbert was right," thought D'Artagnan; "for me the baton of a marechal of France will cost the lives of my two friends. Only they seem to forget that my friends are not more stupid than the birds, and that they will not wait for the hand of the fowler to extend over their wings. I will show them that hand so plainly, that they will have quite time enough to see it. Poor Porthos! Poor Aramis! No; my fortune should shall not cost your wings a feather."

Having thus determined, D'Artagnan assembled the royal army, embarked it at Paimboeuf, and set sail, without the loss of an unnecessary minute.

XLII. Belle-Ile-en-Mer.

At the extremity of the mole, against which the furious sea beats at the evening tide, two men, holding each other by the arm, were conversing in an animated and expansive tone, without the possibility of any other human being hearing their words, borne away, as they were, one by one, by the gusts of wind, with the white foam swept from the crests of the waves. The sun had just gone down in the vast sheet of the crimsoned ocean, like a gigantic crucible. From time to time, one of these men, turning towards the east, cast an anxious, inquiring look over the sea. The other, interrogating the features of his companion, seemed to seek for information in his looks. Then, both silent, busied with dismal thoughts, they resumed their walk. Every one has already perceived that these two men were our proscribed heroes, Porthos and Aramis, who had taken refuge in Belle-Isle, since the ruin of their hopes, since the discomfiture of the colossal schemes of M. d'Herblay.

"If is of no use your saying anything to the contrary, my dear Aramis," repeated Porthos, inhaling vigorously the salt breeze with which he charged his massive chest, "It is of no use, Aramis. The disappearance of all the fishing-boats that went out two days ago is not an ordinary circumstance. There has been no storm at sea; the weather has been constantly calm, not even the lightest gale; and even if we had had a tempest, all our boats would not have foundered. I repeat, it is strange. This complete disappearance astonishes me, I tell you."

"True," murmured Aramis. "You are right, friend Porthos; it is true, there is something strange in it."

"And further," added Porthos, whose ideas the assent of the bishop of Vannes seemed to enlarge; "and, further, do you not observe that if the boats have perished, not a single plank has washed ashore?"

"I have remarked it as well as yourself."

"And do you not think it strange that the two only boats we had left in the whole island, and which I sent in search of the others—"

Aramis here interrupted his companion by a cry, and by so sudden a movement, that Porthos stopped as if he were stupefied. "What do you say, Porthos? What!—You have sent the two boats—"

"In search of the others! Yes, to be sure I have," replied Porthos, calmly.

"Unhappy man! What have you done? Then we are indeed lost," cried the bishop.

"Lost!—what did you say?" exclaimed the terrified Porthos. "How lost, Aramis? How are we lost?"

Aramis bit his lips. "Nothing! nothing! Your pardon, I meant to say—"

"What?"

"That if we were inclined—if we took a fancy to make an excursion by sea, we could not."

"Very good! and why should that vex you? A precious pleasure, *ma foi!* For my part, I don't regret it at all. What I regret is certainly not the more or less amusement we can find at Belle-Isle: what I regret, Aramis, is Pierrefonds; Bracieux; le Vallon; beautiful France! Here, we are not in France, my dear friend; we are—I know not where. Oh! I tell you, in full sincerity of soul, and your affection will excuse my frankness, but I declare to you I am not happy at Belle-Isle. No; in good truth, I am not happy!"

Aramis breathed a long, but stifled sigh. "Dear friend," replied he: "that is why it is so sad a thing you have sent the two boats we had left in search of the boats which disappeared two days ago. If you had not sent them away, we would have departed."

"Departed! And the orders, Aramis?"

"What orders?"

"*Parbleu!* Why, the orders you have been constantly, in and out of season, repeating to me—that we were to hold Belle-Isle against the usurper. You know very well!"

"That is true!" murmured Aramis again.

"You see, then, plainly, my friend, that we could not depart; and that the sending away of the boats in search of the others cannot prove prejudicial to us in the very least."

Aramis was silent; and his vague glances, luminous as that of an albatross, hovered for a long time over the sea, interrogating space, seeking to pierce the very horizon.

"With all that, Aramis," continued Porthos, who adhered to his idea, and that the more closely from the bishop having apparently endorsed it,—“with all that, you give me no explanation about what can have happened to these unfortunate boats. I am assailed by cries and complaints whichever way I go. The children cry to see the desolation of the women, as if I could restore the absent husbands and fathers. What do you suppose, my friend, and how ought I to answer them?"

"Think all you like, my good Porthos, and say nothing."

This reply did not satisfy Porthos at all. He turned away grumbling something in ill-humor. Aramis stopped the valiant musketeer. "Do you remember," said he, in a melancholy tone, kneading the two hands of the giant between his own with affectionate cordiality, "do you remember, my friend, that in the glorious days of youth—do you remember, Porthos, when we were all strong and valiant—we, and the other two—if we had then had an inclination to return to France, do you think this sheet of salt water would have stopped us?"

"Oh!" said Porthos; "but six leagues."

"If you had seen me get astride of a plank, would you have remained on land, Porthos?"

"No, *pardieu!* No, Aramis. But, nowadays, what sort of a plank should we want, my friend! I, in particular." And the Seigneur de Bracieux cast a profound glance over his colossal rotundity with a loud laugh. "And do you mean seriously to say you are not tired of Belle-Isle a little, and that you would not prefer the comforts of your dwelling—of your episcopal palace, at Vannes? Come, confess."

"No," replied Aramis, without daring to look at Porthos.

"Let us stay where we are, then," said his friend, with a sigh, which, in spite of the efforts he made to restrain it, escaped his echoing breast. "Let us remain!—let us remain! And yet," added he, "and yet, if we seriously wished, but that decidedly—if we had a fixed idea, one firmly taken, to return to France, and there were not boats—"

"Have you remarked another thing, my friend—that is, since the disappearance of our barks, during the last two days' absence of fishermen, not a single small boat has landed on the shores of the isle?"

"Yes, certainly! you are right. I, too, have remarked it, and the observation was the more naturally made, for, before the last two fatal days, barks and shallops were as plentiful as shrimps."

"I must inquire," said Aramis, suddenly, and with great agitation. "And then, if we had a raft constructed—"

"But there are some canoes, my friend; shall I board one?"

"A canoe!—a canoe! Can you think of such a thing, Porthos? A canoe to be upset in. No, no," said the bishop of Vannes; "it is not our trade to ride upon the waves. We will wait, we will wait."

And Aramis continued walking about with increased agitation. Porthos, who grew tired of following all the feverish movements of his friend—Porthos, who in his faith and calmness understood nothing of the sort of exasperation which was betrayed by his companion's continual convulsive starts—Porthos stopped him. "Let us sit down upon this rock," said he. "Place yourself there, close to me, Aramis, and I conjure you, for the last time, to explain to me in a manner I can comprehend—explain to me what we are doing here."

"Porthos," said Aramis, much embarrassed.

"I know that the false king wished to dethrone the true king. That is a fact, that I understand. Well—"

"Yes?" said Aramis.

"I know that the false king formed the project of selling Belle-Isle to the English. I understand that, too."

"Yes?"

"I know that we engineers and captains came and threw ourselves into Belle-Isle to take direction of the works, and the command of ten companies levied and paid by M. Fouquet, or rather the ten companies of his son-in-law. All that is plain."

Aramis rose in a state of great impatience. He might be said to be a lion importuned by a gnat. Porthos held him by the arm. "But what I cannot understand, what, in spite of all the efforts of my mind, and all my reflections, I cannot comprehend, and never shall comprehend, is, that instead of sending us troops, instead of sending us reinforcements of men, munitions, provisions, they leave us without boats, they leave Belle-Isle without arrivals, without help; it is that instead of establishing with us a correspondence, whether by signals, or written or verbal communications, all relations with the shore are intercepted. Tell me, Aramis, answer me, or rather, before answering me, will you allow me to tell you what I have thought? Will you hear what my idea is, the plan I have conceived?"

The bishop raised his head. "Well! Aramis," continued Porthos, "I have dreamed, I have imagined that an event has taken place in France. I dreamt of M. Fouquet all the night, of lifeless fish, of broken eggs, of chambers badly furnished, meanly kept. Villainous dreams, my dear D'Herblay; very unlucky, such dreams!"

"Porthos, what is that yonder?" interrupted Aramis, rising suddenly, and pointing out to his friend a black spot upon the empurpled line of the water.

"A bark!" said Porthos; "yes, it is a bark! Ah! we shall have some news at last."

"There are two!" cried the bishop, on discovering another mast; "two! three! four!"

"Five!" said Porthos, in his turn. "Six! seven! Ah! *mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* it is a fleet!"

"Our boats returning, probably," said Aramis, very uneasily, in spite of the assurance he affected.

"They are very large for fishing-boats," observed Porthos, "and do you not remark, my friend, that they come from the Loire?"

"They come from the Loire—yes—"

"And look! everybody here sees them as well as ourselves; look, women and children are beginning to crowd the jetty."

An old fisherman passed. "Are those our barks, yonder?" asked Aramis.

The old man looked steadily into the eye of the horizon.

"No, my lord," replied he, "they are lighter boars, boats in the king's service."

"Boats in the royal service?" replied Aramis, starting. "How do you know that?" said he.

"By the flag."

"But," said Porthos, "the boat is scarcely visible; how the devil, my friend, can you distinguish the flag?"

"I see there is one," replied the old man; "our boats, trade lighters, do not carry any. That sort of craft is generally used for transport of troops."

"Ah!" groaned Aramis.

"*Vivat!*" cried Porthos, "they are sending us reinforcements, don't you think they are, Aramis?"

"Probably."

"Unless it is the English coming."

"By the Loire? That would have an evil look, Porthos; for they must have come through Paris!"

"You are right; they are reinforcements, decidedly, or provisions."

Aramis leaned his head upon his hands, and made no reply. Then, all at once,—“Porthos,” said he, “have the alarm sounded.”

"The alarm! do you imagine such a thing?"

"Yes, and let the cannoniers mount their batteries, the artillerymen be at their pieces, and be particularly watchful of the coast batteries."

Porthos opened his eyes to their widest extent. He looked attentively at his friend, to convince himself he was in his proper senses.

"I will do it, my dear Porthos," continued Aramis, in his blindest tone; "I will go and have these orders executed myself, if you do not go, my friend."

"Well! I will—instantly!" said Porthos, who went to execute the orders, casting all the while looks behind him, to see if the bishop of Vannes were not deceived; and if, on recovering more rational ideas, he would not recall him. The alarm was sounded, trumpets brayed, drums rolled; the great bronze bell swung in horror from its lofty belfry. The dikes and moles were quickly filled with the curious and soldiers; matches sparkled in the hands of the artillerymen, placed behind the large cannon bedded in their stone carriages. When every man was at his post, when all the preparations for defense were made: "Permit me, Aramis, to try to comprehend," whispered Porthos, timidly, in Aramis's ear.

"My dear friend, you will comprehend but too soon," murmured M. d'Herblay, in reply to this question of his lieutenant.

"The fleet which is coming yonder, with sails unfurled, straight towards the port of Belle-Isle, is a royal fleet, is it not?"

"But as there are two kings in France, Porthos, to which of these two kings does this fleet belong?"

"Oh! you open my eyes," replied the giant, stunned by the insinuation.

And Porthos, whose eyes this reply of his friend's had at last opened, or rather thickened the bandage which covered his sight, went with his best speed to the batteries to overlook his people, and exhort every one to do his duty. In the meantime, Aramis, with his eye fixed on the horizon, saw the ships continually drawing nearer. The people and the soldiers, perched on the summits of the rocks, could distinguish the masts, then the lower sails, and at last the hulls of the lighters, bearing at the masthead the royal flag of France. It was night when one of these vessels, which had created such a sensation among the inhabitants of Belle-Isle, dropped anchor within cannon shot of the place. It was soon seen, notwithstanding the darkness, that some sort of agitation reigned on board the vessel, from the side of which a skiff was lowered, of which the three rowers, bending to their oars, took the direction of the port, and in a few instants struck land at the foot of the fort. The commander jumped ashore. He had a letter in his hand, which he waved in the air, and seemed to wish to communicate with somebody. This man was soon recognized by several soldiers as one of the pilots of the island. He was the captain of one of the two barks retained by Aramis, but which Porthos, in his anxiety with regard to the fate of the fishermen who had disappeared, had sent in search of the missing boats. He asked to be conducted to M. d'Herblay. Two soldiers, at a signal from a sergeant, marched him between them, and escorted him. Aramis was upon the quay. The envoy presented himself before the bishop of Vannes. The darkness was almost absolute, notwithstanding the flambeaux borne at a small distance by the soldiers who were following Aramis in his rounds.

"Well, Jonathan, from whom do you come?"

"My lord, from those who captured me."

"Who captured you?"

"You know, my lord, we set out in search of our comrades?"

"Yes; and afterwards?"

"Well! my lord, within a short league we were captured by a *chasse maree* belonging to the king."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"Of which king?" cried Porthos.

Jonathan started.

"Speak!" continued the bishop.

"We were captured, my lord, and joined to those who had been taken yesterday morning."

"What was the cause of the mania for capturing you all?" said Porthos.

"Monsieur, to prevent us from telling you," replied Jonathan.

Porthos was again at a loss to comprehend. "And they have released you to-day?" asked he.

"That I might tell you they have captured us, monsieur."

"Trouble upon trouble," thought honest Porthos.

During this time Aramis was reflecting.

"Humph!" said he, "then I suppose it is a royal fleet blockading the coasts?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Who commands it?"

"The captain of the king's musketeers."

"D'Artagnan?"

"D'Artagnan!" exclaimed Porthos.

"I believe that is the name."

"And did he give you this letter?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Bring the torches nearer."

"It is his writing," said Porthos.

Aramis eagerly read the following lines:

"Order of the king to take Belle-Isle; or to put the garrison to the sword, if they resist; order to make prisoners of all the men of the garrison; signed, D'ARTAGNAN, who, the day before yesterday, arrested M. Fouquet, for the purpose of his being sent to the Bastille."

Aramis turned pale, and crushed the paper in his hands.

"What is it?" asked Porthos.

"Nothing, my friend, nothing."

"Tell me, Jonathan?"

"My lord?"

"Did you speak to M. d'Artagnan?"

"Yes, my lord."

"What did he say to you?"

"That for ampler information, he would speak with my lord."

"Where?"

"On board his own vessel."

"On board his vessel!" and Porthos repeated, "On board his vessel!"

"M. le mousquetaire," continued Jonathan, "told me to take you both on board my canoe, and bring you to him."

"Let us go at once," exclaimed Porthos. "Dear D'Artagnan!"

But Aramis stopped him. "Are you mad?" cried he. "Who knows that it is not a snare?"

"Of the other king's?" said Porthos, mysteriously.

"A snare, in fact! That's what it is, my friend."

"Very possibly; what is to be done, then? If D'Artagnan sends for us—"

"Who assures you that D'Artagnan sends for us?"

"Well, but—but his writing—"

"Writing is easily counterfeited. This looks counterfeited—unsteady—"

"You are always right; but, in the meantime, we know nothing."

Aramis was silent.

"It is true," said the good Porthos, "we do not want to know anything."

"What shall I do?" asked Jonathan.

"You will return on board this captain's vessel."

"Yes, my lord."

"And will tell him that we beg he will himself come into the island."

"Ah! I comprehend!" said Porthos.

"Yes, my lord," replied Jonathan; "but if the captain should refuse to come to Belle-Isle?"

"If he refuses, as we have cannon, we will make use of them."

"What! against D'Artagnan?"

"If it is D'Artagnan, Porthos, he will come. Go, Jonathan, go!"

"*Ma foi!* I no longer comprehend anything," murmured Porthos.

"I will make you comprehend it all, my dear friend; the time for it has come; sit down upon this gun-carriage, open your ears, and listen well to me."

"Oh! *pardieu!* I will listen, no fear of that."

"May I depart, my lord?" cried Jonathan.

"Yes, begone, and bring back an answer. Allow the canoe to pass, you men there!" And the canoe pushed off to regain the fleet.

Aramis took Porthos by the hand, and commenced his explanations.

XLIII. Explanations by Aramis.

"What I have to say to you, friend Porthos, will probably surprise you, but it may prove instructive."

"I like to be surprised," said Porthos, in a kindly tone; "do not spare me, therefore, I beg. I am hardened against emotions; don't fear, speak out."

"It is difficult, Porthos—difficult; for, in truth, I warn you a second time, I have very strange things, very extraordinary things, to tell you."

"Oh! you speak so well, my friend, that I could listen to you for days together. Speak, then, I beg—and—stop, I have an idea: I will, to make your task more easy, I will, to assist you in telling me such things, question you."

"I shall be pleased at your doing so."

"What are we going to fight for, Aramis?"

"If you ask me many such questions as that—if you would render my task the easier by interrupting my revelations thus, Porthos, you will not help me at all. So far, on the contrary, that is the very Gordian knot. But, my friend, with a man like you, good, generous, and devoted, the confession must be bravely made. I have deceived you, my worthy friend."

"You have deceived me!"

"Good Heavens! yes."

"Was it for my good, Aramis?"

"I thought so, Porthos; I thought so sincerely, my friend."

"Then," said the honest seigneur of Bracieux, "you have rendered me a service, and I thank you for it; for if you had not deceived me, I might have deceived myself. In what, then, have you deceived me, tell me?"

"In that I was serving the usurper against whom Louis XIV., at this moment, is directing his efforts."

"The usurper!" said Porthos, scratching his head. "That is—well, I do not quite clearly comprehend!"

"He is one of the two kings who are contending for the crown of France."

"Very well! Then you were serving him who is not Louis XIV.?"

"You have hit the matter in one word."

"It follows that—"

"It follows that we are rebels, my poor friend."

"The devil! the devil!" cried Porthos, much disappointed.

"Oh! but, dear Porthos, be calm, we shall still find means of getting out of the affair, trust me."

"It is not that which makes me uneasy," replied Porthos; "that which alone touches me is that ugly word *rebels*."

"Ah! but—"

"And so, according to this, the duchy that was promised me—"

"It was the usurper that was to give it to you."

"And that is not the same thing, Aramis," said Porthos, majestically.

"My friend, if it had only depended upon me, you should have become a prince."

Porthos began to bite his nails in a melancholy way.

"That is where you have been wrong," continued he, "in deceiving me; for that promised duchy I reckoned upon. Oh! I reckoned upon it seriously, knowing you to be a man of your word, Aramis."

"Poor Porthos! pardon me, I implore you!"

"So, then," continued Porthos, without replying to the bishop's prayer, "so then, it seems, I have quite fallen out with Louis XIV.?"

"Oh! I will settle all that, my good friend, I will settle all that. I will take it on myself alone!"

"Aramis!"

"No, no, Porthos, I conjure you, let me act. No false generosity! No inopportune devotedness! You knew nothing of my projects. You have done nothing of yourself. With me it is different. I alone am the author of this plot. I stood in need of my inseparable companion; I called upon you, and you came to me in remembrance of our ancient device, 'All for one, one for all.' My crime is that I was an egotist."

"Now, that is a word I like," said Porthos; "and seeing that you have acted entirely for yourself, it is impossible for me to blame you. It is natural."

And upon this sublime reflection, Porthos pressed his friend's hand cordially.

In presence of this ingenuous greatness of soul, Aramis felt his own littleness. It was the second time he had been compelled to bend before real superiority of heart, which is more imposing than brilliancy of mind. He replied by a mute and energetic pressure to the endearment of his friend.

"Now," said Porthos, "that we have come to an explanation, now that I am perfectly aware of our situation with respect to Louis XIV., I think, my friend, it is time to make me comprehend the political intrigue of which we are the victims—for I plainly see there is a political intrigue at the bottom of all this."

"D'Artagnan, my good Porthos, D'Artagnan is coming, and will detail it to you in all its circumstances; but, excuse me, I am deeply grieved, I am bowed down with mental anguish, and I have need of all my presence of mind, all my powers of reflection, to extricate you from the false position in which I have so imprudently involved you; but nothing can be more clear, nothing more plain, than your position, henceforth. The king Louis XIV. has no longer now but one enemy: that enemy is myself, myself alone. I have made you a prisoner, you have followed me, to-day I liberate you, you fly back to your prince. You can perceive, Porthos, there is not one difficulty in all this."

"Do you think so?" said Porthos.

"I am quite sure of it."

"Then why," said the admirable good sense of Porthos, "then why, if we are in such an easy position, why, my friend, do we prepare cannon, muskets, and engines of all sorts? It seems to me it would be much more simple to say to Captain d'Artagnan: 'My dear friend, we have been mistaken; that error is to be repaired; open the door to us, let us pass through, and we will say good-bye.'"

"Ah! that!" said Aramis, shaking his head.



"Why do you say 'that'? Do you not approve of my plan, my friend?"

"I see a difficulty in it."

"What is it?"

"The hypothesis that D'Artagnan may come with orders which will oblige us to defend ourselves."

"What! defend ourselves against D'Artagnan? Folly! Against the good D'Artagnan!"

Aramis once more replied by shaking his head.

"Porthos," at length said he, "if I have had the matches lighted and the guns pointed, if I have had the signal of alarm sounded, if I have called every man to his post upon the ramparts, those good ramparts of Belle-Isle which you have so well fortified, it was not for nothing. Wait to judge; or rather, no, do not wait—"

"What can I do?"

"If I knew, my friend, I would have told you."

"But there is one thing much more simple than defending ourselves—a boat, and away for France—where—"

"My dear friend," said Aramis, smiling with a strong shade of sadness, "do not let us reason like children; let us be men in council and in execution.—But, hark! I hear a hail for landing at the port. Attention, Porthos, serious attention!"

"It is D'Artagnan, no doubt," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, approaching the parapet.

"Yes, it is I," replied the captain of the musketeers, running lightly up the steps of the mole, and gaining rapidly the little esplanade on which his two friends waited for him. As soon as he came towards them, Porthos and Aramis observed an officer who followed D'Artagnan, treading apparently in his very steps. The captain stopped upon the stairs of the mole, when half-way up. His companions imitated him.

"Make your men draw back," cried D'Artagnan to Porthos and Aramis; "let them retire out of hearing." This order, given by Porthos, was executed immediately. Then D'Artagnan, turning towards him who followed him:

"Monsieur," said he, "we are no longer on board the king's fleet, where, in virtue of your order, you spoke so arrogantly to me, just now."

"Monsieur," replied the officer, "I did not speak arrogantly to you; I simply, but rigorously, obeyed instructions. I was commanded to follow you. I follow you. I am directed not to allow you to communicate with any one without taking cognizance of what you do; I am in duty bound, accordingly, to overhear your conversations."

D'Artagnan trembled with rage, and Porthos and Aramis, who heard this dialogue, trembled likewise, but with uneasiness and fear. D'Artagnan, biting his mustache with that vivacity which denoted in him exasperation, closely to be followed by an explosion, approached the officer.

"Monsieur," said he, in a low voice, so much the more impressive, that, affecting calm, it threatened tempest—"monsieur, when I sent a canoe hither, you wished to know what I wrote to the defenders of Belle-Isle. You produced an order to that effect; and, in my turn, I instantly showed you the note I had written. When the skipper of the boat sent by me returned, when I received the reply of these two gentlemen" (and he pointed to Aramis and Porthos), "you heard every word of what the messenger said. All that was plainly in your orders, all that was well executed, very punctually, was it not?"

"Yes, monsieur," stammered the officer; "yes, without doubt, but—"

"Monsieur," continued D'Artagnan, growing warm—"monsieur, when I manifested the intention of quitting my vessel to cross to Belle-Isle, you demanded to accompany me; I did not hesitate; I brought you with me. You are now at Belle-Isle, are you not?"

"Yes, monsieur; but—"

"But—the question no longer is of M. Colbert, who has given you that order, or of whomsoever in the world you are following the instructions; the question now is of a man who is a clog upon M. d'Artagnan, and who is alone with M. d'Artagnan upon steps whose feet are bathed by thirty feet of salt water; a bad position for that man, a bad position, monsieur! I warn you."

"But, monsieur, if I am a restraint upon you," said the officer, timidly, and almost faintly, "it is my duty which—"

"Monsieur, you have had the misfortune, either you or those that sent you, to insult me. It is done. I cannot seek redress from those who employ you,—they are unknown to me, or are at too great a distance. But you are under my hand, and I swear that if you make one step behind me when I raise my feet to go up to those gentlemen, I swear to you by my name, I will cleave your head in two with my sword, and pitch you into the water. Oh! it will happen! it will happen! I have only been six times angry in my life, monsieur, and all five preceding times *I killed my man.*"

The officer did not stir; he became pale under this terrible threat, but replied with simplicity, "Monsieur, you are wrong in acting against my orders."

Porthos and Aramis, mute and trembling at the top of the parapet, cried to the musketeer, "Good D'Artagnan, take care!"

D'Artagnan made them a sign to keep silence, raised his foot with ominous calmness to mount the stair, and turned round, sword in hand, to see if the officer followed him. The officer made a sign of the cross and stepped up. Porthos and Aramis, who knew their D'Artagnan, uttered a cry, and rushed down to prevent the blow they thought they already heard. But D'Artagnan passed his sword into his left hand,—

"Monsieur," said he to the officer, in an agitated voice, "you are a brave man. You will all the better comprehend what I am going to say to you now."

"Speak, Monsieur d'Artagnan, speak," replied the officer.

"These gentlemen we have just seen, and against whom you have orders, are my friends."

"I know they are, monsieur."

"You can understand whether or not I ought to act towards them as your instructions prescribe."

"I understand your reserve."

"Very well; permit me, then, to converse with them without a witness."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, if I yield to your request, if I do that which you beg me, I break my word; but if I do not do it, I disoblige you. I prefer the one dilemma to the other. Converse with your friends, and do not despise me, monsieur, for doing this for *your* sake, whom I esteem and honour; do not despise me for committing for you, and you alone, an unworthy act." D'Artagnan, much agitated, threw his arm round the neck of the young man, and then went up to his friends. The officer, enveloped in his cloak, sat down on the damp, weed-covered steps.

"Well!" said D'Artagnan to his friends, "such is my position, judge for yourselves." All three embraced as in the glorious days of their youth.

"What is the meaning of all these preparations?" said Porthos.

"You ought to have a suspicion of what they signify," said D'Artagnan.

"Not any, I assure you, my dear captain; for, in fact, I have done nothing, no more has Aramis," the worthy baron hastened to say.

D'Artagnan darted a reproachful look at the prelate, which penetrated that hardened heart.

"Dear Porthos!" cried the bishop of Vannes.

"You see what is being done against you," said D'Artagnan; "interception of all boats coming to or going from Belle-Isle. Your means of transport seized. If you had endeavored to fly, you would have fallen into the hands of the cruisers that plow the sea in all directions, on the watch for you. The king wants you to be taken, and he will take you." D'Artagnan tore at his gray mustache. Aramis grew somber, Porthos angry.

"My idea was this," continued D'Artagnan: "to make you both come on board, to keep you near me, and restore you your liberty. But now, who can say, when I return to my ship, I may not find a superior; that I may not find secret orders which will take from me my command, and give it to another, who will dispose of me and you without hope of help?"

"We must remain at Belle-Isle," said Aramis, resolutely; "and I assure you, for my part, I will not surrender easily." Porthos said nothing. D'Artagnan remarked the silence of his friend.

"I have another trial to make of this officer, of this brave fellow who accompanies me, and whose courageous resistance makes me very happy; for it denotes an honest man, who, though an enemy, is a thousand times better than a complaisant coward. Let us try to learn from him what his instructions are, and what his orders permit or forbid."

"Let us try," said Aramis.

D'Artagnan went to the parapet, leaned over towards the steps of the mole, and called the officer, who immediately came up. "Monsieur," said D'Artagnan, after having exchanged the cordial courtesies natural between gentlemen who know and appreciate each other, "monsieur, if I wished to take away these gentlemen from here, what would you do?"

"I should not oppose it, monsieur; but having direct explicit orders to put them under guard, I should detain them."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan.

"That's all over," said Aramis, gloomily. Porthos did not stir.

"But still take Porthos," said the bishop of Vannes. "He can prove to the king, and I will help him do so, and you too, Monsieur d'Artagnan, that he had nothing to do with this affair."

"Hum!" said D'Artagnan. "Will you come? Will you follow me, Porthos? The king is merciful."

"I want time for reflection," said Porthos.

"You will remain here, then?"

"Until fresh orders," said Aramis, with vivacity.

"Until we have an idea," resumed D'Artagnan; "and I now believe that will not be long, for I have one already."

"Let us say adieu, then," said Aramis; "but in truth, my good Porthos, you ought to go."

"No," said the latter, laconically.

"As you please," replied Aramis, a little wounded in his susceptibilities at the morose tone of his companion. "Only I am reassured by the promise of an idea from D'Artagnan, an idea I fancy I have divined."

"Let us see," said the musketeer, placing his ear near Aramis's mouth. The latter spoke several words rapidly, to which D'Artagnan replied, "That is it, precisely."

"Infallible!" cried Aramis.

"During the first emotion this resolution will cause, take care of yourself, Aramis."

"Oh! don't be afraid."

"Now, monsieur," said D'Artagnan to the officer, "thanks, a thousand thanks! You have made yourself three friends for life."

"Yes," added Aramis. Porthos alone said nothing, but merely bowed.

D'Artagnan, having tenderly embraced his two old friends, left Belle-Isle with the inseparable companion with whom M. Colbert had saddled him. Thus, with the exception of the explanation with which the worthy Porthos had been willing to be satisfied, nothing had changed in appearance in the fate of one or the other, "Only," said Aramis, "there is D'Artagnan's idea."

D'Artagnan did not return on board without profoundly analyzing the idea he had discovered. Now, we know that whatever D'Artagnan did examine, according to custom, daylight was certain to illuminate. As to the officer, now grown mute again, he had full time for meditation. Therefore, on putting his foot on board his vessel, moored within cannon-shot of the island, the captain of the musketeers had already got together all his means, offensive and defensive.

He immediately assembled his council, which consisted of the officers serving under his orders. These were eight in number; a chief of the maritime forces; a major directing the artillery; an engineer, the officer we are acquainted with, and four lieutenants. Having assembled them, D'Artagnan arose, took of his hat, and addressed them thus:

"Gentlemen, I have been to reconnoiter Belle-Ile-en-Mer, and I have found in it a good and solid garrison; moreover, preparations are made for a defense that may prove troublesome. I therefore intend to send for two of the principal officers of the place, that we may converse with them. Having separated them from their troops and cannon, we shall be better able to deal with them; particularly by reasoning with them. Is not this your opinion, gentlemen?"

The major of artillery rose.

"Monsieur," said he, with respect, but firmness, "I have heard you say that the place is preparing to make a troublesome defense. The place is then, as you know, determined on rebellion?"

D'Artagnan was visibly put out by this reply; but he was not the man to allow himself to be subdued by a trifle, and resumed:

"Monsieur," said he, "your reply is just. But you are ignorant that Belle-Isle is a fief of M. Fouquet's, and that former monarchs gave the right to the seigneurs of Belle-Isle to arm their people." The major made a movement. "Oh! do not interrupt me," continued D'Artagnan. "You are going to tell me that that right to arm themselves against the English was not a right to arm themselves against their king. But it is not M. Fouquet, I suppose, who holds Belle-Isle at this moment, since I arrested M. Fouquet the day before yesterday. Now the inhabitants and defenders of Belle-Isle know nothing of this

arrest. You would announce it to them in vain. It is a thing so unheard-of and extraordinary, so unexpected, that they would not believe you. A Breton serves his master, and not his masters; he serves his master till he has seen him dead. Now the Bretons, as far as I know, have not seen the body of M. Fouquet. It is not, then, surprising they hold out against that which is neither M. Fouquet nor his signature.”

The major bowed in token of assent.

“That is why,” continued D’Artagnan, “I propose to cause two of the principal officers of the garrison to come on board my vessel. They will see you, gentlemen; they will see the forces we have at our disposal; they will consequently know to what they have to trust, and the fate that attends them, in case of rebellion. We will affirm to them, upon our honour, that M. Fouquet is a prisoner, and that all resistance can only be prejudicial to them. We will tell them that at the first cannon fired, there will be no further hope of mercy from the king. Then, or so at least I trust, they will resist no longer. They will yield up without fighting, and we shall have a place given up to us in a friendly way which it might cost prodigious efforts to subdue.”

The officer who had followed D’Artagnan to Belle-Isle was preparing to speak, but D’Artagnan interrupted him.

“Yes, I know what you are going to tell me, monsieur; I know that there is an order of the king’s to prevent all secret communications with the defenders of Belle-Isle, and that is exactly why I do not offer to communicate except in presence of my staff.”

And D’Artagnan made an inclination of the head to his officers, who knew him well enough to attach a certain value to the condescension.

The officers looked at each other as if to read each other’s opinions in their eyes, with the intention of evidently acting, should they agree, according to the desire of D’Artagnan. And already the latter saw with joy that the result of their consent would be sending a bark to Porthos and Aramis, when the king’s officer drew from a pocket a folded paper, which he placed in the hands of D’Artagnan.

This paper bore upon its superscription the number 1.

“What, more!” murmured the surprised captain.

“Read, monsieur,” said the officer, with a courtesy that was not free from sadness.

D’Artagnan, full of mistrust, unfolded the paper, and read these words: “Prohibition to M. d’Artagnan to assemble any council whatever, or to deliberate in any way before Belle-Isle be surrendered and the prisoners shot. Signed—LOUIS.”

D’Artagnan repressed the quiver of impatience that ran through his whole body, and with a gracious smile:

“That is well, monsieur,” said he; “the king’s orders shall be complied with.”

XLIV. Result of the Ideas of the King, and the Ideas of D’Artagnan.

The blow was direct. It was severe, mortal. D’Artagnan, furious at having been anticipated by an idea of the king’s, did not despair, however, even yet; and reflecting upon the idea he had brought back from Belle-Isle, he elicited therefrom novel means of safety for his friends.

“Gentlemen,” said he, suddenly, “since the king has charged some other than myself with his secret orders, it must be because I no longer possess his confidence, and I should really be unworthy of it if I had the courage to hold a command subject to so many injurious suspicions. Therefore I will go immediately and carry my resignation to the king. I tender it before you all, enjoining you all to fall back with me upon the coast of France, in such a way as not to compromise the safety of the forces his majesty has confided to me. For this purpose, return all to your posts; within an hour, we shall have the ebb of the tide. To your posts, gentlemen! I suppose,” added he, on seeing that all prepared to obey him, except the surveillant officer, “you have no orders to object, this time?”

And D’Artagnan almost triumphed while speaking these words. This plan would prove the safety of his friends. The blockade once raised, they might embark immediately, and set sail for England or Spain, without fear of being molested. Whilst they were making their escape, D’Artagnan would return to the king; would justify his return by the indignation which the mistrust of Colbert had raised in him; he would be sent back with full powers, and he would take Belle-Isle; that is to say, the cage, after the birds had flown. But to this plan the officer opposed a further order of the king’s. It was thus conceived:

“From the moment M. d’Artagnan shall have manifested the desire of giving in his resignation, he shall no longer be reckoned leader of the expedition, and every officer placed under his orders shall be held to no longer obey him. Moreover, the said Monsieur d’Artagnan, having lost that quality of leader of the army sent against Belle-Isle, shall set out immediately for France, accompanied by the officer who will have remitted the message to him, and who will consider him a prisoner for whom he is answerable.”

Brave and careless as he was, D’Artagnan turned pale. Everything had been calculated with a depth of precognition which, for the first time in thirty years, recalled to him the solid foresight and inflexible logic of the great cardinal. He leaned his head on his hand, thoughtful, scarcely breathing. “If I were to put this order in my pocket,” thought he, “who would know it, what would prevent my doing it? Before the king had had time to be informed, I should have saved those poor fellows yonder. Let us exercise some small audacity! My head is not one of those the executioner strikes off for disobedience. We will disobey!” But at the moment he was about to adopt this plan, he saw the officers around him reading similar orders, which the passive agent of the thoughts of that infernal Colbert had distributed to them. This contingency of his disobedience had been foreseen—as all the rest had been.

“Monsieur,” said the officer, coming up to him, “I await your good pleasure to depart.”

“I am ready, monsieur,” replied D’Artagnan, grinding his teeth.

The officer immediately ordered a canoe to receive M. d’Artagnan and himself. At sight of this he became almost distraught with rage.

“How,” stammered he, “will you carry on the directions of the different corps?”

“When you are gone, monsieur,” replied the commander of the fleet, “it is to me the command of the whole is committed.”

“Then, monsieur,” rejoined Colbert’s man, addressing the new leader, “it is for you that this last order remitted to me is intended. Let us see your powers.”

“Here they are,” said the officer, exhibiting the royal signature.

“Here are your instructions,” replied the officer, placing the folded paper in his hands; and turning round towards D’Artagnan, “Come, monsieur,” said he, in an agitated voice (such despair did he behold in that man of iron), “do me the favour to depart at once.”

“Immediately!” articulated D’Artagnan, feebly, subdued, crushed by implacable impossibility.

And he painfully subsided into the little boat, which started, favoured by wind and tide, for the coast of France. The king’s guards embarked with him. The musketeer still preserved the hope of reaching Nantes quickly, and of pleading the cause of his friends eloquently enough to incline the king to mercy. The bark flew like a swallow. D’Artagnan distinctly saw the land of France profiled in black against the white clouds of night.

“Ah! monsieur,” said he, in a low voice, to the officer to whom, for an hour, he had ceased speaking, “what would I give to know the instructions for the new commander! They are all pacific, are they not? and—”

He did not finish; the thunder of a distant cannon rolled athwart the waves, another, and two or three still louder. D’Artagnan shuddered.

“They have commenced the siege of Belle-Isle,” replied the officer. The canoe had just touched the soil of France.

XLV. The Ancestors of Porthos.

When D’Artagnan left Aramis and Porthos, the latter returned to the principal fort, in order to converse with greater liberty. Porthos, still thoughtful, was a restraint on Aramis, whose mind had never felt itself more free.

“Dear Porthos,” said he, suddenly, “I will explain D’Artagnan’s idea to you.”

“What idea, Aramis?”

“An idea to which we shall owe our liberty within twelve hours.”

“Ah! indeed!” said Porthos, much astonished. “Let us hear it.”

“Did you remark, in the scene our friend had with the officer, that certain orders constrained him with regard to us?”

“Yes, I did notice that.”

“Well! D’Artagnan is going to give in his resignation to the king, and during the confusion that will result from his absence, we will get away, or rather you will get away, Porthos, if there is possibility of flight for only one.”

Here Porthos shook his head and replied: “We will escape together, Aramis, or we will stay together.”

“Thine is a right, a generous heart,” said Aramis, “only your melancholy uneasiness affects me.”

“I am not uneasy,” said Porthos.

“Then you are angry with me.”

“I am not angry with you.”

“Then why, my friend, do you put on such a dismal countenance?”

“I will tell you; I am making my will.” And while saying these words, the good Porthos looked sadly in the face of Aramis.

“Your will!” cried the bishop. “What, then! do you think yourself lost?”

“I feel fatigued. It is the first time, and there is a custom in our family.”

“What is it, my friend?”

“My grandfather was a man twice as strong as I am.”

“Indeed!” said Aramis; “then your grandfather must have been Samson himself.”

“No; his name was Antoine. Well! he was about my age, when, setting out one day for the chase, he felt his legs weak, the man who had never known what weakness was before.”

“What was the meaning of that fatigue, my friend?”

“Nothing good, as you will see; for having set out, complaining still of weakness of the legs, he met a wild boar, which made head against him; he missed him with his arquebuse, and was ripped up by the beast and died immediately.”

“There is no reason in that why you should alarm yourself, dear Porthos.”

“Oh! you will see. My father was as strong again as I am. He was a rough soldier, under Henry III. and Henry IV.; his name was not Antoine, but Gaspard, the same as M. de Coligny. Always on horseback, he had never known what lassitude was. One evening, as he rose from table, his legs failed him.”

“He had supped heartily, perhaps,” said Aramis, “and that was why he staggered.”

“Bah! A friend of M. de Bassompierre, nonsense! No, no, he was astonished at this lassitude, and said to my mother, who laughed at him, ‘Would not one believe I was going to meet with a wild boar, as the late M. du Vallon, my father did?’”

“Well?” said Aramis.

“Well, having this weakness, my father insisted upon going down into the garden, instead of going to bed; his foot slipped on the first stair, the staircase was steep; my father fell against a stone in which an iron hinge was fixed. The hinge gashed his temple; and he was stretched out dead upon the spot.”

Aramis raised his eyes to his friend: “These are two extraordinary circumstances,” said he; “let us not infer that there may succeed a third. It is not becoming in a man of your strength to be superstitious, my brave Porthos. Besides, when were your legs known to fail? Never have you stood so firm, so haughtily; why, you could carry a house on your shoulders.”

“At this moment,” said Porthos, “I feel myself pretty active; but at times I vacillate; I sink; and lately this phenomenon, as you say, has occurred four times. I will not say this frightens me, but it annoys me. Life is an agreeable thing. I have money; I have fine estates; I have horses that I love; I have also friends that I love: D’Artagnan, Athos, Raoul, and you.”

The admirable Porthos did not even take the trouble to dissimulate in the very presence of Aramis the rank he gave him in his friendship. Aramis pressed his hand: “We will still live many years,” said he, “to preserve to the world such specimens of its rarest men. Trust yourself to me, my friend; we have no reply from D’Artagnan, that is a good sign. He must have given orders to get the vessels together and clear the seas. On my part I have just issued directions that a bark should be rolled on rollers to the mouth of the great cavern of Locmaria, which you know, where we have so often lain in wait for the foxes.”

“Yes, and which terminates at the little creek by a trench where we discovered the day that splendid fox escaped that way.”

“Precisely. In case of misfortunes, a bark is to be concealed for us in that cavern; indeed, it must be there by this time. We will wait for a favourable moment, and during the night we will go to sea!”

“That is a grand idea. What shall we gain by it?”

"We shall gain this—nobody knows that grotto, or rather its issue, except ourselves and two or three hunters of the island; we shall gain this—that if the island is occupied, the scouts, seeing no bark upon the shore, will never imagine we can escape, and will cease to watch."

"I understand."

"Well! that weakness in the legs?"

"Oh! better, much, just now."

"You see, then, plainly, that everything conspires to give us quietude and hope. D'Artagnan will sweep the sea and leave us free. No royal fleet or descent to be dreaded. *Vive Dieu!* Porthos, we have still half a century of magnificent adventure before us, and if I once touch Spanish ground, I swear to you," added the bishop with terrible energy, "that your brevet of duke is not such a chance as it is said to be."

"We live by hope," said Porthos, enlivened by the warmth of his companion.

All at once a cry resounded in their ears: "To arms! to arms!"

This cry, repeated by a hundred throats, piercing the chamber where the two friends were conversing, carried surprise to one, and uneasiness to the other. Aramis opened the window; he saw a crowd of people running with flambeaux. Women were seeking places of safety, the armed population were hastening to their posts.

"The fleet! the fleet!" cried a soldier, who recognized Aramis.

"The fleet?" repeated the latter.

"Within half cannon-shot," continued the soldier.

"To arms!" cried Aramis.

"To arms!" repeated Porthos, formidably. And both rushed forth towards the mole to place themselves within the shelter of the batteries. Boats, laden with soldiers, were seen approaching; and in three directions, for the purpose of landing at three points at once.

"What must be done?" said an officer of the guard.

"Stop them; and if they persist, fire!" said Aramis.

Five minutes later, the cannonade commenced. These were the shots that D'Artagnan had heard as he landed in France. But the boats were too near the mole to allow the cannon to aim correctly. They landed, and the combat commenced hand to hand.

"What's the matter, Porthos?" said Aramis to his friend.

"Nothing! nothing!—only my legs; it is really incomprehensible!—they will be better when we charge." In fact, Porthos and Aramis did charge with such vigor, and so thoroughly animated their men, that the royalists re-embarked precipitately, without gaining anything but the wounds they carried away.

"Eh! but Porthos," cried Aramis, "we must have a prisoner, quick! quick!" Porthos bent over the stair of the mole, and seized by the nape of the neck one of the officers of the royal army who was waiting to embark till all his people should be in the boat. The arm of the giant lifted up his prey, which served him as a buckler, and he recovered himself without a shot being fired at him.

"Here is a prisoner for you," said Porthos coolly to Aramis.

"Well!" cried the latter, laughing, "did you not calumniate your legs?"

"It was not with my legs I captured him," said Porthos, "it was with my arms!"

#### XLVI. The Son of Biscarrat.

The Bretons of the Isle were very proud of this victory; Aramis did not encourage them in the feeling.

"What will happen," said he to Porthos, when everybody was gone home, "will be that the anger of the king will be roused by the account of the resistance; and that these brave people will be decimated or shot when they are taken, which cannot fail to take place."

"From which it results, then," said Porthos, "that what we have done is of not the slightest use."

"For the moment it may be," replied the bishop, "for we have a prisoner from whom we shall learn what our enemies are preparing to do."

"Yes, let us interrogate the prisoner," said Porthos, "and the means of making him speak are very simple. We are going to supper; we will invite him to join us; as he drinks he will talk."

This was done. The officer was at first rather uneasy, but became reassured on seeing what sort of men he had to deal with. He gave, without having any fear of compromising himself, all the details imaginable of the resignation and departure of D'Artagnan. He explained how, after that departure, the new leader of the expedition had ordered a surprise upon Belle-Isle. There his explanations stopped. Aramis and Porthos exchanged a glance that evinced their despair. No more dependence to be placed now on D'Artagnan's fertile imagination—no further resource in the event of defeat. Aramis, continuing his interrogations, asked the prisoner what the leaders of the expedition contemplated doing with the leaders of Belle-Isle.

"The orders are," replied he, "to kill *during* combat, or hang *afterwards*."

Porthos and Aramis looked at each other again, and the colour mounted to their faces.

"I am too light for the gallows," replied Aramis; "people like me are not hung."

"And I am too heavy," said Porthos; "people like me break the cord."

"I am sure," said the prisoner, gallantly, "that we could have guaranteed you the exact kind of death you preferred."

"A thousand thanks!" said Aramis, seriously. Porthos bowed.

"One more cup of wine to your health," said he, drinking himself. From one subject to another the chat with the officer was prolonged. He was an intelligent gentleman, and suffered himself to be led on by the charm of Aramis's wit and Porthos's cordial *bonhomie*.

"Pardon me," said he, "if I address a question to you; but men who are in their sixth bottle have a clear right to forget themselves a little."

"Address it!" cried Porthos; "address it!"

"Speak," said Aramis.

"Were you not, gentlemen, both in the musketeers of the late king?"

"Yes, monsieur, and amongst the best of them, if you please," said Porthos.

"That is true; I should say even the best of all soldiers, messieurs, if I did not fear to offend the memory of my father."

"Of your father?" cried Aramis.

"Do you know what my name is?"

"*Ma foi!* no, monsieur; but you can tell us, and—"

"I am called Georges de Biscarrat."

"Oh!" cried Porthos, in his turn. "Biscarrat! Do you remember that name, Aramis?"

"Biscarrat!" reflected the bishop. "It seems to me—"

"Try to recollect, monsieur," said the officer.

"*Pardieu!* that won't take me long," said Porthos. "Biscarrat—called Cardinal—one of the four who interrupted us on the day on which we formed our friendship with D'Artagnan, sword in hand."

"Precisely, gentlemen."

"The only one," cried Aramis, eagerly, "we could not scratch."

"Consequently, a capital blade?" said the prisoner.

"That's true! most true!" exclaimed both friends together. "*Ma foi!* Monsieur Biscarrat, we are delighted to make the acquaintance of such a brave man's son."

Biscarrat pressed the hands held out by the two musketeers. Aramis looked at Porthos as much as to say, "Here is a man who will help us," and without delay,—“Confess, monsieur,” said he, “that it is good to have once been a good man.”

"My father always said so, monsieur."

"Confess, likewise, that it is a sad circumstance in which you find yourself, of falling in with men destined to be shot or hung, and to learn that these men are old acquaintances, in fact, hereditary friends."

"Oh! you are not reserved for such a frightful fate as that, messieurs and friends!" said the young man, warmly.

"Bah! you said so yourself."

"I said so just now, when I did not know you; but now that I know you, I say—you will evade this dismal fate, if you wish!"

"How—if we wish?" echoed Aramis, whose eyes beamed with intelligence as he looked alternately at the prisoner and Porthos.

"Provided," continued Porthos, looking, in his turn, with noble intrepidity, at M. Biscarrat and the bishop—"provided nothing disgraceful be required of us."

"Nothing at all will be required of you, gentlemen," replied the officer—"what should they ask of you? If they find you they will kill you, that is a predetermined thing; try, then, gentlemen, to prevent their finding you."

"I don't think I am mistaken," said Porthos, with dignity, "but it appears evident to me that if they want to find us, they must come and seek us here."

"In that you are perfectly right, my worthy friend," replied Aramis, constantly consulting with his looks the countenance of Biscarrat, who had grown silent and constrained. "You wish, Monsieur de Biscarrat, to say something to us, to make us some overture, and you dare not—is that true?"

"Ah! gentlemen and friends! it is because by speaking I betray the watchword. But, hark! I hear a voice that frees mine by dominating it."

"Cannon!" said Porthos.

"Cannon and musketry, too!" cried the bishop.

On hearing at a distance, among the rocks, these sinister reports of a combat which they thought had ceased:

"What can that be?" asked Porthos.

"Eh! *Pardieu!*" cried Aramis; "that is just what I expected."

"What is that?"

"That the attack made by you was nothing but a feint; is not that true, monsieur? And whilst your companions allowed themselves to be repulsed, you were certain of effecting a landing on the other side of the island."

"Oh! several, monsieur."

"We are lost, then," said the bishop of Vannes, quietly.

"Lost! that is possible," replied the Seigneur de Pierrefonds, "but we are not taken or hung." And so saying, he rose from the table, went to the wall, and coolly took down his sword and pistols, which he examined with the care of an old soldier who is preparing for battle, and who feels that life, in a great measure, depends upon the excellence and right conditions of his arms.

At the report of the cannon, at the news of the surprise which might deliver up the island to the royal troops, the terrified crowd rushed precipitately to the fort to demand assistance and advice from their leaders. Aramis, pale and downcast, between two flambeaux, showed himself at the window which looked into the principal court, full of soldiers waiting for orders and bewildered inhabitants imploring succor.

"My friends," said D'Herblay, in a grave and sonorous voice, "M. Fouquet, your protector, your friend, your father, has been arrested by an order of the king, and thrown into the Bastille." A sustained yell of vengeful fury came floating up to the window at which the bishop stood, and enveloped him in a magnetic field.

"Avenge Monsieur Fouquet!" cried the most excited of his hearers, "death to the royalists!"

"No, my friends," replied Aramis, solemnly; "no, my friends; no resistance. The king is master in his kingdom. The king is the mandatory of God. The king and God have struck M. Fouquet. Humble yourselves before the hand of God. Love God and the king, who have struck M. Fouquet. But do not avenge your seigneur, do not think of avenging him. You would sacrifice yourselves in vain—you,

your wives and children, your property, your liberty. Lay down your arms, my friends—lay down your arms! since the king commands you so to do—and retire peaceably to your dwellings. It is I who ask you to do so; it is I who beg you to do so; it is I who now, in the hour of need, command you to do so, in the name of M. Fouquet.”

The crowd collected under the window uttered a prolonged roar of anger and terror. “The soldiers of Louis XIV. have reached the island,” continued Aramis. “From this time it would no longer be a fight betwixt them and you—it would be a massacre. Begone, then, begone, and forget; this time I command you, in the name of the Lord of Hosts!”

The mutineers retired slowly, submissive, silent.

“Ah! what have you just been saying, my friend?” said Porthos.

“Monsieur,” said Biscarrat to the bishop, “you may save all these inhabitants, but thus you will neither save yourself nor your friend.”

“Monsieur de Biscarrat,” said the bishop of Vannes, with a singular accent of nobility and courtesy, “Monsieur de Biscarrat, be kind enough to resume your liberty.”

“I am very willing to do so, monsieur; but—”

“That would render us a service, for when announcing to the king’s lieutenant the submission of the islanders, you will perhaps obtain some grace for us on informing him of the manner in which that submission has been effected.”

“Grace!” replied Porthos with flashing eyes, “what is the meaning of that word?”

Aramis touched the elbow of his friend roughly, as he had been accustomed to do in the days of their youth, when he wanted to warn Porthos that he had committed, or was about to commit, a blunder. Porthos understood him, and was silent immediately.

“I will go, messieurs,” replied Biscarrat, a little surprised likewise at the word “grace” pronounced by the haughty musketeer, of and to whom, but a few minutes before, he had related with so much enthusiasm the heroic exploits with which his father had delighted him.

“Go, then, Monsieur Biscarrat,” said Aramis, bowing to him, “and at parting receive the expression of our entire gratitude.”

“But you, messieurs, you whom I think it an honour to call my friends, since you have been willing to accept that title, what will become of you in the meantime?” replied the officer, very much agitated at taking leave of the two ancient adversaries of his father.

“We will wait here.”

“But, *mon Dieu!*—the order is precise and formal.”

“I am bishop of Vannes, Monsieur de Biscarrat; and they no more shoot a bishop than they hang a gentleman.”

“Ah! yes, monsieur—yes, my lord,” replied Biscarrat; “it is true, you are right, there is still that chance for you. Then, I will depart, I will repair to the commander of the expedition, the king’s lieutenant. Adieu! then, messieurs, or rather, to meet again, I hope.”

The worthy officer, jumping upon a horse given him by Aramis, departed in the direction of the sound of cannon, which, by surging the crowd into the fort, had interrupted the conversation of the two friends with their prisoner. Aramis watched the departure, and when left alone with Porthos:

“Well, do you comprehend?” said he.

“*Ma foi!* no.”

“Did not Biscarrat inconvenience you here?”

“No; he is a brave fellow.”

“Yes; but the grotto of Locmaria—is it necessary all the world should know it?”

“Ah! that is true, that is true; I comprehend. We are going to escape by the cavern.”

“If you please,” cried Aramis, gayly. “Forward, friend Porthos; our boat awaits us. King Louis has not caught us—*yet.*”

XLVII. The Grotto of Locmaria.

The cavern of Locmaria was sufficiently distant from the mole to render it necessary for our friends to husband their strength in order to reach it. Besides, night was advancing; midnight had struck at the fort. Porthos and Aramis were loaded with money and arms. They walked, then, across the heath, which stretched between the mole and the cavern, listening to every noise, in order better to avoid an ambush. From time to time, on the road which they had carefully left on their left, passed fugitives coming from the interior, at the news of the landing of the royal troops. Aramis and Porthos, concealed behind some projecting mass of rock, collected the words that escaped from the poor people, who fled, trembling, carrying with them their most valuable effects, and tried, whilst listening to their complaints, to gather something from them for their own interest. At length, after a rapid race, frequently interrupted by prudent stoppages, they reached the deep grottoes, in which the prophetic bishop of Vannes had taken care to have secreted a bark capable of keeping the sea at this fine season.

“My good friend,” said Porthos, panting vigorously, “we have arrived, it seems. But I thought you spoke of three men, three servants, who were to accompany us. I don’t see them—where are they?”

“Why should you see them, Porthos?” replied Aramis. “They are certainly waiting for us in the cavern, and, no doubt, are resting, having accomplished their rough and difficult task.”

Aramis stopped Porthos, who was preparing to enter the cavern. “Will you allow me, my friend,” said he to the giant, “to pass in first? I know the signal I have given to these men; who, not hearing it, would be very likely to fire upon you or slash away with their knives in the dark.”

“Go on, then, Aramis; go on—go first; you impersonate wisdom and foresight; go. Ah! there is that fatigue again, of which I spoke to you. It has just seized me afresh.”

Aramis left Porthos sitting at the entrance of the grotto, and bowing his head, he penetrated into the interior of the cavern, imitating the cry of the owl. A little plaintive cooing, a scarcely distinct echo, replied from the depths of the cave. Aramis pursued his way cautiously, and soon was stopped by the same kind of cry as he had first uttered, within ten paces of him.

“Are you there, Yves?” said the bishop.

“Yes, my lord; Goenne is here likewise. His son accompanies us.”

“That is well. Are all things ready?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Go to the entrance of the grottoes, my good Yves, and you will there find the Seigneur de Pierrefonds, who is resting after the fatigue of our journey. And if he should happen not to be able to walk, lift him up, and bring him hither to me.”

The three men obeyed. But the recommendation given to his servants was superfluous. Porthos, refreshed, had already commenced the descent, and his heavy step resounded amongst the cavities, formed and supported by columns of porphyry and granite. As soon as the Seigneur de Bracieux had rejoined the bishop, the Bretons lighted a lantern with which they were furnished, and Porthos assured his friend that he felt as strong again as ever.

“Let us inspect the boat,” said Aramis, “and satisfy ourselves at once what it will hold.”

“Do not go too near with the light,” said the patron Yves; “for as you desired me, my lord, I have placed under the bench of the poop, in the coffer you know of, the barrel of powder, and the musket-charges that you sent me from the fort.”

“Very well,” said Aramis; and, taking the lantern himself, he examined minutely all parts of the canoe, with the precautions of a man who is neither timid nor ignorant in the face of danger. The canoe was long, light, drawing little water, thin of keel; in short, one of those that have always been so aptly built at Belle-Isle; a little high in its sides, solid upon the water, very manageable, furnished with planks which, in uncertain weather, formed a sort of deck over which the waves might glide, so as to protect the rowers. In two well-closed coffers, placed beneath the benches of the prow and the poop, Aramis found bread, biscuit, dried fruits, a quarter of bacon, a good provision of water in leathern bottles; the whole forming rations sufficient for people who did not mean to quit the coast, and would be able to revictual, if necessity commanded. The arms, eight muskets, and as many horse-pistols, were in good condition, and all loaded. There were additional oars, in case of accident, and that little sail called *trinquet*, which assists the speed of the canoe at the same time the boatmen row, and is so useful when the breeze is slack. When Aramis had seen to all these things, and appeared satisfied with the result of his inspection, “Let us consult Porthos,” said he, “to know if we must endeavor to get the boat out by the unknown extremity of the grotto, following the descent and the shade of the cavern, or whether it be better, in the open air, to make it slide upon its rollers through the bushes, leveling the road of the little beach, which is but twenty feet high, and gives, at high tide, three or four fathoms of good water upon a sound bottom.”

“It must be as you please, my lord,” replied the skipper Yves, respectfully; “but I don’t believe that by the slope of the cavern, and in the dark in which we shall be obliged to maneuver our boat, the road will be so convenient as the open air. I know the beach well, and can certify that it is as smooth as a grass-plot in a garden; the interior of the grotto, on the contrary, is rough; without reckoning, my lord, that at its extremity we shall come to the trench which leads into the sea, and perhaps the canoe will not pass down it.”

“I have made my calculation,” said the bishop, “and I am certain it will pass.”

“So be it; I wish it may, my lord,” continued Yves; “but your highness knows very well that to make it reach the extremity of the trench, there is an enormous stone to be lifted—that under which the fox always passes, and which closes the trench like a door.”

“It can be raised,” said Porthos; “that is nothing.”

“Oh! I know that my lord has the strength of ten men,” replied Yves; “but that is giving him a great deal of trouble.”

“I think the skipper may be right,” said Aramis; “let us try the open-air passage.”

“The more so, my lord,” continued the fisherman, “that we should not be able to embark before day, it will require so much labor, and that as soon as daylight appears, a good *vedette* placed outside the grotto would be necessary, indispensable even, to watch the maneuvers of the lighters or cruisers that are on the look-out for us.”

“Yes, yes, Yves, your reasons are good; we will go by the beach.”

And the three robust Bretons went to the boat, and were beginning to place their rollers underneath it to put it in motion, when the distant barking of dogs was heard, proceeding from the interior of the island.

Aramis darted out of the grotto, followed by Porthos. Dawn just tinted with purple and white the waves and plain; through the dim light, melancholy fir-trees waved their tender branches over the pebbles, and long flights of crows were skimming with their black wings the shimmering fields of buckwheat. In a quarter of an hour it would be clear daylight; the wakened birds announced it to all nature. The barkings which had been heard, which had stopped the three fishermen engaged in moving the boat, and had brought Aramis and Porthos out of the cavern, now seemed to come from a deep gorge within about a league of the grotto.

“It is a pack of hounds,” said Porthos; “the dogs are on a scent.”

“Who can be hunting at such a moment as this?” said Aramis.

“And this way, particularly,” continued Porthos, “where they might expect the army of the royalists.”

“The noise comes nearer. Yes, you are right, Porthos, the dogs are on a scent. But, Yves!” cried Aramis, “come here! come here!”

Yves ran towards him, letting fall the cylinder which he was about to place under the boat when the bishop’s call interrupted him.

“What is the meaning of this hunt, skipper?” said Porthos.

“Eh! my lord, I cannot understand it,” replied the Breton. “It is not at such a moment that the Seigneur de Locmaria would hunt. No, and yet the dogs—”

“Unless they have escaped from the kennel.”

“No,” said Goenne, “they are not the Seigneur de Locmaria’s hounds.”

“In common prudence,” said Aramis, “let us go back into the grotto; the voices evidently draw nearer, we shall soon know what we have to trust to.”

They re-entered, but had scarcely proceeded a hundred steps in the darkness, when a noise like the hoarse sigh of a creature in distress resounded through the cavern, and breathless, rapid, terrified, a fox passed like a flash of lightning before the fugitives, leaped over the boat and disappeared, leaving behind its sour scent, which was perceptible for several seconds under the low vaults of the cave.

“The fox!” cried the Bretons, with the glad surprise of born hunters.

“Accursed mischance!” cried the bishop, “our retreat is discovered.”

“How so?” said Porthos; “are you afraid of a fox?”

“Eh! my friend, what do you mean by that? why do you specify the fox? It is not the fox alone. *Pardieu!* But don’t you know, Porthos, that after the foxes come hounds, and after hounds men?”

Porthos hung his head. As though to confirm the words of Aramis, they heard the yelping pack approach with frightful swiftness upon the trail. Six foxhounds burst at once upon the little heath, with mingling yelps of triumph.

"There are the dogs, plain enough!" said Aramis, posted on the look-out behind a chink in the rocks; "now, who are the huntsmen?"

"If it is the Seigneur de Locmaria's," replied the sailor, "he will leave the dogs to hunt the grotto, for he knows them, and will not enter in himself, being quite sure that the fox will come out the other side; it is there he will wait for him."

"It is not the Seigneur de Locmaria who is hunting," replied Aramis, turning pale in spite of his efforts to maintain a placid countenance.

"Who is it, then?" said Porthos.

"Look!"

Porthos applied his eye to the slit, and saw at the summit of a hillock a dozen horsemen urging on their horses in the track of the dogs, shouting, "*Taiaut! taiaut!*"

"The guards!" said he.

"Yes, my friend, the king's guards."

"The king's guards! do you say, my lord?" cried the Bretons, growing pale in turn.

"With Biscarrat at their head, mounted upon my gray horse," continued Aramis.

The hounds at the same moment rushed into the grotto like an avalanche, and the depths of the cavern were filled with their deafening cries.

"Ah! the devil!" said Aramis, resuming all his coolness at the sight of this certain, inevitable danger. "I am perfectly satisfied we are lost, but we have, at least, one chance left. If the guards who follow their hounds happen to discover there is an issue to the grotto, there is no help for us, for on entering they must see both ourselves and our boat. The dogs must not go out of the cavern. Their masters must not enter."

"That is clear," said Porthos.

"You understand," added Aramis, with the rapid precision of command; "there are six dogs that will be forced to stop at the great stone under which the fox has glided—but at the too narrow opening of which they must be themselves stopped and killed."

The Bretons sprang forward, knife in hand. In a few minutes there was a lamentable concert of angry barks and mortal howls—and then, silence.

"That's well!" said Aramis, coolly, "now for the masters!"

"What is to be done with them?" said Porthos.

"Wait their arrival, conceal ourselves, and kill them."

"*Kill them!*" replied Porthos.

"There are sixteen," said Aramis, "at least, at present."

"And well armed," added Porthos, with a smile of consolation.

"It will last about ten minutes," said Aramis. "To work!"

And with a resolute air he took up a musket, and placed a hunting-knife between his teeth.

"Yves, Goenne, and his son," continued Aramis, "will pass the muskets to us. You, Porthos, will fire when they are close. We shall have brought down, at the lowest computation, eight, before the others are aware of anything—that is certain; then all, there are five of us, will dispatch the other eight, knife in hand."

"And poor Biscarrat?" said Porthos.

Aramis reflected a moment—"Biscarrat first," replied he, coolly. "He knows us."

XLVIII. The Grotto.

In spite of the sort of divination which was the remarkable side of the character of Aramis, the event, subject to the risks of things over which uncertainty presides, did not fall out exactly as the bishop of Vannes had foreseen. Biscarrat, better mounted than his companions, arrived first at the opening of the grotto, and comprehended that fox and hounds were one and all engulfed in it. Only, struck by that superstitious terror which every dark and subterraneous way naturally impresses upon the mind of man, he stopped at the outside of the grotto, and waited till his companions should have assembled round him.

"Well!" asked the young men, coming up, out of breath, and unable to understand the meaning of this inaction.

"Well! I cannot hear the dogs; they and the fox must all be lost in this infernal cavern."

"They were too close up," said one of the guards, "to have lost scent all at once. Besides, we should hear them from one side or another. They must, as Biscarrat says, be in this grotto."

"But then," said one of the young men, "why don't they give tongue?"

"It is strange!" muttered another.

"Well, but," said a fourth, "let us go into this grotto. Does it happen to be forbidden we should enter it?"

"No," replied Biscarrat. "Only, as it looks as dark as a wolf's mouth, we might break our necks in it."

"Witness the dogs," said a guard, "who seem to have broken theirs."

"What the devil can have become of them?" asked the young men in chorus. And every master called his dog by his name, whistled to him in his favourite mode, without a single one replying to either call or whistle.

"It is perhaps an enchanted grotto," said Biscarrat: "let us see." And, jumping from his horse, he made a step into the grotto.

"Stop! stop! I will accompany you," said one of the guards, on seeing Biscarrat disappear in the shades of the cavern's mouth.

"No," replied Biscarrat, "there must be something extraordinary in the place—don't let us risk ourselves all at once. If in ten minutes you do not hear of me, you can come in, but not all at once."

"Be it so," said the young man, who, besides, did not imagine that Biscarrat ran much risk in the enterprise, "we will wait for you." And without dismounting from their horses, they formed a circle round the grotto.

Biscarrat entered then alone, and advanced through the darkness till he came in contact with the muzzle of Porthos's musket. The resistance which his chest met with astonished him; he naturally raised his hand and laid hold of the icy barrel. At the same instant, Yves lifted a knife against the young man, which was about to fall upon him with all force of a Breton's arm, when the iron wrist of Porthos stopped it half-way. Then, like low muttering thunder, his voice growled in the darkness, "I will not have him killed!"

Biscarrat found himself between a protection and a threat, the one almost as terrible as the other. However brave the young man might be, he could not prevent a cry escaping him, which Aramis immediately suppressed by placing a handkerchief over his mouth. "Monsieur de Biscarrat," said he, in a low voice, "we mean you no harm, and you must know that if you have recognized us; but, at the first word, the first groan, the first whisper, we shall be forced to kill you as we have killed your dogs."

"Yes, I recognize you, gentlemen," said the officer, in a low voice. "But why are you here—what are you doing, here? Unfortunate men! I thought you were in the fort."

"And you, monsieur, you were to obtain conditions for us, I think?"

"I did all I was able, messieurs, but—"

"But what?"

"But there are positive orders."

"To kill us?"

Biscarrat made no reply. It would have cost him too much to speak of the cord to gentlemen. Aramis understood the silence of the prisoner.

"Monsieur Biscarrat," said he, "you would be already dead if we had not regard for your youth and our ancient association with your father; but you may yet escape from the place by swearing that you will not tell your companions what you have seen."

"I will not only swear that I will not speak of it," said Biscarrat, "but I still further swear that I will do everything in the world to prevent my companions from setting foot in the grotto."

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried several voices from the outside, coming like a whirlwind into the cave.

"Reply," said Aramis.

"Here I am!" cried Biscarrat.

"Now, begone; we depend on your loyalty." And he left his hold of the young man, who hastily returned towards the light.

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried the voices, still nearer. And the shadows of several human forms projected into the interior of the grotto. Biscarrat rushed to meet his friends in order to stop them, and met them just as they were adventuring into the cave. Aramis and Porthos listened with the intense attention of men whose life depends upon a breath of air.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed one of the guards, as he came to the light, "how pale you are!"

"Pale!" cried another; "you ought to say corpse-colour."

"I!" said the young man, endeavoring to collect his faculties.

"In the name of Heaven! what has happened?" exclaimed all the voices.

"You have not a drop of blood in your veins, my poor friend," said one of them, laughing.

"Messieurs, it is serious," said another, "he is going to faint; does any one of you happen to have any salts?" And they all laughed.

This hail of jests fell round Biscarrat's ears like musket-balls in a *melee*. He recovered himself amidst a deluge of interrogations.

"What do you suppose I have seen?" asked he. "I was too hot when I entered the grotto, and I have been struck with a chill. That is all."

"But the dogs, the dogs; have you seen them again—did you see anything of them—do you know anything about them?"

"I suppose they have got out some other way."

"Messieurs," said one of the young men, "there is in that which is going on, in the paleness and silence of our friend, a mystery which Biscarrat will not, or cannot reveal. Only, and this is certain, Biscarrat has seen something in the grotto. Well, for my part, I am very curious to see what it is, even if it is the devil! To the grotto! messieurs, to the grotto!"

"To the grotto!" repeated all the voices. And the echo of the cavern carried like a menace to Porthos and Aramis, "To the grotto! to the grotto!"

Biscarrat threw himself before his companions. "Messieurs! messieurs!" cried he, "in the name of Heaven! do not go in!"

"Why, what is there so terrific in the cavern?" asked several at once. "Come, speak, Biscarrat."

"Decidedly, it is the devil he has seen," repeated he who had before advanced that hypothesis.

"Well," said another, "if he has seen him, he need not be selfish; he may as well let us have a look at him in turn."

"Messieurs! messieurs! I beseech you," urged Biscarrat.

"Nonsense! Let us pass!"

"Messieurs, I implore you not to enter!"

"Why, you went in yourself."

Then one of the officers, who—of a riper age than the others—had till this time remained behind, and had said nothing, advanced. "Messieurs," said he, with a calmness which contrasted with the animation of the young men, "there is in there some person, or something, that is not the devil; but which, whatever it may be, has had sufficient power to silence our dogs. We must discover who this some one is, or what this something is."

Biscarrat made a last effort to stop his friends, but it was useless. In vain he threw himself before the rashest; in vain he clung to the rocks to bar the passage; the crowd of young men rushed into the cave, in the steps of the officer who had spoken last, but who had sprung in first, sword in hand, to face the unknown danger. Biscarrat, repulsed by his friends, unable to accompany them, without passing in the eyes of Porthos and Aramis for a traitor and a perjurer, with painfully attentive ear and unconsciously supplicating hands leaned against the rough side of a rock which he thought must be exposed to the fire of the musketeers. As to the guards, they penetrated further and further, with exclamations that grew fainter as they advanced. All at once, a discharge of musketry, growling like thunder, exploded in the entrails of the vault. Two or three balls were flattened against the rock on which Biscarrat was leaning. At the same instant, cries, shrieks, imprecations burst forth, and the little

troop of gentlemen reappeared—some pale, some bleeding—all enveloped in a cloud of smoke, which the outer air seemed to suck from the depths of the cavern. "Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried the fugitives, "you knew there was an ambuscade in that cavern, and you did not warn us! Biscarrat, you are the cause that four of us are murdered men! Woe be to you, Biscarrat!" "You are the cause of my being wounded unto death," said one of the young men, letting a gush of scarlet life-blood vomit in his palm, and spattering it into Biscarrat's livid face. "My blood be on your head!" And he rolled in agony at the feet of the young man.

"But, at least, tell us who is there?" cried several furious voices.

Biscarrat remained silent. "Tell us, or die!" cried the wounded man, raising himself upon one knee, and lifting towards his companion an arm bearing a useless sword. Biscarrat rushed towards him, opening his breast for the blow, but the wounded man fell back not to rise again, uttering a groan which was his last. Biscarrat, with hair on end, haggard eyes, and bewildered head, advanced towards the interior of the cavern, saying, "You are right. Death to me, who have allowed my comrades to be assassinated. I am a worthless wretch!" And throwing away his sword, for he wished to die without defending himself, he rushed head foremost into the cavern. The others followed him. The eleven who remained out of sixteen imitated his example; but they did not go further than the first. A second discharge laid five upon the icy sand; and as it was impossible to see whence this murderous thunder issued, the others fell back with a terror that can be better imagined than described. But, far from flying, as the others had done, Biscarrat remained safe and sound, seated on a fragment of rock, and waited. There were only six gentlemen left.

"Seriously," said one of the survivors, "is it the devil?"

"*Ma foi!* it is much worse," said another.

"Ask Biscarrat, he knows."

"Where is Biscarrat?" The young men looked round them, and saw that Biscarrat did not answer.

"He is dead!" said two or three voices.

"Oh! no!" replied another, "I saw him through the smoke, sitting quietly on a rock. He is in the cavern; he is waiting for us."

"He must know who are there."

"And how should he know them?"

"He was taken prisoner by the rebels."

"That is true. Well! let us call him, and learn from him whom we have to deal with." And all voices shouted, "Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" But Biscarrat did not answer.

"Good!" said the officer who had shown so much coolness in the affair. "We have no longer any need of him; here are reinforcements coming."

In fact, a company of guards, left in the rear by their officers, whom the ardor of the chase had carried away—from seventy-five to eighty men—arrived in good order, led by their captain and the first lieutenant. The five officers hastened to meet their soldiers; and, in language the eloquence of which may be easily imagined, they related the adventure, and asked for aid. The captain interrupted them. "Where are your companions?" demanded he.

"Dead!"

"But there were sixteen of you!"

"Ten are dead. Biscarrat is in the cavern, and we are five."

"Biscarrat is a prisoner?"

"Probably."

"No, for here he is—look." In fact, Biscarrat appeared at the opening of the grotto.

"He is making a sign to come on," said the officer. "Come on!"

"Come on!" cried all the troop. And they advanced to meet Biscarrat.

"Monsieur," said the captain, addressing Biscarrat, "I am assured that you know who the men are in that grotto, and who make such a desperate defense. In the king's name I command you to declare what you know."

"Captain," said Biscarrat, "you have no need to command me. My word has been restored to me this very instant; and I came in the name of these men."

"To tell me who they are?"

"To tell you they are determined to defend themselves to the death, unless you grant them satisfactory terms."

"How many are there of them, then?"

"There are two," said Biscarrat.

"There are two—and want to impose conditions upon us?"

"There are two, and they have already killed ten of our men."

"What sort of people are they—giants?"

"Worse than that. Do you remember the history of the Bastion Saint-Gervais, captain?"

"Yes; where four musketeers held out against an army."

"Well, these are two of those same musketeers."

"And their names?"

"At that period they were called Porthos and Aramis. Now they are styled M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon."

"And what interest have they in all this?"

"It is they who were holding Bell-Isle for M. Fouquet."

A murmur ran through the ranks of the soldiers on hearing the two words "Porthos and Aramis." "The musketeers! the musketeers!" repeated they. And among all these brave men, the idea that they were going to have a struggle against two of the oldest glories of the French army, made a shiver, half enthusiasm, two-thirds terror, run through them. In fact, those four names—D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis—were venerated among all who wore a sword; as, in antiquity, the names of Hercules, Theseus, Castor, and Pollux were venerated.

"Two men—and they have killed ten in two discharges! It is impossible, Monsieur Biscarrat!"

"Eh! captain," replied the latter, "I do not tell you that they have not with them two or three men, as the musketeers of the Bastion Saint-Gervais had two or three lackeys; but, believe me, captain, I have seen these men, I have been taken prisoner by them—I know they themselves alone are all-sufficient to destroy an army."

"That we shall see," said the captain, "and that in a moment, too. Gentlemen, attention!"

At this reply, no one stirred, and all prepared to obey. Biscarrat alone risked a last attempt.

"Monsieur," said he, in a low voice, "be persuaded by me; let us pass on our way. Those two men, those two lions you are going to attack, will defend themselves to the death. They have already killed ten of our men; they will kill double the number, and end by killing themselves rather than surrender. What shall we gain by fighting them?"

"We shall gain the consciousness, monsieur, of not having allowed eighty of the king's guards to retire before two rebels. If I listened to your advice, monsieur, I should be a dishonoured man; and by dishonouring myself I should dishonour the army. Forward, my men!"

And he marched first as far as the opening of the grotto. There he halted. The object of this halt was to give Biscarrat and his companions time to describe to him the interior of the grotto. Then, when he believed he had a sufficient acquaintance with the place, he divided his company into three bodies, which were to enter successively, keeping up a sustained fire in all directions. No doubt, in this attack they would lose five more, perhaps ten; but, certainly, they must end by taking the rebels, since there was no issue; and, at any rate, two men could not kill eighty.

"Captain," said Biscarrat, "I beg to be allowed to march at the head of the first platoon."

"So be it," replied the captain; "you have all the honour. I make you a present of it."

"Thanks!" replied the young man, with all the firmness of his race.

"Take your sword, then."

"I shall go as I am, captain," said Biscarrat, "for I do not go to kill, I go to be killed."

And placing himself at the head of the first platoon, with head uncovered and arms crossed,—“March, gentlemen,” said he.

XLIX. An Homeric Song.

It is time to pass to the other camp, and to describe at once the combatants and the field of battle. Aramis and Porthos had gone to the grotto of Locmaria with the expectation of finding there their canoe ready armed, as well as the three Bretons, their assistants; and they at first hoped to make the bark pass through the little issue of the cavern, concealing in that fashion both their labors and their flight. The arrival of the fox and dogs obliged them to remain concealed. The grotto extended the space of about a hundred *toises*, to that little slope dominating a creek. Formerly a temple of the Celtic divinities, when Belle-Isle was still called Kalonese, this grotto had beheld more than one human sacrifice accomplished in its mystic depths. The first entrance to the cavern was by a moderate descent, above which distorted rocks formed a weird arcade; the interior, very uneven and dangerous from the inequalities of the vault, was subdivided into several compartments, which communicated with each other by means of rough and jagged steps, fixed right and left, in uncouth natural pillars. At the third compartment the vault was so low, the passage so narrow, that the bark would scarcely have passed without touching the side; nevertheless, in moments of despair, wood softens and stone grows flexible beneath the human will. Such was the thought of Aramis, when, after having fought the fight, he decided upon flight—a flight most dangerous, since all the assailants were not dead; and that, admitting the possibility of putting the bark to sea, they would have to fly in open day, before the conquered, so interested on recognizing their small number, in pursuing their conquerors. When the two discharges had killed ten men, Aramis, familiar with the windings of the cavern, went to reconnoiter them one by one, and counted them, for the smoke prevented seeing outside; and he immediately commanded that the canoe should be rolled as far as the great stone, the closure of the liberating issue. Porthos collected all his strength, took the canoe in his arms, and raised it up, whilst the Bretons made it run rapidly along the rollers. They had descended into the third compartment; they had arrived at the stone which walled the outlet. Porthos seized this gigantic stone at its base, applied his robust shoulder, and gave a heave which made the wall crack. A cloud of dust fell from the vault, with the ashes of ten thousand generations of sea birds, whose nests stuck like cement to the rock. At the third shock the stone gave way, and oscillated for a minute. Porthos, placing his back against the neighboring rock, made an arch with his foot, which drove the block out of the calcareous masses which served for hinges and cramps. The stone fell, and daylight was visible, brilliant, radiant, flooding the cavern through the opening, and the blue sea appeared to the delighted Bretons. They began to lift the bark over the barricade. Twenty more *toises*, and it would glide into the ocean. It was during this time that the company arrived, was drawn up by the captain, and disposed for either an escalade or an assault. Aramis watched over everything, to favour the labors of his friends. He saw the reinforcements, counted the men, and convinced himself at a single glance of the insurmountable peril to which fresh combat would expose them. To escape by sea, at the moment the cavern was about to be invaded, was impossible. In fact, the daylight which had just been admitted to the last compartments had exposed to the soldiers the bark being rolled towards the sea, the two rebels within musket-shot; and one of their discharges would riddle the boat if it did not kill the navigators. Besides, allowing everything,—if the bark escaped with the men on board of it, how could the alarm be suppressed—how could notice to the royal lighters be prevented? What could hinder the poor canoe, followed by sea and watched from the shore, from succumbing before the end of the day? Aramis, digging his hands into his gray hair with rage, invoked the assistance of God and the assistance of the demons. Calling to Porthos, who was doing more work than all the rollers—whether of flesh or wood—“My friend,” said he, “our adversaries have just received a reinforcement.”

"Ah, ah!" said Porthos, quietly, "what is to be done, then?"

"To recommence the combat," said Aramis, "is hazardous."

"Yes," said Porthos, "for it is difficult to suppose that out of two, one should not be killed; and certainly, if one of us was killed, the other would get himself killed also." Porthos spoke these words with that heroic nature which, with him, grew grander with necessity.

Aramis felt it like a spur to his heart. "We shall neither of us be killed if you do what I tell you, friend Porthos."

"Tell me what?"

"These people are coming down into the grotto."

"Yes."

"We could kill about fifteen of them, but no more."

"How many are there in all?" asked Porthos.



"They have received a reinforcement of seventy-five men."

"Seventy-five and five, eighty. Ah!" sighed Porthos.

"If they fire all at once they will riddle us with balls."

"Certainly they will."

"Without reckoning," added Aramis, "that the detonation might occasion a collapse of the cavern."

"Ay," said Porthos, "a piece of falling rock just now grazed my shoulder."

"You see, then?"

"Oh! it is nothing."

"We must determine upon something quickly. Our Bretons are going to continue to roll the canoe towards the sea."

"Very well."

"We two will keep the powder, the balls, and the muskets here."

"But only two, my dear Aramis—we shall never fire three shots together," said Porthos, innocently, "the defense by musketry is a bad one."

"Find a better, then."

"I have found one," said the giant, eagerly, "I will place myself in ambuscade behind the pillar with this iron bar, and invisible, unattackable, if they come in floods, I can let my bar fall upon their skulls, thirty times in a minute. *Hein!* what do you think of the project? You smile!"

"Excellent, dear friend, perfect! I approve it greatly; only you will frighten them, and half of them will remain outside to take us by famine. What we want, my good friend, is the entire destruction of the troop. A single survivor encompasses our ruin."

"You are right, my friend, but how can we attract them, pray?"

"By not stirring, my good Porthos."

"Well! we won't stir, then; but when they are all together—"

"Then leave it to me, I have an idea."

"If it is so, and your idea proves a good one—and your idea is most likely to be good—I am satisfied."

"To your ambuscade, Porthos, and count how many enter."

"But you, what will you do?"

"Don't trouble yourself about me; I have a task to perform."

"I think I hear shouts."

"It is they! To your post. Keep within reach of my voice and hand."

Porthos took refuge in the second compartment, which was in darkness, absolutely black. Aramis glided into the third; the giant held in his hand an iron bar of about fifty pounds weight. Porthos handled this lever, which had been used in rolling the bark, with marvelous facility. During this time, the Bretons had pushed the bark to the beach. In the further and lighter compartment, Aramis, stooping and concealed, was busy with some mysterious maneuver. A command was given in a loud voice. It was the last order of the captain commandant. Twenty-five men jumped from the upper rocks into the first compartment of the grotto, and having taken their ground, began to fire. The echoes shrieked and barked, the hissing balls seemed actually to rarefy the air, and then opaque smoke filled the vault. "To the left! to the left!" cried Biscarrat, who, in his first assault, had seen the passage to the second chamber, and who, animated by the smell of powder, wished to guide his soldiers in that direction. The troop, accordingly, precipitated themselves to the left—the passage gradually growing narrower. Biscarrat, with his hands stretched forward, devoted to death, marched in advance of the muskets. "Come on! come on!" exclaimed he, "I see daylight!"

"Strike, Porthos!" cried the sepulchral voice of Aramis.

Porthos breathed a heavy sigh—but he obeyed. The iron bar fell full and direct upon the head of Biscarrat, who was dead before he had ended his cry. Then the formidable lever rose ten times in ten seconds, and made ten corpses. The soldiers could see nothing; they heard sighs and groans; they stumbled over dead bodies, but as they had no conception of the cause of all this, they came forward jostling each other. The implacable bar, still falling, annihilated the first platoon, without a single sound to warn the second, which was quietly advancing; only, commanded by the captain, the men had stripped a fir, growing on the shore, and, with its resinous branches twisted together, the captain had made a flambeau. On arriving at the compartment where Porthos, like the exterminating angel, had destroyed all he touched, the first rank drew back in terror. No firing had replied to that of the guards, and yet their way was stopped by a heap of dead bodies—they literally walked in blood. Porthos was still behind his pillar. The captain, illumining with trembling pine-torch this frightful carnage, of which he in vain sought the cause, drew back towards the pillar behind which Porthos was concealed. Then a gigantic hand issued from the shade, and fastened on the throat of the captain, who uttered a stiffl rattle; his stretched-out arms beating the air, the torch fell and was extinguished in blood. A second after, the corpse of the captain dropped close to the extinguished torch, and added another body to the heap of dead which blocked up the passage. All this was effected as mysteriously as though by magic. At hearing the rattling in the throat of the captain, the soldiers who accompanied him had turned round, caught a glimpse of his extended arms, his eyes starting from their sockets, and then the torch fell and they were left in darkness. From an unreflective, instinctive, mechanical feeling, the lieutenant cried:

"Fire!"

Immediately a volley of musketry flamed, thundered, roared in the cavern, bringing down enormous fragments from the vaults. The cavern was lighted for an instant by this discharge, and then immediately returned to pitchy darkness rendered thicker by the smoke. To this succeeded a profound silence, broken only by the steps of the third brigade, now entering the cavern.

L: The Death of a Titan.

At the moment when Porthos, more accustomed to the darkness than these men, coming from open daylight, was looking round him to see if through this artificial midnight Aramis were not making him some signal, he felt his arm gently touched, and a voice low as a breath murmured in his ear, "Come."

"Oh!" said Porthos.

"Hush!" said Aramis, if possible, yet more softly.

And amidst the noise of the third brigade, which continued to advance, the imprecations of the guards still left alive, the muffled groans of the dying, Aramis and Porthos glided unseen along the granite walls of the cavern. Aramis led Porthos into the last but one compartment, and showed him, in a hollow of the rocky wall, a barrel of powder weighing from seventy to eighty pounds, to which he had just attached a fuse. "My friend," said he to Porthos, "you will take this barrel, the match of which I am going to set fire to, and throw it amidst our enemies; can you do so?"

"*Parbleu!*" replied Porthos; and he lifted the barrel with one hand. "Light it!"

"Stop," said Aramis, "till they are all massed together, and then, my Jupiter, hurl your thunderbolt among them."

"Light it," repeated Porthos.

"On my part," continued Aramis, "I will join our Bretons, and help them to get the canoe to the sea. I will wait for you on the shore; launch it strongly, and hasten to us."

"Light it," said Porthos, a third time.

"But do you understand me?"

"*Parbleu!*" said Porthos again, with laughter that he did not even attempt to restrain, "when a thing is explained to me I understand it; begone, and give me the light."

Aramis gave the burning match to Porthos, who held out his arm to him, his hands being engaged. Aramis pressed the arm of Porthos with both his hands, and fell back to the outlet of the cavern where the three rowers awaited him.

Porthos, left alone, applied the spark bravely to the match. The spark—a feeble spark, first principle of conflagration—shone in the darkness like a glow-worm, then was deadened against the match which it set fire to, Porthos enlivening the flame with his breath. The smoke was a little dispersed, and by the light of the sparking match objects might, for two seconds, be distinguished. It was a brief but splendid spectacle, that of this giant, pale, bloody, his countenance lighted by the fire of the match burning in surrounding darkness! The soldiers saw him, they saw the barrel he held in his hand—they at once understood what was going to happen. Then, these men, already choked with horror at the sight of what had been accomplished, filled with terror at thought of what was about to be accomplished, gave out a simultaneous shriek of agony. Some endeavored to fly, but they encountered the third brigade, which barred their passage; others mechanically took aim and attempted to fire their discharged muskets; others fell instinctively upon their knees. Two or three officers cried out to Porthos to promise him his liberty if he would spare their lives. The lieutenant of the third brigade commanded his men to fire; but the guards had before them their terrified companions, who served as a living rampart for Porthos. We have said that the light produced by the spark and the match did not last more than two seconds; but during these two seconds this is what it illumined: in the first place, the giant, enlarged in the darkness; then, at ten paces off, a heap of bleeding bodies, crushed, mutilated, in the midst of which some still heaved in the last agony, lifting the mass as a last respiration inflating the sides of some old monster dying in the night. Every breath of Porthos, thus vivifying the match, sent towards this heap of bodies a phosphorescent aura, mingled with streaks of purple. In addition to this principal group scattered about the grotto, as the chances of death or surprise had stretched them, isolated bodies seemed to be making ghastly exhibitions of their gaping wounds. Above ground, bedded in pools of blood, rose, heavy and sparkling, the short, thick pillars of the cavern, of which the strongly marked shades threw out the luminous particles. And all this was seen by the tremulous light of a match attached to a barrel of powder, that is to say, a torch which, whilst throwing a light on the dead past, showed death to come.

As I have said, this spectacle did not last above two seconds. During this short space of time an officer of the third brigade got together eight men armed with muskets, and, through an opening, ordered them to fire upon Porthos. But they who received the order to fire trembled so that three guards fell by the discharge, and the five remaining balls hissed on to splinter the vault, plow the ground, or indent the pillars of the cavern.

A burst of laughter replied to this volley; then the arm of the giant swung round; then was seen whirling through the air, like a falling star, the train of fire. The barrel, hurled a distance of thirty feet, cleared the barricade of dead bodies, and fell amidst a group of shrieking soldiers, who threw themselves on their faces. The officer had followed the brilliant train in the air; he endeavored to precipitate himself upon the barrel and tear out the match before it reached the powder it contained. Useless! The air had made the flame attached to the conductor more active; the match, which at rest might have burnt five minutes, was consumed in thirty seconds, and the infernal work exploded. Furious vortices of sulphur and nitre, devouring shoals of fire which caught every object, the terrible thunder of the explosion, this is what the second which followed disclosed in that cavern of horrors. The rocks split like planks of deal beneath the axe. A jet of fire, smoke, and *debris* sprang from the middle of the grotto, enlarging as it mounted. The large walls of silex tottered and fell upon the sand, and the sand itself, an instrument of pain when launched from its hard bed, riddled the faces with its myriad cutting atoms. Shrieks, imprecations, human life, dead bodies—all were engulfed in one terrific crash.

The three first compartments became one sepulchral sink into which fell grimly back, in the order of their weight, every vegetable, mineral, or human fragment. Then the lighter sand and ash came down in turn, stretching like a winding sheet and smoking over the dismal scene. And now, in this burning tomb, this subterranean volcano, seek the king's guards with their blue coats laced with silver. Seek the officers, brilliant in gold, seek for the arms upon which they depended for their defense. One single man has made of all of those things a chaos more confused, more shapeless, more terrible than the chaos which existed before the creation of the world. There remained nothing of the three compartments—nothing by which God could have recognized His handiwork. As for Porthos, after having hurled the barrel of powder amidst his enemies, he had fled, as Aramis had directed him to do, and had gained the last compartment, into which air, light, and sunshine penetrated through the opening. Scarcely had he turned the angle which separated the third compartment from the fourth when he perceived at a hundred paces from him the bark dancing on the waves. There were his friends, there liberty, there life and victory. Six more of his formidable strides, and he would be out of the vault; out of the vault! a dozen of his vigorous leaps and he would reach the canoe. Suddenly he felt his knees give way; his knees seemed powerless; his legs to yield beneath him.

"Oh! oh!" murmured he, "there is my weakness seizing me again! I can walk no further! What is this?"

Aramis perceived him through the opening, and unable to conceive what could induce him to stop thus—"Come on, Porthos! come on," he cried; "come quickly!"

"Oh!" replied the giant, making an effort that contorted every muscle of his body—"oh! but I cannot." While saying these words, he fell upon his knees, but with his mighty hands he clung to the rocks, and raised himself up again.

"Quick! quick!" repeated Aramis, bending forward towards the shore, as if to draw Porthos towards him with his arms.

"Here I am," stammered Porthos, collecting all his strength to make one step more.

"In the name of Heaven! Porthos, make haste! the barrel will blow up!"

"Make haste, my lord!" shouted the Bretons to Porthos, who was floundering as in a dream.

But there was no time; the explosion thundered, earth gaped, the smoke which hurled through the clefts obscured the sky; the sea flowed back as though driven by the blast of flame which darted from the grotto as if from the jaws of some gigantic fiery chimera; the reflux took the bark out twenty *toises*; the solid rocks cracked to their base, and separated like blocks beneath the operation of the wedge; a portion of the vault was carried up towards heaven, as if it had been built of cardboard; the green and blue and topaz conflagration and black lava of liquefactions clashed and combated an instant beneath a majestic dome of smoke; then oscillated, declined, and fell successively the mighty monoliths of rock which the violence of the explosion had not been able to uproot from the bed of ages; they bowed to each other like grave and stiff old men, then prostrating themselves, lay down forever in their dusty tomb.

This frightful shock seemed to restore Porthos the strength that he had lost; he arose, a giant among granite giants. But at the moment he was flying between the double hedge of granite phantoms, these latter, which were no longer supported by the corresponding links, began to roll and totter round our Titan, who looked as if precipitated from heaven amidst rocks which he had just been launching. Porthos felt the very earth beneath his feet becoming jelly-tremulous. He stretched both hands to repulse the falling rocks. A gigantic block was held back by each of his extended arms. He bent his head, and a third granite mass sank between his shoulders. For an instant the power of Porthos seemed about to fail him, but this new Hercules united all his force, and the two walls of the prison in which he was buried fell back slowly and gave him place. For an instant he appeared, in this frame of granite, like the angel of chaos, but in pushing back the lateral rocks, he lost his point of support, for the monolith which weighed upon his shoulders, and the boulder, pressing upon him with all its weight, brought the giant down upon his knees. The lateral rocks, for an instant pushed back, drew together again, and added their weight to the ponderous mass which would have been sufficient to crush ten men. The hero fell without a groan—he fell while answering Aramis with words of encouragement and hope, for, thanks to the powerful arch of his hands, for an instant he believed that, like Enceladus, he would succeed in shaking off the triple load. But by degrees Aramis beheld the block sink; the hands, strung for an instant, the arms stiffened for a last effort, gave way, the extended shoulders sank, wounded and torn, and the rocks continued to gradually collapse.

"Porthos! Porthos!" cried Aramis, tearing his hair. "Porthos! where are you? Speak!"

"Here, here," murmured Porthos, with a voice growing evidently weaker, "patience! patience!"

Scarcely had he pronounced these words, when the impulse of the fall augmented the weight; the enormous rock sank down, pressed by those others which sank in from the sides, and, as it were, swallowed up Porthos in a sepulcher of badly jointed stones. On hearing the dying voice of his friend, Aramis had sprung to land. Two of the Bretons followed him, with each a lever in his hand—one being sufficient to take care of the bark. The dying rattle of the valiant gladiator guided them amidst the ruins. Aramis, animated, active and young as at twenty, sprang towards the triple mass, and with his hands, delicate as those of a woman, raised by a miracle of strength the corner-stone of this great granite grave. Then he caught a glimpse, through the darkness of that charnel-house, of the still brilliant eye of his friend, to whom the momentary lifting of the mass restored a momentary respiration. The two men came rushing up, grasped their iron levers, united their triple strength, not merely to raise it, but sustain it. All was useless. They gave way with cries of grief, and the rough voice of Porthos, seeing them exhaust themselves in a useless struggle, murmured in an almost cheerful tone those supreme words which came to his lips with the last respiration, "Too heavy!"

After which his eyes darkened and closed, his face grew ashy pale, the hands whitened, and the colossus sank quite down, breathing his last sigh. With him sank the rock, which, even in his dying agony he had still held up. The three men dropped the levers, which rolled upon the tumulary stone. Then, breathless, pale, his brow covered with sweat, Aramis listened, his breast oppressed, his heart ready to break.

Nothing more. The giant slept the eternal sleep, in the sepulcher which God had built about him to his measure.

Ll. Porthos's Epitaph.

Aramis, silent and sad as ice, trembling like a timid child, arose shivering from the stone. A Christian does not walk on tombs. But, though capable of standing, he was not capable of walking. It might be said that something of dead Porthos had just died within him. His Bretons surrounded him; Aramis yielded to their kind exertions, and the three sailors, lifting him up, carried him to the canoe. Then, having laid him down upon the bench near the rudder, they took to their oars, preferring this to hoisting sail, which might betray them.

On all that leveled surface of the ancient grotto of Locmaria, one single hillock attracted their eyes. Aramis never removed his from it; and, at a distance out in the sea, in proportion as the shore receded, that menacing proud mass of rock seemed to draw itself up, as formerly Porthos used to draw himself up, raising a smiling, yet invincible head towards heaven, like that of his dear old honest valiant friend, the strongest of the four, yet the first dead. Strange destiny of these men of brass! The most simple of heart allied to the most crafty; strength of body guided by subtlety of mind; and in the decisive moment, when vigor alone could save mind and body, a stone, a rock, a vile material weight, triumphed over manly strength, and falling upon the body, drove out the mind.

Worthy Porthos! born to help other men, always ready to sacrifice himself for the safety of the weak, as if God had only given him strength for that purpose; when dying he only thought he was carrying out the conditions of his compact with Aramis, a compact, however, which Aramis alone had drawn up, and which Porthos had only known to suffer by its terrible solidarity. Noble Porthos! of what good now are thy chateaux overflowing with sumptuous furniture, forests overflowing with game, lakes overflowing with fish, cellars overflowing with wealth! Of what service to thee now thy lackeys in brilliant liveries, and in the midst of them Mousqueton, proud of the power delegated by thee! Oh, noble Porthos! careful heaper-up of treasure, was it worth while to labor to sweeten and gild life, to come upon a desert shore, surrounded by the cries of seagulls, and lay thyself, with broken bones, beneath a torpid stone? Was it worth while, in short, noble Porthos, to heap so much gold, and not have even the distich of a poor poet engraven upon thy monument? Valiant Porthos! he still, without doubt, sleeps, lost, forgotten, beneath the rock the shepherds of the heath take for the gigantic abode of a *dolmen*. And so many twining branches, so many mosses, bent by the bitter wind of ocean, so many lichens solder thy sepulcher to earth, that no passers-by will imagine such a block of granite could ever have been supported by the shoulders of one man.

Aramis, still pale, still icy-cold, his heart upon his lips, looked, even till, with the last ray of daylight, the shore faded on the horizon. Not a word escaped him, not a sigh rose from his deep breast. The superstitious Bretons looked upon him, trembling. Such silence was not that of a man, it was the silence of a statue. In the meantime, with the first gray lines that lighted up the heavens, the canoe hoisted its little sail, which, swelling with the kisses of the breeze, and carrying them rapidly from the coast, made bravest way towards Spain, across the dreaded Gulf of Gascony, so rife with storms. But scarcely half an hour after the sail had been hoisted, the rowers became inactive, reclining on their benches, and, making an eye-shade with their hands, pointed out to each other a white spot which appeared on the horizon as motionless as a gull rocked by the viewless respiration of the waves. But that which might have appeared motionless to ordinary eyes was moving at a quick rate to the experienced eye of the sailor; that which appeared stationary upon the ocean was cutting a rapid way through it. For some time, seeing the profound torpor in which their master was plunged, they did not dare to rouse him, and satisfied themselves with exchanging their conjectures in whispers. Aramis, in fact, so vigilant, so active—Aramis, whose eye, like that of the lynx, watched without ceasing, and saw better by night than by day—Aramis seemed to sleep in this despair of soul. An hour passed thus, during which daylight gradually disappeared, but during which also the sail in view gained so swiftly on the bark, that Goenne, one of the three sailors, ventured to say aloud:

"My lord, we are being chased!"

Aramis made no reply; the ship still gained upon them. Then, of their own accord, two of the sailors, by the direction of the patron Yves, lowered the sail, in order that that single point upon the surface of the waters should cease to be a guide to the eye of the enemy pursuing them. On the part of the ship in sight, on the contrary, two more small sails were run up at the extremities of the masts. Unfortunately, it was the time of the finest and longest days of the year, and the moon, in all her brilliancy, succeeded inauspicious daylight. The *balancelle*, which was pursuing the little bark before the wind, had then still half an hour of twilight, and a whole night almost as light as day.

"My lord! my lord! we are lost!" said the captain. "Look! they see us plainly, though we have lowered sail."

"That is not to be wondered at," murmured one of the sailors, "since they say that, by the aid of the devil, the Paris-folk have fabricated instruments with which they see as well at a distance as near, by night as well as by day."

Aramis took a telescope from the bottom of the boat, focussed it silently, and passing it to the sailor, "Here," said he, "look!" The sailor hesitated.

"Don't be alarmed," said the bishop, "there is no sin in it; and if there is any sin, I will take it on myself."

The sailor lifted the glass to his eye, and uttered a cry. He believed that the vessel, which appeared to be distant about cannon-shot, had at a single bound cleared the whole distance. But, on withdrawing the instrument from his eye, he saw that, except the way which the *balancelle* had been able to make during that brief instant, it was still at the same distance.

"So," murmured the sailor, "they can see us as we see them."

"They see us," said Aramis, and sank again into impassibility.

"What!—they see us!" said Yves. "Impossible!"

"Well, captain, look yourself," said the sailor. And he passed him the glass.

"My lord assures me that the devil has nothing to do with this?" asked Yves.

Aramis shrugged his shoulders.

The skipper lifted the glass to his eye. "Oh! my lord," said he, "it is a miracle—there they are; it seems as if I were going to touch them. Twenty-five men at least! Ah! I see the captain forward. He holds a glass like this, and is looking at us. Ah! he turns round, and gives an order; they are rolling a piece of cannon forward—they are loading it—pointing it. *Misericorde!* they are firing at us!"

And by a mechanical movement, the skipper put aside the telescope, and the pursuing ship, relegated to the horizon, appeared again in its true aspect. The vessel was still at the distance of nearly a league, but the maneuver sighted thus was not less real. A light cloud of smoke appeared beneath the sails, more blue than they, and spreading like a flower opening; then, at about a mile from the little canoe, they saw the ball take the crown off two or three waves, dig a white furrow in the sea, and disappear at the end of it, as inoffensive as the stone with which, in play, a boy makes ducks and drakes. It was at once a menace and a warning.

"What is to be done?" asked the patron.

"They will sink us!" said Goenne, "give us absolution, my lord!" And the sailors fell on their knees before him.

"You forget that they can see you," said he.

"That is true!" said the sailors, ashamed of their weakness. "Give us your orders, my lord, we are prepared to die for you."

"Let us wait," said Aramis.

"How—let us wait?"

"Yes; do you not see, as you just now said, that if we endeavor to fly, they will sink us?"

"But, perhaps," the patron ventured to say, "perhaps under cover of night, we could escape them."

"Oh!" said Aramis, "they have, no doubt, Greek fire with which to lighten their own course and ours likewise."

At the same moment, as if the vessel was responsive to the appeal of Aramis, a second cloud of smoke mounted slowly to the heavens, and from the bosom of that cloud sparkled an arrow of flame, which described a parabola like a rainbow, and fell into the sea, where it continued to burn, illuminating a space of a quarter of a league in diameter.

The Bretons looked at each other in terror. "You see plainly," said Aramis, "it will be better to wait for them."

The oars dropped from the hands of the sailors, and the bark, ceasing to make way, rocked motionless upon the summits of the waves. Night came on, but still the ship drew nearer. It might be imagined it redoubled its speed with darkness. From time to time, as a vulture rears its head out of its nest, the formidable Greek fire darted from its sides, and cast its flame upon the ocean like an incandescent snowfall. At last it came within musket-shot. All the men were on deck, arms in hand; the cannoniers were at their guns, the matches burning. It might be thought they were about to board a frigate and to fight a crew superior in number to their own, not to attempt the capture of a canoe manned by four people.

"Surrender!" cried the commander of the *balancelle*, with the aid of his speaking-trumpet.

The sailors looked at Aramis. Aramis made a sign with his head. Yves waved a white cloth at the end of a gaff. This was like striking their flag. The pursuer came on like a race-horse. It launched a fresh Greek fire, which fell within twenty paces of the little canoe, and threw a light upon them as white as sunshine.

"At the first sign of resistance," cried the commander of the *balancelle*, "fire!" The soldiers brought their muskets to the present.

"Did we not say we surrendered?" said Yves.

"Alive, alive, captain!" cried one excited soldier, "they must be taken alive."

"Well, yes—living," said the captain. Then turning towards the Bretons, "Your lives are safe, my friends!" cried he, "all but the Chevalier d'Herblay."

Aramis stared imperceptibly. For an instant his eye was fixed upon the depths of the ocean, illumined by the last flashes of the Greek fire, which ran along the sides of the waves, played on the crests like plumes, and rendered still darker and more terrible the gulfs they covered.

"Do you hear, my lord?" said the sailors.

"Yes."

"What are your orders?"

"Accept!"  
"But you, my lord?"  
Aramis leaned still more forward, and dipped the ends of his long white fingers in the green limpid waters of the sea, to which he turned with smiles as to a friend.  
"Accept!" repeated he.

"We accept," repeated the sailors; "but what security have we?"  
"The word of a gentleman," said the officer. "By my rank and by my name I swear that all except M. le Chevalier d'Herblay shall have their lives spared. I am lieutenant of the king's frigate the 'Pomona,' and my name is Louis Constant de Pressigny."  
With a rapid gesture, Aramis—already bent over the side of the bark towards the sea—drew himself up, and with a flashing eye, and a smile upon his lips, "Throw out the ladder, messieurs," said he, as if the command had belonged to him. He was obeyed. When Aramis, seizing the rope ladder, walked straight up to the commander, with a firm step, looked at him earnestly, made a sign to him with his hand, a mysterious and unknown sign at sight of which the officer turned pale, trembled, and bowed his head, the sailors were profoundly astonished. Without a word Aramis then raised his hand to the eyes of the commander and showed him the collet of a ring he wore on the ring-finger of his left hand. And while making this sign Aramis, draped in cold and haughty majesty, had the air of an emperor giving his hand to be kissed. The commandant, who for a moment had raised his head, bowed a second time with marks of the most profound respect. Then stretching his hand out, in his turn, towards the poop, that is to say, towards his own cabin, he drew back to allow Aramis to go first. The three Bretons, who had come on board after their bishop, looked at each other, stupefied. The crew were awed to silence. Five minutes after, the commander called the second lieutenant, who returned immediately, ordering the head to be put towards Corunna. Whilst this order was being executed, Aramis reappeared upon the deck, and took a seat near the *bastingage*. Night had fallen; the moon had not yet risen, yet Aramis looked incessantly towards Belle-Isle. Yves then approached the captain, who had returned to take his post in the stern, and said, in a low and humble voice, "What course are we to follow, captain?"

"We take what course my lord pleases," replied the officer.  
Aramis passed the night leaning upon the *bastingage*. Yves, on approaching him next morning, remarked that "the night must have been a very damp one, for the wood on which the bishop's head had rested was soaked with dew." Who knows?—that dew was, it may be, the first tears that had ever fallen from the eyes of Aramis!  
What epitaph would have been worth that, good Porthos?

LII. M. de Gesvres's Round.

D'Artagnan was little used to resistance like that he had just experienced. He returned, profoundly irritated, to Nantes. Irritation, with this vigorous man, usually vented itself in impetuous attack, which few people, hitherto, were they king, were they giants, had been able to resist. Trembling with rage, he went straight to the castle, and asked an audience with the king. It might be about seven o'clock in the morning, and, since his arrival at Nantes, the king had been an early riser. But on arriving at the corridor with which we are acquainted, D'Artagnan found M. de Gesvres, who stopped him politely, telling him not to speak too loud and disturb the king. "Is the king asleep?" said D'Artagnan. "Well, I will let him sleep. But about what o'clock do you suppose he will rise?"

"Oh! in about two hours; his majesty has been up all night."  
D'Artagnan took his hat again, bowed to M. de Gesvres, and returned to his own apartments. He came back at half-past nine, and was told that the king was at breakfast. "That will just suit me," said D'Artagnan. "I will talk to the king while he is eating."  
M. de Brienne reminded D'Artagnan that the king would not see any one at meal-time.  
"But," said D'Artagnan, looking askant at Brienne, "you do not know, perhaps, monsieur, that I have the privilege of *entree* anywhere—and at any hour."  
Brienne took the captain's hand kindly, and said, "Not at Nantes, dear Monsieur d'Artagnan. The king, in this journey, has changed everything."  
D'Artagnan, a little softened, asked about what o'clock the king would have finished his breakfast.  
"We don't know."

"Eh?—don't know! What does that mean? You don't know how much time the king devotes to eating? It is generally an hour; and, if we admit that the air of the Loire gives an additional appetite, we will extend it to an hour and a half; that is enough, I think. I will wait where I am."  
"Oh! dear Monsieur d'Artagnan, the order of the day is not to allow any person to remain in this corridor; I am on guard for that particular purpose."  
D'Artagnan felt his anger mounting to his brain a second time. He went out quickly, for fear of complicating the affair by a display of premature ill-humor. As soon as he was out he began to reflect. "The king," said he, "will not receive me, that is evident. The young man is angry; he is afraid, beforehand, of the words that I may speak to him. Yes; but in the meantime Belle-Isle is besieged, and my two friends by now probably taken or killed. Poor Porthos! As to Master Aramis, he is always full of resources, and I am easy on his account. But, no, no; Porthos is not yet an invalid, nor is Aramis in his dotage. The one with his arm, the other with his imagination, will find work for his majesty's soldiers. Who knows if these brave men may not get up for the edification of his most Christian majesty a little bastion of Saint-Gervais! I don't despair of it. They have cannon and a garrison. And yet," continued D'Artagnan, "I don't know whether it would not be better to stop the combat. For myself alone I will not put up with either surly looks or insults from the king; but for my friends I must put up with everything. Shall I go to M. Colbert? Now, there is a man I must acquire the habit of terrifying. I will go to M. Colbert." And D'Artagnan set forward bravely to find M. Colbert, but was informed that he was working with the king, at the castle of Nantes. "Good!" cried he, "the times have come again in which I measured my steps from De Treville to the cardinal, from the cardinal to the queen, from the queen to Louis XIII. Truly is it said that men, in growing old, become children again!—To the castle, then!" He returned thither. M. de Lyonne was coming out. He gave D'Artagnan both hands, but told him that the king had been busy all the preceding evening and all night, and that orders had been given that no one should be admitted. "Not even the captain who takes the order?" cried D'Artagnan. "I think that is rather too strong."

"Not even he," said M. de Lyonne.  
"Since that is the case," replied D'Artagnan, wounded to the heart; "since the captain of the musketeers, who has always entered the king's chamber, is no longer allowed to enter it, his cabinet, or his *salle-a-manger*, either the king is dead, or his captain is in disgrace. Do me the favour, then, M. de Lyonne, who are in favour, to return and tell the king, plainly, I send him my resignation."  
"D'Artagnan, beware of what you are doing!"  
"For friendship's sake, go!" and he pushed him gently towards the cabinet.

"Well, I will go," said Lyonne.  
D'Artagnan waited, walking about the corridor in no enviable mood. Lyonne returned.

"Well, what did the king say?" exclaimed D'Artagnan.  
"He simply answered, 'Tis well,'" replied Lyonne.  
"That it was well!" said the captain, with an explosion. "That is to say, that he accepts it? Good! Now, then, I am free! I am only a plain citizen, M. de Lyonne. I have the pleasure of bidding you good-bye! Farewell, castle, corridor, ante-chamber! a *bourgeois*, about to breathe at liberty, takes his farewell of you."  
And without waiting longer, the captain sprang from the terrace down the staircase, where he had picked up the fragments of Gourville's letter. Five minutes after, he was at the hostelry, where, according to the custom of all great officers who have lodgings at the castle, he had taken what was called his city-chamber. But when he arrived there, instead of throwing off his sword and cloak, he took his pistols, put his money into a large leather purse, sent for his horses from the castle-stables, and gave orders that would ensure their reaching Vannes during the night. Everything went on according to his wishes. At eight o'clock in the evening, he was putting his foot in the stirrup, when M. de Gesvres appeared, at the head of twelve guards, in front of the hostelry. D'Artagnan saw all from the corner of his eye; he could not fail seeing thirteen men and thirteen horses. But he feigned not to observe anything, and was about to put his horse in motion. Gesvres rode up to him. "Monsieur d'Artagnan!" said he, aloud.  
"Ah, Monsieur de Gesvres! good evening!"  
"One would say you were getting on horseback."  
"More than that,—I am mounted,—as you see."  
"It is fortunate I have met with you."  
"Were you looking for me, then?"  
"*Mon Dieu!* yes."  
"On the part of the king, I will wager?"  
"Yes."  
"As I, three days ago, went in search of M. Fouquet?"  
"Oh!"

"Nonsense! It is of no use being over-delicate with me; that is all labor lost. Tell me at once you are come to arrest me."

"To arrest you?—Good heavens! no."  
"Why do you come to accost me with twelve horsemen at your heels, then?"  
"I am making my round."  
"That isn't bad! And so you pick me up in your round, eh?"  
"I don't pick you up; I meet with you, and I beg you to come with me."  
"Where?"  
"To the king."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan, with a bantering air; "the king is disengaged."  
"For Heaven's sake, captain," said M. de Gesvres, in a low voice to the musketeer, "do not compromise yourself! these men hear you."  
D'Artagnan laughed aloud, and replied:  
"March! People who are arrested are placed between the six first guards and the six last."  
"But as I am not arresting you," said M. de Gesvres, "you will march behind, with me, if you please."  
"Well," said D'Artagnan, "that is very polite, duke, and you are right in being so; for if ever I had had to make my rounds near your *chambre-de-ville*, I should have been courteous to you, I assure you, on the word of a gentleman! Now, one favour more; what does the king want with me?"  
"Oh, the king is furious!"  
"Very well! the king, who has thought it worth while to be angry, may take the trouble to grow calm again; that is all. I shan't die of that, I will swear."

"No, but—"  
"But—I shall be sent to keep company with unfortunate M. Fouquet. *Mordieux!* That is a gallant man, a worthy man! We shall live very sociably together, I will be sworn."  
"Here we are at our place of destination," said the duke. "Captain, for Heaven's sake be calm with the king!"  
"Ah! ah! you are playing the brave man with me, duke!" said D'Artagnan, throwing one of his defiant glances over Gesvres. "I have been told that you are ambitious of uniting your guards with my musketeers. This strikes me as a splendid opportunity."  
"I will take exceeding good care not to avail myself of it, captain."  
"And why not, pray?"  
"Oh, for many reasons—in the first place, for this: if I were to succeed you in the musketeers after having arrested you—"  
"Ah! then you admit you have arrested me?"  
"No, I *don't*."  
"Say met me, then. So, you were saying *if* you were to succeed me after having arrested me?"  
"Your musketeers, at the first exercise with ball cartridges, would fire *my* way, by mistake."  
"Oh, as to that I won't say; for the fellows *do* love me a little."

Gesvres made D'Artagnan pass in first, and took him straight to the cabinet where Louis was waiting for his captain of the musketeers, and placed himself behind his colleague in the ante-chamber. The king could be heard distinctly, speaking aloud to Colbert in the same cabinet where Colbert might have heard, a few days before, the king speaking aloud with M. d'Artagnan. The guards remained as a mounted picket before the principal gate; and the report was quickly spread throughout the city that monsieur le capitaine of the musketeers had been arrested by order of the king. Then these men were seen to be in motion, and as in the good old times of Louis XIII. and M. de Treville, groups were formed, and staircases were filled; vague murmurs, issuing from the court below, came rolling to the upper stories, like the distant moaning of the waves. M. de Gesvres became uneasy. He looked at his guards, who, after being interrogated by the musketeers who had just got among their ranks, began to shun them with a manifestation of innocence. D'Artagnan was certainly less disturbed by all this than M. de Gesvres, the captain of the guards. As soon as he entered, he seated himself on the ledge of a window whence with his eagle glance he saw all that was going on without the least emotion. No step of the progressive fermentation which had shown itself at the report of his arrest escaped him. He foresaw the very moment the explosion would take place; and we know that his previsions were in general correct.

"It would be very whimsical," thought he, "if, this evening, my praetorians should make me king of France. How I should laugh!"

But, at the height, all was stopped. Guards, musketeers, officers, soldiers, murmurs, uneasiness, dispersed, vanished, died away; there was an end of menace and sedition. One word had calmed the waves. The king had desired Brienne to say, "Hush, messieurs! you disturb the king."

D'Artagnan sighed. "All is over!" said he; "the musketeers of the present day are not those of his majesty Louis XIII. All is over!"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, you are wanted in the ante-chamber of the king," proclaimed an usher.

LIII. King Louis XIV.

The king was seated in his cabinet, with his back turned towards the door of entrance. In front of him was a mirror, in which, while turning over his papers, he could see at a glance those who came in. He did not take any notice of the entrance of D'Artagnan, but spread above his letters and plans the large silk cloth he used to conceal his secrets from the importunate. D'Artagnan understood this by-play, and kept in the background; so that at the end of a minute the king, who heard nothing, and saw nothing save from the corner of his eye, was obliged to cry, "Is not M. d'Artagnan there?"

"I am here, sire," replied the musketeer, advancing.

"Well, monsieur," said the king, fixing his pellucid eyes on D'Artagnan, "what have you to say to me?"

"I, sire!" replied the latter, who watched the first blow of his adversary to make a good retort; "I have nothing to say to your majesty, unless it be that you have caused me to be arrested, and here I am."

The king was going to reply that he had not had D'Artagnan arrested, but any such sentence appeared too much like an excuse, and he was silent. D'Artagnan likewise preserved an obstinate silence.

"Monsieur," at length resumed the king, "what did I charge you to go and do at Belle-Isle? Tell me, if you please."

The king while uttering these words looked intently at his captain. Here D'Artagnan was fortunate; the king seemed to place the game in his hands.

"I believe," replied he, "that your majesty does me the honour to ask what I went to Belle-Isle to accomplish?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Well! sire, I know nothing about it; it is not of me that question should be asked, but of that infinite number of officers of all kinds, to whom have been given innumerable orders of all kinds, whilst to me, head of the expedition, nothing precise was said or stated in any form whatever."

The king was hurt: he showed it by his reply. "Monsieur," said he, "orders have only been given to such as were judged faithful."

"And, therefore, I have been astonished, sire," retorted the musketeer, "that a captain like myself, who ranks with a marechal of France, should have found himself under the orders of five or six lieutenants or majors, good to make spies of, possibly, but not at all fit to conduct a warlike expedition. It was upon this subject I came to demand an explanation of your majesty, when I found the door closed against me, which, the final insult offered to a brave man, has led me to quit your majesty's service."

"Monsieur," replied the king, "you still believe that you are living in an age when kings were, as you complain of having been, under the orders and at the discretion of their inferiors. You seem to forget that a king owes an account of his actions to none but God."

"I forget nothing, sire," said the musketeer, wounded by this lesson. "Besides, I do not see in what an honest man, when he asks of his king how he has ill-served him, offends him."

"You have ill-served me, monsieur, by siding with my enemies against me."

"Who are your enemies, sire?"

"The men I sent you to fight."

"Two men the enemies of the whole of your majesty's army! That is incredible."

"You have no power to judge of my will."

"But I have to judge of my own friendships, sire."

"He who serves his friends does not serve his master."

"I so well understand this, sire, that I have respectfully offered your majesty my resignation."

"And I have accepted it, monsieur," said the king. "Before being separated from you I was willing to prove to you that I know how to keep my word."

"Your majesty has kept more than your word, for your majesty has had me arrested," said D'Artagnan, with his cold, bantering air; "you did not promise me that, sire."

The king would not condescend to perceive the pleasantry, and continued, seriously, "You see, monsieur, to what grave steps your disobedience forces me."

"My disobedience!" cried D'Artagnan, red with anger.

"It is the mildest term that I can find," pursued the king. "My idea was to take and punish rebels; was I bound to inquire whether these rebels were your friends or not?"

"But I was," replied D'Artagnan. "It was a cruelty on your majesty's part to send me to capture my friends and lead them to your gibbets."

"It was a trial I had to make, monsieur, of pretended servants, who eat my bread and *should* defend my person. The trial has succeeded ill, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"For one bad servant your majesty loses," said the musketeer, with bitterness, "there are ten who, on that same day, go through a like ordeal. Listen to me, sire; I am not accustomed to that service. Mine is a rebel sword when I am required to do ill. It was ill to send me in pursuit of two men whose lives M. Fouquet, your majesty's preserver, implored you to save. Still further, these men were my friends. They did not attack your majesty, they succumbed to your blind anger. Besides, why were they not allowed to escape? What crime had they committed? I admit you may contest with me the right of judging their conduct. But why suspect me before the action? Why surround me with spies? Why disgrace me before the army? Why me, in whom till now you showed the most entire confidence—who for thirty years have been attached to your person, and have given you a thousand proofs of my devotion—for it must be said, now that I am accused—why reduce me to see three thousand of the king's soldiers march in battle against two men?"

"One would say you have forgotten what these men have done to me!" said the king, in a hollow voice, "and that it was no merit of theirs I was not lost."

"Sire, one would imagine you forget that I was there."

"Enough, Monsieur d'Artagnan, enough of these dominating interests which arise to keep the sun itself from my interests. I am founding a state in which there shall be but one master, as I promised you; the moment is at hand for me to keep my promise. You wish to be, according to your tastes or private friendships, free to destroy my plans and save my enemies? I will thwart you or will drop you—seek a more compliant master. I know full well that another king would not conduct himself as I do, and would allow himself to be dominated by you, at the risk of sending you some day to keep company with M. Fouquet and the rest; but I have an excellent memory, and for me, services are sacred titles to gratitude, to impunity. You shall only have this lesson, Monsieur d'Artagnan, as the punishment of your want of discipline, and I will not imitate my predecessors in anger, not having imitated them in favour. And, then, other reasons make me act mildly towards you; in the first place, because you are a man of sense, a man of excellent sense, a man of heart, and that you will be a capital servant to him who shall have mastered you; secondly, because you will cease to have any motives for insubordination. Your friends are now destroyed or ruined by me. These supports on which your capricious mind instinctively relied I have caused to disappear. At this moment, my soldiers have taken or killed the rebels of Belle-Isle."

D'Artagnan became pale. "Taken or killed!" cried he. "Oh! sire, if you thought what you tell, if you were sure you were telling me the truth, I should forget all that is just, all that is magnanimous in your words, to call you a barbarous king, and an unnatural man. But I pardon you these words," said he, smiling with pride; "I pardon them to a young prince who does not know, who cannot comprehend what such men as M. d'Herblay, M. du Vallon, and myself are. Taken or killed! Ah! Ah! sire! tell me, if the news is true, how much has it cost you in men and money. We will then reckon if the game has been worth the stakes."

As he spoke thus, the king went up to him in great anger, and said, "Monsieur d'Artagnan, your replies are those of a rebel! Tell me, if you please, who is king of France? Do you know any other?"

"Sire," replied the captain of the musketeers, coldly, "I very well remember that one morning at Vaux you addressed that question to many people who did not answer to it, whilst I, on my part, did answer to it. If I recognized my king on that day, when the thing was not easy, I think it would be useless to ask the question of me now, when your majesty and I are alone."

At these words Louis cast down his eyes. It appeared to him that the shade of the unfortunate Philippe passed between D'Artagnan and himself, to evoke the remembrance of that terrible adventure. Almost at the same moment an officer entered and placed a dispatch in the hands of the king, who, in his turn, changed colour, while reading it.

"Monsieur," said he, "what I learn here you would know later; it is better I should tell you, and that you should learn it from the mouth of your king. A battle has taken place at Belle-Isle."

"Is it possible?" said D'Artagnan, with a calm air, though his heart was beating fast enough to choke him. "Well, sire?"

"Well, monsieur—and I have lost a hundred and ten men."

A beam of joy and pride shone in the eyes of D'Artagnan. "And the rebels?" said he.

"The rebels have fled," said the king.

D'Artagnan could not restrain a cry of triumph. "Only," added the king, "I have a fleet which closely blockades Belle-Isle, and I am certain not a bark can escape."

"So that," said the musketeer, brought back to his dismal idea, "if these two gentlemen are taken—"

"They will be hanged," said the king, quietly.

"And do they know it?" replied D'Artagnan, repressing his trembling.

"They know it, because you must have told them yourself; and all the country knows it."

"Then, sire, they will never be taken alive, I will answer for that."

"Ah!" said the king, negligently, and taking up his letter again. "Very well, they will be dead, then, Monsieur d'Artagnan, and that will come to the same thing, since I should only take them to have them hanged."

D'Artagnan wiped the sweat which flowed from his brow.

"I have told you," pursued Louis XIV., "that I would one day be an affectionate, generous, and constant master. You are now the only man of former times worthy of my anger or my friendship. I will not spare you either sentiment, according to your conduct. Could you serve a king, Monsieur d'Artagnan, who should have a hundred kings, his equals, in the kingdom? Could I, tell me, do with such weak instruments the great things I meditate? Did you ever see an artist effect great works with an unworthy tool? Far from us, monsieur, the old leaven of feudal abuse! The Fronde, which threatened to ruin monarchy, has emancipated it. I am master at home, Captain d'Artagnan, and I shall have servants who, lacking, perhaps, your genius, will carry devotion and obedience to the verge of heroism. Of what consequence, I ask you, of what consequence is it that God has given no sense to arms and legs? It is to the head he has given genius, and the head, you know, the rest obey. I am the head."

D'Artagnan started. Louis XIV. continued as if he had seen nothing, although this emotion had not by any means escaped him. "Now, let us conclude between us two the bargain I promised to make with you one day when you found me in a very strange predicament at Blois. Do me justice, monsieur, when you admit I do not make any one pay for the tears of shame that I then shed. Look around you; lofty heads have bowed. Bow yours, or choose such exile as will suit you. Perhaps, when reflecting upon it, you will find your king has a generous heart, who reckons sufficiently upon your loyalty to allow you to leave him dissatisfied, when you possess a great state secret. You are a brave man; I know you to be so. Why have you judged me prematurely? Judge me from this day forward, D'Artagnan, and be as severe as you please."

D'Artagnan remained bewildered, mute, undecided for the first time in his life. At last he had found an adversary worthy of him. This was no longer trick, it was calculation; no longer violence, but strength; no longer passion, but will; no longer boasting, but council. This young man who had brought down a Fouquet, and could do without a D'Artagnan, deranged the somewhat headstrong calculations of the musketeer.

"Come, let us see what stops you?" said the king, kindly. "You have given in your resignation; shall I refuse to accept it? I admit that it may be hard for such an old captain to recover lost good-humor."

"Oh!" replied D'Artagnan, in a melancholy tone, "that is not my most serious care. I hesitate to take back my resignation because I am old in comparison with you, and have habits difficult to abandon. Henceforward, you must have courtiers who know how to amuse you—madmen who will get themselves killed to carry out what you call your great works. Great they will be, I feel—but, if by chance I

should not think them so? I have seen war, sire, I have seen peace; I have served Richelieu and Mazarin; I have been scorched with your father, at the fire of Rochelle; riddled with sword-thrusts like a sieve, having grown a new skin ten times, as serpents do. After affronts and injustices, I have a command which was formerly something, because it gave the bearer the right of speaking as he liked to his king. But your captain of the musketeers will henceforward be an officer guarding the outer doors. Truly, sire, if that is to be my employment from this time, seize the opportunity of our being on good terms, to take it from me. Do not imagine that I bear malice; no, you have tamed me, as you say; but it must be confessed that in taming me you have lowered me; by bowing me you have convicted me of weakness. If you knew how well it suits me to carry my head high, and what a pitiful mien I shall have while scenting the dust of your carpets! Oh! sire, I regret sincerely, and you will regret as I do, the old days when the king of France saw in every vestibule those insolent gentlemen, lean, always swearing—cross-grained mastiffs, who could bite mortally in the hour of danger or of battle. These men were the best of courtiers to the hand which fed them—they would lick it; but for the hand that struck them, oh! the bite that followed! A little gold on the lace of their cloaks, a slender stomach in their *hauts-de-chausses*, a little sparkling of gray in their dry hair, and you will behold the handsome dukes and peers, the haughty *marechaux* of France. But why should I tell you all this? The king is master; he wills that I should make verses, he wills that I should polish the mosaics of his ante-chambers with satin shoes. *Mordieux!* that is difficult, but I have got over greater difficulties. I will do it. Why should I do it? Because I love money?—I have enough. Because I am ambitious?—my career is almost at an end. Because I love the court? No. I will remain here because I have been accustomed for thirty years to go and take the orderly word of the king, and to have said to me ‘Good evening, D’Artagnan,’ with a smile I did not beg for. That smile I will beg for! Are you content, sire?” And D’Artagnan bowed his silver head, upon which the smiling king placed his white hand with pride.

“Thanks, my old servant, my faithful friend,” said he. “As, reckoning from this day, I have no longer any enemies in France, it remains with me to send you to a foreign field to gather your marshal’s baton. Depend upon me for finding you an opportunity. In the meanwhile, eat of my very best bread, and sleep in absolute tranquillity.”

“That is all kind and well!” said D’Artagnan, much agitated. “But those poor men at Belle-Isle? One of them, in particular—so good! so brave! so true!”

“Do you ask their pardon of me?”

“Upon my knees, sire!”

“Well! then, go and take it to them, if it be still in time. But do you answer for them?”

“With my life, sire.”

“Go, then. To-morrow I set out for Paris. Return by that time, for I do not wish you to leave me in the future.”

“Be assured of that, sire,” said D’Artagnan, kissing the royal hand.

And with a heart swelling with joy, he rushed out of the castle on his way to Belle-Isle.

LIV. M. Fouquet’s Friends.

The king had returned to Paris, and with him D’Artagnan, who, in twenty-four hours, having made with greatest care all possible inquiries at Belle-Isle, succeeded in learning nothing of the secret so well kept by the heavy rock of Locmaria, which had fallen on the heroic Porthos. The captain of the musketeers only knew what those two valiant men—these two friends, whose defense he had so nobly taken up, whose lives he had so earnestly endeavored to save—aided by three faithful Bretons, had accomplished against a whole army. He had seen, spread on the neighboring heath, the human remains which had stained with clouted blood the scattered stones among the flowering broom. He learned also that a bark had been seen far out at sea, and that, like a bird of prey, a royal vessel had pursued, overtaken, and devoured the poor little bird that was flying with such palpitating wings. But there D’Artagnan’s certainties ended. The field of supposition was thrown open. Now, what could he conjecture? The vessel had not returned. It is true that a brisk wind had prevailed for three days; but the corvette was known to be a good sailer and solid in its timbers; it had no need to fear a gale of wind, and it ought, according to the calculation of D’Artagnan, to have either returned to Brest, or come back to the mouth of the Loire. Such was the news, ambiguous, it is true, but in some degree reassuring to him personally, which D’Artagnan brought to Louis XIV., when the king, followed by all the court, returned to Paris.

Louis, satisfied with his success—Louis, more mild and affable as he felt himself more powerful—had not ceased for an instant to ride beside the carriage door of Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Everybody was anxious to amuse the two queens, so as to make them forget this abandonment by son and husband. Everything breathed the future, the past was nothing to anybody. Only that past was like a painful bleeding wound to the hearts of certain tender and devoted spirits. Scarcely was the king reinstalled in Paris, when he received a touching proof of this. Louis XIV. had just risen and taken his first repast when his captain of the musketeers presented himself before him. D’Artagnan was pale and looked unhappy. The king, at the first glance, perceived the change in a countenance generally so unconcerned. “What is the matter, D’Artagnan?” said he.

“Sire, a great misfortune has happened to me.”

“Good heavens! what is that?”

“Sire, I have lost one of my friends, M. du Vallon, in the affair of Belle-Isle.”

And, while speaking these words, D’Artagnan fixed his falcon eye upon Louis XIV., to catch the first feeling that would show itself.

“I knew it,” replied the king, quietly.

“You knew it, and did not tell me!” cried the musketeer.

“To what good? Your grief, my friend, was so well worthy of respect. It was my duty to treat it gently. To have informed you of this misfortune, which I knew would pain you so greatly, D’Artagnan, would have been, in your eyes, to have triumphed over you. Yes, I knew that M. du Vallon had buried himself beneath the rocks of Locmaria; I knew that M. d’Herblay had taken one of my vessels with its crew, and had compelled it to convey him to Bayonne. But I was willing you should learn these matters in a direct manner, in order that you might be convinced my friends are with me respected and sacred; that always in me the man will sacrifice himself to subjects, whilst the king is so often found to sacrifice men to majesty and power.”

“But, sire, how could you know?”

“How do you yourself know, D’Artagnan?”

“By this letter, sire, which M. d’Herblay, free and out of danger, writes me from Bayonne.”

“Look here,” said the king, drawing from a casket placed upon the table closet to the seat upon which D’Artagnan was leaning, “here is a letter copied exactly from that of M. d’Herblay. Here is the very letter, which Colbert placed in my hands a week before you received yours. I am well served, you may perceive.”

“Yes, sire,” murmured the musketeer, “you were the only man whose star was equal to the task of dominating the fortune and strength of my two friends. You have used your power, sire, you will not abuse it, will you?”

“D’Artagnan,” said the king, with a smile beaming with kindness, “I could have M. d’Herblay carried off from the territories of the king of Spain, and brought here, alive, to inflict justice upon him. But, D’Artagnan, be assured I will not yield to this first and natural impulse. He is free—let him continue free.”

“Oh, sire! you will not always remain so clement, so noble, so generous as you have shown yourself with respect to me and M. d’Herblay; you will have about you counselors who will cure you of that weakness.”

“No, D’Artagnan, you are mistaken when you accuse my council of urging me to pursue rigorous measures. The advice to spare M. d’Herblay comes from Colbert himself.”

“Oh, sire!” said D’Artagnan, extremely surprised.

“As for you,” continued the king, with a kindness very uncommon to him, “I have several pieces of good news to announce to you; but you shall know them, my dear captain, the moment I have made my accounts all straight. I have said that I wish to make, and would make, your fortune; that promise will soon become reality.”

“A thousand times thanks, sire! I can wait. But I implore you, whilst I go and practice patience, that your majesty will deign to notice those poor people who have for so long a time besieged your ante-chamber, and come humbly to lay a petition at your feet.”

“Who are they?”

“Enemies of your majesty.” The king raised his head.

“Friends of M. Fouquet,” added D’Artagnan.

“Their names?”

“M. Gourville, M. Pelisson, and a poet, M. Jean de la Fontaine.”

The king took a moment to reflect. “What do they want?”

“I do not know.”

“How do they appear?”

“In great affliction.”

“What do they say?”

“Nothing.”

“What do they do?”

“They weep.”

“Let them come in,” said the king, with a serious brow.

D’Artagnan turned rapidly on his heel, raised the tapestry which closed the entrance to the royal chamber, and directing his voice to the adjoining room, cried, “Enter.”

The three men D’Artagnan had named immediately appeared at the door of the cabinet in which were the king and his captain. A profound silence prevailed in their passage. The courtiers, at the approach of the friends of the unfortunate superintendent of finances, drew back, as if fearful of being affected by contagion with disgrace and misfortune. D’Artagnan, with a quick step, came forward to take by the hand the unhappy men who stood trembling at the door of the cabinet; he led them in front of the king’s *fauteuil*, who, having placed himself in the embrasure of a window, awaited the moment of presentation, and was preparing himself to give the supplicants a rigorously diplomatic reception.

The first of the friends of Fouquet’s to advance was Pelisson. He did not weep, but his tears were only restrained that the king might better hear his voice and prayer. Gourville bit his lips to check his tears, out of respect for the king. La Fontaine buried his face in his handkerchief, and the only signs of life he gave were the convulsive motions of his shoulders, raised by his sobs.

The king preserved his dignity. His countenance was impassible. He even maintained the frown which appeared when D’Artagnan announced his enemies. He made a gesture which signified, “Speak,” and he remained standing, with his eyes fixed searchingly on these desponding men. Pelisson bowed to the ground, and La Fontaine knelt as people do in churches. This dismal silence, disturbed only by sighs and groans, began to excite in the king, not compassion, but impatience.

“Monsieur Pelisson,” said he, in a sharp, dry tone. “Monsieur Gourville, and you, Monsieur—” and he did not name La Fontaine, “I cannot, without sensible displeasure, see you come to plead for one of the greatest criminals it is the duty of justice to punish. A king does not allow himself to soften save at the tears of the innocent, the remorse of the guilty. I have no faith either in the remorse of M. Fouquet or the tears of his friends, because the one is tainted to the very heart, and the others ought to dread offending me in my own palace. For these reasons, I beg you, Monsieur Pelisson, Monsieur Gourville, and you, Monsieur—, to say nothing that will not plainly proclaim the respect you have for my will.”

“Sire,” replied Pelisson, trembling at these words, “we are come to say nothing to your majesty that is not the most profound expression of the most sincere respect and love that are due to a king from all his subjects. Your majesty’s justice is redoubtable; every one must yield to the sentences it pronounces. We respectfully bow before it. Far from us the idea of coming to defend him who has had the misfortune to offend your majesty. He who has incurred your displeasure may be a friend of ours, but he is an enemy to the state. We abandon him, but with tears, to the severity of the king.”

“Besides,” interrupted the king, calmed by that supplicating voice, and those persuasive words, “my parliament will decide. I do not strike without first having weighed the crime; my justice does not wield the sword without employing first a pair of scales.”

“Therefore we have every confidence in that impartiality of the king, and hope to make our feeble voices heard, with the consent of your majesty, when the hour for defending an accused friend strikes.”

“In that case, messieurs, what do you ask of me?” said the king, with his most imposing air.

“Sire,” continued Pelisson, “the accused has a wife and family. The little property he had was scarcely sufficient to pay his debts, and Madame Fouquet, since her husband’s captivity, is abandoned by everybody. The hand of your majesty strikes like the hand of God. When the Lord sends the curse of leprosy or pestilence into a family, every one flies and shuns the abode of the leprous or plague-stricken. Sometimes, but very rarely, a generous physician alone ventures to approach the ill-reputed threshold, passes it with courage, and risks his life to combat death. He is the last resource of the dying, the chosen instrument of heavenly mercy. Sire, we supplicate you, with clasped hands and bended knees, as a divinity is supplicated! Madame Fouquet has no longer any friends, no longer any means of support; she weeps in her deserted home, abandoned by all those who besieged its doors in the hour of prosperity; she has neither credit nor hope left. At least, the unhappy wretch upon



whom your anger falls receives from you, however culpable he may be, his daily bread though moistened by his tears. As much afflicted, more destitute than her husband, Madame Fouquet—the lady who had the honour to receive your majesty at her table—Madame Fouquet, the wife of the ancient superintendent of your majesty’s finances, Madame Fouquet has no longer bread.” Here the mortal silence which had chained the breath of Pelisson’s two friends was broken by an outburst of sobs; and D’Artagnan, whose chest heaved at hearing this humble prayer, turned round towards the angle of the cabinet to bite his mustache and conceal a groan.

The king had preserved his eye dry and his countenance severe; but the blood had mounted to his cheeks, and the firmness of his look was visibly diminished.

“What do you wish?” said he, in an agitated voice.

“We come humbly to ask your majesty,” replied Pelisson, upon whom emotion was fast gaining, “to permit us, without incurring the displeasure of your majesty, to lend to Madame Fouquet two thousand pistoles collected among the old friends of her husband, in order that the widow may not stand in need of the necessities of life.”

At the word *widow*, pronounced by Pelisson whilst Fouquet was still alive, the king turned very pale;—his pride disappeared; pity rose from his heart to his lips; he cast a softened look upon the men who knelt sobbing at his feet.

“God forbid,” said he, “that I should confound the innocent with the guilty. They know me but ill who doubt my mercy towards the weak. I strike none but the arrogant. Do, messieurs, do all that your hearts counsel you to assuage the grief of Madame Fouquet. Go, messieurs—go!”

The three now rose in silence with dry eyes. The tears had been scorched away by contact with their burning cheeks and eyelids. They had not the strength to address their thanks to the king, who himself cut short their solemn reverences by entrenching himself suddenly behind the *fauteuil*.

D’Artagnan remained alone with the king.

“Well,” said he, approaching the young prince, who interrogated him with his look. “Well, my master! If you had not the device which belongs to your sun, I would recommend you one which M. Conrart might translate into eclectic Latin, ‘Calm with the lowly; stormy with the strong.’”

The king smiled, and passed into the next apartment, after having said to D’Artagnan, “I give you the leave of absence you must want to put the affairs of your friend, the late M. du Vallon, in order.”

LV. Porthos's Will.

At Pierrefonds everything was in mourning. The courts were deserted—the stables closed—the parterres neglected. In the basins, the fountains, formerly so jubilantly fresh and noisy, had stopped of themselves. Along the roads around the chateau came a few grave personages mounted on mules or country nags. These were rural neighbors, cures and bailiffs of adjacent estates. All these people entered the chateau silently, handed their horses to a melancholy-looking groom, and directed their steps, conducted by a huntsman in black, to the great dining-room, where Mousqueton received them at the door. Mousqueton had become so thin in two days that his clothes moved upon him like an ill-fitting scabbard in which the sword-blade dances at each motion. His face, composed of red and white, like that of the Madonna of Vandyke, was furrowed by two silver rivelets which had dug their beds in his cheeks, as full formerly as they had become flabby since his grief began. At each fresh arrival, Mousqueton found fresh tears, and it was pitiful to see him press his throat with his fat hand to keep from bursting into sobs and lamentations. All these visits were for the purpose of hearing the reading of Porthos’s will, announced for that day, and at which all the covetous friends of the dead man were anxious to be present, as he had left no relations behind him.

The visitors took their places as they arrived, and the great room had just been closed when the clock struck twelve, the hour fixed for the reading of the important document. Porthos’s procureur—and that was naturally the successor of Master Coquenard—commenced by slowly unfolding the vast parchment upon which the powerful hand of Porthos had traced his sovereign will. The seal broken—the spectacles put on—the preliminary cough having sounded—every one pricked up his ears. Mousqueton had squatted himself in a corner, the better to weep and the better to hear. All at once the folding-doors of the great room, which had been shut, were thrown open as if by magic, and a warlike figure appeared upon the threshold, resplendent in the full light of the sun. This was D’Artagnan, who had come alone to the gate, and finding nobody to hold his stirrup, had tied his horse to the knocker and announced himself. The splendor of daylight invading the room, the murmur of all present, and, more than all, the instinct of the faithful dog, drew Mousqueton from his reverie; he raised his head, recognized the old friend of his master, and, screaming with grief, he embraced his knees, watering the floor with his tears. D’Artagnan raised the poor intendant, embraced him as if he had been a brother, and, having nobly saluted the assembly, who all bowed as they whispered to each other his name, he went and took his seat at the extremity of the great carved oak hall, still holding by the hand poor Mousqueton, who was suffocating with excess of woe, and sank upon the steps. Then the procureur, who, like the rest, was considerably agitated, commenced.

Porthos, after a profession of faith of the most Christian character, asked pardon of his enemies for all the injuries he might have done them. At this paragraph, a ray of inexpressible pride beamed from the eyes of D’Artagnan.

He recalled to his mind the old soldier; all those enemies of Porthos brought to earth by his valiant hand; he reckoned up the numbers of them, and said to himself that Porthos had acted wisely, not to enumerate his enemies or the injuries done to them, or the task would have been too much for the reader. Then came the following schedule of his extensive lands:

- “I possess at this present time, by the grace of God—
- “1. The domain of Pierrefonds, lands, woods, meadows, waters, and forests, surrounded by good walls.
  - “2. The domain of Bracieux, chateaux, forests, plowed lands, forming three farms.
  - “3. The little estate Du Vallon, so named because it is in the valley.” (Brave Porthos!)
  - “4. Fifty farms in Touraine, amounting to five hundred acres.
  - “5. Three mills upon the Cher, bringing in six hundred livres each.
  - “6. Three fish-pools in Berry, producing two hundred livres a year.

“As to my personal or movable property, so called because it can be moved, as is so well explained by my learned friend the bishop of Vannes—” (D’Artagnan shuddered at the dismal remembrance attached to that name)—the procureur continued imperturbably—“they consist—”

- “1. In goods which I cannot detail here for want of room, and which furnish all my chateaux or houses, but of which the list is drawn up by my intendant.” Every one turned his eyes towards Mousqueton, who was still lost in grief.
- “2. In twenty horses for saddle and draught, which I have particularly at my chateau of Pierrefonds, and which are called—Bayard, Roland, Charlemagne, Pepin, Dunois, La Hire, Ogier, Samson, Milo, Nimrod, Urganda, Armida, Flastrade, Dalillah, Rebecca, Yolande, Finette, Grisette, Lisette, and Musette.
- “3. In sixty dogs, forming six packs, divided as follows: the first, for the stag; the second, for the wolf; the third, for the wild boar; the fourth, for the hare; and the two others, for setters and protection.
- “4. In arms for war and the chase contained in my gallery of arms.
- “5. My wines of Anjou, selected for Athos, who liked them formerly; my wines of Burgundy, Champagne, Bordeaux, and Spain, stocking eight cellars and twelve vaults, in my various houses.
- “6. My pictures and statues, which are said to be of great value, and which are sufficiently numerous to fatigue the sight.
- “7. My library, consisting of six thousand volumes, quite new, and have never been opened.
- “8. My silver plate, which is perhaps a little worn, but which ought to weigh from a thousand to twelve hundred pounds, for I had great trouble in lifting the coffer that contained it and could not carry it more than six times round my chamber.

- “9. All these objects, in addition to the table and house linen, are divided in the residences I liked the best.”

Here the reader stopped to take breath. Every one sighed, coughed, and redoubled his attention. The procureur resumed:

“I have lived without having any children, and it is probable I never shall have any, which to me is a cutting grief. And yet I am mistaken, for I have a son, in common with my other friends; that is, M. Raoul Auguste Jules de Bragelonne, the true son of M. le Comte de la Fere.

“This young nobleman appears to me extremely worthy to succeed the valiant gentleman of whom I am the friend and very humble servant.”

Here a sharp sound interrupted the reader. It was D’Artagnan’s sword, which, slipping from his baldric, had fallen on the sonorous flooring. Every one turned his eyes that way, and saw that a large tear had rolled from the thick lid of D’Artagnan, half-way down to his aquiline nose, the luminous edge of which shone like a little crescent moon.

“This is why,” continued the procureur, “I have left all my property, movable, or immovable, comprised in the above enumerations, to M. le Vicomte Raoul Auguste Jules de Bragelonne, son of M. le Comte de la Fere, to console him for the grief he seems to suffer, and enable him to add more luster to his already glorious name.”

A vague murmur ran through the auditory. The procureur continued, seconded by the flashing eye of D’Artagnan, which, glancing over the assembly, quickly restored the interrupted silence:

“On condition that M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne do give to M. le Chevalier d’Artagnan, captain of the king’s musketeers, whatever the said Chevalier d’Artagnan may demand of my property. On condition that M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne do pay a good pension to M. le Chevalier d’Herblay, my friend, if he should need it in exile. I leave to my intendant Mousqueton all of my clothes, of city, war, or chase, to the number of forty-seven suits, in the assurance that he will wear them till they are worn out, for the love of and in remembrance of his master. Moreover, I bequeath to M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne my old servant and faithful friend Mousqueton, already named, providing that the said vicomte shall so act that Mousqueton shall declare, when dying, he has never ceased to be happy.”

On hearing these words, Mousqueton bowed, pale and trembling; his shoulders shook convulsively; his countenance, compressed by a frightful grief, appeared from between his icy hands, and the spectators saw him stagger and hesitate, as if, though wishing to leave the hall, he did not know the way.

“Mousqueton, my good friend,” said D’Artagnan, “go and make your preparations. I will take you with me to Athos’s house, whither I shall go on leaving Pierrefonds.”

Mousqueton made no reply. He scarcely breathed, as if everything in that hall would from that time be foreign. He opened the door, and slowly disappeared.

The procureur finished his reading, after which the greater part of those who had come to hear the last will of Porthos dispersed by degrees, many disappointed, but all penetrated with respect. As for D’Artagnan, thus left alone, after having received the formal compliments of the procureur, he was lost in admiration of the wisdom of the testator, who had so judiciously bestowed his wealth upon the most necessitous and the most worthy, with a delicacy that neither nobleman nor courtier could have displayed more kindly. When Porthos enjoined Raoul de Bragelonne to give D’Artagnan all that he would ask, he knew well, our worthy Porthos, that D’Artagnan would ask or take nothing; and in case he did demand anything, none but himself could say what. Porthos left a pension to Aramis, who, if he should be inclined to ask too much, was checked by the example of D’Artagnan; and that word *exile*, thrown out by the testator, without apparent intention, was it not the mildest, most exquisite criticism upon that conduct of Aramis which had brought about the death of Porthos? But there was no mention of Athos in the testament of the dead. Could the latter for a moment suppose that the son would not offer the best part to the father? The rough mind of Porthos had fathomed all these causes, seized all these shades more clearly than law, better than custom, with more propriety than taste.

“Porthos had indeed a heart,” said D’Artagnan to himself with a sigh. As he made this reflection, he fancied he hard a groan in the room above him; and he thought immediately of poor Mousqueton, whom he felt it was a pleasing duty to divert from his grief. For this purpose he left the hall hastily to seek the worthy intendant, as he had not returned. He ascended the staircase leading to the first story, and perceived, in Porthos’s own chamber, a heap of clothes of all colours and materials, upon which Mousqueton had laid himself down after heaping them all on the floor together. It was the legacy of the faithful friend. Those clothes were truly his own; they had been given to him; the hand of Mousqueton was stretched over these relics, which he was kissing with his lips, with all his face, and covered with his body. D’Artagnan approached to console the poor fellow.

“My God!” said he, “he does not stir—he has fainted!”

But D’Artagnan was mistaken. Mousqueton was dead! Dead, like the dog who, having lost his master, crawls back to die upon his cloak.

LVI. The Old Age of Athos.

While these affairs were separating forever the four musketeers, formerly bound together in a manner that seemed indissoluble, Athos, left alone after the departure of Raoul, began to pay his tribute to that foretaste of death which is called the absence of those we love. Back in his house at Blois, no longer having even Grimaud to receive a poor smile as he passed through the parterre, Athos daily felt the decline of vigor of a nature which for so long a time had seemed impregnable. Age, which had been kept back by the presence of the beloved object, arrived with that *cortège* of pains and inconveniences, which grows by geometrical accretion. Athos had no longer his son to induce him to walk firmly, with head erect, as a good example; he had no longer, in those brilliant eyes of the young man, an ever-ardent focus at which to kindle anew the fire of his looks. And then, must it be said, that nature, exquisite in tenderness and reserve, no longer finding anything to understand its feelings, gave itself up to grief with all the warmth of common natures when they yield to joy. The Comte de la Fere, who had remained a young man to his sixty-second year; the warrior who had preserved his strength in spite of fatigue; his freshness of mind in spite of misfortune, his mild serenity of soul and body in spite of Milady, in spite of Mazarin, in spite of La Vallière; Athos had become an old man in a week, from the moment at which he lost the comfort of his later youth. Still handsome, though bent, noble, but sad, he sought, since his solitude, the deeper glades where sunshine scarcely penetrated. He discontinued all the mighty exercises he had enjoyed through life, when Raoul was no longer with him. The servants, accustomed to see him stirring with the dawn at all seasons, were astonished to hear seven o’clock strike before their master quitted his bed. Athos remained in bed with a book under his pillow—but he did not sleep, neither did he read. Remaining in bed that he might no longer have to carry his body, he allowed his soul and spirit to wander from their envelope and return to his son, or to God. 6



His people were sometimes terrified to see him, for hours together, absorbed in silent reverie, mute and insensible; he no longer heard the timid step of the servant who came to the door of his chamber to watch the sleeping or waking of his master. It often occurred that he forgot the day had half passed away, that the hours for the two first meals were gone by. Then he was awakened. He rose, descended to his shady walk, then came out a little into the sun, as though to partake of its warmth for a minute in memory of his absent child. And then the dismal monotonous walk recommenced, until, exhausted, he regained the chamber and his bed, his domicile by choice. For several days the comte did not speak a single word. He refused to receive the visits that were paid him, and during the night he was seen to relight his lamp and pass long hours in writing, or examining parchments.

Athos wrote one of these letters to Vannes, another to Fontainebleau; they remained without answers. We know why: Aramis had quitted France, and D'Artagnan was traveling from Nantes to Paris, from Paris to Pierrefonds. His *valet de chambre* observed that he shortened his walk every day by several turns. The great alley of limes soon became too long for feet that used to traverse it formerly a hundred times a day. The comte walked feebly as far as the middle trees, seated himself upon a mossy bank that sloped towards a sidewalk, and there waited the return of his strength, or rather the return of night. Very shortly a hundred steps exhausted him. At length Athos refused to rise at all; he declined all nourishment, and his terrified people, although he did not complain, although he wore a smile upon his lips, although he continued to speak with his sweet voice—his people went to Blois in search of the ancient physician of the late Monsieur, and brought him to the Comte de la Fere in such a fashion that he could see the comte without being himself seen. For this purpose, they placed him in a closet adjoining the chamber of the patient, and implored him not to show himself, for fear of displeasing their master, who had not asked for a physician. The doctor obeyed. Athos was a sort of model for the gentlemen of the country; the Blaisois boasted of possessing this sacred relic of French glory. Athos was a great seigneur compared with such nobles as the king improvised by touching with his artificial scepter the patched-up trunks of the heraldic trees of the province.

People respected Athos, we say, and they loved him. The physician could not bear to see his people weep, to see flock round him the poor of the canton, to whom Athos had so often given life and consolation by his kind words and his charities. He examined, therefore, from the depths of his hiding-place, the nature of that mysterious malady which bent and aged more mortally every day a man but lately so full of life and a desire to live. He remarked upon the cheeks of Athos the hectic hue of fever, which feeds upon itself; slow fever, pitiless, born in a fold of the heart, sheltering itself behind that rampart, growing from the suffering it engenders, at once cause and effect of a perilous situation. The comte spoke to nobody; he did not even talk to himself. His thought feared noise; it approached to that degree of over-excitement which borders upon ecstasy. Man thus absorbed, though he does not yet belong to God, already appertains no longer to the earth. The doctor remained for several hours studying this painful struggle of the will against superior power; he was terrified at seeing those eyes always fixed, ever directed on some invisible object; was terrified at the monotonous beating of that heart from which never a sigh arose to vary the melancholy state; for often pain becomes the hope of the physician. Half a day passed away thus. The doctor formed his resolution like a brave man; he issued suddenly from his place of retreat, and went straight up to Athos, who beheld him without evincing more surprise than if he had understood nothing of the apparition.

"Monsieur le comte, I crave your pardon," said the doctor, coming up to the patient with open arms; "but I have a reproach to make you—you shall hear me." And he seated himself by the pillow of Athos, who had great trouble in rousing himself from his preoccupation.

"What is the matter, doctor?" asked the comte, after a silence.

"The matter is, you are ill, monsieur, and have had no advice."

"! ill!" said Athos, smiling.

"Fever, consumption, weakness, decay, monsieur le comte!"

"Weakness!" replied Athos; "is it possible? I do not get up."

"Come, come! monsieur le comte, no subterfuges; you are a good Christian?"

"I hope so," said Athos.

"Is it your wish to kill yourself?"

"Never, doctor."

"Well! monsieur, you are in a fair way of doing so. Thus to remain is suicide. Get well! monsieur le comte, get well!"

"Of what? Find the disease first. For my part, I never knew myself better; never did the sky appear more blue to me; never did I take more care of my flowers."

"You have a hidden grief."

"Concealed!—not at all; the absence of my son, doctor; that is my malady, and I do not conceal it."

"Monsieur le comte, your son lives, he is strong, he has all the future before him—the future of men of merit, of his race; live for him—"

"But I do live, doctor; oh! be satisfied of that," added he, with a melancholy smile; "for as long as Raoul lives, it will be plainly known, for as long as he lives, I shall live."

"What do you say?"

"A very simple thing. At this moment, doctor, I leave life suspended within me. A forgetful, dissipated, indifferent life would be beyond my strength, now I have no longer Raoul with me. You do not ask the lamp to burn when the match has not illumed the flame; do not ask me to live amidst noise and merriment. I vegetate, I prepare myself, I wait. Look, doctor; remember those soldiers we have so often seen together at the ports, where they were waiting to embark; lying down, indifferent, half on one element, half on the other; they were neither at the place where the sea was going to carry them, nor at the place the earth was going to lose them; baggage prepared, minds on the stretch, arms stacked—they waited. I repeat it, the word is the one which paints my present life. Lying down like the soldiers, my ear on the stretch for the report that may reach me, I wish to be ready to set out at the first summons. Who will make me that summons? life or death? God or Raoul? My baggage is packed, my soul is prepared, I await the signal—I wait, doctor, I wait!"

The doctor knew the temper of that mind; he appreciated the strength of that body; he reflected for the moment, told himself that words were useless, remedies absurd, and left the chateau, exhorting Athos's servants not to quit him for a moment.

The doctor being gone, Athos evinced neither anger nor vexation at having been disturbed. He did not even desire that all letters that came should be brought to him directly. He knew very well that every distraction which should arise would be a joy, a hope, which his servants would have paid with their blood to procure him. Sleep had become rare. By intense thinking, Athos forgot himself, for a few hours at most, in a reverie most profound, more obscure than other people would have called a dream. The momentary repose which this forgetfulness thus gave the body, still further fatigued the soul, for Athos lived a double life during these wanderings of his understanding. One night, he dreamt that Raoul was dressing himself in a tent, to go upon an expedition commanded by M. de Beaufort in person. The young man was sad; he clasped his cuirass slowly, and slowly he girded on his sword.

"What is the matter?" asked his father, tenderly.

"What afflicts me is the death of Porthos, ever so dear a friend," replied Raoul. "I suffer here the grief you soon will feel at home."

And the vision disappeared with the slumber of Athos. At daybreak one of his servants entered his master's apartment, and gave him a letter which came from Spain.

"The writing of Aramis," thought the comte; and he read.

"Porthos is dead!" cried he, after the first lines. "Oh! Raoul, Raoul! thanks! thou keepest thy promise, thou warest me!"

And Athos, seized with a mortal sweat, fainted in his bed, without any other cause than weakness.

#### LVII. Athos's Vision.

When this fainting of Athos had ceased, the comte, almost ashamed of having given way before this superior natural event, dressed himself and ordered his horse, determined to ride to Blois, to open more certain correspondences with either Africa, D'Artagnan, or Aramis. In fact, this letter from Aramis informed the Comte de la Fere of the bad success of the expedition of Belle-Isle. It gave him sufficient details of the death of Porthos to move the tender and devoted heart of Athos to its innermost fibers. Athos wished to go and pay his friend Porthos a last visit. To render this honour to his companion in arms, he meant to send to D'Artagnan, to prevail upon him to recommence the painful voyage to Belle-Isle, to accomplish in his company that sad pilgrimage to the tomb of the giant he had so much loved, then to return to his dwelling to obey that secret influence which was conducting him to eternity by a mysterious road. But scarcely had his joyous servants dressed their master, whom they saw with pleasure preparing for a journey which might dissipate his melancholy; scarcely had the comte's gentlest horse been saddled and brought to the door, when the father of Raoul felt his head become confused, his legs give way, and he clearly perceived the impossibility of going one step further. He ordered himself to be carried into the sun; they laid him upon his bed of moss where he passed a full hour before he could recover his spirits. Nothing could be more natural than this weakness after then inert repose of the latter days. Athos took a *bouillon*, to give him strength, and bathed his dried lips in a glassful of the wine he loved the best—that old Anjou wine mentioned by Porthos in his admirable will. Then, refreshed, free in mind, he had his horse brought again; but only with the aid of his servants was he able painfully to climb into the saddle. He did not go a hundred paces; a shivering seized him again at the turning of the road.

"This is very strange!" said he to his *valet de chambre*, who accompanied him.

"Let us stop, monsieur—I conjure you!" replied the faithful servant; "how pale you are getting!"

"That will not prevent my pursuing my route, now I have once started," replied the comte. And he gave his horse his head again. But suddenly, the animal, instead of obeying the thought of his master, stopped. A movement, of which Athos was unconscious, had checked the bit.

"Something," said Athos, "wills that I should go no further. Support me," added he, stretching out his arms; "quick! come closer! I feel my muscles relax—I shall fall from my horse."

The valet had seen the movement made by his master at the moment he received the order. He went up to him quickly, received the comte in his arms, and as they were not yet sufficiently distant from the house for the servants, who had remained at the door to watch their master's departure, not to perceive the disorder in the usually regular proceeding of the comte, the valet called his comrades by gestures and voice, and all hastened to his assistance. Athos had gone but a few steps on his return, when he felt himself better again. His strength seemed to revive and with it the desire to go to Blois. He made his horse turn round: but, at the animal's first steps, he sunk again into a state of torpor and anguish.

"Well! decidedly," said he, "it is *willed* that I should stay at home." His people flocked around him; they lifted him from his horse, and carried him as quickly as possible into the house. Everything was prepared in his chamber, and they put him to bed.

"You will be sure to remember," said he, disposing himself to sleep, "that I expect letters from Africa this very day."

"Monsieur will no doubt hear with pleasure that Blaisois's son is gone on horseback, to gain an hour over the courier of Blois," replied his *valet de chambre*.

"Thank you," replied Athos, with his placid smile.

The comte fell asleep, but his disturbed slumber resembled torture rather than repose. The servant who watched him saw several times the expression of internal suffering shadowed on his features. Perhaps Athos was dreaming.

The day passed away. Blaisois's son returned; the courier had brought no news. The comte reckoned the minutes with despair; he shuddered when those minutes made an hour. The idea that he was forgotten seized him once, and brought on a fearful pang of the heart. Everybody in the house had given up all hopes of the courier—his hour had long passed. Four times the express sent to Blois had repeated his journey, and there was nothing to the address of the comte. Athos knew that the courier only arrived once a week. Here, then, was a delay of eight mortal days to be endured. He commenced the night in this painful persuasion. All that a sick man, irritated by suffering, can add of melancholy suppositions to probabilities already gloomy, Athos heaped up during the early hours of this dismal night. The fever rose: it invaded the chest, where the fire soon caught, according to the expression of the physician, who had been brought back from Blois by Blaisois at his last journey. Soon it gained the head. The physician made two successive bleedings, which dislodged it for the time, but left the patient very weak, and without power of action in anything but his brain. And yet this redoubtable fever had ceased. It besieged with its last palpitations the tense extremities; it ended by yielding as midnight struck.

The physician, seeing the incontestable improvement, returned to Blois, after having ordered some prescriptions, and declared that the comte was saved. Then commenced for Athos a strange, indefinable state. Free to think, his mind turned towards Raoul, that beloved son. His imagination penetrated the fields of Africa in the environs of Gigelli, where M. de Beaufort must have landed with his army. A waste of gray rocks, rendered green in certain parts by the waters of the sea, when it lashed the shore in storms and tempest. Beyond, the shore, strewn over with these rocks like gravestones, ascended, in form of an amphitheater among mastic-trees and cactus, a sort of small town, full of smoke, confused noises, and terrified movements. All of a sudden, from the bosom of this smoke arose a flame, which succeeded, creeping along the houses, in covering the entire surface of the town, and increased by degrees, uniting in its red and angry vortices tears, screams, and supplicating arms outstretched to Heaven.

There was, for a moment, a frightful *pele-mele* of timbers falling to pieces, of swords broken, of stones calcined, trees burnt and disappearing. It was a strange thing that in this chaos, in which Athos distinguished raised arms, in which he heard cries, sobs, and groans, he did not see one human figure. The cannon thundered at a distance, musketry madly barked, the sea moaned, flocks made their escape, bounding over the verdant slope. But not a soldier to apply the match to the batteries of cannon, not a sailor to assist in maneuvering the fleet, not a shepherd in charge of the flocks. After the ruin of the village, the destruction of the forts which dominated it, a ruin and destruction magically wrought without the co-operation of a single human being, the flames were extinguished, the smoke began to subside, then diminished in intensity, paled and disappeared entirely. Night then came over the scene; night dark upon the earth, brilliant in the firmament. The large blazing stars which spangled the African sky glittered and gleamed without illuminating anything.

A long silence ensued, which gave, for a moment, repose to the troubled imagination of Athos; and as he felt that that which he saw was not terminated, he applied more attentively the eyes of his understanding on the strange spectacle which his imagination had presented. This spectacle was soon continued for him. A mild pale moon rose behind the declivities of the coast, streaking at first the undulating ripples of the sea, which appeared to have calmed after the roaring it had sent forth during the vision of Athos—the moon, we say, shed its diamonds and opals upon the briers and bushes of the hills. The gray rocks, so many silent and attentive phantoms, appeared to raise their heads to examine likewise the field of battle by the light of the moon, and Athos perceived that the field, empty during the combat, was now strewn with fallen bodies.

An inexpressible shudder of fear and horror seized his soul as he recognized the white and blue uniforms of the soldiers of Picardy, with their long pikes and blue handles, and muskets marked with the *fleur-de-lis* on the butts. When he saw all the gaping wounds, looking up to the bright heavens as if to demand back of them the souls to which they had opened a passage,—when he saw the slaughtered horses, stiff, their tongues hanging out at one side of their mouths, sleeping in the shiny blood congealed around them, staining their furniture and their manes,—when he saw the white horse of M. de Beaufort, with his head beaten to pieces, in the first ranks of the dead, Athos passed a cold hand over his brow, which he was astonished not to find burning. He was convinced by this touch that he was present, as a spectator, without delirium's dreadful aid, the day after the battle fought upon the shores of Gigelli by the army of the expedition, which he had seen leave the coast of France and disappear upon the dim horizon, and of which he had saluted with thought and gesture the last cannon-shot fired by the duke as a signal of farewell to his country.

Who can paint the mortal agony with which his soul followed, like a vigilant eye, these effigies of clay-cold soldiers, and examined them, one after the other, to see if Raoul slept among them? Who can express the intoxication of joy with which Athos bowed before God, and thanked Him for not having seen him he sought with so much fear among the dead? In fact, fallen in their ranks, stiff, icy, the dead, still recognizable with ease, seemed to turn with complacency towards the Comte de la Fere, to be the better seen by him, during his sad review. But yet, he was astonished, while viewing all these bodies, not to perceive the survivors. To such a point did the illusion extend, that this vision was for him a real voyage made by the father into Africa, to obtain more exact information respecting his son.

Fatigued, therefore, with having traversed seas and continents, he sought repose under one of the tents sheltered behind a rock, on the top of which floated the white *fleur-de-lised* pennon. He looked for a soldier to conduct him to the tent of M. de Beaufort. Then, while his eye was wandering over the plain, turning on all sides, he saw a white form appear behind the scented myrtles. This figure was clothed in the costume of an officer; it held in its hand a broken sword; it advanced slowly towards Athos, who, stopping short and fixing his eyes upon it, neither spoke nor moved, but wished to open his arms, because in this silent officer he had already recognized Raoul. The comte attempted to utter a cry, but it was stifled in his throat. Raoul, with a gesture, directed him to be silent, placing his finger on his lips and drawing back by degrees, without Athos being able to see his legs move. The comte, still paler than Raoul, followed his son, painfully traversing briers and bushes, stones and ditches, Raoul not appearing to touch the earth, no obstacle seeming to impede the lightness of his march. The comte, whom the inequalities of the path fatigued, soon stopped, exhausted. Raoul still continued to beckon him to follow him. The tender father, to whom love restored strength, made a last effort, and climbed the mountain after the young man, who attracted him by gesture and by smile. At length he gained the crest of the hill, and saw, thrown out in black, upon the horizon whitened by the moon, the aerial form of Raoul. Athos reached forth his hand to get closer to his beloved son upon the plateau, and the latter also stretched out his; but suddenly, as if the young man had been drawn away in his own despite, still retreating, he left the earth, and Athos saw the clear blue sky shine between the feet of his child and the ground of the hill. Raoul rose insensibly into the void, smiling, still calling with gesture,—he departed towards heaven. Athos uttered a cry of tenderness and terror. He looked below again. He saw a camp destroyed, and all those white bodies of the royal army, like so many motionless atoms. And, then, raising his head, he saw the figure of his son still beckoning him to climb the mystic void.

#### LVIII. The Angel of Death.

Athos was at this part of his marvelous vision, when the charm was suddenly broken by a great noise rising from the outer gates. A horse was heard galloping over the hard gravel of the great alley, and the sound of noisy and animated conversations ascended to the chamber in which the comte was dreaming. Athos did not stir from the place he occupied; he scarcely turned his head towards the door to ascertain the sooner what these noises could be. A heavy step ascended the stairs; the horse, which had recently galloped, departed slowly towards the stables. Great hesitation appeared in the steps, which by degrees approached the chamber. A door was opened, and Athos, turning a little towards the part of the room the noise came from, cried, in a weak voice:

"It is a courier from Africa, is it not?"

"No, monsieur le comte," replied a voice which made the father of Raoul start upright in his bed.

"Grimaud!" murmured he. And the sweat began to pour down his face. Grimaud appeared in the doorway. It was no longer the Grimaud we have seen, still young with courage and devotion, when he jumped the first into the boat destined to convey Raoul de Bragelonne to the vessels of the royal fleet. 'Twas now a stern and pale old man, his clothes covered with dust, and hair whitened by old age. He trembled whilst leaning against the door-frame, and was near falling on seeing, by the light of the lamps, the countenance of his master. These two men who had lived so long together in a community of intelligence, and whose eyes, accustomed to economize expressions, knew how to say so many things silently—these two old friends, one as noble as the other in heart, if they were unequal in fortune and birth, remained tongue-tied whilst looking at each other. By the exchange of a single glance they had just read to the bottom of each other's hearts. The old servitor bore upon his countenance the impression of a grief already old, the outward token of a grim familiarity with woe. He appeared to have no longer in use more than a single version of his thoughts. As formerly he was accustomed not to speak much, he was now accustomed not to smile at all. Athos read at a glance all these shades upon the visage of his faithful servant, and in the same tone he would have employed to speak to Raoul in his dream:

"Grimaud," said he, "Raoul is dead. *Is it not so?*"

Behind Grimaud the other servants listened breathlessly, with their eyes fixed upon the bed of their sick master. They heard the terrible question, and a heart-breaking silence followed.

"Yes," replied the old man, heaving the monosyllable from his chest with a hoarse, broken sigh.

Then arose voices of lamentation, which groaned without measure, and filled with regrets and prayers the chamber where the agonized father sought with his eyes the portrait of his son. This was for Athos like the transition which led to his dream. Without uttering a cry, without shedding a tear, patient, mild, resigned as a martyr, he raised his eyes towards Heaven, in order there to see again, rising above the mountain of Gigelli, the beloved shade that was leaving him at the moment of Grimaud's arrival. Without doubt, while looking towards the heavens, resuming his marvelous dream, he repassed by the same road by which the vision, at once so terrible and sweet, had led him before; for after having gently closed his eyes, he reopened them and began to smile: he had just seen Raoul, who had smiled upon him. With his hands joined upon his breast, his face turned towards the window, bathed by the fresh air of night, which brought upon its wings the aroma of the flowers and the woods, Athos entered, never again to come out of it, into the contemplation of that paradise which the living never see. God willed, no doubt, to open to this elect the treasures of eternal beatitude, at this hour when other men tremble with the idea of being severely received by the Lord, and cling to this life they know, in the dread of the other life of which they get but merest glimpses by the dismal murky torch of death. Athos was spirit-guided by the pure serene soul of his son, which aspired to be like the paternal soul. Everything for this just man was melody and perfume in the rough road souls take to return to the celestial country. After an hour of this ecstasy, Athos softly raised his hands as white as wax; the smile did not quit his lips, and he murmured low, so low as scarcely to be audible, these three words addressed to God or to Raoul:

"HERE I AM!"

And his hands fell slowly, as though he himself had laid them on the bed.

Death had been kind and mild to this noble creature. It had spared him the tortures of the agony, convulsions of the last departure; had opened with an indulgent finger the gates of eternity to that noble soul. God had no doubt ordered it thus that the pious remembrance of this death should remain in the hearts of those present, and in the memory of other men—a death which caused to be loved the passage from this life to the other by those whose existence upon this earth leads them not to dread the last judgment. Athos preserved, even in the eternal sleep, that placid and sincere smile—an ornament which was to accompany him to the tomb. The quietude and calm of his fine features made his servants for a long time doubt whether he had really quitted life. The comte's people wished to remove Grimaud, who, from a distance, devoured the face now quickly growing marble-pale, and did not approach, from pious fear of bringing to him the breath of death. But Grimaud, fatigued as he was, refused to leave the room. He sat himself down upon the threshold, watching his master with the vigilance of a sentinel, jealous to receive either his first waking look or his last dying sigh. The noises all were quiet in the house—every one respected the slumber of their lord. But Grimaud, by anxiously listening, perceived that the comte no longer breathed. He raised himself with his hands leaning on the ground, looked to see if there did not appear some motion in the body of his master. Nothing! Fear seized him; he rose completely up, and, at the very moment, heard some one coming up the stairs. A noise of spurs knocking against a sword—a warlike sound familiar to his ears—stopped him as he was going towards the bed of Athos. A voice more sonorous than brass or steel resounded within three paces of him.

"Athos! Athos! my friend!" cried this voice, agitated even to tears.

"Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan," faltered out Grimaud.

"Where is he? Where is he?" continued the musketeer. Grimaud seized his arm in his bony fingers, and pointed to the bed, upon the sheets of which the livid tints of death already showed.

A choked respiration, the opposite to a sharp cry, swelled the throat of D'Artagnan. He advanced on tip-toe, trembling, frightened at the noise his feet made on the floor, his heart rent by a nameless agony. He placed his ear to the breast of Athos, his face to the comte's mouth. Neither noise, nor breath! D'Artagnan drew back. Grimaud, who had followed him with his eyes, and for whom each of his movements had been a revelation, came timidly; seated himself at the foot of the bed, and glued his lips to the sheet which was raised by the stiffened feet of his master. Then large drops began to flow from his red eyes. This old man in invincible despair, who wept, bent doubled without uttering a word, presented the most touching spectacle that D'Artagnan, in a life so filled with emotion, had ever met with.

The captain resumed standing in contemplation before that smiling dead man, who seemed to have burnished his last thought, to give his best friend, the man he had loved next to Raoul, a gracious welcome even beyond life. And for reply to that exalted flattery of hospitality, D'Artagnan went and kissed Athos fervently on the brow, and with his trembling fingers closed his eyes. Then he seated himself by the pillow without dread of that dead man, who had been so kind and affectionate to him for five and thirty years. He was feeding his soul with the remembrances the noble visage of the comte brought to his mind in crowds—some blooming and charming as that smile—some dark, dismal, and icy as that visage with its eyes now closed to all eternity.

All at once the bitter flood which mounted from minute to minute invaded his heart, and swelled his breast almost to bursting. Incapable of mastering his emotion, he arose, and tearing himself violently from the chamber where he had just found dead him to whom he came to report the news of the death of Porthos, he uttered sobs so heart-rending that the servants, who seemed only to wait for an explosion of grief, answered to it by their lugubrious clamors, and the dogs of the late comte by their lamentable howlings. Grimaud was the only one who did not lift up his voice. Even in the paroxysm of his grief he would not have dared to profane the dead, or for the first time disturb the slumber of his master. Had not Athos always bidden him be dumb?

At daybreak D'Artagnan, who had wandered about the lower hall, biting his fingers to stifle his sighs—D'Artagnan went up once more; and watching the moments when Grimaud turned his head towards him, he made him a sign to come to him, which the faithful servant obeyed without making more noise than a shadow. D'Artagnan went down again, followed by Grimaud; and when he had gained the vestibule, taking the old man's hands, "Grimaud," said he, "I have seen how the father died; now let me know about the son."

Grimaud drew from his breast a large letter, upon the envelope of which was traced the address of Athos. He recognized the writing of M. de Beaufort, broke the seal, and began to read, while walking about in the first steel-chill rays of dawn, in the dark alley of old limes, marked by the still visible footsteps of the comte who had just died.

#### LIX. The Bulletin.

The Duc de Beaufort wrote to Athos. The letter destined for the living only reached the dead. God had changed the address.

"MY DEAR COMTE," wrote the prince, in his large, school-boy's hand,—“a great misfortune has struck us amidst a great triumph. The king loses one of the bravest of soldiers. I lose a friend. You lose M. de Bragelonne. He has died gloriously, so gloriously that I have not the strength to weep as I could wish. Receive my sad compliments, my dear comte. Heaven distributes trials according to the greatness of our hearts. This is an immense one, but not above your courage. Your good friend,  
"LE DUC DE BEAUFORT."

The letter contained a relation written by one of the prince's secretaries. It was the most touching recital, and the most true, of that dismal episode which unraveled two existences. D'Artagnan, accustomed to battle emotions, and with a heart armed against tenderness, could not help starting on reading the name of Raoul, the name of that beloved boy who had become a shade now—like his father.

"In the morning," said the prince's secretary, "my lord commanded the attack. Normandy and Picardy had taken positions in the rocks dominated by the heights of the mountain, upon the declivity of which were raised the bastions of Gigelli.

"The cannon opened the action; the regiments marched full of resolution; the pikemen with pikes elevated, the musket-bearers with their weapons ready. The prince followed attentively the march and movements of the troops, so as to be able to sustain them with a strong reserve. With my lord were the oldest captains and his aides-de-camp. M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne had received orders not to leave his highness. In the meantime the enemy's cannon, which at first thundered with little success against the masses, began to regulate their fire, and the balls, better directed, killed several men near the prince. The regiments formed in column, and, advancing against the ramparts, were rather roughly handled. There was a sort of hesitation in our troops, who found themselves ill-seconded

by the artillery. In fact, the batteries which had been established the evening before had but a weak and uncertain aim, on account of their position. The upward direction of the aim lessened the justness of the shots as well as their range.

"My lord, comprehending the bad effect of this position on the siege artillery, commanded the frigates moored in the little road to commence a regular fire against the place. M. de Bragelonne offered himself at once to carry this order. But my lord refused to acquiesce in the vicomte's request. My lord was right, for he loved and wished to spare the young nobleman. He was quite right, and the event took upon itself to justify his foresight and refusal; for scarcely had the sergeant charged with the message solicited by M. de Bragelonne gained the seashore, when two shots from long carbines issued from the enemy's ranks and laid him low. The sergeant fell, dyeing the sand with his blood; observing which, M. de Bragelonne smiled at my lord, who said to him, 'You see, vicomte, I have saved your life. Report that, some day, to M. le Comte de la Fere, in order that, learning it from you, he may thank me.' The young nobleman smiled sadly, and replied to the duke, 'It is true, my lord, that but for your kindness I should have been killed, where the poor sergeant has fallen, and should be at rest.' M. de Bragelonne made this reply in such a tone that my lord answered him warmly, '*Vrai Dieu!* Young man, one would say that your mouth waters for death; but, by the soul of Henry IV., I have promised your father to bring you back alive; and, please the Lord, I mean to keep my word.'

"My lord de Bragelonne coloured, and replied, in a lower voice, 'My lord, pardon me, I beseech you. I have always had a desire to meet good opportunities; and it is so delightful to distinguish ourselves before our general, particularly when that general is M. le Duc de Beaufort.'

"My lord was a little softened by this; and, turning to the officers who surrounded him, gave different orders. The grenadiers of the two regiments got near enough to the ditches and intrenchments to launch their grenades, which had but small effect. In the meanwhile, M. d'Estrees, who commanded the fleet, having seen the attempt of the sergeant to approach the vessels, understood that he must act without orders, and opened fire. Then the Arabs, finding themselves seriously injured by the balls from the fleet, and beholding the destruction and the ruin of their walls, uttered the most fearful cries. Their horsemen descended the mountain at a gallop, bent over their saddles, and rushed full tilt upon the columns of infantry, which, crossing their pikes, stopped this mad assault. Repulsed by the firm attitude of the battalion, the Arabs threw themselves with fury towards the *etat-major*, which was not on its guard at that moment.

"The danger was great; my lord drew his sword; his secretaries and people imitated him; the officers of the suite engaged in combat with the furious Arabs. It was then M. de Bragelonne was able to satisfy the inclination he had so clearly shown from the commencement of the action. He fought near the prince with the valor of a Roman, and killed three Arabs with his small sword. But it was evident that his bravery did not arise from that sentiment of pride so natural to all who fight. It was impetuous, affected, even forced; he sought to glut, intoxicate himself with strife and carnage. He excited himself to such a degree that my lord called to him to stop. He must have heard the voice of my lord, because we who were close to him heard it. He did not, however, stop, but continued his course to the intrenchments. As M. de Bragelonne was a well-disciplined officer, this disobedience to the orders of my lord very much surprised everybody, and M. de Beaufort redoubled his earnestness, crying, 'Stop, Bragelonne! Where are you going? Stop,' repeated my lord, 'I command you!'

"We all, imitating the gesture of M. le duc, we all raised our hands. We expected that the cavalier would turn bridle; but M. de Bragelonne continued to ride towards the palisades.

"'Stop, Bragelonne!' repeated the prince, in a very loud voice, 'stop! in the name of your father!'

"At these words M. de Bragelonne turned round; his countenance expressed a lively grief, but he did not stop; we then concluded that his horse must have run away with him. When M. le duc saw cause to conclude that the vicomte was no longer master of his horse, and had watched him precede the first grenadiers, his highness cried, 'Musketeers, kill his horse! A hundred pistoles for the man who kills his horse!' But who could expect to hit the beast without at least wounding his rider? No one dared the attempt. At length one presented himself; he was a sharp-shooter of the regiment of Picardy, named Luzerne, who took aim at the animal, fired, and hit him in the quarters, for we saw the blood reddened the hair of the horse. Instead of falling, the cursed jennet was irritated, and carried him on more furiously than ever. Every Picard who saw this unfortunate young man rushing on to meet certain death, shouted in the loudest manner, 'Throw yourself off, monsieur le vicomte!—off!—off! throw yourself off!' M. de Bragelonne was an officer much beloved in the army. Already had the vicomte arrived within pistol-shot of the ramparts, when a discharge was poured upon him that enshrouded him in fire and smoke. We lost sight of him; the smoke dispersed; he was on foot, upright; his horse was killed.

"The vicomte was summoned to surrender by the Arabs, but he made them a negative sign with his head, and continued to march towards the palisades. This was a mortal imprudence. Nevertheless the entire army was pleased that he would not retreat, since ill-chance had led him so near. He marched a few paces further, and the two regiments clapped their hands. It was at this moment the second discharge shook the walls, and the Vicomte de Bragelonne again disappeared in the smoke; but this time the smoke dispersed in vain; we no longer saw him standing. He was down, with his head lower than his legs, among the bushes, and the Arabs began to think of leaving their intrenchments to come and cut off his head or take his body—as is the custom with the infidels. But My lord le Duc de Beaufort had followed all this with his eyes, and the sad spectacle drew from him many painful sighs. He then cried aloud, seeing the Arabs running like white phantoms among the mastic-trees, 'Grenadiers! lancers! will you let them take that noble body?'

"Saying these words and waving his sword, he himself rode towards the enemy. The regiments, rushing in his steps, ran in their turn, uttering cries as terrible as those of the Arabs were wild.

"The combat commenced over the body of M. de Bragelonne, and with such inveteracy was it fought that a hundred and sixty Arabs were left upon the field, by the side of at least fifty of our troops. It was a lieutenant from Normandy who took the body of the vicomte on his shoulders and carried it back to the lines. The advantage was, however, pursued, the regiments took the reserve with them, and the enemy's palisades were utterly destroyed. At three o'clock the fire of the Arabs ceased; the hand-to-hand fight lasted two hours; it was a massacre. At five o'clock we were victorious at all points; the enemy had abandoned his positions, and M. le duc ordered the white flag to be planted on the summit of the little mountain. It was then we had time to think of M. de Bragelonne, who had eight large wounds in his body, through which almost all his blood had welled away. Still, however, he had breathed, which afforded inexpressible joy to my lord, who insisted on being present at the first dressing of the wounds and the consultation of the surgeons. There were two among them who declared M. de Bragelonne would live. My lord threw his arms around their necks, and promised them a thousand louis each if they could save him.

"The vicomte heard these transports of joy, and whether he was in despair, or whether he suffered much from his wounds, he expressed by his countenance a contradiction, which gave rise to reflection, particularly in one of the secretaries when he had heard what follows. The third surgeon was the brother of Sylvain de Saint-Cosme, the most learned of them all. He probed the wounds in his turn, and said nothing. M. de Bragelonne fixed his eyes steadily upon the skillful surgeon, and seemed to interrogate his every movement. The latter, upon being questioned by my lord, replied that he saw plainly three mortal wounds out of eight, but so strong was the constitution of the wounded, so rich was he in youth, and so merciful was the goodness of God, that perhaps M. de Bragelonne might recover, particularly if he did not move in the slightest manner. Frere Sylvain added, turning towards his assistants, 'Above everything, do not allow him to move, even a finger, or you will kill him,' and we all left the tent in very low spirits. That secretary I have mentioned, on leaving the tent, thought he perceived a faint and sad smile glide over the lips of M. de Bragelonne when the duke said to him, in a cheerful, kind voice, 'We will save you, vicomte, we will save you yet.'

"In the evening, when it was believed the wounded youth had taken some repose, one of the assistants entered his tent, but rushed out again immediately, uttering loud cries. We all ran up in disorder, M. le duc with us, and the assistant pointed to the body of M. de Bragelonne upon the ground, at the foot of his bed, bathed in the remainder of his blood. It appeared that he had suffered some convulsion, some delirium, and that he had fallen; that the fall had accelerated his end, according to the prognosis of Frere Sylvain. We raised the vicomte; he was cold and dead. He held a lock of fair hair in his right hand, and that hand was tightly pressed upon his heart."

Then followed the details of the expedition, and of the victory obtained over the Arabs. D'Artagnan stopped at the account of the death of poor Raoul. "Oh!" murmured he, "unhappy boy! a suicide!" And turning his eyes towards the chamber of the chateau, in which Athos slept in eternal sleep, "They kept their words with each other," said he, in a low voice; "now I believe them to be happy; they must be reunited." And he returned through the parterre with slow and melancholy steps. All the village—all the neighborhood—were filled with grieving neighbors relating to each other the double catastrophe, and making preparations for the funeral.

#### LX. The Last Canto of the Poem.

On the morrow, all the *noblesse* of the provinces, of the environs, and wherever messengers had carried the news, might have been seen arriving in detachments. D'Artagnan had shut himself up, without being willing to speak to anybody. Two such heavy deaths falling upon the captain, so closely after the death of Porthos, for a long time oppressed that spirit which had hitherto been so indefatigable and invulnerable. Except Grimaud, who entered his chamber once, the musketeer saw neither servants nor guests. He supposed, from the noises in the house, and the continual coming and going, that preparations were being made for the funeral of the comte. He wrote to the king to ask for an extension of his leave of absence. Grimaud, as we have said, had entered D'Artagnan's apartment, had seated himself upon a joint-stool near the door, like a man who meditates profoundly; then, rising, he made a sign to D'Artagnan to follow him. The latter obeyed in silence. Grimaud descended to the comte's bed-chamber, showed the captain with his finger the place of the empty bed, and raised his eyes eloquently towards Heaven.

"Yes," replied D'Artagnan, "yes, good Grimaud—now with the son he loved so much!"

Grimaud left the chamber, and led the way to the hall, where, according to the custom of the province, the body was laid out, previously to being put away forever. D'Artagnan was struck at seeing two open coffins in the hall. In reply to the mute invitation of Grimaud, he approached, and saw in one of them Athos, still handsome in death, and, in the other, Raoul with his eyes closed, his cheeks pearly as those of the Palls of Virgil, with a smile on his violet lips. He shuddered at seeing the father and son, those two departed souls, represented on earth by two silent, melancholy bodies, incapable of touching each other, however close they might be.

"Raoul here!" murmured he. "Oh! Grimaud, why did you not tell me this?"

Grimaud shook his head, and made no reply; but taking D'Artagnan by the hand, he led him to the coffin, and showed him, under the thin winding-sheet, the black wounds by which life had escaped. The captain turned away his eyes, and, judging it was useless to question Grimaud, who would not answer, he recollected that M. de Beaufort's secretary had written more than he, D'Artagnan, had had the courage to read. Taking up the recital of the affair which had cost Raoul his life, he found these words, which ended the concluding paragraph of the letter:

"My lord le duc has ordered that the body of monsieur le vicomte should be embalmed, after the manner practiced by the Arabs when they wish their dead to be carried to their native land; and monsieur le duc has appointed relays, so that the same confidential servant who brought up the young man might take back his remains to M. le Comte de la Fere."

"And so," thought D'Artagnan, "I shall follow thy funeral, my dear boy—I, already old—I, who am of no value on earth—and I shall scatter dust upon that brow I kissed but two months since. God has willed it to be so. Thou hast willed it to be so, thyself. I have no longer the right even to weep. Thou hast chosen death; it seemed to thee a preferable gift to life."

At length arrived the moment when the chill remains of these two gentlemen were to be given back to mother earth. There was such an affluence of military and other people that up to the place of the sepulture, which was a little chapel on the plain, the road from the city was filled with horsemen and pedestrians in mourning. Athos had chosen for his resting-place the little inclosure of a chapel erected by himself near the boundary of his estates. He had had the stones, cut in 1550, brought from an old Gothic manor-house in Berry, which had sheltered his early youth. The chapel, thus rebuilt, transported, was pleasing to the eye beneath its leafy curtains of poplars and sycamores. It was ministered in every Sunday, by the cure of the neighboring bourg, to whom Athos paid an allowance of two hundred francs for this service; and all the vassals of his domain, with their families, came thither to hear mass, without having any occasion to go to the city.

Behind the chapel extended, surrounded by two high hedges of hazel, elder and white thorn, and a deep ditch, the little inclosure—uncultivated, though gay in its sterility; because the mosses there grew thick, wild heliotrope and ravenelles there mingled perfumes, while from beneath an ancient chestnut issued a crystal spring, a prisoner in its marble cistern, and on the thyme all around alighted thousands of bees from the neighboring plants, whilst chaffinches and redthroats sang cheerfully among the flower-spangled hedges. It was to this place the somber coffins were carried, attended by a silent and respectful crowd. The office of the dead being celebrated, the last adieu paid to the noble departed, the assembly dispersed, talking, along the roads, of the virtues and mild death of the father, of the hopes the son had given, and of his melancholy end upon the arid coast of Africa.

Little by little, all noises were extinguished, like the lamps illuminating the humble nave. The minister bowed for the last time to the altar and the still fresh graves; then, followed by his assistant, he slowly took the road back to the presbytery. D'Artagnan, left alone, perceived that night was coming on. He had forgotten the hour, thinking only of the dead. He arose from the oaken bench on which he was seated in the chapel, and wished, as the priest had done, to go and bid a last adieu to the double grave which contained his two lost friends.

A woman was praying, kneeling on the moist earth. D'Artagnan stopped at the door of the chapel, to avoid disturbing her, and also to endeavor to find out who was the pious friend who performed this sacred duty with so much zeal and perseverance. The unknown had hidden her face in her hands, which were white as alabaster. From the noble simplicity of her costume, she must be a woman of distinction. Outside the inclosure were several horses mounted by servants; a travelling carriage was in waiting for this lady. D'Artagnan in vain sought to make out what caused her delay. She continued praying, and frequently pressed her handkerchief to her face, by which D'Artagnan perceived she was weeping. He beheld her strike her breast with the compunction of a Christian woman. He heard her several times exclaim as from a wounded heart: "Pardon! pardon!" And as she appeared to abandon herself entirely to her grief, as she threw herself down, almost fainting, exhausted by complaints and prayers, D'Artagnan, touched by this love for his so much regretted friends, made a few steps towards the grave, in order to interrupt the melancholy colloquy of the penitent with the dead. But as soon as his step sounded on the gravel, the unknown raised her head, revealing to D'Artagnan a face aflood with tears, a well-known face. It was Mademoiselle de la Vallière! "Monsieur d'Artagnan!" murmured she.

"You!" replied the captain, in a stern voice, "you here!—oh! madame, I should better have liked to see you decked with flowers in the mansion of the Comte de la Fere. You would have wept less—and they too—and I!"

"Monsieur!" said she, sobbing.

"For it was you," added this pitiless friend of the dead,—“it was you who sped these two men to the grave.”

“Oh! spare me!”

“God forbid, madame, that I should offend a woman, or that I should make her weep in vain; but I must say that the place of the murderer is not upon the grave of her victims.” She wished to reply.

“What I now tell you,” added he, coldly, “I have already told the king.”

She clasped her hands. “I know,” said she, “I have caused the death of the Vicomte de Bragelonne.”

“Ah! you know it?”

“The news arrived at court yesterday. I have traveled during the night forty leagues to come and ask pardon of the comte, whom I supposed to be still living, and to pray God, on the tomb of Raoul, that he would send me all the misfortunes I have merited, except a single one. Now, monsieur, I know that the death of the son has killed the father; I have two crimes to reproach myself with; I have two punishments to expect from Heaven.”

“I will repeat to you, mademoiselle,” said D’Artagnan, “what M. de Bragelonne said of you, at Antibes, when he already meditated death: ‘If pride and coquetry have misled her, I pardon her while despising her. If love has produced her error, I pardon her, but I swear that no one could have loved her as I have done.’”

“You know,” interrupted Louise, “that of my love I was about to sacrifice myself; you know whether I suffered when you met me lost, dying, abandoned. Well! never have I suffered so much as now; because then I hoped, desired,—now I have no longer anything to wish for; because this death drags all my joy into the tomb; because I can no longer dare to love without remorse, and I feel that he whom I love—oh! it is but just!—will repay me with the tortures I have made others undergo.”

D’Artagnan made no reply; he was too well convinced that she was not mistaken.

“Well, then,” added she, “dear Monsieur d’Artagnan, do not overwhelm me to-day, I again implore you! I am like the branch torn from the trunk, I no longer hold to anything in this world—a current drags me on, I know not whither. I love madly, even to the point of coming to tell it, wretch that I am, over the ashes of the dead, and I do not blush for it—I have no remorse on this account. Such love is a religion. Only, as hereafter you will see me alone, forgotten, disdained; as you will see me punished, as I am destined to be punished, spare me in my ephemeral happiness, leave it to me for a few days, for a few minutes. Now, even at the moment I am speaking to you, perhaps it no longer exists. My God! this double murder is perhaps already expiated!”

While she was speaking thus, the sound of voices and of horses drew the attention of the captain. M. de Saint-Aignan came to seek La Vallière. “The king,” he said, “is a prey to jealousy and uneasiness.” Saint-Aignan did not perceive D’Artagnan, half concealed by the trunk of a chestnut-tree which shaded the double grave. Louise thanked Saint-Aignan, and dismissed him with a gesture. He rejoined the party outside the inclosure.

“You see, madame,” said the captain bitterly to the young woman,—“you see your happiness still lasts.”

The young woman raised her head with a solemn air. “A day will come,” said she, “when you will repent of having so misjudged me. On that day, it is I who will pray God to forgive you for having been unjust towards me. Besides, I shall suffer so much that you yourself will be the first to pity my sufferings. Do not reproach me with my fleeting happiness, Monsieur d’Artagnan; it costs me dear, and I have not paid all my debt.” Saying these words, she again knelt down, softly and affectionately.

“Pardon me the last time, my affianced Raoul!” said she. “I have broken our chain; we are both destined to die of grief. It is thou who departest first; fear nothing, I shall follow thee. See, only, that I have not been base, and that I have come to bid thee this last adieu. The Lord is my witness, Raoul, that if with my life I could have redeemed thine, I would have given that life without hesitation. I could not give my love. Once more, forgive me, dearest, kindest friend.”

She strewed a few sweet flowers on the freshly sodded earth; then, wiping the tears from her eyes, the heavily stricken lady bowed to D’Artagnan, and disappeared.

The captain watched the departure of the horses, horsemen, and carriage, then crossing his arms upon his swelling chest, “When will it be my turn to depart?” said he, in an agitated voice. “What is there left for man after youth, love, glory, friendship, strength, and wealth have disappeared? That rock, under which sleeps Porthos, who possessed all I have named; this moss, under which repose Athos and Raoul, who possessed much more!”

He hesitated for a moment, with a dull eye; then, drawing himself up, “Forward! still forward!” said he. “When it is time, God will tell me, as he foretold the others.”

He touched the earth, moistened with the evening dew, with the ends of his fingers, signed himself as if he had been at the *benitier* in church, and retook alone—ever alone—the road to Paris.

Epilogue.

Four years after the scene we have just described, two horsemen, well mounted, traversed Blois early in the morning, for the purpose of arranging a hawking party the king had arranged to make in that uneven plain the Loire divides in two, which borders on the one side Meung, on the other Amboise. These were the keeper of the king’s harriers and the master of the falcons, personages greatly respected in the time of Louis XIII., but rather neglected by his successor. The horsemen, having reconnoitered the ground, were returning, their observations made, when they perceived certain little groups of soldiers, here and there, whom the sergeants were placing at distances at the openings of the inclosures. These were the king’s musketeers. Behind them came, upon a splendid horse, the captain, known by his richly embroidered uniform. His hair was gray, his beard turning so. He seemed a little bent, although sitting and handling his horse gracefully. He was looking about him watchfully.

“M. d’Artagnan does not get any older,” said the keeper of the harriers to his colleague the falconer; “with ten years more to carry than either of us, he has the seat of a young man on horseback.”

“That is true,” replied the falconer. “I don’t see any change in him for the last twenty years.”

But this officer was mistaken; D’Artagnan in the last four years had lived a dozen. Age had printed its pitiless claws at each angle of his eyes; his brow was bald; his hands, formerly brown and nervous, were getting white, as if the blood had half forgotten them.

D’Artagnan accosted the officers with the shade of affability which distinguishes superiors, and received in turn for his courtesy two most respectful bows.

“Ah! what a lucky chance to see you here, Monsieur d’Artagnan!” cried the falconer.

“It is rather I who should say that, messieurs,” replied the captain, “for nowadays, the king makes more frequent use of his musketeers than of his falcons.”

“Ah! it is not as it was in the good old times,” sighed the falconer. “Do you remember, Monsieur d’Artagnan, when the late king flew the pie in the vineyards beyond Beaugence? Ah! *dame!* you were not the captain of the musketeers at that time, Monsieur d’Artagnan.” <sup>7</sup>

“And you were nothing but under-corporal of the tiercelets,” replied D’Artagnan, laughing. “Never mind that, it was a good time, seeing that it is always a good time when we are young. Good day, monsieur the keeper of the harriers.”

“You do me honour, monsieur le comte,” said the latter. D’Artagnan made no reply. The title of comte had hardly struck him; D’Artagnan had been a comte four years.

“Are you not very much fatigued with the long journey you have taken, monsieur le capitaine?” continued the falconer. “It must be full two hundred leagues from hence to Pignerol.”

“Two hundred and sixty to go, and as many to return,” said D’Artagnan, quietly.

“And,” said the falconer, “is *he* well?”

“Who?” asked D’Artagnan.

“Why, poor M. Fouquet,” continued the falconer, in a low voice. The keeper of the harriers had prudently withdrawn.

“No,” replied D’Artagnan, “the poor man frets terribly; he cannot comprehend how imprisonment can be a favour; he says that parliament absolved him by banishing him, and banishment is, or should be, liberty. He cannot imagine that they had sworn his death, and that to save his life from the claws of parliament was to be under too much obligation to Heaven.”

“Ah! yes; the poor man had a close chance of the scaffold,” replied the falconer; “it is said that M. Colbert had given orders to the governor of the Bastille, and that the execution was ordered.”

“Enough!” said D’Artagnan, pensively, and with a view of cutting short the conversation.

“Yes,” said the keeper of the harriers, drawing towards them, “M. Fouquet is now at Pignerol; he has richly deserved it. He had the good fortune to be conducted there by you; he robbed the king sufficiently.”

D’Artagnan launched at the master of the dogs one of his crossest looks, and said to him, “Monsieur, if any one told me you had eaten your dogs’ meat, not only would I refuse to believe it; but still more, if you were condemned to the lash or to jail for it, I should pity you and would not allow people to speak ill of you. And yet, monsieur, honest man as you may be, I assure you that you are not more so than poor M. Fouquet was.”

After having undergone this sharp rebuke, the keeper of the harriers hung his head, and allowed the falconer to get two steps in advance of him nearer to D’Artagnan.

“He is content,” said the falconer, in a low voice, to the musketeer; “we all know that harriers are in fashion nowadays; if he were a falconer he would not talk in that way.”

D’Artagnan smiled in a melancholy manner at seeing this great political question resolved by the discontent of such humble interest. He for a moment ran over in his mind the glorious existence of the surintendant, the crumbling of his fortunes, and the melancholy death that awaited him; and to conclude, “Did M. Fouquet love falconry?” said he.

“Oh, passionately, monsieur!” repeated the falconer, with an accent of bitter regret and a sigh that was the funeral oration of Fouquet.

D’Artagnan allowed the ill-humor of the one and the regret of the other to pass, and continued to advance. They could already catch glimpses of the huntsmen at the issue of the wood, the feathers of the outriders passing like shooting stars across the clearings, and the white horses skirting the bosky thickets looking like illuminated apparitions.

“But,” resumed D’Artagnan, “will the sport last long? Pray, give us a good swift bird, for I am very tired. Is it a heron or a swan?”

“Both, Monsieur d’Artagnan,” said the falconer; “but you need not be alarmed; the king is not much of a sportsman; he does not take the field on his own account, he only wishes to amuse the ladies.”

The words “to amuse the ladies” were so strongly accented they set D’Artagnan thinking.

“Ah!” said he, looking keenly at the falconer.

The keeper of the harriers smiled, no doubt with a view of making it up with the musketeer.

“Oh! you may safely laugh,” said D’Artagnan; “I know nothing of current news; I only arrived yesterday, after a month’s absence. I left the court mourning the death of the queen-mother. The king was not willing to take any amusement after receiving the last sigh of Anne of Austria; but everything comes to an end in this world. Well! then he is no longer sad? So much the better.” <sup>8</sup>

“And everything begins as well as ends,” said the keeper with a coarse laugh.

“Ah!” said D’Artagnan, a second time,—he burned to know, but dignity would not allow him to interrogate people below him,—“there is something beginning, then, it seems?”

The keeper gave him a significant wink; but D’Artagnan was unwilling to learn anything from this man.

“Shall we see the king early?” asked he of the falconer.

“At seven o’clock, monsieur, I shall fly the birds.”

“Who comes with the king? How is Madame? How is the queen?”

“Better, monsieur.”

“Has she been ill, then?”

“Monsieur, since the last chagrin she suffered, her majesty has been unwell.”

“What chagrin? You need not fancy your news is old. I have but just returned.”

“It appears that the queen, a little neglected since the death of her mother-in-law, complained to the king, who answered her,—“Do I not sleep at home every night, madame? What more do you expect?”

“Ah!” said D’Artagnan,—“poor woman! She must heartily hate Mademoiselle de la Vallière.”

“Oh, no! not Mademoiselle de la Vallière,” replied the falconer.

“Who then—” The blast of a hunting-horn interrupted this conversation. It summoned the dogs and the hawks. The falconer and his companions set off immediately, leaving D’Artagnan alone in the midst of the suspended sentence. The king appeared at a distance, surrounded by ladies and horsemen. All the troop advanced in beautiful order, at a foot’s pace, the horns of various sorts animating the dogs and horses. There was an animation in the scene, a mirage of light, of which nothing now can give an idea, unless it be the fictitious splendor of a theatric spectacle. D’Artagnan, with an eye a little, just a little, dimmed by age, distinguished behind the group three carriages. The first was intended for the queen; it was empty. D’Artagnan, who did not see Mademoiselle de la Vallière by the king’s side, on looking about for her, saw her in the second carriage. She was alone with two of her women, who seemed as dull as their mistress. On the left hand of the king, upon a high-spirited horse, restrained by a bold and skillful hand, shone a lady of most dazzling beauty. The king smiled upon her, and she smiled upon the king. Loud laughter followed every word she uttered.

“I must know that woman,” thought the musketeer, “who can she be?” And he stooped towards his friend, the falconer, to whom he addressed the question he had put to himself.

The falconer was about to reply, when the king, perceiving D’Artagnan, “Ah, comte!” said he, “you are amongst us once more then! Why have I not seen you?”

“Sire,” replied the captain, “because your majesty was asleep when I arrived, and not awake when I resumed my duties this morning.”



"Still the same," said Louis, in a loud voice, denoting satisfaction. "Take some rest, comte; I command you to do so. You will dine with me to-day."

A murmur of admiration surrounded D'Artagnan like a caress. Every one was eager to salute him. Dining with the king was an honour his majesty was not so prodigal of as Henry IV. had been. The king passed a few steps in advance, and D'Artagnan found himself in the midst of a fresh group, among whom shone Colbert.

"Good-day, Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the minister, with marked affability, "have you had a pleasant journey?"

"Yes, monsieur," said D'Artagnan, bowing to the neck of his horse.

"I heard the king invite you to his table for this evening," continued the minister; "you will meet an old friend there."

"An old friend of mine?" asked D'Artagnan, plunging painfully into the dark waves of the past, which had swallowed up for him so many friendships and so many hatreds.

"M. le Duc d'Almeda, who is arrived this morning from Spain."

"The Duc d'Almeda?" said D'Artagnan, reflecting in vain.

"Here!" cried an old man, white as snow, sitting bent in his carriage, which he caused to be thrown open to make room for the musketeer.

"*Aramis*!" cried D'Artagnan, struck with profound amazement. And he felt, inert as it was, the thin arm of the old nobleman hanging round his neck.

Colbert, after having observed them in silence for a few moments, urged his horse forward, and left the two old friends together.

"And so," said the musketeer, taking Aramis's arm, "you, the exile, the rebel, are again in France?"

"Ah! and I shall dine with you at the king's table," said Aramis, smiling. "Yes, will you not ask yourself what is the use of fidelity in this world? Stop! let us allow poor La Vallière's carriage to pass. Look, how uneasy she is! How her eyes, dim with tears, follow the king, who is riding on horseback yonder!"

"With whom?"

"With Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, now Madame de Montespan," replied Aramis.

"She is jealous. Is she then deserted?"

"Not quite yet, but it will not be long before she is." [9](#)

They chatted together, while following the sport, and Aramis's coachman drove them so cleverly that they arrived at the instant when the falcon, attacking the bird, beat him down, and fell upon him. The king alighted; Madame de Montespan followed his example. They were in front of an isolated chapel, concealed by huge trees, already despoiled of their leaves by the first cutting winds of autumn. Behind this chapel was an inclosure, closed by a latticed gate. The falcon had beaten down his prey in the inclosure belonging to this little chapel, and the king was desirous of going in to take the first feather, according to custom. The *cortege* formed a circle round the building and the hedges, too small to receive so many. D'Artagnan held back Aramis by the arm, as he was about, like the rest, to alight from his carriage, and in a hoarse, broken voice, "Do you know, Aramis," said he, "whither chance has conducted us?"

"No," replied the duke.

"Here repose men that we knew well," said D'Artagnan, greatly agitated.

Aramis, without divining anything, and with a trembling step, penetrated into the chapel by a little door which D'Artagnan opened for him. "Where are they buried?" said he.

"There, in the inclosure. There is a cross, you see, beneath yon little cypress. The tree of grief is planted over their tomb; don't go to it; the king is going that way; the heron has fallen just there."

Aramis stopped, and concealed himself in the shade. They then saw, without being seen, the pale face of La Vallière, who, neglected in her carriage, at first looked on, with a melancholy heart, from the door, and then, carried away by jealousy, advanced into the chapel, whence, leaning against a pillar, she contemplated the king smiling and making signs to Madame de Montespan to approach, as there was nothing to be afraid of. Madame de Montespan complied; she took the hand the king held out to her, and he, plucking out the first feather from the heron, which the falconer had strangled, placed it in his beautiful companion's hat. She, smiling in her turn, kissed the hand tenderly which made her this present. The king grew scarlet with vanity and pleasure; he looked at Madame de Montespan with all the fire of new love.

"What will you give me in exchange?" said he.

She broke off a little branch of cypress and offered it to the king, who looked intoxicated with hope.

"Humph!" said Aramis to D'Artagnan; "the present is but a sad one, for that cypress shades a tomb."

"Yes, and the tomb is that of Raoul de Bragelonne," said D'Artagnan aloud; "of Raoul, who sleeps under that cross with his father."

A groan resounded—they saw a woman fall fainting to the ground. Mademoiselle de la Vallière had seen all, heard all.

"Poor woman!" muttered D'Artagnan, as he helped the attendants to carry back to her carriage the lonely lady whose lot henceforth in life was suffering.

That evening D'Artagnan was seated at the king's table, near M. Colbert and M. le Duc d'Almeda. The king was very gay. He paid a thousand little attentions to the queen, a thousand kindnesses to Madame, seated at his left hand, and very sad. It might have been supposed that time of calm when the king was wont to watch his mother's eyes for the approval or disapproval of what he had just done.

Of mistresses there was no question at this dinner. The king addressed Aramis two or three times, calling him M. l'ambassadeur, which increased the surprise already felt by D'Artagnan at seeing his friend the rebel so marvelously well received at court.

The king, on rising from table, gave his hand to the queen, and made a sign to Colbert, whose eye was on his master's face. Colbert took D'Artagnan and Aramis on one side. The king began to chat with his sister, whilst Monsieur, very uneasy, entertained the queen with a preoccupied air, without ceasing to watch his wife and brother from the corner of his eye. The conversation between Aramis, D'Artagnan, and Colbert turned upon indifferent subjects. They spoke of preceding ministers; Colbert related the successful tricks of Mazarin, and desired those of Richelieu to be related to him. D'Artagnan could not overcome his surprise at finding this man, with his heavy eyebrows and low forehead, display so much sound knowledge and cheerful spirits. Aramis was astonished at that lightness of character which permitted this serious man to retard with advantage the moment for more important conversation, to which nobody made any allusion, although all three interlocutors felt its imminence. It was very plain, from the embarrassed appearance of Monsieur, how much the conversation of the king and Madame annoyed him. Madame's eyes were almost red: was she going to complain? Was she going to expose a little scandal in open court? The king took her on one side, and in a tone so tender that it must have reminded the princess of the time when she was loved for herself.

"Sister," said he, "why do I see tears in those lovely eyes?"

"Why—sire—" said she.

"Monsieur is jealous, is he not, sister?"

She looked towards Monsieur, an infallible sign that they were talking about him.

"Yes," said she.

"Listen to me," said the king; "if your friends compromise you, it is not Monsieur's fault."

He spoke these words with so much kindness that Madame, encouraged, having borne so many solitary griefs so long, was nearly bursting into tears, so full was her heart.

"Come, come, dear little sister," said the king, "tell me your griefs; on the word of a brother, I pity them; on the word of a king, I will put an end to them."

She raised her glorious eyes and, in a melancholy tone:

"It is not my friends who compromise me," said she; "they are either absent or concealed; they have been brought into disgrace with your majesty; they, so devoted, so good, so loyal!"

"You say this on account of De Guiche, whom I have exiled, at Monsieur's desire?"

"And who, since that unjust exile, has endeavored to get himself killed once every day."

"Unjust, say you, sister?"

"So unjust, that if I had not had the respect mixed with friendship that I have always entertained for your majesty—"

"Well!"

"Well! I would have asked my brother Charles, upon whom I can always—"

The king started. "What, then?"

"I would have asked him to have had it represented to you that Monsieur and his favourite M. le Chevalier de Lorraine ought not with impunity to constitute themselves the executioners of my honour and my happiness."

"The Chevalier de Lorraine," said the king; "that dismal fellow?"

"Is my mortal enemy. Whilst that man lives in my household, where Monsieur retains him and delegates his power to him, I shall be the most miserable woman in the kingdom."

"So," said the king, slowly, "you call your brother of England a better friend than I am?"

"Actions speak for themselves, sire."

"And you would prefer going to ask assistance there—"

"To my own country!" said she with pride; "yes, sire."

"You are the grandchild of Henry IV. as well as myself, lady. Cousin and brother-in-law, does not that amount pretty well to the title of brother-germain?"

"Then," said Henrietta, "act!"

"Let us form an alliance."

"Begin."

"I have, you say, unjustly exiled De Guiche."

"Oh! yes," said she, blushing.

"De Guiche shall return." [10](#)

"So far, well."

"And now you say that I do wrong in having in your household the Chevalier de Lorraine, who gives Monsieur ill advice respecting you?"

"Remember well what I tell you, sire; the Chevalier de Lorraine some day—Observe, if ever I come to a dreadful end, I beforehand accuse the Chevalier de Lorraine; he has a spirit that is capable of any crime!"

"The Chevalier de Lorraine shall no longer annoy you—I promise you that." [11](#)

"Then that will be a true preliminary of alliance, sire,—I sign; but since you have done your part, tell me what shall be mine."

"Instead of embroiling me with your brother Charles, you must make him a more intimate friend than ever."

"That is very easy."

"Oh! not quite so easy as you may suppose, for in ordinary friendship people embrace or exercise hospitality, and that only costs a kiss or a return, profitable expenses; but in political friendship—"

"Ah! it's a political friendship, is it?"

"Yes, my sister; and then, instead of embraces and feasts, it is soldiers—it is soldiers all alive and well equipped—that we must serve up to our friends; vessels we must offer, all armed with cannons and stored with provisions. It hence results that we have not always coffers in a fit condition for such friendships."

"Ah! you are quite right," said Madame; "the coffers of the king of England have been sonorous for some time."

"But you, my sister, who have so much influence over your brother, you can secure more than an ambassador could ever get the promise of."

"To effect that I must go to London, my dear brother."

"I have thought so," replied the king, eagerly; "and I have said to myself that such a voyage would do your health and spirits good."

"Only," interrupted Madame, "it is possible I should fail. The king of England has dangerous counselors."

"Counselors, do you say?"

"Precisely. If, by chance, your majesty had any intention—I am only supposing so—of asking Charles II. his alliance in a war—"

"A war?"

"Yes; well! then the king's counselors, who are in number seven—Mademoiselle Stewart, Mademoiselle Wells, Mademoiselle Gwyn, Miss Orchay, Mademoiselle Zunga, Miss Davies, and the proud Countess of Castlemaine—will represent to the king that war costs a great deal of money; that it is better to give balls and suppers at Hampton Court than to equip ships of the line at Portsmouth and Greenwich."

"And then your negotiations will fail?"

"Oh! those ladies cause all negotiations to fall through which they don't make themselves."

"Do you know the idea that has struck me, sister?"

"No; inform me what it is."

"It is that, searching well around you, you might perhaps find a female counselor to take with you to your brother, whose eloquence might paralyze the ill-will of the seven others."

"That is really an idea, sire, and I will search."

"You will find what you want."

"I hope so."

"A pretty ambassadress is necessary; an agreeable face is better than an ugly one, is it not?"

"Most assuredly."

"An animated, lively, audacious character."

"Certainly."

"Nobility; that is, enough to enable her to approach the king without awkwardness—not too lofty, so as not to trouble herself about the dignity of her race."

"Very true."

"And who knows a little English."

"*Mon Dieu!* why, some one," cried Madame, "like Mademoiselle de Keroualle, for instance!"

"Oh! why, yes!" said Louis XIV.; "you have hit the mark,—it is you who have found, my sister."

"I will take her; she will have no cause to complain, I suppose."

"Oh! no, I will name her *seductrice plenipotentiaire* at once, and will add a dowry to the title."

"That is well."

"I fancy you already on your road, my dear little sister, consoled for all your griefs."

"I will go, on two conditions. The first is, that I shall know what I am negotiating about."

"That is it. The Dutch, you know, insult me daily in their gazettes, and by their republican attitude. I do not like republics."

"That may easily be imagined, sire."

"I see with pain that these kings of the sea—they call themselves so—keep trade from France in the Indies, and that their vessels will soon occupy all the ports of Europe. Such a power is too near me, sister."

"They are your allies, nevertheless."

"That is why they were wrong in having the medal you have heard of struck; a medal which represents Holland stopping the sun, as Joshua did, with this legend: *The sun had stopped before me*. There is not much fraternity in that, *is there?*"

"I thought you had forgotten that miserable episode?"

"I never forget anything, sister. And if my true friends, such as your brother Charles, are willing to second me—" The princess remained pensively silent.

"Listen to me; there is the empire of the seas to be shared," said Louis XIV. "For this partition, which England submits to, could I not represent the second party as well as the Dutch?"

"We have Mademoiselle de Keroualle to treat that question," replied Madame.

"Your second condition for going, if you please, sister?"

"The consent of Monsieur, my husband."

"You shall have it."

"Then consider me already gone, brother."

On hearing these words, Louis XIV. turned round towards the corner of the room in which D'Artagnan, Colbert, and Aramis stood, and made an affirmative sign to his minister. Colbert then broke in on the conversation suddenly, and said to Aramis:

"Monsieur l'ambassadeur, shall we talk about business?"

D'Artagnan immediately withdrew, from politeness. He directed his steps towards the fireplace, within hearing of what the king was about to say to Monsieur, who, evidently uneasy, had gone to him. The face of the king was animated. Upon his brow was stamped a strength of will, the expression of which already met no further contradiction in France, and was soon to meet no more in Europe.

"Monsieur," said the king to his brother, "I am not pleased with M. le Chevalier de Lorraine. You, who do him the honour to protect him, must advise him to travel for a few months."

These words fell with the crush of an avalanche upon Monsieur, who adored his favourite, and concentrated all his affections in him.

"In what has the chevalier been inconsiderate enough to displease your majesty?" cried he, darting a furious look at Madame.

"I will tell you that when he is gone," said the king, suavely. "And also when Madame, here, shall have crossed over into England."

"Madame! in England!" murmured Monsieur, in amazement.

"In a week, brother," continued the king, "whilst we will go whither I will shortly tell you." And the king turned on his heel, smiling in his brother's face, to sweeten, as it were, the bitter draught he had given him.

During this time Colbert was talking with the Duc d'Almeda.

"Monsieur," said Colbert to Aramis, "this is the moment for us to come to an understanding. I have made your peace with the king, and I owed that clearly to a man of so much merit; but as you have often expressed friendship for me, an opportunity presents itself for giving me a proof of it. You are, besides, more a Frenchman than a Spaniard. Shall we secure—answer me frankly—the neutrality of Spain, if we undertake anything against the United Provinces?"

"Monsieur," replied Aramis, "the interest of Spain is clear. To embroil Europe with the Provinces would doubtless be our policy, but the king of France is an ally of the United Provinces. You are not ignorant, besides, that it would infer a maritime war, and that France is in no state to undertake this with advantage."

Colbert, turning round at this moment, saw D'Artagnan who was seeking some interlocutor, during this "aside" of the king and Monsieur. He called him, at the same time saying in a low voice to Aramis, "We may talk openly with D'Artagnan, I suppose?"

"Oh! certainly," replied the ambassador.

"We were saying, M. d'Almeda and I," said Colbert, "that a conflict with the United Provinces would mean a maritime war."

"That's evident enough," replied the musketeer.

"And what do you think of it, Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"I think that to carry on such a war successfully, you must have very large land forces."

"What did you say?" said Colbert, thinking he had ill understood him.

"Why such a large land army?" said Aramis.

"Because the king will be beaten by sea if he has not the English with him, and that when beaten by sea, he will soon be invaded, either by the Dutch in his ports, or by the Spaniards by land."

"And Spain neutral?" asked Aramis.

"Neutral as long as the king shall prove stronger," rejoined D'Artagnan.

Colbert admired that sagacity which never touched a question without enlightening it thoroughly. Aramis smiled, as he had long known that in diplomacy D'Artagnan acknowledged no superior. Colbert, who, like all proud men, dwelt upon his fantasy with a certainty of success, resumed the subject, "Who told you, M. d'Artagnan, that the king had no navy?"

"Oh! I take no heed of these details," replied the captain. "I am but an indifferent sailor. Like all nervous people, I hate the sea; and yet I have an idea that, with ships, France being a seaport with two hundred exits, we might have sailors."

Colbert drew from his pocket a little oblong book divided into two columns. On the first were the names of vessels, on the other the figures recapitulating the number of cannon and men requisite to equip these ships. "I have had the same idea as you," said he to D'Artagnan, "and I have had an account drawn up of the vessels we have altogether—thirty-five ships."

"Thirty-five ships! impossible!" cried D'Artagnan.

"Something like two thousand pieces of cannon," said Colbert. "That is what the king possesses at this moment. Of five and thirty vessels we can make three squadrons, but I must have five."

"Five!" cried Aramis.

"They will be afloat before the end of the year, gentlemen; the king will have fifty ship of the line. We may venture on a contest with them, may we not?"

"To build vessels," said D'Artagnan, "is difficult, but possible. As to arming them, how is that to be done? In France there are neither foundries nor military docks."

"Bah!" replied Colbert, in a bantering tone, "I have planned all that this year and a half past, did you not know it? Do you know M. d'Imfreville?"

"D'Imfreville?" replied D'Artagnan; "no."

"He is a man I have discovered; he has a specialty; he is a man of genius—he knows how to set men to work. It is he who has cast cannon and cut the woods of Bourgogne. And then, monsieur l'ambassadeur, you may not believe what I am going to tell you, but I have a still further idea."

"Oh, monsieur!" said Aramis, civilly, "I always believe you."

"Calculating upon the character of the Dutch, our allies, I said to myself, 'They are merchants, they are friendly with the king; they will be happy to sell to the king what they fabricate for themselves; then the more we buy'—Ah! I must add this: I have Forant—do you know Forant, D'Artagnan?"

Colbert, in his warmth, forgot himself; he called the captain simply *D'Artagnan*, as the king did. But the captain only smiled at it.

"No," replied he, "I do not know him."

"That is another man I have discovered, with a genius for buying. This Forant has purchased for me 350,000 pounds of iron in balls, 200,000 pounds of powder, twelve cargoes of Northern timber, matches, grenades, pitch, tar—I know not what! with a saving of seven per cent upon what all those articles would cost me fabricated in France."

"That is a capital and quaint idea," replied D'Artagnan, "to have Dutch cannon-balls cast which will return to the Dutch."

"Is it not, with loss, too?" And Colbert laughed aloud. He was delighted with his own joke.

"Still further," added he, "these same Dutch are building for the king, at this moment, six vessels after the model of the best of their name. Destouches—Ah! perhaps you don't know Destouches?"

"No, monsieur."

"He is a man who has a sure glance to discern, when a ship is launched, what are the defects and qualities of that ship—that is valuable, observe! Nature is truly whimsical. Well, this Destouches appeared to me to be a man likely to prove useful in marine affairs, and he is superintending the construction of six vessels of seventy-eight guns, which the Provinces are building for his majesty. It results from this, my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan, that the king, if he wished to quarrel with the Provinces, would have a very pretty fleet. Now, you know better than anybody else if the land army is efficient."

D'Artagnan and Aramis looked at each other, wondering at the mysterious labors this man had undertaken in so short a time. Colbert understood them, and was touched by this best of flatteries.

"If we, in France, were ignorant of what was going on," said D'Artagnan, "out of France still less must be known."

"That is why I told monsieur l'ambassadeur," said Colbert, "that, Spain promising its neutrality, England helping us—"

"If England assists you," said Aramis, "I promise the neutrality of Spain."



"I take you at your word," Colbert hastened to reply with his blunt *bonhomie*. "And, *a propos* of Spain, you have not the 'Golden Fleece,' Monsieur d'Almeda. I heard the king say the other day that he should like to see you wear the *grand cordon* of St. Michael."

Aramis bowed. "Oh!" thought D'Artagnan, "and Porthos is no longer here! What ells of ribbons would there be for him in these *largesses*! Dear Porthos!"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," resumed Colbert, "between us two, you will have, I wager, an inclination to lead your musketeers into Holland. Can you swim?" And he laughed like a man in high good humor.

"Like an eel," replied D'Artagnan.

"Ah! but there are some bitter passages of canals and marshes yonder, Monsieur d'Artagnan, and the best swimmers are sometimes drowned there."

"It is my profession to die for his majesty," said the musketeer. "Only, as it is seldom in war that much water is met with without a little fire, I declare to you beforehand, that I will do my best to choose fire. I am getting old; water freezes me—but fire warms, Monsieur Colbert."

And D'Artagnan looked so handsome still in quasi-juvenile strength as he pronounced these words, that Colbert, in his turn, could not help admiring him. D'Artagnan perceived the effect he had produced. He remembered that the best tradesman is he who fixes a high price upon his goods, when they are valuable. He prepared his price in advance.

"So, then," said Colbert, "we go into Holland?"

"Yes," replied D'Artagnan; "only—"

"Only?" said M. Colbert.

"Only," repeated D'Artagnan, "there lurks in everything the question of interest, the question of self-love. It is a very fine title, that of captain of the musketeers; but observe this: we have now the king's guards and the military household of the king. A captain of musketeers ought to command all that, and then he would absorb a hundred thousand livres a year for expenses."

"Well! but do you suppose the king would haggle with you?" said Colbert.

"Eh! monsieur, you have not understood me," replied D'Artagnan, sure of carrying his point. "I was telling you that I, an old captain, formerly chief of the king's guard, having precedence of the *marechaux* of France—I saw myself one day in the trenches with two other equals, the captain of the guards and the colonel commanding the Swiss. Now, at no price will I suffer that. I have old habits, and I will stand or fall by them."

Colbert felt this blow, but he was prepared for it.

"I have been thinking of what you said just now," replied he.

"About what, monsieur?"

"We were speaking of canals and marshes in which people are drowned."

"Well!"

"Well! if they are drowned, it is for want of a boat, a plank, or a stick."

"Of a stick, however short it may be," said D'Artagnan.

"Exactly," said Colbert. "And, therefore, I never heard of an instance of a *marechal* of France being drowned."

D'Artagnan became very pale with joy, and in a not very firm voice, "People would be very proud of me in my country," said he, "if I were a *marechal* of France; but a man must have commanded an expedition in chief to obtain the *baton*."

"Monsieur!" said Colbert, "here is in this pocket-book which you will study, a plan of campaign you will have to lead a body of troops to carry out in the next spring." [12](#)

D'Artagnan took the book, tremblingly, and his fingers meeting those of Colbert, the minister pressed the hand of the musketeer loyally.

"Monsieur," said he, "we had both a revenge to take, one over the other. I have begun; it is now your turn!"

"I will do you justice, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan, "and implore you to tell the king that the first opportunity that shall offer, he may depend upon a victory, or to behold me dead—or *both*."

"Then I will have the *fleurs-de-lis* for your *marechal's baton* prepared immediately," said Colbert.

On the morrow, Aramis, who was setting out for Madrid, to negotiate the neutrality of Spain, came to embrace D'Artagnan at his hotel.

"Let us love each other for four," said D'Artagnan. "We are now but two."

"And you will, perhaps, never see me again, dear D'Artagnan," said Aramis; "if you knew how I have loved you! I am old, I am extinct—ah, I am almost dead."

"My friend," said D'Artagnan, "you will live longer than I shall: diplomacy commands you to live; but, for my part, honour condemns me to die."

"Bah! such men as we are, monsieur le marechal," said Aramis, "only die satisfied with joy in glory."

"Ah!" replied D'Artagnan, with a melancholy smile, "I assure you, monsieur le duc, I feel very little appetite for either."

They once more embraced, and, two hours after, separated—forever.

The Death of D'Artagnan.

Contrary to that which generally happens, whether in politics or morals, each kept his promises, and did honour to his engagements.

The king recalled M. de Guiche, and banished M. le Chevalier de Lorraine; so that Monsieur became ill in consequence. Madame set out for London, where she applied herself so earnestly to make her brother, Charles II., acquire a taste for the political counsels of Mademoiselle de Keroualle, that the alliance between England and France was signed, and the English vessels, ballasted by a few millions of French gold, made a terrible campaign against the fleets of the United Provinces. Charles II. had promised Mademoiselle de Keroualle a little gratitude for her good counsels; he made her Duchess of Portsmouth. Colbert had promised the king vessels, munitions, victories. He kept his word, as is well known. At length Aramis, upon whose promises there was least dependence to be placed, wrote Colbert the following letter, on the subject of the negotiations which he had undertaken at Madrid:

"MONSIEUR COLBERT,—I have the honour to expedite to you the R. P. Oliva, general *ad interim* of the Society of Jesus, my provisional successor. The reverend father will explain to you, Monsieur Colbert, that I preserve to myself the direction of all the affairs of the order which concern France and Spain; but that I am not willing to retain the title of general, which would throw too high a side-light on the progress of the negotiations with which His Catholic Majesty wishes to intrust me. I shall resume that title by the command of his majesty, when the labors I have undertaken in concert with you, for the great glory of God and His Church, shall be brought to a good end. The R. P. Oliva will inform you likewise, monsieur, of the consent His Catholic Majesty gives to the signature of a treaty which assures the neutrality of Spain in the event of a war between France and the United Provinces. This consent will be valid even if England, instead of being active, should satisfy herself with remaining neutral. As for Portugal, of which you and I have spoken, monsieur, I can assure you it will contribute with all its resources to assist the Most Christian King in his war. I beg you, Monsieur Colbert, to preserve your friendship and also to believe in my profound attachment, and to lay my respect at the feet of His Most Christian Majesty. Signed,

"LE DUC D'ALMEDA." [13](#)

Aramis had performed more than he had promised; it remained to be seen how the king, M. Colbert, and D'Artagnan would be faithful to each other. In the spring, as Colbert had predicted, the land army entered on its campaign. It preceded, in magnificent order, the court of Louis XIV., who, setting out on horseback, surrounded by carriages filled with ladies and courtiers, conducted the *elite* of his kingdom to this sanguinary *fete*. The officers of the army, it is true, had no other music save the artillery of the Dutch forts; but it was enough for a great number, who found in this war honour, advancement, fortune—or death.

M. d'Artagnan set out commanding a body of twelve thousand men, cavalry, and infantry, with which he was ordered to take the different places which form knots of that strategic network called La Frise. Never was an army conducted more gallantly to an expedition. The officers knew that their leader, prudent and skillful as he was brave, would not sacrifice a single man, nor yield an inch of ground without necessity. He had the old habits of war, to live upon the country, keeping his soldiers singing and the enemy weeping. The captain of the king's musketeers well knew his business. Never were opportunities better chosen, *coups-de-main* better supported, errors of the besieged more quickly taken advantage of.

The army commanded by D'Artagnan took twelve small places within a month. He was engaged in besieging the thirteenth, which had held out five days. D'Artagnan caused the trenches to be opened without appearing to suppose that these people would ever allow themselves to be taken. The pioneers and laborers were, in the army of this man, a body full of ideas and zeal, because their commander treated them like soldiers, knew how to render their work glorious, and never allowed them to be killed if he could help it. It should have been seen with what eagerness the marshy glebes of Holland were turned over. Those turf-heaps, mounds of potter's clay, melted at the word of the soldiers like butter in the frying-pans of Friesland housewives.

M. d'Artagnan dispatched a courier to the king to give him an account of the last success, which redoubled the good humor of his majesty and his inclination to amuse the ladies. These victories of M. d'Artagnan gave so much majesty to the prince, that Madame de Montespan no longer called him anything but Louis the Invincible. So that Mademoiselle de la Vallière, who only called the king Louis the Victorious, lost much of his majesty's favour. Besides, her eyes were frequently red, and to an Invincible nothing is more disagreeable than a mistress who weeps while everything is smiling round her. The star of Mademoiselle de la Vallière was being drowned in clouds and tears. But the gayety of Madame de Montespan redoubled with the successes of the king, and consoled him for every other unpleasant circumstance. It was to D'Artagnan the king owed this; and his majesty was anxious to acknowledge these services; he wrote to M. Colbert:

"MONSIEUR COLBERT,—We have a promise to fulfil with M. d'Artagnan, who so well keeps his. This is to inform you that the time is come for performing it. All provisions for this purpose you shall be furnished with in due time. LOUIS."

In consequence of this, Colbert, detaining D'Artagnan's envoy, placed in the hands of that messenger a letter from himself, and a small coffer of ebony inlaid with gold, not very important in appearance, but which, without doubt, was very heavy, as a guard of five men was given to the messenger, to assist him in carrying it. These people arrived before the place which D'Artagnan was besieging towards daybreak, and presented themselves at the lodgings of the general. They were told that M. d'Artagnan, annoyed by a sortie which the governor, an artful man, had made the evening before, and in which the works had been destroyed and seventy-seven men killed, and the reparation of the breaches commenced, had just gone with twenty companies of grenadiers to reconstruct the works.

M. Colbert's envoy had orders to go and seek M. d'Artagnan, wherever he might be, or at whatever hour of the day or night. He directed his course, therefore, towards the trenches, followed by his escort, all on horseback. They perceived M. d'Artagnan in the open plain, with his gold-laced hat, his long cane, and gilt cuffs. He was biting his white mustache, and wiping off, with his left hand, the dust which the passing balls threw up from the ground they plowed so near him. They also saw, amidst this terrible fire, which filled the air with whistling hisses, officers handling the shovel, soldiers rolling barrows, and vast fascines, rising by being either carried or dragged by from ten to twenty men, cover the front of the trench reopened to the center by this extraordinary effort of the general. In three hours, all was reinstated. D'Artagnan began to speak more mildly; and he became quite calm when the captain of the pioneers approached him, hat in hand, to tell him that the trench was again in proper order. This man had scarcely finished speaking, when a ball took off one of his legs, and he fell into the arms of D'Artagnan. The latter lifted up his soldier, and quietly, with soothing words, carried him into the trench, amidst the enthusiastic applause of the regiments. From that time it was no longer a question of valor—the army was delirious; two companies stole away to the advanced posts, which they instantly destroyed.

When their comrades, restrained with great difficulty by D'Artagnan, saw them lodged upon the bastions, they rushed forward likewise; and soon a furious assault was made upon the counterscarp, upon which depended the safety of the place. D'Artagnan perceived there was only one means left of checking his army—to take the place. He directed all his force to the two breaches, where the besieged were busy in repairing. The shock was terrible; eighteen companies took part in it, and D'Artagnan went with the rest, within half cannon-shot of the place, to support the attack by *echelons*. The cries of the Dutch, who were being poniarded upon their guns by D'Artagnan's grenadiers, were distinctly audible. The struggle grew fiercer with the despair of the governor, who disputed his position foot by foot. D'Artagnan, to put an end to the affair, and to silence the fire, which was unceasing, sent a fresh column, which penetrated like a very wedge; and he soon perceived upon the ramparts, through the fire, the terrified flight of the besieged, pursued by the besiegers.

At this moment the general, breathing feely and full of joy, heard a voice behind him, saying, "Monsieur, if you please, from M. Colbert."

He broke the seal of the letter, which contained these words:

"MONSIEUR D'ARTAGNAN:—The king commands me to inform you that he has nominated you marechal of France, as a reward for your magnificent services, and the honour you do to his arms. The king is highly pleased, monsieur, with the captures you have made; he commands you, in particular, to finish the siege you have commenced, with good fortune to you, and success for him."

D'Artagnan was standing with a radiant countenance and sparkling eye. He looked up to watch the progress of his troops upon the walls, still enveloped in red and black volumes of smoke. "I have finished," replied he to the messenger; "the city will have surrendered in a quarter of an hour." He then resumed his reading:

"The *coffret*, Monsieur d'Artagnan, is my own present. You will not be sorry to see that, whilst you warriors are drawing the sword to defend the king, I am moving the pacific arts to ornament a present worthy of you. I commend myself to your friendship, monsieur le marechal, and beg you to believe in mine. COLBERT"

D'Artagnan, intoxicated with joy, made a sign to the messenger, who approached, with his *coffret* in his hands. But at the moment the *marechal* was going to look at it, a loud explosion resounded from the ramparts, and called his attention towards the city. "It is strange," said D'Artagnan, "that I don't yet see the king's flag on the walls, or hear the drums beat the *chamade*." He launched three hundred

fresh men, under a high-spirited officer, and ordered another breach to be made. Then, more tranquilly, he turned towards the *coffret*, which Colbert's envoy held out to him.—It was his treasure—he had won it.

D'Artagnan was holding out his hand to open the *coffret*, when a ball from the city crushed the *coffret* in the arms of the officer, struck D'Artagnan full in the chest, and knocked him down upon a sloping heap of earth, whilst the *fleur-de-lised baton*, escaping from the broken box, came rolling under the powerless hand of the *marechal*. D'Artagnan endeavored to raise himself. It was thought he had been knocked down without being wounded. A terrible cry broke from the group of terrified officers; the *marechal* was covered with blood; the pallor of death ascended slowly to his noble countenance. Leaning upon the arms held out on all sides to receive him, he was able once more to turn his eyes towards the place, and to distinguish the white flag at the crest of the principal bastion; his ears, already deaf to the sounds of life, caught feebly the rolling of the drum which announced the victory. Then, clasping in his nerveless hand the *baton*, ornamented with its *fleurs-de-lis*, he cast on it his eyes, which had no longer the power of looking upwards towards Heaven, and fell back, murmuring strange words, which appeared to the soldiers cabalistic—words which had formerly represented so many things on earth, and which none but the dying man any longer comprehended:

“Athos—Porthos, farewell till we meet again! Aramis, adieu forever!”

Of the four valiant men whose history we have related, there now remained but one. Heaven had taken to itself three noble souls. [14](#)

FOOTNOTES	
3	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Dumas is mistaken. The events in the following chapters occurred in 1661.]	
4	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ In the five-volume edition, Volume 2 ends here.]	
5	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ The verses in this have been re-written to give the flavour of them rather than the meaning. A more literal translation would look like this: “Guiche is the furnisher of the maids of honour.” and— “He has stocked the birdcage; Montalais and—”	
It would be more accurate, though, to say “baited” rather than “stocked” in the second couplet.]	
6	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ The Latin translates to “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”]	
7	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “Ad majorem Dei gloriam” was the motto of the Jesuits. It translates to “For the greater glory of God.”]	
8	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “In the presence of these men?”]	
9	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “By this sign you shall conquer.”]	
10	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “It rained all night long; the games will be held tomorrow.”]	
11	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “Lord, I am not worthy.”]	
1	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “To err is human.”]	
2	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Potatoes were not grown in France at that time. La Siecle insists that the error is theirs, and that Dumas meant “tomatoes.”]	
3	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ In the five-volume edition, Volume 3 ends here.]	
4	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “In your house.”]	
5	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ This alternate translation of the verse in this is closer to the original meaning: “Oh! You who sadly are wandering alone, Come, come, and laugh with us.”	
6	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Marie de Mancini was a former love of the king’s. He had to abandon her for the political advantages which the marriage to the Spanish Infanta, Maria Theresa, afforded. See The Vicomte de Bragelonne, XIII.]	
7	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “[A sun] not eclipsed by many suns.” Louis’s device was the sun.]	
8	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ In the three-volume edition, Volume 2, entitled Louise de la Vallière, ends here.]	
9	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “To what heights may he not aspire?” Fouquet’s motto.]	
10	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “A creature rare on earth.”]	
11	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “With an eye always to the climax.”]	
1	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “He is patient because he is eternal.” is how the Latin translates. It is from St. Augustine. This motto was sometimes applied to the Papacy, but not to the Jesuits.]	
2	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ In the five-volume edition, Volume 4 ends here.]	
3	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ It is possible that the preceding conversation is an obscure allegorical allusion to the Fronde, or perhaps an intimation that the Duc was the father of Mordaunt, from Twenty Years After, but a definite interpretation still eludes modern scholars.]	
4	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ The dictates of such a service would require Raoul to spend the rest of his life outside of France, hence Athos’s and Grimaud’s extreme reactions.]	
5	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Dumas here, and later in the chapter, uses the name Roncherat. Roncherolles is the actual name of the man.]	
6	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ In some editions, “in spite of Milady” reads “in spite of malady”.]	
7	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ “Pie” in this case refers to magpies, the prey for the falcons.]	
8	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Anne of Austria did not die until 1666, and Dumas sets the current year as 1665.]	
9	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Madame de Montespan would oust Louise from the king’s affections by 1667.]	
10	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ De Guiche would not return to court until 1671.]	
11	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Madame did die of poison in 1670, shortly after returning from the mission described later. The Chevalier de Lorraine had actually been ordered out of France in 1662.]	
12	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ This particular campaign did not actually occur until 1673.]	
13	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ Jean-Paul Oliva was the actual general of the Jesuits from 1664-1681.]	
14	<a href="#">(return)</a>
[ In earlier editions, the last line reads, “Of the four valiant men whose history we have related, there now no longer remained but one single body; God had resumed the souls.” Dumas made the revision in later editions.]	